

An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Religion, Science and Identity

Consisting of two parts

A novel titled *Athos*

An exegesis as a postscript



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Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2004

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Petsinis, Tom, 1953-

An interdisciplinary
exploration of religion,
science and identity



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ABSTRACT

Using the interdisciplinary scope of the contemporary novel, the thesis explores religion, science and identity in a monastic context. The research is presented in two sections: a substantial work of narrative fiction tilted *Athos*, and an essay in the form of a postscript.

Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain of the Orthodox world, is a monastic community founded in the 10th century and still active as a spiritual centre. It is located in Greece, on the eastern of the three peninsulas jutting into the north Aegean Sea, and remains to this day an exclusively male enclave. Athos was patronised by Byzantine Emperors, survived the Ottoman Empire, and in the 19th century promoted the emerging national consciousness of Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and to a lesser extent Russians. Travelers have written about its uniqueness, academics have researched its rich store of Byzantine culture, writers have glanced at it in works of fiction, but no novelist has based a work on the Holy Mountain. Drawing on a wide range of disciplines - literary, historical, theological, scientific - the present study presents a broad picture of Athos, together with the lives of its monks and novices, while holding fast to the demands of narrative fiction. Like the academic journal, the novel is an important medium for scholarship, speculation, and dissemination of ideas. This novel depicts Athos not as an anomaly in contemporary society, nor as a place with only exotic interest, but as an intense community whose values differ from those of the secular West. As what might be called 'a religious novel' or perhaps 'a novel of ideas', the work takes risks by exploring unfashionable themes, analysing cross-cultural debate, and contributing to the growing dialogue between science and religion.

The essay reflects on the novel and sets it in the context of religious novels, in particular Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. It also comments on the process underlying literary creation, reviews texts important to the thesis, and highlights techniques and structures specific to the realisation of *Athos*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful to the following people for their assistance with the project.

1. Principal supervisor Professor Brian Matthews, whose enthusiasm and encouragement, particularly in the early stages, helped steer the work in the right direction.
2. Assistant supervisor Professor John McLaren, who undertook many of the tedious administrative responsibilities at the end of the project. His knowledge and experience ensured the thesis was in appropriate shape for examination.
3. Professor Ron Adams, who read the bulky thesis purely from interest and provided valuable editorial suggestions.
4. My wife Vicky for her unstinting support, and daughters Vanessa and Alexia for the little notes of encouragement which showed up mysteriously on my desk.
5. The monks on Mount Athos, whose spirituality inspired me, patience impressed me, hospitality sustained me and made the work possible.

PART ONE

THE NOVEL

ATHOS

PALM SUNDAY

1

Pierced to his bones by a chill that splintered each star in three, Father Maximos struggled across the courtyard, thinking as he limped: better to follow a flame upright in its smallness than to lead a larger-than-life shadow clinging to one's heels. It was an hour before matins, the night air clothed the monk's heavy breath in white and gathered a halo around the lamp in his hand. After sixty years on Mount Athos, the last fifty-five in this monastery, the gatekeeper was still hopeful of witnessing a miracle. No, nothing like the blind man cured with a mixture of spit and dust, or the cripple who placed his sick-bed on his shoulder and walked a straight line, but something minor, perhaps a visitor who turned out to be a little-known saint in disguise. Though he believed in miracles without question, as others accepted the fact that one emerged from the womb of zero, the old monk had never come to terms with the nature of his body. At dusk his right pupil would dilate beyond the circle of the iris, becoming a black hole that devoured the Milky Way at a glance. His left eye had a perpetual squint and couldn't focus on more than one star at a time. When he bowed to the Gospels his right eye took in the spirit of the text by skimming over the lines, while his left would linger on the acute angle of Alpha or the fullness of-Omega. And now, as he shuffled to the front gate, his large pupil accommodated the night without seeking metaphors, while his left studied the flame that resembled a compass pointing to a place beyond the stars, or a keyhole emanating light through which he must pass.

Apart from this, the gatekeeper's feet hadn't moved as a pair since childhood. As the right walked surely, spring-heeled, always pointing to his destination, the left moved at right angles to the other, scraping the ground at each step. The limp had been the legacy of a snake bite in those ragged days when children went barefoot in summer, saving their shoes for winter, and then mainly for Sundays. His parents carried him to an old woman who delivered babies by cutting the cord with a sickle, keened at funerals for a handful of flour, and did much else to lighten the journey between cradle and grave. She pricked his swollen foot with a sewing needle and wrapped it in a poultice of diced onion mixed with oil, which he wore for three days. Yes, the pain subsided, but his foot remained numb and never moved freely again, so that it was always second to enter a church and last to make it to the future. As a novice he would often ponder whether the crone had done something to determine his course in life, for like her he also dressed in black from head to foot, wore his hair in a thin braid, and took to darning his own socks.

Like the fifty or so other monks in the monastery Father Maximos wore a black cassock, a cape that almost brushed the ground, and a cylindrical hat which, upon entering the church, was covered in a veil that fell over his shoulders and back. He usually opened the main gates at sunrise, just before the start of the Liturgy, but this morning he had set out especially early to prepare for Palm Sunday. As gatekeeper for the past thirty-seven years, he was also responsible for checking a visitor's permit and the general appearance of the entrance and portico. Several times each day he swept the uneven cobbles (they shone from a thousand years of leather-soled devotion and iron-shod obedience) with a broom made of dry willow-branches. The gateway was broad, its ceiling vaulted, and the

walls were covered in weathered frescoes. The caged lamp hanging from the centre of the ceiling was lowered and raised twice a day. At sunset, when he lit the wick that fluttered through the night like a canary, and again before sunrise, when he blew away the feathery flame together with moths that had expired from too much light. Fastidious in his cleanliness, he was quick to expel mischievous leaves that scurried in behind his back; he scared off swallows from nesting in the corners, for they stained the walls and spotted the cobbles; and he hurried clattering mules so they wouldn't lift their tails and drop black clumps. His left eye scrutinised all visitors who crossed the threshold, both to ascertain their motive in coming to the monastery and to check for muddy footwear. But if it were up to him, of course, he would follow the Muslim tradition, insisting that shoes be left in pairs outside the gate, for a monastery was as holy as a mosque.

Father Maximos had come to the Holy Mountain as a thirteen year-old, wearing sandals made of pigskin, patched trousers that revealed bony ankles, and a dark cap streaked with the salt of his boyhood. In those days a limp, even a slight one, was an impediment to a family struggling for subsistence. Rocky, with little arable land but an abundance of sky, his village was forgotten in the northwest corner of Greece, in that part of Macedonia close to the kingdoms of Serbia and Albania. Despite hardships the boy managed to learn his whole numbers watching his mother counting grains of wheat for tomorrow's bread, and his fractions from his father, who always cut a shrivelled apple in eighths, one for each extended hand. But he harboured no resentment when his parents, at the risk of blackening their son's manhood, took the advice of the village priest and arranged for him to attend a monastic boarding school for orphans and the needy.

The boy set out from the village with a long-legged woodcutter who went to Athos each spring and returned in autumn. When teased by the locals in the cafe about whether he missed the warmth of his wife, the fellow would blush that his first love had always been his axe, which never left his side, adding it had a better head than his wife and a more slender body. He had gone to Australia ten years earlier, where he worked felling trees and clearing land for farming. His intention had been to join a relative in Melbourne, but after a month at sea he couldn't face another four days of rolling waves, so he disembarked at Fremantle and headed for the nearest logging camp. But Australia didn't agree with him: its summers were as merciless as its flies, its language thick and raw, and the eucalypts so tough his axe barely bit into them, no matter how hard he struck. And so, after three years and thirty three broken handles, he returned to the village, much to the disappointment and chagrin of family members, who had hoped to join him abroad in that land of opportunity. A man of few words, one thought, and no regrets, he dismissed their derision by sharpening his axe on a whetstone moistened with the spit of his pride. Thereafter he went annually to Holy Mountain, where the deciduous beech, chestnut and oak were far more compliant than those sun-scorched gums.

Their profiles set like ploughs to the earth, woodcutter and boy trudged and limped eastward toward Salonika, travelling on remnants of the famous Via Egnatia, which once clattered from dawn in Constantinople to dusk Rome, with a quiet midday interlude over the Adriatic Sea. They refreshed themselves at the cataract in Edessa, though a local blacksmith pointed out the water always tasted better if they referred to the town by its Slavic name Voden. From there they proceeded to Pella, the birthplace of Alexander the Great, in whose ruined palace a flock of geese pecked on the mosaic floor.

Whistling the same melody for three days, as though making up for music's prohibition on Athos, the woodcutter led the way into Salonika, the second largest city in Greece. Here, only thirty years earlier, Jewish rabbis, Muslim imams and Christian bishops would meet in the shady yard of the cafe Platanos, to calculate with calendar and abacus when Passover, Ramadan and Easter would next coincide. The following morning, after a breakfast of sheep-tripe soup, they took their bearing from the rising sun and headed for Halkidiki, the three-fingered peninsular that dipped into the northern Aegean Sea as though into holy water. It was late afternoon when they arrived at the top of the third finger, which the Persian invader Xerxes had almost amputated with a canal, to avoid sailing his fleet around the devastating fingernail. Their long, dusty shadows preceded them into the fishing village of Prosphori, whose name would later change to Ouranoupolis, because the locals became too poor to make offerings of fish to the church, and they envisaged a better life elsewhere, perhaps in a city situated beyond the sky. The village was literally the end of the road, for the religious republic of the Holy Mountain had its own border, and access was possible only by a boat which left every morning at ten.

The sea was grazed red by the setting sun when they finally climbed to a room above a noisy cafe. Testing his axe on a leathery palm, the woodcutter called the boy to the window and nodded to a mauve-coloured mountain rising like a pyramid from the far end of the peninsular. Mount Athos, he said, a place where men forget wives, sons their mothers, and all become one in a brotherhood of black. After a meal of herring and lentil soup, they were about to turn in for the night when one of the locals heard that the woodcutter had been to Australia. He pointed out that an Australian couple lived in the stone tower overlooking the pier, boasting it had been built in the thirteenth century by the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus the Second. Despite the unpleasant experience at the time, the woodcutter had come to look back on Australia with some fondness, so when he saw the tower's lighted windows and balcony hung with coloured rugs, he whistled to his companion and strode off to test his English. Not understanding a word the boy sat eating a serving of fig jam, while the woodcutter felt a little more relaxed in the language after his third glass of raki. The man's name was Sydney Loch, his wife's Joice, and both were tall, at least by Greek standards. Adventurers and writers they had been granted lifetime residence in the tower for their efforts in drawing foreign aid after an earthquake that devastated the region. Years later, perhaps impressed by the sweetness of their jam, Father Maximos would ask visitors about the childless couple. Sydney worked on a book based on his many visits to Athos, only to die just before its completion, when his wife entered the forbidden region on a trail of words, bringing a woman's touch to what Westerners saw as a sternly patriarchal place. He was buried in the village, but his big bones were latter interred and taken to Salonika. Surviving her husband by almost thirty, Joice was laid to rest near the entrance to the cemetery. Her grave, tended by elderly women who had been employed by her as girls, bore two commemorative plaques and a simple horizontal cross of white pebbles.

A week after leaving their village the travellers reached the small port of Daphne, which on that clear spring day bustled with monks and pilgrims, workers and shopkeepers, boatmen and muleteers. They parted company with a wish to meet in the village again. The woodcutter filled his companion's pocket with chickpeas, then boarded a boat that would round the broad end of the peninsular and take him to the monastery of Great

Lavra, where he had been employed for the past few years. Alone for the first time in his life, seeing grimness in every face, too shy to say word to anyone, the boy turned his back on the jagged mountain and his eyes filled with tears at the thought of his family. His shadow tangled in a pile of nets, he remained on the pier for some time, thinking about returning to Ouranoupolis on the same boat. He was about to count his coins for the fare when a scruffy fisherman began slapping an octopus against the boards until it oozed a pool of black. The man smiled and signalled for him to come closer, upon which he dipped a finger in the inky liquid and drew a cross on the back of the boy's left hand. Heartened by the gesture he asked for directions to the school and was told to follow the uphill road behind the buildings, or, if he could afford it, hire a muleteer who would take him there. He set off on foot, limping over the uneven stones, and hadn't climbed more than half an hour when a party of travellers overtook him. Three men dressed in white suits and hats discussed something in a foreign language, and then one of them spoke to the muleteer, who asked in Greek if the boy wanted a ride. Mounted on a mule strapped with suitcases, he soon found himself at the front gate of the school, a crow's call from Karyes - the capital of the Athonite republic.

The school where he spent the next six years of his life, and where his present beard first darkened his cheeks, was situated in a wing of the Russian skete of Saint Andrew - a monastery which didn't have the same standing as the long-established twenty that constituted the Holy Council. Before the Revolution, however, the Russians had sought to elevate its status, perhaps as a way of increasing their power on the narrow peninsular, but their efforts, notwithstanding a visit by the monk Grigory Rasputin, were successfully opposed by the Greeks, who feared the increasing presence of their Slavic brothers. The skete had impressive gates, a fine courtyard, and one of the largest churches in the Balkans, whose design and icons were more in the Italian style than the Byzantine. When he first visited the church shortly after arriving at the school, the monastery was already in a state of decline, and cloisters that once accommodated hundreds were almost deserted. He could still remember gliding his left foot along the floor's cross-hatched parquetry, trying to comprehend the shrunken Greek monk who lectured the boys on how God's wrath had fallen on the monastery because the Russians had moved away from the Byzantine ideal through arrogance and pride. When a boy suggested the decline might have been due to the Revolution and Communist opposition to religion, the old monk turned sharply, as though attacked from behind, and said Providence worked in mysterious ways, for God had initiated the Revolution in order to save Athos from Slavic domination.

When the young man's schooling ended he was faced with the decision his parents had long feared: return home and become a priest or teacher, or remain on Athos for the rest of life. At the time, though, Greece was in the throes of a civil war: Communists were burning churches and fear emptied schools. With conditions in the village more desperate than ever, he considered the routine and order of his present life and decided to stay. For months he became a pilgrim, dragging his left foot the length of the narrow peninsular, spending a few nights in each of the twenty monasteries, kissing icons and holy relics, speaking with abbots and monks, all with a view to selecting a place that would suit his temperament. As a monastery reflected the character of its abbot as much as its physical surroundings, he settled for one the coast because the abbot at the time was known to plant broad beans under a full moon, and wading in salt water eased his numb foot.

Where a younger monk might have found the position of gatekeeper uneventful, perhaps tedious, Father Maximos welcomed the peace and quiet, especially in winter when fewer visitors came. His small side-room had a heater, a gas burner for making coffee, and a table with some books. He had always been fond of chanting to himself, but during the past few years the chants had started giving way to one-sided conversations with the figures on the ceiling and walls. Gazing from the window of his room, or sitting outside on the bench beside the door, he would address this or that saint or martyr as though they had been lifelong friends. He would tell them of his sore knees, apologise for not being able to reach up to clear the cobwebs from their clothes, or remind them of their life and deeds. His memory was unusual in that he often forgot the name of the person whose permission certificate he had just read, yet he could recite entire chapters from the Bible, recall the lives of many saints, and expatiate on the history and traditions of Athos.

Apart from talking to himself, Father Maximos had in recent months started imagining he was the gatekeeper at the main entrance to Jerusalem. Yesterday, perhaps due to the proximity of the first Palm Sunday of the new millennium, his body tingled with an excitement he hadn't felt since youth. He had been especially thorough in sweeping the entrance and, if he had palm branches, they would've decorated the gates. By midday his sense of expectation had transformed the murmur of the sea into the sound of an approaching crowd. He had studied each visitor carefully, spoken to them with greater kindness, and was less pointed with the indiscreet mules. Something would happen, he had told himself. A stranger might arrive on the back of a white mule. But the afternoon slipped away, the sea's murmur subsided to a moan, and shadows darkened the threshold. At dusk he stood at the gate, still waiting. Twilight silhouetted the forest and a chill rose from the cobbles. In pushing the gates shut, he found himself working harder than usual. Tomorrow, he told himself. Something might happen tomorrow. By the time he returned to his cell, however, the disappointment had ebbed and he felt again the stirring of his former expectation. Growing stronger by the hour, it kept him up all night, until he set out for the gate much earlier than usual.

And now here he was, sitting in the dim light cast by the lamp suspended in the portico, preparing for this special Palm Sunday. He was crossing fragrant sprigs of laurel for decorating the entrance when he stopped at what sounded like a knock on the gate. At first he dismissed it as nothing more than his ears popping, but when three distinct knocks struck again his heart fluttered like a moth in the lamp. Should he observe the monastic rule that demanded the gates remain closed between sunset and sunrise? But what if the visitor were injured or had been wandering lost all night? Surely monastic hospitality didn't end at sunset. When the knocking sounded again, sharper than before, he removed the crossbar and opened the gate by degrees, at first enough for a wandering thought to slip through, then a little more, for a famished shadow to enter sideways, and finally for a soul drained of sin by the dark. He held the visitor with his left eye, appraised him with his right, and directed him to the bench beside the office door. It would be an hour to matins, three to the liturgy, four to breakfast in the refectory and possibly five before a room could be provided in the guesthouse, if one was available this time of year. In his capacity as gatekeeper he enjoyed quizzing visitors, perhaps to test whether they were in fact worthy of entering the sacred compound, very much as Plato excluded from his Academy all those who were ignorant of geometry. So now, and maybe because his sense of

expectation wasn't fulfilled, the monk decided to test the patience of his shadowy visitor with a lecture on the history of Athos. If the fellow listened without complaint, in the spirit of one familiar with the taste of darkness, he would be permitted to enter, otherwise the road came as it went, but its stones remained still.

- Well, dear brother, and what do you know about our Holy Mountain? Yes, as much as most others, I suppose. First and foremost, that no woman has set foot here in a thousand years. And for this do we think less of our mothers than our fathers? No, brother, not at all, even though I hear a sisterly chorus chanting in objection. Women aren't the only beings excluded from Athos: our prohibition extends to cows, sheep, mares, bitches, sows and even chickens. The only domestic animals to find a home here are mules and cats: the former because they resemble monks in many ways, not least in that they don't propagate themselves and, by extension, sin; while the latter have used all their feline charm to ingratiate themselves with the abbots. But we're living in times of equality, you'll say. Women have a God-given right to come and kiss the icons and relics. Brother, I'd be the last to deny my sisters their rights, but one needs to know something of the history and prehistory of Athos in order to understand their exclusion.

And Father Maximos proceeded to explain that the maleness of the peninsular began when the earthly Titans rose against the gods on Mount Olympus. Outraged by the challenge to his authority, Zeus hurled an enormous rock at a rebel named Athos, who was instantly petrified into the eponymous mountain - irrefutable proof this had been a province of manly struggles from earliest times. The Titans lost that battle but they eventually won the war, for in time the seat of religious authority shifted from Olympus to Athos. As for the chastity of the place, it went back to the mythical Daphne, after whom the port was named. Disgusted by the thought of relations with any man, the young woman fled an ardent admirer and sought refuge on the peninsular, where she renounced her female nature and lived innocent as a flower. Her presence was still to be found in the shy daphne-laurel, whose leaves monks gathered not only to flavour food, but for making crosses at the beginning of Holy Week, to mark the soul's victory over flesh.

The first monks would never have settled on Athos if Alexander the Great had lived long enough to carry out his grandiose plan. In setting out for Asia the young Macedonian instructed his engineers to draw plans for his features to be sculpted into the bare summit of Athos - a work that would have been the eighth wonder of the ancient world. But the project was forgotten once he embarked on his conquests. Fortunately he died in Babylon, otherwise he might have remembered his idea in sailing past the mountain on his return to Pella. Having conquered the world, he would have had even more reason to implement his design. But Providence prevailed, sighed the gatekeeper, crossing himself three times. Athos was saved from a man who sought to be a god and reserved for the worship of God who became man. And so the first monks dedicated the peninsular to the Virgin, calling it her Garden. They came from Constantinople and Asia Minor, carrying their icons in woollen bags and the desert's silence sealed in their ears with beeswax. They had left the capital because the Emperor Leo the Third outlawed the worship, display and painting of icons. Churches were stripped and images burnt in persecutions that matched those of the Inquisition and the book burning of the Nazis. On Athos, though, the monks used their icons not as ends in themselves but as windows to the divine. Away from women in the flesh, they were free to worship their ideal woman - the Blessed Virgin.

The prohibition on women had been an unwritten law until the eleventh century, when the Emperor Alexius the First set it down on a crisp parchment that bore a colourful picture of himself holding the very parchment scrolled and tied with a crimson ribbon. At the time hundreds of Wallachian shepherd families settled on the slopes of the mountain, whose virginal pastures no sheep had nibbled for hundreds of years. Perhaps like the cats of today, the wives and daughters of those shepherds soon found their way into the monasteries as cooks, cleaners, even companions. It wasn't long before monastic vows were ignored in favour of the comforts provided by the women. Of course, the more ascetic monks objected to the state of affairs and castigated their brothers to return to their vows. When the Patriarch of Constantinople condemned the liberals, riots broke out which might have destroyed the community, if not for the Emperor's edict ordering the shepherd families to leave the mountain. They left, all right, and were followed not only by flocks of shorn sheep but by men who shaved their beards and stripped themselves of black. As a result the population of monks fell to a point where several monasteries became havens for jackdaws, and it wasn't until a century later that their numbers began to increase.

- You see, said Father Maximos, weaving another sprig into a cross. The spirit's willing but the flesh is weak, and it's because of this weakness women aren't allowed on Athos, this and our veneration for women in the form of the supreme woman - our Immaculate Virgin. Greetings to you, lantern of joy - that, brother, is the first line of the Akathistos Hymn, whose words taste of sweetness, especially in Lent.

Detecting no sign of impatience in his shadowy visitor, he continued the lecture with greater enthusiasm. In the year 963 the ascetic cave dweller Athanasios gathered the recluses scattered along the southern end of the peninsular and founded the Great Lavra - the first and still pre-eminent monastery on the Holy Mountain. The young Athanasios had come to Athos disguised as a peasant, and lived in precious obscurity until tracked down by his close friend, the general Nikephoras Phokas, whose star was just then beginning to rise. When the general prepared to free Crete from the Saracens, he asked Athanasios to bless the expedition, to which the latter agreed, though on condition that his boyhood friend swear an oath before the Holy Trinity. Phokas looked into the ascetic's bony sockets and swore that, upon his successful return to Constantinople, he would renounce the world and become a monk. But earthly power and glory seduced him, for upon entering the capital in triumph he dismissed the oath in his quest for the throne. Conscious of his broken promise and his friend's disappointment, the new Emperor donated considerable sums of money toward the construction of Lavra, which Athanasios accepted begrudgingly, for he believed that the salvation of a soul was worth more than all the gold in the East. And then, with truly Byzantine deceit, fortune turned sharply on Phokas and he was butchered by his nephew John Tsimiskis, who was not only intimate with his uncle's wife, the brothel-keeper's daughter Theophano, but on good terms with Athanasios himself. Perhaps as his face was being torn off like a mask, Phokas thought of his boyhood friend and regretted breaking the oath. In any case, Tsimiskis proved as generous as his predecessor, donating funds to complete the monastery, perhaps to cover his sins.

- How did Athanasios view the dramatic turn of events? the gatekeeper asked, taking his visitor aback. Did he accept the gifts of Tsimiskis with an easy conscience?

After all, both Emperors are honoured with frescoes in several monasteries on Athos. Or did he privately denounce the murderer of his friend? Who knows, brother? Away from the murky affairs of men and women, Athanasios might have seen things in a clearer light. He lived on nothing but air scented with incense, and for ascetics like that sin has no categories, no degrees - an evil thought's no different from the act itself. But it's certain he wrestled day and night against the sin of pride, for he wore an iron cross and collar, both of which rusted from the strong sweat of his penance. And so, brother, it wasn't for him to judge the deeds of Emperors, who would answer to a higher authority. No, he came to Athos, the Virgin's Garden, for the salvation of his own soul. A mover of men through leading by example, he is said to have yoked himself beside an ox and strained with his salivating brother in dragging massive boulders from the foot of the mountain. As befitting the best general, he died in the battle of construction, crushed by the collapse of a church dome.

As Father Maximos spoke he studied the visitor's face, his posture, and especially the restrained movements of his hands. Yes, he could have tested him further, but he had seen enough to consider the fellow worthy of entering the monastery. After inspecting his permit, he invited him to rest a while in the office, offering to light the heater and make him coffee. The fellow declined by raising his eyebrows in a typically Greek manner, upon which the monk limped off to decorate the entrance with daphne-laurel, in readiness for Holy Week.

Having diminished to the size of a daisy petal, though still dreaming of sunrise, the flame in the icon lamp now filled his cell more with the oppressive odour of burnt olive oil than useful light - a sign that matins wasn't far off. John Rados, a novice soon to be tonsured a monk, continued the challenge he had commenced just after sunset. This night had been on his mind for several weeks, from the moment he received his father's letter informing him of his visit, and now neither the chill that numbed his fingertips nor the hunger churning in his stomach could weaken his resolve. This was his second Lent on Mount Athos: a time when monks were quieter, paler, more withdrawn due to the rigours of their fast. Like the others he abstained from meat and dairy products throughout the year, avoided oil on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and was punishingly frugal in the forty days before Easter. In the homilies delivered from his table in the refectory, the Abbot of course encouraged fasting, but only according to one's strength and constitution. A monk shouldn't weaken himself to the point where he fainted during matins and vespers, or to a state where he was unable to carry out his appointed duties. Mindful of the Abbot's advice, he also knew his own strength and capabilities, and was determined to see out the all-night vigil, despite the additional privations imposed on him by this most testing time of the year.

John had entered the monastery eighteen months earlier, and from the outset was eager to measure his progress against the youthful deeds of renowned monks and ascetics. A story that impressed him in those early days, and which verged almost on legend, related to a novice who, on the eve of his tonsure, retreated from the monastery to a nearby cave on the foot of Athos. There, shunning others with the shyness of a deer, he spent the remainder of his life praying from dusk to dawn, mostly on all fours. He lived to an old age, as hermits were known to do in days before the proliferation of calendars, but his beard grew much longer than his life. In keeping with monastic tradition, when his remains were exhumed after three particularly wet years, his snowy beard was found to be still growing, covering his naked bones like a chiffon, down to his knees worn white from prayer. The hermit's skull was now stored in the ossuary, together with a host of others, all inscribed with name and age. But his incorruptible kneecaps were nestled in the fleecy beard and kept in a wooden box. They were shown to visitors, not as part of the monastery's official holy relics, but as objects of veneration for those who suffered from arthritis. Shortly after his arrival John had climbed up to the hermit's long-abandoned cave and knelt for an hour in the corner where remnants of the chapel could still be seen. That evening, inspired by his visit, he had attempted his first personal all-night vigil. Despite his best intentions and a determination that had pushed him to run marathons, he was unable to maintain the prayer count, his prostrations faltered due to the pain in his right shoulder, and he yielded to the gravity of sleep.

Now, with the semantron about to strike the call for matins, he was still praying on his knees before an assembly of icons on the shelf, the most prominent depicting a smoke-stained Crucifixion. And once again he leaned forward onto his aching knuckles, pressed his forehead to the floorboards, held that position for some time against the pain shooting through his shoulder, then straightened up and slowly crossed himself three times. He had

performed over two thousand of these prostrations during night, pausing only briefly now and then for a few sips of water or to stretch his body stiff from cold and the occasional cramps. Unlike his previous failed attempt, this time he had made a concerted effort at the very outset to establish a rhythm and maintain a pace that wasn't too punishing. He drew from his experience as a marathon runner. In his first attempt he had gone out too quickly and hit the dreaded wall at thirty kilometres. It wasn't a question of stamina, rather one of rhythm and pacing, and when these were established the wall receded to beyond the finishing line.

The weak lamplight blended objects and shadows in the front of the two-roomed cell. In the centre of the low-ceilinged room a table made of lining boards was covered in books whose titles couldn't be read. Between the window and door leading to the bedroom, a solid bench was neatly arranged with cups, canisters, utensils, and a blackened teapot squatting on a gas burner. The pendulum clock fixed to the wall had belonged to the cell's previous occupant: an elderly monk who died just before John's arrival, having been in the monastery more than seventy years. In spite of its age the clock had a lively tick and was still accurate, relative to dawn and dusk, in keeping Byzantine time: a system which took sunset as twelve midnight and necessitated regular adjustments of the pointed hands. A wood-heater crouched disconsolately in the corner opposite the icons. He had refrained from lighting it at nightfall, for warmth and comfort might weaken his purpose and undermine his vigil.

The ceremony when John would be inducted fully into the monastic order was scheduled for the third Sunday after Easter, but he had already undergone a lesser ritual as the first step toward becoming a monk. A few months earlier the soft-spoken priest, Father Evlogios, had crowned him with a cylindrical hat and covered his cassock with a black robe. He hadn't taken any vows at the time, other than a simple declaration to abide by the rules that governed the life of the monastery. This was regarded as the lowest rung of the monastic ladder: a position one could maintain permanently, without being compelled to aspire to anything higher, and perhaps best suited to those for whom the cloister was a refuge from a tumultuous world rather than an arena for strict asceticism. But this relatively easy position wasn't for him: the twenty eight year-old had renounced a comfortable life in Australia and embraced the austerity of the Holy Mountain in order to engage in ascetic struggle, or what the Holy Fathers called spiritual warfare. By accepting the monastic vows of obedience, poverty and chastity he would be conferred with a new name of his choice, tonsured with the priest's scissors, given the black veil that covered the hat, and made a monk of the Lesser-Habit. Inspired by reading *The Lives of the Saints*, John hoped to climb beyond this and become a monk of the Great-Habit, a title bestowed on those who practiced greater asceticism through a prodigious number of daily prayers and prostrations, longer periods of silence, and even stricter fasting. This had been his dream since entering the monastery: to live the ascetic ideal so that one day he might wear the black stole embroidered with crosses, skulls and monograms. Monks who attained this highest of states underwent another ceremony, assumed another name, and were buried in full habit when they fell asleep in the Lord.

As his brow touched the head of a nail protruding from the floorboard, he imagined once again what he had witnessed several times. He too would enter the nave and prostrate himself before the altar. The choir's hymn would resonate in the dome. Both

the Abbot and Father Evlogios would ask a series of questions, eliciting from him an assurance that he was embarking on this path of his own volition. A reading from the Gospel of Matthew would follow: For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses it for My sake shall find it. Then, in a gesture meant to symbolise an act of free will, he would hand the scissors to the priest for the four-pointed tonsure. The first snip of his hair would sever him from the world, the second from his family, the third from his name, and the fourth from his passions. With that John Rados would be swept away together with the dust, but a new man would arise, baptised in holy black, bearing a first name beginning with the same letter as the name he had discarded, and a surname that of the monastery.

The adoption of a new name had been troubling him for some time. Having studied saints whose names began with J, he felt especially drawn to those who had died in the full bloom of their martyrdom. Give blood and receive spirit: that heroic sentiment had impressed him long before coming to Athos, and now that he was embarking on the ascetic life himself it assumed even more significance. In a recent chat with the Abbot, who arranged to see each monk on a weekly basis, John had proposed several names chosen for the bravery of their bearers. The Abbot adjusted his glasses and reflected for a moment, eyes twinkling with geniality. He then twisted a somewhat oily pony-tail into a bun, secured it under his hat, and suggested another name, that of an early Church Father, a venerable bishop who had been canonised for his polemics against the heresies of the day. John kissed the back of his sun-spotted hand and thanked him in a non-committal manner. A name was more than a hollow sound, the Abbot smiled through whiskers made more ginger by the sunlight. He could empathise with those six hundred Russian monks who, on orders from Tsar Nicholas himself, were expelled from the Holy Mountain in 1913 because they had dared to believe in the divinity of the very sound of God's name, which they chanted in mantric fashion. John had wanted to ask whether the name of God sounded more divine as the Russian Boga, Greek Theos, Hebrew Yahweh, or Australian-Aboriginal Biarni, but he refrained, not wanting to interrupt the other's good-natured homily. At the front door of his spacious and well-furnished rooms, the Abbot advised John to discuss the matter with Elder Kyrillos, adding that a novice must be guided by the wisdom of his spiritual father, no matter how unreasonable it might seem. He related the story of a novice who had complained to him of being verbally abused, even slapped and kicked, by his mentor. He had subdued the young man's resentment by pointing out the need for obedience and forbearance. Athos wasn't a place of rest and recreation: monks were life-long soldiers in the service of the spirit, and novices were raw recruits whose nature must be tempered for the battles ahead. The young man endured the abuse for some time, until a smile broke through his mentor's frown, when he understood at once the two-fold purpose of his actions. The monk had withheld his wisdom and compassion for fear of being admired by the impressionable youth, a situation that might lead to the sin of vanity; at the same time, though, his display of cruelty was intended to curb a streak of pride in the young man's nature.

In returning to his cell John had repeated the name suggested by the Abbot, slowly, as though tasting a new flavour in the syllables, one that tasted slightly bitter, like at seeds of an apple. Why had he chosen that saint and not one who had died young and flushed with faith? But he had no sooner felt this twinge of resentment than he chastised

himself: he must overcome his self-assertiveness if he were to practice the vow of obedience. And in a flash he understood the need to uproot pride from his heart. That tenacious human attribute so nurtured and valued by the world had no place on the Holy Mountain.

He crossed himself with numb fingers and kissed the icon of the Crucifixion. His knees were stiff, knuckles sore and swollen from the floorboards, and his right shoulder blade still ached from that brush with death on his first visit to Greece almost two years earlier. The letter from his father lay beneath a jar of dry figs on the table. How many times had he read it since its arrival? And after each reading the knot in his stomach tightened. Turning to the clock, he added five hours to convert Byzantine time to Greek, then another eight for the time in Melbourne, followed by an addition of thirteen days, for the monastery still used the old Julian calendar. And so he calculated that his father was now on the plane, tomorrow he would be in Greece, while on Wednesday or Thursday he would be on Athos. He took the envelope to the lamp. The bright stamp featured the Olympics, which Sydney would be hosting in five months. What had become of his extensive stamp collection? As an adolescent he had aspirations of becoming a marathon runner and representing Australia in those Olympics. What had become of that dream?

He swallowed back a swell of emotion and stared at his name: it was written in an uneven hand, for despite many years in Australia his father wasn't proficient in English. And suddenly, in the dying light, he saw his name as though for the first time and was struck by the thought of having to discard such an essential part of himself. In a little over two weeks he would sever himself not only from his Christian name, which had belonged to his paternal grandfather, but from a surname which had been sustained and nourished by the flesh and blood of countless ancestors. This throbbing surname, the leap of humanity from generation to generation, an eternity of evolution - all would come to an abrupt dead end in him. In his conscious acceptance of celibacy he was making a tomb of his body. His eyes brimmed with tears at this terrible prospect, but he quickly checked himself by recalling the words of Elder Kyrillos: a monk must die to the ways of the world and the wearing of black was a sign of this surrender and mourning. Such things were difficult at first, he had said many times, but it was only through mourning that one attained true humility, and through humility that one glimpsed the radiance of paradise.

John read the name on the back of the envelope and for an instant saw clearly the shape of his father's hand in his own. His mother had written frequently during his first months on Athos, informing him of this or that, while concealing her emotions behind a matter-of-fact tone. And he had replied promptly, assuring her that he was well and comfortable and adjusting to the long early morning services, his chores around the monastery, the vegetarian diet, with a serving of fish on days commemorating this or that saint. In time, however, her letters unsettled him, stirring a feeling of betrayal at not having fulfilled family expectations, particularly his father's, who left Macedonia at the age of nineteen. His mother was from Crete and emigrated with her parents when she was ten. As the only child of this hard-working couple, he hadn't yet come to terms with a lingering sense of obligation for their sacrifices for him. The letters were always circumspect in reply to questions about his father, and John understood that he was still hurting, but he hoped that one day he would accept the situation, though his silence suggested it was a long way off. When he stopped replying, her letters became less frequent, until she

stopped writing altogether, perhaps sensing her affect on him. And then, out of the blue, this: his father's first contact since coming to Athos. It was terse, hesitant, with several crosses and deletions. There was no anger or bitterness, only a faint note of resignation, as though he had been drained of pain and disappointment. This was not the man John had known. What exactly did it mean? Why was he undertaking this trip? What paternal pressure would he exert in order to sway his son and have him return to Australia? Was it a father's last desperate attempt to save his only child from what he considered a fate worse than death? John now recalled how he had exploded in accusations of ingratitude, threats of disinheritance, rage against what he called "the blackening of the family". John had met those outbursts with restraint (a trait he shared with his mother), until the aggrieved man refused to speak to him, simmering in a silence that crimsoned his ears. Choking with obstinacy, he remained at home on the day John and his mother left for the airport. She possessed a religious temperament, and though she had cried at his decision, he could discern something through her quiet tears, if not exactly a blessing, at least a sense of respect for a course of action beyond her comprehension.

The small flame stirred and nibbled the edge of the envelope. For an instant, perhaps from filial sentiment, he thought of keeping the letter, but the calling to be a monk prevailed and the Olympic stamp suddenly flared. He opened the heater, dropped the flaming letter inside, and watched his father's words shrivel to ash, which he scattered with a light breath. Satisfied his all-night vigil would strengthen him for whatever lay ahead, he went to the window and opened the internal shutters. A faint reflection returned his look. What would his father think of his beard, the ponytail, and the dark wreaths under his eyes? But he quickly admonished himself for these thoughts. Monks were no longer sons of flesh and blood: their mother was the monastery, their father the Word of God. Still, he felt a touch of pride at his austere appearance, knowing it would make a strong impression on his father.

John's attention vacillated from his reflection, to the church in the courtyard. In concentrating on his features, he lost sight of the church; when he focused on the central dome his own face became blurred and insubstantial. At any instant it was either one or the other, not both, just like an ambiguous picture in which one's perception alternated from a young woman to an old man. Was it just the limitations of the human eye? Or did this mutual exclusiveness point to something fundamental in human nature? Was it a hint of man's relationship to God? He recalled Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and how it had intrigued him when he first studied it at university. Under certain conditions an electron was said to behave like a particle, possessing the characteristics of matter, able to be located in space at any instant; in other situations it behaved like a wave, becoming more a cloud than a rain-drop, a process than a point, spirit than stone. And it suddenly occurred to him that monasticism was predicated on a duality as fundamental as the one at the core of the physical world. Like electrons, monks also meditated between two extreme states: the World and the Word. An appreciation of one precluded a full sense of the other. As a product of the World the "I" was an obstacle to God. In this regard the monastic ideal negated the importance of identity and of taking pride in one's self. The monk's task was to weaken the presence of "I", make it faint, see through it as through a dark glass, until the essential person stood in an absolute relation to God.

Down in the courtyard lamps now shone thinly in doorways, in the loggia along the front of the church, the portico leading to the main gate, and above the steps of the small chapel dedicated to the Virgin. Haloed by a chilly hue the crescent moon was poised above the cross on the central dome. The small windows in the cupola glowed with the softness of an icon's background. Early last autumn John had assisted in polishing the lamp-holders, the candlesticks, and the circular candelabra that hung from a massive chain attached to the dome - all for the special service which preceded the monastery's Feast Day. It had started at sunset and continued without interruption through to the early hours of the morning. Unlike the solemnity of matins and vespers, this was a joyful occasion. Smelling of newness and camphor, gowns and head veils were blacker than the springtime shadow of a cypress, while the priest's robes sparkled in red and gold. The proceedings were conducted by the Abbot, who occupied the usually vacant bishop's throne. Stiff in opulent vestments, he simply nodded or raised his staff to set in train a new sequence of movement, accompanied by a different hymn. Orchestrated by tradition, with formal acts and resonating chants, the service was performed on a scale that reminded John of high opera. In a moment of mirth (perhaps the only expression of playfulness he allowed himself), the Abbot pushed the candelabra with his staff, so it lurched to one side with a tingle and rotated erratically before slowing to a harmonic sway. Yes, that had been the high point of the service. The choir rose in a single voice and filled the dome, from whose height Christ looked down less severely. Shadows performed Isaiah's dance on the tiled floor and against the frescoed walls. Father Evlogios rattled the censer above his quiet voice, dispersing clouds of fragrant smoke through the nave. The Abbot's eyes twinkled and a smile flew from the thicket of his reddish beard. The nave became an ark full of life, buoyed on a happy sea, sailing toward sunrise. And for the first time since entering the monastery, John's thoughts and concerns receded, his heart opened fully to the moment, and he felt close to those around him, no longer alone in his skull, but a part of this brotherhood in black.

Again his features emerged from the courtyard and he recalled the summer of his first beard. He had just commenced university at a time when the clean-cut look was popular on campus. Ever since his adolescence he had been fascinated by the bearded figures of science and religion, and now, away from the restrictions of high school, he could finally identify with his heroes. His close friends had laughed he would never impress girls by looking like a throwback from the seventies; while his father frowned that the only people with beards in his village days were priests and Communists, and both condemned the profits of hard work. But their taunts served only to strengthen his resolve, and this in turn gave his beard a kind of robustness. A beard might have been a symbol of rebellion for some students, a show of intelligence for others, but for him it was the outcome of a vow. Upon leaving high school he had sworn to live as a monk of science, not shaving until he completed his PhD and donned the ceremonial black gown and hat.

A monk appeared in the courtyard and walked across the reflection of John's arched eyebrows as though over a bridge. It was Father Theodore hurrying to the semantron waiting with outstretched arms on two brackets fixed to the refectory wall. The thirty-year-old Russian had entered the monastery just after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He was fluent in English and making good progress in learning Greek. When John had asked why he hadn't gone to Panteleimon, the Russian monastery, and the largest of

the twenty on Athos, he replied he felt more Russian away from Russians. Questioned a little further he turned red in explaining how the Revolution had been anathema to the religious life at home and abroad, and how the atheistic State had all but strangled the monastic ideal in Panteleimon. He had come to Athos seeking a place which retained that ideal in its purest form, and which still practiced the Hesychast tradition: the mystical current within the Eastern Church based on silence, meditation and inward prayer. The monastery of Panteleimon was undergoing a revival and committed young monks were arriving from all over vast Russia, which was slowly reclaiming its holiness, still he had chosen to remain here because of the unbroken Hesychastic tradition. He had settled into the monastery without too much dislocation and was now comfortable, but the same couldn't be said for the Greek language, which he had to learn well if he wished to make this a truly spiritual home. It wasn't so much the alphabet, which the Macedonian Saints Cyril and Methodius had used as the basis for the Russian, but certain Greek sounds, 'th' in particular, that were like thorns on his tongue. Having noticed the novice's linguistic problem, the discerning Abbot proposed he adopt the monastic name Theodore, so that familiarity with the first two letters might facilitate their pronunciation. And it had been useful: the phoneme was less thorny on his tongue, though in moments of haste or absent-mindedness he still referred to himself Feodor - the 'th' becoming sometimes a gruff Russian f, other times a tooth-exposing t.

Father Theodore's pleated robe billowed open and the veil draping his hat and back fluttered behind him as he skipped up the steps to the semantron. Resembling two flat oars joined end to end, the smooth sounding board had summoned monks to matins and vespers ever since the Ottoman occupation of the peninsula, when crimson fezzes rode high on horseback and black stovepipes bowed to the earth. The governing Pasha prohibited the sounding of bells, denouncing their ringing as detrimental to a religious sensibility, while others said it was because a bell sounding in a tower carried further than a mullah calling from a minaret. In any case, the Pasha had been more tolerant of the semantron because its sound was mellower, more musical, recalling an age before iron and bronze, when trees flourished and the world was more peaceful. There must have been something in this, for when the Ottomans were finally expelled the monks took to the semantron, as the rest of Greece had taken to the clatter of dice on a backgammon board.

Holding the instrument by its narrow mid-section, Father Theodore turned to from the refectory wall. A shiver seemed to pass through the cypresses on either side of the church's entrance. Here and there, as though anticipating a signal, light leapt out from cloister windows. He looked around, ascertained that everything was in order (or had the thought of shattering so many dreams momentarily arrested him?), then struck the board with a mallet in a series of staccato beats. The rhythmic crack of wood on wood echoed against stone walls, filled the courtyard, rose to the sky riveted with stars. Raising and lowering the pitch, he hammered his joyful summons with a distinctive flourish of the mallet, marching beside the guesthouse, behind the refectory, around the church. As the call became livelier, more insistent, shadows appeared on balconies, descended staircases, and crossed the courtyard on their way to church.

On first entering the monastery John had disliked the sharp clatter that prodded him from sleep and shoved him into the alien dark, denying him time to find the thread of his dreams. As child he had experienced vivid dreams and was intrigued by their

significance, perhaps because his mother would relate hers to family and friends in a manner suggesting they were visions of another world. And later, despite his research in genetics, he remained susceptible to their subtle influence, and feared that computer science might encroach on their domain - a case of wishes scripted and projected on the sleeper's mind. He had feared this intrusion because he believed that dreams were the most private of experiences and that they were somehow a guarantee of human freedom. Playful, chaotic, even irrational, they stripped away social conventions and exposed a different order of reality. What the rational mind took as chaos might in fact be a sublime order, a complex formula, God's infinite unfolding. In this increasingly intrusive age, when manipulators would reach into hearts and minds, perhaps dreams remained the last refuge of the individual, the true home of the self, the inner sanctuary of being. And if science should ever determine the content of dreams, that day might mark the end of humanity.

After a year in the monastery, disciplined to live with less sleep and fewer dreams, he became more accepting of the *semantron*. Its beat was no longer a hammer driving a nail through his skull, but rather a caress inviting him to partake of communal sweetness. As for dreams they still retained their wonder, but the sanctuary of human freedom had shifted from their domain and was now firmly established in the realm of faith. As assistant in the guesthouse since the beginning of the year, when the Abbot shuffled areas of responsibility, he had worked more closely with the *semantron*. After welcoming visitors with a glass of monastic raki and a Turkish delight, whose fine icing-sugar often powdered his cassock, he would inform them of the signals for vespers and matins. The guesthouse was busiest in Holy Week, its resources strained to the limit. Visitors waking at different times: the devout at the first crack of the board, the respectful when John echoed that crack by knocking on their doors just before the Liturgy, while the tourist-minded at the clatter of utensils in the refectory.

As Father Theodore passed beneath the window, the icon flame suddenly died and John's reflection vanished from the glass. The smell of burnt oil mingled with the heavy darkness. In the faint moonlight he adjusted his cassock, tightened the belt-buckle stamped with the Crucifixion, and took his robe hanging from a hook on the wall. It was plain, without pleats, a little frayed around the hem. He wondered whether his father might buy him another, just as he had insisted on paying for the hire of his graduation gown.

As the semantron's crisp staccato rose and fell, approached and receded, Stefan Vekovic knelt beside the cold heater, reciting under his breath: This life is short, but death is long. Forgive me, Lord, for all my sins. He had first read those words shortly after coming to the monastery, quickly internalising them so they sprang to mind at the sound of the wooden board. Now, scraping out yesterday's ash into a tray, he repeated the line over and over, each syllable nailed by the mallet's rhythmic beat. The words were underlined in a small book given to him by John, whose friendship went back to their boyhood in Australia. It was written in the form of a diary and recounted the novitiate of a Canadian-born monk of Greek descent who had settled on Athos in the mid-seventies: a time when others his age were discovering the cloudiness of ouzo mixed with water, the tease of the round bellied bouzouki, and the sweat of Zorba's dance in all-night bars on Greek islands. Stefan wasn't one for reading, but the slim paperback with the purple cover had spoken to him in a calm, assuaging voice. After what he had experienced in Kosovo a year earlier, the book helped to gather his scattered thoughts and settle his emotions.

As the first monks entered the church he snapped a few branches and lit the heater in the inner narthex. He wore black jeans grey at the knees and a padded hunter's vest over a dark-polo-neck jumper. His beard was fair and stringy, and his shoulder-length hair kept in place by a woollen cap pulled over his ears. Though he had been in the monastery almost a year, living as strictly as any novice, he hadn't yet committed himself to monastic life. In discussing his future with the Abbot, who spoke English well, Stefan had asked for more time to resolve certain personal issues. The Abbot had not pressed him for an explanation, though he suspected it had something to do with events in the Balkans, for the young man's face would redden, as though licked by flames, whenever they broached the subject of the war in Kosovo.

A month ago, at the Abbot's tactful suggestion, Stefan had volunteered to assist the construction crew employed in renovating a section of the monastery. Despite the difficult nature of that work, he still managed to get up early and carry out his duty of warming the church in readiness for matins. As in most monasteries the church here was situated in the centre of the courtyard and based on the shape of the Byzantine cross. Its length extended from the main entrance, which opened to the setting sun, through to the rounded apse at the other end. All entered from the gates in the decorated loggia and stepped into the outer-narthex, beyond which the unbaptised were prohibited. Penitents cut off from communion were permitted as far as the inner-narthex. Reserved for the faithful the nave was surmounted by a dome from which Christ the Pantocrator, ruler of heaven and earth, looked down in sorrow and judgment. The iconostasis screened the altar with a series of panelled icons and a pair of gates through which only those who ministered were permitted to enter. Made of walnut the frame and columns were carved with detailed figures, including God's hands in the act of shaping creation and the very craftsmen who chiselled those hands. The semi-circular transepts on either side of the nave contained a lectern around which the choir gathered to chant.

Upon leaving Australia sixteen months ago Stefan had gone directly to his father's village in Kosovo, just as the conflict there was starting to escalate. A few months later,

after NATO's bombing of Belgrade, he was back in the capital, staying in a basement room near Kalemagden Park. Explosions still ringing in his ears, he would stand for hours beneath grief-stricken elms, staring at the battles between the black and white armies on the chessboards of elderly players. Finally he stuffed his few belongings into a backpack and hitchhiked south, toward Skopje, often waiting hours in the rain for barges that crossed rivers whose bridges had been destroyed. The heavy military presence at border posts couldn't stem the turgid flow of humanity: cars and trucks filled with people and possessions stretched for kilometres as the displaced scrambled for safety in neighbouring countries. He made his way through the chaos and entered Greece, spending two days in Salonika before setting out by bus for Hilandar, the Serbian monastery on Mount Athos. He had gone there intent on becoming a monk, but only if he could clear his head and heart of all that had happened in recent months. A fortnight later, however, he thanked the Abbot for his hospitality and left to locate John, who had become a novice in one of the Greek monasteries the previous year. Later he would explain to his friend how he had come to Athos to escape the madness of the Balkans, but this hadn't been possible at Hilandar, which was steeped in Serbian history and too close to his own recent past.

During his first few months in the monastery Stefan had spent hours in John's cell, more often than not deep in thought, as though needing the presence of a close and stable friend. Yes, John had always been more circumspect than he, measured in his approach to life, prepared to train hard in sport and work toward his academic goals. When he felt more settled Stefan had attempted to relate to him through their common past, until it became evident he was reluctant to talk about their life in Melbourne, perhaps because he was still wrestling with his novitiate, and those memories weakened him in that struggle. Their meetings were guarded, tentative, with Stefan tactful in asking what had made him to turn from science to monasticism, while John didn't probe too deeply about what had happened in Kosovo. But their friendship was eventually redefined within a monastic context, and he accepted Greek lessons from John, who insisted the language was necessary if he intended to remain.

With ample time for reflection over the past year, Stefan could now see, though without moral judgment, that he had been brought to this crossroad by his father's beliefs. Ivan Vekovic was born in a small village in southern Kosovo, close to the borders of Macedonia and Serbia. As a teenager he immigrated to Australia with his parents, and at twenty married a Serbian girl who bore two sons - Lazar and, ten years later, Stefan. Ivan was a strong, bull-necked man who worked hard in an iron foundry, drank his homemade plum brandy straight from the bottle, and wept a glass full of tears listening to traditional songs. His wife was praised by relatives and friends for the cleanliness of her house, her dexterity with crochet needles, and the manner in which she prepared for the name days of her husband and sons. When Lazar was twenty he quarrelled bitterly with his father over his Australian girlfriend and left home. One evening, after half a bottle of plum brandy (he insisted it tasted better as slivovits), and a jar of pickled cabbage, Ivan admitted to his wife he had failed as a father and a Serb with his first born, but was determined to succeed with his second. He knocked back another glass, placed the first three fingers of his right hand over his heart, and vowed to save his younger son from the Australian way of life.

And so began Stefan's immersion into the "blood of his people" as Ivan would say. First, apart from his regular education, the boy attended Serbian school on Saturday

mornings, driven there by Ivan, who declined weekend work for the sake of his son. He had forged enough steel, he told his fellow-workers. The time had come to forge his son's soul and make him a proud Serb. Under his father's prodding eyes and pointed moustache (a Vekovic tradition from times when moustaches were braided with hemp and stiffened with beeswax), young Stefan recited by heart tracts from the epic folk-poem about Prince Lazar and the slaughter of his army by the Ottomans at Kosovo Field. When the boy asked why Serbians glorified a massacre and not a happy event in their history, Ivan's reply was sharper than the sickle he had held between his teeth when harvesting corn as a youth. The Battle of Kosovo Field was more important to Serbs than the massacre at Gallipoli to Australians, for the simple fact that Serbian blood had been spilt at home not in distant Turkey. Stefan thought about this for some time and wondered whether blood was really thicker than water. At parties and picnics Ivan would stand the boy on a table and have him entertain relatives and friends with his recitations. And Stefan sensed that reciting Serbian poetry was different from reciting the Australian anthem, for nobody cried at school assembles, while his recitations filled many eyes with Serbian tears, which his father said were saltier than the those of other nations.

It was at this time also that Stefan first heard of Hilandar and its importance to the Serbian nation. The monastery was founded jointly by the Serbian King Stefan (after whom the boy had been named) and his son Ratsko, who turned his back on the pleasures of the court for a life of self-denial on Athos, assuming the monastic name Savvas. When the King finally discovered his son's whereabouts he summoned him back, but received instead the Prince's discarded royal robes. Pining for his beloved son, and yet moved by his unshakable faith, Stefan abdicated the throne and joined Savvas, becoming himself the monk Simeon. From then on the two were no longer father and son, but brothers in the equality of black, ascetics baptised in the sweat of their brows, penitents in the lowliness of their dusty shadows.

Stefan's admiration for Hilandar's founders increased as he understood more fully the extent of their sacrifice. And he began to question himself. What would he sacrifice for the sake of God? The new bike he received for Christmas, which could out-race all the others in the neighbourhood? His collection of football cards - the envy of school? He had bought them over the past year through denying himself sweets and drinks from the school canteen. One autumn afternoon, while his parents were still at work, he decided to test himself. He lit a small fire in the corner of the vegetable patch, beneath a pomegranate tree heavy with bright fruit, and dropped the cards into the dancing flames. The sacrifice had its consolation - his father was right: Serbian tears were the saltiest of all.

When he was fourteen Stefan began serving as an altar boy at a Serbian Orthodox Church. A talented football player, he would have preferred to be out on the field, tearing through the opposition with his speed, but obeying his father he buttoned a light-blue robe up to his neck and tiptoed shyly about church. He assisted with preparations in the sanctuary, filled the priest's censer, and followed as he dispensed smoky blessings to the congregation. Last Easter he had stayed up until midnight, helping decorate the processional canopy with carnations and marigolds. On Good Friday he had been chosen to carry the purple banner embroidered in gold with Christ's thorny head. That evening, leading the large gathering around the church grounds, he had caught a glimpse of his

parents, their faces lit by the candle in their hands: their eyes gleamed more intensely than when he had been awarded the trophy as the best player in the competition.

His first direct experience of Mount Athos occurred a year later, on the third Sunday after Epiphany. It was a hot January morning, with no sign of relief from the searing heat wave that withered the faces of the congregation. As the priest administered communion in what seemed like slow motion, Stefan stood behind the iconostasis, occasionally peeping into the nave through a gap in a sliding side-panel painted with the archangel Michael. The robe, which had been long and loose on him last Easter, now felt tight and uncomfortable, its collar cutting into his neck. A thread of smoke curling up from the hanging censer thickened the air. He wished the priest would hurry, so he could have lunch and join his friends at the local pool. Through the open windows the sound of crow calling crow rose above the chanter's drone, while a warm northerly wind ruffled the candles commemorating the dead. As the communion line neared its end, he observed a bearded figure enter the church, cross himself before the icons, and walk down the aisle with a firm step. He wore an overcoat drawn at the waist by a sash and a black woollen cap pulled to his eyebrows. The laces of his loose-fitting boots were undone. A sack was slung over his left shoulder and a knotty walking stick tapped the floor at each step. Was he a derelict who had strayed into the church looking for a handout? Or was he mentally unwell? But there was a steadiness in his downcast eyes as he joined the others for communion. When his turn came he bowed low before the priest, who asked in Serbian if he were a baptised Christian. The old man nodded and accepted the proffered spoonful of wine. He then took a small cube of bread from a basket and stood to the side, where he was more visible to Stefan. He ate the bread carefully, in several bites, cupping his palm under his mouth to catch the falling crumbs, which he then picked out with a moist fingertip.

After the service the priest and a few men in the church committee, including Stefan's father, met with the stranger in a back room whose walls were covered with prints of Serbian monarchs and bishops. Stefan didn't go home with his mother, but removed his robe and sat quietly in a corner. Having the ability to conjure a bottle of slivovits from thin air, Ivan filled seven or eight small glasses and passed them around on a tray. The old man declined with a polite bow and asked for water. The priest welcomed him to Australia, saying how honoured they were by his visit to their church. A chorus echoed his words, and the glasses were knocked back in unison. After a few more rounds the fiery drink was further distilled as clear sweat on the brows of flushed faces.

In studying the stranger, Stefan saw nothing in his appearance to warrant such esteem, except for the beard spread over his chest like a bramble bush and concealing a large wooden cross. As the crow-calls continued outside Stefan strained after every Serbian word in the ensuing conversation. The stranger's name was Father Clement and he had just arrived from a monastery called Hilandar, located in a place they referred to as the Holy Mountain. He had gone there as a youth, well before the Second World War, when Serbs still hung icons on their walls, not photographs of Marshal Tito whose evil intentions were concealed by a cherubic smile. For forty years he prayed that his people might be delivered from the false prophets leading them to perdition, never wavering in his belief that Communism would fall and icons restored to their rightful place. When his prayers were finally answered, he thanked the Lord and looked forward to seeing out his

days serving in Hilandar, knowing that when his time came he would be buried just outside the monastery walls, in the cemetery whose soil had been sanctified by the righteous. But soul-master God had other plans for his servant. Face redder than a hot pepper, a stout man protested at the harshness of God. What hope was there for him and his colleagues when a lifetime of strictest self-denial had not rewarded the holy Father with a peaceful old age? Stefan thought he saw a smile flutter through the thick beard. The monk replied that he wasn't an accountant, recording profit and loss. With God's grace he had brought his measuring mind into the realm of his heart, where there was neither past nor future, only the unbounded moment between beats. Yes, he had lived ascetically since his youth, had been tonsured a monk of the Great-Habit (he unbuttoned his overcoat and revealed the black stole), but he took no satisfaction from this, for that led to pride, which in turn blinded one to God. The monk was a perpetual beginner on the road to redemption, forever on guard against the Evil One, whose greatest strength was an ability to persuade people he didn't exist.

Father Clement attributed his presence in Australia to Saint Simeon, Hilandar's founder. Stefan had struggled with much of what was said, but at the mention of the saint he pulled his chair closer to the table. At this show of interest on his part, several men congratulated Ivan for the manner in which he had raised his son. In these godless times, when the young were taught to denounce patriotism and national pride, they were pleased to see him becoming more Serbian each day. They filled their glasses and drank to the health of father and son. One of them was so moved he embraced Stefan, kissed him on the cheek, and with index finger pointing like a gun warned him never to forget his origins. Swelling with pride, Ivan wanted to burst out in a folk song about Kosovo Field, but just managed to keep his tongue between his teeth out of respect for the monk. Stefan thought it strange that as the others wiped their brow with a neatly pressed handkerchief, the shaggy monk showed no sign of discomfort. And he wondered whether the aura surrounding him was that of the Northern Hemisphere, where it was now the middle of winter.

Last autumn, Father Clement continued through his beard, on an afternoon when the mist finally lifted and the monastery was honeyed with light, he was picking grapes from a vine rooted in the tomb of Saint Simeon. The stems twisted along the south wall of the church and branched out along overhead supports, forming a leafy shelter where monks and pilgrims often sat in quiet conversation. As keeper of the vine, a position he had held for many years, Father Clement snipped each black cluster and placed it in a basket, careful not to lose a single grape. The annual harvest of three wicker-baskets was carefully dried in the sun, and the resulting raisins were stored in a wooden chest carved with the Mother and Child. Men came from Serbia and abroad seeking the holy fruit, whose miraculous blessing helped childless couples to conceive. And Father Clement would offer each person exactly three raisins, a sliver of vine, and a set of instructions. The husband was to have two raisins, the wife one, and the sliver soaked in holy water that was to be sipped before meals during forty days of sexual abstinence.

Here the monk rummaged in his sack, produced a small pouch, and asked whether anyone needed the fruit of the life-bearing grave. The priest extended his hand, commenting he knew of unfortunate couples reluctant to visit in-vitro fertilisation clinics. Another man said his neighbours had been trying to have children for years. Were they

Serbs? asked another. Turks, he replied, but they often exchanged peppers from their vegetable patch. A flurry of objections arose. Devilish peppers were one thing, holy raisins another. Saint Simeon wouldn't approve. Stefan's father reminded them of Kosovo Field. He had nothing against Turks, in fact he got along quite well with a few at work, but the memory of the Serbian dead would be dishonoured if the sacred fruit were used to bring a Turk into the world. It was wrong to withhold happiness from others, said the man. And would he be the child's godfather? Ivan laughed. Would he take off his shoes and enter a mosque? They were in Australia, countered the man. Mosques, churches, synagogues - they were all places of worship. What kind of Serb was he? An Australian-Serb, the man replied. Then he wasn't a true Serb, snapped Ivan, striking the table with his knuckles as though playing a trump card. All turned to Father Clement, expecting something profound, but he related a parable about seed being scattered far and wide.

Bored by the talk of raisins, Stefan wanted to know what had made the monk leave the monastery. As captain of the football team he had developed confidence in addressing people and making speeches at presentation nights, so now, where a boy of his age would have remained silent in the company of men, he asked Father Clement what had happened on that autumn afternoon. Others echoed his question and once again praised Ivan for having such a lively son, when so many others of his age were nothing more than blockheads. Father Clement turned to the boy and asked whether he said his prayers. He advised him to say them every night, without fail, for they would keep him from harm. His light-grey eyes fixed on Stefan, yet seeing through him, he proceeded with his story.

Reaching for the last of the grapes, he had suddenly felt lightheaded and the church's red-bricked wall swayed and lurched toward him. Old age, he thought, securing the basket. All his life he had sought to ascend the difficult path to heaven, and now here he was, dizzy on the fifth rung of a ladder. He climbed down and sat on a bench warmed by the mellow sun. Two black butterflies were playing kiss-me-if-you-can above one of the baskets when a tall figure in monastic robes appeared in the play of light and shade beneath the vine and called him by name. It was Saint Simeon - the monk recognised him at once from the icons in church. He wanted to reply, but his tongue was sluggish, as in dreams when one couldn't move a muscle. The Saint instructed him to leave the monastery and go the Australian desert, just as the first monks had sought the desert of Egypt. People had flocked to Australia for its wheat and gold, not knowing that its real wealth lay in the purity of the desert, in the holy struggle with sand and silence, when the flesh dissolved in sweat and tears, and the soul flew off like a butterfly in spring. When his time came he would be buried in that foreign land, to make it less alien to the faithful, and so an Orthodox saint might eventually arise from that soil. Certain it wasn't a daydream or a fanciful thought flitting among the vine leaves, he saw the Abbot after vespers, related what he had experienced, and indicated his intention to leave the monastery. He was advised to test the vision on the touchstone of fervent prayer, and if it remained luminous after forty nights to follow the Saint's bidding.

Two months later, here he was, having just arrived, an immigrant in his seventies, though not to start a better life, but to prepare for death. He wanted to set out for the desert as soon as possible. How far was it from here? Could he walk there? Should he take an umbrella for the sun? Moved by the monk's naïve manner, Stefan turned questioningly to his father, as if to ask whether they might drive him to the outback. Some of the men

chuckled, but the monk continued, bemused by their mirth. He had heard that a small Serbian community lived in the mining town of Coober Pedy. He would start there and push further into the wilderness. He wanted also to meet an aboriginal Elder and, somehow, discuss with him the life of the spirit. In the meantime, he needed a quiet corner for a few days to pray and prepare for his journey. Stefan implored his father with a grimace. Ivan pushed back his chair, poured another round, proposed a toast to the monk's health, and offered him a room for as long as he wished.

It was the last week of the school holidays and with both parents at work Stefan assumed the role of host, seeing to the monk's comfort, not that he needed much, for he ate little and hardly left his room. Occasionally, knowing it wasn't host-like, he would press his ear to the door: the smell of incense was unmistakable, but he wasn't sure whether the monk was praying or speaking to himself in a low voice. When his friends John and Paul called him to go swimming, he declined, explaining he was looking after an important visitor - a holy man who had come to Australia to die in the desert. This fired their imagination and they asked whether they might see him. Stefan replied he couldn't be disturbed in his preparation for death. John, who had the best stamp-collection in the neighbourhood, offered him a hundred stamps to see the holy man. Exploiting their curiosity, Stefan refused, saying he had lost interest in stamps. What about the microscope John had received for Christmas? It magnified blood cells and Stefan could have it a week. Seeing his friend deliberate, Paul quickly added his skateboard as inducement.

Stefan set off down the corridor to what had been his brother's room. Should he knock? Was it rude? What would the monk say? He didn't really want the microscope or the skateboard, for his curiosity was greater than theirs. Encouraged by their excitement in the kitchen, he was about to knock when three taps sounded from inside and the door opened. Father Clement stood before him, walking stick in hand. Stefan didn't know what to say, but the monk asked with a smile whether he might go to the backyard. He had seen a few raucous birds with spiked crests and wanted to observe them from closer range. They were black cockatoos, Stefan said, leading him into the kitchen. The boys sprang up from the table, but the monk gestured for them to remain seated. Stefan seized the moment and told the monk his friends had come to meet him. He asked whether they spoke Serbian. Stefan explained that John's parents were born in Greece and Paul's ancestors were Irish. As the monk extended his hand over the table Stefan instructed his friends to kiss it after shaking. He encouraged them to pray and said true friendship meant sacrificing one's self for the sake of others, in big things and small. In the stillness of church a monk tolerated the mosquito on his hand so it wouldn't drink another's blood. Reaching into his overcoat, he took out three small crosses carved from the vine of Saint Simeon and gave one to each boy with a blessing they always remain friends.

When Father Clement returned to his room the smell of incense permeating his clothes lingered in the kitchen. The boys remained at the table and silently examined the crosses, all impressed by the monk's holiness. Stefan proposed a pact to mark the solemn occasion. His friends agreed, though somewhat circumspectly, for they knew his tendency to over-react, such as the time he threw himself onto a group of boys who had called him a Croatian wog. As he explained latter, it wasn't so much the wog but the reference to being a Croatian that had made him see red. And now, eyes flashing, he announced they should become blood brothers. As the other two exchanged questioning looks, he went to

a drawer and returned with a long candle (a remnant from last Easter) and a knife. He lit the wick and held the blade over the flame, explaining they would cut the tip of their right index finger and press them together while pledging an oath of eternal brotherhood. John warned against it, pointing out the danger of infection. An oath would be sufficient, added Paul. Knife in one hand, cross in the other, Stefan expressed his disappointment. Were they afraid of AIDS or Hepatitis B? Was their friendship so shallow? Then he would carry out the pact alone. He bit the cross. The others winced as he slit himself with the hot blade. Blood trickled into the hollow of his palm. He was about to touch the flame with the bleeding finger, but the others restrained him. There was a glow about him as he challenged them to carry out the pact. Paul then John followed his example, the former cutting slightly deeper than he had intended. As Stefan chanted an impromptu oath to the melody of a hymn that commemorated the dead, three fingers pressed together in a union of boyish blood.

A car trip to Coober Pedy had been the furthest thing from Ivan's mind, and he dismissed the idea bluntly when Stefan first proposed it, but the boy's prodding references to Hilandar, Saint Simeon, and Serbian loyalty eventually got the better of him. His wife packed a basket of food, including a flask of Turkish coffee to keep her husband awake, and covered everything in a cloth embroidered with crosses used for church functions. Ivan wanted to take a bottle of slivovits, saying distances seemed shorter under its influence, but his wife reminded him of his last breathalyser test. They left Melbourne before sunrise and sixteen hours later reached the dusty mining town just as the sun was shimmering on the horizon. After a few enquiries they located a Serbian opal-miner who embraced Father Clement and offered accommodation in his subterranean house. The good Father was welcome to live there permanently, said the miner, for he could add another room to his house simply by digging for opal.

Stefan and Ivan spent an uncomfortable night in a corner of the dugout house. The following morning, their backs aching, they climbed out of the tomb-like dwelling and farewelled Father Clement. He traced the cross on their foreheads and wished them God's grace and guidance in all their endeavours. Stefan was saddened by the parting and swallowed back a rise of emotion. Knowing the monk had come here to die, he now told himself it would be a happy death, a fitting end to a long and holy life. Father Clement tapped him on the shoulder three times in a grandfatherly manner and reminded him of what he had said in the kitchen. Stefan took the cross from around his neck and held it up between his thumb and bandaged finger. As they drove off he observed Father Clement in the side mirror until the monk receded to a black spot in the dust stormed up by the car.

The fire was now humming strongly and a little smoke smelling of pine escaped from the long flue. Father Evlogios entered the church, bowed here and there, and proceeded into the nave with his robe trailing behind. Small lamps shone before icons; a few candles glowed in the nave like spearheads; otherwise the interior was dim and the frescoes on the upper sections of wall were in darkness. Stefan opened the heater and, perhaps seeing something in the writhing flames, reflected for a moment before pushing in another wedge of wood. Crimson light startled a flock of shadows and leapt at a section of wall frescoed with youthful soldier-saints. Painted in bold blues and reds Saint George and Saint Demetrios were ready for battle. A year ago Stefan would have admired their haloed

helmets, that fish-scaled armour, those shining greaves, now his own life seemed threatened by their spears and two-edged swords.

The semantron concluded with a rapid volley of beats, perhaps intended to penetrate the skull of the heaviest sleeper. One by one monks began entering the church; their faces downcast, shadowed by veils covering their cylindrical hats; bare hands wrapped in knotted prayer cords or buried in black sleeves. Passing from one section to another, they crossed themselves, kissed the icons, and took their place in the upright stalls along the walls of the nave and inner-narthex. The younger monks strode in with a rush, their robes swooping like wings, while the elderly shuffled in the looseness of their flesh. With measured steps and sounding staff, the Abbot also went from icon to icon, then took his position in a stall from which he could observe and make a mental note of any absences. As Holy Week saw the greatest number of visitors in the monastery, they tended to come throughout the service, distracting the priest and chanters, causing some of the older monks to mutter into their beards.

Stefan took his place in a stall close to the heater, from where he could stoke it during the long service. In the light of a small oil lamp he examined his left hand and picked out a small splinter. Beneath the lamp, cheek to cheek with the Child, the dark-featured Virgin known as the Guiding-One held Stefan with a look at once tender and fierce.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

The choir chanted the words again, this time in a lower tone, with the last syllable trailing outward like a circle on the surface of a pond. Gathered around the lectern in each transept, the choristers on the right invoked the Lord to have mercy, while those on the left provided a bass hum that added body and background to each word. Father Evlogios swung the censer in rhythm to each stressed note, his golden chasuble glittering in the light of the candelabra. A puff of fragrant smoke and the liveliness of silver bells went up before the icons on either side of the altar gates. Crossed sprigs of laurel leaf were tied to the columns of the screen. As the Lenten fast was strictest during Holy Week the choristers had extended their abstinence to everyday speech, avoiding spicy gossip and idle conversation in order to purify their tongues for matins and vespers. And now, sounding the ancient hymn, they tasted the crispness of each consonant, savoured the sweet melisma of each vowel. A member of each group held a small candle that appeared to sprout from his fingertips. Stirred by the choir's breath the flame strained to the musical text whose Byzantine notation resembled an Arabic script, gave colour to hands pale from the cold, gleamed in eyes lowered in concentration, and filled mouths with crimson light.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

Eleven voices rose above the pull of flesh and bone that grows with age, denied the force of time spinning faster than life, overcame the gravity of ego that reduces the soul to selfishness. Shaped by countless circumstances eleven voices blended in true communion and filled the church from nave to outer narthex, from crypt to cupola. Eleven voices fused in harmony, one as the shadow of embracing bodies, or the colours in unrefracted light. Monks, novices, visitors - all were buoyed by the swelling chant. Swaying back and forth, the old mouthed words and counted beats with arthritic fingers, while the young leapt from crest to crest on the back of the undulating rhythm. The Abbot listened with a look of satisfaction. Yes, he agreed with the Church Fathers who regarded music closest to the language of the soul. For him the choir represented the paragon of monastic life: individuals renouncing name and age, wants and desires, in order to attain perfect union in the very name of the Lord. And this morning, perhaps because the dream of a young woman who had died a lifetime ago was still lodged in the corner of his eyes, he thought about those words in a deeper way. How many times had they been said in prayer and sung in praise? How many tongues had they moved in hope, and hearts melted in the joy of redemption? How many knees and knuckles had they callused, and prayer cords worn out in counting? Still, unlike the music of the world that seldom survived the composer's hand, those words were new every time he heard them: they arose from tongues that were more flame than flesh, infused with breath untainted by darkness, resurrected in hearts that renounced the world.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

The hymn ebbed almost to a whisper and the litany became faster, more urgent, each string of nine Kyrie Eleisons recited in a single breath. At this point Father Maximos would prostrate himself in front of the draped icon-stand, before shuffling off to open the gate for the workers who came for the Liturgy. This morning, however, as his forehead

touched the tessellated tiles, he remained there longer than usual, marvelling at how men were most like angels when they lived for nothing more than a mouthful of breath. It was for these two words that the pious first left the world and settled between the rocky toes of Athos as hermits and cave dwellers. They came from Constantinople, the City, where for a thousand years, until its fall to the Ottomans in 1453, Constantine's Cross was present everywhere: from the floor plan of Aghia Sophia, the largest basilica in the Orthodox world, to wooden discs used for stamping fleshy dough; from the Akathistos Hymn, signed with an x by its anonymous author, to brawls among butchers about whether lambs should be hung by their front legs or back; from the dazzling mosaic of Christ the Pantocrator, whose pupils were cut from Egyptian basalt and inserted last, to mathematicians determined to prove the Trinity's theorem.

Yes, it was a cosmopolitan city, welcoming all, except through the gate overlooking the Golden Horn, where in the time of the Emperor John Palaeologos the vigilant keeper stopped those who so much as smelt of being foreign and asked them to count to five on their fingers. Now if the bemused person started with the thumb and ended by showing an open palm, the gatekeeper smiled and allowed him entry; on the other hand, if the foreigner started with the little finger and concluded with a fist, he was promptly instructed to wash in the Bosphorus and try again at Easter. And foreigners arrived from the remotest corners of the empire, because they had heard wonderful stories about how Providence was more prevalent in the City. Young men looked at their dusty shadows and saw the fortunes of Justinian. Born of peasant stock the youth had set out to make a living from the sweat of his brow and found himself crowned emperor. Looking into their cracked mirrors, young women beheld Theodora. Her father was a bear-feeder in the Amphitheatre, but the twenty-year-old grabbed the bull by the horn and somersaulted into Justinian's bed.

When conditions in the City had never been better, when its walls were buttressed and harbour protected by the secret of Greek Fire, God-fearing souls began leaving the clatter of prosperity for the quiet of Athos. They renounced the fullness of one world for the frugality of another, seeking to live on grace alone. Yes, thought Father Maximos, they were drawn to Athos by the sweet hum of Kyrie Eleison like bees to a flower, and here they became solitaries devoted to silence and inward prayer. Saint Peter, the first Athonite monk, discarded his Byzantine robes and went naked in the cold and heat for the sake of those words. He subdued his appetite for food, eating nothing but herbs and grasses for years, in order to prepare his body for salvation. He stripped away the language of the City and cast it away as though slough, so his tongue would be worthy of calling on the Lord for mercy. He cleaned his ears of the dark wax of dead words and then plugged them with clay, to safeguard his silence for the appointed season, whose coming he would know from the number of seeds in a pomegranate. Only after more years did he dare whisper those two words, upon which he tasted manna. And only after greater discipline did he chant them aloud, understanding at once why angels were sustained by praising God.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

And in time those words drew others to the Holy Mountain, Father Maximos pondered, his forehead still pressing the cold tile. Many travelled on foot from the furthest reaches of the Orthodox World, praising the seven syllables for having graced their heart

with lightness and their body with flight, because the journey had seemed effortless, with the days counted on a prayer cord and distances measured by Archangel Gabriel's wingspan. They came, the majority illiterate, their fate written in the lines of their tongue, but with a gift that modulated prayer to melody. And their melodies became more moving than the dirges of Orpheus that turned stones in their mossy sleep; sweeter than Songs of Solomon in whose rhythm hearts opened like a rose; more soothing than the Psalms of David accompanied on harps of cypress wood and said to elevate minds from headache and depression. Of such singers none was greater than John Koukouzelis, thought the monastery's historian, raising his head for a breath, then going back down on his forehead. He was born toward the end of the thirteenth century, his birthplace clutching the heel of a mountain in what was the Western-most province of the Byzantine Empire. Then, as now, with Balkan winds turning the pages of history as though vine leaves, the province was won by Serbia, reclaimed by the Byzantines, overrun briefly by Bulgarians, taken back by the Byzantines, lost to the Ottomans, and eventually ceded to Albania, though Greece still called it Northern Epirus. As for his ethnic background, he may have been Greek, possibly Albanian, though some referred to him as a Slav-Macedonian, whom Bulgarians of the day considered the same as themselves.

The mid-wife attending his birth claimed the infant's first sound wasn't a squeal of complaint, but a hum of thanks at having been plucked from a suffocating element. He cried seldom as a child, and then only on certain days of the year, such as when the village commemorated the death of Eudoxia, a local peasant girl whose tongue had been torn out in the time of Julian the Apostate because she refused to stop singing the Psalms. But his cry wasn't the screech of a two-year old; on the contrary, its melodic quality silenced even the blacksmith at the anvil, while women left their washing at the babbling creek and marvelled at the sound. The boy outgrew his cries, but was slow in learning the language of the village, as though the spoken word were barbed with thorns. At the age of nine or ten he went out as a goatherd, whistling other people's flocks from hill to hill, where, despite his mother's warnings, he would often sit in the shadow of a cypress tree. And it was up there, in the vast silence of a summer's afternoon, that he first hummed Kyrie Eleison, which he had heard the day before at the funeral of a little girl. At dusk the words had taken took root in his tongue and seemed to be singing themselves.

He made up for his backwardness in speech through this newfound ear for melody: a facility that enabled him to recite the longest, most melismatic chant after a single hearing. One Saturday night, just before All-Souls Day, the regular chanter fell ill after eating one too many grilled mushrooms (apart from diarrhoea, he had a bad case of apocalyptic dreams), and the boy was called to take his place. When he sounded Kyrie Eleison in that Sunday morning service, the villagers looked up from thinking about pig-trotters quivering in jelly made from marrow. It was as though they heard the words for the first time, and they left the church eager to forgive and be forgiven. From that day he gave up herding and became a local celebrity, sought after in neighbouring villages and towns, where he chanted at marriages, baptisms and funerals. One day, chanting in the lake town of Ohrid, he attracted the attention of a bishop who arranged for him to be accepted in the Imperial Singing School in Constantinople. The youth's reputation soon echoed throughout the Court, until the Emperor heard his voice and advised him to marry and remain as Imperial Chanter. But, just as a match can set an entire forest ablaze, so a

brief conversation with the visiting Abbot of the Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos fired the young man's imagination. In a flash he saw he had been using his talent to please the Court, instead of praising the glory of God. With this came an overwhelming need to purify his voice through penance and silence.

And so the Imperial Chanter slipped from the City and set out for Lavra dressed as a ragged pilgrim. There, concealing his identity from the Abbot, he offered his services as a goatherd in the hope of eventually being accepted as a monk. For three years he tended the monastery's herd (livestock was permitted on Athos at the time), forever biting back the urge to sound the chants at the roots of his tongue. One morning in late spring, as his herd strained for the oak's tender leaves and the sea breeze rummaged in his beard, Koukouzelis was so inspired by the beauty of Athos, so thankful for the simple life God had granted him, he sang a litany of Kyrie Eleisons, one more heartfelt than the other. The chanting was so moving the goats stopped eating and skipped around him. A hermit living in a nearby cave heard the sweet voice and, thinking an angel had come to take his soul, went out to welcome the singer. On seeing the ragged goatherd, he hurried and told the Abbot, who summoned the youth and extracted his identity. Meanwhile the Emperor had been looking for his missing chanter and wanted him back in the City, but the Abbot interceded and he remained on Athos.

After his long silence Koukouzelis sang again, though not for the lords and ladies of Byzantium, but for his humble brothers in the church of Great Lavra. On Athos his voice acquired a richness and depth of feeling that moved many to tears. Up to that point there had been a rigorous tradition of chanting set down over the centuries, very much as in icon-painting and the construction of churches, but Koukouzelis broke with this and introduced a personal style, which sprang spontaneously from a love of God and His creation. Those years of silence, in which he practiced the Hesychast teaching of Saint Peter the Athonite, strengthened his belief in man's ability to commune directly with God, and this in turn encouraged him to chant boldly, without fear of condemnation. Such daring and openness enabled him to reach levels that seemed to transcend human speech, verging on a kind of pentecostalism. More than one monk had remarked how his meaningless sounds, his ecstatic vowels, resembled singing in tongues, while others had compared it to the language of the heavenly choir, which an early Church Father had described as consisting only of vowels, for consonants were fish bones to angelic throats.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

The ceaseless chant of those words lay at the centre of the fourteenth century controversy that threatened the existence of the Holy Mountain. It started in Salonika, at the spot where the Via Egnatia passed under the Arch of Galerius, with a dispute that degenerated rapidly from warm breath to cold blood. One group called for acceptance of Europe and dialogue with Rome, while the other stood firm in its opposition to the West. Gregory Palamas, bishop of the city, called on his followers to shun Western worldliness and maintain the Orthodox tradition of inwardness, which brought enlightenment through stillness and the recitation of Kyrie Eleison. His bitter opponent, the Orthodox Calabrian monk Barlaam, advocated unification of the churches as a way of improving material conditions in the impoverished East, arguing that enlightenment would come from counting by three's not staring at three. In a speech delivered against the Rotunda (a cylindrical structure built by the Romans as a temple for their pantheon, which

subsequently became a Christian basilica, later an Ottoman mosque, and more recently a place where Jewish rabbis recalled the Inquisition), Barlaam praised the Church of Rome. A copper cross in one hand and a vine leaf in the other (flies were especially persistent that summer, biting as though with teeth), he informed his audience the Western soul had been strengthened not by the imposition of penance but through the sale of indulgences. Not only this, the Western mind had been given wings through the church's encouragement of the liberal arts and its tolerance of science. And if the needed more proof, the Western body had never been healthier, thanks to the Church's investment in commerce and industry. As the monk swiped at a large black fly clinging to his forehead (a listener whispered to another it would rain tomorrow), he encouraged the East to move westward on the path of reason. He plucked the fly like a bad thought, flicked it over his shoulder, and denounced the Hesychasts as idle dreamers and navel-gazers.

That afternoon, at precisely the same time (both speakers felt a mild earth tremor), Gregory Palamas delivered a homily in the church of Saint Dimitrios. In a few words separated by volumes of silence he exhorted his followers to remain firm in the face of temptation. The soul's salvation lay in tears not silver drachmas, the mind's freedom in prayer not knowledge, and the body's wellbeing in living on less.

Despite watchful gatekeepers the controversy entered the monasteries of Athos, perhaps concealed in ears full of darkness, and it wasn't long before two factions arose. The first always faced East, believed more in sunrise than sunset, and walked backwards in going West. For them silence was more sacred than speech, and they safeguarded it under their armpits, as their grandmother's had hidden golden coins. They crossed themselves when the wind blew from the West, for they sensed there was more to Rome than met the eye, though less than love in a Latin tongue. They worked only in the morning, stopping at noon to pray until sunset for the uncreated light, which differed from sunlight in that it didn't cast shadows. They used only prime numbers because these were pure, springing directly from God, as the virgin Athena had sprung from the head of Zeus. Loners by nature, even within the confines of the monastery, they struck stars from white pebbles for the smell sulphur and counted Kyrie Eleisons on in their beards, which they twisted and knotted in multiples of three.

The second faction preferred thunder to lightning, and read only from the Book of John, and that aloud. They believed more in sweat than tears, whose smell they prized, in stones than shadows, which they always separated. Their walls were often one-sided, their paved paths moved in stillness, and their works more significant than words. They sowed broad beans under a full moon and in gathering grapes counted the number in each cluster, separating the odd from the even, the latter to be used for communion wine. At dusk they were known to laugh in scraping the armour of fish. In summer they used birch wood for their icons and compasses to draw the haloes of the saints. Apart from the cross they believed in the ladder.

In the end Palamas prevailed against Barlaam, who packed halva and chickpeas in his sack and followed the sun setting on the Via Egnatia. On Athos the Hesychasts managed to convince their counterparts that meditation was as useful as tending a vegetable patch. With rhetorical subtlety (the symbol of Rhetoric was a hand open in a gesture exactly halfway between giving and taking, while Logic's was a tightly clenched fist) they reminded their active brothers that in praying for one they prayed for all, without

being diminished by so much as an iota. And, to illustrate their argument, they adduced the priest's candle at the Resurrection service: it gave light to a host of others yet wasn't lessened any more than in burning alone. On one level harmony was restored, though on another the two remained essentially different. In looking at a star, for instance, they both compared it to a grain of salt, but where the Hesychasts tasted sorrow, the others saw the tip of a nail.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

The words passed through John, like a breeze through a tree, causing a twinge of pain in his right shoulder blade. Despite his fatigue from the all-night vigil, he remained upright in his stall, determined not to lean on the smooth armrests. His emotions rose and fell throughout the long service, but occasionally the choir sounded a Kyrie or an Eleison on such an uplifting note it seemed he would dissolve in its resonance. And then his own being expanded and he felt drawn to everyone around him, from the visitor concealing a yawn, to the old monk anchored to this world by his shadow, to Christ the Pantocrator looking down from the dome. But those lucid moments were fleeting, lasting no longer than a vowel, and then he became conscious again of the pain in his shoulder, the pull of the past.

After the second month of his novitiate, when the flush of excitement evoked by the new surroundings had subsided, John felt anxious and out of place in the monastery. That was the experience of most novices, the Abbot had assured him. The sound and colour of city-life were addictive, and his present unease was due to the sudden absence of that stimulation. He advised him to fill his emptiness with prayer and subdue his anxiety with prostrations, for prayer was as vital to the spirit as breathing to the body. He then introduced John to the 'Jesus Prayer' or the 'Prayer of the Heart' as it was otherwise known. It had been practiced by the very first Athonite monks and entailed an almost mantric repetition of the words Kyrie Eleison. The Abbot instructed him how best to say the prayer, stressing the importance of posture and correct breathing. Yes, it was easy to taste the sweetness in whispering the words, more difficult to hear the harmony that resonated in each syllable, and hardest of all to feel a love of the world that emanated from renouncing the world through the very act of saying the prayer. For those whose faith was strong the prayer became a melodic hymn, a way of being that underscored not only one's action, but every thought and dream. At that stage the prayer drew the mind from the distractions of the world and restored it to its rightful place in the centre of the heart, just like a flock of pigeons drawn to their dovecote at sunset.

The Abbot had sounded the challenge and John was now determined to master the prayer, so it might fill his emptiness and settle him in the life of the monastery. To assist in the practice and appreciation of the prayer, the Abbot gave him a little book called "The Way of the Pilgrim", in which an anonymous nineteenth century Russian wanderer set out on a pilgrimage to learn the secret of the prayer. Guided by the simple fellow John started by repeating the prayer three thousand times a day, counting each on his prayer cord, which was woven from strands of black wool and consisted of ninety-nine knots. At first he found the exercise monotonous, but by the end of that week he was saying his daily quota easily, accompanied by a pleasant sensation which radiated from his face and spread through his body. Following the wanderer's example, he then increased the count to six thousand prayers a day, which proved far more difficult. It was only by foregoing the

evening meal that he was able to make the count, by which time his tongue and jaw hurt from whispering, his fingers were numb from the knots, and his head heavy with numbers. He fell asleep exhausted, as though having run a marathon. To his surprise, though, he awoke the next morning feeling fresh, as if invigorated by the ordeal. And so after matins, he began again, avoiding the other monks, taking advantage of every spare moment. On this and the following two days he reached his goal with less effort, and by the end of that week it seemed the prayer was saying itself, automatically, without need of a fleshy tongue.

At this point John had experienced a strange sensation: the instant he stopped whispering, he felt light-headed, disoriented, and it was only by taking up the prayer again that he located himself within its peaceful centre. The Abbot said the disorientation signified the prayer was being internalised, becoming as indispensable as breathing. He advised John to settle on that number for the remainder of his novitiate, adding the prayer would eventually draw his mind into his heart of its own volition. He also cautioned him against pride and youthful impatience. Just as heaven could not be taken by storm, so the enlightenment that came from the union of heart and mind couldn't be forced. There had been monks who said the prayer to a prodigious count, and this for more than fifty years, without experiencing the glow of its words.

The Abbot's counsel didn't subdue John's ardour for the prayer; on the contrary, he was even more determined to match the achievements of the anonymous Russian wanderer. And so, upon reading the fellow had managed to say twelve thousand in one day, he immediately took up the challenge, without telling the Abbot. He had often overcome the dreaded wall in running marathons, sometimes several in the course of race, yet now, in an easier exercise, he found himself confronted by what seemed an insurmountable barrier. After three days, foregoing meals in the refectory, he couldn't get beyond eight thousand, marking each thousand with a small pebble in his pocket. He pushed himself, remembering grueling marathons, but the mental strain was too taxing and he could barely keep his eyes open during compline. The following day he set off again, but the prayer stopped saying itself, his tongue felt sluggish, his thoughts were thick with fatigue. By midday he conceded: the simple wanderer with the withered arm had outrun him. Furthermore, it seemed the ordeal had not only dulled his senses but extinguished his feeling for the prayer.

In the end he had bowed to the Abbot and confessed his actions. Driven by pride and arrogance he failed in the most elementary of monastic tests: obedience. The Abbot listened in a manner that lined his forehead and gave his eyes a wistful look. He then advised him to stop the exercise altogether, for if the seeds of Kyrie Eleison were well and truly sown the prayer would return to him like a familiar melody. And things unfolded exactly as he had foreseen. He stopped the prayer for two days, and on the evening of the third, it came back to his lips, like a tune whose whistle lightened the body. Thereafter, he did not force the prayer, but said it slowly, welcoming it with heart-felt emotion. Yes, he had failed to keep up with the pious wanderer, but his efforts weren't wasted: they helped to sever his ties with the outside world and settle him in the ways of the monastery.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

The words now rose to a crescendo and centred on the silent Father Sophronios, who conducted the choir from the lectern in the right transept. His eyes were closed, his

head bobbed up and down like a metronome, and the first three fingers of his right hand embroidered the air. The renowned chanter and choirmaster was a head taller than the other choir-members, though he stood with a hunched back that belied his height. His complexion was the colour of candle wax, his once robust beard grey and cleft in the middle. A mysterious illness had weakened him over the past year, but he declined the Abbot's offer to go to Salonika for medical treatment. Having placed his life in God's labouring hands a long time ago, he wasn't about to change to a rubber-gloved surgeon. While there was breath in his body he would continue directing the choir, and by conserving his strength still chant on special occasions. His ability to modulate vowels with just the right degree of melisma, particularly those in Kyrie, moved his listeners as no homily had done. And then hearts swollen by worldly pride contracted, bodies firm in the confidence of youth softened, eyes which had sought salvation in paintings and texts dissolved in tears, though not in despair but in a holy sorrow that lightened the soul.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

As a deeper hum bodied the words above the candelabra Father Sophronios paused a moment, gripping the side of the lectern. For him those words contained the very essence of Athos. Day and night throughout the year, going back a millennium, a moment didn't pass when they weren't being sung or sighed somewhere on the Holy Mountain. Like many others he also believed that if the words should stop being uttered, even for an instant, the world would suddenly come to an end. From caves, hermitages, cells, churches - those syllables rose like threads of candle smoke and formed an invisible web over the narrow peninsular, connecting the first hermits on Athos to young men arriving from far off Australia. Yes, a mouthful of breath sustained the great ascetics, strengthened the early Hesychasts, and continued to nourish the living during the Lenten fast.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison.

As in most monasteries on Athos here also the refectory stood directly across the church, so if a builder's string were stretched between their entrances it would pass through the covered fountain centred in the courtyard. This gazebo-like structure served mainly as a circle of repose where monks and pilgrims would rest for a while and reflect in low voices on the impermanence of life. But on the morning of each Epiphany the large flat dish with the ornate fountainhead was filled for the annual blessing of the waters. Wrapped tightly in their robes monks would gather, often with snow falling on their veiled caps, as Father Evlogios dipped a silver cross in the dish and sprinkled the assembled with icy droplets in commemorating Christ's baptism in the river Jordan. The proximity and orientation of the church and refectory had been determined by tradition for symbolic reasons. Facing each other, the buildings represented the dual nature of man, though not in a Manichean separation of body and soul, but in a form that intimated their union. Where the church provided spiritual nourishment through hymns, the liturgy and communion, the refectory sustained the body and reminded the monk of his place in the world and his obligation to nature. Through the act of eating and drinking, whose holiness was supported by many Gospel miracles, the monk redeemed nature and was in turn redeemed by the grace of a hungry God.

The congregation emerged from matins, accepted a sprig of laurel from a monk at the door, and spilled into the courtyard reclaiming its colours from the grip of night. Gathered in small groups monks and visitors discussed travel plans, related last night's dream of this or that saint, or simply stood with arms folded, eyes fixed on the refectory. Today the Lenten fast was entering its most rigorous phase, so when the doors were finally opened the workers and visitors were quick to fall in behind the novices, who in turn followed the monks leading the way to breakfast.

The Abbot and a number of older monks strode between two rows of U-shaped tables and stood behind a bench at the far end of the refectory. Father Theodore climbed a ladder to a pulpit painted with figures whose nakedness was partly concealed by beards falling between spindly legs. After a short prayer the Abbot sounded a small bell and everyone sat to the same meal: a bowl of lukewarm lentil soup, a plate of boiled spinach, bread baked three days ago, and a wrinkled apple. Spoons smiled in the fullness of reflections, knives collaborated with forks, while all around stomachs rumbled from the severity of the fast.

Father Theodore began the day's homily and would continue reading until the bell sounded again, signalling everyone must stop eating, whether they had finished or not. He had been assigned this role by the Abbot as a way of further exercising his tongue, with a view to softening his Slavic consonants so one day he might be ordained a priest and read from the Gospels in smooth Greek. Apart from the Reader the assembled observed the rule of silence, looking neither left nor right, bowing to the table whose marble top had been worn smooth from a thousand years of use. As prescribed by tradition the homily related to the ascetic ideal, with readings from the lives of exemplary saints and monks.

- Brothers in the suffering of our Lord, Father Theodore began in a hesitant voice, swallowing the third vowel of the last word. If we're obliged by blood to respect the

works of our natural forebears, then we're bound by the Word to honour the sacrifices of our spiritual forefathers: those steadfast monks whose bodies melted like wax in the flame of their ascetic struggle and whose selfless prayers have sanctified Athos. If we honour their memory and follow their example, a mantle of light will drape us when we shed these black garments, but if we forget them and succumb to carnal passions our souls will be smeared in pitch.

The Russian had embraced the religion of his ancestors after the death of his sister, Vera, who had been three years his senior. Nineteen at the time, with Communism having just collapsed, he was looking forward to studying mathematics at university, particularly the concept of infinity, whose metaphysical, almost spiritual essence, had fascinated him from adolescence onwards. But he discovered that God worked out His own startling solutions in dealing with the affairs of men and the unfolding of abstract mathematics: instead of discovering a new theorem the young man was waylaid by the Holy Spirit and transported on Athos. A decade had passed since Vera's death, but Father Theodore's blue eyes still brimmed with tears whenever he recalled her intense looks and athletic body.

- Brothers, as we face the trials of Holy Week let's draw strength from the struggles of Elder Markos.

Holding the book in one hand, a Russian cross in the other, he read with a little more assurance over visitors whispering for another slice of bread, the tinny chatter of spoons and bowls, and water chortling into cups. The Elder was born in a village high in the Rhodope Mountains of Thrace – a region where in ancient times newborn infants were greeted with tears and swaddled in black, while the dead were shrouded in white and buried with laughter. A loner from a young age he was content in the company of his family's modest flock of sheep. He knew only the first three letters of the alphabet and couldn't count past his little finger, but God had given him an ear for interpreting the wind as it rustled through ancient oaks, an eye for reading the weather, and a tongue for extracting goodness from grasses and herbs. When he was about ten he had either misheard or somehow imagined that the monks on the Holy Mountain of Athos never sat down to a meal unless a bell sounded in heaven. Impressed, he decided to follow their example by tying a sheep-bell to an oak. On windy days he would eat at his leisure, though even then always frugally, and if the wind stopped abruptly he would put down whatever he held, no matter how tempting the morsel. Sometimes, in the stillness of summer when not a leaf stirred, he would go hungry all day, returning home with his sack exactly as his mother had packed it, explaining God has seen fit not to ring his bell. This continued until he was seventeen, when his thoughts and dreams overflowed with stories of Athos from villagers who had been there for work. One morning, instead of setting out with the sheep, the youth slung his sack over his shoulder and in five words, for he was frugal even in this, informed his parents he was going to become a monk. His mother hurried off and returned with a crust of bread and a glass of red wine. Standing on the doorstep, he broke the crust in three pieces and tossed each over his left shoulder in the direction of his journey. His mother then placed the glass on the step and instructed him to spill it with his right foot, careful not to stain his shoes. Perhaps expecting such news, his father nodded and asked why he wore a sheep-bell around his neck. He rattled it three times and replied he wanted the Good Shepherd to lead him safely to Athos.

Observing the rule of sobriety, the monks ate solemnly, barely making a sound with their utensils. Some pushed aside their half-eaten soup and concentrated on the homily while focussing on this or that figure frescoed on the walls. Others broke off small crusts of bread and raised them discreetly to their mouths as though eating was a shameful act. As it was Holy Week several abstained from everything and sat with heads bowed, fingers tangled in a prayer cord. In contrast to the slow-motioned monks, the majority of visitors ate with lively appetites, their cheeks puffed with food, conscious of the Abbot's bell. At a time when monks were under greatest strain and in most need of peace and quiet, they were obliged to put up with laughter in the cloisters, smokers in the courtyard, rattling and talking in the refectory. Whenever a monk expressed annoyance at these distractions the Abbot would reprove him gently, reminding him of his vow of hospitality, especially during Holy Week.

The monastery was among the oldest on Athos, going back a thousand years to the Emperor Basil the Second, sometimes called the Bulgar Slayer because he ordered the eyes of twenty thousand captured Bulgarian soldiers to be plucked out and crushed like grapes. What he did with the oily liquid was never recorded, though some have speculated he used it to light the lamp before his personal icon of Christ. As for the soldiers, he had them released so their blindness might devastate their Tsar and burden their families for generations to come. With mouths open to the sun they were led home by a small group whose left eye had been left intact. With benefactors such as Basil the monastery prospered and accommodated more than five hundred monks. But its fortunes changed and numbers declined due to the ravages of the passing Crusaders, the long-lasting Ottoman occupation, and several devastating fires. By the 1970's it housed a dozen monks, and they were old and tired, barely strong enough to drag their shadows from cloister to church. Twenty five years later, mainly through the efforts of the present Abbot, signs of vitality were evident again, not only in courtyard and cloister but in the surrounding forest and fields. Upon his appointment he brought with him a core of younger monks from the monastery where he had been, and they in turn attracted others from Greece and abroad, several converting from Catholicism and Protestantism. His first major reform had been the restoration of the monastery from idiorhythmic rule that allowed monks ownership of property and general independence of each other, to the older and stricter coenobitic rule, in which property was communal, work was shared, and obedience in spiritual matters sworn to the abbot.

- On the advice of a villager who had visited all the monasteries, Elder Markos entered one on the eastern side of the peninsular. There, because of his familiarity with livestock, he spent several years as a muleteer, transporting timber from slope to sea, and his gratitude to God on the way back.

Father Theodore was interrupted by the Abbot, who added a brief exhortation to the text, and when he resumed reading his tone was stronger, his pronunciation of troublesome Greek words more confident. Though pleased with the monastery's altitude and easterly aspect, the Elder was a solitary by nature and he found communal life burdensome. And so, with his abbot's permission, he wandered about until he found a suitable place near the summit of Athos, where the low conifers and shrubs opened to a scree. There he built a stone hut and spent the remainder of his long life in conditions that would have worn out the strongest of men. He never left his eyrie, assiduously avoided

others, and was careful not to step on the same rock twice, for granite, unlike water, retained traces of footprints. His clothes were threadbare and rags covered his feet, but his faith was so fervent icy winds warmed themselves on his palms and wolves stopped howling when he prayed. Upon arriving on Athos the Elder had flattened and shaped his sheep-bell into a jagged cross, which remained on his bare chest for the rest of his life, gradually rusting as much from the strength of his sweat as the tenderness of his tears.

A father and his ten-year-old son sat pressed together at a table with a dozen other visitors, some of whom had come to Athos from various parts of the world especially for Holy Week. Kosta was about sixty-five, bearded, with an angular face weathered by the sun. His eyes were deep-set and overhung with brows shaggy from neglect. Panayoti was small for his age and sat with head bowed, gazing at his reflection in the hump of his untouched spoon. They had arrived yesterday afternoon, tired and hungry, having left the island of Corfu the previous day. At the entrance Father Maximos had scrutinised them in his customary manner and asked Panayoti if he liked riddles. The boy turned to his father, who nodded on his behalf. Chuckling, the gatekeeper asked for something with a single dome in which no priest had ever set foot. A mosque, Panayoti stammered, intimidated by the monk breathing down on him. No, a mushroom, declared the gatekeeper, beaming with delight. But Kosta had been quick to point out that, in fairness to the boy, the monk should have added countless priests had set foot on the mystery object. Frowning at having lost the last word, Father Maximos stood aside and directed them to the guesthouse.

Kosta had spoken to several of the men sitting at the table. Most intended to leave for another monastery after breakfast, a few planned to stay another night, while the fellow sitting opposite him had received permission from the Abbot to stay a few weeks, for which he had offered to assist with whatever was needed, including washing dishes in the refectory. He was about fifty, stocky, in a suit looking shabby from continual wear. Last night, in the foyer of the guesthouse, he had introduced himself as Nico, originally from Sparta, but a resident of Chicago for the past thirty years, until two weeks ago, when he returned to Greece for good. And what had drawn him to Athos? Looking away from Kosta, he replied the truth had come to him in an instant between life and death. It appeared as though he was going to elaborate, but his eyes became misty and the book he was reading covered his face. On a leather cord around the man's neck Kosta had noticed a small wooden cross and an obsolete coin with a hole in the centre - a tenth of a drachma, which forty years ago would have bought a handful of sweets.

And now Kosta wished he had a handful of sweets for his son, who was complaining the soup was full of garlic and the bread too hard. Kosta urged him to have a little more and offered to peel him an apple, but the boy refused, saying he wanted to go home to his friends. They couldn't leave without hearing Father Sophronios chant, Kosta whispered. He might even invite them to his cell and advise Panayoti how best to develop his God-given voice. They should consider themselves fortunate to be here at such a time. As the great chanter was getting on in years, he now saved his voice for important occasions, and nothing was more important than Good Friday. But that was days away, Panayoti complained. He didn't like the monastery, he wouldn't chant for the old monk, and he wanted to leave at once. A few visitors glanced at Kosta, expecting him to assert his authority, but he had never seen his son in this mood and wasn't sure what to do. Was

he tired and irritable from the early start? Would he be more cooperative after a nap? In drinking some water, Kosta's attention was caught momentarily by a frescoed panel depicting three naked men, hands tied behind their backs, being led by a black angelic figure. And what if the boy persisted in his obstinacy? How much longer could Kosta withhold from him the real reason for their visit to Athos? He gazed at the ring on his left hand, which his wife had given him shortly after they had met. She had worn his cross and he this ring stamped with a crescent moon. Yes, Kosta had loved her very much, and it was that love which now compelled him to offer his only son to the Holy Mountain, just as old Abraham had taken Isaac up to Mount Moriah.

Father Theodore read on, less conscious of his tongue, not thinking about the dental fricative in the first syllable of God. The Elder Markos ate not for enjoyment or to satisfy a bestial hunger but for strength to praise the Creator. He survived a lifetime on the Mountain's bounty of fruit, nuts, grasses and herbs. His body was leaner than a cypress, his cheekbones protruded like those of a dead man's, but his spirit was strong and he withstood the Tempter on three occasions. Shortly after moving into his hut he was visited by a relative with news that his father was on his deathbed, bellowing for his son to return and take charge of the household. Turning his back on the fellow, the Elder prostrated himself before his icons, on a stone slab that bore an impression of his knees. The instant he commenced his prayer claws scurried frantically behind him, and when he looked around the smell of sulphur filled the empty hut.

John thought about having another slice of bread but refrained, despite the strong churning in his stomach. He was heartened at having completed his first all-night vigil: it indicated he had taken another step toward living the monastic ideal. Last night he had withstood the pull of sleep and the prod of pain, this morning he denied the gnaw of a growing hunger, and tomorrow or the day after he would be strengthened to face his father and remain firm against whatever he might say. He crossed his fingers on the cold marble and looked up at a rectangular fresco whose lower border rested on the haloes of several life-sized saints. A man and three longhaired women were performing a lively dance, their hands clasped and raised above their heads, accompanied by drummers and horn blowers. The fresco had seemed inappropriate in this solemn place and he would always shun it in sitting at his meal. But this morning, perhaps because the flowers of the magnolia tree had already opened, he noticed for the first time the female dancers' ornamental breast bands, the outline of their plumpish bodies, the liveliness of their steps. How had such a scene come to decorate the refectory? Was there something redeeming in dancing? His father was a dancer, the first to start when the band sounded at parties and picnics, plastering the musicians with money so they would stretch out his favourite tunes. But he had shied away from all that as an adolescent and never learned the traditional steps. His father had badgered him to learn, saying it was the only way of becoming a full member of the tribe, but he resisted, for even in those days he had been wary of dark impulses and turgid feeling which so easily erupted in displays of emotional excess, even violence. Later, at university, he had rejected the chaos of popular music, believing the world would be made better by the laws of science not the turmoil of rock-and-roll. And when doubt became more palpable than his computer, when the random and irrational threatened his view of the world (which tended to happen mainly in spring), he would

place his faith in the order of the universe and work harder at learning the language in a ribbon of DNA.

- On the second occasion, dear brothers, the Tempter came as a young monk with a thin beard and cheeks red from the cold. He bowed before the Elder and went to kiss his hand, but the great ascetic swept it to his armpit like a swallow to a nest. Brimming with praise for the Elder's achievements, the monk asked to become his spiritual son, not only to learn from him the ways of sanctity, but to care and comfort him in his old age. The Elder knew praise had snared many hearts, so he cursed the monk and told him to go back to his master. Now if the visitor was genuine he would have taken such harshness as a sign of love and insisted even more on remaining, but the good Elder had barely uttered his curse when he fluttered off, complaining louder than a crow at sunset.

Sitting at a back table with the tradesmen, Stefan stared at his inverted reflection in the hollow of the spoon and questioned again whether he was suited to monastic life. His Greek was still basic, he felt like an outsider in the monastery, and Kosovo was always on his mind. In his meetings with John he would listen to his support and encouragement with a stirring of hope. The future would become clearer once he committed to becoming a monk, and he would feel closer to those around him when his heart opened to a spiritual guide. Yes, he sensed the truth of his friend's words and wanted to act on them, but the flutter of hope was short-lived and once alone in his cell he found himself wrestling with uncertainty and doubt. He now recalled what John's spiritual guide had said when they visited him a few days ago. When Moses left them in order to climb the mountain, the Israelites became afraid of the wilderness, lost sight of the future, and yearned the Egyptian gods in whose reflection they had felt safe. As faith in an unseen, nameless God had yet to take root in their hearts, they succumbed to the past and made a Golden Calf, which they would have worshipped if not for Moses's timely return. Elder Kyrillos had pointed out a novice was no different from an Israelite, Athos was the wilderness, while the condition of faith was the Promised Land.

Stefan looked up at a panel depicting scenes of martyrdom: in one a naked youth was being dragged by a white horse; in another a man was hanging upside down; in a third a kneeling cleric was reaching out for his severed head. Was his father, the proud Serbian, responsible for all that had happened in the past year? No, he hadn't known any better: his cultural identity had been set before immigrating to Australia. But he, Stefan, should have distanced himself from that identity. After all, he was born in Australia, his first language was English, and he had played Australian Rules, not soccer. After almost a year of soul-searching he still couldn't say how he had allowed himself to be swept away from Australia and cast into a Balkan war. Maybe that had been the problem all his life: hotheaded and spontaneous he would jump in where angels feared to tread. Perhaps it had started when he turned sixteen and suddenly discovered his strength. Already taller than his father, he refused to be an altar boy and attend Serbian social functions. He wanted to play football instead. His coach praised his natural talent and was certain the boy had potential to play at the highest level. Football! The sport was unknown in Serbia, his father protested. Soccer, he might consider, for he had played as a sweeper at a high level himself, but football was uncivilised and, because of the ball's shape, more a game of chance than skill. His mother attempted to reason with her husband, reminding him he had

already estranged one son, but he hid his anger under his moustache and bushy eyebrows and stormed off for a game of cards at the cultural club.

On that clear, wintry Sunday afternoon, still seething from the quarrel with his father, Stefan leapt onto his bike and announced to his friends he was going to climb 'The Tower' - a disused red-brick chimney that rose above their neighbourhood. They had discussed the feat two years earlier, when breeding pigeons had been popular and flocks were seen flying in and out of the chimney's small windows, but nothing came of it, perhaps because of the barbed-wire wall. John and Paul tried to reason with him, pointing to the dangers, but he called them gutless, reminded them of their oath, and sped off. On a ladder made from three bikes Stefan led the way over the wall and wrenched open the steel door with a pipe. Pigeons scattered from the windows in the upper sections as they gazed at a corroded metal staircase spiralling to a circle of blue. John commented it looked like the molecular structure of DNA. For Paul the chimney was a cannon pointed at heaven's foundations. No, it was the stairway to freedom, said Stefan, springing up three steps at a time. John kept pace with him, not far behind, while Paul soon lost his breath and slowed to a walk. The view got better from each window, until they reached the uppermost, from which they could see the ocean. A strong wind blew through the opening as they congratulated each other. Still smarting from the confrontation with his father, Stefan wasn't satisfied with reaching the metal landing, so he dared the others to step onto the windowsill and look down for ten seconds. John and Paul refused, saying the wind was too strong and there was nothing to grip. Freedom or nothing, Stefan shouted, adding his ancestors used to spit at death before going to battle. He climbed onto the sill, braced himself by pushing against the wall, and spat down. Look, he called, pointing at the ocean with both hands. Kosovo Field! Rebuked by the others for his madness, he replied his act would give him the strength to leave home and school. He would run away to Western Australia, become a professional football player and forget his father's nonsense. John, who had as much natural stamina as Stefan, though not his strength and speed, tried to calm him down, saying he should try to impress his father with his football skills. Not one for sport, determined to become a writer even at that age, Paul offered to run away with him. His parents had separated, he hardly saw his old man, and he wanted to experience life for the sake of his writing. Together they could see the outback, go the Coober Pedy and locate the old monk if he was still alive, and from there travel across the Nullarbor to Perth. In the end Stefan took John's advice, perhaps because his friend could match him in running.

- And the Tempter came for the third and final time as Elder Markos was preparing for his death, though, indeed, all his years on Athos had been a quiet preparation for that moment. Chanting tearfully in praise of God's creation, the Elder pulled down his hut and carried the stones up to the scree, scattering them east and west. He then burnt his meagre belongings, including his clothes and icons, and threw the ashes joyfully to the wind, which blew them back in his eyes. Naked, except for his tears and rusty cross, he then went down to the forest and began digging his own grave. He was on his knees, scraping the earth with his fingernails, when an angelic figure appeared from behind a cypress tree and covered him in its silver shadow. Markos, said the figure, it's time to fly away from here. Pushing back his arms, the Elder revealed his angled shoulder blades and said, My bones are heavy and not yet wings. Markos, you've toiled enough for your salvation. The

voice was now sweet, feminine, and reminded him of his boyhood, and how his mother would call him indoors as darkness settled over the village. But my grave's not finished, he replied, shielding his eyes from the figure standing against the setting sun. Markos, you've earned your place with the saints, the voice whispered, now sad as the wind through evening pines. No, my soul's not worthy of paradise. And as the Elder continued digging, softening the earth with his tears, the figure's face turned bright red, as though choking with rage, and it flew off to tempt others. Lighter by a lifetime of tears, the Elder lay in the grave, folded his hands on his cross and closed his eyes to the world. The Lord took the Elder's soul, but his thin body wasn't left exposed to the buzzards circling the summit. At the moment of his death a tremor shook the Holy Mountain and the rocks that tumbled happily down from the scree covered his remains.

The Abbott sounded the bell and everyone stopped eating. Those monks who worked in the kitchen left first, formed two lines outside the refectory, and, seeking forgiveness for any fault in their service, bowed from the waist as the others filed past. Staff in hand the Abbot blessed them with a sign of the cross. By now morning's grey had lifted, sunlight grazed the top of the dome, the surrounding forest was a patchwork of greens, and in the distance snow gleamed on the peak of Athos. Monks, visitors and workers gathered in the courtyard for a few minutes of quiet conversation, then slowly dispersed to various parts of the monastery, each taking with him a common silence old as stone and a shadow newer than spring.

HOLY MONDAY

1

Yes, thought the Abbot, standing at the window, after a long winter when days were pressed by leaden clouds and nights came cloaked in mists spun from the breath of wolves, when snow covered the tonsured dome and wouldn't melt on a fervent tongue, when the clock in the tower froze on Epiphany and its hands stopped counting until Lazarus's Day, when jackdaws gathered on rooftops and chainsaws wailed in the forest, when mules struggled under a load of forgiveness and fire's skeleton crawled from chimneys, when the fig tree was pruned for the sins of its fruit and the orange knotted with ribbons of grief, when wicks in lanterns learnt the meaning of zero and the ladder was left naked in defending the wall, when raki was distilled in the damp cellar and coffee beans ground to discourage dreaming, when an old monk's soul steamed on a washing line and the charcoal of burnt vine branches stained a novice's face, when the blood of martyrs dripped from crusty crosses and thoughts of heaven became heavy as bone, after all that and more, at last spring cleaned the monastery in preparation for Good Friday, restored ochre to bricks fired in the kilns of redemption, glossed over rafters and beams darkened by rain, pegged three cassocks sleeve to sleeve like dancers at a festival, polished the leaves of the magnolia and filled its flowering chalices with brother bee's morning hymn, sparkled new grass bristling between cobbles on which Saints George and Dimitrios would sharpen their swords, mixed jasmine and penance in the palms of the breeze, frocked sister swallows in black and white and sent them to scissor space with their innocent tails, and, above all, scoured blue the great dome of the sky in preparation for a master icon painter, the one who would come from the south with a carnation in his ear and a gold florin between his teeth, to astonish the world with the Redeemer's face.

The papered walls of the Abbot's guestroom were hung with paintings and photographs of people in some way connected to the monastery. In renouncing his personal past, to the extent of not having so much as a snapshot of his parents, he had come to consider these faces as his direct ancestors. Unlike his genetic forebears, whose presence was mute and whose lineage would terminate in him, these figures spoke to him daily, imparted their living faith, and perpetuated themselves by transforming their flesh into the Word. They were his true progenitors, and as their spiritual child he would propagate the Word through his prayers. Though he had studied them all carefully over the years and could identify abbots, bishops and patriarchs from the shape of their beard, he couldn't walk through the spacious room without someone catching his eye and demanding his attention.

As the mid-morning sun filtered through the curtains and laced the assembly of elders on the opposite wall, the Abbot put down the book he was reading and went to straighten the black and white portrait of his predecessor. Whether it was the tilt of the frame or the way light angled into the room, he now saw the former abbot as though for the first time: his eyes were pools of stillness at the close of an autumn day, his beard wispy as a cirrus cloud, the fingernails of his right hand raised in a gesture of blessing shone like candle-flames. The Abbot smiled at the memory of the good-natured elder and returned to his book on the table. A bibliophile from a young age, he had been compelled to curtail his reading in recent years because of his numerous responsibilities. Initially the situation had vexed him, until he became more selective, learnt to do with less sleep, and seized every

opportunity to read a few pages. And now, while waiting for Father Meletios, the clockmaker, he bowed again to Vladimir Soloviev's book *The Anti-Christ*, in which the nineteenth century Russian mystic-philosopher predicted Satan would arise as the head of a United Europe. Father Theodore had recommended the book and managed to acquire an English translation through the Internet.

Not content to serve as custodian of a crumbling house, the Abbot had accepted his present position determined not only to restore the monastery to its former standing within the Athonite community but make it relevant to an increasingly secular world. He saw no contradiction in being progressive while upholding monastic tradition and the teachings of the Church Fathers. When monks came to him troubled by uncertainty, he would say life was riddled with irreconcilable paradoxes, especially when seen through the lens of logic, and went on to assure them all paradoxes vanished before a heart cleansed by humility and eyes washed by tears of faith. The Abbot's thoughts on paradoxes were informed both by Scripture and the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, known as the Dark, whose oracular writings reminded him of the Hebrew prophets and the gospel of Saint John. He was especially fond of quoting an obscure aphorism which, alluding to mortals and immortals, declared: We live in each other's death and die in each other's life.

The Abbot was born on Crete, in a small town nestled between the toes of a mountain whose ankles were kept bare by goats that could extract nourishment from rock. His parents were about to take up a joint teaching appointment in Macedonia, where the government had been making concerted efforts to Hellenise the Slavic-speaking villages, when war broke out and German boots used the island as a stepping stone to North Africa. Encouraged by the heroes of the Greek War of Independence, the father grew a thick moustache and joined the resistance fighters in the mountains. For three years he embraced a rifle and warmed it on his body-heat, occasionally sneaking home across enemy lines to spend an evening with his young wife. The couple's first child, a boy, slipped into the world on the morning the town's church-bells announced the liberation of the island. Perhaps sensing more strife on the way, the father insisted his three-month son be baptised without delay. Dismissing arguments the child was too young, he set out to find a suitable godfather and finally shook hands with the best backgammon player in town - a man who would unnerve his opponents by striking the board in moving each piece. The priest immersed the boy in water, snipped his hair in three places, and returned him to the godfather with arms covered in a white towel. But the child's cries were still echoing in the church when the first shots of the Greek Civil War rent the island in two. Despite his views on the circular nature of life, to which neither absolute left nor right could be assigned, the father was nevertheless conscripted to fight the Communists.

To this day the Abbot still crossed himself at the sound of an aeroplane (last year his hand had wearied from jets flying to Kosovo and Belgrade), just as he had done as a five-year old when the sky would groan with birds of death. The blackness of those years leached into his mind, clouded his once happy disposition, and, perhaps as much as anything else, contributed to him wearing a cassock. He could still recall the hard shadow over the village square, the smell of gunpowder mingling with basil, those grim faces gathered around the priest, and his father on the back of a mule, wrapped in a brown blanket, dead from defending a narrow pass in the mountains. And then there was the fire in the yard and water boiling in a large smoke-stained pot and his mother dyeing her colourful dresses black - the colour she would wear for the rest of her life. A proud and beautiful woman, with eyebrows

like a crow's outspread wings, she was sought by many suitors, both bachelors and widowers, but refused them all. Upon slipping her wedding ring onto the fourth finger of the opposite hand, she had vowed her life to her son.

Completing high school with outstanding results, the Abbot resisted pressure from various quarters to study law and enrolled in a course of theology instead. His mother supported his decision, though she would have preferred him to study pure mathematics, which she considered impervious to a world moved by hatred and greed. She became suspicious after her husband's death, and her opinion of the legal profession was coloured by a protracted legal battle with her sister over matters of inheritance - a battle that would have been resolved years ago but for the inflammatory lawyers on both sides. He was aware of his mother's antipathy toward lawyers, and this may have influenced his decision, but his own views on the matter were no less important. At that time he had fallen under the spell of Plato and had seen the world as nothing more than a pale shadow of a higher reality. If the physical circle was an imperfect representation of an ideal form, how much more so the laws of the land? And if the quest for Truth were mankind's noblest aspiration, then surely the study of Divine Law was closer to this ideal than the application of shadowy laws that could be interpreted for personal advantage.

He had studied theology in Athens and spent several years in London on his doctorate. When he returned for an academic position at the university of Salonika, his homeland was trembling under the tanks of a dictatorship. Alarmed by the ubiquitous presence of the military, he spent the summer on Crete, roaming the hills surrounding the town, climbing the mountain where his father had been killed, questioning whether he could teach in a country whose institutions were controlled the junta. Not only this, his uncertainty about the future was compounded by thoughts of joining the priesthood, something he had entertained since adolescence, but which never quite captured his imagination until a particular moment in England toward the end of his stay. He had been in the reading room of the British Library, sitting at a table near the one on which Marx had written his theories for a better world, when he was jolted by the question: How could he best live the ideas he was studying? With education becoming increasingly a means to prestige and power a separation was occurring between the life of the body and that of the mind. What then should he do? Accept the situation and teach the ideas of theology or live them by becoming a priest?

One hot afternoon, thirsty from another soul-searching walk in the hills, he stopped at a tap just outside the town, where a soldier was bent over the trough, slurping from cupped hands. To his surprise the drinker turned out to be a young woman who smiled, commented on the cold water, and shook loose a mass of springy hair from under a hat. A thick book lay on the edge of the trough.

- Das Kapital, he remarked.

Shy by nature, especially in the company of women, he felt a little more at ease through the mere presence of the book. She studied him a moment, drops of water sparkling on her chin.

- Comrade, society needs changing, she said, with an edge to her voice.

- And you're ready for battle.

The uniform had belonged to a brother recently discharged from National Service. As a student of political science at the Polytechnic in Athens she wore it in protest at the inequality in Greece. Their eyes met for an instant in mutual curiosity, and then he bowed to

the tap. In Athens and London he had avoided Communist students, partly from resentment over his father's death, but more because of their brash arguments against religion and God.

- Is Marx going to save the world? he asked.

She delivered a lecture on the humanity of the Communist State, followed this with an attack on Greece's present regime, and concluded by calling on all students to take to the streets in open revolt. She spoke with conviction, but he was more interested in her than in leftist rhetoric. The few women he had known liked to play hide-and-seek behind appearance and pretence, whereas she was refreshingly spontaneous.

- I suppose you're a Royalist? she asked.

- A Christian, he replied.

He usually kept his faith out of such conversations, or else referred to it with some reticence, for in student circles it was taken as an admission of backwardness. But there was something about her that drew it from him without reservation.

- It's the same thing: Christ as the King of kings.

- I'd say the ultimate liberator.

- You sound like a priest.

- I've just completed a doctorate in theology.

She thumped the book against her thigh and laughed naturally as the water from the tap.

- And what will you do with it? Cut it up into a million pieces to feed the poor? Use it to build hospitals for the sick?

- I might teach.

- In this prison of a country?

- The spirit of freedom will prevail.

- Not without a Kalashnikov, comrade.

- Your Communists killed my father in the Civil War.

- And mine was killed by your Royalists. But we're living in dark times, comrade.

The way forward's with Molotov cocktails, not candles. The new saviour will be a revolutionary like Che Guevara, not a feeble Christ.

Having never contested such matters with a woman, he was now surprised to find himself delighting in sparring with her. He quoted an early Church Father who wrote that remembrance of death was useful to life and reminded her Marx had not once referred to death in his entire opus. A heaven on earth would never be realised by revolution or legislation, but through inwardness, personal revelation, that moment of enlightenment when men and women glimpsed their life against the backdrop of eternity. Remembrance of death fostered a condition of humility that cleansed the heart of vanity, brought enemies together in mutual forgiveness, and prepared the way for lasting humanity. If this awareness were lived by all, the earth would become heaven in the space of a heartbeat.

As sunset blazed in the trough she dipped her hand in the crimson water and sprinkled his face, laughing he was now baptised in the name of the revolution. He asked if they might meet again. Yes, but only on the condition she would attempt to make a Communist of him. In that case, he would do his utmost to restore her to Christianity.

In the weeks that followed they met often and walked around the countryside, discussing and debating their respective beliefs, sometimes engaging in heated exchanges, other times in playful banter. She became more attractive with each meeting, but he didn't have the courage to tell her. After all, what would she think of someone with gingery

hair, glasses, and a stocky build? His chance to find out occurred one afternoon when she arrived on her brother's motorcycle, wearing shorts and a top that revealed her midriff. She invited him to get on, saying they were going for a swim. He hadn't liked the sea as a child and never developed much of a stroke. Later, as an adolescent, he avoided the beach altogether, convinced his physique was comical. Noticing his hesitation, she asked if he was embarrassed to be seen with a Communist. No, he didn't have his swimming gear. She winked he wouldn't need it. Warm blush spread over his face as she revved the bike. It was his first time on a motorcycle and he didn't know where to place his hands, but when they sped off he wrapped his arms around her bare waist.

The road climbed between terraced olive groves and through small villages where men sitting in the shade of sprawling plane trees vented their disapproval as the pair drove past. At one point, encouraged by the envious remarks of a shepherd grazing sheep in a stony field, he wanted to say something complimentary about her shapely neck, but his heart pounded violently and a rush of blood scattered his thoughts. As the bike strained toward the summit the sea appeared over a row of conifers. Slowing down, she pointed to a cove surrounded by sheer cliffs and said that they would have it all to themselves. On the descent he held her a little tighter, until the road levelled off and they turned onto a dirt track which ended in scrub.

The sea was unusually calm, with waves unfolding onto the shore with barely a sound. He felt uneasy at the thought of swimming, especially without shorts, but quickly chastised himself for thinking like a schoolboy. The beach was covered in smooth coloured pebbles that crackled with the wash of each wave. She had come prepared, not only with a towel each but her brother's shorts for him. He changed behind some rocks and stepped out awkwardly, conscious of their tight fit, blushing at her playful laughter, until he laughed with her and felt more at ease. She removed her shorts and halter-neck and stood before him in a floral bikini, looking fuller than he imagined. They exchanged looks for a moment, as though not knowing what to say, and then she turned abruptly and ran lightly over the hot pebbles. She swam out some distance and waved for him to come. The sea was calm and its sandy bed fell away steeply. Once out of his depth he was no longer conscious of his appearance, and for an instant imagined they were two heads belonging to the great body of water. She circled him a few times, duck-dived under, tickled his foot, surfaced and swam further out, where she floated on her back, arms spread wide. Seizing the moment, he was about to tell her how beautiful she looked when a cramp gripped the back of his thigh. He thrashed about in panic as she swam to help him. The pain was now excruciating and he began sinking. She slipped underwater, turned him on his back, and extended his leg until the pain eased. Holding him around the chest, she kicked away, her breasts rubbing against his ribs, her smooth legs working powerfully. For a moment he forgot he had almost drowned and wished they might never reach the shore. When they touched bottom he embraced her in gratitude as her body rose and fell in gasping for breath.

- Well, comrade, she heaved, you're now indebted to me.
- Anything you want.
- Swear you'll become a Communist.
- You're my sweet saviour.

An hour later they were climbing out of the cove along steps cut into the rock. Half way up she stopped and pointed to a ledge leading to the mouth of a cave, saying a

monk used to live there. It was now mid-afternoon, the sun was intense, and she suggested they rest inside for a while. The cave was cool, its ceiling low, covered in moisture. A circle of stones contained the remnants of a recent fire and a few cans of food. She pointed to a table, a seat, and what appeared to be a bed - all hewn from the sandstone. Here and there crosses had been scratched in the walls. According to her brother, who had shown her the place, the cave was the work of a monk called Theologos, who had lived in it about a hundred years ago. As a young man he had left a nearby village and visited the Holy Cave on the island of Patmos, where the book of Revelation was written. There, captivated by the figure of Saint John the Theologian, he decided to become a monk and emulate the life of the inspired writer. Unable to find a suitable cave on Patmos he returned to Crete and excavated this with his own hands, spending the rest of his long life in constant prayer, beseeching God for a revelation like that seen by Saint John. He asked whether the monk's prayer had been answered. She shrugged her bare shoulders. The locals had found him down there, among the rocks. His death had been transformed to legend by gullible and superstitious minds. Some maintained Satan had tempted him by taking the form of a beautiful mermaid calling from the rocks. Others, that his soul shed its body and flew to heaven on angel wings. Her explanation was he had thrown himself from the cave in utter disappointment. Sitting on the stone bed, she removed her sandals and massaged her toes.

- Disappointment? he asked, caught in the echo of the word. At what?

- A wasted life, she replied.

Some locals believed the monk's soul still inhabited the cave and his prayers became audible if one listened hard enough, just like the sound of the sea in a shell. She lay back on the stone bed, hands under her head, the curve of her breasts accentuated.

- He slept on this night after night for fifty years.

- What a passion for God, he added.

- And his passion for life? she asked, turning on her side. What on earth drove him to bury his manhood in this tomb?

He wanted to say monks weren't subject to the ways of the world and this place may have been his womb to eternal life, but the sparkle of her eyes silenced him. A swell of tenderness filled him again, only more irresistible than when he had embraced her on the shore. No, he wouldn't disappoint her a second time. Heart pounding, scattering his thoughts, he knelt on the spot where the monk had bowed in countless prostrations. She drew him with a smile. He was drowning again, this time in the turbulence of his own blood, until he kissed his saviour's lips salty from the sea. Later, as they lay naked on the monk's stony bed, he whispered she was the first woman he had ever loved and asked if she would marry him. Yes, but only after she completed her course.

When summer ended she returned to Athens and he decided to take up the teaching position in Salonika, having been persuaded by her that it was the lesser of his two evil options. They saw each other often in the following months, travelling from one city to another, sometimes meeting half way in Larissa. As this was her last year of study they planned to become engaged next Christmas and marry the following summer, though they hadn't settled on whether it was to be a traditional church ceremony or one by a civil celebrant. But fate had other plans for them. She was killed in the student demonstrations on that November night in '73 when soldiers and tanks stormed the Polytechnic. Her death tore the light out of his eyes, just as his father's had done to his

mother, but not having a child to lessen his grief he left his position at the university and blackened himself on Mount Athos. For years he lit candles to two women: the girl in the cave and the Holy Virgin. In time the memory of the former blended with his worship and adoration of the latter, and he could look back on that summer not as an occasion of sin but as a ripening of spirit through the black kernel of death. And perhaps her Communist ideals had seeped into him after all, for as the newly-appointed Abbot he abolished private property and divisions between rich and poor monks, instituting a true commune, where labour and property were shared equally in the name of Christ, though she would have said Che Guevara.

The Abbot left his book again and went to answer the door. Father Meletios entered with Nico, the sad-eyed visitor to the monastery. Wearing a black apron over his cassock and considerable girth, the clockmaker must have come directly from his workroom, for he was still wiping his oily hands on a cloth. They came for the ornate grandfather clock standing in the corner of the room. It had been donated to the monastery a hundred years ago by an anti-Western Russian count, a fellow addicted to the roulette wheel, betting only on multiples of three. He had sought to replace the decimal system of counting with one based on the number three, arguing that 10 in the latter was closer to the soul of Orthodoxy than its designation in the former. The clock had suffered a paralytic stroke a few days ago that froze its pendulum. The community of clocks on Athos was generally in poor condition because of the constant setting and resetting in aligning midnight with sunset. The Abbot had sought the skill of Father Meletios not so much for the sake of accurate time (he wore a watch for that), but for the clock's companionship. Over the years he had grown accustomed to the sound of its unhurried ticking, which accompanied his reading and prayers, reminding him of a blind person tapping their way to the future. He liked the sway of its silver disc, whose convexity smoothed his reflection and allayed his concerns. As for the clock's hourly chime, it sounded loudest in the dead of night, could be heard from his bedroom, and served to lighten his sleep. And so, Father Meletios, the healer of clocks, was never short of patients, with cases arriving from all over Athos.

- Well, let's see old boy, he said.

Floorboards creaking at each step, he went to the clock, opened the glass door and pulled on a thin chain. The disc oscillated a few times but stopped under the weight of his reflection.

- It needs the hospital, he frowned.

He called on the quiet Nico, who had retreated to the opposite corner, and together they rattled the clock from its position and raised it onto their shoulders as though it were a coffin. The Abbot opened the door for them and asked how long the repairs might take, adding he had become very fond of his companion. As Nico struggled under the foot of the clock, Father Meletios wiped his hands, balancing his end by cocking his head to one side. The mechanisms inside tingled at the sound of his resonant voice. If grandfather needed nothing more than the oily elixir of life, he would be returned tomorrow; if it was heart trouble and parts were available, he would back in a few days; but if the old boy's soul had flown away, the good Abbot would have to wait an eternity.

Having stripped and made the beds of a dozen visitors who had left the monastery after breakfast, washed the sheets and pillowcases and hung them to dry on the long balcony overlooking the forest, swept the guesthouse foyer, kitchen and corridor, mopped the toilets and the single shower whose use the Abbot discouraged, welcomed several early arrivals with a tray of hospitality and accommodated them before their impatience showed, John returned to his cell for the mid-morning respite. He picked up a book titled *The Philokalia* - a collection of writing that served as a manual for monasticism - and opened to the chapter *Forty Texts on Sobriety* recommended by the Abbot. He sat at the table and read a few pages, but even these proved somewhat of a struggle as his thoughts flitted from his father, to objects in the room caught by the playful light, to images from last night's dream which not even the spring sun could dispel. Working the prayer cord, he went from one room to the other, as though looking for something to allay his growing restlessness. He drank a glass of water, ate a shrivelled fig, then stood before the icon shelf and tried to banish his dream by means of prayer and the instructions of the Hesychasts, who stressed the importance of bringing thoughts under the authority of a pure heart. But this exercise in control and inwardness was more difficult in broad daylight than in slender lamplight, and images from his dream continued springing to mind. He had no more than dozed between prostrations last night, yet in that moment a wave of emotion had swept over him. Had hunger and lack of sleep triggered the startling dream? Or the warmer spring days stirring his blood? Or his reading yesterday about Saint Mary of Egypt - the prostitute who left the brothels of Alexandria and spent the remainder of her life in the desert, attaining sanctity through a life of torturous asceticism?

He was roaming the Australian desert, gnawed by hunger, when a full-bodied crow wrapped in its own shadow called from an outcropping of rock. As he looked around for a stone to kill the bird for food, a monastic figure appeared from a cave painted with saints and animals. Suddenly the sand was hot and he wasn't wearing his thongs, but the figure beckoned with a crimson palm and he hobbled off hopeful of something to eat. At the cave's entrance he stood before a thin woman dressed in black from head to foot, her eyes dark as candle-smoke. She must be in mourning, he thought, trying to make out who she was, for her thinness was familiar. But the sun shone from behind her head, forming a dazzling halo that temporarily blinded him. The fruit of the tree of life, she said, taking him by the wrist. Her hand was moist, her voice sweet. She told him not to be afraid: the desert had cleansed her of all evil and she would take his sins into her body. He felt a stirring of desire for her, but chastised himself at once. She smiled her body was his life and offered him the wine of her lips. He was drawn by her tenderness. Eat the bread of my breasts, she whispered, opening her arms. He drank and ate, felt a growing strength in her bony embrace, until he was struck by the thought of Easter. He wanted to stop, but his hunger was compelling, her body delicious. Then, sounding from somewhere outside of himself, he heard his own voice saying this was only a dream. As his voice became clearer, more centred in his being, he tried to stop these feelings from taking their natural course, but an irresistible wave was now carrying him off. And as he thought how pleasant it would be to yield to the strong undertow, his shoulder ached and his forehead touched the floorboards. He woke with a start and remained dead still, hunched in a foetal position, summoning all his concentration in

arresting the loosened swell now coursing through his body. For an instant he was caught between the pull of his blood and the equal and opposite pull of his will, and then his heart relented and the wave ebbed. He stood and crossed himself, feeling indebted to the saints for his victory, and thankful his struggles during Lent and Holy Week had not been undone by a moment's surrender.

The dream had vexed him throughout the liturgy, in the refectory, as he went about his chores in the guesthouse. And now he wondered at this susceptibility to his own capricious fantasies. Would he ever succeed in subjecting them to the ascetic ideal? In their writings the Church Fathers stressed the importance of sobriety and watchfulness, but how could he exercise such things in the realm of the unconscious? Must he remain constantly vigilant, perhaps forego sleep altogether, in order to avoid those nocturnal temptations? Were they the source of demons that had tormented Saint Antony in his desert retreat? The dark powers and unseen principalities of Saint Paul? And what if he had succumbed last night? Would it have invalidated his preparation for the coming days? If a wilful thought constituted sin, what could be said of wrong doing in dreams? Did the condition of sin extend to dreams? Or was sin bound to purpose and wilfulness, and so inadmissible in a state ruled by chance and caprice? But what of the truly great ascetics, those who had kept strict watch over their hearts and minds into old age? Surely their purity extended to the very depths of their dreams. Imbued with light, perhaps they had the gift of grace to hover over their shadowy selves and determine even their dreams.

He flicked through the *Philokalia*, stopping at random to read short passages in the whimsical hope that chance, or perhaps Providence, would deliver something that might answer some of his questions. But after a few minutes he closed the book, ate another fig, and went to the window. The simpleton Father Akakios, whom some likened to a Holy Fool, was sitting on the steps of the refectory, caressing a black cat, one of several he had trained to roll playfully on its back and jump over his extended arm. He would react to these performances by holding his grubby hands in an attitude of prayer and clapping in delight, a gesture that evoked laughter from visitors, and teased a smile from the beard of the sternest monk. The father and his young son walked hand in hand toward the entrance, perhaps going down to the jetty, where visitors sat and reflected during the quiet part of the day. As in the refectory this morning, the boy was now scowling, shaking his head, and trying to pull away. On passing the chapel dedicated to the Virgin, the father quickly crossed himself before the door, while the boy strained for the gate like a pup on a leash. In the wing under reconstruction a series of ladders zigzagged up to the roof, where workmen stood on dark rafters, hammering new slats in preparation for roof tiles. Stefan was also up there, a load of timber on his shoulder, walking lightly along a beam near the edge.

John turned from the window and slipped on the woollen cap he wore while working or venturing outside the monastery. Yes, there was enough time before his afternoon chores to visit Elder Kyrillos. He hoped a brisk walk and the Elder's words might dispel his present unease. And yet this agitation, particularly at the onset of spring, wasn't new to him: he had been subject to it from adolescence, when he would subdue it through concerted study and longer jogs. In fact, upon first entering the monastery, he had approached the Abbot with the unusual request of being allowed to continue jogging. Twisting the end of his reddish eyebrow, the Abbot had pointed out a monk's task was to be an athlete of the soul, not the body, and running might be considered an indulgence rather than a privation. But John had persisted, finally persuading him it would be conducive to meditation and internalising the

Jesus Prayer through the rhythmic breathing in running. In this regard jogging could be seen as an ascetic exercise, not unlike repeated prostrations, and through it, as through the latter, the weight of the body was overcome by the strength of a mind fixed on God. The Abbot had deemed shorts inappropriate, so John ran in a black tracksuit during the early part of his novitiate. He went out every second day, sometimes for an hour or more, jogging on the paths and mule tracks through the forest, along the undulating coast, and up the mountain's slopes. After his induction ceremony, however, jogging became more difficult for practical reasons: monastic rules compelled him to wear the long cassock at all times. Again, after discussing the matter with the Abbot, who was progressive in many ways, he was permitted to go walking as a form of spiritual exercise.

In the courtyard John greeted Father Akakios sitting cross-legged on the steps, with the cat dozing sleekly on his lap, its triangular ears twitching. The scruffy simpleton was continually on the move, going where his fancy took him, sometimes traversing enormous distances in a day. Despite his age, he had the constitution of a mountain goat and was known to celebrate matins at the monastery of Zographou in the far north of the peninsular (it didn't matter the monks there spoke only Bulgarian) and vespers in one of the remote hermitages at Kerasia in the south, a distance of about thirty kilometres according to a crow, more on the back of a mule, and even further for a wayward monk. Though officially bound to this monastery he was at home all over Athos, often disappearing for weeks and months. And if he spent most of his time here, it wasn't because of attachment to belongings, for he had nothing apart from what he carried in a hessian sack, but from affection for his cats. Now, having just returned from Karyes, feeling blissfully lethargic in the spring sun, he replied to John's greeting with a grin that seemed to come from a distant place, where intellect and language counted for nothing, and a monk was the brother of a cat.

John walked past the fountain as a speckled dove perched on the rim of the dish echoed another's three-note call. He felt the sun on the back of his hands and noticed how pale they had become. The black cardigan over his cassock absorbed the light and warmed his body. Suddenly, as though arresting the pleasant sensation, he concealed his hands in his sleeves and stepped in the cool shadow of the church. The last few days had been taxing enough, and now, on top of the gruelling fast, his father's imminent visit, the inward preparation for his coming tonsure, he felt again the force of spring stirring in his depths, making him both restless and melancholy. This time last year he had strengthened himself with extensive readings from the Lives of the Saints, in particular those who had prevailed against the temptations of the flesh. Their ordeals had moved him. In rising from the dust of their spiritual warfare they glowed with boundless love for creation - a love emanating from the very denial of one's self. Of course, he knew nothing directly of this beatitude, and perhaps never would, but he hoped for it intensely, and this was one of the reasons he had left Australia.

He had undergone his own struggles with this dark force from the time it first erupted as red buds on the mirrored face of a fifteen-year-old. As other boys were delighting in their own body, he refrained not on the basis of sin and punishment (though he had noticed in church an icon of the Archangel Michael severing a man's hands), but from a youthful notion that heroism lay in overcoming easy pleasures. And yet his ideal was challenged wherever he turned. Advertisers used the lure and lever of sexuality to sell their products to the young, and happiness was to be found in the instant gratification of the body. As for the heroic spirit of self-denial, it was ridiculed and dismissed as repressive in an age

of liberation.

At the time John's emotional life had come under the influence of Saint Anthony, whose life by Saint Athanasius he had read several times at the expense of his homework. Impressed by the anchorite's prodigious struggles, he also wanted to overcome temptations, which were far more prevalent in modern society than in the emptiness of the Egyptian desert. As this was happening at one emotional level, at another he still admired his heroes of science, whose struggles and self-sacrifice were no less impressive than the Saint's. Moved by the spirit of both, he attempted to live as a kind of scholar-monk, seeing no contradiction in this, for he regarded science as an expression of God's will, not its negation. Imbued with such youthful idealism he viewed momentary pleasure as a dissipation of being to no real purpose, whereas discipline and self-denial were essential in the struggle for universal truths. Thereafter, and throughout his university years, he regarded this union his personal religion: the synthesis of faith and intellect would define the surest and straightest path to God. At the age of sixteen, when bony wrists protruded from his school blazer, he had already noted fundamental similarities between science and religion. Both were fully lived only by a leap of faith into the unknown, the latter through belief in a God of love and meaning, despite the prevalence of evil; the latter through the assumption of a universe based on laws susceptible to the human mind, despite the appearance of chance. And just as religion was practiced not according to one's own wishes and whims but through the commandments of Scripture, so scientific pursuit was constrained by the mathematics inherent to the laws of nature. Not only this, the vows at the centre of monastic life, which he regarded as the highest form of religious experience, were also observed by those who dedicated their lives to discovering a formula or fact. Like monks, scientists who lived solely for research denied their own personality for the sake of objective truth and stood with humility before creation's awesome complexity. In the first flush of his enthusiasm he had daydreamed of becoming a mystic of his personal religion: the loner who retreated from society for the sake of a discovery that would benefit the world. But he was also aware such prizes fell to scientists as revelations to prophets - by the presence of what the latter called grace, the former intuition.

In the summer vacation of that year John's uncle had arranged a job for him at the abattoirs. The shy youth was grateful, but would have preferred to spend the holidays at home, not to go swimming with friends, for he had outgrown beaches and pools, but to read about saints and scientists. Books were fine, his father scolded him, but it was just as important to read people and situations, for which there was no better teacher than factory work. He turned to his mother for support, but on this point she nodded in agreement. Perhaps they were concerned he was becoming somewhat withdrawn and saw this as a way of forcing him to be more gregarious. Though he had been gradually moving away from their narrow world - one limited by language and lack of education - he remained mindful of the difficulties they had experienced in coming to Australia. Sometimes, when reading in the comfort of his room, thinking how at his age they had toiled in factories and fields, he would be struck by a pang of guilt, as though books were a source of illicit pleasure. And so he agreed to go with his uncle, hoping it would serve a two-fold purpose: allay their apprehension about his solitary nature and ease his sense of guilt in relation books.

On the first morning he was directed to the storeroom, where an elderly man greeted him with a string of swear words, as though the youth's very shadow had

disturbed the order of his world. Cursing everything from the size of John's foot, to the spelling of his surname, the fellow issued his white work-wear and instructed him to return it for cleaning at the end of the day. The foreman gave him a knife and set him to work at the end of the mutton line. After the sheep had been slaughtered, gutted, skinned and washed, it was his job to locate the kidneys in the warm fat, cut them out, and throw them into a tub - a process he repeated more than fifteen hundred times a day. The work was mind-numbing, the smell permeated his body, and the daily count of kidneys was multiplied enormously in his dreams. Once or twice, he came close to telling his father he couldn't take any more, but held back, not wanting to embarrass his uncle, who had praised his reliability to the foreman.

As the hot weeks fused into each other, he put up with the trying conditions more from a sense of personal pride than family considerations or financial reasons. Having no desire to buy things or go places, he came to see work not as a means to an end but purely as a test of whether he could endure it for eight weeks, after which he would be back in his natural element - school. Seen as a challenge the tedious work suddenly assumed Herculean dimensions. Just as the ancient hero had been awarded divinity for completing his twelve labours (one of which was to clean a stable whose stench was unbearable), so John's stinking labour of cutting out one hundred and sixty-five thousand kidneys would reward him with a place among the immortals of science.

One lunch hour he left the smoke-filled canteen and climbed up to a landing overlooking the pens bursting with sheep, pigs and cattle. The thought that not one animal would be alive by the end of the day reminded him of the food triangle. The animals before him were bred and slaughtered so humanity might live and build cities and create works of art and make discoveries in science and mathematics. But was humanity at the apex of the triangle? What if mankind was being subtly herded into cities only to be harvested by a higher intelligence? Perhaps good thoughts sustained an angelic order, while evil ones constituted the food of demons. Was this why all religions advocated purity of thought and emotion?

A man with tattooed arms jumped into the pigpen and, striking with a black rubber tube, began mustering the herd up a wooden ramp. John was startled by the deftness with which a large pig mounted another and jerked back and forth in a manner he would not have imagined possible. The man swore and whacked the animal's rump, but its movements became even more frenzied and arcs of semen spurted into the air like jets from a fountain. He was struck by the timing of the animal's desperate thrust. Had it sensed what lay at the top of the ramp? Was life lived more intensely in proximity to death? Within minutes a charge of electric current would deliver another convulsive experience, and in an hour it would be hanging upside down in a cool-room.

The sheep pressed into each other as the siren blared for work. Their fate moved him, perhaps because they were more compliant than the other animals, more trusting, as though one body climbing a ramp that would take them to the green pastures of paradise.

And now, recollecting those sheep, he was reminded of Dolly - the first mammal to be successfully cloned. He thought it significant that a sheep and not a pig had been chosen for that groundbreaking experiment. A pig would have been inappropriate for that defining moment in history, not only because Muslims saw it as an unclean animal, but because in the Gospel story the herd of swine possessed by the demons had plunged into the ocean. Sheep, on the other hand, were associated with the Lamb of God, and just as

Christ had been sacrificed for the salvation of mankind, so meek and innocent Dolly might be the forerunner of much that would happen in genetics and cloning.

In passing the front of the church John's attention was caught by the frescoed panel to the right of the main doors. He had often observed it in the course of his daily coming and going, but this morning the colours appeared brighter, the subject matter somehow more arresting. In the centre of the panel two connected ladders rose from earth to heaven. Monks were shown at various stages in their struggle to reach the top: some encouraged and guided by angels, others fighting off grasping demons, a few falling headlong into the mouth of a serpent. The lower ladder was inclined at a moderate angle, while the upper rose precipitously to a semicircle in which Christ awaited the successful with outstretched arms. He thought of the passage: Heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by force.

As he started counting the rungs on the lower ladder, curious as to whether the number was a prime or not, Father Meletios and Nico appeared from the other side of the church with a grandfather clock on their shoulders. The shorter man was struggling under the load, mincing along in trying to keep up with the clockmaker's firm stride. John hurried to help them and took the corner next to Nico, who insisted he could manage. His round face was flushed, set in determination, and his words strained between sharp breaths.

- And if you have a heart attack? chuckled Father Meletios.

- You're the doctor, he replied. The heart's no different from a clock.

- Do you want to rest a while? asked John.

- I've carried heavier things.

- There's only one thing heavier than time, said the clockmaker, and that's the dead weight of sin.

- Yes, Father, well put, the dead weight of sin, said Nico. In Chicago I once worked in a factory shouldering sacks of barley from dawn to dusk, and they were nothing compared to the dead weight of sin.

- Confession, said Father Meletios, turning his head to the side. The burden of sin is lightened when one bows low before a confessor. And don't be ashamed to shed tears: they're to the heart what oil's to a clock.

- Yes, Father. You've put it well again. I lived with the dead weight of sin until it almost killed me. But now I feel light, despite this clock, and tomorrow I'll be free.

- Save your breath, advised Father Meletios, you'll need it for the stairs.

The clockmaker held his end with both hands while climbing steadily backwards, a gentle smile showing through his sunlit beard. Pressed side to side, heads almost touching, John and Nico couldn't quite keep in step, so the clock rattled and its chime struck a dull sound. At the top they proceeded in silence along a corridor with a series of arched openings looking out to a sprawling eucalypt. The tree had somehow found its place near the back of the church, with a few of its thicker limbs extending over the apse. For John there was something incongruous in the presence of this long-leafed evergreen among these Byzantine cloisters. On winter mornings it looked ghostly in snow-coated branches, as though yearning for the brown of a distant southern summer. And even after almost two years he still expected to hear the sound of a magpie or bellbird, instead of jackdaws and nightingales. But more than this, its smell and whisper (less suspicious than the tight-lipped cypress) evoked memories firmly rooted in Melbourne, especially the spacious parklands near his home, where he had spent so much of his childhood with Stefan and Paul. The tree had come as a sapling from the island of Leros, where Italian soldiers had planted eucalypts

when they occupied a number of Aegean Islands. Father Maximos wanted the tree felled both for the perennial problems with unruly leaves and the ominous creaking over the church on windy days. But Father Loukas opposed him: the monastery's herbalist collected the year-round supply of leaves, extracted their pungent oil, and dispensed it to those suffering from rheumatic aches and pains.

The workshop was crowded with clocks that had found their way there by jeep, boat, mule, and strapped to the shoulders of broad-backed monks. They placed the grandfather upright beside a bench strewn with tools and jars containing parts salvaged from bodies with chronic inaccuracy and crippling arthritis. Father Meletios was in his mid-forties had been a successful watchmaker in Athens before coming to Athos. Ten years earlier he had suddenly decided to sell the business, distribute the assets among nephews and nieces, and set out on the monastic path. The cause of this radical change had not been a religious experience, as with so many of the monks, nor disillusionment with love, but a single encounter with an elderly woman dressed in black from shawl to shoe. She had entered his shop with a basket containing a bouquet of carnations, a loaf of bread stamped with symbols, a bowl of boiled wheat mixed with almonds, and a small plastic bottle half-filled with red wine. She placed an embroidered pillowcase on the counter and took from it a common clock with green enamel chipped in several spots. Looking somewhat desperate, she asked whether it could be repaired before the end of the day, adding she still set the alarm to the time her husband would rise for work, even though he had died three months ago. The clock had been given to them as a wedding gift and never left their bedside table, becoming a steadfast witness of love and pain, childbirth and the death. At that instant something about her cut through the order of his bachelor life and brought him face to face with his own mortality. Putting aside more pressing work, he managed to repair it and have it ready by midday. But she didn't return that afternoon or the next day. He made a few inquiries among the shopkeepers in the neighbourhood, but she wasn't a local and nobody else had seen her. By the end of the week the widow's clock had affected him more than years of lugubrious tolling by wise grandfathers: he felt his own death, not in some abstract sense, but in the sharpness of each tick fixing his flesh to the black-felted board of his death. A month later, the clock packed in a suitcase with his tools, he set out for Athos.

Father Meletios thanked his helpers and offered to make coffee. Nico thumbed the coin around his neck and smiled. John declined, saying he had to visit Elder Kyrillos. The monk clapped and reached for a round-faced clock with Roman numerals belonging to the Elder. Extending it to John on a palm the size of a bowl, he assured him it had been oiled and tightened and would tick evenly until Judgement Day.

After another day on the roof with the tradesmen, Stefan took off his shirt, removed Father Clement's black cross from around his neck, and sponged his torso at the trough beneath the window in readiness for vespers. The start of the late-afternoon service depended on the season, but it lasted just over an hour, concluded at sunset, and was followed by supper in the refectory. The water was cold from the snow on Athos melting and swelling the stream tapped by the monastery. He welcomed spring and the advent of warmer weather. Yes, the days were longer and there was far more to be done around the place, but he preferred manual labour to being confined indoors with nothing to do but think. Several monks, including the Abbot, had mentioned that idle dreamers didn't last long under the monastic yoke. Coming to Athos with all sorts of notions picked up from books and films, they were soon disillusioned by what they saw as the drudgery of work. And yet it was this drudgery, this grappling with nature through work that prepared one for the spiritual struggle ahead. If a novice or monk didn't love labour, then he wasn't a true participant in creation and was excluded from communion with God. But if hard work was a way of dispelling illusions and anchoring a novice in the spiritual life of the monastery, it served a very different purpose in Stefan's case. More than prayers and prostrations, whose efficacy he had yet fully to appreciate, physical work helped to disperse the fog that seeped into his being from his experiences in Kosovo.

High in the monastery's east wing his cell overlooked the extensive vegetable garden that stretched almost to the sea. A golden spread of sunlight now covered the well-worked soil like heavenly fertiliser, enhancing parallel furrows and the richness of a darker patch hoed during the day. In a couple of months from now the garden would be flourishing with cherub-cheeked tomatoes and white-haired leeks, big-hearted pumpkins and purple-robed aubergines, tight-fisted garlic and strong-teared onions, odd-shaped beans and even-seeded watermelons, red-tongued peppers and salt-loving cucumbers, long-suffering spinach and born-again potatoes - and all that abundance irrigated by the gratitude of monks praying in their sweat and the joy of streams tumbling from the summit.

The vineyard lay in a section of the garden that sloped upward and backed onto the forest. Trained along wires the vines were now covered in light-green leaves. Last autumn Stefan had assisted in the grape harvest. Pairing up with Father Theodore, they had worked together agreeably, snipping the heavy clusters, filling the baskets strapped to each side of a mule, taking the fruit to the cool wine-cellar containing enormous barrels made of oak and bound with rusty hoops. A week earlier Father Akakios had spent three days and nights in the cellar, cleaning and scrubbing the insides of the barrels marked with a white cross. Stefan had been amazed by the endurance of the monk, whose light-mindedness was matched by his nimble feet. Not only had he climbed into barrels and scrubbed vigorously all day, his labour lit by a candle, he had even slept in them, though perhaps no more than a few winks, by stretching out on the ladder set along the base. In the first barrel the monk had imagined himself to be Jonah in the belly of the whale; in the second, a sinner condemned to hell's pungent pit; in the third, a penitent alone in the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre. His chants and praises had echoed with growing strength, until the third morning, when he climbed out of the barrel announcing he felt like a new

man.

When Stefan and Father Theodore had delivered the first load to the cellar, Father Akakios was there once again, a grin wider than a church door, tattered trousers rolled past his knees bony kneecaps, barefooted in a wooden trough mounted over the opening of the first barrel. He called on them to tip the baskets into the trough and began stomping on the grapes while holding onto a chain suspended from the ceiling. This he did with boyish delight, laughing through his ragged beard, chanting, breaking out into a dance. And then he sang that making wine had always given him greater pleasure than drinking it. When Stefan asked why, the monk's laughter fluttered like a bat. Grapes were the tears of old Mother-Earth mourning the death of the sun, he replied. In crushing them, he would bring forth sweetness from sorrow, that would sustain his brothers through the long dark winter, until the Mother-Earth smiled again at the sun's rebirth. By the end of the day the mule had tired of coming and going, but not light-footed Father Akakios, who continued rattling the chain in dancing on sorrow and death. As Stefan collected the grape skins in a large basket (they would be distilled to make the strong raki that greeted visitors), he envied the monk's joy and wondered whether he would ever crush the sorrow in his own heart.

A month after the harvest, when winds sharpened their knives and flocks of jackdaws darkened the sky, Stefan had assisted with pruning the vines. In cutting the gnarled branches he recalled Father Akakios's words. Yes, grapes were born of anguish and sorrow, for they weren't the fruit of the stately mulberry or chestnut, but of limbs tormented and twisted by a feeling for the earth. The cuttings were loaded onto the mule, brought back to the monastery, and sheltered beside the woodpile. A few weeks ago, working again with Father Theodore, they had taken the dry cuttings to the basement of the refectory, where an olive press had been set up ages ago, in times when smoke rising upright from chimneys could redden a monk's eyes at ten paces. As olives were now processed at a neighbouring monastery having modern equipment, the press here was used for grinding charcoal into fine powder, which was then compacted and burnt in censers. Following the instructions of an experienced monk, Stefan and Father Theodore fed the cuttings into an open fire and watched as they turned crisp and black. They were then shoveled onto the press and crushed under a stone wheel turned by a blinkered mule plodding anticlockwise in circles. (The supervising monk had explained mules pulled longer in that direction because the distance traveled was marginally shorter) When the charcoal had been sufficiently ground the monk scooped a handful of powder, rubbed it between his fingers, tasted it with the tip of his tongue, and signalled for it to be scraped from the press and stored in a sack. Placing the first handful of powder in a small pouch, the monk used it to blacken his face and the foreheads of his helpers, as a reminder of the body's ultimate fate. And then, feeding the mule from a bucket of scraps, he delivered a short homily on the versatility of those massive stones. Yes, they now ground the bones of old Satan and produced a powder whose fragrant smoke would purify the church, but in years gone by they had crushed black olives as though pupils full of light, extracting golden oil not only for food but for the holy lamp of the Eternal Flame. In times of hunger they had crushed corn for bread darker and heavier than the bricks of the church. In the War of Independence the monks used more than prayer to help liberate Greece: they harnessed themselves to those very stones and made the finest gunpowder, which the freedom fighters used not only in their weapons but to blacken their moustaches so

courage should permeate their dreams.

Sitting before the fire, waiting for another supply of charcoal, Stefan had asked his companion what had attracted him to Athos. Father Theodore's prominent cheeks blazed as he prodded the branches with a poker. The mule's bell tingled and the stone wheel groaned in turning.

- My sister's death, he replied, staring at the flames.

- I'm sorry, said Stefan.

- No, she's a new martyr and her story must be told.

As an adolescent Vera had excelled in athletics and the State began grooming her for the Olympics. But God, the coach of athletes bound for heaven, had other plans for the gifted girl. The first signs of her inwardness, which others took for aloofness, occurred during a State-run training camp. A few months later she gave up athletics, stopped eating, and shut herself away from family and friends. Christians in an unholy age, their parents kept the wicks of their candles short and turned their icons to the wall, having backed them with prints of State leaders. One evening they dared the red sunset and took their daughter to a starets, an elder, who lived in the nearby monastery of Bogoroditsa, whose meaning Stefan understood because 'Mother of God' was said the same way in Serbian. The Starets was a thin old monk with a gentle smile and milky pupils. He had been in the monastery from his youth and had worked tirelessly to keep it going, knowing a monastery without monks became State property.

The Starets attributed Vera's condition to a dream at the training camp, which he repeated to the family just as he had heard it. The girl had found herself on a ladder set over an abyss like a bridge. She was exercising and making her way to the other side, when a figure appeared on the ladder as though from the darkness below. It resembled the Archangel Michael found on the side door of altar screens, only it didn't have a halo and its wings were blacker than charcoal. Vera wanted to cross to a dome glowing in the birch forest on the other side, but was caught in the figure's powerful wings. She struggled against the suffocating embrace for what seemed like an eternity, and just as her strength began to fail a ray of light from the dome caught her eye. In an instant she slipped from the grip, somersaulted over the figure, and landed on the steps of a church. She woke in a tremor, her fingers numb, the pillow smelling of the figure's wings. Interpreting the dream in spiritual terms, the Starets encouraged Vera to use her natural gift not for gold medals, but for the glory of God. Moved by his words she left the family and became a nun.

Never one to do anything by half measures Vera lived as an athlete for Christ, waking early, working hard in the nunnery's upkeep, disciplining herself to eat less and pray more. As her faith grew more intense she would often express her admiration of the virgin martyr Saint Catherine of Alexandria. She longed to surrender her life in the name of Christ, just as the young Catherine had done on the wheel of her death. But the abbess, in whom she confided all things, disapproved of such zeal. A longing for martyrdom was a sign of youthful pride and Christ was best served tending the humble vegetable patch. Martyrdom must never be sought, she instructed. It always came unbidden, in an unforeseen moment, as an act of grace in return for selfless faith.

Working daily for her faith, Vera had been in the monastery five years when Communism collapsed. Suddenly, after more than seventy years, icons could see the light of day again and the first three fingers of the right hand could meet other than in holding a pen. But the joy with which the nuns had greeted the event soon turned to disappointment. The

openness and freedom brought with it economic chaos, which in turn gave rise to greed, opportunism, crime - the Russian Mafia. As the founders of the Communist State had based their doctrines on ideas appropriated from the West, so these underworld figures modelled themselves on what they saw in American movies. They began to plunder Russia in order to satisfy the West's appetite for things new and exotic. Weapons, art works, women, icons - the demand was insatiable.

One evening, a week before Assumption, Vera had been doing the rounds of the courtyard when three youths climbed over the wall and made straight for the church that had several venerated icons. She intercepted them, pointing out the harm they were doing their souls, but they surrounded her and laughed in her face. They were no more than fifteen or sixteen, all with crew cuts and Nike running shoes. Holding up the large silver cross around her neck, she tried to reason with them, pointing out icons were articles of faith not objects of art. This seemed to incense them even more, for they threatened to kill her if she stood in their way, but she remained firm, ready to defend the icons with her life. As one of them kicked at her, she sprang away and ran off to sound the alarm. They swept past her and scrambled over the wall, though not before one had snatched the cross from her neck.

Three days later Vera was found dead on the steps of the church - stabbed by her own cross, whose longer end had been sharpened to a point. The door had been forced open and the icons stolen. She had died a martyr defending the church against the demonic atheists, united with her beloved Saint Catherine through their supreme act of faith. When Father Theodōre had beheld his sister in the coffin, her hands folded like a dove's wings, he decided there and then to renounce mathematics and follow in her footsteps. He had been tonsured by the Starets. The old monk's face had a yellow tinge, his voice struggled, but his hands were almost translucent in the afternoon light. At the end of the ceremony he blessed Father Theodore and instructed him to empty his heart of worldly things so he might fill it with his sister's love for Bogoroditsa.

That moment in the basement had moved Stefan profoundly. The look in Father Theodore's eyes as he ended his story, vine branches crackling in the fire, the bell tingling on the mule, hands blackened and hanging in resignation, their shadows swaying as one on the rough stone wall - all combined to evoke a feeling of kinship toward the Russian monk. He had wanted to reach out in a fraternal manner by confiding his own story for coming to Athos, but the supervising monk suddenly barked that the branches were over burnt.

Beyond the vegetable garden the sea was untroubled, waves crowned white by the afternoon breeze. A fishing boat from Daphne had rounded the southern end of the peninsular and was now ploughing north to the town of Erissos. Soon the tourist season would start again and ships would come with sightseers, keeping the obligatory five hundred metres from the shore. Men and women, many with binoculars, would survey the rocky coast, marvel at the more precipitous monasteries, and perhaps wonder at a white-bearded monk leaning on a balcony. And Stefan realised he hadn't seen a woman in almost a year. He thought of Kosovo and the Albanian village, but immediately put the cross around his neck again and repeated a string of Kyrie Eleisons. He then held out his left arm and, on the inside of the forearm, inspected a light-blue tattoo of the Serbian cross.

He had tattooed himself at fifteen, following an argument with his father over playing football on Sundays. His mother had sided with him, but his father wouldn't hear

of it, accusing him of betraying his family and forgetting his origins. She remonstrated with her husband: he had already alienated one son and would surely drive the other away if he persisted in his obstinacy. Let him go, Ivan growled, cutting a loaf of bread against his broad chest. But the boy should remember: a man wasn't a mountain and a day would come when he couldn't live alone. Stefan stormed out, but Ivan bowed to a salad bowl and dipped his bread in a mixture of oil and vinegar.

At Paul's house Stefan was determined to show the old man a thing or two. Despite Paul's warning and refusal to assist, they went to the garage with a candle, a sewing needle, and a plastic ink-tube from a pen. He instructed his friend to press Father Clement's cross against his left forearm while he heated the needle on the flame, dipped it in ink, and traced its outline with the deftness of a sewing machine. This was followed by a bold C in the cross's right quadrants and its mirror image on the left. Paul winced, calling on him to stop, warning him of infection, but Stefan's mind was fixed on his father and he continued mixing ink with blood, until a strong outline of the Serbian symbol emerged.

The following Sunday, his bag packed for the football match, Stefan went to the back shed, where his father had set up a still to make slivovits from several boxes of over-ripe plums. Ivan growled for him to shut the door, or the smell of his secret brew would permeate the neighbourhood and have the police on their doorstep. A gas burner hissed beneath a sealed copper cylinder, while clear liquid trickled into a pot from a coiled tube.-

- What do you want? he frowned.

- I've come for your blessing, said Stefan, rubbing his forearm.

Ivan raised a hydrometer and read the alcohol content of his slivovits.

- Strong as our Serbian tears, he said.

- I'm true a Serb, Dad.

- Dad? Tato!

- Come and watch me play, Tato. You won't be disappointed.

- Disappointment tastes better with this.

Stefan unbuttoned his left sleeve and extended his arm. Ivan stared at the tattoo, then looked into his son's eyes, and finally smoothed his moustache. He disapproved of the tattoo, but not the symbol. As the slivovits trickled from the still like the sound of a finch at sunrise, Ivan reached out and touched his son's forearm.

- Who did this to you? he asked, struggling with conflicting emotions.

- I did, Tato, for you.

Stefan wasn't sure what to make of his father's expression and tone. In his eagerness to prove his worth had he miscalculated the reaction of this staunch Serb? But just as his uncertainty verged on fear, his father kissed the tattoo and caught his son in a powerful embrace.

- You're a true Serb, he said, eyes glistening.

- Will you come, Tato?

Ivan nodded and proposed they mark the occasion in a proper manner. He poured a little of the brew into a small glass, dipped his finger into it, and made the sign of the cross on his son's forehead. Observing tradition, he then instructed Stefan to have three sips of the burning drink, knocking back the remainder with a gulp of satisfaction.

- You're a man now, Ivan announced. So eat your bread proudly, son, with both

cheeks bulging, and don't mind that your fingers are different lengths, for they're all one when curled in a fist. And keep the tattoo from your mother - she wouldn't understand.

His parents watched him play that Sunday and by the end of the game Ivan was so impressed by his son's talent he became his greatest fan. With his father's blessing Stefan left school at sixteen and became a carpenter's apprentice, in order to concentrate on football and make it to the top. After so many years had Ivan finally embraced Australia? Had he accepted greater skill was needed to judge the tumble of an egg-shaped ball than the roll of a round one? No. He realised his son could bring recognition to their ethnic background by becoming a champion and outshining the Aussie kids at their own game. Braving the Melbourne winter, he attended every game, cheering his son in broken English and cursing the umpire in blunt Serbian. He waved a flag with the club emblem on one side and the Serbian colours on the other, and carried a flask of home-brew in one trouser-pocket and salty pumpkinseeds in the other.

At twenty, having completed his apprenticeship, Stefan worked as a carpenter putting up house frames. He still played football, though not at the top level, for which he certainly had the skill and ability. No, much to Ivan's disappointment, he didn't make the grade because he had lost his desire to climb to the top. Of course, his father had pushed him to be more serious and single-minded, to socialise less and train harder, but Stefan was wary of his advice, perhaps sensing that seriousness would dampen his spontaneous nature and extinguish his love of the game. This aside, however, the memory of Father Clement still hovered over his emotional landscape, casting a faint shadow over pursuits valued by many around him. He had moved away from the religion of his childhood, and his memory of the monk was somewhat shadowy, but there were moments when he saw top level football for what it really was: a game which business had deceptively glamorised and exploited. Glimpsing these things at seventeen or eighteen, he had decided not to get caught up in the deception, to play football at a lower level, where the enjoyment was no less real playing before a hundred spectators than in a stadium with a hundred thousand.

Though Stefan had moved in different circles from Paul and John, he looked forward to their regular meetings, perhaps because he could still be frank and open with them in a way not possible with friendships made later in life. They had completed high school and were at university, where John was studying science and Paul humanities. On their part they enjoyed Stefan's company because, unlike their more reserved natures, he was full of energy and spontaneity. They were both pen pushers, sheltered in labs and libraries, while he worked in the real world, on construction sites putting up trusses and frames with a powerful nail-gun like a toy in his hands. He played his football hard and fast, winning on several occasions the award for the best player in the competition. And he gambled compulsively with a devil-may-care attitude to money, often going directly to work after an all-night game. He never played on poker machines or punted on the horses, for they involved little thinking and required no skill. Later, when Melbourne's first casino opened, he refused to patronise it because of the gaping crowds, the glitz and glamour, and the requirement of formal dress for some of the gaming rooms. He preferred to gamble at private venues: in garages, at the back of shops, in rooms rented out for such gatherings. And there he played Manilla, Poker and Blackjack: games of skill and nerve, for which he learned to read others the way his friends read textbooks. As his reputation grew, the standing of a game was often determined by his presence.

One sultry evening Stefan had taken his friends to a card-game at the back of a pizza shop. He radiated an unusual energy that night: his hands were lightning, he called bluffs successfully, and his folds were timely. Privy to his cards from behind, his friends watched in fascination, as though playing through him and sharing in his success. A few players became irritable, thumped their losing hand on the table, swore at each other and cursed God for their misfortune. When one accused him of dealing from the bottom, Stefan laughed and told him to leave if he couldn't take losing. The next instant the fellow pulled out a gun and pushed it against Stefan's head. Paul made a movement toward his friend but John restrained him. The man called him a cheat, ordered him to lay his hands flat on the table, and screamed he wanted his money back. Stefan remained dead still, until the fellow reached over for a pile of notes, and then he snatched the gun, head-butted him flush on the face, and demanded an apology, which the fellow made with a mouthful of blood.

With the winnings from the game Stefan offered to pay for his friends to visit a brothel, which he made no secret of frequenting when Lady Luck smiled on him. He was good-looking and had no trouble meeting women, but he avoided relationships from fear of being trapped, as he put it. Paul had been sharing an apartment with a girlfriend at the time, but had never been to a brothel and was keen to experience something new. He was enrolled in a unit of creative writing and the visit might prove valuable for a short story due in a couple of weeks. John declined the invitation, saying he had seen enough for one night. Knowing his reticence with woman, the others pressed him to come along, insisting the experience would forge another link in their friendship. He stood firm, however, refusing to pay for sex with someone who thought nothing of him. They were on the brink of the third millennium, Paul reminded him, and such attitudes were old fashioned. One appreciated life by plunging in it, not by testing it with one's fingertip. When it seemed their debate might flare, Stefan intervened with their oath of brotherhood. He asked John not to spoil the evening, to join them in the brothel, and what followed would be entirely up to him. There would be time for women, John replied, and left without another word. And did Stefan think any less of his friend because he had declined his generosity? No. He admired his resolve and the strength of his convictions.

As the semantron now struck for vespers Stefan took the lamp that burned before the icon of the Mother and Child. Extending his arm, he held the flame directly below the tattoo, keeping it there until the pain was unbearable and the smell of singed hair filled the cell.

Father Akakios had his own explanation for nightfall: it slipped out furtively from the eyes of his feline brothers and sisters. And to prove his theory he would call on doubters to observe how at noon a cat's pupils were no wider than a sliver of light, while at dusk they became round enough to swallow a moon rising full from the sea. Perhaps he was right, for with supper having just ended, a sombre grey settled on the church's leaden dome, lengthening shadows covered the courtyard, and several cats gazed slyly at the evening star, in a manner suggesting collusion with the Prince of Darkness. A number of monks were still cleaning up in the refectory, others had set off on pressing administrative matters, the remainder, together with the more devout visitors, were assembled for compline in the chapel dedicated to the Virgin. They crowded into the narthex and nave, both of which were frescoed extensively, though in a style inferior to the work in the main church. The venerated icon of the Virgin was set on a stand draped in purple curtains, which some thankful woman had embroidered in gold with crosses and vine-leaves. It was one of the most esteemed icons on Athos, as much for its miraculous appearance at the monastery on the back of a mule a thousand years ago, as for more recent wonders associated with the sick and dying. Painted by an artist for whom anonymity was a virtue, the figures of the Mother and Child were covered by a silver screen, except for their faces and hands, which were dark and barely discernible. On certain festive occasions the icon was carried shoulder-high in a procession outside the monastery walls, and then those bowing to the figures were surprised by fine termite holes in the Virgin's eyes and a hair-line crack in the Child's forehead. The panel of glass protecting the icon was covered in offerings from centuries of contrition and gratitude: chains and coins, watches and wedding rings, crucifixes and bracelets - the display resembling the window of a pawnbroker's shop.

Compline, the last office of the day, was conducted by Father Evlogios, the youngest of the monastery's three priest-monks, appointed by the Abbot to conduct the various services during the course of the year. Born of Greek parents in America he was about forty and had come to Athos as a twenty-five-year-old, having turned his back on a promising acting career. He had seen the light when playing the role of Father Sergius in an off-Broadway production of Tolstoy's eponymous story. As he would explain to inquiring visitors, testing each word on the tip of his tongue, the decision to renounce Hollywood's promise for the poverty of Holy Athos had been vindicated ten-fold, for here he performed in a real-life drama, the good-guys wore black, and it was directed by God. Now, standing beside the icon of the Virgin, he began reading the Akathistos Hymn in a subdued manner, as though his voice were unworthy of such words.

- Greetings to you, lantern of joy. Greetings, cure of the ancient curse. Greetings, height beyond human reason. Greetings, depth angels can't fathom.

When asked why his delivery of the beautiful hymn praising the Virgin wasn't more spirited, Father Evlogios pondered the question, examined his palms, and replied he wanted those present to be more attentive, to work harder for the text, and to interpret for themselves the meaning of each word. The less of his personality that imbued the hymn, the more accessible it became to others. And just as its author had chosen to efface himself from the text, so he sought to remain at a distance to the hymn in the very act of

reading it. In short, he was not a chanter capable of moving hearts with melody, but a Reader whose eyes were moved by the text.

- Greetings to you, throne of the king. Greetings, star that summons the sun. Greetings, ladder on which God descends. Greetings, teacher who never asks how.

John had been unable to visit Elder Kyrillos that afternoon: the guestmaster had caught him and asked for assistance with an unexpected rush of visitors wanting to stay the night. Tomorrow, he told himself, working the prayer cord. Yes, he would visit the Elder without fail and discuss how best to handle his father's arrival. He tried to allay his unease by concentrating on the priest-monk's self-effacing voice. The hymn's sweet, lilting rhythm rippled through him, loosened him from the here and now, and drew him to the words as though they were windows open to a spring day. At that moment he wasn't John Rados, the curious young man who had been struck by a bullet two years earlier, or the anxious son whose father would be attempting to coerce back to Australia, or the conscientious novice on the threshold of becoming a monk – no, at that moment he was an empty vessel being slowly filled by the piety and poetry of those words.

- Greetings, vine full of shoots. Greetings, field golden with wheat. Greetings, fruit ripe with compassion. Greetings, table laden with mercy.

His shoes worn and perhaps beyond polish, John wondered how he might get a new pair for his coming ceremony, but rebuked himself at once for such a petty thought and focused on the figures painted above a side window. They had aroused his curiosity from the first time he set foot in the chapel, and even now he couldn't look at them without a sense of wonder. The five heads could have been taken for saints or biblical characters, but they weren't haloed and their names could only be read when the sun streamed through the cupola's windows: Thales, Pythagoras, Democritos, Plato and Aristotle. How had they come to be painted in the nave? Which broad-minded abbot had allowed these pagans to join the company of prophets and saints? Despite turning from research to worship, he still retained a feeling for science. While most monks considered science inimical to religion, he had been imbued by both since his adolescence, when one or the other would hold sway over his thoughts and emotions, though without ever negating each other.

- Greetings to you, freedom from sin. Greetings, guide who leads us from lust. Greetings, truth that blights fire's worship. Greetings, love that extinguishes passion.

John's earliest memories were tinged by a sense of the religious, and this, as in most Greek households, had been engendered by his mother, whose family had a succession of village priests, the most recent being a maternal uncle. She had immigrated to Australia with her parents as an eleven-year-old, went to school for a few years, then completed a dressmaking course. Upon marrying Peter Rados she worked from home specialising in bridal outfits, for which her skill and flair were in great demand. Quiet by nature, she would often walk around the house with a needle or pin in the corner of her mouth. In working over the sewing machine, she would hum all day long, either traditional folk songs or Easter hymns. She knew the important days of the religious calendar and attended church regularly with her son. But her devotion annoyed Peter. Coming from a family with Communist sympathies during the Greek Civil War, he saw the Church as a business that exploited the ignorant, pointing to the girth of this or that priest to prove his point. Yes, he attended church at Easter and Christmas, but more from tradition than belief. They were in Australia, he would chide his wife, not in some remote

village where people couldn't read or write. Education was the way to salvation, not the tired mumbling of a priest. He tolerated the situation until his wife began taking John to Sunday school. What other plans did she have for his son? Dress him as an altar boy? And after that? Make a priest of him, like those parasites in her family? Reduced to silence by his sarcasm, she retreated to her sewing room, where John would find her crying over the machine, tears falling on a blue pincushion shaped in a heart. Busy establishing his construction company, Peter had left the boy's upbringing to his wife, until he found her cutting out an altar-boy's robe, and then, determined to save his son from the debilitating influences of the Church, he got up early on Sundays and took him to tennis lessons.

The more Peter browbeat his wife over her faith, the more John was drawn to her through a mixture of love, pity and sorrow. As a child he liked watching her light the lamp housed in the icon-case above the fridge. Once the flame was aglow, she would hold up the match for him to make a wish and they would slowly cross themselves - head, navel, one side, then the other. Watching her closely, he would touch the left side of his chest first, only to be told he must touch the other side. One Friday evening, he must have been five or six, she took down the glass-covered icon from its case and wiped it with a cloth. As she filled the lamp with oil and replaced the black wick with a pink one, he stared for some time at the face that had always been up there in the corner, but which he now saw as though for the first time. Unlike other icons he had seen, this one looked like a photograph. The head of the bearded man was circled by strands of thorns piercing his forehead, spilling bright drops of blood that reminded him of pomegranate seeds. The eyes gazed upward and only part of each pupil was visible. But there was a strange composure in the face that frightened John, for he had recently fallen into a rosebush and scratched his cheek, so he knew how much pain the man must really be feeling.

Unlike his Australian friends who liked Christmas for the presents they received, John's favourite time was Easter, when the week long fast was followed by a wonderful feast. He liked being in the kitchen as his mother prepared for Easter Sunday. Despite his father's disapproving glances, he enjoyed pulling handfuls of warm dough from the fleshy pile on the table, rolling them into long strands and braiding them ready for the hot oven. When his mother was ready to dye the eggs, he would run off to the nearby park and gather a variety of leaves. Once they had trimmed the oak and elm and cut small crosses from the long gum leaves, they would wrap them around the eggs with pieces of stocking and immerse them in the bubbling pot. For the remainder of that week his palms would be stained a deep red that couldn't be removed even with a pumice stone.

- Greetings to you, wreath of restraint. Greetings, life that shines from the tomb. Greetings, tree that sustains the faithful. Greetings, soft-leafed branch and mankind's shade.

He was ten when his mother announced she was expecting a baby. Much later he would learn she had desperately wanted another child and had miscarried on two previous occasions. An oppressive darkness settled over him during the latter stages of her pregnancy, and even now he couldn't say whether it had been due to the thought of sharing his mother's affection with a sibling, or the fact their street had just been resurfaced and the smell of bitumen lingered in the air for what seemed like the entire summer. Before the obvious signs in his mother, he dismissed talk of an addition to the family as grown-up games meant to tease and annoy him, but when she began to swell

and her usually brisk step became slow and heavy, he sometimes imagined himself suffocating in steaming bitumen. He was embarrassed to be seen with her in public and the thought of what she was carrying filled him with such apprehension he couldn't bring himself to pray for the welfare of his sibling-to-be.

The darkness seeped into his being the day she went to hospital. It was the first time they had ever been separated, and he was left with a female relative who kept saying how much fun it would be having a baby brother. She was so certain of the gender he suspected her of having secret information, perhaps extracted from the strange symbols at the bottom of a coffee cup. What else did this smiling woman know? The baby's name? The colour of its eyes? Whether its right ear would have an elfish point like his? There was something malicious about her smile, as though she were enjoying his present unhappiness.

The following morning his father picked him up and they drove to the hospital. He was surprised by the stubble-growth on his cheeks, for he always made it a point to shave, even when staying indoors all day. Unable to hold back any longer, he finally asked whether the baby had arrived. His father stopped the car in the shadow of a blue-stone church at whose entrance a happy crowd surrounded a bride and groom. They had lost the child, he replied in a flat voice, and his mother would remain in hospital for another week. At first he took it as a bad dream from which he would wake on reaching their destination, but when his father hugged him he began to cry and the church dissolved in his tears. His father tried to console him, but he felt undeserving of love and comfort, and then a horrible truth struck him: he hadn't prayed for the child's wellbeing and now it was dead and nothing in the universe could ever undo his crime.

His mother was in a large room with several other women, propped up in bed with a pillow on each side. She turned sideways as they entered and greeted them with a faint smile. The shadows under her eyes were accentuated by a slightly yellow complexion. She took her hands from under the rustling sheet and reached out to him. But how could he reciprocate knowing he was the cause of her suffering? Unable to meet her look, he kissed her on the cheek. But the instant she spoke, calling him her sunshine, his resolve to be strong broke down in tears and apologies. His father drew him close, saying nobody was to blame, while his mother sat up a little and explained God had decided to take back the child because it hadn't been ready for the world.

Years later he would learn that the baby, a boy, had died from asphyxiation - the umbilical cord having wrapped around its neck. Complications developed for his mother and she was advised another pregnancy might prove fatal. It was a blow from which she would never fully recover. Yes, she smiled again, but it was always forced; they played his favourite games, but she would often lapse in silence and forget to move a piece; and when she bowed over the sewing machine her songs were slower, sadder.

In the weeks following his mother's return from hospital, a sense of guilt gnawed him at the thought of the cord around the neck of his unborn brother. And when Paul and a few other Catholic friends went reluctantly to confession on Saturday nights, he would join them, though they couldn't understand why. A few blocks up the street their church was so different from the ones he knew: it was bigger, had no altar-screen, and there wasn't an icon in sight. Observing them, he would also dip his fingers in the holy water near the entrance, cross himself with four fingers instead of three, and kneel for an instant before the altar. As one after the other entered the confessional, he sat in a back pew and

wrestled with the idea of confessing. How would the priest know he wasn't Catholic? But would he forgive him as he forgave the others? His sin was far more serious than stealing a magazine from a shop. A hundred Our Fathers and seventy Hail Marys couldn't atone for what he had done. Still, he might feel less guilty by confessing, even if his punishment was to be the fire of hell. One windy Saturday night his resolve firmed and he entered the confessional. The priest's sharp profile was discernible behind the perforated screen. When a strong voice asked what sins he had committed in the past week, John recoiled as though an abyss had suddenly opened before him. Terrified, he dashed out, swept past his friends, and ran all the way home.

His mother had just lit the icon lamp and the smell of burning olive oil filled the kitchen. In addition to Christ there was now another icon in the case above the fridge: the Virgin cheek to cheek with infant Christ. Three round loaves stamped with symbols glowed on the kitchen table, freshly baked for tomorrow's forty-day memorial service for the infant. At his abrupt entrance she asked if a ghost had chased him. Racing my friends, he replied, stirring the flame with his breath. Skirting around what was really on his mind, he asked why flames were placed before icons. To purify them and protect the household from evil, she replied. Was fire from God or the devil? Everything was from God. What about the fire of hell? She looked at him without replying. Fire was the devil's element and shouldn't be placed before the holy icons. Her initial look of surprise gave way to a tenderness he hadn't seen in a long time. She sat down, opened her arms, and sat him on her lap. It was a moment of intimacy he would never forget: the icon seemed to hover above them; the kitchen was warm and cosy from the baking; the plastic trumpet-lilies gleamed on the windowsill. Overcome by emotion, he buried his face in her breasts and confided everything. She called him her darling boy, embraced him, and kissed him on each cheek. He wasn't to blame, she said, caressing him. And if he hadn't said a prayer for his little brother when he was in her womb, then he must say a prayer for him now that he was in heaven.

He breathed easier after his confession: the guilt began to loosen its grip and he felt close to his mother once again. But if he wasn't the cause of his little brother's death, who was? She had said God wanted him in heaven. Why? Surely parents had a greater right to the child than God. And what was the purpose of earth if heaven was such a wonderful place? God had been selfish in taking his brother and yet his Religious Instruction teacher was forever saying one mustn't be selfish and hurt others. Unable to reconcile God with his brother's death, he was determined to make it up to his parents by being a good and loving son. As for his little brother, nothing would ever bring him back to life, but he vowed before the icon to become a doctor and deliver other children safely into this world. And if God wanted some of those children, he would pit his knowledge against God's will in a life and death struggle.

- Greetings, wisdom that confounds the wise. Greetings, proof that writers are wrong. Greetings, word that withers the myths. Greetings, lamp that illuminates many.

Several years later, John's vow to improve mankind's lot was rekindled by a spark from Pythagoras's Theorem. One winter's morning, when the desk seats were almost too cold to sit on, the teacher used a metre rule to scratch a right-angled triangle on the sunlit blackboard. Injured in the Vietnam War he held the chalk awkwardly between his thumb, fourth and little finger. He then ruled a square each side, explaining the areas of the two smaller squares added to the area of the largest. When he pointed out

this was true of any right-angle triangle John sat up, eager to know more. The teacher translated the diagram into a formula and, without touching the ruler, was able to calculate the third side of any right-angled triangle given the lengths of its other sides. The theorem struck John like a revelation, and in an instant mathematics was elevated from pages and pages of numbing exercises to something akin to magic. The three-lettered formula was a universal key that could instantly access all the right-angled triangles imaginable. Striking the blackboard with the stick of chalk, the teacher instructed the class to copy what he had presented. His mind spinning, John could barely contain his excitement in wanted to learn other formulas and find other keys. Before this revelation, he had been nothing more than a consistently average student in most subjects; with this awakening, however, he immersed himself in books at every opportunity and soon excelled in both mathematics and science.

If Pythagoras's Theorem had been one of the defining moments in John's life, another occurred toward the end of his third year at high school. He was in the school library, browsing through the latest issue of a popular science magazine, when he noticed a photograph of Gregor Mendel. In an instant he found himself transported to nineteenth century Moravia, to the city of Brno, into the grounds of an Augustinian monastery where a monk spent years cultivating and crossbreeding different species of peas. Through painstaking observation of the transfer of characteristics from one generation to the next, the monk had succeeded in reducing his voluminous data to a few simple laws, thereby laying the foundation of a theory of inheritance and genetics. As John read on, Mendel's character became clearer, more admirable: a monk of infinite patience, working in the hothouse located in a corner of the monastery garden, just below the library window, examining his peas, making notes and predictions. His face was roundish, cheerful, shaved clean, unlike the solemn monks of Athos in church books. He wore small, circular spectacles, while a large cross hung from a chain around his neck. Spectacles and cross: the former signified the keen observer, the dissecting scientist, the intellect focused on discovering the fundamental laws of life; the latter, the man of faith, the follower of Christian self-denial, the man sworn to celibacy. He was struck by the irony of the celibate monk studying procreation. Religion and science: how had Mendel managed to accommodate both? But maybe there was nothing to reconcile, it suddenly occurred to him. Maybe both were expressions of wonder.

His imagination seized on Mendel and raised him on a pedestal. He wanted to devote himself to science and remain celibate for its sake. Medicine no longer interested him because it treated symptoms and abnormalities, often without success; genetics, on the other hand, had the potential to raise mankind to a higher level of wellbeing and prevent what had happened to his unborn brother. Through Mendel he saw the Creator's presence in the physical world: in the peas on his dinner plate and the trees in the park, in the nucleus of a human cell and the shape of a galaxy. And Christ? He still possessed his childhood faith, still attended church with his mother, but he was starting to question much of what he had received through tradition. Reading had broadened his perspective on religion, and he wanted to separate faith from superstition - the feeling that if he failed to say his prayers something terrible would happen. The Christ of his youthful understanding wasn't opposed to the spirit of science; on the contrary, he embraced all those who sacrificed their lives in the pursuit of an ideal that was close to the religious. Perhaps the Second Coming wouldn't occur in a candlelit altar, but in the broad light of a

laboratory. Of course, his ideas at the time were somewhat vague, idealistic, lacking in experience of the world, but even in those early days he tried to embrace both science and religion, and perhaps his leap of faith was a belief in the possibility of unifying the two, just as physicists sought to unify the forces of nature into a single, universal force.

Several years later, while at university, John undertook a thorough study of Mendel's work, together with a reading of revisionist biographies. He was surprised to learn that his hero had been neither an ascetic monk nor a scientific martyr. As a young man he had often feigned sickness to avoid farm work, and later, as a monk, he relished food, becoming so stout he could barely walk. But what really astonished John was the fact that Mendel had joined the liberal Augustinian order because his father, a poor farmer, couldn't afford to further his gifted son's education. Fortuitous as this may have been, monasticism suited young Mendel's temperament. He found himself in an order that encouraged learning and research, and whose abbot set aside garden plots and erected a hothouse for the scholar-monk's cultivation of peas. Yes, his image of brother Mendel as a suffering hero was largely dispelled, but by then he had already set his sights on a career in genetics, guided by the monk of his youthful imagination.

- Greetings to you, bolt of splendour. Greetings, lightning that wakens souls. Greetings, thunder that stuns enemies. Greetings, source of countless lantern flames.

John glanced at the head of Pythagoras. Where his enthusiasm for Mendel had waned over the years, his appreciation of the ancient Greek had steadily grown. He now saw the Pythagorean school as the forerunner of Christian monasticism, and its founder a John-the-Baptist figure who had been burnt to death by his enemies. The Order was a brotherhood consisting of novices, adepts, elders. Its members underwent initiation, wore prescribed clothes, abstained from certain foods, and used mathematics as the language of their liturgy. Perhaps he was most drawn to Pythagoras because his teaching integrated science and religion not merely as a theoretical exercise, but as the very basis for a way of life, in which mathematics transformed matter into the very stuff of mind.

In his scientific work John had sought to use the tools of reason in order to uncover evidence of God. At times reports of his research into cloning would arouse the wrath of fundamentalists and protests from bio-ethicists. Now, looking up at Christ painted in the dome, he could say with sincerity that he had never been driven by intellectual pride or the prospect of wealth from companies investing in genetic engineering. He hadn't set out to challenge the teachings of religion and undermine humanity; on the contrary, even in the laboratory he never stopped examining his motives and assessing the implications of his work. Why then had he embarked on research of that type? Wonder, as much as anything else. The word itself had always intimated something holy, a kinship between creature and Creator. Wonder did not brood upon the limitations of the mind, nor was it melancholy at the finitude of life, instead it rejoiced in those instants when the eternal found expression in the shape of a pea.

- Greetings to you, through whom foes fall. Greetings, comforter of my flesh. Greetings, salve and saviour of my soul. Greetings, virgin and unwedded bride.

It was dusk when John emerged from the chapel, and not a moment too soon, for he had started to feel nauseous from the smell of candle-wax, incense-smoke, and human breath made heavier by the garlic-dip served for supper. Weakened by fasting and private vigils most of the monks plodded to their cells, faces veiled and downcast, intent on conserving their strength for the demanding days ahead. But here and there in the courtyard those with a little more endurance sat with visitors and answered questions about monastic life, their quiet voices clear in the cool air. A few workers wished Father Maximos good night and left for their quarters outside the monastery. Having already raised the lantern in the portico, the old monk limped to the entrance, looked left and right for latecomers, and pushed the gates shut, securing them with bolts and iron rods.

On the threshold of another night, John felt again the touch of doubt that brushed his forehead in this the grey part of the evening. On Athos this had been a time of uncertainty, if not doubt, since the first monks settled here, those barefooted souls whose strength was made perfect in weakness, and who planted the olive and cypress - the former for the fruit of its sorrow, the latter for its perennial silence. Now, above the courtyard, the last swallow crisscrossing between refectory and church was indistinguishable from the first bat, not only in form and flight, but the very pitch of its anxiety. Gazing at the peak of Athos covered in the ash of another day, one monk saw it as a triangle perfect in its uselessness, another a fulcrum for raising earth to heaven. The sun reclaimed its thirty-three varieties of green from the surrounding forest and left it to sigh in the darkness of its sap. Frogs clattered like pebbles under the feet of the damned as a nightingale sharpened its beak on the thorn of the evening star. A lone wolf stalked the angel of the walnut tree, while the young mule tied in the stable brayed for a future it could never have.

But John wasn't the only one whose heart contracted like a pinecone at this time of evening. There, going to the guesthouse, the Abbot walked in step with his black staff, lighter by the absence of a shadow, certainly, but heavier by the thought transfiguring his brow. His large fists swinging like pendulums, Father Meletios shambled past the semantron in returning to his clocks, perhaps thinking an hour at noon was less than an hour at night, just as a straight line wasn't always the shortest distance between two points. At the back of the refectory, black cap covering his thoughts, Father Akakios stood in the doorway with a plateful of scraps, drawing cats from every corner of the monastery. Kosta whispered to his son in the gazebo containing the fountain: stroking the boy's head, he implored him to be a little more patient, saying they must stay until Good Friday, when Father Sophronios's chanting would make everything worthwhile. Nico appeared from behind the church balancing a ladder on his shoulder in what was either an exercise in humility or in assisting the workers. He set it at a steep angle against the scaffold, felt the coin around his neck, and wiped his eyes, unable to stem a flow of tears evoked by the icon of the Virgin. On his way to get a book for his Greek lesson with John, Stefan stopped beneath the eucalypt tree and shredded a large leaf: the sharp smell recalled rubdowns with liniment before a football match.

It was the time when John was perhaps still more man than monk and his questions hovered between fear and faith. When would the black robe extinguish the fire

in his being? Would the death of the self give birth to the spirit? Was God closer to Athos or Athens? But it was also the time when he recalled the Elder's words of encouragement, or, more precisely, when those words came to him of their own accord, like pigeons returning to their roost at the end of the day. And suddenly he heard the Elder's voice, clear as a bell, relating a legend that had become as much a part of the holy peninsular as its forests and streams. It happened in the early days of settlement, when monks ate boiled acorns on Fridays, believing the Holy Cross was made of oak, and burnt their dwellings on the eve of All Soul's Day so they wouldn't become attached to their beds. Head and shoulders gleaming in the sun, dazzling all with pagan pride, Mount Athos challenged God to a show of prominence. At that moment, in a hut at the foot of the mountain, a frail monk was praying on his knees. As his head touched the ground sprinkled with the ash of last night's fire, a little morning vapour issued from his mouth at each whispered Kyrie Eleison, until his prayers formed a mist that rose and swallowed the titanic rock.

As John descended the steps Father Maximos hobbled from the portico and informed him a visitor had arrived during compline and asked for him by name. John's first thought was his father had arrived earlier than expected, but the gatekeeper described the visitor as a young man with a head balder than a watermelon. Asked whether he had noted the man's name, the old monk took off his hat, looked inside, shook his head, and said he couldn't quite remember, then adding the fellow was Australian and didn't speak a word of Greek.

The spacious foyer at the top of the stairs served as the guesthouse common room. Its walls were hung with prints of Greek kings and queens, patriarchs and bishops, and prominent figures of the War of Independence, among them Lord Byron, who, with curly hair and shaved cheeks, seemed somewhat boyish in the company of men with fierce moustaches and chests crossed with bullet-belts. A bookcase and table stood in an alcove which had once been a balcony. Three Germans who had arrived at midday were at a table with the large visitors' book. Joking and laughing, they regretted not bringing along a pack of cards to pass an hour or two. They had come not in the spirit of a pilgrimage but as seasoned hikers, complete with detailed maps and spiked walking sticks, taking advantage of monastic hospitality to trek the forests and slopes of Athos. They had no respect for Holy Week, John thought, annoyed by their frivolous manner. They were here to enjoy themselves, with no consideration for what the monks were going through. But he checked himself with the Abbot's words: even visitors of this sort were welcome, for they tested a monk's patience, humility and willingness to serve.

The Germans were subdued by a stern hiss from an elderly monk who, leaning back in a divan, was conversing with two serious-minded young visitors. He was explaining the nature of prayer and pointed out newspapers weren't needed in the monastery. The youth on his right suggested prayer was more focussed and efficacious when one was aware of what was happening around the world. Surely the knowledge of atrocities committed in the recent Balkan War moved one to pray more fervently for the victims. Not at all, replied the monk. The prayer evoked by a picture in a newspaper was in fact nothing more than a knee-jerk reaction. In genuine prayer saints and ascetics could grasp the entire world with eyes closed, and then more tangibly than a photograph. Such prayer arose spontaneously from a heart moved by concern for mankind in general, as a lesser heart was moved only by its family's welfare.

Looking for his Australian visitor, John went to the alcove, where a thin man was sitting in front of the bookcase. He had arrived several months ago, on an icy Saint Trifon's Day, wearing only a thin jacket and carrying a plastic shopping bag with a few belongings, as though sidetracked to Athos in returning home from the supermarket. A heroin addict he had come to the monastery with the intention of giving up the needle and becoming a novice. The Abbot had welcomed him and offered to help him start a new life. He rarely spoke, walked with head bowed, and had a habit of cracking his knuckles. Even during the Liturgy he would snap each finger twice - once at the first joint, then at the second - so that twenty crisp cracks echoed in the narthex. And this he did naturally, oblivious of cowed looks, as though each crack counted a prayer. As he read from a large Bible, his forehead twitched, his lips moved at each word, and every now and then his eyes closed tightly in an effort to retain an elusive thought.

John walked behind him to the other side of the bookshelf. The bald visitor was there, writing with his back to him. He didn't look familiar at first (perhaps someone had given the fellow his name as an introduction to the monastery), but when he turned John was speechless. Paul scraped back his chair and stood with a look of disbelief. They studied each other for a moment, as though coming to terms with how much they had changed since Melbourne. Paul went to embrace John, who quickly extended both hands and shook instead.

- Look at you, said Paul, running his fingers through John's beard. A real monk if ever I saw one.

- I'm still a novice, John replied. For a few more weeks anyway.

They sat down opposite each other and Paul slipped the notebook into his backpack. John was struck and a little alarmed by his appearance: the shaved head, loss of weight since their last meeting, protruding cheek bones, and the pale, almost yellowish complexion. He had always possessed an inner energy that sparkled in his eyes and animated his open face, but there was none of that now, only the look of a man worn out by illness.

- You should've written you were coming, said John.

- You didn't reply to my letters when you first got here.

John apologised and looked down at the prayer cord wrapped around his palm. The first six months in the monastery had been difficult, he said. And there was a need to distance himself from his past in order to settle into the routine of monastic life. Paul hoped his visit would not prove a distraction, and in saying that his words seemed to catch on his sharp Adam's apple. Moved by the heavy look in his friend's eyes, John reached out, tapped the back of his thin hand, and suggested they go to the guesthouse kitchen. With sufficient notice he could have arranged a private room, but with the number of visitors at the moment that was now impossible and he would have to share one with three or four others. On the way to the kitchen John wondered whether he should mention Stefan, but decided to surprise them later in his cell. Paul sat at a large bench that served as a larder, while John opened a few cupboards and set before him some halva, bread and a bowl of fig-jam. He then immersed a handful of camomile stalks in a saucepan of water and placed it on a gas burner.

- I'm sorry there's nothing more substantial, he said. We're fasting.

- It's more than enough. Besides, my appetite's not what it used to be.

- You've lost weight, Paul.

- And a bit of hair.

The kitchen looked out on the monastery's small jetty stacked with logs waiting to be shipped to the mainland. Light from the tradesmen's windows rippled on the dark sea. A few stars pierced the eastern sky. Paul warmed his fingers on the cup of tea. They were both reflective, somewhat hesitant, uncertain of their friendship in the present situation. Their last meeting had been in a café in Melbourne. Paul was incredulous at John's announcement to become a monk. Yes, he had noticed a change in his friend since his return from Greece a month earlier, but he attributed it to the trauma of the border incident, which would have made anyone question the meaning of life. He had advised him to forget religion and concentrate on his scientific work. Why go back to the Dark Ages when the world was about to pass through the silicon gates of the third millennium? For his part, John had attempted to explain his feelings, saying the idea of monastic life had taken root in his heart and things he once valued now seemed worthless in comparison. But he was aware that his words sounded vague, incomprehensible to Paul, who kept shaking his head.

- How's God treating you? Paul asked, dissolving a spoonful of honey in his tea.

- He's closer some days than others.

- Still managing to reconcile science and religion?

- God's a priest, poet and physicist.

- And happiness, John? Have you found it here?

- Yeš, through living with less.

- Always the idealist.

- No, I've become very practical here, Paul. My main duties are here in the guesthouse, but I also help in the refectory, the vegetable-garden, even in the forest with a chainsaw.

- And that draws you closer to God?

- It does, replied John, working the prayer cord.

The other gave a wry smile and spread fig-jam on a slice of dark bread. A seventh generation Australian of Irish descent, Paul Ryan was born into a family with a long history of natural storytellers, which may have accounted for his strong interest in literature from an early age. As a child he would listen in fascination as three-toothed granddad Butch recalled the Depression years in Melbourne. How he had run an illegal two-up school from the back of a church-hall, how famous football players were paid to drop games, and how he had once upset God's books by throwing a string of thirty-one consecutive double tails. In those days, when John praised the conquests of Alexander the Great, Stefan the bravery of Prince Lazar marching to his death, Paul seized on granddad Butch's stories and made them his legends and source of pride. And it was perhaps these stories as much as anything else that contributed to his defiant attitude toward all forms of authority. He had attended a Catholic school run by Christian Brothers, only to renounce both faith and Church by the time he was fifteen. Outspoken and rebellious he had opposed the teachers both for their use of corporal punishment and for their views on the theory of evolution. Things came to a head when he took up the cause of a timid student who claimed one of the teachers had molested him at a school camp. Paul organised a boycott of the teacher's classes and called on the principal to investigate the matter. It turned out the student had fabricated the story as payback for having been bullied and brow beaten by the teacher. They were both expelled and Paul promptly left

the Catholic Church, becoming a fervent atheist. In a backyard ceremony marking his liberation, he had called on John and Stefan to witness the burning of his Bible. They attempted to restrain him, invoking Father Clement and the crosses he had given them, but he gleefully tore out the thin pages and threw them in the fire. He promised to restore the Word to a condition of freedom by wresting it from the Church and delivering it to the hands of poets, where it rightfully belonged. And he expressed a hope that people would live poetically and come to see the beauty of the world through new and fresh metaphors. Yes, he vowed to live aesthetically and never to constrain his thoughts with religion. In order to become a writer he would experience life to the full, then live for his art as others lived for their God. At the time of John's last meeting with him he was working part-time as an English teacher at a high school and writing a novel which had already gone through several drafts.

- Are you afraid of death? Paul asked, dipping the hard crust in the tea.

- Monastic life's a preparation for death, John replied in a low voice. We observe the ancient saying: remembrance of death is useful to life. And you, Paul, are you still an atheist?

- I've seen nothing to change my view, John. Here we are planning and hoping in a speck of time and space, while all around us the universe rolls on without purpose, moved by blind chance and mute gravity toward the ultimate Black Hole that will devour everything. And then there'll be another Big Bang and the whole meaningless thing will start again and in ten billion years from now you'll ask me if I'm still an atheist. Do I sound bleak and pessimistic, John? Well, my friend, if Paul Ryan was a hard-line atheist a year ago, he's now well and truly a die-hard case.

- Then you've come to the right place, said John.

- To prepare for my death?

- To find God.

- Yeah, a God of the grave.

John went to the sink and began washing a few cups and saucers. Paul's tone and manner disturbed him: the flashing exuberance of the past had given way to a morose fatalism. If disrespectful visitors tested one's patience and charity, Paul's presence would test the strength of his faith. They could argue a lifetime about the existence of God, invoking the theories of quantum mechanics and the latest findings in genetics, but when it was all said and done would any of that prove or disprove the existence of God? No, God was above argument and proof. In the end a sense of God wasn't the result of intellectual rigour or the degree of electrical activity in the parietal lobe, as suggested by several American neuroscientists. No, the sense of God was distilled from one's silence, in those moments of encounter with the infinite.

- Are you still teaching? John asked, returning to the table.

- I resigned just before Christmas.

- Did you finish your novel?

- It was all rubbish, Paul smiled weakly. I burnt it and threw the ashes to a Northerly howling through Melbourne. I resisted the urge to write for over a year. No more pretensions, I told myself. If the urge were strong enough I'd write again; if not, I'd resign myself to being a reader.

- And what happened?

- I've started scribbling again.

- You've got talent to succeed as a writer.
- Sure, I'm set for a great career.
- Writers mature in their thirties and forties.

Paul became thoughtful and passed his hand over his smooth scalp, but the next moment his face lit up with a semblance of its former quickness.

- I had a great idea for a short story on the plane, he announced. It'll be about religion and cloning. There's enough in it for a novel, but I haven't got the time or the staying power for the long haul. A few days, that's all I need, and then I'll read it to you. I'd appreciate your comments - good or bad.

For an instant John wondered whether Paul knew about Stefan being in the monastery. But Stefan had kept his whereabouts secret from everyone, and even his parents were thought he was still in the monastery of Hilandar, resting and recovering from whatever he had faced in Kosovo. John was tempted to tell him about Stefan, but desisted and led him from the kitchen, to a room with four beds, three covered in clothes and belongings. John advised him to leave his backpack, take his passport and valuables, and if he didn't have slippers to use the plastic pair under the bed. After pointing out the washroom and toilets, he invited him to his cell, explaining on the way the monastery's program, including the early start for matins. Visitors, including those from non-Orthodox backgrounds, were expected to attend church services as a sign of respect.

- And atheists? Paul asked, tapping his friend on the shoulder.
- Writers should be open to new experiences.

As John hung his hat and outer garments on the wall, Paul flicked through a few books on the table. He offered to make tea or coffee, but Paul declined, saying he didn't want to be running to the hole-in-the-floor toilet in the middle of the night. John poured chickpeas and raisins in a bowl and apologised again for not being able to offer more. Darkness had now descended and a few lamps shone in the courtyard. Sitting at right angles to each other, John told him his father was due to arrive tomorrow or the day after, intent on persuading him back to Australia.

- How will you handle him? Paul asked.
- In a way I'm pleased he's decided to come.
- Pleased? Why? To take you from this simple cell?
- To see for himself the life I've chosen.

- You know, John, I really envied you when we were growing up. It seemed your parents couldn't do enough for you. Your home was spotless, dinner was on the table at six, and your mum was always there when you got home from school. In my place all hell would break loose at least once a week. My parents divorced when I was ten and the old man shackled up with a woman who had children of her own. Not long after my mother remarried and we moved in with our stepfather, who also had children from a previous marriage. On weekends children were piled in cars and shuffled around from house to house like unwanted furniture. People say children are adaptable - bullshit! My sisters and I didn't cope at all, and I left home at the first opportunity. This might sound cute, but in retrospect I don't regret my childhood in the least. Why? Because I became free of the burden of family and religion at a young age. Yeah, there's a price to be paid for everything. Love binds more than it liberates. Here we are, almost thirty, and you're still in your father's shadow. And I bet you still want to please him, the way you used to as a kid when you'd take home those great school results. Want my advice, John? Live

for yourself and die for yourself, and in between don't burden anyone.

There was a knock at the door and John opened. Stefan was at first surprised by the presence of a bald visitor, as was Paul at sight of the bearded caller, but in an instant of mutual recognition they flew to each other and embraced.

- It's too good to be true, beamed Paul.

He had heard all sorts of wild rumours in Melbourne. One, that Stefan had gone missing in action somewhere in Kosovo; another, he had become involved in gun-running for a Serbian paramilitary organisation; while in a more recent story he was wanted by an International War Crimes Tribunal in relation to certain atrocities.

- Rumours, Stefan grimaced, nothing more.

- We're together again, said Paul, with an arm over each. Just like when we were kids. You know, boys, if I were even slightly religious I'd attribute our reunion to that old Serbian monk.

Stefan showed them the black cross around his neck. John unwound the prayer cord from his wrist and held up his gift from the Serbian monk. Reaching into his pocket, Paul said he couldn't bring himself to dispose of his, even though he had no reservation in burning his Bible. Stefan extended his right index finger and asked whether they still remembered the vow they had made. The others pressed their finger against his and echoed his words: friends for life. As though overcome by emotion Paul turned abruptly to his reflection in the window.

- Boys, he said, looking through himself into the dark courtyard.

The word was like a summons. They glanced at each other in alarm and waited from him to continue.

- My number's up, boys. I've got leukemia.

He turned from the window and bit a weak smile. There was a moment's silence as the others tried to come to terms with the disclosure. Yes, they knew of his tendency to exaggerate and cry wolf, but were soon enough convinced by the bitten smile and how he reached for a book from the table. Stefan embraced him and offered a few words of encouragement, while John lit the chalice on the icon shelf and crossed himself.

- The chemo tore out my insides and most of his hair, he said. The razor cleaned up the rest. Lucky for me baldness is in fashion.

- What have the doctors said? Stefan asked.

- My white blood count's improving.

- That's a good sign, said John.

- But no guarantee.

- It's not a death sentence, John added in a stronger tone.

- The very words of my specialist.

The thought of a Melbourne winter had been unbearable so he decided on a European holiday for a few months. His specialist had agreed: the Mediterranean sun would brighten his outlook and help him in his fight back. From Greece he wanted to visit Italy, France, England, then back home. Recalling his mother's battle with cancer eight years earlier, John said he had done well to come to Athos. His spiritual father, Elder Kyrillos, had helped many people with all sorts of physical conditions. They came from Greece and abroad seeking his guidance and blessing.

- We'll visit him tomorrow, said John.

- I don't need a faith healer, Paul replied.

He went to the window again and stared through his pale features at a bat circling the dome. No more illusions, he said. His body was a battlefield and he vowed to fight, only on his terms and conditions. He had come to Athos for John's support in this fight, and Stefan's unexpected presence strengthened his resolve. Having no real family, they were his family, and he now called on them in his hour of need. Yes, he would get the better of the disease, but first he must overcome death, though without faith and God. And it was vital he write the story before setting out on his travels.

- Will you help me, blood brothers?

- Of course, we'll help you, said Stefan, going to him.

- What about you, Brother John?

Struck by Paul's defiant attitude, wondering whether it belied fear and despair, John hesitated in committing himself, then said he would help through his vows to the monastery. But it was now getting late, matins would be starting earlier because of Easter, and they would talk more tomorrow. Hearing that Paul had been placed in a room with three others, Stefan was quick to offer accommodation in his cell: the divan was comfortable and he could write in peace and quiet. When they left John remained at the table for some time, working the prayer cord knot by knot, stopping to feel the cross, then starting the cycle again. He could do nothing for Paul's physical condition, but he would try hard to dispel the defiance that rendered him impervious to God. There was something in his last words that now filled John with disquiet. He had engaged with lots of visitors—who professed atheism, but those encounters were nothing more than intellectual banter, exercises in sophistry that barely touched him, whereas his friend's attitude to death affected him profoundly. Suddenly, he felt responsible for Paul. Yes, it was incumbent on him to keep his friend from the darkness intimated by those defiant words. He must open his heart, make it receptive to the sense of God, and fill it with the healing grace of prayer. His friend had become a battlefield, though not in terms of fighting a disease, which so often proved futile, but as a struggle between light and darkness, faith and emptiness. Yes, he must endeavour to overcome the despair in Paul, and through that his own faith would be strengthened. He went to the icon shelf, prostrated himself, and touched the bare boards with his forehead.

HOLY TUESDAY

1

Its flame hovering between a black wick and the encroaching dark, the lamp on the table was screened on one side by an upright book shadowing half the room. Two narrow beds were pressed against opposite walls: one had already been made and was laid out neatly with a child's clothes; in the other on the darker side Panayoti was curled in sleep, the blankets clutched under his chin. Kosta leaned over him, his face close to the boy's, and tried to wake him with whispers.

- It's time for matins, my boy. The semantron's sounding down in the courtyard and you're still fast asleep. Wake up, my little bird. We must get to church before the first hymn. Ah, you're such a good boy, and not because you're my son. No! In these times when so many children are rude and disrespectful to parents you're obedient as an angel. Of course, it's only natural for someone your age to be tired. After all, you barely ate in the refectory last night. A piece of halva, nothing more, and even that pecked like a sparrow. And now you're so deep in boyish dreams the semantron's a world away. There, your lashes are fluttering like a pair of butterflies. And you're whistling at each breath like a songbird about to wake the world.

Father and son had left Corfu last Friday, arriving at the monastery on Saturday. They came for Father Sophronios, who was from a village not far from Kosta's on the island of Corfu. His was the finest chanting voice on Athos, they had been told, better than any Bulgarian, Russian or Serb, but failing health restricted him to special occasions, Good Friday being the most important. Of course they came to celebrate the spirit of Easter, but as an expression of that spirit Kosta was also anxious for his son to hear the famous chanter and, if possible, to arrange a private meeting with him.

Yes, you've been blessed with a wonderful voice, thought Kosta, running his fingers through his son's thick hair. A few words from the old chanter will encourage you to avoid the pitfalls of this world by developing your talent. And yours is a God-given talent, my boy, which must be used it to serve God by praising Him and His Creation. How easily you took to reading Byzantine music, all those curves and commas, as if it was your mother tongue or a language you've always known. And the chants and hymns, you learnt them at once and know them all by heart. Ah, to hear you sing, my boy. The way you close your eyes to this miserable world and lift your head to heaven. Words pour from your slender body like tunes from a clarinet. You dissolve my flesh and bones, loosen my soul, raise me a closer to God. In those moments you fill me with such peace I could embrace my worst enemy and meet death itself halfway. I'll never forget last year's Good Friday night. The choir fell silent and allowed you to sing parts of the Virgin's Lament on your own. How the villagers wept! Even men whose hearts had turned to stone by the horrors of the Civil War. Tears shone like diamonds in the light of the candelabra. And then that vision suddenly flashed before me. Yes, I'm an excitable person, my boy, and I've seen many visions in my life, but never one so moving as on that holiest of night. It was Judgement Day and the world's covering fell away like slough. The currencies of the great nations became worthless and values thought important were reduced to rubble. People were overwhelmed by despair. How could they redeem themselves from utter annihilation? As humanity froze in silence, you started

chanting, my little angel. A small, sweet voice defying the darkness. One after another began weeping at the sound of your hymn. People gathered their warm tears in cupped palms and offered them to God. And He was moved, my little angel, moved to pity and forgiveness.

Kosta sniffled back his own tears, turned up the lamp's flame, and caressed the boy's crimson cheek with the back of his fingers. Moaning in his sleep, Panayoti turned to the wall.

- Wake up, my little angel, Kosta whispered, kneeling beside the bed. It's time for church. The choir's about to start. Father Sophronios is waiting for us. We mustn't offend the good Father by being late. Up, my little songbird. It's time to announce the morning sun and realise your dreams. Do you want to become a great chanter? Want to make people holier? The world a better place for all? Well, you'll never realise your dreams without the Father's blessing. Remember the story of Orpheus? How he moved trees and rocks with the magic of his songs? Well, Father Sophronios is descended from Orpheus. He'll show you secrets meant for the chosen few. Wake up, my golden canary. Open your precious eyes and ease your mother's suffering. Her soul won't until you become a great chanter like the Father. And then your hymns will draw her to the fountain of your heart. Wake up, my morning light. We mustn't be late.

Kosta had met his second wife, the boy's mother, shortly after returning to Corfu from Canada. Thirty years before that, though, the young man had completed his military service in the Greek infantry and set out across the rough Atlantic still wearing parts of his uniform because his parents couldn't afford a proper suit. Working as a kitchen-hand in a relative's taverna, he would often step onto the dance-floor at the end of the night to ease a feeling of homesickness that weighed him down from time to time. And how he danced! The twang of the bouzouki's silver strings quickened his blood, lightened his body, and he would spring in the air, slap his heel, and perform a turn in mid-flight all without losing a beat. A few months after his arrival, depressed by a tear-smudged letter from his parents, he was dancing with real fervour when a Greek girl's furtive glance caught his eye. In the space of two crescent moons Kosta captured her heart and by the year's snowy end lay in the warmth of holy marriage with the youngest daughter of a wealthy fishmonger – a fellow who used all five daughters as bait for son-in-laws who would expand his business. Two years later Kosta was a twice-blessed father of dark-eyed twin girls, and twenty years after that he owned perhaps the finest sea-food restaurants in down-town Toronto.

But fate played fickle with Kosta as he approached fifty, though some said the Devil had waylaid him, and others that prosperity had gone to his head. In any case, at a time when he should have been enjoying the fruits of his hard work and preparing dowries for his daughters, he was swept away by a ruinous passion for cards. A year after first entering the casino's exclusive high roller's room, he had gambled away a fortune and would have lost the restaurant if his wife hadn't discovered his well-kept secret. Taking her father's advice (the old man's mouth was set as grimly as a cod's), she left promptly left him and turned her daughters against their irresponsible father. And so, as though waking from a dream, Kosta was back on Corfu, exactly as he had set out: with a battered suitcase held together by knotted twine.

With his parents long-since dead and his only brother in Germany, he moved into the family's abandoned house, where he had plenty of time to reflect on the nature of

gambling. Were Greeks more susceptible to gambling than Germans? Were they conditioned by the fact that not all villages had schools, while every village-square had at least one cafe in which men of all ages gathered for cards and backgammon? Or was there something even more existential at work? In shuffling a deck of cards or rattling a pair of dice was the Greek taking a stand against the inhumanity of chance that sought to reduce him to insignificance? Perhaps Kosta had an inkling of this - more a feeling than a thought - and it partly explained his irrational behaviour in Canada. If gambling was a form of protest, an act of defiance, an open revolt against a lawlessness that would deny being, then men such as he were direct descendants of Prometheus and Sisyphus.

In the first few weeks of his return remorse preyed on his mind like the vulture that circled Prometheus's liver, and weighed on his body like the massive rock Sisyphus pushed up the hill. He spent the days alone, hardly leaving the house, and then only for food, when he would endure in silence the barbs and sneers that pointed to the failure, the stupid Canadian, the one who had squandered a fortune. His life might have continued in a downward spiral, perhaps plunging into the Ionian sea from one of the island's many cliffs, but for his father's amber worry beads hanging from a nail on the bedroom wall. He had been sweeping the floor when their distinctive click reminded him of the stories he had heard as a boy - how his parents had survived wars, hardships, poverty. No, he said, raising the broom as though a javelin aimed at the sun. Greeks were fighters, survivors. They defeated the Persians who swarmed through Greece like a plague of locusts. Unbroken by five hundred years of Ottoman oppression, they eventually lit their candles in the dark, rang their bells rusty from silence, and rose in victorious revolt. And it was Greek resistance against Nazi-Germany that helped the Allies win the war. Recalling the deeds of his ancestors, he felt again the stirring of the Greek spirit that thrived on challenge and adventure. Yes, the spirit that drove Alexander across Asia, knowing he would never return to Macedonia, impelled modern Greeks to emigrate and succeed wherever they settled - Canada, America, Australia. The largest factory was like a prison to them, but put them in their own tiny grilled-chicken bar and they sprouted wings. Yes, it was in Kosta's blood to overcome obstacles, to comb his hair in the face of adversity, just as the Spartans had done who defended the narrow pass at Thermopylae.

And so, at fifty-three, clicking his father's beads like knuckles cracking in determination, he felt ready for a new beginning in the village of his birth. Opportunities abounded, unlike thirty years ago, when his family's subsistence depended on what they could squeeze from gnarled olives and vines. Tourism had transformed the entire island into a summer playground: hotels and resorts rose from the rubble of coastal villages, while foreigners built dazzling villas with pools and tennis courts on stony plots sold by those who had gone abroad. His English was good and, as Corfu was especially popular with the British, he found work managing a block of apartments owned by a local who had returned from Australia.

Perhaps over-excited by the spirit of things Greek, Kosta had forgotten the gambling virus still lurking in his blood, for he had no sooner come out of his shell than he fell victim to the casino in Corfu town, losing his first month's wages in a night. The next few months were just as bad, until in his desperation to get the better of chance he decided to sell his share of the family's property - the house and a few scattered plots. He caught a train to Frankfurt, with a view to offering his share to his older brother, who owned a number of lavish sweet shops.

After a successful night in the casino in Wiesbaden he invited his brother to go out with him, in order to discuss his proposal. Wanting something different, but not too distant from Greek, Kosta suggested a Turkish nightclub not too far from the casino. As they sat down to a beer, the band struck up a familiar tune and a belly dancer shimmered onto the dance floor. The patrons, mainly middle-aged men, clapped as she turned and twisted, weaving her way between the tables. Circling the brothers, she loosened her black hair and teased them with her tingling body. Forgetting his proposal, or perhaps because it weighed heavily on him, Kosta leapt up and danced with her, slipping notes between her quivering breasts, under the band around her shaking hips, crooning the only Turkish words he knew, Aman, gyuzel, gyuzel, which in Greek became, Ah, my rose, my rose. The true character of the Greek spirit emerged when confronted by challenges, and the writhing mermaid before him suddenly became his challenge. There and then he resolved to overcome the misfortune that had befallen him in Canada, his age, and the long-standing enmity between Greeks and Turks. On the dance floor he showered her with roses, argued with the owner until waiters brought out piles of plates which he smashed at her feet, emptied a bottle of whisky in a tray and set a match to it, and then danced with her around the costly flames. His passion for the dancer aroused the envy of her boyfriend, who, having an unmistakably pimpish look, strode from the bar and pulled her away. Kosta managed to restrain himself, despite the surrounding laughter, for he was now alone on the floor, looking like a fool, as the band continued playing. But he was determined to have the last laugh. His challenge became even greater, for he now saw this struggle in Trojan terms. He would make off with the dancer as the Greeks had done with Helen. Not for him the brazen Achilles, he would be the crafty Odysseus, whose Ithaca was close to Corfu. If nothing else, his experience as a gambler had taught him to judge character and ascertain a person's hand by reading the expression on their face. Assessing the present situation, he was certain she felt nothing for the boyfriend, whereas she had been flattered by his attention. And he knew well enough that flattery was the best way to make a woman's heart flutter, and once it had been set aflutter it could be made to fly directly to him, like a lovely homing pigeon.

The following night he went to the club alone, against his brother's warning. Again he joined the dancer on the floor and filled her generous cleavage with crispy German marks, while keeping an eye on the edgy boyfriend, baiting him with his generosity. He didn't have long to wait before playing his next hand. As the boyfriend pushed aside a companion who tried to hold him back, Kosta placed a golden chain and cross around the dancer's neck. Furious, the boyfriend leapt at him amidst cries and shrieks. As they caught each other in a headlock, Kosta whispered a few disparaging remarks about his manhood. The barb had the desired effect: he pulled away and whipped out a gun, which Kosta had detected the previous night. I kill you, I kill you, he raged. Patrons scuttled behind whatever they could find. The dancer pleaded with him to put the gun away, but he shoved her aside and persisted with his threats. Kosta now played his winning hand: he fell on his knees, spread open his arms and invited the boyfriend to shoot, saying he was willing to die for the one he loved. I kill you, I kill you three times, shouted the boyfriend. One in your head, two in your heart, three in your balls, so you never can have children. Only three times? Kosta taunted. Gyuzel was worth a thousand deaths. And he tore open his shirt to give him a better shot. As the boyfriend took aim, Kosta turned to the screaming dancer. Better the black earth than life without your eyes,

he said, confident his bluff would win out. Seething with rage, the boyfriend kicked him in the face and stormed out. Blood gushing from his mouth and nose Kosta slumped to the floor, anticipating what would happen next. The dancer ran to his assistance, knelt beside him and wiped his face with a napkin. He exaggerated the pain, moaned and winced as she lay his head on her lap, hot tears falling on his face, mixing with his blood. But that pain was Kosta's doorway to redemption and paradise. And what paradise! The more he moaned the more she assuaged him with warm sighs and soft caresses. Feigning weakness, he stood with her help, pressing against her breasts. When she had cleaned him up, she slipped into her overcoat and took him to her apartment.

A week later, having decided against selling his share of the family property, he farewelled his brother and returned to Corfu with Gulcin. If he had married his first wife out of need, he lived with Gulcin in gratitude and love. She cured him of his gambling, brought a woman's light touch to the small cottage, and encouraged him to start his own business. Working and saving, he bought a dozen mules and organised riding tours to inaccessible parts of the island. They lived as man and wife (he always called her his wife, even though they never married), and were soon the proud parents of a son, Panayoti, after Kosta's father. Now as both weren't devout in their respective faiths, they agreed not to baptise the boy. Of course, the villagers were shocked by this and became openly hostile toward Gulcin. And when she stood her ground they reviled her openly: as a woman she must convert to Orthodoxy for the sake of the child's immortal soul. She learnt to speak Greek fluently, danced the sirtaki better than the locals, but both she and Kosta were adamant religion would have no place in their family.

When the boy was about five Kosta noticed a change in Gulcin's manner. One evening, after feeding the mules tethered in the olive grove, he asked whether she was troubled by the animosity of those around her, or whether the alienation was getting her down. She shook her head and turned to her son, whom she had been teaching mournful Turkish songs, which he sang in a voice that sustained the long notes and modulated them with little highs and lows. As she withdrew into herself, Kosta attempted to humour her in the hope of evoking a semblance of the vivacity he had seen on the dance floor. But a dark veil now covered her face and she barely spoke, unless it was to the boy, and then in order to teach him another song. She went about her housework morosely, humming a quiet tune, at times standing on the porch and staring at the horizon for hours. A woman's thing, thought Kosta, and waited for the veil to lift and the light to return to her eyes. That wasn't to be, for when Panayoti started school, often coming home in tears from taunts about being a Turk and an enemy of Greece, Gulcin fell into a state of depression. Kosta suggested they leave the island, go to Canada where it didn't matter whether you were Greek or Turk, but his words made no impression on her. In time she stopped humming, the songs dried on her lips, and her dark gaze became fixed to her hands.

One windy day at the end of summer, when Panayoti was ten, a fisherman found Gulcin's body on the rocks at the bottom of a cliff. As the sun was setting behind dark pines, Kosta rode into the yard with the mules jingling behind him. Seeing villagers gathered around the front door, he straightened his straw hat and took out his father's amber beads. He cursed and swore, dispersing the crowd, and then embraced his son in order not to fall apart. Three days later, having obtained permission from the authorities, he buried his wife with his own hands in a corner of his small vineyard. The wind officiated as priest, the jackdaws as mourners, while father and son placed marigolds on a

mound of earth. She had slipped and fallen, he consoled the boy, and they went to the cliff and looked down on the sea breaking against the rocks. He held the boy's hand, unable to say anything comforting, as people said on such occasions. And then he was struck by the thought: What was the meaning of Gulcin's life and death in the absence of God? The age-old words 'May God have mercy on her soul' came to mind. Suddenly, he wanted to say them aloud as his parents had done - those familiar words which had been sighed over countless deaths, whose very sound echoed with bells and the fragrance of incense, and whose meaning encouraged the grieving to hope. But a bitter silence filled his mouth, as though the roots of his tongue had rotted.

In turning to go he noticed, further along the edge, a small shrine like those beside highways, in fields, on mountain-tops - the sort erected on the spot where people had either encountered death or were brushed by its black wing. He led the boy to the blue casement and opened the small window: an icon of the Mother and Child leaned against the back. With the matches inside he lit the wick floating in the chalice of oil and showed the boy how to cross himself. A week later, on a Friday, Kosta dreamt of the shrine. The window opened and Gulcin stepped out, wearing a burgundy shawl fringed with golden tassels. She offered him a pomegranate and requested the boy's voice be dedicated to the service of God. He woke with a start and recalled that a person's soul hovered in the vicinity of their body for forty days. The following Sunday, the Virgin's birthday, Panayoti was baptised and permitted to join the village choir. Impressed by the boy's pitch and clarity, the priest took him under his charge and tutored him in Byzantine notation. Six weeks later Gulcin appeared to Kosta in another dream. Again she emerged from the shrine, this time offering figs, and instructed him to take the boy to the mountain, where his life would be dedicated to God. He recalled the dream in all its details, down to the black thread tied around Gulcin's left wrist, yet he didn't know what to make of her words.

That morning he packed some food, saddled two reliable mules, and set off with the boy. On the upward climb Panayoti kept asking where they were going and why, to which he replied that God's purpose would soon be revealed. When they reached the summit of the highest mountain on Corfu, Kosta pointed over a narrow stretch of water to the desolate hills of Albania. Was that why they had come? Kosta replied by looking up at the gathering clouds. He then took out a hunting knife, cut a loaf into thick slices and set out some food on a napkin Gulcin had embroidered. As the boy reached for the last olive, lightning lashed the sky and thunder cracked it open. Large drops fell and evaporated at once on the warm rocks. The clouds suddenly crumbled in a downpour. Instead of running for shelter Kosta shook the napkin, placed it on the boy's head, and held him firmly by the hand. Father and son stood pressed together as the rain swept over them. When it stopped abruptly after a few minutes, the clouds opened, and the two figures found themselves in a shaft of golden light. Without a word Kosta led the boy back down to the steaming mules, satisfied he had interpreted his dream.

By the time the last leaf fell from the fig tree in their yard, Panayoti was a favourite with the villagers and was now happy at school. His smile, so like his mother's, lightened Kosta's grief. As the months passed the boy's singing drew his father back to the religion of his ancestors, and he began helping in church, first with the candles and collections, then behind the iconostasis. By this time word of Panayoti's voice had spread and people came from all over Corfu to hear the 'golden-mouthed' boy.

A year after Gulcin's death, on the day before Assumption, Kosta had spent hours scouring the village for extra chairs in expectation of a larger than usual congregation. On his last forage he managed to wheedle six from the cafe owner, together with an icy bottle of retsina. The mid-day sun was so intense even the shadow of the old cypress tree fled the village square. Back in the church, feeling light-headed and heavy-eyed, he decided to stretch out on a pew, just until his lethargy passed. The nave was quiet, cool, and before long he dozed off while gazing at the Virgin frescoed in the half-dome above the apse. When he woke from that delightful nap Kosta was confronted by a harrowing instruction. Gulcin had appeared to him again: descending from the dome, she set a plate of sugared pancakes at his feet and directed him to take the boy to Mount Athos, where he must become a chanter and monk.

He kept the dream to himself for months, anguishing over what to do, until his feelings for Gulcin got the better of him. He hadn't done enough for her while she was alive, and now she had presented him an opportunity to atone for his oversight. Without telling the boy, he made inquiries about Mount Athos and was amazed to learn there was a Theological Academy in Karyes, which followed the Greek Secondary School curriculum, and provided for orphans and children from underprivileged backgrounds. This was what Gulcin had meant! At first he was troubled at the thought of being separated from the boy, until he realised it was only selfishness on his part. Was the world really such a wonderful place? Greenhouse gases were choking the earth; the wars in the Balkans might engulf Greece; drugs and despair were rife among the young, even on the island. Gradually he persuaded himself the boy's future lay in a life dedicated to God. But he wouldn't tell him just yet. No. They would go to Athos and visit Father Sophronios, about whom they had heard from the village priest, and once there he would disclose his dream.

And now Panayoti moaned and complained that his head felt heavy and full of darkness. Father Sophronios would give him wings and fill him with light, Kosta promised, sitting him on the edge of the bed. And they might yet make it to church before the first hymn. The boy was a little more compliant, though sleep was still thick in his eyes. As Kosta dressed him and tied his shoelaces, Panayoti stared dreamily at the flame in the lamp, seeing in it his mother's steady gaze.

At the front gate John exchanged a few words with Father Maximos, who didn't look up from vigorously sweeping out eucalypt leaves. He complained they were forever scuttling about the portico and gathering in corners like mischievous little demons sharpening their claws on the cobblestones. John determined not to get caught up in a homily, but the gatekeeper wouldn't be denied. In his opinion the leafless cypress was the ascetic of trees, and that for three reasons: its back was always turned to the sun, it didn't court the company of cicadas, and it knew only one word, which it kept strictly to itself. John nodded and hurried out to the road winding up to Karyes. As though setting a brisk pace the Elder's clock ticked strongly in the woollen bag strapped over his shoulder. It was just after ten, according to Greenwich time, and he had about two hours for his visit to the Elder. The daily ferry from Ouranoupolis reached Daphne at twelve, most visitors then caught the bus for the thirty-minute climb to Karyes, half an hour later the first of the newcomers would arrive at the monastery, when John had to be back to assist with their accommodation.

The morning had been cool, with a mist over Athos and dew on the grass bristling between courtyard stones, but the gauze of clouds gradually dispersed and the sun now shone on forest and sea. Insects simmered around him, blossom blazed from fruit trees, a host of fragrances thickened the warm air. Yes, spring had burst open and it would call for even greater efforts in maintaining the denials imposed by the Easter fast. He thought of Paul again and how much paler he had been in the courtyard after breakfast. Was it the illness? Jet lag? The trip from Australia was long and tiring, especially the leg from Athens to Athos. Or the fact that he had worked on his story into the early hours of the morning? He might have a little more colour tomorrow, after a day without buses and boats and cantankerous officials blowing cigarette-smoke in your face. John now had another reason to see the Elder. He would discuss his friend's condition with him, in the hope of taking back a few words of comfort, perhaps something that might induce Paul to pay him a visit.

The unsealed road had been excavated some years earlier for the increasing traffic on the narrow peninsular, and since then vehicles of all types billowed dust in summer and churned mud in winter. At the first opportunity, however, John veered left and followed a stony path used in the past by men and mules. Walking with extended strides that would have been even longer but for his cassock, he maintained a regular breathing rhythm: inhaling nasally the syllables Lord-have-mer-cy and exhaling orally Ky-rie-lei-son'. He took in with each English syllable a fragrance enhanced by the sun. Here, the promise of white on branches still black with winter; there, the innocence of starry flowers cracking rock's experience; further on, the blind hope of herbs too reticent to face the light; and mixed with this, like an indispensable base, the renunciation of decomposing leaves.

The bittersweet scent of a flowering plum tree reminded him of the last months of his final year at high school. At a time when his friends were beginning to grow their hair in anticipation of the freedom beyond blackboards and bells, he had kept his short, like Brother Mendel's, and felt more in his element in the ordered world of science than in the chaos of pubs and bars. This reclusion had been developing slowly, perhaps inexorably,

unfolding according to a combination of his genetic blueprint and the requirements of university entrance. In the month before the decisive examinations, when the plum trees along his street blushed in pink petticoats, he buried himself in study: mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and English, which he disliked because it seemed formless, subjective, impossible to prepare for in the absence of tables, formulas, procedures. The science subjects were structured and related: biology was linked to chemistry, both reduced ultimately to physics, while all three were based on mathematics. His youthful intuition seemed more active under the intense pressure of study, and he was able to grasp connections between things which would not have occurred to him in more relaxed circumstances. In a flash he saw the elements of the periodic table as light's alphabet, colour as matter's taking and giving of light, life as a transformation of light, and the mind as light's ultimate manifestation, which in turn rendered light even more ethereal by expressing as a mathematical equation. He sensed, albeit vaguely, a fundamental process in what he termed the involution of the universe: the inward spiral from the cosmos to cell, from matter laden with gravity to a mind deep in concentration, from light to the consciousness of light. He worked hard in those heady months, not only for university entrance, but also to please his parents by fulfilling their hopes and expectations. After all, they had come to Australia for his sake, knowing they would always be outsiders because of the language barrier. He had often overheard them lamenting the fact they couldn't help him with his studies. Moved by their look of helplessness, he assured them he needed no help and would always be grateful for their sacrifices for him. His success would be theirs, and through him they would come to feel more a part of their adopted country. And he went on to do very well in the examinations, though not brilliantly, obtaining a score sufficient for his first preference - genetics.

At this time, having outgrown the games and adventures in the nearby park, he would sneak out there for a solitary jog, and then at night, as large fruit bats struggled overhead and dark forms peered from behind every tree. He had won blue ribbons as a cross-country runner at high school, only to give up all competitive sport upon entering university, though he continued to jog regularly as a way of balancing body and mind, a condition he couldn't attain through yoga and meditation. A mind set in concentration could push and prod the body to complete a marathon, despite aching thighs, burning lungs and stinging blisters; however, there was a point of balance between the mind and body, a harmony and cooperation, when as a jogger he was neither one nor the other, neither mass nor energy, but the equal sign in the famous equation. Sometimes during a jog, when mind and body were in perfect equilibrium, his thoughts moved at a greater speed and ideas flashed that wouldn't have arisen in a sedentary state. And he wondered whether a higher order of reality prevailed in a state of self-propelled motion. Perhaps if Einstein had thought on the run, instead of on his bum, the laws of relativity might be different.

The path weaved through the dense forest, rising and falling, broadening and narrowing, sometimes more soil than stone, occasionally disappearing in scrub, now following the boisterous stream breaking down from above, then cutting across it by means of mossy boulders and logs, and always passing another shrine in need of a caring hand, another cross that might have served for kindling, another pointed sign which had long ago lost all sense of direction. As though intoxicated by the scents and syllables, he felt light-headed, buoyant, each step becoming a bound under the force of an irrepressible

spring. The Elder's hermitage wasn't far off, but the warming earth filled him with such vitality given half a chance he would have stashed his cap, hitched his cassock, and dashed off for the joy of running. And in a flash of wishful thinking he imagined himself bounding through oak-groves trimmed with blossom, beneath the light-leaved chestnut trees growing on the higher slopes, beyond the whisper of birch and pine, to the very peak of Athos gleaming with snow.

Last year, in the first week of October, John and Stefan had set out after matins for that very peak. John could have climbed there two months earlier, on Transfiguration Day, together with a host of others sweating up for the annual service and feast. In heat made even more oppressive by the presence of so much black, he could have joined the retinue of monks with umbrellas, visitors with packs, and mules loaded with supplies, all struggling against the deafening ambush of cicadas. But he had wanted to go there under quieter circumstances, and then as a test of his endurance, for several older monks had mentioned that nobody from the monastery had ever managed to walk there and back between sunrise and sunset.

Hearing of their intention to climb the summit, Father Maximos had told them about his fourteenth century namesake, the hermit Maximos, who, in the ecstasy of prayer, had been called to the peak by the Virgin Herself. Doubting his ears, which he kept stopped with pine-sap, the hermit went about his labours, but when the call sounded even more insistently on two other occasions, the third on the Sunday of Pentecost, he raised his eyes to the peak and there beheld the Virgin and Child surrounded by a choir of radiant angels. The next instant, by the grace of God, the hermit was transfigured, becoming the very stuff of faith, which was something between flesh and flame, and just as fire's nature was to ascend, so, in the space between heartbeats, he rose to the peak. Some maintained the hermit had died at the age of ninety-five, others added another four years because a moment of ecstasy was equivalent to a year of experience. In this dispute Father Maximos had sided with the latter, adding his own reason: in the ancient Greek number system ninety-nine spelt the word Amen. John had heard many such legends since entering the monastery. Yes, they were as much a part of Athos as its icons, and just as each icon glowed with a golden background, so the charm of a legend lay not so much in the details but in the wonder emanating from a suspension of disbelief.

In seeking the Abbot's permission to undertake the climb, John was advised against it with a significant arch of his ginger eyebrows. Apart from the threat of poisonous vipers, a few over zealous young men, most recently an inexperienced German mountaineer, had fallen to their death in the steep ravines. But John persisted: the climb would be undertaken as a spiritual exercise, an opportunity to strengthen will and sharpen faculties. The Abbot remained resolute: taking unnecessary risks was often an expression of pride and egotism. John bowed and asked his forgiveness, upon which the Abbot smiled and gave his blessing to the climb.

They had set out straight after matins, dispensing with breakfast, intent on using every minute of precious light. Each carried a shoulder bag with food, water and, on the Abbot's advice, an extra loaf of bread as a gift for any hermit who happened to cross their path. The morning had started promisingly, but as they followed the coastal road brooding clouds gathered over the peak and the lower slopes turned sombre green. Even at that hour the air was humid and the warm breeze from the south swelled and churned the sea. A thunderstorm appeared likely, but they pushed on at a brisk pace (John had yet

to wear a cassock), despite the road's increasing rise. As the climb was a spiritual exercise, a time to reflect on their reasons for being on Athos, they didn't say much along the way, except to comment on the clouds or some feature of the landscape. At one point John asked about Stefan's experiences in Kosovo, but his reply was terse, evasive, to the effect that certain things happened which had turned him against his former values and beliefs. And thereafter John backed off, recalling Elder Kyrillos's advice about not delving too deeply for the reasons that drew men to the monastic life, for such disclosures would be freely made in the fullness of time. The force that drew men to Athos was as private and mysterious as that which attracted others to women, and just as it was improper to ask a man about his intimacy with the woman he loved, so, too, asking a monk about his relationship to the monastery.

After two hours on the coast they turned inland and took a path through a forest thick with chestnut trees. All around them red and brown leaves fluttered like happy butterflies in a hothouse. Encouraging each other with nods and smiles, they pushed on strongly to the bare backbone of hills that ran the along the entire length of the peninsular and rose to the head - Athos. The clouds had now lifted, the sun silvered the ocean, and the mountain's full height stood before them, clear and challenging. They were heartened by sight of the peak, for they had been told the views from up there were truly wonderful. With both sides of the peninsular now visible, they stopped briefly for a drink and a handful of figs and nuts, restricting their conversation to a few words, as though not wanting to intrude on each other's thoughts and meditations. They followed a track winding through scrub and prickly bushes covering the stonier ground. The vegetation at that height was sparser, duller, tenacious in its grip. Here and there they came across red and yellow berries, or clusters of small purple flowers, or a chalice-shaped crocus full of indigo.

With the sun now almost directly overhead and the humidity high, they picked their way up the steep slope with walking sticks cut for the occasion. Sweat dripped from their brows and darkened their shirts. John's thighs began to hurt, his heart pounded, and his breathing became laboured. He recalled running against Stefan in the school cross-country, when he had always managed to get the better of him. Glancing at his friend, he noticed he was also working hard, with a look that wouldn't admit fatigue. The challenge now became a contest between them. Could they maintain this pace to the summit? Who would be the first to ask for a rest? Whose legs and lungs would hold out? Pushed by each other's silent determination, they left the scrub behind and soon reached Athos's waist, where the ascent was made a little easier by the welcome shade of conifers. Surprised by Stefan's endurance, John accepted his friend's more powerful physique was better suited to climbing. They were both breathing heavily when he suggested they rest a while, and yet he didn't feel a sense of having lost the unspoken contest. On the contrary, perhaps his admission of fatigue had spared Stefan having to say it first, and in this he realised he had made some progress in overcoming pride.

They stopped at the lower end of a massive bed of rocks and boulders covered in snow for most of the years, but bare and desolate in the summer months. It was cooler at this altitude and the wind was fresher. John commented how he couldn't stop his legs from trembling, and Stefan admitted the same. For a moment they looked at each other not as competitors, but affectionately, as fellow-strugglers in a holy pilgrimage, brothers in the happiness of their sweat, and to seal that moment they wiped their brow and shook

firmly with the same hand. They could have continued around the bed, but agreed it was quicker, though riskier, to make their up way through it. And so they scraped and scrambled over warm boulders worn smooth by an ice-age of snow. They took turns in leading the way, offering a hand or the end of the walking stick when the other couldn't find a foothold.

The peak seemed almost within reach when they made it to a plateau resembling Athos's shoulder, where they quickly inspected an empty hut, which the monks referred to as Panaghia, the Virgin. A few fir and larch trees clung to the rocks just above the plateau, but beyond that the peak was bare and bone white. Mindful of the time and their need to return to the monastery before sunset, they didn't linger over the sweeping views, but took up their sticks and set off on the last five hundred metres to the summit. The stony track behind the hut would have taken them easily to the peak, but they decided not to use it: having come this far in good shape, they would push themselves up the last stretch in the name of the spirit. Working hard, sometimes on hands and knees, stopping to rest every fifty metres, they zigzagged to the mountain's rocky crown and embraced each other's shaking body.

They caught their breath, sat on the highest rock, and marvelled at the view. The wind was keen at that altitude and quickly cooled their sweat. John had studied the map in anticipation of this moment and he now found his bearings. He pointed to Turkey in the east, adding that monks could once see the fires of Constantinople at night, but that was in *timēs* when the air was cleaner and a constant haze of pollution didn't cover the earth. There, southward, was Mount Olympus, and not far from it the island of Sciathos, which derived its name from the fact the Athos's shadow touched it at sunrise. And in the west, the mountains of Macedonia, with Kaimakchilan standing out from the rest, where rivers of blood flowed during the Balkan Wars more than eighty years ago. Bulgaria lay to the north, and that mountain was Pirin, named after the Slavic god Perun, who traded lightning and thunder with Zeus.

A small white chapel crouched on their left. Beside it an iron man-sized cross was braced to the rock with rods. Monks and visitors crowded in there for the annual all-night service, John explained. Bread and grapes were blessed on the morning of Transfiguration Day and the congregation then descended to the hut for the traditional meal. They went in, lit a candle, and prostrated themselves before the icons. Outside they removed their shirts, buttoned them around the cross to dry, and sat in a warm crevice sheltered from the wind. They remained there for half an hour, each deep in his own thoughts, as the wind whistled and flapped their shirts. An eagle, perhaps a buzzard, drifted above them in wide circles of contemplation. Their shelter looked out over the green-grey sea crossed by ferries and ships. John located southeast and gazed at the horizon, imagining the coast of Asia Minor and all that lay beyond. There were summits there, too: the mountains of the patriarchs Abraham and Moses, the mountain of Christ in his transfiguration, the mountain of Mohammed, and the mountains of Buddha in Tibet. And he pondered the relationship between men and mountains: in climbing a mountain a man didn't conquer it, as Hilary was said to have done to Everest, but was conquered and humbled by it. Perhaps the religious experience was precisely that: a sense of one's insignificance in the face of such immensity, that moment when eternity swept and reduced one to nothing, when one reached out for meaning beyond one's self, outside of human terms, above the temporal.

It was approaching one when they took their shirts from the rusty cross. John suggested they make their way down the southeast slope to Kerasia: a collection of houses and cottages occupied by groups of monks or solitaries. From there they would turn north and take the coastal road back to their monastery, hopefully before sunset, by which time they would have covered about forty kilometres. Their descent was effortless, and they occasionally broke out into a jog from the sheer lightness of body. From above, Kerasia resembled a small village situated in a vast hollow in the side of the mountain. Once they entered the valley, it became warmer again and the air was heavy with the fragrance of grapes and figs and noisy cicadas. The place looked deserted and many of the houses were rundown. A mule tethered to a hazelnut tree accorded them a disinterested side-glance. Water trickled into a cistern. As they approached a cottage wreathed by a vine still heavy with fruit, a monk greeted them and pointed to a house with a large verandah a little further down the hillside, saying if they rang the bell on the banister the guest-master would attend to them. John explained they had been to the summit and were in a hurry to return to the monastery before sunset. Impressed by the distance they had traversed, the monk offered them coffee, adding the guest-master was hard of hearing and could be anywhere at this time of day.

The kitchen was simply furnished: a few kerosene lamps were fixed to the walls, together with icons and plastic bags stuffed with dry herbs. Afternoon light streamed in through the bare windows and reflected off cooking utensils and cutlery scattered on a bench. He cleared the table of books and papers and placed a chair at each end. In making coffee he asked about their backgrounds. He had an uncle somewhere in Australia, and under different circumstances might have been there instead of here. It was just after he had completed military service: he was twenty-one, Greece had just emerged from seven years of dictatorship, and he was free as a note plucked from a bouzouki. He received a letter from his uncle, who offered to pay his fare to Australia and help him start a new life. Having set before his visitors a cup of coffee, water, and a bowl of glistening grapes, he sat between them, facing the window. He was in his mid-forties, measured in what he said, with a beard already more grey than black. Light glowed on his bony cheeks laced in fine red veins. He crossed himself and praised God before sipping the black froth. They followed his example. Stefan asked through John why he hadn't gone to Australia. For the same reason young men left it, he replied, eyes gleaming, and then continued in a more serious tone. In his youth he had been subject to intermittent bouts of melancholy that induced in him a feeling for solitude and poetry. One summer's evening, in the grip of such a mood, he had gone down to Salonika's esplanade and sat on a bench near the enormous bronze statue of Alexander the Great mounted on his rearing charger Bucephalus. Before long an old woman dressed in black from head to foot appeared from the conqueror's shadow and shuffled toward him. She was bent at the waist and carried a black bag that scraped the ground at each step. His first thought was she must be a beggar, the sort who feigned disability at street-corners. Her face was covered in a shawl, except for her eyes, and when she stopped before him their clarity surprised him. She took a pamphlet from her bag and extended it without a word. He reached for it involuntarily and then felt compelled to give her a coin, which she accepted with a gloved hand. He looked into her eyes again, but only for an instant, for she turned abruptly and disappeared among the trees and bright roses behind him. But where had he seen those eyes before? They had the quick light of a younger woman's. Was she in fact a young

gypsy in disguise? He knew they were capable of all sorts of ruses. The pamphlet turned out to be a copy of the Akathistos Hymn. He had heard fragments of it in church over the years, without really appreciating its poetry because it had seemed too pious. That evening, however, perhaps because of his melancholy, or because he could still smell the candle-smoke in the old woman's clothes, he began reading the Hymn with the rhythm he had heard in church. He read it once, then again, and by the end of the third reading his melancholy had lifted and joy filled his being. A month later he was on Athos.

The monk swirled the thick sediment of coffee and swallowed it with a gulp. He had lived in the cottage more than twenty years, supporting himself by carving religious artefacts, while continuing to follow his calling as a hymnographer. He had abandoned the poetry of the world, which was full of despair and pessimism dressed in glitter, and now wrote hymns in praise of the Virgin's Garden. Yes, he had loved the world's poetry in his youth, was drawn to it like a child to a block of chocolate, but he now realised it was all ephemeral, determined by prevailing fashions and tastes, and written from vanity and a longing for renown. Now he was happiest writing anonymous hymns in which he sought to grasp the Virgin's immanence in the natural beauty of Athos. Though he wrote not to win praise but in heartfelt praise of the Blessed One, testing each word on the silence of Kerasia, some hymns had somehow found expression through monastic choirs, others on the mainland, and a few abroad.

In listening to the monk's story they had forgotten their dead-line: with the sun now just above the ridge behind them, they had about three hours to make it back before Father Maximos closed the gates. Once past the outskirts of Kerasia they jogged the downhill path until they reached the dusty coastal road just before the monastery of Great Lavra. Under different circumstances they would have visited the oldest monastery on Athos, but had time for nothing more than a drink from the tap just outside the gates. They waved to an elderly monk sunning himself near the entrance, who in turn crossed himself in bewilderment. Jogging most of the way, they made it back just as Father Maximos was raising the lighted lamp. His astonishment at their achievement was such that he glanced at their ankles and felt their shoulder blades for wings. Satisfied he wasn't in the presence of figures like the hermit Maximos, he congratulated them, adding if men were brought closer together in sharing their salt, then they would be bound in lasting friendship through the purity of the sweat streaming from their brows.

Striding with as much vigour as on that occasion, John now skirted a long-abandoned hermit's cottage in a thicket of bushes and overhanging oaks. A patch of spiky new grass was stamped with what appeared to be fresh footprints. His curiosity was aroused even more by the smell of burnt wood. A cuckoo started counting by twos. Small and squat, the cottage had a slate roof covered in moss and was missing a front door. In the far corner a man lay cocooned in a sleeping bag, his back to the entrance. The remnants of a fire smouldered not far from his feet. John stepped down onto the sunken floor and announced himself in Greek with the traditional Athonite greeting.

- A blessing on you, brother.

A pair of small-sized boots stood awkwardly near the sleepers cowed head. Despite the bag's padding, he appeared to be slight and somewhat short. John went closer to the circle of stones containing the embers and repeated his greeting in a louder voice. The man turned slowly at first, then sat up in alarm. He was young, about twenty, with a boyish face perhaps yet to feel a razor's edge.

- I didn't mean to startle you, said John.

Relaxing his grip on the inside of the bag, the man cast an upward glance from under the hood and said he didn't speak Greek. His English was good, though he stressed the k with a Slavic harshness.

- Where are you from? asked John.

Hearing Serbia, he was about to mention Stefan, but desisted, mindful of his friend's wish to distance himself from Serbian connections due to whatever had happened there last year.

- Have you spent the night in here?

He had set out from Hilandar yesterday morning, with the intention of reaching John's monastery before sunset, but felt weak and feverish after a brief visit to the monastery of Vatopedi. He continued in stops and starts, becoming weaker by the hour, and by late afternoon, knowing he wouldn't make it to the gates before sunset, decided to spend the night here. The fever shook him during the night and he couldn't get warm, even with the fire, and it wasn't until daybreak that something resembling sleep carried him off. A spasm shook him and he pulled the bag closer. He felt cold and weak, he said in a faint voice, and was uncertain of continuing his pilgrimage.

- The monastery's not far, said John, and downhill all the way.

He nodded and hung his head, his face drained of colour by fever and fatigue. John was reminded of an injured pigeon he had found in the backyard of his childhood and how he had nursed it day and night until it was well enough to fly again. Moved by the fellow's helplessness he offered to return after his visit to the Elder and help him to the monastery. He assisted in the guesthouse, John explained, and would see to suitable accommodation and aspirin for his fever. A glance flashed from under the hood, nothing more than a flutter of an eyelash, but it momentarily stunned John, as though he had glimpsed a world of suffering and felt a gravity that would draw him to regions he had never imagined. The man thanked him and said he would be packed and waiting.

On the uphill path to the Elder's, John was unable to concentrate on inhaling and exhaling the syllables. He had been unsettled not only by the look in the fellow's eyes, but by something almost uncanny in the circumstances of the meeting. How many legends had related accounts of angelic figures disguised as pilgrims appearing to monks and hermits in order to test their kindness and hospitality? There was something unnatural, almost otherworldly about the slender fellow. On the other hand there were just as many legends about Satan coming in disguise and tempting hermits to their ultimate downfall. Was the look in his eyes a glimpse of hell? Then again the whole thing might have been a kind of hallucination induced by a combination of fasting, walking and the deep breathing. Yes, perhaps on his way back he would find the hut empty, without trace of anyone having spent a night there. For some reason the possibility of this dispelled his unease and he quickened his pace, breathing in the quickness of Greek, breathing out slowly in English.

Hammering his own semantron at midday, Stefan was high up on a few planks, assisting the carpenters with putting up new roof-beams. His thoughts had been on Paul all morning. After settling him in last night, they had talked for a while: reminiscing, skirting what had happened in their lives in the past year, occasionally lapsing into an awkward silence. When he suggested they turn in, his friend was still too excited to sleep, saying the monastery's old-world charm was ideal for writing. He took out a notebook and asked if he might work for a while. Stefan wished him a good night and left him at the table with the lamp glowing softly. This morning, seeing him fast asleep on the divan, he didn't wake him for matins, but went back later and roused him for breakfast. In the refectory he observed how his friend grimaced at his plate and ate with little appetite. John joined them in the courtyard, but after a brief conversation Paul excused himself, explaining he wanted to return to his work, on which he had made a good start overnight.

Down below, near the front gate, Stefan noticed Father Nikitas entering the chapel of the Virgin. In his first few months at the monastery he had felt intimidated by the elderly monk's surly manner, and simply crossing his line of sight chilled the back of his neck. But, after learning from John about the quirks and peculiarities of certain monks, he had felt less apprehensive in his presence, more inclined to nod in passing. His friend had informed him monks mustn't be judged by the manners and proprieties of the outside world: a different moral and ethical order prevailed here, based on the salvation of the soul, not the body, and governed by living closer to death. To this end some of the older Fathers, particularly those renown for their asceticism, adopted a deliberate aloofness toward newer arrivals. They did this to distance themselves from the esteem of others, for esteem sowed the seeds of vanity, and a vain soul was heavier than a sack of rocks on the back of a mountain climber.

Their first real conversation had occurred five or six months after Stefan's arrival. They had met by chance under the eucalypt tree, as the first snow began falling lightly through the still leaves. Extending his right hand, whose index finger was amputated at the second joint, Father Nikitas caught a few flakes on his palm and brought them to his mouth as though crumbs of bread. He asked Stefan if he had ever seen the famous picture of the enlarged snowflake that bore the image of Christ. No, then he would remember to locate the book in his cell and show it to him, as encouragement in his monastic endeavours. Yes, he understood the struggles of the novice, the difficult transition from the mire of Western self-indulgence to the purity of living selflessly. A fish thrashed futilely on a pier because its gills weren't suited to the lightness of air, he said. It was the task of a novice to endure his new environment until he developed the special lungs that would enable him to live in the lightness of Christ. He chose his English words carefully, mentioning the great Serbian founders of Hilandar, pointing out the traditional bond that existed between Greeks and Serbs, and condemning America's action in the Balkans, particularly the bombing of Belgrade. Yes, he understood Serbian sentiments regarding the virtual loss of Kosovo to the Albanians: as a child of Byzantium he still lamented the loss of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks, even though it had happened more than five hundred years ago.

Despite his impatience with Father Nikitas's political views, Stefan admired his austerity and uncompromising faith, which might serve to strengthen his own resolve to

remain on Athos. The monk's references to Serbia had prompted Stefan to write to his parents. Tersely, in a detached tone, he told his mother he was safe and well, and she mustn't blame herself for the path he had chosen. He was finally at peace with himself and wished the same for them. The short paragraph to his father pointed out he was no longer a Serb. He renounced every form of nationality and would shortly shed even his name for the sake of Christ. There must be no further correspondence between them, at least for the next year or two, by which time he hoped to overcome the pull of ancestral blood and establish himself in his new family. His parents had sent a few letters in reply, but when he returned them unopened, they stopped writing.

In more recent conversations Stefan had observed signs of a gentler light in Father Nikitas's steel-grey eyes, though he was unsure whether the monk was actually warming to him or trying to win him over to his reactionary views on the European Union. Last week their paths had crossed in front of the bakery located behind the refectory. The smell of warm bread took Stefan back his childhood: he liked being in the kitchen with his mother, watching her quick hands rolling and pulling the fleshy dough, stretching it from all sides until it was thin as strips of skin peeled after sunburn, when she would crumble white cheese onto it and fold it in readiness for the oven. A number of monks were gathered around a large bench, chanting, their sleeves rolled back to their elbows, black aprons sprinkled with flour, pulling chunks from a body of dough and massaging them into shape. It was at that moment Father Nikitas greeted him with a look of unmistakable tenderness, and in that silent look Stefan saw again the monk who had stayed with them in his childhood. Suddenly, the knot in his heart loosened a little, his eyes welled with tears, and he wanted to tell the monk everything: his involvement in the Kosovo war, his crime in the Albanian village, his need for forgiveness. But the bakery's door closed, the light in the monk's eyes dimmed, and the moment passed.

Stefan had joined the construction crew because a worker had left unexpectedly two weeks ago, complaining he couldn't tolerate another day in this sterile environment. From what the tradesmen were able to piece together it appeared the young man had come to the monastery with more than labour in mind. He had heard that not all the monks were celibate, some paying handsomely for the company of young men. Of course, given Athos's all-male environment, such rumours and stories circulated in cafes and bars by people who couldn't comprehend celibacy and had never visited the place. At first the young man had approached a few of the workers and was promptly rebuffed. He then offered his services to Father Theodore, who advised him to uproot his carnal desires through confession. Summoned by the Abbot, he broke down and cried he needed the money to repay debts arising from his drug addiction. The Abbot offered to assist him in overcoming the evil that had taken root in his body. He gave him a prayer cord and instructed him to say the Jesus Prayer three hundred times whenever he felt vulnerable. The cord should be used as a rope for raising himself from the baseness in which he had fallen. The fellow took the cord and the Abbot's blessing, only to leave the following morning like a thief.

When the workers stopped for lunch the foreman invited Stefan to join them. They were accommodated in a recently refurbished, two-storey dwelling located near the jetty. Living outside the monastery, they were free to cook for themselves, stay up late, play cards, and listen to the radio, provided it wasn't too loud. The six men had signed on for contracts of up to six months, during which they also led a kind of monastic existence.

They ate in the refectory after matins and vespers, but the span between those meals was long, especially when the days lengthened, so they returned to their quarters for lunch, where each man kept his own store of food.

The carpenters were middle-aged Greeks who had worked at various monasteries over the years. Athos hadn't cured their salty tongues: loud and cynical, they often invoked Christ and cursed the Virgin in the same breath. The young stonemasons referred to themselves as Greeks from the southern part of Albania (or the northern part of Epirus, as Greeks called the region). They didn't speak the language well, but their families had maintained the Orthodox faith through the dark period of Albanian Communism. Thirty people would gather in a concrete bunker around a single candle and an icon concealed in a cigarette pack. The bunkers were constructed by the Communists as shelters in the event of attack from a belligerent West. At a time when hunger sharpened to a point each beak of the country's two-headed eagle, these stout bunkers ate up precious resources and sprouted like mushrooms in fields and folds, parks and public squares, schoolyards and cemeteries, and were never used. The Romanian labourer knew no Greek, but he listened intently while puffing out clouds of smoke from a black pipe.

The foreman of the crew apologised to Stefan for the fact that he and his colleagues weren't observing the Easter fast as strictly as they should. Anesti, one of the other carpenters, was quick to add that conditions here were difficult enough and they needed to keep up their strength if the job was to be finished. Stefan glanced at the stonemasons.

- Don't look at them, said Anesti, his cheeks bulging with food. They can't afford olives and cheese. Besides, they're used to living on air. Bread's a luxury in their part of the world and they fast all year round.

In their early twenties the stonemasons had entered Greece through proper channels, with documents that described their ethnicity as Greek. They had been welcomed to the monastery by the Abbot, who had on several occasions discussed with them conditions in Albania. In their month here they had worked hard, attended the daily services, and disproved the widespread view among Greeks that Albanians were illegal immigrants responsible for an increase in crime, proliferation of drugs, and the fact that locals were losing jobs because they worked for a fraction of the cost.

- Listen, said Aleko, the other carpenter, indicating the radio.

A news bulletin was giving an update on a bus that had been highjacked in Salonika yesterday and driven to the town of Florina, near the Greek-Albanian border. A tense standoff was in progress between police and what the reporter described as a deranged highjacker. Holding a grenade in each hand, the man was threatening to blow up the driver and fifteen passengers if the authorities didn't meet his demands: a million U.S. dollars and safe return to Albania.

- Another Albanian criminal, beamed Anesti.

- It's close to my village, said Aleko.

- They're nothing but savages, my friend. We lived in safety before they started pouring into our country. People used to sleep with open doors and windows, now they're fortifying homes with gates and grilles.

Aleko, whose hands weren't still for a moment, related the misfortune that had befallen the only child of their village-priest. The young man had met an Albanian woman who worked as a waitress in a cafe in Florina. He soon enough fell in love with

her and, despite opposition from his family, they married, though not before she was baptised a Christian by the unhappy priest. A few months after the wedding, the young man returned from work to find the house stripped of furniture and the woman nowhere in sight. Unable to bear the humiliation of being jilted, he fell into a depression deeper than a well, and a week later ended his life with his father's hunting rifle, for his had been stolen by his runaway wife. The investigating police uncovered an elaborate swindle. It turned out the woman was already married to an Albanian and used her looks to sting unsuspecting Greeks. She had arranged everything like clockwork. Her husband went to the young man's house with a truck, loaded it with as much as it would carry, including the priest's vestments worn on Sundays, and took her back to their village in Albania.

- And you expect us to trust you? Anesti addressed the stonemasons in a loud voice. You're all liars and thieves. How do we know you're Orthodox?

- We've got papers, replied the shorter of the two, his Greek heavy with accent.

- Papers! They're all false.

- The Abbot checked them.

- It's the law of the jungle over there, continued Anesti. And little wonder, after fifty years of Stalinist Comrade Hoxha. For fifty years you lived without faith, without a sense of yours and mine, without a gram of self-respect. Hoxha slowly turned you into beasts of burden, while feeding you propaganda about living in paradise compared with the West. But the doors suddenly opened and you saw what we had in Greece and how you'd given your souls for nothing. And now you're full of hatred over Comrade Hoxha's deception, but he's not there for your vengeance so you take it out on Greece. Yes, it's all right to lie, steal, and kill - that's what Hoxha did to you and that's what you're going to us Greeks.

- Slow down, Anesti, said the foreman. We're all foreigners or refugees from some place or another. Your grandparents came to Greece as refugees from Asia Minor, mine came from Bulgaria during the population exchange after the Balkan Wars, and Aleko's ancestors might've come down from Russia with the migration of the Slavs. That's Europe - people are forever on the move, they settle in a place for a few hundred years, conditions change, and they move on again. Maybe that's how new civilisations arise. Maybe that's what gives Europe its vitality.

- Don't expect civilisation from Albania, my friend.

- Civilisation's born with pain.

- Greece was fine the way it was.

- Hunger, my friend, that's what drives people to leave their home in search of a better life. If necessity's the mother of invention, hunger's the mother of new cultures and civilisations. Look, do you think these boys enjoy being away from their families and spending time with the likes of us? It's hunger, and you'd do the same if your kids were starving. You'd lie and cheat to make a better future for them. That's human nature, my friend: the same for Greeks, Albanians and Turks.

- No, said Anesti, becoming more worked up. We've known hunger, too. The Turks oppressed us for five hundred years, but did Greeks become savages? No! My parents starved during the Second World War, did they lie and cheat? No! And as for our village women, they'd bake a rock and pray it becomes bread rather than work as prostitutes in the bars of Athens and Salonika. No, it's more than hunger that drives them to lie and cheat - it's an absence of morality due to fifty years of living without a sense of

having a soul.

- The boys are all right, said the foreman, tapping Anesti on the shoulder. They're fasting and they go to church everyday. Look at us! What sort of Greeks are we? Eating cheese in Holy Week. And how many times have we been to church in the past month?

- Church, sneered Anesti. It's all show and opportunism with them. Why did Albania become Muslim at the time of the Ottomans? To gain favours and concessions from the ruling Pashas and Sultans. The Orthodox toiled under the Turkish yoke, while the Albanians became policemen and overseers.

- We're Orthodox, protested the other stonemason. Our families kept their faith during Hoxha's regime, when people were put in prison for crossing themselves. And I'm thinking of staying here to become a monk.

- Of course, in becoming a monk you'll be granted Greek citizenship under the constitution of Athos, you'll bring out your family under the protection of the Abbot, and before long you'll throw off the cassock and settle in Greece. There's no better way of gaining citizenship and access to Europe.

- And what's wrong with that? asked the foreman. How many of our people have become citizens of America and Australia?

- What's wrong? My sons can't find a job because these Albanians have overrun the country.

- Anesti, my friend, there's plenty of work for those who really want it. But our Greek youth has become lazy, that's the trouble. They don't want to work in the fields and orchards, so these Albanian boys do the harvesting and picking. They don't want to dirty their hands, so these boys carry the stones and timber on building sites. These boys keep the country moving, while ours sit in cafes all day, smoking American cigarettes over Nes-frappes. If the priest's son got stung, he should've been out working, not lazing about in a cafe, eyeing off a bit of skirt. And if your boys want work they should be here, in your place, instead of relying on you to support them.

As the others laughed Anesti leapt up and seized the shorter stonemason by the shirt. Stefan had been listening to the conversation with a preoccupied look, occasionally tugging at the cross around his neck, but the instant the scuffle broke he was the first to intervene. He pulled them apart with the help of the others, and Anesti stormed out, cursing and swearing.

Stefan's sudden reaction was triggered as much by events in Kosovo as by an incident six years earlier. He had gone with John and Paul to a restaurant called The Balkan Grill, a dingy place located in one of Melbourne's inner suburbs. Though they had drifted somewhat apart after their high-school days, they still managed to arrange a monthly get-together in honour of the vow they had made as boys. It was at the time of the Bosnian War. Stefan's father had taken a passionate interest in the events crumbling his homeland, and this in turn awakened in Stefan a long-dormant sense of being Serbian. As the conflict escalated and atrocities by both sides increased, national feelings in the Vekovic household grew, fuelled mainly by Ivan, who cursed the Australian media for portraying Serbs as wrongdoers, often spitting at the newsreader, irrespective of whether they were male or female. At first Stefan had trouble coming to terms with these unsettling emotions. After all, for the past six or seven years he had deliberately shunned all things Serbian and referred to himself as an Australian, yet now, with the outbreak of hostilities, he felt as though he were being claimed by a force beyond his control. He

attempted to subdue these feelings with rational arguments, telling himself the conflict had nothing to do with him, that he was born in Australia and his allegiance was to this country. But it wasn't long before he found himself buying the Serbian newspaper, even though he had trouble reading it, and listening to Serbian programs on the radio. Of course, his father was delighted to see the change in his son. A month earlier he was certain he had lost another child to the Australian way of life, now he beamed with joy as they sat reading the paper and discussing the war. Stefan began taking a lively interest in his parents' past and the history of the Serbian people. Our son has come home, Ivan whispered to his wife one night, with tears in his eyes. He was overjoyed when Stefan asked to be taught the old, patriotic songs - the ones he had sung as a child, without knowing what they really meant. Now, to Stefan's utter astonishment, the slow melodies that contained the suffering and hardship of the Serbian people brought tears to his eyes, just as they had done to his father. And those songs became even more heartfelt when his father received a letter from his brother in Kosovo, informing him their first cousin and his entire family had been killed by Bosnian Muslims in a village near Sarajevo. As his father wept, recalling how they had played together as boys, Stefan counted his tears and stopped on the seventh, which fell from his left eye.

The incident in the Balkan Grill occurred in this atmosphere of intense national fervour, when Stefan had come to see his identity against the bloody backdrop of Serbian history. Despite its shabby appearance the restaurant had a good reputation for soups and charcoal grills. The owner, a thick-set Macedonian, maintained the smoky barbecue behind the counter, constantly wiping his flushed, sweaty face with the towel around his neck. Stefan and his two friends had finished their bean soup when a group of young men entered noisily and sat at an adjacent table. It was Friday night, the restaurant was full, and Macedonian songs were playing softly in the background. The newcomers filled their glasses with red wine and proposed a toast to the owner, who turned from the glowing coals and acknowledged them with a wave of the towel. A member of the group then called for the music to be turned up, and they all took up the song, placing their extended arms on each other's shoulders. The song ended in a burst of laughter and applause. A thin-faced fellow with receding hair took out a crimson fez from under the table and cocked it on his head, turning its black tassel to one side.

- A toast to Ali Pasha, the cry went out.

Stefan knocked back a glass of wine and leaned back in his chair with a surly expression. His friends noticed the change and attempted to humour him, which only made him more sullen. The men were now quickly passing the fez from head to head, and the one on whom it stopped was compelled to skull a glass of homemade raki. John and Paul were puzzled by their friend's reaction, for they had always known him to be easy-going and tolerant of others.

- What's the matter? asked John.

- That fez killed my relatives, he said, finishing another glass.

Paul leaned back and asked the fellow behind him what the fez signified. They belonged to a Macedonian theatre-group and had come directly from a performance of a historical drama, in which the fez was worn by an Ottoman governor.

- Put it away, said Stefan, with an edge to his voice.

The noise subsided, prompting the owner to turn from the sizzling grill.

- Ali Pasha, did you hear that? laughed the man behind Paul, addressing the thin-

faced fellow, who was now wearing the fez. He wants you to put it away.

- Tell him Ali Pasha, the Lion of the Balkans, does as he pleases.

They clapped and cheered. John gripped Stefan's forearm and advised him to ignore them. Another Macedonian song started in the background.

- Ali Pasha might get his head knocked off, said Stefan.

In an attempt to ease the tension, the owner danced to Stefan's table carrying a silver tray piled with grilled chops, steaks, kebabs and chicken-wings.

- Balkan goodies, friends, he grinned. Enjoy it and be thankful for Australia.

Paul and John complimented the owner, who wiped his brow and returned to the grill. Stefan leaned back and, in a quiet tone, though still seething with anger, told the fellow with the fez to put it away. Ali Pasha took off the fez, brushed it with the back of his hand, stroked the tassel, and carefully placed it on his head again, tilting it to the side.

- Put it away, Stefan snarled. Australia's no place for fezzes.

- We're in the Balkans, he declaimed with a sweeping gesture, and I'm Ali Pasha.

John and Paul attempted to subdue Stefan, but his face was set and his eyes were alight. The owner scurried back and his ample girth filled the space between the antagonists.

- Boys, boys, he laughed, we're Balkan brothers. Let's have a dance together.

He broke out into song and shuffled around the tables, clapping and encouraging patrons to join him. The diversion lasted a minute, and then Stefan turned to Ali Pasha and knocked the fez from his head. In an instant a whirlwind swept through the restaurant as Ali Pasha leapt at Stefan, who let fly with his fists. Shouting and swearing in Macedonian, the owner threatened to call the police. John and Paul tried to pull Stefan away, but they were brushed aside with a strength that surprised even them. As patrons began leaving the owner rushed to the front door, assuring them this was just a little show of Balkan excitement and it would soon be over. By now tables had been thrown aside and the two were thrusting at each other with knives.

- Get out, screamed the owner, his face redder than the coals in the brazier.

But they continued scrambling and goading each other over the food and furniture, until Stefan lunged out and slashed Ali Pasha across the cheek. He fell to his knees and covered his face, blood oozing between his fingers. As friends rushed to his assistance, John and Paul pulled Stefan away, who wouldn't move at first, as though wanting to pounce on the fallen victim and finish him off.

- Let's go before the cops come, urged Paul.

- You'll pay for this, screamed the owner.

He grabbed at Stefan but was pushed aside, falling onto the mess on the floor. The fez had been picked up by one of the patrons and placed upside down on the counter. On the way out Stefan knocked it to the floor, crushed it with his foot, and kicked it outside.

A few days later Stefan was arrested (one of the actors had run out after them and recorded the registration number of his car) and made a full confession, although he withheld the names of his friends, saying they had nothing to do with the incident. Ali Pasha had been discharged from hospital the same night with a few stitches in his cheek. Stefan's mother burst into tears and shook her head in bewilderment. She repeatedly asked what had possessed him to do such a thing, and prayed for the earth to open and swallow her, saying that was preferable to living with the shame of what friends and relatives would say. He placed his arm over her shoulder and replied it had happened in a

flash, a reaction to the provocative fez. He felt for her distress and was sorry her clothes smelt of biscuits from the factory, sorry he hadn't been a more considerate son. His father had said nothing, but his eyes glowed darkly with paternal pride and the points of his moustache seemed sharper than ever.

The case was heard by a female magistrate who viewed the proceedings over the top of her glasses. Stefan's barrister pleaded guilty to all charges, citing events in Bosnia as an explanation for his client's action. The magistrate warned him in a pointed tone there was no place in Australia for such behaviour. This was a free country and people had the right to wear fezzes, turbans, yarmulkes, or even swimming caps without fear of intimidation and racial vilification. As the sentence was about to be delivered Stefan and Ali Pasha exchanged looks, the latter running a finger along the scar on his right cheek. His admission of guilt and the testimony of several character witnesses, among them his football coach, who spoke of his preparedness to put his body on the line for a team-mate, worked in Stefan's favour. The magistrate was compelled to record a conviction due to the severity of the case, however, as this was his first appearance before the courts, she reserved the right to place him on a two-year good-behaviour bond, during which he would have to undertake three hundred hours of community work. Stefan accepted the sentence, bowed to the magistrate, and removed his tie once outside the court. On the way to their car Stefan felt a swell of emotion as his father placed an arm over him and his mother folded his tie striped with Serbian colours.

The shorter Albanian thanked Stefan for his help.

- You're from Australia? he asked.

Stefan nodded.

- I'd give my soul to be there.

Gazing from the window at the calm sea, he mused how it must be like paradise in that distant land. Everyone had their own house, a private garden, and drove new cars. Was it true people were paid for not working? He had heard the unemployed got more in a week than he earned in a month breaking his back carrying stones. Why did Stefan leave paradise for the hell of the Balkans? If the devil were to show up one night and offer him a passport to Australia in exchange for his soul, he wouldn't hesitate. His grandfather would say the soul was no different from a jackal, sniffing about the body in hard times, only to disappear when things were good.

Stefan twisted the cross around his neck.

As John climbed toward a clearing in the forest the Elder's tin-roofed hermitage gleamed through branches bursting with blossom. They had met by chance at the edge of that clearing about a month after John's arrival on Athos. It had been a brooding afternoon toward the end of November, and John had set out from the monastery for a jog before vespers. On that occasion, instead of taking the safe coastal road, a whim had impelled him along an inland path, which he followed until it disappeared under a thick blanket of damp leaves. He pushed on, expecting to see it again, but after a few twists and turns it became evident he had lost not only the path but, in the absence of sun, his bearings as well. With nightfall sounding in the cries of jackdaws, he was beginning to feel anxious about returning to the monastery on time, when the Elder suddenly appeared with a sack over one shoulder and the weight of his years on the other. He had been walking slowly, he explained with a smile, counting every third step, while the young man had been running for quite some time, and yet they still managed to meet at the same spot. John was at once taken by the monk's nature and saw in him the kindly grandfather he had always wanted. The Elder must have sensed something in the novice, for he invited John to his house. He scooped out handfuls of chestnuts from his sack and roasted them on the stove. They were full and plump and whenever one burst he smiled with childish delight. He related the story of a simple-minded shepherd who would not be moved to anger, despite a litany of misfortune conveyed to him by the devil. In the end, unable to provoke the shepherd to curse God, the devil turned black and burst from exasperation, just like a chestnut on a stove. In accepting a glass of water John noted that its level, which appeared more horizontal than in Australia. The Elder asked about that far off place and marvelled at the fact that most of it was desert. Not fit for anything, John said. Except to strengthen weak souls, added the Elder. When John explained he had lost his way and needed directions, the Elder plucked a camomile flower from a bunch drying upside down on the door and gave it to him, saying it was better than a compass. There were no dead ends in the Virgin's Garden, for each petal pointed in the direction of God. When John reminded him of Father Maximos and the dead-end of a locked gate at dusk, the Elder walked him to the verandah and gave him directions, advising he keep the stream always on his left. As the howl of a jackal went through the forest, shedding a host of red leaves, the graceful light in the old monk's eyes momentarily dispersed John's thoughts of Australia and parents and the life he had left behind. The Elder then took a handful of hazelnuts from his pocket and gave them to his visitor, together with another little story he had heard from a Russian monk years ago. If a person found two kernels in the same hazelnut, he should give one to whoever happened to be nearest, and together they should make a wish. He picked out a nut and instructed John to break it open: twin kernels were curled snugly into each other like the Chinese Yin-Yang symbol. The Elder accepted one with a beaming smile.

On the morning after the chance meeting with the Elder, John spoke to the Abbot, who had been advising him to seek out a spiritual Father from among the monks in the monastery. What should he look for in making his choice? First and foremost a feeling of having found a soul-mate, like that which elevated one friend above others, for even Christ had a favourite disciple. As guide and godfather it was his sacred duty to prepare

the novice for his tonsure, and thereafter to assist him in his struggle against the dark forces that would pull at him on the ladder to enlightenment. On his part the novice must obey his spiritual Father in all things, no matter how difficult or unreasonable they seemed. In time a bond would develop between them, stronger than that between a father and son, for its fibre wasn't temporal flesh but timeless spirit. The Abbot gave examples of novices who had been tested by their spiritual Fathers in ways that seemed callous, even cruel, but were meant to further the young man's development. One Elder was known to have verbally abused his spiritual son, calling him a worthless insect, and on occasions letting fly with a slap whose sting wasn't lessened by the beard on the cheek. How could this pass for friendship? Well, said the Abbot and adjusted the large cross around his neck. The welfare of the soul had prescriptions unpalatable as those for the body. Having studied the novice's silence as much as his words, the Elder belittled him in order to uproot his youthful pride and replace it with humility. In presenting a harsh demeanour he sought not only to test the novice's endurance and obedience, but more importantly to train him in the most difficult of all Christian commandments: to love one's enemy. It was easy to respect those who were affectionate toward one, but only an enlightened soul was humbly disposed toward those who looked on him with contempt. In this, too, a watchful Elder knew how far to blacken himself for the young man's sake. At the end of the probationary period, when the novice had been sufficiently tested and perhaps reduced to tears, the experienced Elder reached out and accepted him as a godson. ~ ~

When John had explained the circumstances of his meeting with the Elder, the Abbot tapped the table in stressing God's grace often worked in mysterious ways, and continued with a few details about the Elder. Yes, he had attained the highest level on the monastic ladder, hence his title, and the stole of the Great Habit he wore concealed under his cassock. Many monks in the monastery were called Elder, but that was simply in deference to their age, and then as a form of respect. The title really belonged to monks such as Father Kyrillos, for they lived the ascetic ideal ceaselessly, struggled day and night with the burden God had placed on their shoulders, and glimpsed paradise through their pain. He had come to the monastery as a young man in his mid-twenties, completed his novitiate, and set out to live alone in a hut on the slopes of the mountain. In those years he wandered restlessly over Athos, visiting renowned monks and hermits, receiving their blessing and spiritual counsel as openly as a child. In those days he compared himself to a bee gathering pollen from the flowers of the wilderness, so that in the fullness of time he might produce his own honey, which would sweeten the lives of those who came to Athos seeking nourishment. Eventually he returned to the monastery and sought permission to reside in his present hermitage, which had been recently abandoned by a monk who suddenly feared living alone. In all his years on Athos, despite invitations to address the faithful in Athens and abroad, the Elder had left on only one occasion, during the military dictatorship, when he was taken to a hospital in Salonika. A transfusion was needed for an operation on his stomach, but blood was scarce and he refused to contact relatives for assistance. His life hung in the balance, until a group of nuns from a convent just outside Salonika heard of his plight and offered to be donors. Yes, he recovered fully, but he never forgot their kindness, and would often say the kind sisters had brought him closer to the Virgin and the Akathistos Hymn.

The Abbot had sounded a note of caution, which John took to heart. The Elder's

charismatic nature attracted many who sought him as a spiritual father, and while he was more than willing to offer advice he was also most selective in whom he chose, saying a father needed to be strong and he was beginning to feel his years. Attributing their first meeting to Providence, John had visited the Elder a few days later, hoping to be accepted as spiritual son. Greeted with the same warm affection, John's spirits rose and he asked the Elder if he would honour him by being his spiritual father. The monk smiled and tapped him on the shoulder. He couldn't refuse a pilgrim who had come all the way from Australia not only in answer to the Virgin's call, but to share his twin hazel with an old hermit who could barely see past his fingertips and couldn't taste beyond his tongue.

The Elder's house was situated in a grassy clearing spotted with poppies. On one side a variety of nut trees stood out in white and pink blossom, while on the other a long-established vegetable patch had been recently turned and planted with three crosses, their arms fluttering with strips of coloured cloth. The house was elevated on stumps, with a verandah along the front overlooking the valley, the stream, and further down a triangular section of sea. The outer walls were timber, repaired here and there with corrugated sheets. Years ago the hermitage had accommodated four or five monks living in close-knit fellowship, but as one after another passed away it became more neglected, until the Elder's coming, when he had to evict a brotherhood of bats.

John climbed the loose steps to the verandah, called out, and went to the back. There, where the clearing backed onto the forest, the Elder was tending a beehive, without protection of any sort. Five or six skeps were scattered around the clearing. He had made them by weaving vine branches and thatching the frame with straw. They were lighter to carry than timber hives and kept his bees warmer in winter. He practically lived on honey and nuts, which he also sold to supplement his meagre needs.

- A blessing on you, Elder, said John, stopping a few metres from the skep.

- And may your shadow grow stronger in the sight of God.

He wore a woollen cap with a cross stitched in red on the front. Hanging loosely over his cassock, a sleeveless cardigan was missing several buttons and held together by two safety pins. His cassock was more grey than black, the cuffs of his trousers were frayed, and his shoes had no laces. He was in his late-seventies, somewhat thin, with a sparse beard and a prominent jawbone, but he moved lithely, his teeth were intact, and his bones still capable and strong.

- You should wear protection, said John.

- They've stung me so many times I'm immune to them. Besides, their little nips promote health and wellbeing. Look, here! The old queen has swarmed off and the new one has taken her place. The drones and workers chant night and day for their sovereign, just as we monks offer our prayers to the Queen of Athos.

- And people say womankind has no place here.

- Look around you, said the Elder, with a sweep of his hand. She's everywhere: in this skep, in those poppies, in the blossom, in my very blood. We're living in the garden of the Virgin.

John took the clock from his bag and passed on Father Meletios's greetings and apologises for the delay in repairing it. Holding it in cupped hands, the Elder raised it to his ear, listened for a moment, and nodded in approval. He would repay the clockmaker with a jar of honey. His fingers were sinewy, longish nails gleamed in the sunlight, and a prayer cord was wrapped around his bony wrist.

- Your tonsure's not far off, said the Elder.

John mentioned his apprehension at his father's imminent visit. Working deftly on the skep, the Elder concentrated on what was being said, glancing up from time to time with a deeply lined forehead and raised eyebrows. Those who took up the cross did so at the expense of their loved ones, he reminded John. At the marriage in Cana even Christ had been dismissive of his mother when he realised his higher calling. He advised him to welcome his father, converse with him quietly and respectfully, and show him that while he was still his son in the flesh, he was God's son in spirit. Once his father experienced Athos and saw his son's dedication, he would be more understanding and accepting of his decision to become a monk. And his visit during Holy Week was timely, for it would further test John's readiness for his coming tonsure.

- He's a strong-willed man, Elder.

- And what will he do? Take you back to Australia by force? Athos has a way of humbling the strongest of wills, my boy. After all, a thousand years of faith haven't simply disappeared like a wisp of smoke: they've left an impression on everything around us. Every leaf in the forest is imprinted with the prayers of those who have passed this way before us; every stone bears the impression of a knee bent in humility; every stream runs with tears of penance. All this humbles the wilful and proud.

He covered the trays with the skep and they walked in step back to the house. In the guestroom he served John a small plate of walnuts mixed in honey. Was the Elder a mystic, as some maintained? He would laugh at the suggestion and dismiss it by referring to himself as an old man who often couldn't see beyond the roundness of his eyes. And in the same breath he would mention the truly great ascetics from the past, whom God had graced with a seventh sense. How this one had been visited by the Virgin while cleaning a stable, and that one had foreseen the hour of his death, and another's body had been found intact and fragrant three years after its burial. At other times he would suddenly point to things with heart-felt humility. Look, he would exclaim with child-like wonder, black sister-spider had woven a shining web from the juices of her being. She was closer to God in her silent work than he in his prayers. Despite this self-effacement, word had spread throughout Greece and beyond that he was gifted with insight, and many people came to Athos specifically for his advice, comfort and spiritual guidance.

John had neither sought nor seen evidence of the Elder's so-called mystical nature, but he was always moved by the sweetness of his voice, the mellow silence that surrounded his words, the clear light of his brown eyes, and the way his hands folded into each other as he sat on his three-legged stool, looking up at his visitors. Sometimes it was enough to be in his presence, helping him with wood or water, for John to feel a sense of belonging. Other times he enjoyed discussing scientific matters with him, for his ideas were remarkably advanced. Unlike many monks who vilified science as the work of satanic reason, the Elder saw it in term of human creativity, which in turn reflected the work of a creative God. He would often mention Prometheus in their conversations: the archetypal scientist had wrested fire from the old gods and presented it to mankind in order to free them from ignorance and raise their heads to a higher God. And contemporary science was no different: instead of invalidating the notion of divinity, it pointed to a wonderfully complex universe that not only humbled the heart but compelled the mind to recognise God's subtle hand in creation.

In their free-flowing discussions the Elder often mentioned the schism between

religion and science. But things were improving, he would say with a look of delight, and there was now more dialogue between the two than at any time in the past three hundred years. In his opinion the two were never as mutually exclusive as extremists on both sides made out? After all, the priests of ancient Egypt and Babylon were also the keepers of astronomical knowledge. Having studied in both places, Pythagoras fused mathematics and mysticism. And Plato's philosophy was a blend of intuition and intellect, religion and science. He saw the beginnings of the schism in the rise of Christianity, which in turn arose from Hebraic tradition that denounced both science and art. Hostility to science was expressed most cruelly in fifth century Alexandria, when Christian fundamentalists killed a woman named Hypatia for teaching mathematics and Plato instead of Christ. As this was happening in the city's east, in the west an opposing group bound a young Catherine to a wheel and tore her to bits for being Christian. Both deaths marked the onset of the Dark Ages, and for the next millennium science retreated to superstition, while religion flourished, often through the sword and flame. Finally, in the fifteenth century, the light of the Renaissance dispelled the darkness. Copernicus proposed a sun-centred solar system, which Galileo supported by looking through his telescopes. The Italian retained his faith, despite the Church's charge of heresy, arguing that religion taught how one went to heaven, and science how the heavens went. And if the earth wasn't the centre of the solar system, the Elder had once said, it could still be the centre of the universe, for in an infinite sphere any point was theoretically the centre.

A serious breach between science and religion occurred in the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment was a period of exploration, technological progress, confidence in the power of the human mind. With science now in the ascendancy everything was possible and mankind was limited only by imagination. Unlike the initial schism, however, this was instigated by scientists who sought to wrest God from the Church and place Him in laboratories. As the Queen of the Sciences mathematics would unlock the secrets of the universe, predict its future course, and elevate man to his ultimate place in the cosmos: man as the image of God, perhaps even in the place of God. The triumph of science continued into the nineteenth century, highlighted by Maxwell's astounding equations which unified the forces of electricity and magnetism, and later by Darwin's publication of *The Origin of the Species*. And yet, despite these strident advances, there were still notable scientists who retained their religious outlook. Faraday, whose work paralleled Maxwell's, remained firm in his belief of God, while Darwin had wanted to become a parson, and his theory of evolution wasn't meant to abolish God, but to align observation with creation.

Einstein wasn't a spiritualist, but he did believe in the God of Descartes and Spinoza: a creator of order and harmony, not a dictator of human affairs. Intuition and wonder were for him the deepest of human experiences, underlying both science and religion. He sense of the divine lay in those fleeting moments when the universe's beauty and sublimity were feebly and indirectly glimpsed. If his theory of relativity jolted the Enlightenment's idea of a universe running like a well-oiled machine, quantum mechanics shattered the underlying assumption that matter was subject to strict determinism. Suddenly there was no more certainty and the universe was explained in terms of probability and chance. Physicists conceded they were unable to calculate when precisely an unstable nucleus would emit a particle. Light, whose speed was still the only absolute in the universe, was found to be far from absolute in the laboratory: its

whimsical nature confounded experimenters, who observed it acting now as a particle, then as a wave. When Heisenberg put forward his Uncertainty Principle, the either/or dichotomy left many scientists with nothing to stand on.

The Elder had marvelled at how the new physics undermined Newtonian certainty, replacing it with predictions based on probability distributions, only to facilitate the present dialogue between science and religion. If the symbol of the Enlightenment had been the ticking clock, that of the Quantum Age was a pair of rattling dice. Physicists had a field day manipulating the wave equations of quantum mechanics, postulating the existence of parallel universes and the possibility of reversing the arrow of time. They also attributed a kind of rudimentary consciousness to sub-atomic particles, for when twin protons were split and separated each appeared to be aware of the spin of its distant sibling. As electrons were no longer particles but processes, or fields of activity, some scientists began to see in them the very stuff of spirit. The age-old question of free will was also given new impetus, and God was finally brought back into the equation. Chance represented ultimate freedom, an eternally unfolding universe, which accorded with God's unboundedness. And what of the laws of nature grasped by man's limited mind? Some maintained they were the short-term swirls and eddies in the great cosmic flux, or the observation of number patterns in casting a die an infinite number of times.

In discussing John's studies before coming to Athos, the Elder had said the twentieth century belonged to quantum physics and computer technology, but the twenty first would-belong to biology. Genetic engineering would benefit mankind, just as Prometheus's fire had done; however, he feared some scientists would be tempted to strive for what the Enlightenment had been unable to achieve: the physical perfectibility of man, the creation of a new Adam, and the making of heaven on earth. John had asked whether they would succeed. He explained that humans were like an iceberg: one sixth of our being existed in the sensual world, while the rest was submerged in a realm that buoyed us, whose reality we barely sensed. Physical perfection would never be realised without an awareness of that other realm. John had mentioned the views of former colleagues who maintained human DNA was impressed with the God's thumb print, and how it was incumbent on them to reconstruct Him through the creation of a new man. The Elder had pondered this for about a dozen knots of his cord and smiled. God was broad-minded and generous enough to accommodate an infinite number of theories about the essence of His being. For the foreseeable future, though, the Elder remained hopeful that science, in particular genetics, would continue to engage in meaningful dialogue with religion. And when John had asked about the significance of Christ in this new dialogue, the Elder explained the Incarnation could be seen in terms of both creation and evolution. If evolution was the process whereby creation transformed matter to mind, consciousness to spirit, then Christ represented the dual movement from Creator to creature and from man back to God.

The guestroom was always redolent of lavender, for the Elder hung small pouches of the herb on the walls as a way of overcoming the smell of dampness that settled in the house during the winter months. As John ate his conserve with relish, the Elder asked if he had settled on a name for the coming ceremony. He mentioned the Abbot's suggestion and added it hadn't quite caught his imagination. The Elder laughed. Names had a way of growing on one, just like a pair of shoes that felt uncomfortable at first. He had been christened Kosmas and lived with those two syllables for more than twenty years; after

his tonsure, perhaps feeling ready for a life of struggle, he had doubled the vowels and wore the weighty Konstantinos for the next forty; in accepting the Great Habit he had lightened his burden somewhat and would now wear Kyrillos to the grave.

- What about Jacob?

- Jacob, mused John, tasting the name together with the conserve.

- The name of an old hermit I met years ago, said the Elder. He put me up on a stormy night when I was roaming around Athos. I've never forgotten the look of joy in his eyes as lightning cracked the darkness and filled the hut. Every moment should be as intense, he said, and broke out into a hymn. Strange, I dreamt of him last night. He was sitting in your chair and instead of a monastic hat he wore a skep humming with bees. What brings you here, brother? I asked. He didn't answer at first, but continued examining the sole of his foot. When I repeated the question, he looked up and said he expected a storm on the evening of the third day. Isn't it strange? I wouldn't have recalled the dream if you hadn't come.

The Elder's words stirred John and brought the old hermit vividly to life. For an instant he was with them in the hut on the night of the storm. He saw the look in Jacob's eyes and understood its significance.

- Jacob, he said.

- God rest his soul, intoned the Elder.

John thanked him. The name had a pleasant sound and deserved consideration. He was about to mention his encounter with young man when the Elder took the dish from him and returned with two glasses of water.

- It's almost time for vespers, said John, studying the water's level.

- What is it, my boy?

A dove sounded from the back of the house, its call immediately echoed by another. John's reticence began to yield in the Elder's steady gaze.

- I know, he said and looked down at the grey floorboards, perhaps to spare John unnecessary embarrassment.

- But it's hard to subdue, said John, blushing.

- You're young and spring excites the seed.

It was now John's turn to talk about dreams: he recounted his of Saint Mary and how he had almost succumbed. He asked whether sin extended to dreams? The Elder replied the pure in heart were pure in dream. The great ascetics barely slept and knew to wake themselves at the onset of unholy dreams.

- But what of us novices?

- Yes, it's a powerful force, replied the Elder. One that physics hasn't even started to address in its quest for a unified theory.

- What's to be done with it, Elder?

- Use it to overcome it, my boy. That's the way of the truly great ascetics, those athletes whose feats have astonished the world. They made the Virgin the sole object of their desire and their passion was for paradise. Try to harness that force with your prayer cord, subdue it with your tears, tame it by fasting, and bring it under your control through heart-felt prayer. And you'll know when you've succeeded in this matter, for the force will become a source of unspeakable joy.

- It takes real strength to channel it into faith.

- No, it takes real faith.

Always ready with encouragement from his own experiences, the Elder admitted to the same struggle and temptation upon first arriving on Athos. Yes, he had succumbed, and not only in his dreams, but then, like John, he had been a beginner in this most difficult of paths. Gradually though, guided by his elder, he had succeeded in turning that force upon itself, thereby freeing himself from its powerful sway. The force could be used in three ways: wasted in self-gratification, furthered through procreation, or harnessed so one rose above nature. Of course it was easy for him to offer advice, for the force had long ago released its grip on him; nevertheless, as one who had also walked that thorny path, he empathised with John and reminded him of the need for sobriety as advocated in the *Philokalia*. And then, springing from the stool with the agility of a man half his age, he went to the window-sill lacquered with sunlight, snapped a sprig of blossom from a single branch in a bottle of water, inhaled its fragrance, and extended it to John as though it were a small flame. In a tone full of paternal affection he advised him not to fear his desire, for passions were often springboards to paradise.

On the verandah John mentioned Paul, his illness, and a little of his background. The Elder removed some clover from a pot of basil on the banister. Writers were strange and varied creatures, though the ones who had visited him over the years were alike in this regard: they all possessed a religious sensibility, including those who openly denied it and called themselves as atheists. If John wanted to help his friend he should endeavour to tap into this sensibility, and through it reconcile him to God. His face now glowed in the late afternoon light. Perhaps his friend was riper for God than others, he said. Socrates maintained the lover was closer to the divine than the beloved. The same could be said of the sick and suffering: they were closer to God than those flushed with health and happiness, for strength inevitably sinewed one to the body, while sickness loosened the soul.

Night had fallen when Stefan returned to his cell after compline. Paul was at the table, writing in an exercise book whose lines were blue as the veins of a three-month infant. He had been indoors all day, except for a brief outing to the refectory for supper, and even there he seemed more interested in the bent fork than the simple offering of food. Stefan removed his vest and lit the chalice before the Virgin and Child. Paul leaned back with a sigh, placed his hands behind his head and pushed forward, cracking the bones in his nape. Despite the long hours of intense work and having barely eaten, he looked less pale than yesterday, as though the pen connected him to a source of sustenance and wellbeing. After a moment's reflection Stefan suggested it might be appropriate if he attended one of the services, as a mark of respect to the Abbot and monks. It needn't be for the entire service, an hour at most, perhaps at sunrise for the Liturgy.

- I'll be spending an eternity with the good Creator, he replied.

- A little preparation mightn't hurt.

- This is my preparation, he said, tapping the book.

- A story set in the future?

- I'm imitating your Creator by creating?

- It's fiction, Paul, not faith.

- In the end there's only fiction, he said, becoming agitated.

After jabbing his palm with the pen several times, he scraped back the chair, strode to the window, from there stopped before the chalice-flame, then knelt beside the backpack and removed something wrapped in a blue cloth. He placed it on the table and uncovered an A4 sized icon. Stefan crossed himself and held it up to the lamp.

- Don't get the wrong idea, he said with a laugh. I don't believe in miracles, not for a second, unless it's the miracle of art. I carry it around like those bits of rabbit fur we kids carried for good luck. That's Saint John, Christ's closest friend, and he's dictating the Book of Revelation to his young scribe Prochorus. He was an old man at the time of his vision, probably too old to read and write. The icon mirrors my thoughts on the subject of inspiration and the written word. Do I believe in your saint? No, but I believe in the Word, because creation started with the Word, which was indistinguishable from God. You know, Stef, I've also had a vision, a revelation of sorts, but I haven't got a scribe and my strength ebbs and flows.

He had bought it in Melbourne on the Sunday after receiving the devastating news. Having been alone for three days with the word leukemia, he had suddenly felt a need to step and surrender himself to the strong wind thrashing the trees outside his bedroom window. He wandered about for some time, watching crows struggling in the bluster of the warm northerly, following a crushed can being kicked along the bitumen, feeling like a page in search of the book from which had been torn. Eventually, he was swept into an art gallery that had once been a church, to an exhibition of icons painted by a friend, whose invitation he had forgotten in the wake of his diagnosis. The middle-aged woman had been a successful portrait painter, commanding a handsome fee from prominent members of society, until a broken marriage arrested her career. After a period of soul-searching she rediscovered her Bulgarian Orthodox faith, renounced her former work, and started painting icons - saints instead of sinners, as she had put it to Paul. The

simple iconic line and austere composition began to manifest themselves in her day-to-day life. Unable to paint such things in a middle-class environment, she donated most of her possessions to charities and moved into a modest cottage, taking with her the barest of essentials. She soon enough learned to live with less, and through this found not only fulfilment but a sense of liberation in each new work. Why hadn't she felt this in painting portraits? They were too grounded in the here and now, she had explained, whereas icons were a blend of the temporal and the eternal, a fusion of faith and fantasy, an exercise at once artistic and spiritual.

The icon before them arose when an author in the throes of writer's block visited the woman. By way of encouragement she mentioned Saint John the Evangelist was the patron of writers. When the fellow's face lit up, she offered to paint an icon of the Saint and his scribe. If he prayed before it, the gentle Saint would intercede and help him overcome his dead-end. Her words were like a beacon to the desperate man and he accepted at once, though he couldn't pay her for some time. When she replied it would be a token of friendship, he kissed her hands and left. He dropped in daily over the next week, staying briefly to observe the work-in-progress, taking heart from the way her brush caressed the board, as though coaxing it to blossom in colour and life. On the day of its completion he arrived with a bottle of claret and a bouquet of carnations. The icon glowed on the easel and he touched the Saint's halo with his fingertip, only to pull back as though it were electrically charged, not knowing the paint was still wet. Two weeks later, however, he returned looking dark-eyed and dishevelled, as though having spent nights on a park bench. Pacing the small studio, he hugged something wrapped in a yellow bed-sheet. He had tried prayers and candles on twelve consecutive nights, he said, and on the thirteenth sat with pen poised. But there had been nothing, no ideas, not so much as fleeting thought. He took the icon from the sheet and thanked her. The fault wasn't in Saint John, he sighed, but in himself, in that he couldn't summon the necessary faith.

Feeling vulnerable at the time, Paul had been moved by the word-portrait she had painted of the unfortunate writer, and felt a kinship to him through their ownership of the icon. What had become of him? Had he found a way out of his predicament? Shortly after returning the icon, he had paid her another visit, having grown a beard and now rattling a rosary. Saint John had appeared to him in a dream, he said, diffusing his excitement in clouds of cigarette smoke. The Saint had advised him inspiration would come from an icy desert. As the night-time temperature in Central Australia often fell below zero, he was certain that was what the Saint had meant. Once there he would find a suitable cave, as the Saint had done on Patmos, and wait for the Holy Spirit's inspiration.

About two months later he dropped in on the woman again. His beard and hair were now like that of an Old Testament prophet, and his sandal-strapped feet black from bitumen and neglect. He had found nothing in the wilderness, but he wasn't disillusioned, for the experience had revealed the true significance of the Saint's paradoxical words. One night, while sheltering in a cave, he had suddenly realised in the manner of a revelation that the 'icy desert' could only mean Antarctica. And so he had already signed up as a work-hand with a scientific team bound for the southern-most continent. But all this had happened a year before Paul acquired the icon, and the woman had been unable to tell him anything more about the writer or whether he made it to Antarctica.

Shortly after buying the icon Paul had examined it with a magnifying glass and

found the fellow's fingerprint. He now pointed to a spot near the Saint's right ear, but Stefan couldn't distinguish the print mark from the fine brush strokes. What would the future make of the fingerprint? Paul asked. Genetic scientists and art historians were scouring the works of Leonardo da Vinci, looking for traces of his saliva or urine, which he used for enhancing the colour and texture of his paint. Even a minute sample would be sufficient to detail his DNA, which could then serve as sure signature in authenticating other of his works. Beyond that, given developments in the human genome project and advances in computer imaging, it might eventually be possible to project a three dimensional image of the great artist. And beyond that...

Stefan suggested they take the icon to the chapel of the Virgin and leave it there overnight as a way of blessing it. No, it wasn't a religious object, Paul said sharply, but more of a charm for artistic inspiration, and that so far it had been more efficacious for him than for its original owner. As he wrapped it in the soft cloth, the first four beats of the semantron sounded on the door. John entered and apologised to Paul for barely catching up with him during the day. The guesthouse was at its busiest and certain inconsiderate visitors had run him off his feet with their petty requests. Stefan noticed an unusual quickness in the way he brushed back his hair and gathered up his ponytail under the hat. He couldn't stay long: on top of everything else he had to act as nurse for a young man who had arrived at midday burning with fever.

- You'll make a fine nurse in your black cassock, Paul chuckled.

- I went to see the Elder today, said John.

- And no doubt discussed my condition?

- You'd benefit from a chat with him. He's well read and lives not far from here.

- No, sounds too homely for me. I'd like to meet a real hermit, a cave-dweller, a character like those I've read about in books on Athos.

- We can do that, too, said John.

- The three of us could go, Paul beamed. It would be a real adventure, just like the old days. The last adventure before... Is it true some of them become so ecstatic they jump off cliffs thinking they're leaping into paradise? Is it true? Are there monks who'd happily end their life in a leap of faith?

- There are, said John.

- We have to visit one tomorrow, he said with some urgency. The three of us, just like old times.

Having paced between the window and icon shelf, he now turned abruptly to the table and stood before his friends with a gleam in his eyes.

- Stef, if I were to leap into eternity would you help me?

Taken aback by the directness of the question, Stefan didn't know what to make of it. Was it nothing more than the bravado of someone who felt harshly treated by fate? Or did it arise from an underlying sense of futility? Struggling for words, he reminded Paul of what old Father Clement had said and advised him to draw on the strength of their long friendship to see him through this difficult time.

- What about you, John?

- We'll both help you through this, he replied.

- There's no getting through this, boys, he said with a laugh. The leap's been on my mind for months. I don't want to slip from this world in a hospital, breathing through an oxygen mask, numbed by morphine. Cancer won't get the better of me. Paul Ryan's

going to assert himself, boys, have the final say, make it his last act of will. Remember how afraid I was in taking my first jump off the diving board at the local pool? I stood there, my toes gripping the edge, frightened of the black lines wriggling on the bottom like eels. There's nothing to it, you called from below. So I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and here I am. Well, boys, Paul Ryan's last deliberate act will be no different: a deep breath, a plunge into the cold water of eternity, and then....

- No, said John, that's not the way of faith.

- People overcome these things, added Stefan. You're not alone, Paul. We'll help you fight it.

- Faith, John, in what? Your heaven at the bottom of a grave? And, Stef, you want me to continue fighting this thing. Why? To satisfy the whims of a cruel God - if there is a God? And if not, what's the purpose of suffering?

- Open your heart, John countered. Meet us half way. Allow us to help you.

- Help me? How, brother John? By accepting my death sentence with a contrite heart? But I've done nothing wrong. And as for your notion of sin - it's meaningless and I refuse to accept it.

- A few more days here, said Stefan, and you'll see things in a different light.

- And by Easter Sunday you'll be a new man, added John.

- Come to the Liturgy tomorrow.

- It will clear your head and heart.

- But my head's never been clearer, Paul retorted. I want to avoid suffering - is that a sin? I want the final say in how I die - is that madness? I want to go on my terms, not when cancer's gnawed my bones - is that irrational? No, things are perfectly clear. There's no greater freedom than choosing the moment to leap into the abyss.

John recalled the Elder's words and Paul's ripeness for God, but how was he to make him receptive to God? His refusal to meet the Elder meant they must arrange a visit to a cave-dweller without delay. He would discuss the matter with the Abbot and seek his permission.

- You know, boys, Paul continued, my life's not all that different from yours. I mean, you've turned your back on the world for the sake of your God, and I've done the same thing for the abyss. Who knows, in the end it might all come down to nothing more than a point of view. And is my decision to leap into the abyss different from a monk's choice to die to the world? Isn't that why you wear black?

- There's joy in our blackness, said John, not bitterness and despair.

- Joy in a fortress like this? In an outpost on the furthest frontier of civilisation? In defending your precious soul against satanic forces? But there's neither a soul to defend nor a Satan to repel. It's all a game, an elaborate hoax, self-deception. How can there be joy in extinguishing every vestige of the individual and covering life in black? We humans are such devious creatures, able to make a paradise of the most abject hell. The only true joy lies in the right to deny the existence of God and...

- Settle down, Stefan interrupted him. You're not the first to ask those questions? We live with them every minute of the day and struggle with them in bowing before our icons at night.

- And you choose to remain here? Why?

- Because I've seen things you wouldn't believe.

- What have you seen? A miracle, I suppose? An icon shedding tears?

- I've looked into your abyss, Paul. Believe me, I know it.

For a moment, perhaps surprised by his intensity, both John and Paul fixed him with an expectant look, but his shoulders fell and he took out a frayed prayer cord.

- As your hosts, John said in a lighter tone, it's our responsibility to show you the worth and meaning of monastic life. If we can't convince you of it, we're guilty of not doing enough for our brother.

- Well, boys, we ought to make a wager then, Paul said, glancing at the icon shelf. If you succeed in convincing me your God exists, I'll accept my condition in a manner befitting a good Christian; if not, you'll be there to support me in my final leap. Today's Tuesday, let's make Friday the deadline. And it will be a Good Friday if you succeed. What do you say?

He extended a hand to John, who wouldn't reciprocate. And was Stefan ready to test the grace of God against the gravity of the void? Such matters shouldn't be trivialised he replied in an offended tone. Sensing he had perhaps gone too far, Paul sat between them and flicked the pages of his notebook. A moment later he called for their hands, apologised, and promised to stay away from the abyss, at least until the story was finished. Beyond that, anything was possible. Fiction was full of mysteries and miracles. If writers invigorated stories with their own flesh and blood, then in exceptional cases the idea of a story might invest a writer with strength and vitality, for the sole purpose of it being realised in written form.

- Boys, don't look so glum, he said, holding up the book. The idea of my story might have miraculous properties. Who's to say it hasn't chosen me as its scribe, just as Saint John chose Prochorus? It might fill me with wellbeing, so that through me it becomes the original Word. Who knows, the idea might grow into a novel whose realisation could take a decade - an extra ten years of life for the sake of the Word. And what if it were to be an epic in seven volumes, each requiring seven years? You see, boys, anything's possible in fiction. In serving the Word I might outlive both of you.

John stood and gave Paul an encouraging pat on the shoulder, at which the other caught his hand for a moment. He apologised for having to leave: work awaited him in the guesthouse, but he would speak to the Abbot about a receptive cave-dweller and arrange a visit as soon as possible. In passing the eucalypt tree, whose fragrance was unusually pungent, he felt a knot tightening in his stomach and wondered what was happening to him. Had he not contained the self-abandon of adolescence through study and self-discipline? Had he not embraced monastic life in a manner even the Abbot found a little too zealous? Yet now, at a time when his thoughts and emotions ought to be docile, he found himself unable to subdue a sense of disquiet. Yes, his father's intended visit troubled him, as did Paul's condition, and now, on top of that, there was the young man with the fever, whose self-effacing nature also unsettled him.

After leaving the Elder, John had hurried back down to the hut, wondering all the way whether the young man would still be there. Again stories of angels and demons visiting monks flashed to mind. In one legend a hermit visited by an angel exposed it as a demon by announcing he had no need of angels in this life. John had been relieved to find him sitting close to a small fire, with arms around his thin legs, though looking weaker than before. He wore jeans, a loose-fitting jacket, and a navy blue cap whose visor partly shadowed his face. A spasm went through his body and he extended his palms to the flames. His fingers were slender and blue veins lined the back of his hands. He darted a

glance from under the visor and said in a faltering voice he was feeling weak and didn't know whether he could make it to the monastery. Assuring him it wasn't far, John dispersed the embers and went to take the backpack, but the fellow grasped the strap as though someone had attempted to steal it. John said he would carry it for him, at which the other reflected a moment and then struggled to his feet. They were silent most of the way, stopping here and there when the fellow's breathing became laboured and it seemed his strength would give way. At one point as he fell behind and leaned on a trunk in some distress, John took his arm to help him along, but he pulled away in alarm and continued unaided. It appeared he was very shy and lacked confidence in English, for his reply to the odd question was hesitant, guarded, terse. Nevertheless, John had managed to learn his name was Anton, he was from a small town not far from Belgrade, and he had come to Athos on behalf of a twin sister who had been unwell for the past year.

At the monastery gate John had explained to Father Maximos the new arrival wasn't feeling well and must be accommodated without delay. The gatekeeper stood before them with thumbs tucked into a broad belt containing his girth. He held the visitor with one eye, assessed him with the other, and, perhaps noticing his smooth cheeks, posed a riddle: When does a man put on a beard in order to remove two. John intervened, saying his guest didn't speak a word of Greek, upon which the gatekeeper chuckled and put the riddle to him. He promised to think about it, but Father Maximos wouldn't be denied the last word, announcing with a belly laugh: when shaving.

Earlier that morning John had reserved a small room for his father, one which had become vacant due to a visitor's sudden departure, but now, given the urgency of the situation, he decided to place Anton there and make other arrangements upon his father's arrival. Dispensing with the usual formalities, he took him directly to the narrow room with a single bed. Its low ceiling sloped down to a window looking out on the sunlit forest. A wood-heater stood at one end, a table and chair at the other. The walls were bare, except for a small icon of the Virgin and Child directly above the bed. John offered to arrange a meal, but Anton shook his head weakly and asked for aspirin instead, saying he could feel another onset of fever. John hurried to the kitchen and returned with a packet of aspirin, a jug of water, and a small plate with two Turkish delights.

The afternoon had been busy, but just before vespers John had hurried off to check on his visitor. He was fast asleep, curled tightly on his side, in an angular shaft of golden light. His jacket was over the chair, the jug was half full, and one of the sweets had been nibbled. As he was about to leave he noticed a certain glow on the side of Anton's face, which in turn accentuated his jaw line, an ear crimson from fever, and the arc of his eyebrow. He suddenly felt deeply for the sick young man, though he couldn't say whether it was compassion for the suffering of a fellow human being, or perhaps admiration for what he had undertaken for his sister's sake. At that instant the semantron struck and Anton's left eye fluttered a few times, perhaps just long enough to see that someone was standing over him. As though caught in an act of impropriety, John blushed and was about to excuse himself, but realised Anton had only stirred in his feverish sleep.

During vespers John had found his thoughts drifting to Anton. At one stage, in an attempt to concentrate on the service, he fixed his attention on a fresco depicting a saint with a grotesque appearance, whom some referred to as Saint Christopher the Pig-Face and others the Dog-Face. According to one source Christopher had been an extremely handsome youth who lived a charmed life in Constantinople at a time when pitting boar

and hound was popular entertainment. At the age of twenty, having seen the banality of his existence, he was gripped by the idea of becoming a monk and settling in the caves of Cappadocia. His endeavours in this direction were thwarted by his physical beauty: young women from wealthy families sought him as a husband, the wives of generals tempted him with promises, while profligate men courted him for their own ends. Frustrated by constant distractions, unable to pursue his calling, Christopher prayed that he might be less attractive to those around him. One morning, after waking from a particularly deep sleep, he sensed his face was unusually heavy, as though it had been strapped with a mask. At first he was repulsed by the brutal reflection in the mirror, until he realised his prayers had been answered. Of course, the rich and decadent avoided him after that, but the virtuous saw a miracle in his face and sought his blessing, even when he retreated to a cave in the wilderness. According to another source Saint Christopher had been born with that grotesque face. Badgered and bullied throughout his childhood, he retaliated violently as an adolescent, eventually becoming a brigand, attacking caravans along the Via Egnatia. One day he waylaid a group of monks on their way to Athos and was about to stone one to death, when the old man called upon God in a gentle voice to have mercy on the unfortunate sinner. Suddenly the rock in Christopher's hand became a dove and flew off to a nearby herd of swine grunting for acorns. Astonished, he spared the monks, returned their meagre belongings, and accepted a rough cross from his would-be victim. That night he prayed fervently before the cross not only for forgiveness but that he might become a servant of the Lord. The following morning, washing himself in a turgid river, he felt a different face. He ran to his horse and examined himself in its black pupil: a handsome young man greeted him with amazement. Thereafter he became a tireless worker for God and through his physical charm converted forty-eight thousand pagans, among them many young women, and not a few corrupt men who had sought to seduce him.

Lamp in hand John now made his way along the guesthouse corridor, leaving behind the conversation of several men in the foyer. Anton was asleep, though he must have got up, for his backpack was now at the head of the bed. Despite the warmer days, the nights were still cool, especially when the sky was clear and sharp with stars. He lit the heater and watched as the flames cracked the dry branches.

- Who is there? asked a weak voice.

John got up from the heater and placed the lamp on the table. Anton was shivering and had the blankets pulled up to his chin.

- It is cold, he struggled to say through teeth chattering.

- I've started the fire, said John. You'll get warm soon.

The jug of water was now empty, more tablets had been taken from the open packet, but the Turkish delights were untouched. John offered to bring him some food, for it was more than likely he hadn't eaten since yesterday.

- I am not hungry, he said.

- A slice of bread and jam?

- Water, please, nothing else.

The fire had picked up and John stoked it with a few logs. From the window the dark line of treetops stood out against the night sky. Anton fell asleep again. John placed the jacket over him and stood there a moment. Why had this feverish stranger evoked such compassion? John imagined his twin-sister and how much he must have loved her to

set out from Serbia at a time when the country was in turmoil. Yes, he was aware of the uncanny bond that existed between twins, and the thought of one setting out on a difficult journey for the wellbeing of the other moved him. Then, under the watchful eyes of the Virgin on the wall, he reached out and felt Anton's forehead: it was warm and slightly moist with perspiration. He stirred but didn't wake. His heart beating unusually hard, John lowered the flame and left quietly with the empty jug.

HOLY WEDNESDAY

1

If it was mid-afternoon according to all the icon-lamps glowing in the nave, it was also mid-morning if one measured with black footsteps the shadows of the twin cypresses, those steadfast guardians of sobriety, whose vigilance kept boisterous swallows from nesting in the church's loggia. Father Akakios's favourite cat lay on the steps of the refectory, curled in sleep, concealing its more silent half that caused its ears to twitch from time to time. Dark patches slipped past the Virgin's chapel as a few immaculate clouds drifted slowly over the monastery. In gratitude for the hospitality he had received, Nico removed his coat, hung it on the eucalypt tree, and resumed scraping grass from between the cobbles with a wedge-shaped hoe. High above the courtyard hammers rejoiced in the union of wood and steel. An old monk stepped out onto a balcony, flapped a few items of calico underwear, and pegged them on a washing line. A sack over one shoulder and dandruff on the other, Father Loukas set out from the main gates, intent on gathering the vitality of spring in nameless flowers and herbs.

Having walked up from the direction of the sea, a visitor stopped under the chestnut tree outside the monastery and unburdened himself of a bulky backpack. He was about fifty, lean and quick-eyed, with silver-framed glasses and a broad-brimmed hat. After a drink of water and a few pieces of chocolate from a large block, he entered the portico and removed his hat, though more in amazement at the surrounding frescoes than from respect in visiting a holy place. Father Maximos swung open his office door and, thrusting a book under his armpit, asked brusquely for his permit, annoyed at being interrupted from his reading by yet another curious foreigner. The visitor greeted him in broken Greek and produced the document from his jacket, which the gatekeeper scrutinised. His name was David Brooks - the monk smiled at the richness of his Greek language in that all surnames had at least two syllables, while many had seven and eight. He was a professor from England - the monk frowned at the thought of the Elgin marbles in the British Museum. And Catholic had been written in the space for religion - the monk saw red in this, but remembered it was Holy Week. The permit had been issued in Ouranoupolis the previous morning and was valid for four days.

- Are you a man or a mule? asked the gatekeeper, indicating the pack with a nod of his head. If the former, you shouldn't be carrying such a load, for a man lives best who lives with least. Unless, of course, it's full of rocks, in which case you're more monk than man, despite your short hair and smooth cheeks.

He pointed to a fresco depicting an austere figure in a black robe and cowl, but who lacked a halo, either because it had completely faded or had never been painted. The icon commemorated a monk who had been a perpetual pilgrim in his many years on the Holy Mountain. He would tramp all day for the sole joy of bowing before venerated icons and relics, from which he drew his sustenance and strength by touching them lightly with his lips, just as a bee extracted nectar through kissing a flower. Dispensing with the need of a permanent home, he wandered from place to place, carrying in his sack five rocks each one the size of a loaf of bread, and sleeping wherever he could find shelter, be it a

cell or cave. When asked why he carried such a load, he would reply that a dead weight fostered a living soul.

- And if you're a mule, continued the gatekeeper, returning the permit, you're welcome all the same, for if a dog is a man's best friend, then the sterile off-spring of a male donkey and a female horse is surely a monk's brother. Why? There's a plethora of reasons, most centring on its being a humble, long-suffering beast of burden. But there's a reason that's not so well known, which I heard from my grandfather as a boy. His stories, sharpened by the raki he sipped of an evening, have remained with me to this day, while much of what I've experienced has dispersed like smoke on a windy day. In his story the colt mentioned in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the one that bore Christ through the gates of Jerusalem, well that colt was in fact a young mule, and as reward for its part in the Passion it was blessed above all other four-footed creatures. How can it be blessed when it's compelled to carry the weight of the world? You know, friend, and I call you that despite your Church's betrayal, I've had plenty of time to reflect on that question in my position as gatekeeper. I see it like this: the one who serves will surely be served; the one who bears another's burdens will surely be unburdened; while the one who takes on the sins of his brother will himself be deemed sinless.

The Professor didn't comprehend everything the monk said and explained with carefully chosen words his understanding of Greek was far better when reading a text, and even then he was more familiar with New Testament Greek than demotic. But taking this as the modesty of a learned man, Father Maximos decided to test him with a riddle.

- What am I, Mr. Professor? I clothe the world and yet myself go unclothed.

Tired, making a visible effort to contain his impatience, the Professor examined the inside of his hat, swept a hand over his thinning hair, and asked for the answer. Father Maximos plucked a needle with a black thread from the breast pocket of his cassock and held it up with a look of delight. He then asked whether the visitor was passing through or staying the night.

- I'd like to stay one night, he replied, and several if possible.

After one more sharp-eyed appraisal, during which the Professor tried to outstare his inquisitor without success, Father Maximos pointed to the guesthouse. It might be best to enjoy the sunshine before venturing up there, added the monk, for neither the guestmaster nor his assistant could attend to him for some time.

It was now quiet in the courtyard. High up on the roof the workers were taking a short rest. The scent of lemon flower mingled with the smell of burning wood. Doves cooed and echoed in Greek something that sounded like I love you. Trudging in chunky hiking boots, the Professor went to the chapel and sat on the steps before the door secured with a heavy padlock. He closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the sunlight on upturned palms resting on his knees. Arriving on Athos yesterday, he had spent the night in Xeropotamou, the monastery about an hour's walk from the port of Daphne. After vespers the visitors had been shown an impressive collection of relics, among them a piece of the True Cross. The monk in charge of the reliquary had described it as the largest known fragment of its kind and pointed out a nail hole in the dark wood. In preparing for his visit, the Professor had read the library contained twenty valuable manuscripts written on parchment. He asked if they might be seen, explaining he was a scholar of Orthodox iconography, supporting this with letters of introduction from his English university and

the Greek Embassy in London. The monk raised his bushy eyebrows at the letters, indicating no, and said the material was in the process of being catalogued and stored in a computer. Meeting with the same response from the abbot, he returned to his room and spent what seemed an interminable night with seven or eight other visitors, some of whom snored loud enough to wake the dead but not themselves. He had left straight after breakfast, guided by a detailed map. The journey had been hard going: paths that began promisingly soon reduced to tracks and eventually petered out to stone; others led to dead ends and impenetrable scrub; some were indistinguishable from creek beds. But he had conditioned himself for the Holy Mountain by hiking every third week-end for a year, and so four hours later, having climbed one side of the peninsular and descended the other, he finally reached the monastery for which he had undertaken the trip.

The Professor was about to make an entry in a notebook when a monk appeared from behind the refectory and made his way across the courtyard, prodding his stony shadow with a walking stick. Father Nikitas was in his mid-seventies, still sturdy as an old cypress tree, with an imposing beard that spread across his chest and concealed his belt-buckle. This extension of his being was the colour of ash scraped from heaters on All-Souls night. It was laced with light, tangled with threads of candle-smoke, and often sprinkled with breadcrumbs. Bees straying into that bramble-bush emerged wiser for their struggle, moths and butterflies never came out alive, while the wind was careful not to disturb it for fear of bad luck. The knotted walking stick had belonged to his spiritual father, and Father Nikitas used it not so much for support and balance, but as means of keeping the earth at a distance, in case he should become too attached to it. Under his cassock he wore the stole of the Great Habit, conferred on him some years earlier for the rigour of his fasting and his appetite for prayers.

Leaning against the chapel door, the Professor watched with interest as the old monk raised his stick to scatter a pair of doves courting in the magnolia tree. He then stopped and ran his hand along the crown of a bell large enough to shelter a man. It had been lowered from the crenellated tower above the gateway last spring, and now stood on wooden bearers, covered in light-green tarnish. The supporting beams in the tower had rotted and funds were unavailable for their replacement, so the bell had been left to the elements. He walked around the bell thoughtfully, perhaps recalling the booming toll that would strike on Sundays and other holy days, and in whose powerful after-shock the monastery seemed to dissolve like a cube of sugar stirred in mountain tea. It had been forged in Russia a century ago and presented to the Fathers by a wealthy Count, a cousin of the Tsar's, whose dying daughter had been restored to health through the intercession of a replica of the chapel's wonder-working icon. From crown to rim the bell was covered in scenes from the Gospels, including the raising of Jairus' daughter. A bee humming over the bell, touching a disciple here and a sinner there, now stopped on the figure of Christ, arched its body, and turned this way and that as though dancing on a stamen. Father Nikitas flicked it off with his stick, but he wasn't really mindful of his action, for his thoughts were on what he perceived to be the terrible crisis threatening monastic life. With Greece a full member of the European Union, Athos had been receiving considerable funds for restoring and modernising its monasteries. Yes, these funds had improved the material conditions on the Holy Mountain, but they had also caused deep divisions and hostilities within the community. The majority of monks welcomed this financial assistance, albeit with a touch of reservation, for they saw it as the only way of averting the

gradual disintegration of cloisters and churches. As the Abbot had pointed out not long ago: the funds were really no different from the generous patronage of Emperors and Tsars - a patronage that hadn't subverted the faith of their spiritual forefather. The others, represented by Father Nikitas, wanted nothing to do with the European Union, whose money they regarded as thirty pieces of silver.

Only last night in the quiet of his austere cell Father Nikitas had urged Father Gerasimos, a young monk who shared his zealous views, to remain watchful. The Europeans were attempting to deliver Athos into the hands of the West, and this through the oldest form of deception: benevolence. Yes, Brussels had generously assisted with the construction of new roads, arguing they were needed to transport timber, an important source of monastic revenue, and were vital in the event of earthquakes and fires, which were known to devastate monasteries from time to time. And what happened? Their bulldozers had ripped through forests, the likes of which were unknown in goat-ravaged Greece, and left wide scars along the hills and coastline. Now roads snaked from gate to gate, drawing ever greater numbers of cars and four-wheel drives and buses, all of which had polluted the solitude. And would they stop there? Of course not! They planned to extend the roads beyond the border of Athos, connect them to the freeways of Europe, and perhaps tear down chapels to provide parking in courtyards. Was there a need for such roads? Of course not! As the monastery's spiritual leader, the Abbot should encourage monks and pilgrims to walk, as was done in the old days, for walking promoted meditation, which in turn fortified the soul, and kept intact the ancient network of stony paths used by men and mules for the past thousand years.

And after the roads the kind Europeans came with offers of machines, hiding their crooked teeth behind a persuasive smile. And out they rattled: an army of chainsaws, tractors, generators. But where the bite of age-old axes had echoed with humanity, these new blades screamed through trees and shredded the holy silence, which, as the Abbot knew, was the very sustenance of prayer. Where the humble hoe had fostered patience and bowed the user to the earth in constant reminder of what awaited him, the horsepower of steel and rubber promoted a feeling of dominance, superiority over nature, that separated the monk from the true meaning of his labour. And where the living flame of candle and lamp had enhanced the icon's aura through the interaction of light and shade, the electric filament scourged the face of the Virgin and swept the darkness out of sight. But a monk needed his daily darkness, as much as his light, for God had dwelt in it before the creation, and had perhaps retreated to it after the birth of His Son.

With their skill in wrapping evil in kindness, the Europeans were now persuading abbots to embrace the new instruments of communication as a way of being relevant in the third millennium. Monasteries were being fitted with telephones, ostensibly for administrative purposes and so visitors could make appointments, but in reality to wire Athos to a godless world. (Just the other day Father Nikitas had observed from his balcony a young monk slipping a mobile phone from the pocket of their cassock and engaging in animated conversations) The more progressive monks had computers and laptops in their cells, having convinced the open-minded Abbot they were necessary for preserving icons and manuscripts on incorruptible discs that glowed like haloes, and for making the spirit of Athos better known throughout the world. Yes, perhaps those monks had sent out a trickle in promoting Athos, but the flow of information had been two-way, and the world had flooded their consciousness with temptations of every kind. And the tragic irony of all this: the world had slyly slipped into the

place whose very meaning was a denial of the world. And what would inevitably follow? Women, of course. Having accepted European money, the abbots were already facing increasing pressure to allow women on Athos in the name of Equality Opportunity and Human Rights. And Greece would inevitably side with her European masters, for she mustn't appear backward in such matters. Yes, Greece was a provincial woman who would sell herself cheaply for European sophistication and gladly renounce her Balkan-Byzantine past. But it was the holy duty of all monks to defend and preserve their Byzantine tradition, with polemics if necessary. If the abbots needed finances they should make louder appeals to the Greek government, which still owed Athos enormous sums of money for land and properties confiscated in 1922 and given to refugees from Asia Minor.

He had warned Father Gerasimos not to be deceived by the cunning Europeans, for their kindness was laced with poison. Their aim was secularisation, which was absolutely necessary for good business, and to this end they sought to dismantle religion, just as the Communists had done. Coming from the West, the medieval Crusaders had plundered Constantinople and Athos in order to destroy the symbols of Orthodoxy. The modern Europeans were no different, only their methods were subtler, using money instead of might. Should Athos despair? Was this narrow peninsular doomed? Would the candle-flame be extinguished by the breathing of wolves? After all, wasn't everyone from Russia to Bulgaria clamouring to join the wonderful Union? No, brother, he had exhorted the younger monk. They must resist being swept up by the herd of swine. Standing alone, they must take heart from those other occasions when all had seemed lost. The spirit of Athos had survived the seductions of the Wallachian women, survived the ruthless Crusaders, the Uniats who sought to force a union with unholy Rome, Turkish garrisons whose horses were stabled in churches, and the threat of Communism. They would overcome the present crisis through the ideals of the Hesychast Fathers - faith, prayer and steadfastness. Salvation lay in struggle, not in the temporary comforts offered by the West. They must walk the narrow path, even if it meant the disintegration of monasteries and a return to the caves of the first Athonite Fathers. And if they must endure crushing poverty, so be it, for at least they would be thin enough to pass through a needle's eye.

As the Professor recorded a brief description of the elderly monk, mentioning the long prayer cord around his left wrist and his glowing ears, Father Nikitas was suddenly before him, his thick shadow covering him like a cloak. He closed his notebook and stood. Bowing to the chapel door, the monk crossed himself with two and a half fingers. The Professor greeted him in Greek, but the other replied in English heavy with accent. As though accused of some wrongdoing, the visitor was quick to explain he had been advised by the gatekeeper to wait a while before going up to the guesthouse. Father Nikitas twisted the walking stick into the shoots of new grass bristling between the stones.

- I was making a few notes about your monastery, said the Professor.
- English, are you not? asked the monk. And your religion?
- Catholic, the Professor replied, bracing himself.
- So, you cross yourself with four fingers?
- And you with not quite three.
- If the eye offends it must be plucked out.

He invited the visitor to resume his position and, sitting beside him, began to relate the circumstances whereby he had lost the useful half of his finger. Before coming to Athos his

name had been Naum. His mother had died suddenly when he was nine, leaving him, his older brother and two younger sisters in a household ruled by a stern, unforgiving father whose leg had been amputated in the disastrous Asia Minor campaign of 1922. Unable to work the land, he had opened a cafe in the village, and as compensation for his injury the government provided a wooden leg which he strapped on at the knee, together with an exclusive license to sell spirits and cigarettes. The children effectively ran the cafe, while their father oversaw the till and barked orders from a cushioned chair in the back corner. Where his siblings cowered at the sound of their father's voice (the shepherds laughed they could hear him in the hills), Naum was more defiant by nature and began to clash with him in his demand for more freedom. The situation was exacerbated by the fact the children slept in the basement of the cafe. Yes, their father would wake first and open for the men working in the nearby coal mine, but he made sure the children didn't over-sleep, jolting Naum from the sweetness of his adolescent dreams by stomping the floorboards with his wooden leg.

The arguments between them escalated, coming to a head when Naum was about fifteen. It was the day before Christmas: the café was thick with smoky conversation, redolent of unadulterated raki, and loud with losing hands. He desperately wanted to join his friends for a sweet in the provincial town, but his father wouldn't allow him, shouting it was the busiest day of the year. Looks were exchanged, angry words shot back and forth, and then the walking stick flew across the room, smashing a mirror on the wall. The patrons laughed and goaded the father over the disrespect shown by the boy. As Naum made for the front door, the wooden leg struck him on the back of the head with a blow that shot a shower of stars before his eyes. The café exploded in laughter, attracting a passing gypsy selling trinkets against the Evil Eye. A moment later everyone fell silent as Naum picked up the stump and glared at his father, who cursed him in a voice that shook the overhead lamps. A tense standoff followed: the father demanded his leg back, while a dazed Naum held it like a club. The good-for-nothing patrons were waiting for him to make the next move, but this was a family matter, and he wasn't going to give them the satisfaction of a public display. Swallowing his pride, he went to his father, knelt before him, and strapped the leg around his knee.

The humiliation gnawed at him all day, more painfully than the lump on the back of his head. That night his father went to bed early, as was his habit, but in the village-square the traditional Christmas Eve fire was blazing high, a sheepskin bagpipe squealed, people danced in circles, and young men tested their bravery by daring each other to leap over the flames. When his siblings left the house to join the revellers, Naum went quietly to his father's room and pressed his ear to the door, his blood throbbing hard. A dull headache had been gathering at his temples and now, at a sudden jab of pain, his anger got the better of him and he entered. A tiny flame peered into the darkness from the icon-case, for being thrift in all things his father kept the wick short to conserve oil. As he snored a happy tune, Naum took the leg from where it stood upright beside the bed and left for the woodpile. There he tied it in kindling and ran with it to the fire in the square, where people were throwing not only wood and unwanted household objects, but things that had burdened them during the year, in the hope of being freer and lighter in the coming year. He threw his load in the fire with a roar of approval from the bystanders, and then, suddenly feeling especially light, he joined his friends in springing over the grasping flames.

Early the following morning the village was woken by a voice bellowing for a leg that had gone missing. A patron joked that it may have set off on its own during the night; another,

that it had developed an itchy foot, gone dancing, and failed to return. Naum denied knowledge of its whereabouts, though a few patrons whispered to the café-owner they had seen the boy throwing a pile of branches into the fire. His father became suspicious but also more circumspect: for if his son were capable of such an act then God knows what else he might do. Thereafter he became somewhat less demanding, though he still kept watch over the till and the sale of cigarettes. As for his leg, the government provided another, a more modern type, complete with a shining black shoe, which he polished every Sunday before going to church.

Relations between them remained tense until the outbreak of the Civil War, when Naum seized the opportunity to escape the oppressive conditions. His father had been a staunch Royalist all his life. Yes, he had given his leg for his King, but the sacrifice had not been forgotten: there was the generous pension and the many concessions awarded to the café. But Naum dismissed all that in light of his newly discovered Communist ideals. Taken by promise of a redistribution of wealth, he joined the Party, attended meetings, and began organising the local youth. His father was outraged, for if word got out his son was a Communist the government would stop his pension and concessions. Threatened with disinheritance, Naum replied he would take the café when Communism ruled the world. When war finally broke out he left and spent the next three years in hell for the promise of the coming heaven. Poorly equipped, always short of food and supplies, his brigade was stationed in mountain camp, where Naum counted circling vultures in summer and sang the Internationale against the howl of wolves in winter. Riding bony mules, they made incursions into towns and villages sympathetic to the Royalists, while waiting for Soviet aid to carry out the ultimate offensive.

In one raid they encountered five or six Royalist soldiers on the outskirts of a village. After an exchange of fire the soldiers retreated to a chapel commanding a view of the cemetery and the valley beyond. Naum and his comrades took shelter behind a wall and bullets whistled like shepherds over the headstones all afternoon. It was November, All-Souls Day, and the north wind had already bared its teeth. As night fell they had to take the initiative or run the risk of being caught in a blizzard or surprised from behind by Royalist reinforcements. Lacking grenades, Naum suggested they smoke out the enemy and he climbed over the wall into the cemetery. Using headstones for cover, he filled a bottle with olive oil by emptying the chalices in the small shrines at the foot of each grave. When he struck a match, his comrades opened fire. He lit the Molotov cocktail and projected it through an unattended window. In an instant the dark chapel burst in flames. Naum waited with rifle cocked and when the first soldier ran out he was sent crashing face down onto a shrine. The others scrambled out and disappeared among the graves. It was too cold and dark to give chase, so Naum and his comrades warmed themselves at the door of the burning chapel. The wooden iconostasis was alight, flames beating like the wings of an apocalyptic angel. Icons blistered, oil paint sizzled, and frescoed walls were soon blackened. As fire engulfed the chapel they all shouted: Long live the revolution. Naum went to the soldier he had shot and turned him onto his back: in the crimson light smelling of icon-paint he recognised his brother. Sounding an inhuman howl, he fell to his knees and embraced the body. When the others realised what had happened, they tried to pull him away, but he sobbed uncontrollably and wouldn't release his grip. In the end, seeing the lights of approaching vehicles, his comrades mounted their mules and galloped away. He stood and turned to the chapel, thinking of throwing himself into the inferno, but his attention was caught by the icon of Christ on the right of the altar-door: the face was gentle and composed, even as it peeled away from the wood, like the skin of a leper. Tears streaming down his face,

Naum dragged his brother from the cemetery and placed him over his mule. Without being conscious of what he was doing, he took the reins and set off into the darkness, and on the way his brother's face alternated with Christ's, until the two became indistinguishable. He couldn't say how he survived that night, how he kept from putting a bullet through his brain, and how he managed to return to his village.

His father had just opened the cafe and was scraping ash from the heater when Naum entered with the body over his shoulder. Stunned by what seemed like an apparition emerging from the mist outside, the father dropped the tray with the ash and pushed aside several tables for the soldier to be set on the floor. At the sight of his dead son he slumped back in a chair and groaned, tapping the floorboards with the heel of his shining black shoe. Naum kneeled before him, told him what had happened, and gave him his revolver. He felt the barrel at his head and braced himself, but his father took his right hand, spread it on the table, and shot off his index finger at the second joint. Naum kissed him on both cheeks, grasped a handful of ash, and left the village. He didn't return to the Communist camp in the jagged mountains of the west, but spurred the mule east, in the direction of Mount Athos.

Father Nikitas raised the stump of his index finger, saying he always recalled his brother and asked Christ for forgiveness in making the sign of the cross.

- I'm so sorry, said the Professor.

- Every monk has a story, he replied, that is why we are here.

He became thoughtful and his shoulders fell, but only for a moment, for he stood abruptly and with his walking stick scattered a black butterfly hovering on the chapel's padlock.

- Have you come for leisure or enlightenment? he asked in a sharper tone.

- Enlightenment, the Professor was quick to assure him. As a scholar of early Byzantine iconography I've read many wonderful things about Athos in general and this monastery in particular.

- A scholar of icons, mused the monk. What can an educated Catholic learn from our humble paintings? You should be studying Michelangelo and Raphael.

- Western art has its origins in Eastern iconography.

- Yes, and Catholicism in Constantinople.

Sensing he might be subjected to a lecture on the evils perpetrated by the Catholic Church, the Professor stood and saddled himself with the pack.

- Your Pope has made overtures to visit Athos, said Father Nikitas.

- It might help promote dialogue between our churches.

- Dialogue? With Rome? No, we will not welcome him. He apologised to the Jews for the wrongs done to them, we also want an apology for the things we suffered as a result of the schism.

A Catholic by birth rather than conviction, the Professor didn't feel a need to defend the Pope, so he simply nodded in order to appease the monk, whose ears were bright crimson against his black hat. He then asked whether he might see the Abbot about the possibility of staying a few days in order to undertake some research. As the monk manipulated the prayer cord, the Professor noticed the knuckles of both hands were swollen and brown with calluses.

- He enjoys the company of Western scholars, said the monk.

- I've heard your monastery possesses a very rare icon.

- Yes, the Virgin in there, he said, pointing with his stick to the chapel.

- And the icon of Christ Dancing.
- No, we have no such icon, scowled the monk.

He bowed to the chapel, crossed himself slowly, and kissed his half finger. His face was now glowing and there was a grey glint in his eyes. Surprised by the abrupt change in his manner, the Professor thanked him. Father Nikitas nodded and set off toward the back of the church, his stick pushing away the earth at each resolute step.

John was folding sheets in the linen room when the Abbot entered with an envelope in one hand and his staff in the other. His first thought was it must be from his father, perhaps informing him of his decision to cancel the trip. Breathing heavily from the walk up the stairs, the Abbot asked with his customary smile whether, in view of his tireless capacity for physical exercise, he might serve as a postman. All the monastery's vehicles were occupied and it was a matter of some urgency for the document to reach the Secretary of the Holy Council in Karyes before midday. John accepted the envelope with the double-headed eagle, more than pleased with the opportunity of being outdoors at a time when there was so much on his mind. He told the Abbot about Paul and asked whether he might recommend a cave-dweller not too far from the monastery. The Abbot listened sympathetically and suggested a hermit whose charismatic nature might make an impression on his friend. As Head of the monastery he had met many writers over the years and knew their susceptibility to monks who practiced extreme asceticism. He would arrange for John to be relieved of duties this afternoon so his friend could meet the hermit. After all, what was their purpose as monks if not to help a brother in his encounter with the infinite? In leaving he quoted the philosopher Heraclitus: fire is both poverty and wealth.

On the way to Karyes John was unable to get Anton out of his mind. Last night he had gone to bed after completing a great number of prostrations, only to start from sleep an hour later with the young man's face glowing above the flame lighting the icon of the Virgin. He tossed and turned and counted on his prayer cord, but couldn't subdue a dark murmur in his being. In the end he got up and resumed his prostrations until the semantron sounded. Before going to matins he had been to check on him and found him sleeping peacefully, wheezing faintly at each breath. He returned after matins as a grey light was reclaiming the objects in the room. This time Anton had started at the sound of the door and pulled the blankets up to his chin as though feeling a sudden chill. John asked whether he was still feverish. He nodded. Could he make it to the refectory for breakfast? No, he still felt too weak to stand. John offered to bring him something to eat, to which he closed his eyes in acceptance. When he returned from the refectory with a tray of food, the room was full of sunlight, but to his surprise Anton was sleeping again, his short-cropped hair tinged with gold. He placed the tray on the table and stood over him, moved by a kind of brotherly affection, perhaps not unlike the feeling that had moved the young man to set out on this journey for his sick sister. John extended his hand over the head of the sleeping figure: its shadow on his face made him stir and woke. He offered to help him with the food, but Anton replied he was now feeling a little better and could manage on his own. His voice was sweet with gratitude, his eyes no longer murky, and his slender hands slipped out coyly from under the blanket.

At the monastery gates his usually high spirits in setting out on a walk were weighed down by the thought of leaving Anton in that condition. In trying to fathom his concern for the visitor he recalled again the injured pigeon of his boyhood, and how he had been unable to stay away from the cardboard cage. He would wake before his parents to check on the bird, and observe it with a torch at night until his father drew him indoors. One Sunday he had even refused to accompany his parents on a day trip to the country because it meant being away from the bird for such a long time. Yes, he reasoned with a sense almost of relief: his concern

for Anton was nothing more than an extension of what he had felt for that injured pigeon, and there was something distinctly bird-like about him. The occasional flash from his eyes, the quick turn of his head, his edgy movements - when these coincided it seemed as though he were about to take flight.

On the outskirts of Karyes John stopped on a footbridge over a surging stream and breathed deeply of the cool, moist air. He felt a sudden twinge of pain just above his right shoulder blade: the legacy of his visit to his father's village almost two years earlier. He had been in Greece a month, on a holiday paid for by his father, who had promised it long ago as a gift for completing of his PhD. In writing the concluding chapters of his thesis on the genetics of cloning, he had been faced with many moral and religious questions, which had in turn stirred his earlier enthusiasm for matters that lay beyond the scope of science. The years of study and research had overshadowed his religious sensibility, but in the intellectual freedom that came from putting aside formal work he had found himself once again susceptible to spiritual matters. And so where other twenty-six year olds sought the pleasure and nightlife of the islands, he strapped himself to a backpack and set off on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Greece, at times walking more than thirty kilometres a day. The famous cave on the island of Patmos, the Byzantine town of Mistra in the Tagytos mountains, the monuments at Eleusis and Delphi, the monoliths of Meteora - they had fired his wonder and imagination, and he began to see science as a manifestation of spirit, perhaps the most compelling because it appealed so strongly to reason, the senses, and the instinct for survival.

He arrived in the village at noon for an overnight stay before going to Salonika, from where he would push on to the monasteries of Mount Athos, for which the past month had been a kind of preparation. It was August, the height of summer. As the bus roared off with a hot burst of diesel, a woman dressed in thick black appeared in the deserted square and introduced herself as a relative, explaining his father had phoned to say he was coming. She opened the ancestral house, said it had been empty since the death of his grandparents, asked a few questions about Australia, and left him to rest. The village was tucked away in the hilly north-west corner of Greece, a stone's throw from the border of the Republic of Macedonia and a bullet's whistle from Albania. As a child he had been fascinated by stories of village life, and in time they came to possess both a mythical quality and a sense of being aspects of his own personal past. He had listened enviously to his father, thinking life in suburban Melbourne was boring and he would have nothing comparable to tell his own children. Excited at being in the place of his boyhood imagination, eager to see as much as possible, he left his things in an upstairs bedroom and set out to explore. He wandered over hills scarred with trenches from various wars, through forests where some believed the sword of Alexander the Great lay buried, past fields his grandfather had ploughed and harvested by hand, beside a creek with remnants of mills whose circular stones lay cracked and covered in moss.

By mid-afternoon he found himself leaning on a bridge's hot railing, grateful for the shadow of a poplar falling across the concrete and steel structure. He was tired and thirsty, and the thought of sunstroke crossed his mind. Emaciated from a long summer the creek rattled as though in its death throes. Sunglasses and hat would have been useful, he thought, shielding his eyes from the glare of the whitewashed church. In his haste to board the bus he had forgotten them in the station's waiting room. It was now the hottest part of the day. He considered returning to the house, but his itinerary was tight and he hadn't yet been to the graves of his grandparents, both of whom had died a few years ago, nor had he explored the hills north of

the village. A NATO jet roared overhead on its way to monitor the situation in Kosovo. It was a regular occurrence, according to an old man in the bus-station, who had crossed himself and predicted another Bosnia in Kosovo. Unsettled by the noise he leaned over the rail and fixed on his reflection in a rocky pool. A moment later what sounded like voices rose from the creek. He dismissed them as the jet still echoing in his ears, but when they persisted he strained to grasp a familiar word, while thinking the sun had got to him. They were now humming a melody, a hymn he had heard chanted at funerals, and then a plaintive voice (he couldn't say whether male or female) detached itself from the chorus and sang a slow refrain. With each repetition the words underwent a subtle change, as though an ancient language yearning to make itself understood, until the refrain sounded clearly in the village dialect.

- Free us from the dark.

Having conveyed its message, the voice trailed off and receded into the bony rattle of the creek. He firmed his grip on the rail, confused, not knowing what to make of the request or whether he had really heard it. Had the creek snatched words from the mouths of all who had bowed to drink and, over the centuries, transformed them into that moving refrain? He chastised himself for entertaining such a fanciful idea. No! It was the sun and the excitement of being in a place he had always wanted to visit, in which he had invested so much emotion, so many thoughts and daydreams. He left the bridge, turned off the bitumen, and followed a path rising toward the church. The relative had said his grandparents lay in the back corner of the cemetery. On the balcony of a rundown house a young woman in a blue dress was breast-feeding an infant. Strings of red peppers hung from thick beams. He waved to her, but regretted it at once, for she stood and went inside. A crow called from the bare flagpole in the schoolyard covered in weeds and dry grass. He pushed open a gate topped with a flock of two-headed eagles. A priest was high up in the stone tower beside the church, knotting a rope to the head of a large bell

- Hey, Australian! he called. Give me a hand.

It was cool in the tower and a wooden staircase zigzagged to a platform where the priest was securing the knot.

- Pull, he said, throwing the rope over the edge. Pull hard.

A dull clang echoed against the walls and rippled over the village. The priest climbed down and sat a few steps from the bottom. He removed his stovepipe hat and wiped the inner rim damp with sweat.

- Thank God, he sighed. It's right for tomorrow.

- Tomorrow?

- August the fifteenth, he flashed. Assumption Day. The Virgin's passing to Heaven.

His faint reflection nodded in the silver cross on the priest's chest.

- Isn't the Assumption celebrated in Australia?

Unsure of what to say, he shrugged and stepped out into the shadow of the tower. The priest followed, teasing his stringy beard with fingers toughened and gritty from farm work.

- Australia! he scowled, padlocking the door. People find gold and lose their souls.

He wanted to ask a few questions, learn something about the history of the church, perhaps go inside and cross himself before the icons donated by his ancestors, but the priest's black shoes crunched off toward the gate. The Assumption, he thought. Yes, he would get up early tomorrow and attend the morning service before leaving for Salonika. Prodded by the shrill of cicadas, he set off for the cemetery. The back section looked neglected, overgrown

with long grass and thorny bushes. Here and there he stopped to look at a photograph bleached by the sun, read a familiar surname, calculate how long a person had lived. A woman in black was bowed over a monument near the back corner. As he rustled toward her, she straightened up and wrapped a scarf around the lower part of her face. A few burning candles had wilted in a tin filled with sand.

- I'm looking for my grandparents, he said.

- What's that? she asked, her words muffled by the scarf.

He repeated himself, raising his voice against the cicadas.

- Your father should've come back to bury them.

They had died within months of each other five years ago. His father had wanted to return, but had just then taken on a large construction project. She pointed to two graves beside a thorn bush.

- Can I have a candle? he asked, offering her a silver coin.

- A flame for the living and a coin for the dead.

She chuckled, handed him two candles from a sheaf wrapped in newspaper, and inquired about a girlfriend who had gone to Australia. He lit them from the ones in the tin, thanked her, and shuffled off through knee-high grass.

- Candles won't cure everything, she called after him.

Their graves were next to each other and slightly skewed, as though their foundation had given way. He planted the candles in a clump of earth, cleared a few twigs, and ran his finger over the flaking remnants of once golden letters and numbers. The cicadas were now deafening. Unable to attune his thoughts to his emotions, he was about to stop his ears when the voice of an old man sounded above the noise.

- You've come for us.

- We live in you, faltered an old woman.

- How are my children? asked a third.

- My brother? a fourth.

Suddenly questioning voices surrounded him, competed for his attention, became incomprehensible. He looked around, bewildered. The old woman was dissolving in the shade of a cypress tree. He was about to call out to her, when the refrain he had heard on the bridge sounded again.

- Free us from the dark, the voice sang more plaintively than before.

Cicadas raged from all sides as he hurried out of the cemetery, but instead of descending to the square he took a dusty path leading up to the hills on the north side of the village. Heedless of the sun's intensity, he jogged to the top of a bare hill and stopped to catch his breath. He listened - nothing. It must have been the cicadas: they had unnerved him. Now more composed he surveyed the valley: the creek was a silver thread and the village a cluster of pebbles. Yes, he had come here to learn about his ancestry, acquaint himself with the surroundings, walk these hills, about which he had heard so much. But perhaps he had also come to atone for a vague feeling of guilt: for his father not having returned to bury his parents. Perhaps he wanted to experience the past, not just his father's and grandfather's, but the past of forgotten ancestors. Soldiers, shepherds, peasants - all had left traces on these stones. Yes, the past was all around him and he felt it murmuring in his blood. He spread his fingers wide, as if to grasp a flock of sheep which just then appeared on the other side of the valley.

Enticed by the shade of an oak-grove on the crest of a higher hill, he set off up the slope, at times going on all fours, sweat stinging his eyes. Feeling light-headed, he stopped about fifty metres from the grove, where a small chapel crouched among the trees. The door and windows were covered by corrugated sheets, but the walls appeared sound, the roof intact.

- Free us from the dark.

Coming from the chapel, the words now barely surprised him. He marched toward the grove, calling on the voice to identify itself, his words sticking to his tongue and the corners of his lips. But another voice sounded from the distance.

- Stop!

A shepherd was waving vigorously from the hill where the sheep were grazing.

- Stop!

Mines, he thought, recalling the wartime stories his father had told him. He looked around to assess the situation. A white metre-high column stood just inside the shade – a line of these columns extended in both directions at twenty metre intervals. The border! The thought struck him like a bolt. The chapel was on the other side. Borders were dangerous places in this part of the world, especially with the present conflict in the Balkans. Caught by soldiers of either country he might find it difficult to extricate himself. Dismissing the refrain, he turned from the chapel and, dispensing with the winding path, scrambled down the side of the hill.

Eyes sore from splinters of light, temples throbbing, he crossed the deserted village square. Here and there, faces peered from windows and disappeared behind curtains. The signs of dereliction were everywhere: crumbling houses and barns, sunken roofs, fallen balconies, gaping walls, yards covered in weeds. He wondered how much longer the village would survive. A small silver bell tingled as he pushed the gate to the two-storey house.

- Hey, Peter!

An old woman called in the village dialect from across the lane.

- Come to your Aunt.

He was in no mood for conversation, but her tone got the better of him. He climbed to a vine-covered verandah where she was sat on a low stool, peeling potatoes with a large knife.

- Thought Aunt Dora wouldn't hear you? Why haven't you come to see me? You played with my boys in this yard, now you won't come and say hello. Went to Australia and forgot everything. Not even a dollar for all the pomegranates you picked from my tree.

As she pointed with the knife to a stump in the middle of the yard, he noticed her pupils and irises were covered in a milky film. Cataracts. She had obviously mistaken him for his father, but he was too tired to explain.

- I'm sorry, he faltered.

He opened his wallet (his father glanced at him from a small photograph), placed a note in her palm and kissed her shrunken skin. Chuckling, she shoved the note between the buttons of a woollen cardigan.

- What were you doing up there? she smiled, revealing purple gums.

- How do you know?

- The shepherd wasn't calling out to his sheep like that. It's not safe up there. The black market's rife in these parts. I've lost my sight, but my hearing's sharper than this knife. I hear all kinds of things.

Unnerved by the vacancy in her eyes, he turned to a crimson rooster scratching beside a pile of wood. Should he question her about the refrain?

- There's a chapel up there, he began.

- Of course there is! Dedicated to the Virgin. But nobody goes there any more - it's now on the other side.

- Hasn't the border always been there?

- Borders! God meant people to come and go freely. I've got relatives in the village over the hill. We used to visit each other in the old days - two hours on foot, that's all it took. Not any more. With passports, visas, the border crossing far away - it would take me a week to get here.

- And the chapel? he asked tentatively.

- We used to go there when I was a girl, she smiled. How we'd wait for Assumption in those days! No housework, no harvesting, no threshing. People from surrounding villages would gather up there for the morning service. The chapel would be whitewashed and flowers set on its steps and sills. Inside, it was full of candles and incense, and the icons were so real you thought they'd speak. After the service there'd be food and as many sweets as you could eat. Then the band would start and I'd dance till my sandal-straps broke. Such joy - even the saints and martyrs looked happy.

Gazing at the trees concealing the chapel, John could almost grasp the festival, as though it were an event he had experienced, a memory which had lain dormant for years, waiting for this moment, for the old woman's words to raise it from the depths of his blood. In turning from the hill he confronted her white stare: a look he had seen in frescoed figures whose eyes had been scratched out, revealing plaster.

- I heard a voice up there, he said hesitantly, ears ringing.

- Free us from the dark, she sang, rubbing a potato.

- Who wants to be freed?

- The saints, the angels, the Virgin, Christ - they want the chapel open tomorrow, as it was in the old days.

The rooster sprang onto the stump, flapped its iridescent wings, and tore the afternoon with its cry. The dull throb in his temples suddenly sharpened to a spike between his eyes.

- I've got a headache, he grimaced, fearing a blackout.

- We've waited a long time, she said.

He leapt from the verandah and ran across the lane sticky with mulberries, followed by her girlish chuckle. Someone had left a hamper of food on the front steps. A pleasant shiver passed through him in the coolness of the thick-walled house. White stars flashed at each blink. After washing his face in the kitchen trough, he ate a firm tomato from the hamper and climbed the stairs to the bedroom. He thought of undressing, but the effort was too much and he collapsed on the sagging bed.

It was dark when he awoke. Not knowing where was he gripped the metal bedhead to steady himself against the disorientation. Moonlight filtered through the lace curtains, covered the walls in a fine web, gleamed on the frame of a wedding photograph in which he could just make out his parents. Rats scurried in the ceiling. Feverish, hair and neck moist with sweat, he went to the window. It was almost three. A dog barked in the distance, setting off several others. The sky teemed with stars and the moon was white and full. Like a disc of ice, he thought. If only he could press it to his forehead. Cool light silvered the courtyard, the stony houses, trees nestling the chapel on the hill.

- Free us from the dark.

He turned from the window calmly, as though he had expected the call. The wardrobe's mirror caught him by surprise, and for an instant, perhaps because of the strange light, or the warped surface, he noticed for the first time a resemblance to his father, particularly in the mouth and chin. Without turning on the light, he went downstairs and opened the front door. A breeze scented with basil and cow dung rustled the leaves of the pear tree in the courtyard. The creek's trickle was more pronounced at this hour. In an open shed stacked with firewood he found an adze among his grandfather's tools. Its handle was smooth from years of cutting and whittling. A pear fell with a thud and rolled to his feet. He bit into the firm skin: juice glistened in the moonlight. He ate it quickly, with relish, and remembered he hadn't eaten properly since yesterday's breakfast. Holding the small bell tied to the gate from rattling, he saw something flit across Granny Dora's house. The breeze stirring the large vine leaves, he thought. An instant later there was a movement in an upstairs window. He slipped into the shadow of a wall and pressed his cheek against the still-warm stones. It was her, Granny Dora, standing at the window in a white nightdress, braiding a thin tail of hair.

Gliding through the still village, he felt a closeness to these derelict houses now whitened by the moon; over the bridge, he understood the creek's language; past the tower, he wanted to ring the bell, wake the villagers, embrace them all; walking in step with his shadow on the cemetery wall, he would have liked to place a candle on each headstones, the named and the nameless. He moved effortlessly along the path winding around the hill like a wedding ribbon. From the trees on the hilltop a nightingale's trill drew the stars closer to the narrow valley. His happiness overflowed in tears.

- Free us from the dark.

The words were melodious, joyful, and he was light-footed, buoyant. The surroundings assumed a fluid quality: trees, rocks, hills - everything seemed to sway in rhythm to the voice. Granny Dora's words came back to him, evoking the past in vivid detail. He was on his way to the festival she had described. People were gathered in the grove, waiting for him. He began running up the steep incline, weightless as his shadow. When the white markers were just above him, stark against the hill's curved silhouette, he stopped and listened. Voices - not the melodious call from the chapel, but mutterings from the other side of the border. He knelt behind a marker. In a depression about thirty metres away four men were squatting among low-lying scrub, exchanging goods. One of them raised a pair of binoculars and looked at the moon.

- Halt!

The men snatched up their goods and scurried off in different directions. A shot cracked the night. He dashed between two markers and plunged into the shadow of the trees. Dogs barked, voices shouted, rocks crackled on all sides. Another shot. Peaceful in the clearing, the chapel radiated a white sheen. He rustled through the dry grass to the sealed door. Inside, wings fluttered, feet shuffled. As he prized loose the top section of a corrugated tin sheet with the adze, a rush of birds whirled through the opening and scattered wildly into the night. Moonlight streamed inside as he tore the sheet from the doorway. The figures on the walls stirred and a hymn sounded faintly. In the half-dome above the altar the Virgin greeted him with open arms.

- Halt!

A shot cracked nearby. He turned to the entrance: figures were running among the trees. Another shot followed. A bolt struck his right shoulder and knocked him down. Blinded

by pain he thought of his parents and how they would cope with the death of their son. The grass between the stone slabs on the floor bristled against his cheek. And then the figures on the walls began to move: eyes shone, angels preened their wings, a ruby in Christ's book throbbed, while the Virgin reached out to him more tenderly than before. The border columns were transformed into children who ran off among the trees. Men and women, young and old, came to the grove from all directions and gathered around the chapel. An old couple, his grandparents, limped to where he lay, dipped a finger in the blood flowing from his shoulder and walked off with a spring in their step. A girl with a long braid and a white dress placed a pomegranate on his chest, then smiled and skipped away to her friends. When the band started a brisk melody people joined hands and danced in a circle around the chapel. The melody became faster, the dance livelier, yet everyone kept in step. Evening's gold settled on the tree-tops and the sky gradually darkened to a deep blue. The dancers broke off into groups and sat on the fragrant grass, content in their food and wine, at peace with themselves and the world. A clarinet sounded a soulful tune and it was taken up by countless voices in different languages. And as he sang, the voices of his ancestors flowed from him, adding to the hymn echoing through the valley.

He regained consciousness as a church bell tolled slowly in the distance, but before emerging fully from the darkness he grasped at a fleeting thought: the bell was sounding for him. And then, feeling the pain in his shoulder, he realised where he was and what had happened. Birds were twittering and sunlight shone on the Virgin in the half-dome above him. He tried to move but felt as though spiked to the stone floor. Had the bullet struck his spine? The thought dazed him and he felt a thick darkness spreading from his chest, coursing through his body, filling his eyes. The feeling was pleasant, soothing, and he might easily have succumbed to it but for the sound of the bell which pulled him toward the light in the half-dome. He began counting each toll aloud: the resonance of each number dispersed the darkness and he was strengthened by the tone of his own voice. As he focused on the halo around the Virgin's head, which now glowed with morning light streaming through the oaks, his counting gave way to a prayer for help. And then he saw his mother in the features above: she called his name with her thin lips, reached for him with her tender palms, embraced him with the fullness of her eyes. He struggled up off his back and steadied himself on the windowsill, beside a fresco of Saint Panteleimon, who could have passed for a young woman. A patch of blood stained the floor where he had lain. He tried to cross himself, but the very thought shot a bolt of pain through his shoulder. Leaning back against the Saint, he caught his breath and crossed himself with his left hand, in gratitude to the Virgin on this her day of Assumption.

Outside, surrounded by the chitchat of countless birds, he removed his belt and used it as a sling for his right arm. After a last look at the chapel he set off down hill, driven by the thought he must get the village without delay. In the square he was met by several men dressed in suits, on their way to church. They examined his wound and one of them ran off and returned in a car. He was taken to the hospital in Florina, where he had left his hat and sunglasses. The bullet had shattered the lower part of his shoulder blade, without penetrating further. He spent a week in hospital, during which he spoke daily with his parents. His father offered to fly over and escort him home, but he assured him he felt strong enough to undertake the journey alone. Back in Australia he relived that night over and over, until it became the focus of his life, strengthening his resolve to visit Athos.

Mindful of the Abbot's letter John rolled his shoulder this way and that, spat lightly in the rushing stream three times, and set off for Karyes, whose domes glowed above the treetops.

Kosta sat on a narrow balcony overlooking Athos rising sharply from the surrounding forest. He sipped his black coffee and thought about Panayoti, who was napping in their room, tired after matins and again barely eating in the refectory. Yes, over the past three days the boy had complained the hours in church were long and hard on his back, the routine monotonous and weighed on his heart, the food tasteless and good only for stomach cramps. And in this time Kosta had tried to encourage him with smiles and caresses, continually pointing to tall Father Sophronios, for whose advice they had undertaken the journey. The monk was busy with Easter preparations, but he would meet them at the first opportunity. They should consider themselves fortunate: when not chanting or working with the choir he preferred to keep silent because of his age. Kosta had also endeavoured to occupy the boy with visits to neighbouring monasteries and by accompanying some of the more receptive monks in their daily work. Yesterday, for instance, they had spent a few hours on a fishing boat with a young monk who did his best to entertain the boy with stories of his sea-faring life before coming to Athos. Despite these efforts, after the refectory this morning Kosta had been struck by a note of defiance in his son's sweet voice. Panayoti missed his friends and threatened to run away unless they went-home soon. The boy's morose look now filled Kosta with alarm, for he saw again his unfortunate wife in the last weeks of her life. Torn between the shining vision that had drawn him to Athos, which gave some meaning to his wife's tragic death, and his son's present unhappiness, he swallowed the coffee's bitter sediment took left to find a solution to his dilemma.

He climbed the stairs to the Abbot's residence and knocked on the door three times, having heard from an elderly monk this was a holy number which, when struck before entering a house, would promptly dispel all manner of unwholesomeness and ensure the visitor of a Christian welcome. The Abbot had been in the reception room for some time, writing a monograph on capitalism and the monastic life, drawing on the ideas of Heraclitus, in particular the fragment that said: The fight against desire is hard and comes at the price of the soul. He preferred to work here instead of the study at this hour of the day, as the easterly aspect of sun and sea provided an ideal backdrop for his far-ranging thoughts. At the sound of the knocks the Abbot was staring wistfully at an icon of the Virgin on the wall, thinking about that summer on Crete, trying to summon the face of that girl, which had long since been subsumed by the Virgin's dark countenance. He opened the door and welcomed the unexpected caller. Noticing a page half covered in glistening writing, Kosta apologised for the interruption. The Abbot screwed the top of a fountain pen, gathered the sheets and tapped them on the table. Kosta began awkwardly, expressing his appreciation for the hospitality they were receiving. He was well aware they had stayed longer than was customary, but they weren't here as sightseers but pilgrims on a holy calling. As a widower knocking on the door of old age, he was completely devoted to his son, whose welfare was now his only concern. The boy had an angelic voice, and it was this God-given gift that brought them here. He wanted him to attend the theological school in Karyes with a view to becoming a monk. But, unable to bear the thought of being separated from his beloved son, he hoped the Abbot might see fit to allow him to

remain in the monastery during his education. Yes, he was getting on in years, but his teeth were still intact (he opened his mouth for the Abbot to see) and he could work for his keep in numerous ways, including tending the mules, having considerable experience with the all-bearing creature from his tourist business on Corfu. Besides, he would sell his assets on the island and offer the proceeds to the monastery. Leaning back in his chair, the Abbot rubbed the large cross around his neck with thumb and forefinger.

- Does your son want to study here? he asked.

- I haven't exactly discussed it with him yet, Abbot.

- Shouldn't you attend to that first?

- I will, Abbot, most certainly, without fail. It's been on my mind ever since we came here, but timing's all-important in a delicate matter like this. The moment must be right, if you follow my meaning. I've met gamblers who've had a heightened sense of the right moment: they've known when to bet and when to hold back, when to stake all and when to walk away. Tomorrow, Abbot, I'll discuss it with him tomorrow, after we visit Father Sophronios. The boy's shy and lacking in confidence, but a few words from the famous chanter and his heart will open like a flower to the idea of the school.

- Our school isn't for everyone. Boys raised on the instant gratification of Coca Cola and television find the austerity difficult. Some leave after a week.

- My Panayoti's a good boy, Abbot. He'll adapt quickly.

- Most boys leave Athos once they finish their studies.

- He belongs here, I know it in my heart.

- If God wills it, smiled the Abbot. Meanwhile, you're welcome to stay.

- Can we visit the school?

The Abbot explained it was closed for Holy Week, but he could arrange for them to be shown inside by making a phone call to Karyes. Kosta thanked him and returned to the guesthouse in high spirits. In the foyer he met Father Gregory, the guest-master, carrying an armful of folded towels. Run off his feet by the unexpected number of visitors, his resources strained to the limit, the usually affable monk asked with a heavy-eyed look how much longer Kosta intended to stay. Hearing the Abbot had granted them permission to remain until a certain matter was resolved, he raised his eyebrows and dropped the corners of his lips. Kosta offered to assist him in the guesthouse, but he shook his head, muttered in his beard, and walked off to clean up after the departure of several visitors and to prepare for more arrivals.

Lying on the bed, staring morosely at the ceiling, Panayoti didn't move when his father entered the room. He wanted to hurt him in some way for this unbearable situation, but he was also keenly aware of his love for him, and so, conscious of being watched, he remained silent. Careful not make him even more sullen, Kosta sat on the edge of his own bed, sighed in a protracted manner, and focused on the ring given to him by his wife. The boy glanced at his father and then turned onto his side.

- When are we going home? he asked sharply.

- Soon, my boy, soon.

- You said that yesterday and the day before.

- Let's go out for a while. You'll feel better after a walk. We'll go up to Karyes.

- To see another church?

- There's a bakery up there and a restaurant. I'll buy you fresh bread, fried eggs, cheese, whatever you want.
- Aren't we meant to be fasting?
- You deserve a treat.

Panayoti reflected a moment, then sat up and put on his running shoes. Watching his son tying the long laces, Kosta was overcome by paternal feeling and considered telling him the reason for their visit to Karyes, instead he stroked the boy's curly hair and went to the door. No, better to wait until after the meeting with Father Sophronios, for the chanter's encouragement would certainly make an impression on his son, rendering him more receptive to the idea of staying on Athos.

The morning was ideal for walking: plump as cherubs a few clouds drifted across the sky, the breeze blew playfully from the sea, warmth rich with fragrance rose from the forest. Their uphill journey seemed effortless and they made it in good time.

Karyes, the capital of the Athonite Republic, and the only capital in the world without boutique or barber-shop, where no child had been born since the first millennium and the word milk hadn't been uttered for ages; where water from wells became hard in the absence of a woman's touch and shadows at midday were darker than elsewhere from dreaming of the sun. Quiet Karyes, where the Holy Council met on the even days of the week and, in whispers filtered through beards, discussed the Old Calendar's role in locating Christmas and whether clocks should be set according to dawn or dusk. Cobbled Karyes, centred on the redbrick Protaton, the oldest, most venerated church on Athos (despite its spined roof), that housed the icon of the Virgin Axion Estin, whose dark eyes saw the light of day once a year, the morning of Easter Monday, when it was carried to the nearby monastery of Koutloumousiou, with the entire procession chanting under still tongues the four-fold 'O, You, worthy it is'. Commercial Karyes, where monks older than an abacus dozed in the splendour of their beards while keeping shops cluttered with books and artefacts. Monks from a bygone age, who would test a youth by inserting a comb in his moustache and counting to ten: if it remained upright he was deemed ready to become a novice, if not he was ordered to go home and return when his whiskers were manlier. One-cafe Karyes, where the sound of dice chattering in complicity was never heard, where Queens were removed from every pack of cards, and the only music that filled the air was the whistle of a hammered kettle. Communal Karyes, a place where Serb, Greek, Russian and Bulgarian were all brothers in the blackness of their cassocks, and the laughter that scattered from the windows of the nearby school was picked up by rock partridges and used for their nests. Cultivated Karyes, and thrice blessed: first, with happy vineyards on whose broad leaves monks practiced their calligraphy, in particular the letter X, which they always adorned with red grapes; second, with vegetable gardens into whose soil monks hoed their prayers so tomorrow's leeks might have whiter beards and onions shed a tear of pity; third, with olives blacker than pupils dazzled by the sun, from which virgin oil was extracted that kept icon flames upright through the longest of nights. Cornucopian Karyes, surrounded by groves of nut-trees: almonds that sheltered eyes with an asiatic curve; walnuts whose skull contained a brain creviced by necessity; chestnuts bursting their skins with the fullness of being; and hazels whose secret wisdom teeth would never crack.

Several vehicles were parked in the main square, with monks and visitors discussing times and destinations. Kosta and Panayoti walked along the cobbled street, crossed themselves before the Protaton, and passed a few shops selling groceries and souvenirs - the former run by laymen, the latter by monks. The dingy cafe, which also served as a restaurant, was crowded and thick with smoke and conversation, but they managed to find a small table near the window. Kosta ordered what he had promised Panayoti, while he, observing the fast, settled for a glass of ouzo. When the food arrived, the boy hesitated, mindful of the fast, but Aleko signalled it was all right and he ate with relish, wiping the yolk with a crust of fresh bread. Yes, he was pleased his son had enjoyed the meal, and even more pleased when the boy acknowledged his wink with a smile. The uncertainty he had experienced all morning now dispersed under the influence of the clear drink, the sunlight streaming through the dirty window and swirling smoke, the touch of yellow at the corner of his son's mouth. As he knocked back his third glass, three boys not much older than Panayoti, and all in black gowns, laughed in walking past the cafe.

- Look at them, said Kosta, feeling light-headed. Happy as blackbirds.

- Are they novices?

- They're students, my boy.

- Is there a school here?

Kosta explained with some animation there was a school for orphans and boys from poor families. They were accommodated, fed and educated through the generosity of the monks. And then he realised a God-given opportunity had presented itself to test the boy's reaction to his intention. He licked the taste of aniseed from his lips and began by saying he was getting on in years.

- No, you're not old, said the boy.

- Yes, son, Kosta continued, his words now having a life of their own. Old age has a way of creeping up on you and catching you first by the sideburns, then by the hair, until finally it throws you in a net of wrinkled skin. And then you lose your strength very quickly, or, worse still, your memory, so a father's unable to recognise his own son. What if that happened to me, boy?

- No, that won't ever happen to you, he replied, with a look of concern.

- Let's say it did. What would become of you? Who'd look after you?

- You're not old, you're not.

- Would you consider the school here?

- Why are you saying these things?

- They'd look after you, give you a good education, and groom you to become the best chanter on Athos, just like Father Sophronios.

- I don't want to stay here. I want to be with you.

His dark eyes glistening with tears, Panayoti reached out for his father's hand.

- You belong on Athos, my boy. It's your mother's wish. She directed me here in a dream. You've inherited her sweet voice - use it to praise God and lighten the hearts of men. And we can still be together, I swear. I'll live in the monastery and we'll see each other every day.

Panayoti was now whimpering and attracting sharp glances. Wiping his hands on a grimy apron, the proprietor asked if everything was all right. Kosta dismissed him with a nod and a note, then attempted to calm his son by assuring him he was only being

hypothetical, though it wouldn't hurt to see the school. As they stepped outside the boys who had passed the restaurant earlier were now walking back in the opposite direction. Kosta asked them for directions and they offered to escort them, saying they were going there to help with some cleaning during the Easter break. On the way Kosta questioned them about their backgrounds. One was an orphan, the other two from poor families. They liked the school, but the mathematics teacher was very strict. Would they stay to become monks? The orphan said Athos was his mother and father. He wanted to become a theologian and denounce those who humanised Christ, especially that heretic Kazantzakis. The others had families outside and felt obligated to repay them for the opportunity of gaining an education. Talking in a lively manner, robes flapping, the boys attempted to draw Panayoti into conversation, but he became more sullen with each step.

On the outskirts of Karyes they turned left, passed a few vegetable gardens, and came to the large Russian Skete of Saint Andrew, where the orphan pointed to a three-storey blue-stone building to the right of the main gate. The open windows looked out onto a neglected courtyard with a scrawny persimmon tree. As the boys led the way along a gravel path, Panayoti suddenly turned and sprinted in the direction of Karyes. Startled, Kosta set off after him, while the boys laughed. He called for him to stop, drawing a response from an elderly monk tending a vegetable patch. Panayoti dashed past a group of monks and visitors gathered before the Protaton, and by the time a breathless Kosta got there, he flew down the main street, rounded the corner where the bakery stood, and disappeared. Kosta stopped and between gasps shouted for him to come back. One of the monks complained if fathers couldn't control their unruly children they had no business disturbing the peace of the Holy Mountain. Kosta was about to defend his son, when John appeared from the administrative building opposite the Protaton.

- My boy, my boy, cried Kosta, running to him.

John advised him to make his way back to the monastery and, removing his hat, set off after the boy. He hadn't run for months, but his strides were effortless on the downhill road, and it saddened him to think he would be denied this feeling of vitality once he was tonsured. At a fork in the road he guessed on the path which veered left, into the dense forest. After five minutes of hard running without a sign of the boy he was beginning to question his decision, when he noticed small footprints on the edge of a creek flowing across the path. He leapt over the water, increased his pace, and soon found himself at a junction of paths, where a small shrine stood under an overhanging oak tree. The boy was sitting on the steps of the shrine, face hidden in his arms, whimpering. Careful not to startle him, John stopped some distance away and congratulated him on his speed. Panayoti looked up, recognised the novice, and lowered his head again. John sat beside him without saying a word.

- I want to go home, he cried, holding his right ankle.

- You'll be home in a few days, John assured him.

- You're lying, just like my father. I don't want to go to school here. It's like a prison. I thought he loved me! What sort of father would send his own son to prison?

- He does love you, said John.

- How do you know?

- From the way he looked at you in the refectory this morning.

- No, he wants me to become a monk, and all because of my voice. But what's the use of a voice if you're miserable? I'd rather be mute and happy. He wants me to chant for Father Sophronios tomorrow, but I won't. He can't make me chant. I want to go home. If he tries I'll...I'll throw myself off a cliff, just like my mother did because the villagers made her miserable. He thinks I don't know what happened, but the boys at school told me. The villagers made her life hell because she was Turkish. I used to go to that cliff when the boys called me a Turk and an enemy of Greece. I'd look down at the sea breaking on the rocks and think how easy it would be to join my mother. But her songs kept me from jumping. She taught me lots of Turkish songs and father says I've inherited her voice. And when I'd get too close to the edge she'd come and wipe my tears and lead me back home. Her songs saved my life and now he wants to dress me in black and put me in prison. But I don't belong here. I'm half-Christian and half-Muslim. Yes, I've been baptised and all the villagers like my chanting, but my voice belongs to my mother and she was a Muslim.

Moved by the boy's defiant outburst, John wanted to comfort him but was at a loss for words. He placed his arm over his shoulder and thought about his own father. How would he react to him tomorrow? Would he try to coerce him back to Australia? Would he attempt to discourage him from his chosen path?

- What am I, Father? Panayoti asked, wiping his eyes. Am I a Christian or a Muslim? All that fighting in Kosovo last year between Christians and Muslims really confused me. Who's right, Christ or Mohammed?

- We believe in Christ, replied John.

- And those who believe in Mohammed?

John had thought about that very question long and hard before coming to Athos. He was a Christian as a consequence of birth, but what if he were born in Turkey, or Israel, or India? Should one overcome the religion of one's birth, examine carefully all the other faiths, and then select one? A religion chosen on the basis of freedom and in accordance with one's temperament. Would this be fostered by the Internet, which was bringing down borders and making people citizens of the globe? The question of religious relativism had vexed him deeply in multicultural Australia, but the acceptance of monastic life had focused his thoughts and energies on the Orthodox tradition and the question had lost much of its urgency. And now this boy had made him confront that question again. He was waiting for an answer. If Christ wasn't the ultimate truth then what validity was there in his present life? Why had he renounced the certainty of science? In moments of deepest faith the truth of Christ seemed glorious as sunlight, in moments of doubt it was slender as a trembling icon flame.

- Christ is the way for me, said John.

- Is He the only way to heaven?

- For those on Athos, yes.

- But my mother wasn't a Christian, does it mean she's not in heaven?

- Heaven's a big place, with room for all who seek it.

- They wouldn't allow her to be buried in the village cemetery because she was a Muslim. One of the boys at school said people who take their own lives go to hell forever. Is that true, Father?

- God alone judges our soul.

- I loved her more than anything in the world, Father. If she's not in heaven then heaven's not for me. I chant in the village church as a way of being with her, but if that's not possible because she wasn't a Christian then I'll become a Muslim for her sake.

- Your mother draws near when you pray and chant, said John, moved by the boy's innocence. A heart brimming with love is a fountain that draws the dead closer to the living.

- Do you really believe that, Father?

- I do, replied John, surprised by his own conviction.

As the boy was now calmer, more thoughtful, John took the opportunity to suggest they return to the monastery, where his father would be anxiously awaiting. In getting to his feet Panayoti winced and clutched his right ankle. He had twisted it in jumping over the creek and managed to hobble this far before the pain became too much. John removed boy's shoe and sock: the ankle had already become swollen. He assisted him on one side, but after a few steps the boy stopped in pain. It would take over an hour to run to the monastery and return with help, so John squatted and told him to climb onto his back. He considered pushing on to the monastery, but they weren't far from Elder Kyrillos's hermitage, and he was good at treating twists and sprains. Yes, he would alleviate the boy's pain and calm his troubled soul with a few words said in just the right tone. The downhill path was easy-going and on the way Panayoti questioned John about Australia. He looked forward to watching the Sydney Olympics on television and would visit that faraway place when he grew up. But was it true the sun was unbearably hot in summer? And people didn't dare go outdoors from fear of sunstroke? John explained it was no worse than the Greek sun in mid-August.

When they arrived at the Elder's he was in his vegetable garden, shredding a red cloth and tying strips to the arms of a scarecrow.

- And I thought you were Saint Christopher, he smiled, coming toward them.

- Young Panayoti has twisted his ankle, said John.

- How did you manage that?

- I was... running, said the boy.

- He runs fastest who stands still, the Elder chuckled.

They helped the boy to the verandah and sat him on a chair. After examining his ankle, the Elder went inside and returned with a bottle of olive oil, a small onion and a knife. Kneeling before Panayoti, he poured a little oil into his palm and began massaging the foot, gently at first, then more vigorously, turning it this way and that until his patient cried out for him to stop. He apologised and bowed low, touching the boy's foot with his forehead. Panayoti didn't notice the gesture, for his eyes were closed in pain, but John saw it and was surprised. Had he glimpsed something in the boy? Perhaps the first touch of darkness in an innocent soul. He diced the onion, mixed it with oil, and wrapped the ankle with the poultice.

- Have you passed this way before? asked the Elder.

Panayoti turned to John as though seeking an answer.

- No, Elder, he replied, bemused.

- Then perhaps I dreamt it.

- Dreamt what? Panayoti asked.

- A boy with a striking resemblance to you limped to where I stood beneath a fig tree and asked for directions home. He was crying tears the size of silver coins and when I offered him a handkerchief he began chanting the Hymn of Lamentation. His voice was so intense, he rose from the dusty ground and hovered above the tree. A woman appeared in the sky, with a cross in one hand and a crescent moon in the other. The boy called her mother, and the next instant he flew toward her as though on wings.

Panayoti was speechless.

- Yes, it must've been a dream, mused the Elder. That's old age for you! It's becoming harder to distinguish dreams from reality.

- Thank you, Elder, said John. The boy's father is waiting for us.

- Will you come to visit me again, Panayoti? smiled the Elder.

- Yes, I will, he replied in a lively manner.

With Panayoti mounted on his back again, John strode off across the clearing and took the path through the forest, determined to reach the monastery without stopping. He must see to Anton, who appeared to be improving, and then there was the visit to the cave-dweller, which he had arranged with Stefan and Paul before leaving for Karyes. At one they had to be at the jetty for the boat that would take them to where the Abbot had suggested. A few minutes after setting off, Panayoti asked if John had told the Elder about his unfortunate mother. No. And the remainder of the journey passed in silence.

In the meantime, the forest swaying around him and Athos loosened from its base under the influence of the ouzo, Kosta had somehow managed to hurry back to the monastery without mishap. At the entrance Father Maximos had enquired about the boy, without failing to sniff aniseed on the father's breath. The question had prompted a flow of naked tears as the distraught man explained how his son had run off into the forest like a rabbit, and all because he had been too hard on the poor child. When the gatekeeper mentioned bears and snakes emerged from hibernation this time of year, Kosta's legs had almost given way. Feeling utterly helpless, he had called on the gatekeeper to witness his promise: if the boy returned safely he would dedicate his gold ring, a gift from his dead wife, to the Blessed Virgin in the chapel.

And now, pacing the sunny courtyard between the chapel and church, Kosta questioned his motives in coming to Athos and castigated himself for having put the child through such an ordeal. As he stopped before the fountain for a moment, Paul approached him from the other side of the church and greeted him with a few words. Having worked all morning on his story, he felt like some sun and conversation, and was surprised when Kosta replied in English.

- I was in Canada many years, he said, glancing at the entrance.

- And how long have you been on Athos? Paul asked.

- Five days.

- When are you leaving?

- When my son decides.

Paul noticed the fellow's eyes were bleary and the whiff of ouzo scenting each word reminded him of the fennel that grew in Stefan's backyard. It was used by his father in making sausages, as a breath-freshener after a meal heavy with garlic, and to expel an accumulation of intestinal gas, whose efficacy could be heard as he worked in his shed.

- He has the voice of an angel, my friend, but he doesn't want to stay here to become a monk. And now I don't know where he is. He ran away from me an hour ago and the forest is full of snakes and bears. Ah, it's my fault, all my fault.

In the absence of a father, having tempered his identity in the fire of freedom and experience, Paul was pricked by the man's sentiments. He had no right to impose his will on the boy. If there was anything pure and sacred in this miserable world, it was the sense of being an individual, and this grew from fully expressing one's own will, even at the expense of offending family and society. But the warmth of the sun on his bare scalp suddenly reminded him of his condition. Yes, strength of will was man's greatest asset, for it alone was the means of rising above the world. There were moments, in writing his story for instance, when his will was most concentrated, most creative, and then he was no longer a man alone, dying of cancer, but an essential participant in the universe's unfolding. And when the time came for the ultimate expression of will, it would be an act of creativity not unlike writing, through which he would become as elemental as the hydrogen in the nucleus of his degenerating cells, in the core of stars yet to be born.

- Don't shut him in a cage, said Paul, with an edge to his voice. If he sings like an angel, give him his wings, let develop his talent in freedom.

- Where are you from? Kosta asked, examining Paul for the first time.

- Australia.

- Then, my Australian friend, you've also been poisoned by Capitalism. I don't want my boy to experience your freedom. Why? I'll tell you. The word has no meaning in the West. Advertisers have exploited it to make consumers of the young.

- Your son needs to express himself as an individual.

- Look, I lived in Canada and I know how people are manipulated. No, I don't want your freedom for my boy. You talk about the individual and expression, but these things don't exist in a consumer world. As for a young person's identity, it's what advertisers say is fashionable this season. Yes, my friend, advertisers rule the world, make no mistake. They promise freedom, as long as young people buy their products. Freedom to smoke, drink, experiment with sexuality. And where does it all lead? Where? Drugs, Aids, homelessness, death.

- Your son's got a right to experience life for himself.

- Why? To become a mindless consumer so advertisers can live in their mansions? To be exposed to the poison that's out there? No, my Australian friend, there is no freedom out there, only the snares of Satan who runs a global advertising agency. Freedom is to be found here, within the walls of this monastery, in a heart and mind directed to God. When my boy chants, he sprouts wings and flies over the temptations of this world. That, my friend, is true freedom. Should he turn from that to become a drugged pop-singer? No! Those creatures are driven by nothing but ego. Have you seen the way they sing? Their faces are twisted with anger and desperation. Why? Because inside they are empty. Yes, my friend, empty. Their songs offer no hope, no comfort, only the spread of their own emptiness. They are in business with advertisers, and together they sow young minds with the seeds of despair. There is evil out there, my friend, and it's plain for all to see, but who will dare to speak against it? Nobody! Why? Because advertisers have made capital out of it and governments have become dependant on it.

Deception, illusion, creation of desires that can't be satisfied - that's what's out there, my friend, and I want none of it for my boy.

- Should we all shut ourselves in a monastery?

- That's for you to decide. But I reject a world that embraces lies instead of truth, that promotes greed instead of humility, and whose heroes are pop-singers instead of saints. This is the place for my boy. Here his pure soul will never be polluted by images that stir up poisonous desires. Here his voice will not swell his ego, but comfort those who come needing spiritual sustenance. Here, my Australian friend, within these ancient walls, my son will find his freedom and bloom in the sight of God.

Impressed by Kosta's heart-felt convictions, Paul found himself warming to his ingenuous manner, and he now saw him not as a religious fanatic who sought to stifle his son's freedom but a loving father whose view of the world wasn't altogether wrong. Strange, where yesterday he would have dismissed such talk as dogmatic and narrow-minded, he was suddenly more circumspect, even curious to hear more of his singular views. He was about to question him further, when the fellow uttered something in Greek that sounded like 'pun a gear' and dashed off toward John entering the monastery with a child on his back.

After the emotional reunion between Kosta and Panayoti in the portico, John left them wiping away each other's tears and went to check on Anton. He tapped on his door, but there was no answer. Asleep again, he thought, and turned the handle, only to be surprised by an empty room. The bed had been neatly made, the pillow smoothed of wrinkles by gentle hands, and not a sign of Anton's belongings. Had he recovered from the fever and ventured out for some fresh air. But why take the heavy backpack? Jolted by the thought he might have left for another monastery, he hurried off to locate Father Gregory.

The guest-master was taking an inventory of supplies in the kitchen, assisted by the ever-compliant Nico, who had just finished washing a sink full of coffee cups and raki glasses from the new arrivals. As Father Gregory made a note in his book, Nico observed the heavy look in his eyes and felt sorry for him. Twisting the cross and coin hanging from his neck, he overcame a natural reticence that brightened his stubbled face and spoke to the guest-master.

- You look tired, Father, he said.
- Holy Week's a time of struggle, good Christian.
- You could do with more help in the guesthouse.
- A helping hand is saved from the darkness lurking in pockets.
- Tell me honestly, Father, are we visitors troublesome? Do we distract you from your holy endeavours?

- Not at all, my good Christian. Physical work, especially for the sake of another, is also a holy endeavour. Yes, young men come here seeking the spiritual life, and many are quick to leave because they consider the work somehow demeaning and unspiritual. But manual labour, whether in the guesthouse or the vineyard, whether polishing the candelabra or clearing manure from the stables, is a monk's anchor from drifting off into idle reveries and fantasies about the life of the spirit. You see, my Christian, there must be a willingness to toil and serve if one is to live the monastic life, for it's through labour that one takes the first step on the difficult path of spiritual struggle. We're not here to escape the world, despite what outsiders say, but to serve it in our own way. And how can this be done from a monastery? First and foremost by safeguarding our precious soul, good Christian. Where the blind lead the blind into the abyss, the monk whose eyes have been unsealed leads his brother to the summit. Athos is a holy beacon in what's becoming an increasingly dark age. Our twenty monasteries have kept the holy flame safe for over a thousand years. And each one, Greek or not, welcomes honest pilgrims like you. Our hope is to light the slender wick of your spirit, so you might then take our truth to a world in much need of enlightenment. Our flame has been the sustenance of the entire Orthodox World since the decline of the Byzantine Empire. Greeks, Russians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians - all have come here in their hour of darkness. Yes, good Christian, the monk's heart is a chalice for the holy flame, and as much as it sustains us, we sustain it through the labour of our hands and the breath of our prayers. And the flame continues to draw people here, and not just the Orthodox, for in recent years more and more are coming from many other faiths, all seeking the truth of our Hesychast tradition. And how much longer will the Holy Mountain continue to enlighten those who come seeking? Thirty years ago, when

numbers here fell to the lowest in a thousand years, I asked an Elder if the holy flame would ever be extinguished. He replied only when the mountain is flattened by the odd ant that crawls to the summit and returns to the shore with a grain of rock. Yes, my good Christian, the work here is tiring, but as guest-master I feel honoured to serve pilgrims, to offer them a bed, and refresh their bodies for their spiritual struggle.

- I'm not afraid of work, Father, Nico said, barely able to say his words from an excess of enthusiasm. These shoulders have carried sacks of barely from dawn to dusk.

- A blessing on you, my good Christian.

- Do you think, Father, I might also serve?

- By helping in the guesthouse?

- By...becoming a monk?

- If God wills it, my brother, and the Abbot agrees.

John entered the kitchen and apologised to Father Gregory, explaining his delay in returning from Karyes. The monk looked up disinterestedly from inspecting the contents of a drawer and commented he had never known so many visitors at this time of year. As of tomorrow, though, they couldn't accept any more, for he knew from experience that those present on Maundy Thursday remained for the feast on Easter Sunday. John asked if he had seen the young man staying in room eleven. The guest-master ran his fingers through his beard, blew away several strands, and said he was unaware of anyone being in that room. When John recounted the circumstances of Anton's arrival, following this with a description of him, Father Gregory closed his eyes and tilted back his head, indicating he knew nothing of such a visitor. John thought for a moment, turning his prayer cord, and decided to ask elsewhere. Bowing to the guest-master, he apologised for having to be absent again, possibly until after vespers, on an outing approved by the Abbot. The monk closed his eyes and said he was fortunate to have the services of the good Nico at this most demanding of times.

Preoccupied with Anton's whereabouts, John was oblivious of the men sitting in the foyer, until the Professor caught him by the sleeve and asked whether he spoke English. Somewhat on edge, he introduced himself as a scholar of Byzantine iconography and said the Abbot had granted him permission to research an important icon, for which he had been advised to make contact with a certain Father Theodore. He had walked up and down a dozen staircases and scoured the courtyard, without sight of the elusive monk, who had been appointed to act as his interpreter in a meeting with a certain Father Daniel, the owner of the icon. This time of day Father Theodore could be anywhere, John explained, pulling away from his grip. Perhaps even praying in his room. The Professor's face lit up and he asked for directions to his cell, but John cut him off, saying visitors weren't permitted in that part of the monastery, unless accompanied by a monk. He gripped John's sleeve again and asked to be taken there. Reflecting a moment, John suggested he try the vineyard, for Father Theodore might just as likely be there, securing vines or tying them with ribbons to keep blackbirds away. The Professor thanked him for his directions and set off down the stairs, taking two at a time.

On a balcony overlooking the eucalypt tree now shading the back of the church, John tried to make sense of Anton's unannounced departure, and recalled again the pigeon he had lovingly nursed as a child. When the bird's wing had healed, his father advised him to release it, saying it would either return as a solitary homer or become part of someone

else's happy flock. Having grown attached to it, he didn't want to lose it, but also realised how cruel it was to keep it confined. Finally, late one afternoon, he took it out, kissed its round head, and threw it up to a clear sky. The bird circled the house a few times then flew out of sight. He waited in the backyard until dusk, his neck sore from looking up - nothing. After a sleepless night, he ran out early the following morning, only to find an empty box. And now, gazing at the tree's smooth limbs, he was unable to account for a similar feeling of loss in regard to Anton. Suddenly, though, he chastised himself for this inexplicable sentimentality. Anton was no different from that injured pigeon. If he had left the monastery, God be with him! It meant he was feeling well enough to continue his pilgrimage, perhaps to return to his unfortunate sister, whom he would comfort with an icon or a cross from the Holy Mountain. And yet he still felt a twinge of disappointment at Anton's leaving without word of goodbye, without so much as a note of thanks. He recalled the unsettling look in Anton's eyes, which had caused him to turn away from fear of being drawn into something beyond his depths. Yes, he had experienced that look once before, toward the end of his first year at university. It was in a chemistry lab, the last for the year, and he had been painfully infatuated all semester with a girl working on the next bench. That afternoon, while distilling a small amount of salicylic acid, their eyes met for no more than an instant, but in that space between heartbeats his being dissolved in a flush of blood, was carried off on a swell of emotion, and it was only the acid's pungency that brought him back to the lab. After the session he waited outside on the steps as sunlight slanted on the redbrick building. When she appeared, he took a breath, only to hesitate at the crucial instant: she skipped down the steps and he never saw her eyes or those shapely calves again.

Was it possible no one else in the monastery had seen Anton? The question struck him like a bolt. What if he was an apparition? A satanic figure disguised as a sick young man? After all, wasn't there something strange about him, unsettling, not altogether of this world? He had read somewhere about 'the devil's cough', and Anton coughed in a manner not quite that of a man. Again, he rebuked himself for giving air to such thoughts and ideas, and set off to check the guest register. Yes, it was there in his own handwriting: Anton Novakovic. He passed his finger over the name. What was happening to him? A few days ago he was focused, ready to undergo his tonsure in two weeks, now his thoughts had become whimsical, unbecoming of a would-be monk. Paul, Anton, his father's arrival tomorrow - circumstances beyond his control had conjoined to unsettle him. Still, he must rein his thoughts with his prayer cord and bring them back into the heart, as the Hesychasts directed, and for this the visit to the cave-dweller would benefit him as much as Paul.

It was just after one when they boarded a boat at the monastery's jetty. Stefan and Paul each carried a light backpack, while John had his monastic bag over his shoulder. They had been to the refectory before leaving, packing water and food for themselves, and additional supplies for the hermit. The boat serviced the eastern side of the peninsular, beginning in the morning at Erissos, a small town just beyond the border of Athos, and stopping at all monasteries as far as Daphne. The weather was mild, a light breeze blew from the north, and the boat churned along close to the shore at a good speed. A few elderly monks sat in the covered section, while visitors and younger monks were on benches in the open. Paul wore a black woollen cap John had given him, not so much for

protection from the sun, which was still friendly, but because a bald head was out of place on Athos. John had apologised in giving it to him, but he laughed it off, saying it wasn't the subtlest way of inducting him into the monastic ranks. With Anton still on his mind, John described him to Stefan and asked if he had seen him around the courtyard this morning. No, why? He was about to disclose Anton's nationality, but replied the young visitor had been unwell with a fever and may have left in a condition unfit for travel.

When they left the jetty of Great Lavra monastery, the swell became stronger, the captain less talkative, though he continued pointing out landmarks along the way. The boat's roll increased at the Caves of the Wicked Dead. Excommunicated monks from Lavra were buried there in the thirteenth century for siding with the Latinisers, who sought to bring Athos under Rome's authority. And then there was the relatively uninhabited region known as Burnt Huts, named after an ascetic monk who would burn his makeshift lodgings in order to be taken for a fool and left alone. Reaching the Pulleys, the captain blasted the boat's horn, for it was there two and a half thousand years ago that a raging tempest shattered the Persian fleet sailing to invade Greece. Towering cliffs were spotted with small huts clinging to the sheer rock face like swallow's nests. Negotiating the choppy water, the captain reversed the boat to a rocky ledge and the trio disembarked.

Paul struggled on the steep track, breathing hard, dismissing suggestions to stop for a moment. The others exchanged glances that questioned the wisdom of their outing. At one point, noting their concerned look, Paul forced a laugh and promised not to die on them, not there anyway, even though such surroundings would make it easy to slip into heaven or hell, eternity or nothingness. Following the Abbot's directions, John led the way along the top, through clumps of gnarled scrub, until a semblance of a trail veered abruptly to the left and down the cliff. They picked their way toward a small hut protruding from the cragged rock-face. The descent became steeper, with fewer footholds, but they used a cable pinned into the rock. Below, the rough swell broke white against the boulders. The hermits hut appeared, its tin roof secured by rocks. They descended onto a wooden landing that moved with their weight. A cross made from thick branches was tied by wire to a supporting post. John knocked three times on the door patched with a flattened olive oil can. The features of a young woman were still visible, despite the battering she had received. A ragged figure opened the door.

- Your blessing, Father, said John, bowing and extending his hand.

- The Lord blesses, replied the hermit and concealing his right hand behind his back so it wouldn't be kissed by the visitor.

He was about sixty, with a tangle of beard and matted hair, and blue eyes whose sharpness was enhanced by a complexion dark from weather and neglect. His cassock and trousers were no more than rags, his bare feet seemed as if he had been walking in pitch, and for a hat he wore a dark, checked handkerchief knotted at the corners. The rattle of a chain accompanied his every step. Despite his dishevelled appearance, all three friends were struck by a certain glow that emanated from his face, as though in expectation of good news. John conveyed his greetings from the Abbot, to which the hermit bowed low.

- The great sinner Nyphon thanks the good Abbot.

John translated his words for Paul, at which the hermit shook his head.

- Ah, you're from Australia, he said in English. The young man who is now old Nyphon lived twenty years in that country.

- We're from Melbourne, said Paul.
- And that young man lived in Sydney, near King's Cross.

The friends turned to each other in surprise, and John pictured the Abbot chuckling at this revelation, for no doubt he had sent them to this particular hermit knowing his background. As John explained the circumstances of their visit, the hermit arranged makeshift seats around an old door that served as a table. The hut was in fact a cave with a facade set on overhanging beams. The sea was visible through gaps in the warped floorboards. A chapel had been set up at the back of the cave, with an assembly of icons fixed to the wall. Five skulls greeted the visitors from a shelf, their name inscribed on the forehead, which Father Nyphon introduced as former inhabitants of the cave. A hurricane lamp hanging above the table was covered in cobwebs. His bed consisted of a few planks, while the sum of his possessions sat on a few shelves. A rope stretched across the mouth of the cave. The visitors took out their gifts and placed them on the table, but he showed no interest in them, thanking God instead for the mountain's provisions. He apologised for having nothing to offer them: bread and water sustained him during Lent, and in Holy Week even bread was too much. He invited them to have what they had brought, for a sinner like him wasn't deserving of their kindness.

- Why do you call yourself a sinner, Father? Stefan asked. Surely your life of solitary struggle has absolved you of sin. We're the sinners and in need of your blessing.

- Brothers, it's like this, he began, spreading his hands on the table. Years ago a famous professor of mathematics came to Father Nyphon, downhearted at the fact he would never know all the undiscovered theorems in his field. He wasn't comforted by his vast knowledge – the known was finite and trivial. No, he was troubled by the unknown, the infinite that remained to be discovered. It's the same with sin, brother. The more progress you make on the path of chastity and humility, the deeper you probe into your heart for understanding, and the greater your enlightenment, the more you realise the extent of your shortcomings and the depths of your sinfulness.

- And how does one purify the heart?

- Through confession, dear soul, he replied with a look that pierced Stefan. In this there are three stages. First by watering the good earth with your tears, then by bowing to your brother, and finally surrendering to God.

Stefan felt his cheeks redden as he glanced at his friends. They waited for him to continue, but he lowered his gaze and scratched the tattoo on his forearm.

- And how is life in Australia? asked the hermit, turning to Paul.
- The rich are getting richer, and the poor are gambling more than ever.
- Is it still the land of plenty?
- Yes, plenty of people are dying of heart attack.
- Too much free time, frowned the hermit, and they forget their souls.
- Why did you leave Australia, Father?

- Let's not spend good breath on what no longer exists, he said, tapping John on the back of his hand. The young man of those years disappeared like a dream in sunlight. For thirty years now the monk before you has lived like one dead to the world, and yet he has felt more alive than in the prime of his manhood. Why? He lives for the boundless future, for eternity, for nothing but God. Yes, brother, he has emptied himself of his past and filled his heart with the joy of what's to come. When he looks out on a ship speeding

past, saving time for those aboard, he knows the fullness of life is found in stillness not speed. Brothers, we save time by losing ourselves in the timelessness of prayer.

- You're fortunate to have such faith, said Paul.

- Faith, yes, Father Nyphon has it, but it's not like money in a bank. He struggles for it each minute of the day and reclaims it from the jaws of doubt by offering the very marrow of his bones. Faith, brothers, it's truly a wonderful paradox. You have it and don't have it. You struggle for it, grasp it, and no sooner are you conscious of having it, than it slips through your fingers like holy water. And so you spend a lifetime struggling for those fleeting moments, that approach of grace, when the fragrance of eternity fills your nostrils like incense at the Resurrection service. Our huts here on the cliffs of Karoulia are nests, brother. Those skulls are the discarded eggshells of souls that have flown to paradise. Yes, brothers, give blood and bone and God will reward you with spirit. But first you must overcome death, and that's done by chewing at it day and night, as if it were a black root. And then, dear brothers, something miraculous will happen: death will lose its bitterness and become sweeter than honey and sustain you for the life to come.

- What of those close to death but distant from your faith? Paul asked.

- You're close to God, dear soul, so close - a thickness of a thought away.

- And if there's no God? If Australia's the truth and your life here's a fantasy?

- Materialism is captivating, brother. Only the pure-hearted escape its charms, and then only through the grace of God.

- I've overcome its charms, Father, only not through God. You see, I've been mindful of death day and night for the past six months. My death, Father, a fact confirmed by medicine, by the number of white cells in my blood, not some philosophical notion or religious abstraction. Yes, I'm close to it, Father, closer than you to your God. I've counted it as the chemotherapy dripped into my vein. But I'm not afraid. When the time comes I'll vanquish that dark force on my own terms, through the humanity of my will. My final act will express the nobility of man and prove God doesn't exist.

There was a momentary pause when the crashing beneath them became louder and a tin sheet flapped on the roof. Nodding thoughtfully, Father Nyphon gazed down at his hands still spread on the table: his nails were thick and almost yellow, his knuckles knotty and callused from going down on his knees. John and Stefan exchanged another glance, uncertain of where the conversation would lead and how the hermit would react to their friend's opinions. Paul waited for a reply with an intense look, his face glowing in a manner not unlike the hermit's.

- Dear brother, that's the demon of pride speaking. It settles in a heart closed to humility and feeds off darkness and fear. Dwelling in ignorance and self-glorification, it becomes defiant, denies the Resurrection, and finally sets itself up as God. But pride hasn't overcome a single death and leads many into the abyss. Our salvation is in the hands of the Lord, who conquered death by dying, and whose death brought God closer to man. Our cross is a symbol of this bridge between human and divine. Listen to Father Nyphon, dear brother. Open your heart to humility, uproot the demon of pride, and you'll be filled with an overpowering love. What else is a hermit if not a solitary lover? And many have said that erotic love is but a shadow of the presence of God. As for this sack of bones before you, the soul within is clothed in white light and waits like a bride for her groom.

John thought of his own feelings, the powerful advent of spring, the stirring he had experienced in recent days. And he remembered a line he had read somewhere: I'll tame the restless seed with an ascetic text. He had read the Philokalia more assiduously last night, precisely in the hope of taming the restless seed, but his thoughts flitted from Anton, to his father, to the meaning of celibacy, to the women he had seen last summer, when he accompanied an elderly monk to Salonika for a minor operation. He hadn't been in the monastery a year and the Abbot had chosen him to assist the old Father. Why? Was it to test him for what lay ahead? They had arrived at the bus station in the afternoon and from there caught a taxi directly to the hospital. After the peace and tranquility of Athos, he felt the full onslaught of traffic, advertisements, and women in summer outfits, until the monk was assigned a room. Relieved to be in a quiet place again, he settled in a corner armchair, where he intended to spend the night before leaving to catch the first bus at six in the morning. He sat there for some time, reading the solemn words of the Philokalia, feeling more composed, occasionally seeing to the monk's needs. But the rustle of a young nurse snatched him from the text. His heart leapt like a rabbit at her quick smile, her starched dress buttoned tightly down her front, the outline of her underwear. He concentrated on his book with even greater attention, but the effort meant he didn't take in a thing. At sunset the monk said he would be all right for a while and suggested he go out for a walk. He felt uneasy at the thought of the city's turmoil, but the monk's insistence prevailed and he left his book on the chair with a promise to return soon. It was Saturday, the hospital wasn't far from the seaside, and he soon found himself on an esplanade full of evening strollers. He sat in a treed garden near the White Tower - a prison built by the Ottomans, but long since appropriated by the citizens as the symbol of their city. Music throbbed from cafes and nightclubs along the traffic-clogged street. Waves slapped the sea wall. A crimson sunset stained the horizon. Young people sauntered past and cast curious glances at him. A few teenage girls giggled as though teasing him. If only he had brought his book. An old woman bowed to him in respect. Vendors approached him with nuts and lottery-tickets on poles. A woman with bright make-up and high heels walked past slowly, attracting attention by her dress and exaggerated gait. Feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious in the unrestrained sensuality of the surroundings, he was about to leave when a young man sat next to him, crossed his legs, extended his arms on the bench's back-rest and commented on the passionate nature of the sunset. He liked poetry, especially the work of the Nobel-winner Elytis, which was abstract, timeless, and every bit as moving as a church hymn. John nodded, his attention on the young man's twitching foot. He asked whether John liked Art. And sculpture? He liked the freedom of the ancients and the nakedness of their gods. Everything was well proportioned, including their genitals. When John felt the fellow's hand on his shoulder, he stood and hurried off, his body shaking, unable to rid his mind of the twitching foot. He spent the night in a corner of the hospital room, reading, praying, focussing on the monk's stole, whose stitched cross and skull had almost faded.

Conscious of the silence becoming heavy and awkward, John asked the hermit how divine love differed from Platonic love.

- Platonic love is intellectual and aesthetic, he replied. As such it's a state of mind that begins with the notion of physical beauty and proceeds to a heightened sensibility, where the object of desire is replaced by an abstraction, what Plato called an Ideal Form.

Divine love, on the other hand, is a state of being that proceeds from a denial of self and the reduction of intellect to zero. When this is attained, thoughts disperse, the heart is set alight, and one is caught up in rapture.

- Words, said Paul, becoming suddenly annoyed. Pretty soap bubbles. God died in the Big Bang and was scattered in an expanding universe. Man's now the measure of all things, including death, because he can take his own life.

- Yes, said the hermit. The word that's not lived and felt like a nail in the flesh is nothing more than a soap bubble.

John and Stefan listened as Paul and the hermit continued their discussion for some time. When his friends finally suggested they might have to make a move, Paul flushed in surprise. They had tired Father Nyphon with all their questions, said John. Not at all, replied the hermit, scratching the floorboards with his clawed toes. When Paul asked if they could stay a little longer, the hermit offered to accommodate him for the night, saying he could catch the morning boat back to the monastery. Then, with a strange flash in his eyes, he added they ought to make a wager: either the young man would leave the hut in the morning believing in God, or Father Nyphon would renounce his solitude and perhaps return to Australia. Paul beamed at the offer, though both John and Stefan attempted to dissuade him. Conditions were harsh in this part of Athos, the nights were cold, and they would feel responsible if anything happened. But he was now aroused by the idea, and as they knew from Melbourne once he wanted to experience something new nothing could keep him from it. They thanked the hermit for his hospitality and stepped out on the platform.

The weather had changed in the time they were inside: dark clouds now tumbled down from Athos; a strong wind battered the hut and clashed a loose sheet on the roof; rolling waves shattered on the rocks in a surge of froth and foam.

- A storm's coming, said the hermit, with a look of delight.

- It's wonderful, shouted Paul, standing close to the edge with outstretched arms.

- Truly wonderful, added the hermit. Monks have leapt from such cliffs in moments of ecstasy, mistaking their slender arms for wings. Foolishness, brothers, yes, but born of extreme longing and faith.

- Of ultimate freedom, said Paul, barely able to contain his excitement.

- Take care, said Stefan, shaking his hand.

- Why so glum, Paul laughed. He's a man of God, not the devil.

- And don't do anything foolish, said John.

- Like throw myself into paradise?

Stefan led the way as they scrambled up the precipice and hurried back to the rocky pier. The sea was heaving and they wondered whether the boat would set out for the return journey. They took shelter behind some boulders and ate a little of what they had brought along.

- Did we do the right thing leaving him there? asked Stefan.

- It might be his night of Gethsemane.

Their hopes of returning to the monastery were sinking when the boat suddenly appeared, labouring hard in the dark-green swell. Swearing and cursing, the captain tried several times to manoeuvre it close to the ledge. On the third attempt his assistant leapt out, pulled it in, and shouted to the waiting pair to jump aboard. The sea was less

turbulent away from the rocks, but the boat still pitched wildly from side to side, and spray flew up from the bow. They sat in the sheltered section, together with a few pale visitors braced to whatever they could find. A cigarette in the corner of his mouth, the captain asked about the third member of their party. Chuckling, he praised their friend's wisdom: better a night with a light-headed hermit than death by drowning in this heavy-handed sea.

If Father Akakios was indeed a genuine Holy Fool, as some in the monastery believed, and not simply a common fool, then he was part of a tradition that went back to the very beginnings of Christianity, if not before, with a philosopher such as Diogenes the Stoic, who lived in an enormous wine-jar, went naked through the streets of Athens, and urinated on the shadow of Alexander the Great, declaring the shadow of a fair-haired king and that of an Ethiopian slave were born of one father, the sun, whose colour was the same as the urine of an honest man. From the bits and pieces that had come directly from him (though one could never be certain whether he was being truthful, for his tongue was unusually thick and he gnawed it when speaking), Father Akakios, or Andreas as he had been known in the outside world, had a feeling for God from a young age. When his father, a wealthy Athenian lawyer, had jokingly said a true Christian was as rare as a hole in water, the boy spent the entire day jabbing a nail into a glass of wine. A struggler at school, he liked to play the fool and would often take the blame for things he didn't do, not only to spare others the strap (their fists clenched at its very sight, whereas he would meet it with a beggar's palm), but because he liked to be sent to the corner, facing the wall, where he could be alone with his ten fingers. Perhaps he exaggerated his backwardness in reading, telling those in the monastery he didn't have a head for words. The very alphabet had been too much for him to learn at school. Yes, he had tried to memorise it, but those black letters would always scatter from his mind like jackdaws at sunset. Still, he was quick in arithmetic and would often count for the sheer joy of counting, sometimes singing the numbers to chants he had heard in church. He had once asked his teacher how far he must count to reach the kingdom of heaven. It couldn't be reached by counting, he was told, only by praying. He wasn't convinced, for he had seen an icon in which a ladder touched the very sandals of God. Still, mindful of the teacher's words, he began counting his prayers, reasoning that numbers were like nails and prayers like rungs, and together they would make a strong ladder.

When the father accepted his son would never follow in his footsteps, not least because the boy was also pigeon-toed, he promptly stopped his education and ferried him off to a distant relative on mountainous Crete. Having a greater interest in homegrown mythology than imported Christianity, he instructed the relative with regard to his son's occupation: the boy must tend mischievous goats, not head-bowed sheep, for the goat had been synonymous with the god Pan, and its quickness might quicken the dullard's mind. In letters the relative sent to the lawyer, he pointed out how Andreas liked nothing better than to be alone in the silence of the hills, and how he hadn't learnt much from the goats, but they had learnt a lot from him, for each one would answer to a number he had assigned them, his favourite being the seven-syllabled ninety-nine.

As Andreas grew so did his beard, but he stubbornly refused to shave. In those days only Communsits wore beards and when asked if he were grooming himself for a life as a Red, he replied a life in black was more to his liking. When the distraught Royalist

relative asked why he wouldn't shave, Andreas answered he wanted to live lighter. But didn't the beard weigh him down? Not as much as a brush, razor, and, worst of all, a mirror. And why was the last so bad? Because the devil appeared whenever one looked into a mirror. But that was a reflection, persisted the relative. Perhaps, he countered, but in the end they were one and the same. Lurking in reflections, the Cunning One promoted pride, vanity, selfishness. No, a mirror wasn't a window, but a screen between a man and his soul, a woman and her neighbour, a monk and God. One shouldn't be deceived, he warned his speechless relative. The Evil One used reflections to catch the unsuspecting - first the eye, then the heart, finally the soul.

When his beard became thick as a thrush's nest, Andreas so feared and loathed the thought of his reflection he ate his lentil soup with a wooden spoon and drank his wine with eyes closed. He was wary in going out after it had rained, taking care to fill his pockets with white pebbles, which he threw at still puddles not only for his own welfare but for the sake of the sun, who might be tempted to admire itself. By this time his hatred of mirrors was such that he took to smashing them around the village. Once, in walking past the house of a seamstress, he noticed a young woman inspecting her new dress in a full-length mirror. Alarmed at the thought of her seduction by the devil, he burst into the room and shattered her reflection with a fire-poker. Another time, collecting rusty nails in the village square (they were washed down after an electrical storm), he noticed the barber shaving the back of the mayor's head. Now it was known the mayor was having an affair with a woman from a neighbouring village, whom he was now preparing to visit, and so, wishing to save the poor man from the sin of lust, Andreas entered the shop backwards, approached the mirror, and threw a large rock over his shoulder, leaving a clean rectangle where the devil's haunt had been. On the third occasion, in the village church on Saint. George's Day, he noticed how people admired themselves in the glass covering as they bowed to kiss the icon of the handsome Saint, especially the younger women, who imprinted the surface with lipstick. Springing out from the side, Andreas snatched an old man's walking stick and smashed the glass.

His behaviour outraged some villagers, confounded others, and amused children, who teased him in the village-square and dazzled him with mirror-fragments they had picked from the barber's rubbish pile. Unable to bear the humiliation, the relative wrote to his father wanting him to take back his son, but the father wouldn't accept him. His wife had just refurbished the house, and among the new items were several expensive mirrors from Venice. Not only this, Athens was shaking off her provincialism and looking more like a modern city: cooking utensils were no longer made of dull copper and aluminium, but ageless stainless steel, in which women could pluck their eyebrows; well-stocked shop-front windows reflected proud pedestrians who had exchanged sheepskin coats for suits; while cars were now everywhere and drivers polished their rear-vision mirrors, to see where they had come from while speeding to the future. If his son was as the relative said, he would find the capital bewildering, worse still, he might go on a rampage and smash everything in sight. In the end the relative conferred with the village priest, who, knowing something about Holy Fools, suggested the youth be sent to Mount Athos, the only place in the world where women were not allowed and mirrors were few, for it was a known fact that women, more so than men, saw eye to eye with mirrors. There the youth could put his penchant for numbers to good use by counting prayers on a cord, for it was

also a known fact that Athonite monks prayed without ceasing, even in their dreams. And so Andreas farewelled his numbered goats one by one, packed his wooden eating implements into a sack, and was escorted onto a timber barge bound for a place where, he was told, every third laurel-tree shed a prime number of leaves on Good Friday, and men were as silent as lambs, though they dressed only in black.

In the monastery opinions concerning Father Akakios's state of mind differed. Father Gregory, for instance, considered him a harmless simpleton, whose actions were selfless and who in many ways was more innocent than his cats. The guest-master was also quick to point out that Father Akakios was closer to God than most in the monastery, for he knew neither pride nor vanity. He maintained Providence had sent the humble Father to Athos as a reminder to all that salvation lay in becoming a fool for Christ. Perhaps the guest-master was right: over the years Father Akakios's behaviour and manner had become reminiscent of the simpletons one saw grinning at flustered pedestrians in the heart of big cities. His tongue had grown thicker and resembled the root of a tree, making his already garbled speech almost incomprehensible to outsiders. Not only this, the gnarled tongue was constantly exposed, for, as he struggled to explain, it had lived in darkness long enough and he now liked the taste of light. And why, when he was seen with shoes, were they always slung over one shoulder? They had carried him long enough over the thorns of this world, he grinned, and the time had come for him to return their humble kindness. On certain sunny days, when the moon was also faintly visible, he would walk backwards both in going west early in the morning and east late in the afternoon. Questioned about this by Father Gregory, he replied there was something sinister in his black Siamese-twin, and that one's shadow was a reflection of sorts, which explained why he would suddenly exclaim 'Get thee behind me' as though someone had struck him on the back.

Father Maximos had disagreed with the guest-master, who simply nodded in a congenial manner. A keen observer of men, the gatekeeper had over the years watched Father Akakios in his carefree comings and goings, and from the point of view of his discerning left eye had concluded the monk was pretending to be foolish in the righteous manner of famous Holy Fools. He had reminded the guest-master of Saint Simeon, who spent thirty sanctifying years in the Byzantine wilderness before returning to the world. Thereafter, concealing his saintliness to avoid the poisonous admiration of men, he acted the fool for no other reason than to be reviled, ridiculed, even despised, and all this in order to subdue passion and pride. On one occasion Simeon went into the bedroom of a woman taking an afternoon nap, removed his clothes, and stood naked before her. Wakened by his prayers, she screamed to her husband, who ran in and battered the monk black and blue. Of course, Simeon took the beating and abuse in silence, smiling like a windy-headed fool, while deep down he thanked God for granting him a state of dispassion in which women were no different from trees and grace accompanied the blows of a wrathful husband.

No, Father Maximos had insisted, the ragged, cat-loving monk wasn't as simple-minded as the good guest-master believed. After all, he did no regular work around the monastery, was free to come and go as he pleased, enjoyed all the benefits of the community, and in the end would probably find a better place in heaven than he, who had worn his eyes to the whites in guarding the gate. But if that wasn't enough to convince the

guest-master, he gave two further examples of Father Akakios's so-called foolishness, appending each with coda. First, there was the time he strolled up to a visiting Archbishop and, without the slightest provocation, smeared the large silver cross around his neck with fresh mule manure and then, with the same hand, slapped him on the cheek. Three monks were needed to restrain his Eminence from raising an ornate staff and clubbing the gaping offender over the head. Could one extract a drop of wisdom from such folly? Certainly! Apart from fearing his reflection in the over-sized cross, Father Akakios had sought to deflate the pride he had seen in the Archbishop's swollen girth. And he succeeded, for his Eminence was genuinely contrite at not having turned the other cheek at the instant of the slap. He sought out the monk after vespers and, now wearing a simple cross carved from hollyoak, was about to ask for his forgiveness when the cat-lover removed his crushed cap and bowed to him, startling his Eminence, who reciprocated the gesture at once. Father Akakios then fell to his knees and touched the Archbishop's polished shoes with his forehead, upon which his Eminence prostrated himself and kissed the monk's yellow-toed feet. When he sprawled face down on the floorboards, like a cat that had just devoured a dove, the Archbishop was determined not to be outdone, but was prevented such lowliness by his girth. In the end he thanked Father Akakios and left the monastery intent on passing through the eye of a needle.

And then there was the time the nimble-footed monk had danced in church. As the chanters sang a lively hymn and the priest's censer jingled like a tambourine, he stepped out to the centre of the nave and began twirling under the candelabra as though in a nightclub or, worse still, a Muslim dervish. Some monks veiled their faces so they wouldn't be infected by the demon possessing the poor soul; others chuckled in their palms; while laughter flew like noisy swallows from several beards thick as blackberry bushes. He was escorted out by a refectory-keeper and his assistants, who later protested to the Abbot, demanding his expulsion from the monastery. Father Maximos happened to be in a stall close to the dancer and had studied the look in the dancer's eyes. He agreed with the Abbot: Father Akakios had danced both in celebration of God and to humour his fellow monks, for laughter, especially at one's self, was as efficacious as prayer in promoting a sense of brotherhood.

Father Meletios had yet another opinion of the obtuse monk. As one well versed in the convoluted intricacies of watches and clocks, he also knew something of the workings of the human heart. In his view Father Akakios wasn't a natural Holy Fool, for such souls were more rare than geniuses, but a fine actor who sought to live the life of exemplary Holy Fools. His acting was so consummate, added the clockmaker, it had deceived everyone, including himself, so that he was no longer able to distinguish between his role and reality. Now the point made by Father Meletios was indeed subtle and he expounded it as follows: a sane person playing the part of a Holy Fool in a self-deceiving manner was in fact simply a fool; whereas one acting more transparently, with a hint of self-consciousness, wasn't a fool at all, but someone closer to a Holy Fool. Having spoken to many actors in his Athenian watch-shop, Father Meletios had long ago realised that a good actor lived by a deceit that precluded natural goodness, which flowed from constant vigilance and self-awareness, the venerated attributes of the famous Holy Fools.

Seizing the opportunity of practicing his Greek, Father Theodore had also contributed to the discussion, though ever mindful of his pronunciation. He had received

lessons in phonetic from none other than Father Akakios, in whose protruding tongue the semantron-striker had discovered the secret of sounding certain soft Greek consonants. The Slavic monk pointed to the glorious tradition of Holy Fools in his homeland. Yes, it had its roots in the Byzantine world, but once transplanted to Russian soil it quickly flourished and developed a character all its own. Both men and women answered the call and set out on the path of humiliation, out-fooling anything the Greeks had done. The most famous cathedral in Russia, in Moscow's Kremlin Square, was named in honour of the Holy Fool Basil. And then there was Xenia of Saint Petersburg, who was canonised for her foolishness. On the death of her adored husband, the young woman sold her belongings, dressed in his clothes, and roamed the streets calling herself Andrei, the name of the departed. She slept in doorways even in the depths of winter (though shopkeepers were only too pleased to have her holy dreams grace their premises), prayed on her knees at crossroads and vacant lots, and, disguised as a man, worked as a brick-carrier on the construction of a church. As with most Holy Fools she was also blessed with clairvoyance and foretold the death of the Empress. Running through the streets of the city like one demented, she shouted that every household in Russia would be making pancakes tomorrow. And so it happened, in funeral feasts throughout the land people gave and received pancakes in memory of the Empress.

Father Gregory had praised the semantron-striker on his progress in Greek and then spat lightly to the side three times, to keep the Evil One from nesting in the hollow under the Russian's tongue. Yes, he liked the story of Xenia, and commented on the similarity between Greeks and Russians, though the former made pancakes at the birth of a child.

Coming late into the discussion, Father Nikitas had related an incident which he saw as indisputable proof of God's grace working through the foolishness of Father Akakios, for he believed the monk was neither a simpleton nor a saint, but a hollow instrument through which God sounded His purpose. A few days earlier he had watched from the balcony as a young, progressive monk walked across the courtyard with a computer monitor in his arms and heaven knew what in his head. The nine-and-a-half fingered monk had objected to the introduction of computers, but the Abbot had argued they were needed to record the monastery's manuscripts and icons and save them from further disintegration. Strong in his beliefs, Father Nikitas countered that just as the human body was subject to decay, so man-made objects must go the way of dust. As a natural process, disintegration was an act of God, and perhaps human intervention in such matters was contrary to divine law. But his arguments had made no impression on the Abbot, and shortly thereafter computers found their way into the cloisters. And so, as the young monk embraced the monitor in going to his cell, Father Evlogios called him to assist with something in church. Pleased to help the priest-monk, he left the monitor on the wall surrounding the fountain and went inside, when along came Father Akakios whistling the hymn from the Resurrection service. Not knowing what to make of the object before him, he crept up behind it, sniffed the cables, and walked around to the black screen. Suddenly cries of 'The devil! The devil!' filled the courtyard as the barefooted monk ran around the fountain like one stung by a bee. When the young monk emerged from the church, Father Akakios had the monitor raised above his head, and before the startled black-beard could utter a word of restraint, the grey-haired servant of God hurled it to the ground, shattering

the screen. When the monk groaned the two-syllable 'why', stretching the second over four beats, the breaker of mirrors grinned he had seen the devil in there. And on being told it was his reflection, Father Akakios replied it was the same thing. Pointing to the circuitry, he laughed it was the devil's brains, and shuffled off in the opposite direction to which he had been going.

Now as the wind whistled through the pines, gathering clouds from the North; as lightning struck its devilish pact, flashing a signature in white; as large waves broke on the shore, crackling pebbles in the backwash; as thunder grumbled from Athos, threatening the semantron clattering for vespers – in short, as a storm was brewing, Father Akakios picked his way gingerly over the rocks near the workers' quarters, with the bottoms of his trousers wet. The carpenters Anesti and Aleko were smoking on the verandah, bored by their reflections in the coffee's black sediment, when the monk suddenly appeared from the side of the building. Recognising him at once, they winking mischievously to each other as a signal for a little fun.

- Your blessing on us, good Father, called Anesti.
- Your blessing on me, he replied, chewing his thick tongue.
- How can we bless you? asked Aleko. You're the one who's lived a holy life.
- But you're closer to Christ, he said.
- In that we're sinners, Father?
- We're all sinners, brother. But as carpenters you practice Christ's trade.

Their laughter pleased him and he chuckled in delight, rattling a collection of pebbles in each pocket. He accepted their invitation to join them. Aleko offered him a coffee, but he declined and turned their cups upside down in their saucers.

- Why aren't you fasting, Father? Anesti asked.
- Not fasting? I've forgotten the last time I ate.
- But you're chewing your tongue like it's a steak, he laughed.
- Been chewing it all my life, brother.
- Is it that tasty, asked Aleko.
- Only with a spread of sunlight.
- Why do you chew it? asked the other.
- It's a bother when I speak.
- And if you chew it away? Anesti continued.
- I'd have the voice of an angel.

They asked him what he had been doing down there among the rocks. He rattled the pebbles, saying he would use them to blind the eye of the approaching storm. At the sound of a horn, the sprightly monk leapt from the verandah and scurried off to the jetty, shouting over his shoulder the captain would need his help. Hump-backed waves broke and washed over the concrete jetty as the boat rose and fell in reversing to the landing. Father Akakios caught the rope and pulled hard as John and Stefan jumped out. He then threw it back to the assistant with a blessing and the boat churned away, struggling in the swell. Large drops fell as they hurried off toward the monastery. Lightning flickered above the dome and thunder clapped a stone's throw away. On the uphill path a shiver passed through Stefan as rain shot through the overarching trees. Father Akakios took off his cap and, with childish delight, stuck out his tongue to taste the drops.

- God's blessing, he cried, God's blessing.

- But we'll get soaked, said John.
- The rain will wash away the devil's stench.
- Have you seen him again? asked Stefan.

Trotting between the brisk-striding pair, he explained with some excitement he had been poking around near the abandoned mill, where the stream opened to the sea, when he noticed someone washing in a rock pool. At first he thought it was a boy from the school in Karyes, for those blessed nuisances were always sneaking off for a dip down there, even though swimming was forbidden in the holy waters of Athos. He urged himself to walk away, but was drawn forward by the smell of incense and sweat. By now, though, he knew exactly who it was, for the Evil One's smell had been described by many monks, in particular ascetics, who never trimmed the hairs in their nose for that very reason. No, he couldn't be fooled, not even by the jacket and jeans folded neatly beside a pair of boots. Kneeling behind a rosehip bush, he watched the Evil One scrubbing his short hair until it turned to froth. And then the Cunning One turned and revealed the true blackness of his art: there knee-deep in the pool stood a young woman, naked as water, beckoning him from his hiding place. But he gripped a thorny branch with all his might and stood his ground, for he knew the devil was most active during Holy Week. He counted his frenzied crosses and watched with his left eye, and that half-closed, in case both were corrupted. In the end, realising he couldn't be tempted, she wiped herself with a towel, got dressed, and left without a word. He went to the pool, though not too close, to make sure he wasn't seeing things. If he had doubts, they vanished at once, for the water was the colour of blood.

- Brothers, I threw a stone in that pool and ran for my soul. But thank God the rain will wash the place clean.

The rain became heavy as they approached the gate, but Father Akakios wouldn't go in with them. He wanted to continue walking, for he liked praying in such conditions, and left them with a short apothegm: the drops were many, but lowly water was always one. The others greeted the gatekeeper and ran across the courtyard to their respective cells. John put on his outer robe and hurried back down to the church for vespers, entering just as the service commenced. In the nave he went to a vacant stall and nodded to the Abbot, who seemed pleased they had made it back for the service. The storm had now broken loose: rain washed down from all sides, thunder accompanied the choir, and lightning flashed through the small windows in the cupola, revealing the features of Christ the Pantocrator, who at this hour would not otherwise have been visible at that height. Glancing up at the Virgin's mantle, John could barely contain his sense of unease. He tried concentrating on the hymn, but the words of Father Akakios quickened his heart. Working the prayer cord, he followed the choir's modulated 'Kyrie Eleisons' until the archangel Gabriel painted on the left door of the iconostasis caught his attention. But it wasn't the slender rod in the figure's hand that interested him, nor the curvature of its wings, nor the lightness of its step - no, he now saw its face as though for the first time and wondered whether it was male or female. What had Father Akakios really seen? Was it all nothing more than his playful imagination? No, the details were too much the same. The jeans, the boots, the short hair - everything pointed to Anton. But was the old monk mistaken about the other features? Had he really seen a woman, or had Anton's slight build deceived him?

And then he was stung by another question, one he could barely confront. He steadied himself on the smooth armrests. What if Anton were a woman disguised as a man in order to enter Athos? Such things happened from time to time. Father Gregory had related an incident from the eighties about a German who had spent four days on Athos before being exposed as a woman. Suddenly, everything made sense. Yes, Anton was a woman, that was the reason he felt confused and questioned himself about all sorts of things, some of which he wouldn't dare mention to anyone, even the Elder. He felt a sense of relief, as though waking from a bad dream, and said a prayer for his explanation to be right. Yes, there was no other explanation. He could now admit the truth to himself: his feelings for Anton verged on infatuation because he had sensed, perhaps subliminally, the presence of a woman. Last night, as he struggled with those feelings, the memory of his father's words had struck him again, this time with greater force. When he had first announced his intention to become a monk on Athos, his father raged in disbelief, shouting he would shame the family name, for only gays turned their back on life and blackened themselves in that place. Those words had hit him hard. Upon first arriving on Athos he often questioned his celibacy and whether its source lay in what his father had said in anger. In time, however, he managed to subdue the question and find an inner peace, until Anton's appearance. But his fear was unfounded. What Father Akakios had seen dispelled everything. Yes, but first he must find the young woman, see her for himself. Had she returned to the monastery after her wash? And was she now in her cell? His heart pounded and the enormous candelabra hung with a wealth of accoutrements seemed to sway above him. Voices blended with the thunder, while icons sprang to life at each spasm of lightning. He bowed as the priest-monk approached and swung his censer, sending up a puff of fragrant smoke. For an instant he thought of Paul in the hermit's hut and tried to pray for his safety and wellbeing, but he was now too agitated to focus on anything except Anton's identity.

The congregation crowded into the loggia after the service. It was now raining heavily and streams cascaded from the dome. Above the courtyard the night sky was tinged purple. A few visitors dashed across to the refectory for the long-awaited supper. Monks raised their robes and stepped carefully over puddles in the cobblestones. John hurried to the guesthouse. The lamps in the foyer and along the corridor were burning low, as though retreating from the storm. He was somewhat flustered when Anton answered his knock and invited him inside. Were they the jeans Father Akakios had seen? Was that the jacket zipped to the chin? The boots drying beside the heater? Anton, no, the visitor smelt of shampoo.

- I came earlier, John said, struggling for words. The room was empty and I thought you'd left for another monastery.

- I felt better and went for a walk.

- And a wash?

The visitor's cap was pulled low, but John noticed a freshness of face that wasn't there before. The eyes were quick and evasive, and when they finally exchanged looks John felt as though on the edge of a precipice.

- Are you a woman? John asked awkwardly.

And for a moment he was in free fall. Water gushed from a leaking down-pipe beside the window. A flash of lightning cleft the darkness, revealing a bank of low clouds.

The cap came off and feminine features glowed in the lamplight. Slender fingers unzipped the jacket, revealing a woman's torso in a tight-fitting jumper. John's heart thumped like a fist, his thoughts swirled in confusion. Was this really happening to him? Was Father Akakios right? Had the devil now come to him in the form of a woman? He recalled how other monks had been tempted in all sorts of ways just before their tonsure. A part of him feared her and what she might be, while another wanted to thank her for the fact that she was a woman. She sat on the bed and gazed at the floorboards. John took a chair and sat opposite her, not knowing what to say, though realising her presence in the monastery was a terrible transgression.

- Who are you? What's your name?
- Mara, she said, without looking up.
- Why have you done this?
- I am...Anton's sick sister.
- But this is no place for women, he said firmly.
- Please, Father...
- I'm not a monk yet - call me John.
- Please, John, let me stay a few more days.
- That's impossible.
- I've come for the Good Friday service.
- Your presence here is wrong.
- Do you really believe that?

John hesitated. Yes, the prohibition on women was a matter of tradition rather than Scripture; nevertheless, as a novice on the verge of becoming a monk he must obey and uphold the ancient traditions, for obedience, no matter how much it went against the grain of reason, was one of the fundamental rules of monastic life.

- You're not meant to be here, he said.

- I have been unwell, John, she said in a soft voice. Doctors call it depression and have given me drugs. But my illness is due to loss of faith, and it started when bombs began falling on Belgrade. I have come here because of your wonder-working icon. Please, John, let me stay until Saturday. Let me pray to the Virgin. I know she will restore my faith and help me get better. Please, don't send me away. There's a terrible darkness in me and I'm scared it will ...Please, until Saturday, and I promise to leave without a word, as if I had never been here. Please, think of it as an act of kindness, as saving the life of a human being.

Brimming with tears, her large eyes gleamed in the lamplight. John drew his chair closer and took her hands and was surprised by their warmth. Blood throbbed in his ears and he could feel them turning crimson.

- Don't cry, he said. Your tears are precious. Save them for your prayers to the Virgin. Don't cry, Mara. I'll work something out.

And then, barely aware of what he was doing, he wiped the tears from her eyes and cheeks. She clasped his hands and, pressing them to her breasts, implored him for help. Her nipples were firm on back of his hands and he felt himself being drawn into new emotions.

- Don't cry, Mara, he said, pulling his hands from her. I'll work it out. But you mustn't leave the room. I'll say Anton's still unwell and in need of care.

She clasped his right hand and was about to kiss it, but he quickly bowed and kissed her fingers.

- No, Mara, I'm grateful to you. But you're probably starving. I'll be back shortly. You mustn't leave the room. Promise me you won't leave.

- I promise, John.

He had never heard his name said like that, in a voice so tender, vulnerable, full of sorrow. An hour ago he had felt distant from his name, ready to shed it for another, but suddenly Mara had infused it with new life and meaning, which would now make its shedding difficult.

He felt buoyant in the corridor, light-footed, as though a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The foyer was empty. As rain trickled down the window his attention vacillated from his distorted reflection to the blurred haloes of lamps in the courtyard. He smelt her tears on his palms. Was this really happening to him? Now, more than ever, he needed clarity and strength. How else could he face his father tomorrow? How else could he help Paul? Yes, his feeling toward her was more than sympathy for someone in need. She had pressed his hand to her breast and he had almost yielded. He had denied this feeling in Australia by living as a monk of science; he had checked it in coming to Athos by means of fasting and prayer; yet now, when he imagined it subdued, it leapt out of the blue and grabbed him by the heart. He took several deep breaths and, working the knotted cord, ran through a string of Kyrie Eleisons. The refectory-door suddenly opened and light splashed onto the wet cobbles. He tried to grasp his reflection, but it dissolved in the rain.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

1

After a night of lashing rain the monastery looked refreshed in the morning light, ready for tomorrow's important service. The church-walls were restored to their original Byzantine brown, vapours danced and swirled from wooden balconies black with damp, redemptive rust dripped from the large cross wired to the dome, cobblestones shone and puddles reflected the silver underbelly of dispersing clouds, propped by crutches the ageing fig tree sparkled with Eve's tears, each budding drop containing the seeds of a fruit that promised eternal life. There was an earthy smell in the air as the sun warmed the storm's aftermath, sharpening the fragrance of herb-pot and flowerbed, raising the hopes of novice and monk.

Father Nikitas rubbed his eyes with the stump of his index finger. He had just come from the Abbot and was in no mood to appreciate the clarity of the spring day. Stopping beneath the fig tree, he struck a branch with his walking stick, showering Father Akakios's favourite cat. When the sleeping animal didn't stir, he poked it with his stick, sending it off with a squeal. Cats, he thought, continuing across the courtyard. The monastery was crawling with them. No telling male from female. At mating-time their shameless moaning exasperated him. If only he were the Abbot! There wouldn't be a cat in the place. The creatures bred faster than the rats they were supposed to catch. And then there was Father Akakios and his trained cat! The monastery was becoming like a circus. Visitors clapped at his performances and monks laughed aloud.

An hour earlier Father Nikitas had been welcomed by the smiling Abbot and shown to the guestroom, where the two sat facing each other at a table covered in books. His fingers crossed tightly on a leather-bound text, he compared for a moment his coffin of a cell to this spacious room with its tall bookcases and ornate pelmets. Setting out on the visit hadn't been easy: his resentment of the younger Abbot had grown in proportion to the monastery's modernisation. Yes, his resentment was a reaction to those liberal ideas that threatened to deliver Athos into the hands of Europe. But was that all? Or had the thorn of envy lodged in his right eye? The question had troubled him for years and he cudgelled his conscience for a truthful answer. He sought to overcome it through those ascetic practices that had conferred on him the stole of Great Habit, but it seemed rooted in his heart like a dark pine tree in stony ground. And yet, for all that, he had felt no antipathy toward the Abbot on his appointment; on the contrary, he supported his initial reforms, in particular his decision to restore the monastery to the coenobitic way of life. He had agreed with those early Church Fathers – the architects of spiritual life – who discouraged the use of the first person singular in favour of the plural, and avoided as obscenities all pronouns of possession. In this there was perhaps an echo from his younger days, when he believed Communism would transform Greece to a place where every baker could perform a miracle and every fishermen multiply his catch. Of course, he had renounced those ideas before coming to Athos, but their similarity to the coenobitic ideal continued to impress him. Yes, he had genuinely welcomed the new Abbot, for the liberties practiced in the hitherto idiorrhythmic monastery appalled him. Monks were permitted to have money and private possessions, they ate separately, often feasting,

bought and sold property, and even employed poorer monks to cook and clean for them. In short, Capitalism at its worst.

His initially enthusiasm began to change when the Abbot and the dozen younger monks who had followed him from their previous monastery began displaying what Father Nikitas perceived as haughtiness toward the older, less-educated monks. He disapproved of the Abbot's appetite for books and writing, seeing it as a form of intellectual gluttony. And when he started going abroad for talks and conferences his receptiveness to Europe became more than apparent. His younger followers were energetic, industrious, but in ways that seemed at odds with monastic ideals. Where they should be endeavouring to make their intellect subservient to their heart, and directing their energies in ascetic practice, they seemed far too busy in moving the monastery into the third millennium. They were too intellectual, Father Nikitas had told his own followers, behind closed doors, and then whispering through his thick beard. He wasn't a narrow-minded zealot, and his resentment didn't stem from a feeling intellectual inadequacy (he had taught himself English, the language of the West); no, he was first and foremost a monk who directed his thoughts and energies to the faith of the great Church Fathers. And he reminded his followers of the words in Ecclesiastes: making books was endless and study wearied the flesh.

The Abbot had spoken first, offering his guest a glass of water, but Father Nikitas declined, and so each tested the other's silence for a moment, biting it with their wisdom teeth. He glanced at the Abbot's soft hands and was pleased his were rough and callused from prostrations. Observing the Abbot's shadow on the polished floorboards, he felt justified because his was darker and more familiar with dust. He took heart from the Abbot's smile, for he believed that Holy Week was a time when one should experience the suffering of Christ. And it was precisely in relation to suffering that Father Nikitas had visited the Abbot. He wanted him to deny the visiting Professor permission to see the icon belonging to Father Daniel, for it was heretical, some would say blasphemous, and should not be made public, particularly in Holy Week, least of all to a Westerner. He had brought up this issue on several occasions in recent years, and each time the Abbot had smiled in a boyish manner, saying he saw nothing heretical in the icon. And again today he had dismissed his request with the same boyish smile. Yes, the work was unusual, but that was due to its age, going back to a time before the traditions of iconography had been set. Father Nikitas countered that an icon depicting Christ in the act of dancing didn't belong in the monastery. This was Holy Week, a time when monks and visitors should reflect on the passion of Christ, not on the demeaning content of that icon. It was incumbent on the Abbot to stop these assaults on long-established traditions and protect younger monks from the influence of such heresies. The Abbot had listened, turning the silver cross around his neck, which occasionally dazzled Father Nikitas. Then, in a friendly manner, he pointed out there was nothing in Scripture which precluded the likelihood of Christ dancing. Wasn't He in Cana as a wedding guest? Hadn't He performed his first miracle there, providing more wine for the pleasure of all, of which He no doubt partook? And where there was a wedding, wasn't there also dancing? So it was more than likely Christ participated in a dance or two, as depicted in Father Daniel's icon. There was joy in Christ, the Abbot had concluded, and though almost two thousand years of painting had never shown him with anything even resembling a smile, he didn't object to the icon in

question. Father Nikitas had shaken his head at what he considered nothing more than sophistry. He insisted Christ never danced and to suggest otherwise was to deny His divinity and reduce Him to flesh and bones. Though not as well read as the Abbot, he was nevertheless certain the icon had been influenced by paganism. Several heretical sects in the early days of Christianity had sought to portray Christ as the successor of the ancient god Dionysos, and this mainly through association with wine. He didn't have the Abbot's university education, but he had read enough as a schoolboy to be certain the icon had been influenced by one of those sects, for Dionysos was not only the god of wine but of revelry and dancing. Remnants of those sect had survived until fairly recently in the forests of Russia. Calling themselves Khlysts, they sought union with Christ through dancing and debauchery. Did the Abbot wish to promote such practices by attracting attention to the icon? Did he intend to have a band in the refectory as monks danced in imitation of it? Taking all this with a good-natured smile, the Abbot replied the icon belonged to Father Daniel, and it was ultimately up to him whether or not it was displayed.

And it was to visit Father Daniel, a painter of icons, that Father Nikitas was now making his way across the courtyard, careful not to wet the hem of his gown in the eyes of last night's storm. His look was so forbidding, a flock of starlings scattered at his approach, while a ginger cat peered from beneath the rim of the Russian bell until he passed, and only then dared to run out for scraps at the back of the refectory.

But Father Theodore and the Professor were already with Father Daniel, in a bright studio whose open windows overlooked the courtyard and the tower above the front gate. The icon painter was about seventy, with blue eyes as lively as wrens and a mole like a grilled mushroom on his left temple. His beard was sparse, almost threadbare, and this because of a compulsive habit of plucking hairs as he worked. Instead of the stiff monastic hat he wore a cotton cap whose blackness had long ago faded to purple. He was ambidextrous and his slender hands, which could have passed for those of an adolescent, were never still. Those hands had been at odds with each other for as long as he could remember. Slightly bigger than its reflection, and possibly older, the left resented the fact that it was forbidden to make the sign of the cross, that it had been discouraged from writing, and that it held the fork instead of the knife. Up to the age of seven, however, he used his left for eating his crusts of bread, holding the blunt pencil, and even crossing himself in passing the cemetery, when such unruliness was checked by judicious slaps from parents and teachers. Feeling the stigma of unworthiness, the left took to hiding in pockets full of darkness, from which it became paler than the right, which in turn gave it a suspicious, if not sinister, appearance. Yes, Father Daniel painted with his right, as tradition demanded, but unknown to anyone he used his left when depicting the Virgin and other female figures, which many considered his finest work. Over the years, though, a growing mutual mistrust resulted in his hands seldom touching, so that the Bible came between them when he prayed, he washed his face with one or the other, and he no longer tied knots, for even the simplest required close manual co-operation.

His studio was covered in icons he had been commissioned to paint for monks on Athos and visitors from as far as New Zealand. The work-in-progress on the easel beside the window depicted Judas in the act of hanging himself. The sapling on which the traitor had knotted the rope was arched with the weight of his body, in a way suggesting it would either snap, plunging the sinner into an abyss, or suddenly spring upright and catapult him

to a host of angels witnessing the event. The subject was unusual but not without precedent: a fresco still existed in the fourteenth-century cemetery chapel in Vevi, a village some hundred kilometres west of Salonika, and formerly known as Banitsa. Like monks, villages in this part of the world also bowed to a change of name, but in a baptism scented with Balkan gunpowder. Yet a village differed from a monk in this regard: its stones had a longer memory than flesh and their impressions were deeper, so Banitsa could still be seen, perhaps better with sunglasses, on the dazzling front wall of Constitution Square in Athens. Last autumn a visitor from that village, now a resident of Australia, had brought a photograph of the fresco and asked Father Daniel for an icon, which he wished to have before him when praying for the souls of suicides in general.

Father Daniel was descended from a long line of icon-painters. His parents had come to Greece as refugees from Asia Minor in 1923, under what was officially a population exchange with the Turks, but practically a form of ethnic cleansing. They were from Trebizond, a town on the Black Sea famous in Byzantine times for the tenderness of its octopus and the enduring quality of the creature's ink. The finest authors of the Empire used it for writing texts likely to be read under an abrasive sun (lamplight was gentler on the written word), among them Michael Kamenios, whose commentaries on Aristotle's notion of entelechy perished in a shipping accident. On the journey from East to West that passed through the gold-capped teeth of the Bosphorus, his father had kept a precious heirloom close to his skin. Wrapped in linen and secured in a special pack, the icon of Christ Dancing was strapped to his back during the day and to his chest at night. It had been passed down from father to son, going back to a time when men were said to walk barefoot on fire and women were fluent in the language of water.

According to what Father Daniel had been able to piece together, the icon was painted by a three-fingered ancestor, who severed the other two himself because they weren't needed in holding a brush and making the sign of the cross. A drinker and dancer, the man had staggered out of a tavern, lost his way home, and took shelter from the howling wind in the warmth of a sheepfold. That night, perhaps because it was the eve of Epiphany, Christ appeared to him in a dream and instructed him to paint an icon that showed Him dancing and happy, for He had come to bring joy to the world. The following morning, instead of going to church, he went to his studio and set to work. It was a time when icon painting was just beginning and artists were still free in what they depicted. Working in a fit of inspiration (some said under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, others under the influence of alcohol), he completed the work in a day and had it on the dinner table that evening. Initially the icon was so uplifting to the faithful, especially those suffering from melancholy, it was thought to have wonder-working powers. In time, however, when the lines of iconography were established and Christ was shown as either solemn or suffering, the icon was considered un-Orthodox by the authorities and thereafter seldom saw the light of day. It continued to be passed down in the family, but now more as a heirloom than an object of veneration, though people still occasionally met in basements and cellars, where they lit candles before it and prayed for relatives and friends who had fallen victim to black colic.

In the middle of the eighth century the Emperor Constantine V issued an edict prohibiting the display and veneration of icons. Constantine wasn't artistically minded, so the edict had nothing to do with what some considered a serious decline in the standard of

work pouring out of studios. His decision was influenced by two principal concerns, which he saw as having the potential to undermine the Empire. First, religious works were becoming so artistic, especially mosaics whose splendour left people gaping from Antioch to Ravenna, it was almost impossible to distinguish worship of God in spirit from worship of God as a graven image, with the latter no different from pagan idolatry. Second, he believed Christianity had to be purged of its images in response to the spread of Islam. As the Muslim faith prohibited all images, except for the Holy Word, the mullahs claimed theirs was a purer, less materialistic religion, thereby appealing to many on the fringes of the Empire who perhaps resented the wealth of the Capital. And so for the next century the 'War of Images' raged through the Byzantine world, with icons smashed and burned in public displays that prefigured the Inquisition and the book-burning Nazis. Father Daniel's ancestors saw the writing on the wall, and believing man was made in the image of God, they turned from icon painting to making mirrors.

Yes, the icon of Christ Dancing survived this period, but Father Daniel couldn't say whether it was the work of Providence or the perspicuity of the man in whose possession it happened to be. When the alert fellow smelt oil-paint burning in his neighbourhood, he quickly cut a mirror and mounted it on the icon's face with a dab of glue in each corner that set like nails. This glue was made from oak resin, and once set it could only be dissolved with palm oil, for these trees had become inimical to each other ever since the latter had offered its leaves for Palm Sunday, the former its limbs for Good Friday. He then placed the mirror on the bare wall directly opposite the front door and waited. When the fanatics entered, they glanced sideways at their reflections, ransacked the house, and returned to the mirror. Inspecting it closely, they considered breaking it to see what lay behind, but recalled a saying in their trade: a mirror deliberately broken brought seven times seven years of bad luck. So they hung it back on the nail and left. It remained disguised as a mirror until the ban on icons was repealed due in no small part to the intercession of the Empress Irene, who perhaps proved the old proverb: a man could live without a woman, but a woman couldn't live without her object of desire. And so by succession it came to Father Daniel, who had brought it with him to the Holy Mountain forty years ago. He kept it locked in a chest, whose key he wore around his neck, on the same cord as his cross. He was especially fond of it during Holy Week, when he set it on his icon shelf at the end of the day and secured it in the chest before leaving for matins. And throughout the week he never tired of kissing his heirloom, in gratitude both to Christ for the joy His sacrifice had brought the world, and to his ancestors, whose presence he could smell in the dark wood.

Father Daniel, whose lay name had been Dimitrios, learnt the art of icon painting before the down on his upper lip had started to darken. His diligence and skill were such that he bought his first razor from the sale of a work depicting a dishevelled John the Baptist carrying his own head on a platter. The youth's talent was recognised, commissions followed, and the father glowed with pride at his youngest son continuing the family tradition, for the others had chosen to become furriers in the town's growing fur trade. After the brutality of the Civil War, when Communists iconoclasts destroyed churches, a sudden demand for icons meant his father's studio was overwhelmed by orders. Dimitrios was eighteen when his father sent him to Athens in order to replenish their stock of materials. But a chance visit to an exhibition of Modern Masters shook his

very foundations. In what he referred to as a moment of epiphany, the youth felt the full liberation of colour from object, figure from form, intuition from reason. The works excited him in the same way as the advent of spring, when villages sounded with festivals and girls in colourful dresses danced with sprigs of blossom in their hair. Realising in a flash he had been painting according to a formula, he suddenly wanted to free the young saints and martyrs from long-established tradition, and through them liberate himself from the constraints of the past. Yes, he would no longer follow but give flight to his youthful imagination, infusing each subject, even Christ, with sorrow and joy drawn from his own experiences. From now on he would be consumed by the energy of colour, just as the young martyrs had been consumed by fire, and throw himself into each work the way these Masters had done, covering it with blood and brain.

That evening Dimitrios took the money meant for materials and went to Plaka, the nightclub district at the foot of the Acropolis. There he spent the notes in his right pocket drinking and dancing to the sound of the bouzouki (perhaps some element of that early ancestor had surfaced atavistically in him), and with those in his left he staggered off to enjoy the warmth of an older woman's body. He didn't return home the following day, or the following month, but wrote to his parents informing them he was well and had found his calling in Athens. Impressed by his portrait of her as a Magdalene figure, a prostitute took him in, acted as his model, and introduced him to several of her influential clients. With the proceeds from the sale of his first exhibition, which featured an array of pimps and prostitutes from Plaka, Dimitrios bought a truckload of material and sent it to his father. His reputation outgrew the narrow streets of Plaka, his style had an unmistakable signature, and it wasn't long before he became the darling of Athenian society. Several years passed in an outpouring of work, during which he avoided all contact with relatives and friends. Was he ashamed of his life? Did he feel his present work betrayed the tradition of his ancestors? These questions must have gnawed him even in the flush of his success, for upon hearing his father was dying and wanted to see his youngest son, he left Athens at once.

And so on a bright, windy day in late autumn, his shadow darkened the doorstep on which he had sat on as a child, while his hair brushed the lintel still marked with a cross from the Resurrection flame. His mother embraced him and led him to his father's studio, where a divan had been placed for the sick man, who was covered in a crimson quilt that smelt of camphor. He opened his eyes and reached out with a thin hand that still bore the traces of paint-marks. Dimitrios glanced at the window: a quince tree tossed about in the strong wind, its golden fruit swaying like bells. He took his father's hand and sat on the edge of the divan.

- How many colours in the rainbow? asked his father.

- As many as in a fish's eye, replied the son.

The sick man smiled weakly, raised himself with some effort, and pulled aside the quilt: on his chest lay the icon of Christ Dancing, just as such objects were placed on the dead in their coffin. He beckoned his son to kiss it. As Dimitrios bowed the icon's distinctive smell imbued him with a feeling for his ancestors, while in Christ's bare feet he saw a new path opening before him.

- Will you accept it? asked his father. Or must I take it to my grave?

Dimitrios paraphrased the question to himself: would he renounce Western art and return to the tradition of his ancestors? In that moment of deliberation he glimpsed in the icon a small detail he had never before noticed: one of the figures dancing around Christ held a paintbrush in a three-fingered hand, not only this, the young man bore a striking resemblance to him. Yes, it might have been nothing more than coincidence, but he was impressed by the figure, and saw in a revelatory flash that he, not his father, must take the icon to the grave. He promised to continue the tradition, but in a manner no ancestor had followed, by becoming a monk on the Holy Mountain and devoting himself to glorifying Christ in colour. His father gave him the icon in exchange for a tearful kiss, and a week later gave up his body in exchange for eternity. After the forty-day memorial service Dimitrios packed his implements and left for Athos. Of course, celibacy meant he wouldn't have a blood successor for the heirloom, as tradition demanded, but this strengthened his resolve in the course he had chosen, for the icon's journey would reach its end by returning to its source.

And now, listening to his guests with a look of delight, Father Daniel plucked at his thin beard. Yes, he thought, glancing at the painting of Judas gleaming in the sunlight, the sapling would have snapped if the betrayer had the thirty pieces of silver under his belt. The Professor was listing his credentials to Father Theodore in plumb-in-the-mouth English, which he in turn translated under his breath into down-to-earth Russian, before conveying them to the painter in broken Greek. And in this struggle with foreign words the Russian monk thought of his *semantron*: its meaning was understood by all because its consonants were clean and its rhythm based on the smallest prime. If it were up to him, though, Father Theodore wouldn't be acting as interpreter, but the Abbot had requested it, saying it was time the West learnt more about Athos and men such as the Professor would assist in this regard. But there was something about the Professor, a certain edge to his voice when referring to Father Daniel's icon, which reminded Father Theodore of the circumstances of his sister's death. For some inexplicable reason he imagined that someone like the Professor had come in possession of the icons for which she had given her young life. A connoisseur for whom objects of faith were nothing more than artifacts to ornament walls, commodities to be sold at a profit, or at best works of art to be studied and appreciated aesthetically.

- I'm researching early Byzantine iconography, continued the Professor, and I've come a very long way to see your icon.

Father Daniel went to a cupboard and served his guest *raki* and a Turkish delight, setting them on a table piled with rectangular wooden panels of various sizes. When they arrived a few days ago from the workshop of a neighbouring monastery, he caressed them all, measured their dimensions with his hand-span, smelt that they had been suitably dried, inspected the knots and the flow of grain, and decided there and then which subject each one would bear. As Father Daniel disappeared into the other room, his large slippers flapping at each step, the Professor's face brightened in expectation. He ate the sweet in one bite, licked the icing-sugar from his fingertips, and tossed back the *raki*. Irritated by the fellow's delight, Father Theodore turned away and examined a recently completed icon showing the Slaughter of the Innocents. A detail of a man about to smash a chubby infant against a wall held his attention for a moment, and he wondered what the painter had felt in bringing it so vividly to life. Father Daniel returned and set his heirloom against

the panels, saying it mustn't be touched. The Professor took out a magnifying glass and studied it for some time. The icon was about three hand-spans long, half as wide, and dark from centuries of veneration. Christ was in the centre in a burgundy gown, barefooted, arms extended not in crucifixion but in the transport of dance. Wedding guests danced around Him, while the bride and groom sat at a table laden with food.

- Remarkable, said the Professor, must date from the fifth century. You must allow me to photograph it, Father.

He then commented on the tiny borer holes dotting the surface and invited the painter to see them through the glass. If the icon weren't treated immediately the borers would reduce it to dust. Through Father Theodore the old monk said everything had a lifecycle, including icons. The holes had been there ever since he could remember; besides, it didn't matter if it perished in his lifetime, in fact it was most timely, even providential, for he had decided long ago to take it with him to his grave.

- No, Father, said the Professor. It belongs to the world.

- Sir, it's mine to do with as I please.

- Yes, of course, but there's your obligation to the past.

- Tradition demands it go from father to son, but having no offspring...

- Surely you have pupils you instruct in this holy art?

- A few boys, replied the painter, from the school in Karyes.

- Well, beamed the Professor. The icon should be passed on to the most talented, your spiritual child, for in many ways he's more than your flesh and blood.

Father Daniel tapped a three-beat canticle with his left hand and a two-beat prayer with his right. The Professor continued with growing excitement. Having studied icons for thirty years, he had recently employed chemists to prepare a compound that would preserve valuable works. The spray would eliminate the borers and guarantee the icon another thousand years of life. He offered to treat the work, assuring him the substance was harmless to wood, colour and humans. His antipathy toward the Professor becoming stronger, Father Theodore hoped the painter would decline his glib-tongued proposal, but after a moment's reflection, moved perhaps by the thought of a spiritual son, the old monk agreed by nodding slowly three times. There was a sharp knock on the door and Father Theodore opened for Father Nikitas. The monk entered with a grim expression. Seeing the icon on the table, he turned away as though dazzled by the sun.

- That doesn't belong here, he scowled. And to display it during Holy Week!

- Welcome, Father Nikitas, said the painter.

- We're monks, Father Daniel, not men of the world.

Father Theodore translated their words to the Professor, who seemed annoyed by the intruder. As the others spoke he took out a measuring tape and, starting with the diagonals, began recording the dimensions in a small notebook.

- Father Nikitas, you're too serious.

- It's Easter, Father Daniel!

- A time when Mother Earth wears her finest colours.

- And Mother Mary mourns her Son.

- Who brings this clean, new light every year.

He raised a sunlit panel before Father Nikitas as though a mirror, but the latter wasn't impressed and turned from his shadow on the pale surface.

- Please, Father Daniel, this is no time for humour. Your icon promotes the very heresies condemned by the Church Fathers. It advances Christ's humanity, instead of His divinity. This heresy makes a mockery of monasticism and robs the world of hope. I've been here fifty years, Father, and given blood for my faith. Your icon ridicules my heart-felt beliefs. It says salvation lies in happiness, not asceticism. No, Father, the figure in your icon isn't the Christ of Scripture, the Second Person of the Trinity, the uncreated light of my prayers - that figure is Satan usurping Christ's form to lead men to their doom.

- Father Nikitas, you look too much through a needle's eye.

- Better a needle than a window.

- But isn't Christ entitled to a moment of joy before dying for the sins of the world? Come, Father Nikitas. There's nothing to fear. Rejoice in the sweet smile, the unmarked palms and feet, the glow of His being. Yes, Father, I take out my icon in Holy Week, but not out of disrespect, or to belittle our lives as monks, but to lighten my burden in these difficult days.

- Father Daniel, he said, pointing with his stumpy finger, our salvation lies in suffering, not art and dancing.

- What would you have me do with it, Father?

- Burn it and scatter the ashes.

- But the Professor here wants to photograph it.

- You mustn't allow it.

- What harm can it do?

- It will bring disrepute to Athos and our tradition of iconography. Catholics and Protestants, not to mention Muslims, will use it as ammunition in their argument against our veneration of icons. If you must have it, then keep it under lock and key, away from impressionable eyes and those who'd mock us.

He turned to the Professor, who was again scrutinising the icon through the glass, concentrating on Christ's magnified face.

- Sir, he said, carefully choosing his words. You are not permitted to photograph the icon. It is not meant for public display.

- It must be photographed, countered the Professor.

- We are not here for the sake of Western scholarship.

- But, Father, it's a matter of research.

- Allow me to remind you: this is a monastery, not a university.

- Monasteries were universities in the Middle Ages.

- In the West, perhaps, but not in the East. On Athos faith has always come before philosophy.

Despite not understanding a word they said, Father Daniel followed the exchange with a look of delight, turning from one to the other. Father Theodore wasn't needed in the proceedings so he retreated to a corner and counted on his prayer cord. He was generally unsympathetic to Father Nikitas's views but agreed with him on this issue. The Professor turned to the painter and asked if could photograph the icon.

- No, interceded Father Nikitas.

- It belongs to Father Daniel, said the Professor.

- He has no say in what can and cannot be photographed.

- This defies international conventions of co-operation and scholarship, snapped the Professor, a flush spreading from his cheeks to his scalp. The European Community has invested large sums in the restoration of Athos, and we have every right to conduct research in a respectful manner.

- Sir, we are not in the service of Europe.

- But you accept European grants?

- I am not the Abbot.

- Then I'd better see him.

The Professor gathered his things and left in a fluster, followed by Father Theodore. Father Nikitas urged the painter to remain firm and resist the Abbot in his undoubted support of the foreigner. In leaving he tried to avoid the icon, but it caught his attention and he accorded it a fiery look. Father Daniel was pleased to be alone with the friendly sunlight and the scented breeze rustling the pages of an open book. He sat before the icon for some time, plucking his beard with one hand, counting knots with the other. Finally he stood, kissed the warm figure of Christ several times, and recalled his ancestors.

The bus from Daphne was overdue in Karyes, which probably meant a larger than expected number of visitors had arrived with the morning ferry for the last three days of Easter. John waited for his father in front of the Protaton's bell-tower. Here and there, as though abandoned by the passing storm, an infant cloud hung low and lost in the blue expanse. Water trickled down the crooked gutter of the main street, singing the only hymn it knew. Washed white overnight the Holy Council's offices dazzled the eyes of monks long milky with cataracts. The rain had enhanced the rich fragrance of the surrounding forest, and this may have contributed to the unusual amount of activity in town. The crowded restaurant was thick with talk and cigarette-smoke. Shops run by mainlanders overflowed with goods and groceries, while those run by monks were bursting with souvenirs. An elder laboured with the weight of his shadow as boys from the school stepped lightly around him. Several vehicles waited for passengers and packages, their engines humming out of tune. Groups of men were discussing their impressions of Athos, impatient for the bus that would take them down to Daphne.

John was sitting on the steps on the side of the bell-tower, enjoying the warmth of the wall on his back, while drowsiness pulled pleasantly at his eyelids. All night he had struggled with his feelings for Mara, occasionally falling on knees and knuckles in praying for strength and guidance. The irony of his predicament didn't escape him. Ever since adolescence he had prided himself on his ability to keep his thoughts and emotions under check, and now, on the verge of his becoming a monk, she appeared out of the blue and plunged him in turmoil. Yes, he must tell the Abbot about her, for the presence of a woman on Athos was a serious offence, but he couldn't bring himself to do it - not just yet. Last night, in praying to the Virgin, he admitted to himself his feeling for Mara, and from that moment anguish and uncertainty gnawed at his heart. His only comfort was the Elder, in whom he would confide as soon as possible and act on his advice.

After matins he had taken breakfast to Mara, telling Father Gregory the young man was still running a high temperature. The lie had been painful and he looked away in saying it, but at the same time he justified it to himself in terms of restoring her wellbeing. She had answered his knock guardedly. When he placed the tray on the table, she secured the latch on the door and removed her jacket and cap.

- How did you sleep? he asked.

- The rain kept me up, she replied, avoiding his searching look.

- I shouldn't be doing this, Mara.

She closed her eyes and nodded.

- I'm betraying the monastery.

- Please, John, another two days and you will never see me again.

Those words had stunned him. What would happen in two days? Would she fly off and disappear like the wounded pigeon of his childhood? She was lovely in the morning light streaming through the bare window. It lay gently on the nape of her neck, gave her short hair a golden sheen, and accentuated the sadness in her eyes. And it was this sadness that made his heart ache, for even as a youth he had sensed that love was somehow intimately bound to sorrow, and if he were ever to fall in love it would be with a woman

whose eyes were exactly like Mara's. Should he tell her his feelings? What would she think? He tightened the prayer cord around his wrist. Having come to Athos on a pilgrimage, she might be outraged by such a confession, perhaps question the meaning of her faith. She was vulnerable and dispirited, and his confession might confuse her even more. Two days, he had told himself, and everything would be known. In the meantime he must rope his heart with the knotted cord.

- Will you return to Serbia? he asked
- I have lived like a shadow since the bombing, she nodded.
- The Virgin will help you, Mara.

As she stirred her tea he noticed the fair down on the back of her hand and the curve of her breasts under her jumper. It wouldn't take much for him to renounce his present life and follow her to Serbia or take her with him to Australia. But he checked this thought at once: this feeling was infatuation and it would pass with her leaving.

- Are there any Serbians here? she asked, sipping the tea.
 - A young worker by the name of Stefan Vekovic, but he was born in Australia.
- She squeezed a little more lemon into her tea and ate remainder.
- It's best nobody else knows you're here, said John.
 - Yes, I understand.

He took a small icon from his pocket and extended it to her, saying it had been given to him by an Elder, a very holy man, and it would help restore her faith and wellbeing. She didn't reach for it at once, and when she took it her face became pale.

- Thank you, she said, almost swallowing her words.
- It's a copy of an original called The Hope of the Despairing.

The Virgin and Infant were depicted cheek to cheek, with a tenderness rarely seen in icons of the same subject. She held the Infant close to her body with her right arm, while announcing Him to the world with a silver-plated left hand that covered the original hand. Her look was at once loving and profoundly sad, intimate and faraway, expressing a joy in the present and a fear of eternity. The Infant embraced His mother, though more in offering comfort than to be comforted. His eyes, fixed on hers, were full of curiosity and concern, foresight and acceptance. Mara appeared to lose herself in the icon for a few minutes, and when she looked up her eyes brimmed with tears.

- It's all right, Mara, said John, drawing his chair closer to her. The Elder often speaks about the healing power of tears. Cry to the Blessed Virgin. She'll take your despair and lighten your soul.

- She is staring at the grave of her child, she sighed.
- But He'll rise from the grave.
- No! She will mourn him forever!

Moved, he took her hand, but she flashed in surprise and pulled away. Flustered, he apologised and stood.

- Stay, Mara. A day or two, what does it matter against the backdrop of eternity? I'll take full responsibility for your presence. The Virgin will guide us, you'll see, and the spirit of Easter will fill us with light and hope.

John's heart leapt at the sound of the bus approaching Karyes from the direction of the Skete of Saint Andrew. He closed his eyes for a moment and steadied himself by saying a string of prayers. The overcrowded bus stopped with a shuddering hiss and the

passengers scrambled out with typical Greek unruliness. A few complained they had almost suffocated, but the driver dismissed them with a laugh. Peter Rados emerged from the door at the back and looked around for his son. He had become thinner since they were last together, the lines on his face had deepened, his shoulders were stooped. John wondered whether the flight and the journey to Athos had drained him. Or was he beginning to feel the weight of his years? For his part, Peter didn't recognise his son until he stood in front of him, and even then he studied him a moment before his face lit up and they embraced. He held John at arm's length, looked him up and down, then felt his beard.

- My boy's a real monk, he smiled.

- I'm still a novice, John replied, somewhat awkwardly.

- Then there's still a chance to save you from a life in black.

John pulled away and began working the prayer cord.

- How's mum getting on?

- She misses you, son.

- Why didn't she come with you? You should've had a holiday together.

Peter's eyebrows fell and he bit the inside of his mouth, mannerisms whose meaning John knew only too well.

- Is she...all right?

- There's a lot to talk about.

The conductor called on everyone to take their luggage and instructed those going to Daphne to commence boarding. John took his father's bag and, together with seven or eight others, they climbed into the back of a jeep that would make the rounds of several monasteries. They were quiet for most of the twenty-minute journey. John told him about Stefan and Paul, and he asked what there was in this narrow peninsular that couldn't be found in the vastness of Australia. But his tone wasn't as cutting as John had known, and this made him a little suspicious. A few others also got off with them. They walked past Father Maximos's left eye and followed John to the guesthouse. He welcomed them with the customary hospitality, took their details, and allocated beds. He had intended to accommodate his father in Mara's room, but the unexpected turn of events meant he would share a room with two others, as monks and novices were discouraged from having relatives and friends stay with them. From the guesthouse John took his father to his cell, where he made him coffee and invited him to take off his shoes.

- So, this is home, said Peter.

- It's comfortable, replied John.

His father nodded slowly, unconvinced. He glanced at the wood-heater, the kerosene lamp, the tap and trough - things he had left behind in setting out to Australia forty years ago. He hadn't returned to the village once in all those years, while many of his relatives and friends had been back several times. A holiday to that backward place, he would scoff at their taunts. And when his parents died business commitments had kept him from attending their funerals. No, he wasn't nostalgic for the place of his birth, and he might never have come back if his son had remained in the land of opportunity. Peter Rados was, above all else, a practical man whose hands were large and coarse, and for whom the present was a stepping-stone to an unlimited future. God curled the fingers inward, he would say to his growing son. Meaning, don't linger in the here and now, but seize the moment and pull yourself forward. As a youth in the village, though, Peter had

been considered lazy and mischievous, more intent on enjoying today than sweating for tomorrow. His father would threaten him with a stick when he refused to tend their meagre livestock or help in stony fields. Given half a chance he would raid a neighbour's vegetable patch and make off with the biggest watermelon, or steal a chicken from the priest's yard on Sunday morning. And people were wary in walking around the village, for more than one unsuspecting head had been bloodied by a stone projected from his slingshot. Perhaps the youth's behaviour arose from a feeling of hopelessness: a sense of scraping and toiling for nothing more than subsistence – a slice of dry bread and half an onion. When he arrived in the New World he became a new man. His first task was to clear the debt to his parents, who had borrowed both for his fare to Australia and his exemption from Military Service. Working as a kitchen-hand in a relative's restaurant, he shaved his hair at a time when baldness was considered an oddity, if not a sign of illness, so he wouldn't be tempted to socialise and squander money. In this way, serving his own conscription and living as frugally as a monk, he worked two shifts until he had repaid his parents and had enough for a deposit on a house. He would often recount those first years to his young son, impressing upon him the importance of hard work, for he was aware that the children of immigrants often became complaisant, spoilt, and in their laziness expected the fruit of their parents' labour to be served on a platter. Reading the cycles of housing booms with uncanny accuracy, Peter became a successful real-estate developer. He would buy, build and sell in complete disregard of accountants and financial advisers, until his wealth confounded their wisdom and his acumen became the talk of his community. And now, thinking about his assets, he tried to comprehend why his son had turned his back on everything for this tiny two-roomed cell.

- We didn't really discuss things before you left, he began.

- I tried, but...

- Yes, I know, it was my fault.

The open admission appeared genuine and came as a surprise to John. This wasn't the man of two years ago: the one who had raged at his son and threatened to disown him for what he considered a betrayal of everything he believed in. John wondered whether he had finally come to terms with the situation, perhaps through having been worn out by his own stubborn silence, or whether this was an indication of his slipping into old age. His forlorn look moved John, whose gaze fell on his blackened thumbnail, a legacy of an accident years ago.

- It hit me like a ton of bricks, said Peter, shaking his head. A son, an only child, leaving to become a monk – it was like telling me you wanted to kill yourself.

- It's been almost two years. I'm still alive and well.

Peter reached across the table and caught his son's bony wrist, stopping him from flicking the knots in turning the prayer cord.

- Why did you leave Australia, son?

- For the reason you left your parents and shaved your head.

- I did it for a better future, a fuller life for the family I'd some day have. Why have you grown a beard and blackened your manhood?

- For a purer life and the best of all possible futures.

As Peter could only envisage a future in terms of bricks and cement, a place built by sweating in the here and now, he found his son's words incomprehensible. Frustrated,

he flared for an instant, as though about to vent his feelings, but his shoulders fell and he looked into his coffee cup as though into a black well.

- As a boy you were always reading. Remember? You were going find cures for all sorts of things and make the world a better place. We felt so proud when you got your PhD. I was ready to invest money in your research because I believed in you.

- The incident in the village changed everything. Death passed through me that night, not as a thought or an idea but as a vivid dream. I did a lot of serious thinking in the hospital-room in Florina. When I came home I couldn't relate to things around me. Family, friends, study - the world I'd known seemed distant after that brush with death. Trauma, people said. I'd get over it. But it was more than trauma. Australia couldn't fill the hole left by the bullet. I needed something else, a way of life that would not only accommodate death but go beyond it. That night in the village was like a revelation. I suddenly felt close to God, closer than when I'd pursued Him through science and research.

Fortuitous or otherwise, perhaps the night in the village had provided the circumstances for John's true character to emerge. From childhood he had felt most at ease in his own company, either following the meaning of words and symbols on a page or pursuing his own thoughts through parks and gardens. When he was eighteen the family shifted from their two-storey inner suburban terrace to a sprawling acre property abutting the Yarra river in Melbourne's northeast. He was against leaving the house of his birth, but his father's business was expanding and the accountant had advised him to invest in a property with a tennis court and swimming pool. His mother had wanted something smaller, more manageable, but in the end succumbed to her husband's insistence, even though neither of them could swim or had any interest in tennis. John's unhappiness was ameliorated somewhat by the proximity of the river and the endless running paths shaded by gums and wattles. Still, he never really felt comfortable in the large house, and shortly after enrolling in a doctorate he informed his parents of his intention to find an apartment close to the university. The quiet announcement met with the expected reaction. His mother, a small woman with a dimpled smile and youthful looks, pointed out life alone would be difficult and he would in fact have less time for study because of cooking and cleaning. His father slapped the table with an outspread hand and shouted he had bought the house with a view to eventually accommodating a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. He would sell it tomorrow if his son were to move out. When John remained firm in his resolve, his father cursed his studies and advised him to forget this foolishness about a doctorate and help him run the business. He compared himself to Phillip of Macedonia: using his brawn he had laid good foundations in this new country, now his son could do what Alexander did - use his brains to build an empire on his father's modest achievement. When these arguments failed to make an impression he attempted a more conciliatory approach. Did John want his privacy? Was that his reason for moving out? But there was plenty of room for privacy in the house. He could have his own self-contained bachelor pad and bring in anyone at any time. Yes, he understood a young man's needs and he would make sure there was sufficient privacy for those needs to be fulfilled. Blushing, John explained his moving out was a matter of convenience, nothing more. He wanted a simple, uncluttered life, without the burden of maintaining a car or the drudgery of spending hours a day on public transport. All he needed was a small apartment within

walking distance of the university: a clean, quiet place, where he could concentrate on the only thing that really excited him - the study of genetics.

Between his mother's eyes twinkling with tears and his father's sombre with untrimmed brows, John left the sprawling home, which, as relatives commented, could have accommodated five extended families back in the village. He rented a place in the backyard of an antique dealer's shop, meeting expenses through the aid of a scholarship and a few hours of tutoring. Detached from the main building, the redbrick structure had once been a stable and loft, with access through a cobbled lane. A century ago the horses were kept below, while the hay and grain were stored above, in what was now a compact apartment. The door to the loft had been converted to a window, but the overhanging beam with the rusty pulley and hook were still intact. The property belonged to an elderly Polish Jew who ran the shop and stored goods in the bottom of the stable. John had little to do with him, except on rent-days, when he would slowly count out the notes (the owner counted aloud after him, as though a tongue were more reliable than two eyes), collect his receipt, and leave between mirrors that bounced his reflection all the way to infinity. This state of affairs suited John perfectly, for he preferred to keep his distance from people, projecting a deliberately surly demeanour. He knew that cordiality invited conversation, which often resulted in unwelcome visitors, and time wasted that could have been devoted to reading and research.

The first meaningful conversation with the owner occurred a few months into his lease. It was a mild day in late autumn and the fellow's shirtsleeves were rolled, revealing a five-digit number tattooed on his forearm. His chattiness on that occasion may have been due to the mellow sunlight angling into the shop, lacquering everything with a soft glow. He inquired about John's studies and after listening solemnly asked what he thought of eugenics, the science of breeding a better human species, which the Nazis wanted to develop using Jews as guinea pigs. Without waiting for a reply, he asked whether the end justified the means. If a modern Mephistopheles offered Doctor Faust the knowledge to cure all manner of diseases, not at the price of his soul, which many altruistic people would happily sacrifice for the common good, but at a cost of performing lethal experiments on ten thousand humans - should he accept the offer? The owner leaned on the glass counter and examined his tenant through a pair of thick glasses. John hesitated, taken aback by the urgency of the question. A world free of cancer, he continued, at the expense of ten thousand lives - would Faust do it? All right, if that were too hard, what about a thousand lives? Millions spared from misery by the sacrifice of a thousand. Still too hard? What about a hundred lives? Perhaps the question should be put to the hundred who were to be sacrificed, John replied. And if they consented should Faust perform the lethal experiment? John pointed out that ethics were transgressed even in the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. God had instructed Abraham to sacrifice his only son, while later on He had allowed His only begotten Son to be crucified for the redemption of mankind. The owner considered the reply, pocketed the rent, and left the counter to attend to something at the back of the shop.

John's time in the loft was quiet and outwardly uneventful. On Sundays he would visit his parents, who appeared to accept the arrangement, perhaps impressed by their son's sober, orderly life-style. Apart from evenings with Stefan and Paul, he associated with a few like-minded research students from his department, meeting in a local cafe

where they philosophised about science and religion and the salvation of mankind. He was often invited to parties in communal houses, but seldom attended because he disliked the loud music and the pervasive smoke. Colleagues introduced him to girls, but nothing eventuated, for he wanted no complications at this stage of his life. During this time he jogged the perimeter of the General Cemetery, whose dark pines were visible from his apartment. Every afternoon, rain or shine, he ran for an hour around what seemed like the still axis of the restless city. On sunny days the pines overhanging the iron-barred fence provided thick shade along a straight stretch of footpath, while in early winter he shuffled through elm leaves on the opposite side. He memorised the names on stones near the fence and amused himself by recreating lives from scraps of information, or envisaging a world without graves, where people's bodies were cremated but samples of their DNA were stored for posterity. Despite this daily proximity to death, he didn't feel a sense of futility; on the contrary, his strides were springier than ever, his body more energy than mass, as though those east-facing headstones were a source of life and strength.

- Are you happy, son? asked his father.
- Monks don't seek happiness.
- What do they seek?
- A state that asks for nothing and in which one finds everything.

Again his son's words were beyond him, as religion had been throughout his life. Yes, his company had won a tender to build a Greek Orthodox church in an affluent suburb of Melbourne, but even this didn't endear him to his ancestral faith. And, until recently, he still blamed his wife's superstitious beliefs, as he called them, for the mess his son was in.

- I'm glad you've come, John said.
- I had to see what took you from Australia.
- And not to persuade me back home?

Peter's left eyebrow fell more than his right. It was now obvious to John he was troubled by something other than seeing his son in black, perhaps something to do with his mother's health. He glanced at the icons on the shelf and braced himself for bad news.

- Is mum all right? he asked.
- She's...not well, son.
- Has she had a relapse?

His father's disconsolate nod filled John with painful memories. In the second year of his PhD his mother had a biopsy performed on a small lump just below her arm-pit - the very place where babies came, or so he had been told as a child. The evening before the results she was at the sink, washing and peeling potatoes. She urged him to focus on his studies, saying she was perfectly well and it was probably nothing more than a blocked duct. His father also put up a brave front, packing his work lunch with a stoicism that belied his concern. The following morning the specialist placed the film on the screen and, with a yellow pencil, pointed to a dark spot the size of a pea. In explaining the results, he rotated the stethoscope hanging from his neck, catching distorted reflections in the silver disc. She hadn't understood everything the doctor said, though she clutched the golden Saint George hanging from a chain around her neck. John managed to convey she would need a mastectomy, after which everything would be all right. She lowered her eyes and

thanked the specialist in leaving. At home that evening John had been heartened by her strength.

- Let them take this breast, she said, after lighting the chalice in the icon case above the fridge. The Amazons cut off their own breasts to pull the bowstring further. Women in the village blackened their breasts in weaning children. Let them take it if they must. You'll be closer to my heart when we embrace.

A cloud descended on him in the week of his mother's operation. He had read that such things were caused as much by stress as by genetic factors, and recalled the baby she had lost and how hadn't prayed for its wellbeing. In his basement office at the university he would stare vacantly at the colourful poster of a cell taped above his desk. It was the source of life, encoded with information to replicate itself, and yet in his mother's case some of her cells were turning against the fundamental principal of life. He had marvelled at the miracle that infused a string of molecules with life, and now that miracle was being undone. When other research students weren't present, he would slip out the Gospels and draw some comfort from the words of Christ. The cross and the cell: if the former helped him accept the human condition as it presently stood, the latter was a beacon in the dark, summoning him forward, urging him to concentrate on his work and advance research, so a cure for cancer might eventually be found.

- What have the doctors said? John asked, barely able to voice his words.
- It's spread into her bones, there's nothing more they can do.
- Is she in much pain?
- She has her good days.

John clasped his father's rough hand and looked into his eyes. This wasn't the proud, confident man who had scoffed at God in the flush of his success, but a human being reduced to fear by the growing darkness at the centre of life.

- What can I do, Dad?
- She'd like to see you before...
- I'm going to be tonsured in two weeks.
- Son, I'm sorry.

John stood and went to the window. He had come to the monastery as a retreat from the world, but first his friends had sought him out, disturbing his equanimity, then Mara, now his father with this terrible news. A week ago he could rein his heart with the prayer cord, now it seemed beyond his control. Should he return to Australia in his mother's hour of need? Is that what she really wanted? Or was this his father's way of drawing him back? Yes, his mother had been saddened by his decision to come to Athos, but not devastated. After her first brush with cancer, they had gone to church together where she made an offering to the Virgin: the gold coin with Saint George, which had been a bridal gift from her in-laws in Greece. John could still recall how devoutly she had hung it before the icon. His father had been against the idea, but contained his disapproval in deference to his wife's gentle pleading. Yes, his mother had become even more religious after her mastectomy, and he had felt that she understood his calling. He remembered the look in her eyes when he related the incident in the chapel, as if she had understood the mystery of that night and secretly approved of his chosen path. And now did she want him home? But what could he do by returning, other than unsettling his already troubled state of mind. Yes, the next few days would determine everything, he told himself. He would be

tested to the limit in his own Garden of Gethsemane - a test that would indicate the strength of his faith and whether he would continue as a monk or a man.

Father Evlogios chanted over the deceased, pausing now and then to look up from the book of prayers. More reserved than usual the priest-monk read in a brittle voice that seemed incapable of carrying the weight of such words. Several visitors turned to each other, brows creased in surprise. When other priests read these prayers their jugulars would bulge in projecting them to a distant God, with an accompanying resonance that tickled the noses and misted the eyes not only of women hardened by widowhood but blacksmiths who had long-ago hammered their sorrow into sickles and scythes. Not so the monk before them, whose shoulders and spine were clearly outlined beneath his cassock. His voice was so feeble it could barely be heard against the swallows twittering in the nests above the chapel's entrance. Had the long period of fasting weakened him? Or was he saving his strength for the Easter services? Father Evlogios noticed these questioning glances, but wouldn't be tempted to read louder. No! Those who wanted to grasp the truth must become more discerning by developing their sense of hearing. The Holy Spirit didn't come clothed in purple thunder, imposing itself on one and all. Far from it! Quieter than a leaf falling in the dead of night, its advent was apprehended only by those who could distinguish whether the leaf fell from an oak or an elm. Yes. The ears of the righteous were made crimson in their pursuit of the truth. And so he was determined to continue reading in what was almost a whisper, and through this sought to practice self-effacement, for one was humbled not only by concealing one's hands in walking through the courtyard but by allowing the word to speak for itself.

Father Naum had died peacefully yesterday morning, after a life that saw the four seasons of man pass through his long beard. As the monastery's tailor he had pedalled on a squeaking sewing machine in his journey from youth to old age, tirelessly hemming robes and mending cassocks, patching trousers and lining caps, making pillow-cases and calico underwear. Resembling a cradle, the bier stood before the altar gate. The body was covered in a black mantle stitched in red with a cross and several letters. A napkin embroidered in gold had been placed over the head, an icon of the Resurrection lay on the chest, while sprigs of daphne were scattered at the feet.

Having followed proceedings from the chapel's crowded narthex, Stefan was relieved when Father Evlogios concluded the service. The air had become thick with incense, candle-smoke, and the odour of unwashed bodies. He joined the queue filing past the bier, crossed himself above the icon, and went outside. It was almost noon: the courtyard basked in sunlight; a monk wearing an apron pushed a barrow full of wood to the back of the refectory; having opened its flowers, the magnolia tree played host to a convocation of bees. Stefan removed his vest and rolled the sleeves of his flannelette shirt. He had met Father Naum a few months ago when his jeans needed patching at the knees. The old monk had turned them inside out, lamented that souls couldn't be mended as readily, and completed the job with a deftness that belied his years. Stefan had offered to pay him, but the other smiled, a pin flashing between his teeth, and asked him to be present on the day of his funeral. Their beards a refuge for shadows, six younger monks carried the bier to the cemetery, which lay a short distance from the monastery. Father Evlogios and the Abbot walked directly behind the pallbearers, heads close together in

conversation, their vestments glowing. Leading the procession, a stout monk held three candles in the shape of a cross. The small flames were almost invisible in the surrounding brightness, but the day was still and they remained alight all the way to the cemetery.

The procession gathered around the narrow grave excavated the previous day. Inspecting its depth, Stefan was dazzled by the sun in a yellow pool at the bottom. The grave's shallowness surprised him, until he recalled that a monk's tenancy on this plot of land was only three years, not ninety-nine, after which tradition insisted his bones be exhumed and stored in a communal ossuary. Something plopped into the pool and shattered Stefan's reflection. Grinning from behind a cypress tree, Father Akakios projected another stone. Several visitors standing at the edge stepped back in alarm. One of the young Albanians removed his shoes and socks, jumped into the grave, and scooped out the water with a plastic bucket. His companion then threw a few shovels of soil inside, making a dry bed. A monk removed the napkin, icon and mantle. The body was wrapped tightly in a black sheet stitched crookedly with twine, like a parcel meant to be shipped overseas. The congregation gathered around as the pallbearers descended the body by means of ropes. Father Evlogios said another prayer and concluded by chanting 'Eternal Memory', his words fusing with the blue smoke rising from the jingling censer.

Stefan gazed at Father Naum wrapped like an infant. From the cradle to the grave, he thought. The monk's body was clearly outlined, especially his thin arms crossed on his chest. Looking up again, he noticed a visitor on the other side of the grave. The slightly built young man wore a loose jacket, didn't remove his cap during the service, and kept his hands in his pockets as others crossed themselves. When their eyes met the fellow quickly bent down and plucked a poppy growing from the base of a wooden cross. Monks and visitors filed past the grave, sprinkled a pinch of damp soil over the body, and left the cemetery. Stefan was reluctant to leave, perhaps feeling the need to repay Father Naum's kindness in some tangible manner. He watched for some time as the young Albanians secured three horizontal pieces of timber across the grave, just above the body, which they proceeded to line with clean pine boards. Satisfied the flooring was secure they took up their shovels and began filling the grave. When the first clod fell with a lugubrious thud Stefan stopped them and offered to complete their work. They were bemused at first, until he explained he owed the old monk a debt of gratitude, at which they gave him a shovel and two half-smiles and left for lunch.

Stefan was now pleased to be alone. There was enough time to fill the grave and still be at the jetty to greet Paul on his return from the hermit. He closed his eyes and savoured the fullness of the moment: bees hummed in the warmth rising from the damp earth, blossom sweetened the still air, while a cuckoo counted evenly in the distance. A surge of vitality rose from the depths of his being: a sense of strength and confidence that had pushed him on the football field, and which had later drove him to Kosovo. As he pushed the shovel into the mound of soil he recalled again the events of that February.

It had been a hot night early in the month and he was dreaming in his sweat when the phone rang. His father stirred first and swore that only the devil called at that hour, but it was his mother who sprang from their bed and answered it. A moment later her 'Le-le' rent the silence of the house. Ivan took the phone as Stefan helped his mother to the table. The caller, a relative from Kosovo, shouted in a voice audible from across the room.

- Ah, Ivan, the black horseman has come to your father's house and, in a lightning raid, carried off the eldest grandchild. Ah, Ivan, the dreaded Vila, that dark-haired beauty of the forest, has snatched the breath of your brother's only son. Ah, Ivan, the one-eyed shepherd has whistled up the soul of your nephew, the infant you used to toss in the air before leaving for Australia. Ah, Ivan, your Stefan's first cousin, Goran, has fallen to an Albanian bullet.

Father and son had been following the recent developments in Kosovo with even greater passion than the earlier Bosnian conflict. Now, wearing only underpants, Ivan paced the kitchen, cursing the Albanians and lamenting his nephew. His wife went to the icon case, lit the chalice, and kept crossing herself until the match nipped her fingertips. Stefan didn't know his unfortunate first cousin, but the look of sorrow in his mother's eyes moved him, while the anger in his father's Serbian jaw stirred his sense of outrage. His mother took out a bottle of slivovits and went to make Turkish coffee, as was the custom on such occasions. Father and son sat opposite each other at the table, where the front page of the Serbian newspaper showed pictures of mass rallies in Belgrade and the destruction of a village-church in Kosovo. They each had two glasses of the home-made brew before the coffee came. And then, in an instant of transparency (his parents gazed into their cups for a sign of tomorrow, the icon-flame froze in the hum of the fridge, a lone cricket was counting the stars), Stefan suddenly realised he was more Serbian than Australian. -

- Ah, Kosovo, Kosovo, Ivan sighed, your fields sprout the reddest poppies because of Serbian blood. Woman, he said, turning to his wife. I must attend my nephew's funeral and comfort my brother in his hour of need.

His wife reminded him his passport had expired and it would take weeks for another to be issued. Ivan slapped his forehead and cursed the mother of the Immigration Department. Stefan extended his tattooed forearm and volunteered to go as the family's representative. He had been to Bali with the football club: his passport was current and he could leave immediately. His mother gathered up the newspaper in a huff, saying one death in the family was more than enough. Ivan turned from his irate wife, to his imploring son, to the memory of his brother in the bottom of the cup. They said nothing more in the kitchen. But later, in bed, as the slivovits distilled to sweat, Ivan considered what Stefan had proposed. He began singing a folk song about a sword destined to pass from father to son until Serbia was free of the Ottoman yoke. He sang quietly for some time, accompanied by a mosquito buzzing about his ear, until his wife jabbed her sharp elbow into his ribs, at which he swiped at the irritating musician and crushed it in his fist.

In deference to his mother, who was going through a hard time, Stefan didn't attend his cousin's funeral, though he still harboured the idea of visiting Kosovo. She had recently become a grandmother but Ivan had forbidden her to see the grandchild. The elder son had drifted in and out of relationships, finally marrying a Lebanese girl in a civil ceremony. Of course, Ivan didn't go to the wedding. If his son's first girlfriend, the Australian, had been a stinging slap on the cheek, a girl from a Muslim background was a knife in heart. And so he disowned his son and forbade others from having anything to do with him. But this was Australia, his wife had cried, races and religions were mixing. Three generations from now there mightn't be a Serbian school or church in Australia. If that day should ever come, he growled, he would return to Serbia. But there mightn't be a

Serbia, she continued, especially if the European Union had its way. And she reminded him of the former Yugoslavia and how people had identified as Yugoslav first, then as Serbian or Croatia. Perhaps in the new Europe Serbs might refer to themselves as Europeans first. Ivan wouldn't be swayed and insisted she have nothing to do with their renegade son. Stefan remained loyal to his father on the issue, even though he felt for his mother and her wish to see the grandchild.

A week after the funeral, when things at home were a little calmer, Stefan told his father he had bought a ticket and would be leaving for Serbia in a few days. Ivan looked at his son, perhaps as his father had looked at him when he announced his intention to go to Australia, and caught him in a strong embrace, saying he would sort matters out with his mother. As a father Ivan was reluctant to see his only son (that was how he referred to him) go to a Balkan powder keg, but as a Serb he was proud of the boy's feeling for Kosovo, and in the end the latter gained the ascendancy. His mother reacted sharply, despite her husband's assurances. No! This was no time for a holiday in Kosovo. She blamed Ivan for the misery in her life. His fanaticism had driven one son from home and was now encouraging the other to visit a dangerous place. After threatening to leave him if he didn't stop this holiday to hell, she went to her room and cried fiercely, with more tears falling from her left eye than her right, which was known to happen when a Serbian mother cried for a son.

Stefan had kept his real intentions hidden from his parents, though he discussed them with Paul on inviting him to his farewell party. It was a sultry afternoon and they met in a pub not far from where his friend was sharing a house rundown by years of nomadic tenants. Stefan had been waiting inside for some time when Paul arrived with a paper-bag containing several books. Flashing a smile, he apologised for being late, adding he had finally found the perfect books on genetics and cloning. The subject had fascinated him and he was looking for a way of exploring it in his stories. If the literature of the third millennium didn't accommodate developments in science it would become irrelevant. A couple of girls outside had caught his fancy and he suggested they ask to share their table.

- I'm leaving for Kosovo, Stefan said abruptly.

- Are you crazy?

- Albanian separatists killed my cousin.

- And what are you going to do? Bring him back from the dead?

- Have you heard of honour and family loyalty?

- Yeah, in films about the Mafia.

- This is no joking matter, Paul.

- You Slavs are too serious.

- Blood's thicker than beer, my friend.

- Not when it stains the earth.

- You don't understand, there's no history in your veins.

- That sort of history's poison.

- My people need me, Paul. I want to help them, even if it means joining a Serbian militia.

- John's gone off to become a monk and you want to become a martyr. What's got into you, Stef?

- It's called patriotism, my friend.

- It's all bullshit, if you ask me.
- The call of tribal blood.
- Why would anyone want to leave this paradise for someone else's war?
- For the same reason your great-granddad fought in Gallipoli.
- Well, he gets no respect from me. The old man's side of the family still parade on

Anzac Day, but I wouldn't be seen dead marching with them.

- It's all to do with belief, Stefan said firmly.
- More like brainwashing.
- Belief in more than just having a good time.
- And what's wrong with having a good time?
- Look at them, Stefan frowned, scratching his tattoo. There's not a person out

there who'd risk their life for a belief. That's Australia for you, my friend. No conviction in our leaders and none in people our age. You read books, Paul, you write. What's your belief? What would you die for?

- Stef, this isn't an age for martyrs. People will think you're a fanatic.
- Better to die for a belief than to live believing in nothing.

The night of the party was a feast just like the ones back in the village when the traditional Slava was celebrated in honour of the family's patronal saint, or when a young man would set off on a two-year stint of Military Service. Reminding his wife that one could run from fear but not from shame, Ivan managed to silence her opposition. Yes, perhaps it wasn't right to be celebrating at a time like this, but they could think of the party as a wake for his nephew, and it was important for Ivan to send off his son in the traditional way. Unconvinced, she kept her words in the dark and prepared for relatives and friends. In the lead up to the party, his friends at the social club congratulated him on his son's initiative. Each reference to Stefan's bravery and true Serbian spirit swelled Ivan's pride, until he began to imagine his son was going not only to pay their respects to his brother's family, but in defence of Kosovo, though, of course, he didn't breathe a word of this to anyone.

The party was well under way when Paul arrived. It had been a scorching day and the night brought little relief. A lamb was turning and sizzling on the spit, gazing at proceedings with eye-balls ready to burst and small teeth set in anger. The men were in the backyard, seated at a long table; the women were bustling in the kitchen, arranging dishes on the bench, examining what others had brought. An accordion player in an embroidered vest and cap was singing a slow ballad. Ivan sat at the head of the table, beaming, while his wife shredded cabbage at the sink with a sullen look. Stefan greeted Paul and asked him not to mention what they had discussed in the pub. The men took turns to tell stories about the old days, with the musician squeezing emotion from each speaker. At the end of his story an elderly man stood and, bread-knife in hand, declared if he were thirty years younger he would now be in Kosovo, fighting for his village. A cheer went up, followed by a toast for the man's brave words. Another stood on a chair and, with the first three fingers of his right hand spread over his heart, vowed to sell one of his rental properties and send the money to finance a militia in his region, and may the earth swallow him if he reneged on his promise. A roar brought out some of the women and another toast was proposed. As host Ivan felt uneasy about being outdone by his guests: it was now incumbent on him to contribute to the cause in a more substantial manner than the

previous speakers. He climbed onto the table, directed Stefan to stand on a chair next to him, and summoned all the women outside. With his son on his right and wife on his left, he nodded for the musician to commence. The slow, sustained notes in the lower register had an immediate effect: Ivan took them in as though inhaling the smell of fresh bread, savoured them for a moment, then spoke.

- Friends, thank you for coming to honour us on this bittersweet occasion. Yes, our boy's off to the village of his forefathers. Yes, he'll extend our condolences to my brother and his family. Yes, he'll carry us in his heart, just as we carried our parents in coming to Australia.

- Bravo, Stefan, a man shouted from the back.

- Your heart's big enough to carry us all, said another.

A snuffle sounded her and there.

- Friends, continued Ivan, becoming more expansive. We must remember Kosovo in these difficult times. When wolves waited at the onset of winter the shepherd would sprinkle his palm with salt. Friends, my boy's a true Serb, even though he was born in Australia.

Taking his son's arm, Ivan kissed the tattoo and displayed it for all to see. Stefan blushed, while his mother scowled at her husband, but he was now too imbued by patriotic fervour to notice her unease.

- Yes, my boy's going to Kosovo, but not only as a messenger. Tonight, before you all, I give him my blessing to take up arms against the forces threatening the village of his ancestors.

Stefan was stunned: how had his father fathomed what he intended? He turned to Paul, who shrugged his shoulders. Having been brought up in the old ways, where women carried water and washed their father-in-law's feet, his mother bit her tongue and returned to the kitchen.

- Yes, friends, my boy will defend the living and the bones of the dead in the village cemetery. And he'll see to it the Serbian flag flies in the schoolyard, just like the flag that was passed from brother to brother in the struggle against the Ottomans. May the crows of Kosovo pluck out these eyes if he doesn't live up to my words.

A resounding chorus of affirmations drew neighbours to peer over the fence. Ivan blessed his son with a kiss on each cheek and one on the forehead, which Stefan accepted by kissing the back of his father's right hand. The men gathered around and congratulated them with handshakes and threefold kisses. Less enthusiastic the women retreated to the kitchen and comforted the distraught mother and wife. As the musician struck up a lively tune, father and son led a line of dancers, among them Paul, around the lamb grinning and wide-eyed.

When Stefan finished at the grave he scraped the clay from the soles of his boots and took the shovel down to the workers' quarters. The Albanians stood to make room for him at the lunch table, but he declined and explained to the foreman he might be late for the afternoon shift. One of the Albanians threw him an apple, which he ate on the way to the jetty. Unlike yesterday the sea was calm and the water slapped the concrete walls. Several visitors were waiting for the boat to take them to monasteries further north along the peninsular. His net spread around him, as though to catch the passing day, a monk was humming on his knees while deftly weaving repairs. Stefan waited beside a shipment of

bare logs bound for the mainland. He had been on Athos almost a year and was still no closer to making a decision about his future. Yes, the Abbot was tolerant, understanding, and often referred to the monastery as a hospital for sick and wounded souls, but how much longer would his patience last? But then again, as an astute judge of character, a doctor of the soul, able to read sin in the whiteness of sweat-stains, perhaps he knew exactly how much convalescence each patient needed. Still, Stefan was determined to break the deadlock. Easter was a good time for deciding whether to remain as a novice or return to Australia. But what was there for him in Melbourne? The baptism of fire in Kosovo had blackened his past. He had not only distanced himself from his family, but had written sharply to his father, forbidding him from visiting until certain troubling matters were resolved. And he was painfully aware they would only be resolved through a confession of what had happened in the Balkans. A confession, yes, but to whom? To John? He had tried several times, but couldn't bring himself to talk about it, partly from a feeling of overwhelming guilt, partly from his friend's growing aloofness, which was probably due to his own struggles with monastic life. To the Abbot? What were his legal obligations in confessions of a criminal nature? Would he be compelled to call in the authorities. And now there was Paul. Should he tell him? Unburden himself to a brother in suffering? Yes, he had been there at the party and might best understand the madness of nationalism. Or should he bite the bullet and confess to the War Crimes Tribunal? And again the black smoke of Kosovo rose in him and might have engulfed him but for the boat which just then appeared from behind the rocky cove.

Stefan was pleased when Paul reached for his hand and leapt onto the jetty. He and John had been apprehensive about leaving their friend with the hermit, for there was no telling what he might do in that state of mind. But he now looked surprisingly refreshed, even cheerful, as though he had spent the night in a comfortable hotel. As they climbed toward the monastery Stefan asked about the hermit. Paul's voice was charged with excitement, his face radiated energy from not having slept a wink. The hut had been shaken by the storm almost to the point of collapse, but he wasn't afraid in the least. Danger had sharpened his senses, made him more receptive of the elemental, accepting of an order he couldn't comprehend - and all thanks to the hermit. He had never met anyone like him. They stayed up all night sparring with words, grappling with each other's ideas, wrestling with their wills. The hermit was a tireless athlete of the soul, a marathon runner of the spirit. Under his cassock he wore a pair of chains crossed over his bare torso, rusty from his sweat, fixed by a small padlock whose key he had long ago thrown into the sea. He hardly slept and used the rope stretched across the back of the hut to lean on when night vigils proved too much for his knees. Stefan was aware of Paul's short-lived enthusiasm for new experiences, but there was something stronger and deeper in his present ardour, for he had gone to the hermit in a life-denying mood.

- Who won the wager? Stefan asked.

- He did, a thousand times over, but in losing I also won.

- Did he convince you God exists?

- We spoke as if we'd known each other all our lives. As a young man he chased women like one possessed, until he stumbled on meditation and the secret of tapping into the source of sexual energy. This opened his senses, quickened his heart, and elevated his soul. He discovered the purity of the Virgin and the uplifting joy of praying before Her

icon. Having found his ideal woman, he left Australia and came to Athos as a lover in solitude.

Stefan wasn't able to grasp all this, but it appeared to make sense to his friend, who was far better read. After sexual energy and the paradox of the solitary lover, they spent the remainder of the night discussing death. The hermit's rapture had moved Paul profoundly, to the point where he now saw his own condition in a different light.

- He won the wager, continued Paul, and he didn't mention God once. No, he won me over by his attitude to death. As lightning lashed the hut I suddenly realised my ideas about the will were nothing but cowardice, a retreat before the unknown. At the same time I observed his gentle face and saw how he had achieved the ultimate expression of will through the very act of renouncing will. Yes, it came to me in a flash and I'm not ashamed to say I cried. He rejoiced in my tears, urged me to gather them in my palms, said they were more precious than pearls. He lives on the edge of the infinite, Stef, on the threshold of the end of time. His face glowed with an unspeakable ecstasy, his eyes shone as though beholding a revelation. There was a joy in him born of renunciation and fulfilment. He knows death, Stef, just as a mathematician knows a theorem or a musician a piano concerto. And why shouldn't he? If mathematicians can see realities beyond the scope of others, why not a ragged hermit possessed by the idea of death? He's fearless, Stef. And it's all in looking beyond yourself, isn't it? Making a window of one's self, not a mirror. No, he hasn't convinced me of God's existence, but I've found a way of preparing for whatever lies ahead. And maybe, just maybe, it's all in the acknowledgment and acceptance of death.

As they neared the monastery a copper-brown snake sprang from a patch of scrub and flicked at Paul. With reflexes still sharp from his sporting days, Stefan pushed his friend aside and swiped at the aggressive creature with his vest, driving it back into a hump of rocks. When Paul realised what happened he gripped Stefan's forearm.

- Thanks, mate.
- It was probably harmless.
- And if it wasn't? Death by snake bite - a fitting act of Providence.
- You're too dramatic, said Stefan, tossing the vest over his shoulder.

In the courtyard a few visitors were strolling about or relaxing on benches in the sun. Stefan noticed again the young man with the cap and jacket: he was sitting alone on the steps of the chapel, absent-mindedly shredding a gum leaf. As he walked past him they exchanged looks for a moment, until he turned away from the fellow's unflinching gaze. He was somewhat unnerved by the look, but then dismissed it as nothing more than the vacant stare of a daydreamer. Father Meletios and Nico appeared from the side of the church, shouldering the grandfather clock. Seeing the latter struggling at the rear, Stefan offered to help them, at which they stopped and placed the clock upright on the ground. Paul saw the pair as pallbearers and smiled. Through Stefan he asked where they were taking the clock, adding that his experience with the hermit had revealed how a time of death could so easily be transformed into the death of time. Stefan was about to translate this to Father Meletios, but Nico conveyed it first.

- That's well put, replied the clockmaker, through his helper. Brother, most people see clocks as counters that chip away at life and reduce spirit to seconds. They live in constant fear and anxiety: what you've called a time of death. And I was one of those,

until a widow brought in a clock that had stopped in its tracks. I restored its strong tick all right, but it changed my life forever. You see, Brother, I began to hear my death in its ticking. I panicked and didn't know where to turn for solace. In my despair I happened to come across the Jesus Prayer: Kyrie eleison. I recited the syllables using the clock as a metronome, and before long the ticks lost their edge and became musical notes, stepping-stones to Athos. There you have it, Brother. The timed prayer vanquished my fears and I sensed the meaning of what you've called the death of time.

Father Meletios chuckled heartily, spat in his hands, and said to Nico it was time to move on, for the Abbot had been waiting for his companion. Refusing a further offer of help, they raised the clock onto their shoulders and set off in the bright sunshine. It was now mid-afternoon and the builders were hammering on the roof. Stefan advised Paul to rest before vespers then turned to the ladders zigzagging among the scaffolding.

The refectory's kitchen was a hothouse aflutter with hands. A group of monks was seated around a long bench, their sleeves rolled to their elbows, faces beaming, hats pushed back from glistening foreheads, all cheerfully gutting and scaling the morning's abundant catch. Father Akakios was among them, his head uncovered, cassock partly unbuttoned, revealing the white hairs on his chest. He counted by twelve in a singsong manner, while jabbing out the eyes of fish with the point of his knife. Asked the significance of his actions, he replied Satan hid in all sorts of places. Better a blind fish that never shed a tear than a monk caught by his reflection and cast into an ocean of tears. And the song? A monk's life was one of continual subtraction, so it was only right at Easter to think of multiplication and the miracle of the fish that fed thousands. Another group was kneading and slapping bodies of dough, tearing off clones, braiding strands to be baked as Easter bread and biscuits.

Kosta threw a few more logs into the stove as a large circular pot steamed and bubbled with red dye. Panayoti was sitting at a table, polishing red eggs with an oily cloth. They had already dyed thirty dozen and this was the last clutch of thirty-six. Kosta had done his best to regulate the heat, to prevent eggs from premature cracking, for that was to occur on Easter Sunday, when monks and visitors would test the strength of each other's chosen egg by striking them point to point, exclaiming 'Christ has arisen'. He stirred the pot with a wooden ladle, careful not to add another to the dozen or so that had cracked in the dyeing process. Heartened by his son's cheerfulness, he scooped out several and placed them on the table. The boy rubbed each egg to a shine, stopping now and then to examine a particularly sharp-ended one, perhaps trying to determine whether it would prevail against the others in Sunday's cracking contests.

Yes, Kosta could barely contain his happiness at the change he had observed in his son since yesterday. The meeting with Elder Kyrillos had made an impression on him, for he was not only less irritable, but had managed to eat his breakfast without a word of complaint. After their reunion the boy had hugged his father with tears of remorse for running away. They spoke affectionately in their room for some time, with Kosta thanking the Virgin over and again for his son's safe return. In this outpouring of emotion he apologised to Panayoti for having had him so late in life, knowing how boys taunted him by saying his father was old enough to be his grandfather. And he couldn't give him what other fathers gave their sons: properties, contacts with people in positions of authority, a descent family environment. He was sorry for having brought him into a world where children were exploited and abused. If he wanted him to attend the school in Karyes, it wasn't from a lack of love, rather from too much love - a love that sometimes choked him and twisted his heart. Where most fathers saw to their children's physical and intellectual needs, he was more concerned with developing his son's God-given talent and preparing his soul for eternity. Listening to this tearful confession, the boy had perhaps blamed himself for his father's anguish. He agreed to go up to the school, to see what it was like, and also to visit Father Sophronios, whose advice he would take.

Overjoyed at the turn of events Kosta had inspected the boy's ankle, made him comfortable in bed, and hurried down to the chapel, intent on offering his wedding ring to

the Virgin, not only for the boy's safe return, but for the miraculous change in his disposition. Father Evlogios was securing the padlock on the chapel door. Excited, Kosta had kissed the back of the monk's hand before the latter could retract it, and asked whether he might enter the chapel for five minutes to present the Virgin with a small token of gratitude. The monk replied he must prepare for vespers, but Kosta persisted, saying he had witnessed a miracle. Twisting and pulling, he managed to slip the ring off his fourth finger.

- I haven't taken it off in thirteen years, he smiled.

He extended it to the monk, but the latter appeared preoccupied and his hands remained hidden in his loose sleeves.

- It belonged to my wife, Father. The poor woman took her own life.

Nodding, Father Evlogios pondered a full moment, his gaze heavy on the padlock.

- Then you must pray to the Virgin.

He spoke in a voice just above a whisper, choosing his words carefully, weighing each on his tongue. And then, noticing something, he took the ring and examined it.

- What's this? he asked, pointing to the engraving.

- The new moon, Father, as it appears in the west.

- Yes, he frowned, it's not the full moon rising in the east.

- But there's only fourteen nights between this and the other, Kosta was quick to add in a conciliatory tone.

- And fourteen between the other and this.

- That's twenty-eight, chuckled Kosta, an important number in every woman's life.

And my poor wife was no exception, Father.

- Brother, you're wearing the Crescent, the monk said sharply.

- Crescent, quarter, half or full - does it matter? If Mother-moon has many faces, should we think any less of her than Father-sun who's always one?

- Were you married to a Muslim?

- Love's blind, replied Kosta.

- And you wish to place this before the Virgin?

- For my boy, Father. As a token of gratitude for his safe return.

The monk teased his beard in considering the matter. This was a sensitive issue and he wasn't sure whether he had the authority to decide. The Cross had clashed with the Crescent throughout history. How would the pious feel should they notice the ring in bowing before one of the most revered icons on Athos? Would they see it as a sign of the Crescent infiltrating the domain of the Cross? Or perhaps the Cross's tolerance of the Crescent? In the end Father Evlogios decided to permit the offering not so much on the basis of historical arguments, but on the honesty and depth of this visitor's emotions. If, through his offering, the man's heart opened to the Virgin, then, as the one in charge of the chapel, he felt compelled to grant him his wish. He returned the ring, opened the door, and waited at the entrance to the nave as Kosta prostrated himself before the silver-screened icon and placed the ring among the rich collection of jewellery.

The fire hummed and eggs tumbled in the pot grumbling like distant thunder. Bread and biscuits baking in the oven filled the kitchen with the golden smell of coming summer. Eyeless fish-heads gleamed and gaped at the cat pacing the sunlit windowsill. The monk responsible for the refectory supervised proceedings with hands flying like a

symphony conductor. Panayoti's cheeks glowed with the crimson flush of innocence. As all this Easter preparation filled and expanded his being with joy, Kosta sensed the completeness of the moment and felt at home in this place. Yes, once the boy had settled in the school at Karyes, he would go back to Corfu, sell off whatever he could, and return to the monastery, to see out his days close to his son. He now stood, wiped his hands on a cloth, and explained to the supervising monk that he and his son had an appointment with Father Sophronios. The monk thanked them for their help and, turning to Panayoti, invited him to select three eggs for Easter Sunday, advising him to take his time and pick out the strongest. Beaming at the privilege, the boy spent several minutes examining the colour and feeling the curvature of quite a few before making his choice from the hundreds before him. The monk then passed each one over the boy's forehead in the sign of the cross and wished him a 'Good Resurrection'. Before leaving they washed their hands vigorously, yet their palms were still the colour of twilight.

Panayoti sat on the steps of the fountain and rubbed his swollen ankle. Kosta offered to carry him to the chanter's cell, but the boy scoffed at the idea, saying he would be all right to continue after a short rest. Turning to the frescoes decorating the church's loggia, the father's attention was caught by a panel showing Abraham and his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. He had noticed it several times in coming and going, but now, with the late-afternoon sun highlighting the facade, the colours were more vivid and the details sharper. Isaac, whose dark curly hair resembled Panayoti's, was kneeling beside a skeletal fire. His hands were tied behind his back and his right cheek was pressed to the ground. Abraham stood over him, knife raised in readiness, its blade like a compass pointing to a hope beyond the last hope, to a life beyond death. An angel hovered above the knife, while a lamb grazed on a few blades of green in an otherwise barren landscape.

Moved by the image, Kosta suddenly imagined Abraham preparing to carry out God's terrible command. Sarah, his wife, dressed their only child in clothes she had made for special occasions. Isaac admired himself and asked whether they were going to a wedding or festival. The salt of her silence was unbearable and tears fell onto his new sandals as she bit off a crimson thread hanging from his sleeve. Abraham's profile became sharper, but he continued twisting strands of camel hair into a rope. Later, alone with his wife, he was surrounded by a sea of maternal affection as she wept that henceforth the sight of another's child would be like a knife in her heart. He didn't say a word, for his right foot had already taken a step toward a region beyond human understanding. He held his breath, knowing only too well that even a sigh would draw him back to her and away from God's directive. In setting out for the high country, Isaac farewelled his mother with a smile that flashed like a sickle, while Abraham counted the lambs in his fingernails. When the boy asked where they were going, his father didn't dare look him in the eyes for fear of seeing his reflection. He fixed his gaze on the peak of the distant mountain and replied they were playing a game devised by God. A glittering prize would be theirs, he promised, but only if the boy remained steadfast in trusting his father's judgement, no matter how absurd it might seem.

For three days and one long night they took turns on the dusty mule until they reached the mountain. There, Abraham instructed his son to gather kindling and light a fire, assuring him it was all part of the game. The boy ran off playfully, singing as he went, while the old father squatted on his haunches and sharpened the knife on a hot stone

moistened with his spit. By this time, with no sign of God since the original command, Abraham had also started to imagine the whole thing might be a game in which God would intervene at the last minute. When the fire began crackling he took the rope from around his waist and called his son. They were about to carry out the most important part of the game, he said, but he mustn't fear or they would be denied the prize. He tied the boy's hands behind his back, pressed him down onto his knees, and held his forehead to the ground. As he slipped out the knife, Isaac turned his head, just enough for their eyes to meet. Alarmed, the boy struggled for a moment, but the father tightened his grip, whispering it was all part of the game. And still Abraham waited for God to show His hand, but the sky was desolate and the desert wind cracked his lips. When the knife's edge touched the boy's throat, an angel suddenly appeared and commended him on his faith. He untied his son and embraced him with tears. The game was over and they had won, he said. When Isaac asked for their prize, Abraham pointed to a lamb among the stones. Disappointed, the boy brought it to his father, who promptly slew it, burning some and roasting the remainder.

The affection between mother and child was strengthened after their reunion, but a certain reticence developed between father and son going back to the look they had given each other on the mountain. Seeing the knife, Isaac had suddenly doubted it was a game; in fact, it wasn't his father's strong hand that had subdued his struggle, but the thought of being in a place beyond good and evil, where human love gave way to love of a nameless God. As for Abraham, that instant would haunt him for the remainder of his long life, notwithstanding the appellation as the Father of Faith. Certain that God wasn't going to intervene, he had steeled himself to take the boy's life. Thereafter, father and son never looked directly at each other, and whenever they glanced at each other their faces would darken at the memory of that instant on the mountain.

Kosta grasped all this in the interval of several strong heartbeats and it strengthened his resolve in what he had set out to do. Like Abraham he had also come to the mountain with his son, intent on sacrificing the boy's future in the world for a life of chanting and austerity in a monastery. Yes, his actions were righteous and he believed that his beloved son would be restored to him, just as Isaac had been to Abraham.

Father Sophronios welcomed his visitors and directed them to a divan covered in a striped rug of the sort woven by village women. Sitting on a stool, he asked about Corfu and the changes on the island since his departure in the fifties. Yes, he had heard about the casino whose false hope attracted tourists from all over the world. And he praised the octogenarian bishop of Florina who had successfully opposed the construction of a casino in that provincial town. The developers had spared no expense on the grand project and just as it was about to open the shrewd bishop played his trump card. He invoked a little-known law going back to Byzantine times, which granted the Church ownership of land where religious edifices had once stood. Producing a rare map drawn by Ottoman cartographers, whose script was translated from Arabic, to Latin Turkish, and then to modern Greek, the bishop was able to show beyond all doubt that a small chapel dedicated to the Prophet Elijah had once stood on the disputed spot. Abandoned and stripped of its fittings, the casino now served as a haven for jackdaws

- Providence, the monk said in a resonating voice.

Father Sophronios had been baptised as Stavros by a wealthy businessman who openly professed his atheism. Unable to have children of his own, the fellow was more than pleased to act as godfather, often being summoned to church from his backgammon game in the cafe, usually when winning. As his generosity spread throughout the region, poor families sought his patronage, which he never refused. Kindness was the only miracle, he would say, and likened it to yeast.

While still at primary school Stavros was often chosen to sing the national anthem and recite patriotic poetry. His father was a doctor, his mother the daughter of a man who had gone to America in the twenties, during the Prohibition, and made a fortune using his homegrown skills distilling whiskey for the bootleggers. Keen for him to pursue an operatic career, his parents spared no expense in engaging tutors for violin and voice. Stavros complied until he was sixteen, when Greece's lively spirit began to emerge from under the rubble of Civil War. One summer's evening, returning from a music lesson, he stopped and listened to a song coming from a house with a walnut tree in the front yard. A woman was singing in an earthy voice, not unlike how village women sang at funerals. The words were sad and beautiful and told of a young man who, rejected in love, vowed to spend the rest of his life in a monastery. Stavros crept to a side window and was at once captivated by the singer. She was about thirty, wore a lilac petticoat, and sang while ironing a black dress. He had listened with admiration to recordings of divas performing arias from the great opera, but none had stirred him like this woman. Startled by his presence, she covered herself with the dress, at which Stavros bolted away, leapt over a bed of marigolds, and ran home.

He lay awake all night thinking how best to arrange a meeting with the singer. The following morning he set out with a stick of charcoal and notebook, ostensibly to sketch a gnarled pine tree opposite her house. Having envisaged the scene a thousand times, he knew exactly what to say the moment she stepped outside, but was taken aback when she appeared from a side lane, returning from the market in a black dress. His heart racing in a dozen directions at once, he said good morning and apologised for being at the window yesterday, adding her song had drawn him there against his will. The words caught in his throat and he fell silent. She studied him for a moment. And then, with a boldness that surprised even him, he asked if she would teach him the song. Encouraged by the gleam in her eyes he continued that opera had been his love for several years, but her singing had suddenly reduced it to empty sounds. She and her husband had performed in the best clubs of Athens and Salonika, the woman explained. He had died five months ago and her voice had gone with him. She was a widow now, and widows didn't sing, unless it was at the cemetery. Consumed by a painfully pleasant fire Stavros pleaded for the song, offering to share her sorrow. The morning breeze blew against her dress, outlining the curve of her hips and thighs. Perhaps impressed by his sincerity, she gave him a red apple from her basket and invited him to come later that afternoon. Barely able to contain his delight, he ran off along the waterfront, stopped after some time in the dusty shadow of a church, where he rubbed the apple to a shine and bit into what would be the sweetest moment of his youth.

That afternoon she sang again in the same mellow voice as yesterday. The veins in her neck swelled, her breasts rose and fell, her lips trembled under the weight of each word. Stavros forgot everything and decided there and then to become a singer of what

she called Rembetika songs. He saw her daily in the next week, each time dissolving in her presence and the sadness of her songs. One time he noticed a bouzouki on a side table and asked if he might see it, as he had never held one before. It had belonged to her husband, she said, taking the instrument from its black case. He examined the round body, the long neck, and plucked several notes on the silver strings. When he looked up, her eyes sparkled with tears.

By the end of that week he broke the news to his parents: he was giving up the violin for the bouzouki, and opera for Rembetika songs. They objected, but he remained firm. No more Italian lyrics and libretto, from now on he would sing the spirit of Greece through songs of hardship, thwarted love, disappointment. Rembetika music was degenerate, his mother complained. It arose from the underworld and glorified vice and corruption. She then turned her anger on the widow: the loose-living nightclub singer had led her son away from his true calling. Where the father was certain the boy would return to his senses, the mother's anger flared at the thought of something more intimate between them. She confronted her in public and accused her of corrupting the young. Mortified, Stavros apologised for his mother's behaviour and promised to defend her against narrow-minded slander.

He began taking bouzouki lessons and, with his knowledge of the violin, soon learnt to play the song he had first heard. One afternoon he asked to accompany her on her husband's instrument. She nodded and closed the window. He tuned the strings. She eased into the melody, found her tone, and teased some of the words into protracted sighs. His heart throbbing against the instrument's curved body, Stavros was drawn into the song. He began hesitantly, his voice feeling its way around hers, until they blended in soulful harmony. When they finished her eyes shone with tears. He apologised if his request had upset her and returned the instrument. She became thoughtful a moment, caressing a small silver plate engraved with her husband's name. Her singing career was over, she said, but there was no reason why the bouzouki should remain silent in its black case. Overcome with gratitude, he kissed her on the lips and hurried out with the instrument under his arm.

A few days later, having summoned the courage to visit again, he learnt from a passing neighbour that she had sold the house and returned to Salonika. Alone in his room he played the bouzouki and sang her songs until he fathomed why she had left without a word. She had taught him the first lesson in becoming a Rembetika singer: he felt the fire of love and tasted the ash of its sorrow. When he emerged from his room he saw himself in a new light, and his hands were now those of a man. He refused to go back to school at the end of summer. The woman had bewitched him, his mother complained, and they should visit an old villager who knew how to make and break charms. His father calmed her down, insisting the boy would see the error of his ways and return to his senses.

On completing his National Service Stavros left Corfu and settled in Salonika, where he quickly established a reputation as one of the finest singers and bouzouki players. During this time, though, she was constantly on his mind, and when fellow soldiers attempted to entice him to a brothel he remained faithful to her memory. In Salonika her sad image fuelled his emotions, strengthened his voice, and kept him from showing the least interest in other women. His initial efforts to find her came to nothing, until he learned she had left Salonika a year earlier for a nunnery just outside the city. As

though grief-stricken he cancelled an appointment with a recording company and set out to visit her.

She was dressed in black from scarf to shoe, though not in mourning, she smiled, but as a bride of Christ. They sat on a bench under a flowering lilac tree. After some initial awkwardness Stavros poured out his feelings. She had been on his mind every waking moment from the time of her first song. She was the source of his music, the meaning of his life, and he wanted her to leave the nunnery and come away with him. He would marry her tomorrow, despite their age difference, and promised to love her no matter what happened. Her pale fingers plucked at a sprig of lilac, scattering pieces onto her lap. She looked up and silenced him with her eyes. Her life was now irrevocably dedicated to God, but she would pray for him, that he might be inspired to sing in order to lighten the suffering of others. A church bell sounded in the distance and a void began opening in him. They were meant for each other, he pleaded. Another separation would wither his voice. But they would remain soul-mates for life through the miracle of prayer, she smiled. And then, not knowing where the idea came from, Stavros vowed to become a monk for her, so that no other woman might ever come between them. She blushed, or perhaps her cheeks were tinged by twilight. But the idea now gripped him and he persisted with heartfelt conviction. He would prove his love by becoming a monk and using his voice for chanting and praising her in his prayers.

And now Father Sophronios offered to serve his guests a Turkish delight, apologising they might be a little stale. Kosta replied they hadn't come for sweets, but for the honey of his advice. They had heard how he seldom accepted visitors, especially during Holy Week, when advancing years forced him to conserve his strength for the important services.

- And how can I help you? asked Father Sophronios, hunched on the stool.
- We've come for your opinion of my son's voice, Father.
- So, we have a little blackbird.

Panayoti nodded bashfully. Father Sophronios sat a little more upright and asked the boy to chant whatever he pleased. The boy turned to his father, who encouraged him to perform the melodic hymn chanted at the conclusion of the service for the dead. The boy stood, crossed himself, and began in a clear voice. Sitting on the edge of the divan, Kosta rubbed the impression on his finger left by the ring. The monk closed his eyes and nodded in time with the melody. In the fullness of his voice Panayoti overcame his shyness, his sore ankle, the thought of the school in Karyes - in chanting he remembered his mother and imagined her drawing close to him. Suddenly Father Sophronios stood to his full height and accompanied the boy in a deep bass hum. The old monk's voice was like a solid column of oak, while the boy's trained around it like a tender-leafed vine. They sang together for some time, their hymn spilling from the open window, stopping visitors and monks in the courtyard. When they finished Father Sophronios patted the boy's head and invited him to chant with the choir tomorrow night. Tears of joy streaming down his unshaven cheeks, Kosta sprang up and caught the monk's hand, kissing it before he could hide it in his cassock.

- Father, he said, barely able to contain his excitement, my boy will be attending the school in Karyes. Do you think you might instruct him in the art of psalmody?

- Of course, smiled the monk. God has sent us another Koukouzeli. His voice will become a silver ladder between heaven and earth.

And Kosta wiped his eyes, sensing that Panayoti had already been returned to him through the mysterious nature sacrifice and salvation.

Vespers became progressively longer as Holy Week unfolded in ritual and tradition. This evening there would be more prayers to intone than yesterday, more psalms and hymns to chant, beatitudes to recite, and twelve lengthy readings from the Gospels, mainly from the Book of John. Veiled monks and visitors with ashen faces occupied the stalls in all three sections of the church. Late-comers, and monks who preferred to stand in order to feel the weight of their body on the cross of their spine, gathered in doorways, shadowy corners, and behind the choir in each transept. As befitting the solemn occasion, the nave was lit by a few candles and lamps. The crosses on the altar gate were tied with black and purple ribbons. Standing before the lectern, holding a small flame midway between the text and his lips, Father Theodore read in a voice that complemented the softly-spoken Father Evlogios. While many admired the progress he had made in learning Greek, others, both visitors and monks, winced and bit their tongues at his strong Slavic pronunciation of many words, especially the two-syllabled God. Father Nikitas, who stood in his usual stall beneath a fresco depicting a stern warrior-saint, had complained to the Abbot. He could tolerate the Russian brother reading the homily in the refectory, but his accented Greek had no place in church, especially in Holy Week. Why had the Abbot offered him such an important position? After all, he was Russian and the Russians had attempted to take control of Athos in the early part of the century. They had pushed most aggressively for the large Skete of Saint Andrew to be elevated to the same rank as the other twenty monasteries, in order to have another representative on the Holy Council. The Abbot replied they were all brothers in Christ, but Father Nikitas countered with further examples of Russian arrogance. That they considered themselves superior to Greeks was evident from the size of their Sketes, the grandeur of their monastery of Saint Panteleimon, the opulence of their churches, and their domineering bells whose toll shuddered over the length and breadth of the peninsular. All this was opposed to the Hesychast ideal of humility, poverty, and silence. But more importantly, and here Father Nikitas had raised his amputated finger, the Greek word for God had acquired a holiness unto itself, which the Russian monk denigrated whenever he sounded the first syllable of that most holy of words. The Abbot had asked Father Nikitas for tolerance: their brother in Christ had been working hard, even practicing with pebbles in his mouth to improve his sounds, and in time his pronunciation of God would be indistinguishable from how it was said by a Greek from Western Macedonia.

Suddenly the Russian's consonants lost their Slavic edge, his vowels became mellow, his intonation full of tenderness. His critics looked up from beneath drooping veils and heavy brows. Some took it as a response to the text's moving lines, but at that moment Father Theodore happened to glance at a fresco of the wide-eyed demon of covetousness, which recalled the look in the Professor's eyes. That look now filled him with apprehension, for he saw signs of a demonic longing for Father Daniel's icon, which, of course, reminded him of his beloved sister and how she had given her own life in defending the monastery's icons against those youths demented by desire for material goods.

- And she cried out, Where are you going, O my child? And why in such haste? Is there another wedding in Cana, where water must be turned to wine? Take me with you, O my child. Give me a word, O You who are the very Word. Don't leave me in the wake of your silence.

The carved canopy in which Christ's effigy would be carried around the church tomorrow night stood before the altar, decorated in flowers, herbs, sprigs of white and pink blossom, even aromatic leaves, among them the long eucalypt. This profusion of colour and scent was the handiwork of Father Loukas, the herbalist, who now leaned in a stall beneath the window in the right transept. Born in New York to a Greek father and Jewish mother, he was confused about his identity as he was growing up. Greeks inherited their lineage from the father, while Jews took it from the mother, and in his case both parents were so strong willed he became a battle ground for their dispute. In the end, however, the father's will prevailed and his mother disappeared with the boy's piano teacher. The sixty-year-old monk renounced his profession as a pharmacist half his age ago, when in a moment of clarity he realised that he was serving a society obsessed with life. A week later he threw aside his white overcoat, left New York, and set out for Athos, there to dress in mourning black, where he found abundant life both inside the monastery and beyond its walls.

Early this morning he had ventured out into the surrounding forest, knowing exactly where particular varieties of plants and flowers grew. But he was also discerning in what he picked for the canopy, to the extent of counting petals and selecting only those with an odd number. This predilection went back to his days at Pharmacy College, when he had read about the Pythagorean notion of oddness being somehow more pleasing to God. Developing this further, he had become especially watchful for flowers with a prime number of petals, believing that primes were pure entities in so far as they weren't nuptial products of other numbers. In his more fanciful moments he saw primes as having sprung directly from the mind of God, just as Athena had been born from the head of Zeus, and Christ from an Immaculate Conception. Of course his work was made relatively easy, for he soon enough observed that most flowers had three, five or seven petals, but with daisies and roses he would count them all, choosing only those that agreed with his idea. And so this morning, feeling especially joyful in the expectation of decorating the canopy, he had been chanting aloud in a clearing bright with poppies, when a young visitor appeared from a thicket, having lost his way to the monastery. Explaining a compass was needed for the way to one's salvation, Father Loukas took a daisy from his sack and handed it to the bemused fellow, who twirled it with his fingertips and asked for the northerly direction. The monk smiled he shouldn't give such prominence to north. Behold the dumb daisy: it had thirty-one petals and each pointed directly to God.

When the herbalist had returned just after mid-day with a bulging hessian sack on each shoulder, he noticed the young pilgrim sitting in the courtyard, airing his feet. The monk commented on the infallibility of his compass. Yes, sighed the other, but it had taken him all of six long hours to reach the monastery, when he could have made it in far less. One hour or six, it was all nothing when divided by eternity. Besides, hadn't he felt the presence of God during those six hours in the forest? The pilgrim replied he had felt exhausted. Well, snorted Father Loukas, perhaps Athos was no place for the faint hearted.

With that he hurried off to the church and spent the hours before vespers decorating the canopy.

Bowed in his stall, inhaling the lively fragrances mixing with incense, he now recalled how on this day a small boy would accompany his black-shawled paternal grandmother to the Greek Orthodox Church in New York's suburb of Astoria. The area in front of the icon screen would be covered in baskets of flowers, and his grandmother would ask him for this or that colour as she and the other women worked deftly in dressing the bare canopy. And the boy would stare at the icon of Christ being adorned with small roses, at the twisted thorns on his head, and the bright drops on his brow that looked like sweet berries. Father Loukas sighed and his shoulders fell, but only for a moment: when he looked up again from under his overhanging veil, his collection of flowers filled his heart with joy, for he knew beyond reason that all those prime-numbered petals pointed to the coming resurrection.

- Everything that breathes should praise the Lord, and praise Him again to the heights of His heaven.

The acting chanter's voice rose above the accompanying hum of the choristers in the opposite transept. Biting the tip of his tongue, Father Sophronios directed the leading choir with his large hands, occasionally raising a grey eyebrow at a monk who had sounded a flat note or failed to sustain a melismatic vowel. At other times, looking over the heads of those before him, he glanced at Kosta and Panayoti, whom he had instructed to stand close to the choir in order to observe the proceedings. The ageing chanter yearned for tomorrow night as never before. Yes, his health had deteriorated in recent months, and he stubbornly refused medical treatment, fearing an operation might prevent him from chanting on what could well be his last Good Friday and perhaps his last official chant. Just yesterday the thought of slipping into silence would have disturbed him, but now, having heard the boy's pure voice, he sensed the hand of Providence at work. And if he were destined to sing his swan song tomorrow, it would surely be in angelic company, for the boy would take his voice, modulate it with his own, and through this project him into eternity.

- Lord, enlighten and save me through the wood of the Cross, just as You deemed the thief worthy of paradise.

If Father Evlogios was naturally soft-spoken, then his voice this evening was even more subdued, in order to complete the numerous prayers, supplications, and lengthy passages from the Gospels. Whenever his turn came to raise the large silver-bound Bible, whose weight seemed to increase during the service, a stir would pass through the church as monks and visitors positioned themselves to catch his words. And now, as he cleared his throat for a reading from the Book of John, his stomach grumbled under his golden vestments. Well, he thought, just as fasting increases one's appreciation of food, and as the low flame opens the pupil, drawing the beholder closer to the icon, so a quiet voice makes the assembled more receptive to the Word. In the end, when all had been said and done, perhaps the truth of the Holy Spirit wasn't conveyed through icons or soaring hymns, but through the quiet Word. No, there was no shame in his delivery. If today he read the truth of the Scriptures in a quiet voice, tomorrow he would announce it in a whisper, and in future he might give it ultimate expression through a silence that compelled all to enter the meaning of the Word.

- He said to his mother, Woman, behold your son. Then He said to the disciple, Behold your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

Leaning on the armrests, finger crossed under his beard, John was thankful for this respite in what had been a demanding day. The news of his mother's condition had shaken him, though he tried to keep it from his father, knowing full well it would be used as a lever to persuade him back to Australia. After accommodating him in the guesthouse, he had returned to his cell and prayed for her wellbeing, and for strength and guidance. Yes, his father would continue to tug on his heartstrings, but he resolved to remain firm and respectful, and through this convince him of his commitment to monastic life. But was he being callous in not returning to Australia in his mother's hour of need? No. He must find the gentle strength of those iconic saints who were able to keep the world at a distance with nothing but the lines of an open hand. If he believed for a moment that his return would improve her health, he would have already sought leave from the Abbot, but of course that couldn't be guaranteed, and in the end he could do much more for her here, on Athos, through his prayers to the Virgin. He would write to her at the first opportunity, explaining why he couldn't return. And he knew she would read his letter with an understanding smile - the same smile with which she had accepted her mastectomy, and which had greeted his decision to come to Athos.

And then there was Mara, who had also been on his mind all day. Yes, he was transgressing monastic law in allowing her to stay, and while one part of him justified this in the name of humanity and her ultimate wellbeing, another condemned him for his feelings toward her. He glanced at the Abbot: upright in his stall, hands resting on his gleaming staff, he was alert to everything around him, like a shepherd mindful of his black flock. John wondered again whether he should tell him about Mara after vespers. He was known for his tolerance and broad-mindedness, but would he condone her presence until Saturday? Perhaps there was something in his past that might sway him to look compassionately on the unfortunate girl. John then noticed Father Nikitas in a stall beneath a window in the right transept, his veiled head silhouetted against the evening grey. The steely-eyed zealot was always contesting matters with the Abbot, and if word got out that a woman had been permitted in the monastery he would construe it as further evidence of the sinister West, and by implication the Catholic Church, attempting to subvert the sovereignty of Athos. Forty years earlier a meeting between Athenagoras, the Patriarch of Constantinople, and Pope Paul VI had so outraged certain monks they denounced the Patriarch, refused to mention his name in prayers, and to this day still displayed a banner above the gate of their monastery declaring: Orthodoxy or Death. If a meeting between a bearded Patriarch and a beardless Pope could stir zealots to such passion, there was no telling how they would react to the presence of a young woman. In view of this, John decided not to involve the Abbot in a matter that might prove difficult for him. Tomorrow he would confide in Elder Kyrillos instead.

- This is my commandment: love one another just as I have loved you. There is no greater love than when a man gives his life for his friend.

Those words continued to echo in Paul's head, even though Father Evlogios had read them some time ago. He and Stefan stood in the opening between the nave and the inner narthex. Stefan had been surprised and pleased at his friend's willingness to join him for vespers. His story was almost finished, Paul had explained, and he always felt like

being with people after an intense period of writing. He had reminded Stefan of the last time all three were in church together, and joked that the hermit might be succeeding in restoring his childhood feeling for God. And now, as Father Evlogios approached them, jingling the censer and sending up puffs of smoke, Paul inhaled the fragrance and recalled that other church, toward the end of his second year at university. Returning from lectures one afternoon, he noticed a black cab parked outside the house he was sharing with a few others. Terik Kazikian, an acquaintance from high school, got out and, with a dour expression, asked to see him on an important matter. He had been happily known as Terry throughout high school, until the beginning of the last year when he somewhat gloomily began using his Armenian name, politely asking teachers and students to do the same, especially in the presence of his father. They hadn't seen each other in almost two years, though Paul knew that, having failed dismally in the exams, he had gone into the family's prosperous taxi business. After a few preliminary questions about study and the whereabouts of several people, Terik explained his father was a prominent member of Melbourne's Armenian community, a position that placed enormous expectations on the entire family. As a result Terik had been badgered over the question of a university degree, for his father desperately wanted him to be a solicitor - a profession that would bring honour to the family name and serve their community. Bowing to his father's wishes, he had attended night school, only to fail his exams again, though not as badly as the first time. His father had harangued him in Armenian, humiliated him before guests by calling him a pumpkin head, which was more hurtful in their language than in English, and demanded he study harder. Terik had tried to explain he enjoyed driving the cab and conversing with passengers from all walks of life, but his father wouldn't hear of it, threatening to disown him if he didn't get a law degree. And so he was now preparing for his third attempt, but with the exams only a month away he had become anxious, subject to insomnia, unable to concentrate on his studies. His anxiety had reached a point where he had contemplated connecting a hose to the cab's exhaust and sitting back to the sound of Armenian folk music.

He spoke calmly, stressing his words, hands together as though in prayer or pleading for his life. Looking around, he lowered his voice and asked Paul if he would sit the exams for him. Impossible. He promised to make it worthwhile. Money was no obstacle. Two thousand a subject, ten thousand the lot. But it was a criminal offence. There was nothing to fear. He would arrange everything, including a wig and moustache to conceal his good friend's identity. When Paul refused with a few sharp words, Terik countered it wasn't fair. If man were truly made in God's image everyone would have the brains of an Einstein. No! There was no God, no heaven and hell - only a strong-willed father. Paul advised him to stand up for himself and tell the old man he liked driving a cab. His father's voice was thunder and lightning flashed from his eyes when he scowled. No, he had to become a solicitor or else. The hose was in the cab and he had already picked out the spot - a parking lot overlooking the bay. He turned to his reflection in the cab's bonnet and swore that certain people would have to live with his death on their conscience. Taken aback by this play at emotional blackmail, Paul attempted to reason with him, but Terik repeated his threat and sped off.

The image of the black hose disturbed Paul. Had he misjudged Terik's state of mind? What if he carried out his threat? He bought the morning paper each day for the

next week and went straight to K in the obituary. Nothing, except his palms blackened from ink. Perhaps it was a bluff, after all? A few more days passed, and just as the knot in his stomach began to loosen, Terik showed up again and asked if they might chat in a nearby park. The sun was setting behind trees loud with anxious birds, and the smell of freshly mowed grass filled the air. They sat on a bench and he repeated his request, only this time with a look of resignation, as though even in asking he had sensed the utter futility of everything. Concealing his alarm, Paul remained adamant in his refusal. Terik stood, considered something for a moment, then walked off without a word. At that moment, perhaps moved by the wrinkles on the back of his yellow shirt, he was about to call out, but Terik got in the cab and drove off without so much as a wave.

On the morning of the first exam Paul was shocked to find Kazikian in the funeral notices for the following day. He contacted Stefan and John at once and told them everything. They attempted to allay his sense of guilt, but the ifs and buts were like a crown of thorns. The funeral was held in an Armenian Church. Terik's parents stood before the open coffin and were inconsolable during the service. A young man read the eulogy in English and Armenian, praising Terik's generous nature and how he had often assisted relatives and friends. He concluded by saying the reasons for his cousin's death were beyond human comprehension and would remain forever with God. The mother wailed and Paul's heart contracted. Should he go to the front and announce his role in Terik's death? But then he would have to explain the details and mention the exams and his father's threats - and now wasn't the time for such things. The priest rattled the smoking censer over the coffin. He followed his friends and bowed to the unfortunate youth dressed like a groom. Extending his sympathy to the parents, he managed to compose myself and say how truly sorry he was for what had happened. Why? Why? the father sighed, pouring all his anguish into that single syllable. For an instant Paul sensed the father knew why, which lightened his own sense of guilt. Behind the emotion, he detected a certain glint in his grey eyes, perhaps anger at what his son had done. Coming from a culture that had endured centuries of hardship and oppression, persecution and bloodshed that verged on genocide, he no doubt valued strength and courage and the will to overcome adversity. Yet his son had displayed none of these virtues, and his death would cover the family in eternal shame. A warm northerly wind rustled the cellophaned flowers on the front steps of the church. People, passing traffic, white tufts of cloud - all were reflected in the polished rosewood coffin and the sleek hearse waiting with open doors and cool breath.

And for years after, Terik would appear in Paul's dreams, sometimes on two or three consecutive nights. Always in the same short-sleeved shirt, the shadowy figure never responded to Paul's approach. He retreated instead into a dark background of pines and boulders, just like the hapless Ajax, who took his own life when denied the armour of Achilles, and refused to come forward when Ulysses summoned the shades of the underworld to the pool of blood. On waking from such dreams Paul felt somewhat despondent at the thought of having missed an opportunity to reach out, atone for what had happened, and draw his friend back to the light of day. If only he had said a few words or simply shaken his hand - it might have helped him come to terms with Terik's death. But the figure dissolved in morning light and Paul was left wondering why the narrative of dreams lay beyond reason's grasp.

He had discussed these matters with John on several occasions, when his friend suggested science might invent the means of determining the content of dreams. Wishes and fantasies scripted, directed and projected in technicolour on the sleeper's mind. Paul questioned the desirability of such developments. As the most private of experiences dreams vouchsafed freedom and enhanced humanity. Yes, they were chaotic and playful, but it was precisely this irrationality that stripped away social conventions and presented a different view of reality. What the rational mind took for chaos might well be sublime order. John's study of science had not closed his mind to the possibilities of being and consciousness. He adduced the monk Mendel who had discovered a fundamental pattern in nature while sifting through what had at first seemed the random transmission of characteristics from one generation of peas to the next. Still strongly pro-Green at the time, Paul swore at those intrusive corporations and their amoral lackeys, the advertisers, who colluded not only in polluting the world but manipulating susceptible minds. Their devious assault was proceeding on all fronts, but they must be denied access to our dreams, for he believed that dreaming was the last refuge of the individual, the true home of the self, the inner sanctuary of being.

- Amen.

The choir's concluding word echoed in the nave and spread through the church, prompting a flurry of crosses and prostrations. John left his father with a few other new arrivals who were to be shown the holy relics, among them silver cased skulls, a saint's shrivelled left hand, and fragments of the Cross. It was dark outside and a chorus of frogs croaked from the other side of the east wall. As this was a one-meal day for the monks, and that after matins, John was needed in the guesthouse, where the visitors were to be served supper in the dining room. Stefan and Paul were waiting for him in the loggia, beneath a mural depicting the torments of hell. He apologised to the latter for not catching up during day, explaining the demands were such that he had barely a minute to himself. He wanted to hear about Paul's night with the hermit and invited them to his cell after supper. With his father also there it would be just like in Melbourne. Stefan asked him about the young visitor he had mentioned yesterday. Surprised by the question, John managed an awkward reply, saying he was still unwell and confined to his room.

- But I saw him in the cemetery, said Stefan.

- Yes, he went out for some fresh air and returned feeling feverish again.

- Who is he? Where's he from?

- We'll discuss him later, he said and hurried off.

As the visitors were still making their way to the guesthouse, John quickly prepared a tray of food and took it to Mara. She ate with more appetite, dropping pieces of dry bread into a bowl of warm lentil soup. He reprimanded her for going outside and warned her again that things would prove difficult for both if she were discovered in the monastery. Did she understand the extent of his transgression? He was risking everything for her spiritual and physical wellbeing. She apologised, thanked him again for his kindness, and added she was feeling better and would be ready to leave on Saturday. Where this morning her eyes had the quickness of a frightened creature, they now met his with a sure and steady look. John felt for the cord around his wrist. Should he tell her how he felt? No. She would leave soon, things would return to normal, and he could focus again on his coming tonsure. Yet the thought of her leaving troubled him. He chastised

himself. Where was the strength of his faith? What was the meaning of his struggle over the past eighteen months? Why had he left his parents and a promising career? Was that all to be undone by this strange girl? Who was she? Had Providence sent her to test his preparedness for the monastic life? Or had she come to plunge him into turmoil?

- Yes, you're looking better, he said, placing a chair in front of her.

- I want so much to feel alive again.

- The Virgin will help you, Mara.

- Do you think so?

- Open your heart to Her.

- My heart has been a stone for so long.

The sorrow behind those words, the small creases that formed between her fine brows, moved John profoundly. He slipped the knotted cord from his wrist and worked it with both hands. Blood murmured in his ears and he wondered if she noticed the tremor in his body.

- You've opened my heart, he said, surprised at his own words.

- Please, she said. Don't say any more. You are a monk.

- I thought I'd overcome my manhood, but...

- But you want my body?

Her directness flustered him and he felt ashamed.

- No, Mara, it's not what you think. Ever since my youth I've prided myself on being detached from those kinds of things. When others were running around chasing girls, I was searching for the absolute truth, sometimes in science, other times in religion. I believed in enlightenment through overcoming the body. But you've opened my heart to new feelings, Mara, and I don't know what to make of them.

- What can I say?

- Say I'm a fool, a hypocrite.

Her jaw-line set in defiance.

- Please, Mara, leave the monastery tomorrow.

- And my prayers to the Virgin? she asked, her eyes flashing. Would you deprive me of hope because you can't handle your feelings?

Stung and mortified by her comment, he took the tray and left without a word. On the way back to the kitchen he rebuked himself for his weakness: the novice who had hoped to emulate the deeds of the youthful martyrs couldn't overcome the first real obstacle on the path to asceticism - himself.

GOOD FRIDAY

1

As Father Theodore struck the board for matins he imagined it to be the cross on which Christ had been nailed. This morning the summons echoed against the darkness with less insistence than usual, and was welcomed by those who had spent the night in prayer and prostration. Since his appointment to the semantron, it had become his private ritual to count each crack of the mallet and to complete the rhythmic round of the monastery on the same number of beats. Sixty four from the refectory to the cellar, whose cool breath always smelt of wine; forty eight from the front of the church to the eucalypt tree; ninety six from the guesthouse to the chapel. Now, as his cape brushed the Russian bell standing like a skull in the courtyard, he thought again of his sister, who was never far from his mind. Vera had been such a strong and agile girl, always ready to meet any challenge. Once, acting on a dare, she had climbed the village bell-tower from the outside. Stone by rough stone she worked her way onto the roof and cleared an abandoned stork's nest surrounding the cross. She had placed her life in God's hands many times, but where was God when those demons fell upon her? A familiar sadness pulled at Father Theodore, but he checked it at once by striking the board a little louder. No, his sister's death had not been in vain. A youthful martyr in an age that scorned martyrdom, her self-sacrifice glowed in the dead of night and like a candle always pointed to God.

Hung with its own lanterns the lemon tree was lit by a nearby lamp. Its small white flowers caught his attention and he wondered at their likeness to stars. Yes, they survived for no more than a week, while the others shone for a billion years, but time was an extension of number, and number itself could be seen as an attribute of God. A few days ago, while contemplating the multiplication tables on the back of an exercise book, he had extracted a curious result from the products of seven. If the cube of the larger digit were subtracted from the cube of the smaller, the difference was always exactly divisible by seven. He demonstrated this for a dozen cases and then managed to find a general proof. For the monk who had wanted to become a mathematician, these bright threads in the fabric of number were sufficient evidence of a sublime order underlying creation.

Father Theodore had renounced much of the world in coming to Athos, but not the wonder of mathematics. He still often pondered the Pythagoreans and their discovery of irrational numbers, those immeasurable entities arising from the diagonals of squares, which the secret brotherhood safeguarded in their inner sanctum. Legend had it that members were killed for revealing their existence. Why? Perhaps because these new numbers threatened a social order based on the geometry of measurable lines, for which the Parthenon, the great temple of Athena, had stood as supreme testament. Yes, irrational numbers had hinted at the collapse of Greek rigour and the emergence of a new, unbounded geometry, full of freedom and possibility, where parallels would meet this side of infinity and triangles made fun of the straight-edged ruler.

Under different circumstances he would have become a mathematician and immersed himself in the work of Cantor. The German had attributed his findings to the guiding hand of God, and his notion of infinity may have been influenced by his youthful readings of medieval theologians who speculated about how many angels could dance on

the tip of a pin. As an adolescent Father Theodore had of course been a Platonist, believing mathematics was discovered, not created, and he dreamt of going beyond Cantor by finding a class of numbers with its own laws of arithmetic. He was fascinated by the paradoxes inherent to an infinite set. There was something transcendent in the set of counting numbers having the same number of elements as any proper subset of itself, such as the multiples of ten. How could the part be equal to the whole? Such ruminations would later lead to metaphysical speculations. If God was the set of infinite being, then man, as a proper subset of God, must stand in a one-to-one relationship with Him, which meant man was also infinite in being. But he had soon enough realised that the atmosphere on this plane of mathematics was extremely rare, and one couldn't dwell there for long periods without feeling lightheaded, for which one needed to smell a handful of earth or a rotting apple. With the infinite caressing his brow day and night, Cantor had perhaps neglected to smell the earth and paid with his sanity.

The young man had devoted much time to the mathematicians whose work was imbued with a sense of the divine. He studied the heavy-eyed Descartes, who saw the basis of coordinate geometry in an irrational dream, and later attempted to fuse reason and religion in a series of logical arguments proving the existence of God. Pascal's solitary struggle moved him profoundly. The Frenchman had wrestled for years to square fact with faith, only to renounce mathematics after a mystical experience, though not before proposing his famous wager based on probability. All things being equal reason demanded that one stake the happiness of this life in order to win infinite happiness with God. And if God didn't exist, one lost nothing, for life was reduced to zero in the absence of God. He was also impressed with Newton: the founder of differential calculus maintained a religious sensibility throughout his life, esteeming his exegesis on the Book of Daniel above his formula for universal gravitation. And then there was the seventeenth century Franciscan monk Marin Mersenne whose speculations on prime numbers were both inspired and revelatory. The celibate number theorist had reconciled reason and faith through the mystery of unbegotten primes, perhaps arguing that just as God couldn't be circumscribed by reason alone, so these pure numbers couldn't be generated by a formula. The poor knot counter had aspired to God on the simple ladder of number, perhaps believing in the ladder's divine creation. The penitent seeker of primes had seen no contradiction in devoting himself to mathematics and Christ, for both demanded humility and self-surrender, and both were the way to the splendour of God.

Despite his name, Godel was too steeped in logic to be religious, but the young Father Theodore couldn't ignore his work, for it shook the very foundations of the mathematical palace, throwing open its windows to metaphysics and a transcendental logic verging on mysticism. Adopting a self-referential approach to mathematics, the Austrian had shown that any system based on a set of axioms, such as arithmetic or geometry, contained propositions that couldn't be proved. Young and daring, Father Theodore had applied Godel's Incompleteness Theorem to the Communist State in which he lived. As a system founded on the scientific principles of the nineteenth century Positivists, Communism was positively geometric in its rigidity. The system collapsed because it was founded on the proposition that God did not exist. Godel's Theorem had strengthened the young man's belief in God, for it dealt a blow to those who sought to explain the universe in terms solely of axiomatic reasoning. If a system contained propositions that couldn't be

proved, then it must be extended to accommodate new axioms for those propositions. And if it were still incomplete, as the Theorem demanded, further axioms were needed to make it sufficient. Now if this process were continued until one had allowed for a system of infinite axioms covering all possible propositions, such a system would in fact mirror the very mind of God, wherein all paradoxes were resolved and all propositions definitively proved. And so in its quest for the ultimate truth reason undermined itself and opened the way for God and faith.

Yes, it had been largely through Cantor and Godel that Father Theodore had come to see God, and then not only in the infinitude of the night sky but equally in the infinitesimal, for being one and indivisible God was wholly present in both flower and star. And did he regret not being both a mathematician and monk? Initially, perhaps, but he had soon accepted that this wasn't the seventeenth century. The wonderful spirit of mathematics could be accommodated within the walls of a monastery, between matins and vespers, alongside the knots of the prayer cord, but the technical details and specialised research belonged in a university.

He stopped beating the semantron, even though well short of his count. In the dim light from the church window he could just make out something unusual on the chapel wall. On closer inspection he was alarmed by what looked like the letter C painted in red. He placed the board on the steps and hurried off to the Abbot, who happened to be descending the stairs for matins, feeling each step with his staff.

- You shortened the call to matins, Father, said the Abbot.

- There's something strange on the chapel's wall, replied Father Theodore, crossing himself with an unsteady hand.

At last perhaps something miraculous, thought the Abbot, and adjusted the veil covering his hat and falling over his back. Stories of the Virgin's appearance had passed into legend, becoming as much part of the monastery as its walls. He recalled the story of a lamplighter who had been assigned the duty of rising before the others to prepare for matins. Having a predisposition to vivid dreaming, the young monk resented the early starts, for they deprived him of his only pleasure in life. For weeks he polished the lamp before the icon of the Virgin, and filled the vessel with olive oil, in the hope of the Kind One interceding in his request to the Abbot for some other duty. Time past, nothing happened, and the monk felt his bile changing from black to yellow. One day during Lent, having almost completed his forty-day fast, the monk dreamt of the refectory in readiness for the Easter feast. As he reached out with his right hand for a piece of fried fish, the semantron shattered his dream. Storming into the church with a bare head, he reproached the Virgin and, in a fit of anger, raised the knife used for scraping wax from candlesticks. He was about to slash the ancient icon, when the Virgin's smile arrested him. Stricken by shame and remorse he fell to his knees and howled for forgiveness. For three years his eyes were fountains of tears, and he spent every spare moment in prayer and penance. In the course of time, the unrighteous hand became a pariah strapped in a leather glove. Thereafter his two palms never touched and he crossed himself with the blameless fingers of the other hand. Later, when the monk's bones were exhumed for deposit in the ossuary, the offending hand was found to be intact within its glove - a sign the All-Holy One had forgiven but not forgotten. It was placed in a silver casket and kept in the reliquary, where countless pilgrims kissed it who sought Her intercession in all sorts of complaints.

The Abbot's sense of expectation was now sharpened both by such stories and the shard of a dream lodged in his memory. Like most monks he didn't sleep at all on Good Friday eve in a practice of watchfulness, which the disciples had been unable to do in the Garden of Gethsemane. While on his knees, in a moment of drowsiness, he had found himself climbing a hillside path, picking his way forward with his staff. The day was hot, the journey steep, and his vestments felt so heavy he was tempted to shed them. He stopped at the sound of water. A young woman stepped from behind a large rock and beckoned him with her smile. He recognised at once the girl of his youth. His heart leapt toward her, but his abbatial robe weighed him down and he couldn't move. She was dead, he told himself, and yet there she was, living as the water gleaming from the base of the rock. And then her face began to glow and the sun became a halo and she was no longer the girl he had loved but the Virgin herself. She dipped her hand in the water and sprinkled his face, at which his eyes opened to an icon of the Mother and Child lit by a small lamp.

The Abbot and Father Theodore reached the church as a number of monks, John and Stefan among them, were whispering about the semantron's abrupt silence. On hearing something strange had taken place, they promptly took down a lamp from here and there and followed the pair to the chapel, only to stop in their tracks at the sight of the symbol. Some crossed themselves, others kept their distance, while a few murmured in apprehension. Father Nikitas took his place beside the Abbot and they led the gathering forward. The symbol was now clearly visible: the recently whitewashed wall had been painted in with what appeared a large red C. Speculation fluttered from the depths of thick beards. An act of wanton graffiti intended to disrupt the beginning of Good Friday. No, it was the Byzantine-Greek lower case S, obviously meant to signify Satan, and painted by some black magician presently in the monastery. Father Nikitas disagreed. Tracing the outline of the symbol with his walking stick, he explained it was the Latin C, representing Catholicism, and was no doubt a sign of the West's attempt to overcome the Orthodox tradition. The perpetrator was a western visitor, he insisted, perhaps someone very much like the Professor who had come to the monastery to undermine Orthodoxy by photographing heretical icons. The Abbot interrupted him by tapping the wall with his silver-capped staff. If it were the Latin C, then it could just as well stand for Christ, in which case it was the expression of a westerner who, moved by his experience in the monastery, was in fact commemorating the passion of Christ. Father Nikitas shook his head. Another monk suggested it wasn't a C at all, but an incomplete O, perhaps written by a zealot who had been interrupted in his intention to write Orthodoxy or Death. Another whisper from the back asked what exactly had been used to draw the symbol. Was it paint, dye from yesterday's eggs, or perhaps wine? Lamp in hand a monk stepped forward, felt the symbol with his finger, then smelt his finding. The substance wasn't yet dry, he announced, but it felt more like paint than dye and didn't have the sharpness of wine. At the suggestion it might be blood the monk wiped his finger on the wall and a dozen hands flew up in a flurry of three-fold crosses.

To John's astonishment Stefan took a lamp from one of the monks, examined the symbol, and turned to the Abbot with a troubled look.

- The symbol's not the letter C, he began and paused, scratching his tattooed forearm. It's the Crescent Moon - the sign of Islam. I saw it in Kosovo last year, on the walls of Orthodox churches stained with Serbian blood.

When the Abbot translated his words a number of monks were outraged by the thought of a Muslim being in the monastery and desecrating the chapel. One suggested they go to the guesthouse and interrogate all the visitors, for the front gate was bolted and the perpetrator must still be inside. Another asked about the source of the blood. Had the desecrator injured himself? Or had he deliberately cut himself? In either case the amount of blood needed for the symbol indicated a substantial wound, one that couldn't be easily concealed. His suggestion of an immediate examination of all visitors was met with loud approval. Another monk asked whether the Albanian workers were responsible. They claimed to be Orthodox but that might be nothing more than a pretext for entering Greece and working on Athos. Perhaps one of them had injured himself with a tool and stained the wall in an unguarded moment. Yes, several chorused, they should go at once to question the sneaky workers. The Abbot restrained them and defended the Albanians. If it were their crime they would have done it before vespers and the symbol would have been seen in daylight. Enough speculation for now, he said in a surprisingly firm tone. Had they forgotten it was Good Friday and they were meant to be in church? The matter would be investigated further after matins, in the clear light of day. Until then they mustn't jump to hasty conclusions, for there was no telling whether it was blood or paint. They should be thankful no attempt had been made to break into the chapel and desecrate the icon of the most Blessed Virgin. Father Nikitas had the last word. He instructed Father Maximos to be strict at the gate. The workers could enter for the Liturgy but not a soul must leave before the matter was resolved. In the meantime, he exhorted all to be vigilant, for there was no telling what the agent of the West might be planning next.

Matins was more sombre than usual, not only for the fact that today's readings and chants had a mournful tone, but also because many were still pondering the meaning of the symbol. Father Evlogios had been preparing in the sanctuary when the others went to the chapel, so he didn't learn of the incident until later. That the symbol might be the Crescent Moon played on his mind throughout the service, and his voice was no louder than the flutter of a moth. He wondered at the coincidence of Kosta's ring and what had been drawn on the wall. Was he responsible for the symbol? Having placed the ring before the Virgin, perhaps he had been encouraged in what might be an act of devotion to his deceased wife. The priest-monk felt a pang of guilt: he shouldn't have acquiesced to the fellow's plea. He must report it to the Abbot without delay, at the risk of being rebuked for showing poor judgment.

Just prior to the Liturgy's start, as the frescoes were beginning to reclaim their colour from the greyness in the portico, Father Maximos pulled open the main gate and scrutinised the workers. He drew the Albanians aside and began with a story from his childhood. His maternal grandfather would say war and bloodshed followed a red moon appearing before sunrise. Transfixing both with his left eye, he examined them with his right, looking for an incriminating reaction, but the youths were barely awake and the shorter of the two yawned so wide his jaw cracked.

- Well then, continued the gatekeeper, here's one to wake you up. What am I? Held firmly I'm your slave, released I'll dig your grave.

As the Albanians picked sleep from their eyes, he walked around them, looking for a sign of injury. The taller one shrugged and replied they would be late for the Liturgy.

Annoyed, the monk sent them on their way and bolted the gate until further notice from Father Nikitas.

The courtyard was still covered in shadow when matins ended, but an unusually rich sunlight glowed on the upper part of the tower, gilded the forest on the higher slopes, and anointed the bare head and shoulders of Athos with olive oil. As a monk instructed the congregation to assemble in the refectory for an important address, the Abbot and a visiting doctor hurried to the chapel. Father Akakios appeared with a bucket of fish heads, surrounded by a retinue of dancing cats. He asked the Abbot if he had seen his favourite, the black-furred brother he had trained to perform tricks. The Abbot replied he couldn't tell one black cat from another, and then questioned him on whether it was appropriate to feed his cats fish on the strictest of fast-days. Holding up an eyeless head, Father Akakios grinned there was one God for humans and another for cats. The doctor asked what the latter was like. A lion, of course, chuckled the monk. Peering over his glasses, the doctor examined the symbol for a moment and confirmed it was blood. Father Akakios crossed himself three times and stammered they were living in bloody times. The Abbot asked if he had seen anything strange in his nocturnal wanderings. No, but he had come across a bloody pool yesterday. Pressed for more details, he gave an account of what he had witnessed. The Abbot and doctor exchanged glances and set off for the refectory. Concerned, Father Akakios went looking for his favourite companion, knowing only too well that certain monks were unhappy with what they referred to as a plague of cats in the monastery. What if brother cat had been killed by one of those grim-faced monks, as a way of stopping him entertaining visitors on these solemn days? A knot tightened in his stomach. He turned to the symbol and, crossing himself, prayed that it might not be the blood of his cat.

On the steps of the refectory John asked Stefan whether Kosovo had been that brutal. He wouldn't have asked this yesterday, from deference to his friend's silence on the subject, but his opinion before the gathering of monks intimated a readiness to talk about the past. Stefan's comments at the chapel had been a surprise even to himself, for they had come out spontaneously in response to the symbol. He now wondered whether Paul's presence had somehow contributed to those long-suppressed matters suddenly finding expression. His friend wasn't strengthened by faith, yet he was courageous enough to spend a night on a precipice with a hermit touched by God. (The ordeal had proved taxing and Stefan didn't wake him for matins) Yes, despite his life hanging from a thread, he didn't flinch in confronting death, as though playing a game with a friend to see who would blink first.

John's father approached them, eating chickpeas, saying a man could starve to death in trying to save his immortal soul. He deftly tossed a few more into his mouth, then reached into his pocket and offered the others a handful, which they declined. Last night in John's cell all four had discussed Australia and Athos for several hours. Not wanting to risk antagonising his son, Peter Rados had focussed on Stefan, pointing out the sacrifices his parents had made in leaving Serbia and settling in Australia. The other countered he had also made sacrifices in coming to Europe. Why? Peter asked, glancing at his son. Could someone enlighten him? Was it for a better life? Hardly! Their children's future? No! All his efforts to understand such actions had come to a dead end. Stefan attempted to explain that Australia lacked something, but before he could elaborate Peter

interrupted, saying it had everything. Refugees and asylum seekers were risking their lives to get a toehold in the place, while those born in paradise were leaving for the hell of Kosovo and to blacken themselves on Athos. When Stefan replied that perhaps Australia's cultural climate wasn't conducive to the religious life, Peter reacted as though stung by a barb. John intervened and promptly turned the conversation to Paul and his night with the hermit, but the writer was visibly tired and disinclined to talk.

In the refectory the monks occupied their places, while the visitors sat at the back tables. The Abbot strode to the front, his shoes squeaking at each step, and stood at the centre of the main table. He apologised for summoning them at a time when they should be reflecting on the meaning of Good Friday. The senseless act had diverted thought from the importance of the day. Yes, blood had been used for the symbol, and he didn't wish to speculate why, nor did he feel it appropriate to search every visitor for signs of a wound. He hoped the person responsible would visit him in private and explain his actions, if not the gates would open shortly and he should leave at once. As the gathering dispersed, a buzz of incredulity sounded from the visitors, while the monks were silent in their beards.

On the way out Father Evlogios caught the Abbot by the sleeve, drew him beneath the fresco of the Dancing Maidens, and proceeded rather nervously to tell him about Kosta's ring. The Abbot adjusted the large cross around his neck and demanded to see it at once. In the courtyard he was stopped again, this time by Nico, who asked whether he could whitewash the marked wall. The Abbot considered the request for a moment. Was more forensic work necessary on the symbol? No. Better to remove it without delay, for it would prove an unwelcome distraction in the lead up to the Resurrection. Beaming with gratitude, Nico reached for the Abbot's hand, which disappeared in his sleeve, so he bowed instead and hurried off with the workers.

Stefan left to check on Paul, while John and his father remained in the courtyard, standing in the sunlight now angling over the eastern wall. The novice had never known such anxiety, both over his improper feelings for Mara and in being alone with his father. Yes, Peter Rados had always been a strong-willed man, with success in business steeling his determination to get the better of people. And John now sensed it was only a matter of time before he became more assertive in his effort to draw him back to Australia.

- You've chosen a hard life, Peter said, chewing on chickpeas.

- No harder than when you went to Australia.

- Yes, but I knew things would improve.

- Life here's not so bad.

- There's no life here, son. It's all fasting and prayer.

- There are moments of sweetness.

- But it's not right, son. It's...not natural.

- Monks strive to rise above nature.

- I'm a laughing-stock, he said with a painful expression. I mention Athos and people say crude things about the place. Ah, son, son. I don't know what to think any more. We were so proud of you. Your mother sprouted wings in your achievements. A doctorate, important research, someday maybe a professor. You were the talk of the community. And then, Athos! Why, son? Where did we go wrong? I'm ashamed to meet friends and relatives because of what they say.

- People always gossip about things they don't understand.

- Come home, son.

- Did you go home to your parents in the village? No. You found your paradise in Australia. Well, I've found mine here.

- Don't do this to your mother.

- She understands, I know she does.

Just then Kosta, Panayoti and Father Evlogios appeared in the courtyard, on their way to the chapel, where the Abbot was waiting to discuss the ring. Looking more cheerful than ever, the boy pointed to the symbol with a palm still red from yesterday's eggs. Father Nikitas leaned against a crooked ladder and viewed proceedings with the hard eyes of a hawk. An instant later Nico appeared from the direction of the stables with a brush and bucket containing a mixture of lime and water.

- She hasn't got long to live, son.

- Come with me to see my Elder. He's not far from here. He'll help us both.

- Your spiritual Father?

There was a look of sorrow in Peter's eyes. He felt hurt that his son, his own flesh and blood, had chosen to see a stranger as his spiritual Father, while he had been almost dismissed as worthless. And suddenly his sorrow hardened to resentment and anger.

- I'm leaving tomorrow, he said.

- Stay a few more days. Meet the Elder. You'll see things differently.

- I've seen enough. I want to spend some time in the village.

He turned abruptly and set off toward the entrance just as Panayoti emerged from the chapel. Peter stopped the boy and asked why he was limping.

- So I never leave Athos.

- He's going to become a great chanter, Kosta called from the doorway.

Peter hurried from the gates and headed for the jetty, there to clear his thoughts in the wide expanse of sea and sky. Determined to visit the Elder before noon, John made for the guesthouse, to help with breakfast and see Mara. A smiling Nico brushed the symbol white.

As the tradesmen weren't required to work over the next three days Stefan looked forward to spending more time with Paul. His explanation of the symbol had been brief, hardly the public confession he imagined, nevertheless it opened a crack in the stony silence around his involvement in the Kosovo war. Eager to converse with his friend, he now hurried across the courtyard and took the stairs two at a time, as though racing his heart back to his cell. Paul was working on his story, though less intensely than before visiting the hermit. A discernible change had come over him since that visit: his edginess had given way to a thoughtful resignation that was reflected not only in a more balanced attitude to his work, but, more importantly, in what appeared an acceptance of his condition. He stood and stretched, his hands almost touching the low, undulating ceiling.

- That's it, he said, cracking the bones in his neck. All done and finished. A few grains of gold extracted from an otherwise worthless life. It's a good story, and honest, but some will find it offensive. Am I wrong to be proud of my work, Stef? The hermit advised me to destroy it, saying it was nothing but vanity and an obstacle to God. What do you think? The question's not fair, is it? You've never been one for fiction. You set out for Kosovo to experience the world through blood not ink. Who knows, I might still take the hermit's advice and throw it in the fire instead of throwing myself in the sea. What do you say, Stef? When's a work of art not an expression of vanity? That's the question, isn't it? Where's the artist who creates for the salvation of mankind, not for his own conceit? But can an artist ever be a saint? Or are the two mutually exclusive? Maybe that's the test of a real artist: one who finishes a masterpiece and throws it in the fire before it sees the light of day. Don't worry, mate, I won't burn it, not just yet anyway. Come on, don't look so gloomy. You take me too seriously, Stef. There's still too much of the world in me for a bonfire of the vanities.

After a frugal breakfast in the guesthouse Paul asked Stefan if he might see the ossuary, having read that all monasteries had a repository for the bones of dead monks. No, it wasn't a morbid fascination with death, he added, just his way of making dying easier. They went to the basement containing the raki still and wine cellar, where Stefan led the way along a passage whose very stones exuded a pungent dampness. The white-washed room was lined on three sides by deep shelves from floor to ceiling, all neatly arranged with skulls eight or nine rows deep, each forehead inscribed in black. A community of bones rose in a pyramid against the back wall. A small table was set with a silver crucifix, a Bible, and an icon of the Resurrection. Following Stefan's lead, Paul lit a candle, planted it in a tin of sand, and crossed himself - something he had last done back in his school days, and then with four fingers instead of three.

- They're like a theatre audience, he said, inspecting the shelves.
- More like jurors about to announce their verdict, added Stefan.
- And we're the tragic actors.
- Or the guilty waiting to be sentenced.

With their lower jaws missing the skulls had been arranged squarely on the shelves. Some were black, a few chalk-white, the majority various shades of brown. Having seen

bloodshed and death in Kosovo, Stefan wasn't uneasy before these bones gnawed clean by the dark. He stood with arms folded as Paul continued his inspection.

- What's written on each? he asked.
- The monk's name and year of death.

He moved slowly around the room, browsing from shelf to shelf as though at books in a library, now and then stopping to stare deeply into a socket or a cavity where a nose had been. After ten minutes Stefan suggested they leave, but Paul wanted to draw on the Fathers a while longer, for he gleaned an understanding in those dark sockets that would light his way forward to whatever awaited him. They sat on a bench, both leaning forward, elbows on knees, not saying a word. With anyone else Stefan would have been uneasy in the protracted silence, but Paul's steady breathing moved him profoundly. For an instant he imagined him drawing on death as a bee taking in pollen. The lamp-flame stirred as though at an invisible presence. Stefan felt again the pull of friendship – a pull that had drawn them to become blood brothers and would join them in a brotherhood of death.

- It's time I opened up about what happened in Kosovo, he began.
- You couldn't have chosen a better place for a confession, said Paul.
- The Church Fathers were right: remembrance of death is useful to life.
- Nearness to death loosens hearts contracted by fear.
- And funerals unite the bitterest of enemies.

Stefan had arrived in Belgrade full of patriotic fervour, eager to join one of the many Serbian paramilitary groups fighting what the Albanian called the Kosovo Liberation Army. Yes, the ethnic Albanians outnumbered the Serbs in that part of former Yugoslavia, but that didn't give them the right to take control of the traditionally Serbian region and deliver it to the waiting arms of Albania. His determination to defend his father's birthplace in eastern Kosovo, close to the Macedonian border, was strengthened on his arrival in the Balkans. He attended a massive rally in the heart of Belgrade, where the President exhorted a million people to oppose the powers that sought to take the cradle of their culture and bring the proud Serbian nation to its knees. Stefan had never experienced such a crowd and an outpouring of such passion. Yes, he had been to several football grand finals in Melbourne, along with a hundred thousand other fans. He had cheered wildly for his team, abused the umpires, even fought with opposition supporters, heedless of the consequences. For two hours he lost all sense of being Stefan Vekovic, becoming instead a nameless supporter with eyes only for the colours of his team. Deaf to the sound of his own voice, he contributed to the powerful cry urging his team to victory. His heart joined fifty thousand other hearts in beating blindly for his team. Yes, it had all been moving at the time, but now, seen against the backdrop of war, it seemed like nothing more than child's play. On that bleak winter's day in Belgrade, with the crowd chanting "Kosovo or death", Stefan had found himself being swept away by the irresistible swell of a common will. If a football game could incite him to swap punches with opposition supporters, what wouldn't he do for the place where his ancestors lay buried?

In his father's village relatives greeted him with one hand and with the other pointed to the snow-capped mountains in the west. Ashen and dressed in black, his uncle and aunt introduced themselves, their eyes spent and shrivelled from shedding tears for their son. An elderly fellow with badges of cherub-faced Tito pinned on his lapel stepped

under Stefan's nose. Those Albanian separatists were leaner than winter wolves, he stammered, and the smoke from their skimpy fires could be heard scratching the sky in grasping at flocks of jackdaws. The mayor, a childhood friend of his father's, hurried across the square, embraced the visitor, and announced a reception for him in the school hall. The next morning, observing tradition, Stefan's uncle led several men to the pigsty. A festive atmosphere filled the yard, as though in preparation for a wedding. Water boiled to laughing point in a large cauldron; women in white shawls scrubbed boards set on trestles; children ran around chasing the chickens. The restless pig was pulled from the slush and held firmly by its ears, tail, and a rope tied to its snout. A man approached with a sledgehammer, took aim, and bludgeoned it between the eyes. Conscious of being watched by the villagers, Stefan didn't flinch as his uncle stepped on the animal's head and slit its throat. Blood steamed into the damp earth and a dozen hands lifted the quivering body onto the boards. Children gathered around, red-faced from the cold, clear-eyed with excitement. The uncle cut open the animal and pulled out its steaming entrails. He squeezed the urine from the bladder, washed it in warm water, and inflated it with a plastic straw. As buckets filled with coagulating fat and trays with pinkish meat, the children played soccer with the slimy ball, while a white rooster pecked at a patch of dark earth.

Later that evening, after the platters of salty crackle and pork had been emptied, an old gusle-player entertained the gathering with epic poetry. The ends of his moustache were knotted under his chin, his face was lined with Cyrillic characters, and he wore his sheepskin coat inside out. As he sawed away on his one-stringed instrument, Stefan felt a sense of belonging, as though this was a homecoming celebration. Toasts were proposed in his honour and many greasy kisses left on both cheeks, which he didn't wipe away as a sign of respect. Finally the mayor stood and delivered a speech praising their visitor. A glass of slivovits in one hand and a cigarette in the other, he said many people had left the village, succeeded overseas, and forgot the poor land of their forebears. Before them stood an exceptional young man: born in Australia, he had turned his back on the wealth and comforts of that country and, at his own considerable expense, answered the call of his ancestral land. Having a rhythmical left ear (the right was plugged with a hearing aid), the mayor began couching his words in the verse-form of what had been recited, so the gusle-player took up his instrument and accompanied him. At first Stefan was embarrassed by his lyricism, but the melody soon grew on him and, perhaps under the influence of the strong drink, he allowed the praise to flow through him. How many other young men would undertake such a thing? The mayor's voice quivered as he put an arm over Stefan's shoulder. How many others would risk their lives for a village in the Balkans where dry cow manure was still used to light bread ovens and whose inhabitants still ate pig-trotters in marrow jelly? After another toast to his health, the gusle sounded a lively tune and people danced around Stefan with short, mincing steps. And soon he was leading the circle of dancers, surprised by his own fleet-footed weaving, feeling warm and at home among these people whose bony cheeks glowed like pomegranates.

Next morning Stefan put a few things in a backpack, thanked his uncle and aunt, and accompanied the bleary-eyed mayor to the village church, which was still up to its knees in mist. Lighting a thin candle, he realised his father had been baptised here, perhaps in the dented baptismal font turned upside down in the corner, and suddenly things around him felt closer and even the austere icons glowed with familiarity. The priest sprinkled him

with a few sprigs of basil dipped in holy water and, with many teeth and one tongue, called upon the good Lord to protect His servant in whatever lay ahead. Stefan accepted the fragrant blessing, kissed the icons, and followed the mayor to a shed where his car was flanked by cows with swollen udders. Mist rose and thickened as they drove on a sealed road winding up through the hills. A woman's voice whined yet another Serbian pop-song from the cassette player, the interior filled with cigarette smoke, bends were taken heedless of on-coming traffic, and through all this Stefan struggled to contain a rising nausea. At the risk of offending the mayor he was about to ask him not to light another cigarette, when the car turned off the bitumen, rattled for a while, and stopped before a fallen tree. Stefan opened the window and took several deep breaths. The mayor laughed and encouraged him to fill his lungs, saying their mountain air was worth more than all the gold in Australia. Suddenly, five or six men sprang from the mist and surrounded the car. All were armed, in military uniform, wearing black balaclavas. The mayor cursed their mothers and called for someone nicknamed Kosten, meaning chestnut. A thickset fellow came forward, greeted him by name, and pulled off his balaclava, which served as a signal for the others to do the same. Apart from Kosten, who was around forty, the others were young, some no more than teenagers, and all with crewcuts. Two of them went to the boot of the car and took out cartons of cigarettes and boxes with bottles of slivovits. The mayor wished Stefan good fortune and promised to put on another feast when the Albanians had been taught a lesson.

- What brings you here from Australia? asked Kosten.

- I want to help my people, replied Stefan.

- Well, start by taking that, he laughed, indicating a box of slivovits.

Stefan raised the box onto his shoulder and they set off along a muddy road. The cold bit his fingers and chilled his body. His clothes were too light for a Balkan winter and he regretted not taking his mother's advice. But Melbourne had been sweltering when he left, and heavy clothing was furthest from his excited mind. The bottles clinked louder as his hold on the box became weaker. Should he call on Kosten to stop a moment? Perhaps ask for a pair of gloves or a balaclava for his ears? But this might be their way of testing his strength of character? He pushed on, trying to dispel the cold by concentrating on the warmth he had left behind. An hour later they turned onto a wheel-churned path through a forest of oak trees whose stark branches dripped frost. Dogs barked in the distance, a wisp of smoke rose from the treetops, the smell of petrol sharpened the air. They entered a clearing in which a high stone wall surrounded a few buildings. Heads with crimson berets appeared above the wall and the wooden gate opened. In the courtyard a wolfish dog sprang at Stefan from behind a jeep, but Kosten was quick to drive it back by cursing its ancestors. They were greeted jovially by those inside, who were eager for the drink and cigarettes. Kosten took Stefan to the militia's commander, saying the base had been a monastery that housed thirty monks in the days before Tito. He put on his beret and led the way to a small church in the centre of the compound. The walls of the nave had long ago been stripped back to bare brick, while a line of makeshift office partitions replaced the traditional icon screen. They walked between several rows of chairs, stacks of boxes containing military supplies, and tables with maps and communication equipment. Kosten knocked on the partition and, after some time, a quiet voice invited them to enter. A uniformed man in his mid-thirties sat at a desk covered in papers and books, positioned

where the altar should have been. Kosten saluted him as commander Zlatko, introduced Stefan, and left abruptly to warm his soul with a glass of slivovits. The commander nodded, gazed at the silver pen in his hands, and resumed writing. When he looked up again his attention seemed more focussed

- Images, he said, they're best caught at night.

Stefan shivered and rubbed his fingers numb from the cold.

- Vek, Vekov, Vekovic, mused Zlatko.

- That's right, sir.

- The mayor says you're a true patriot.

- I've come to help.

- Tell me about yourself, Vekovic. How's life in distant Australia?

He listened thoughtfully, occasionally making a note on a sheet different from the one that had occupied him. He was clean-shaven, with honey-coloured hair thinning at the crown, and a blue gaze that seemed to vacillate from things present to thoughts of the future. When Stefan finished Zlatko spoke with surprising frankness about his own life. He was a poet and a lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Belgrade. Before obtaining his academic position, he had served in the army as an officer, and contacts from those days had supported him in setting up this paramilitary unit. Yes, he was married, with two young daughters. He took out his wallet and showed Stefan a family portrait. Of course, he missed them, but his love of family was bound to his love of the greater family, the Serbian people, and it was small-minded to concentrate solely on the welfare of wife and children when the entire nation was under threat. He had answered the patriotic call and urged his colleagues to put down their pens and take up arms in defence of their nation. He rebuked them for their crippling analysis of the situation and the sludge of words that filled the Serbian soul. There came a time when blood should be allowed to speak freely, directly, without argument and sophistry. And then he mentioned his poet friends, with whom he had most strongly identified. They, too, challenged his beliefs and accused him of moral weakness, of not upholding the poetic ideals of tolerance and dialogue. But he defended himself by pointing to the decadent nature of what he had not so long ago considered good poetry. Seen against the backdrop of the clouds looming over Serbia, much late twentieth century poetry appeared morally weak, uncommitted, trite, or else sound and fury signifying nothing. It was time for a return to strong national poetry: the muscular epic of Homer, the ballads of the Serbian folk-singers, the prose-poetry of Nietzsche. In times such as these it was not enough to write poetry, one must live poetry and, if circumstances demanded, die for it. Stefan didn't understand all of what Zlatko said, but he could relate to it emotionally, and his misgivings in walking to the compound were soon dispelled by the commander's bearing, his tone of voice, and the fatalistic sadness in his blue eyes.

That evening Stefan was inducted in a ceremony devised by Zlatko. Large candles lit the nave and the men sat solemnly in full uniform, and beret. After reciting his own lengthy poem by heart, the commander called their brother from Australia to the front and instructed him to strip. When Stefan was down to only his underpants and the cross around his neck, Zlatko snipped his hair in three places and sprinkled the strands over a flame floating in a dish of oil. He then cut a crescent from the first three fingernails of his right hand, gathered the parings, and dropped them in a wood-fired heater. Finally, after

directing him to take three sips from the glass, he presented him with a uniform and a Kalashnikov rifle shining in its virginity. When Stefan had dressed from beret to boots, Zlatko kissed him on the forehead and both cheeks, upon which the others filed past and did likewise. Again Stefan felt that sense of belonging, a bond of brotherhood far stronger than he had ever known in being a member of a football team. Patriotic songs were played on a cassette, slivovits was brought out, and the commander led the circle of dancers, followed by Stefan. At one point he broke off and went to the end, leaving the newcomer to lead thirty men joined arm on arm, dancing as a single body and singing with a common voice.

In the months that followed jackdaws cried against the cough of mortar and the rattle of gunfire, vehicles heaved and groaned and churned snow to sludge, while Stefan warmed his hands on the barrel of his Kalashnikov. His admiration for Zlatko grew with each violent confrontation, which in turn strengthened his own confidence and daring. The last time he experienced this adulation for another person was in adolescence, when he would hero-worship football players and attempt to emulate their courage on the field. Leading by example, Zlatko would be first into a village in search of Albanian separatists and the last to pull back. His self-control astounded Stefan: after an engagement that would leave many in the unit pale and trembling, he would return to his desk in the sanctuary of the church and spend most of the night writing poetry.

As-violence fuelled violence they struck at villages with greater ferocity, clearing them of inhabitants, adding to the growing swell of human misery pouring south into Macedonia. Stefan didn't stop to question his actions: the world had degenerated into a nightmare beyond good and evil. They were restoring Kosovo to its rightful owners, and in this he felt no remorse for the victims of their campaign. There were excesses, too, and not just against captured separatists. In one village Stefan had watched from his lookout as several men, alleged sympathisers, were marched down to a ravine and summarily shot. Should he have intervened? Called out in the name of justice? Yes, of course, but reason fled first in times of war, and madness ran riot over the unfortunate. He wasn't making excuses and didn't want sympathy. No, his conscience had made thorns of those memories, and he now felt ashamed before Paul and guilty before God.

A month later, on a bitterly cold day in March, they descended on an Albanian village which had been shelled and reduced almost to rubble. He was waiting in a jeep for a comrade who had dragged a young woman into a shattered mosque. Her cries sounded against flocks of jackdaws, but he sat there, eyes fixed on a patch of snow on the side of the road, listening to the crackling radio for orders from Zlatko. When the fellow came out, he pulled off his black balaclava, returned Stefan's overcoat (his had been muddied after slipping into a ditch), and said he had tied the woman to a column. The wind was cutting and jets screamed in the distance. Stefan jumped out, slipped into his overcoat, and was about to head for the mosque, when a radio message ordered them to join the main convoy at once. His comrade prodded him to be quick, saying he would reverse the jeep closer, but the message was repeated and they drove off.

- I was ready to do it, he shook his head.

- You were caught in the madness.

- I would've raped her, he said incredulously. My God, I would've gone into that mosque and raped her without a second thought.

- But you drove away, Paul said, placing his arm over Stefan's shoulder.

- No, a part of me remained there, and will always be there - caught between that patch of snow and the crumbled mosque.

The atrocities worsened when NATO entered the conflict. As American jets bombed Belgrade and dehumanised Serbs from the safety of the sky, so the militia dehumanised Albanians. Whenever there was a lull in the conflict and the horror of their actions began to grip their minds, Zlatko would gather them in the candlelit church and recite his poetry. Cruel and beautiful, powerful and melodious, his words vindicated their actions, assuaged their conscience, and elevated them to the status of freedom-fighters, just like their Hajduk ancestors who had fought to throw off the Ottoman yoke.

One clear night in early spring, after a particularly moving recitation (Zlatko's poetry became more charming and beautiful as the conflict became more brutal), Stefan was on watch-duty at the wall, thinking about autumn and the start of another football season in Melbourne, when a shell screeched overhead and exploded in the courtyard. The blast threw him over the wall and he scrambled for safety behind an outcropping of rock. Several more explosions shook the compound. He remained there long enough to subdue the tremor in his body and then crawled out. The gates were torn off their hinges, vehicles were blazing, men staggered into the courtyard. He went back inside and helped some of the injured to a clearing just beyond what was left of the wall. Suddenly, struck by Zlatko's absence, he held his breath against the thick smoke swirling from a burning jeep and hurried to the church. Stars were visible through a gaping hole in the dome. The partition had fallen and in the light from a burning jeep he could see the commander hunched forward over the desk. A beam cracked and roof-tiles shattered on the floor. He thought of retreating but the gleam of baldness on Zlatko's crown drew him forward. The jeep exploded and flames leapt into the church. As he pushed the commander back in the chair, blood gushed from his mouth onto a sheet of paper with what appeared to be a poem. His left eye was partly open, as though taking aim, and his right hand gripped a silver pen. Stefan reached for his pulse, but he was now trembling again and all he could feel was the warm stickiness of the neck. For some reason he tried to pull the pen from Zlatko's grip, but a beam snapped, tiles crashed, and he ran from the collapsing dome.

Dazed, bleeding from the head, a young man in dark underwear stumbled from the ruins of the sleeping quarters. Stefan led him to the clearing, where Kosten had taken charge of the injured. Their vehicles and communication equipment destroyed, Stefan volunteered to get help from his father's village, which, according to Kosten, was about twenty kilometres away in the direction of the crescent moon rising from a range of hills. He set off at a brisk jog and it wasn't long before his lungs burned more painfully than any football match. Would he win this game? Did he have enough endurance? He recalled Zlatko's bloody gasp. Tears filled his eyes, blurred the dark landscape, splintered the stars. Suddenly he didn't know where he was, and the moon had disappeared. For an instant he remembered the Southern Cross, and how as a boy he would use it and the Pointers to determine south, but there wasn't a familiar constellation in the sky. He continued running until a feeling of hopelessness pulled at him, draining him of the adrenaline that had driven him this far. He stopped beneath a tree fragrant with blossom and sobbed for Zlatko, for those who hadn't survived the blast, for the horrible things they had done in those Albanian villages. A breeze stirred the branches and sprinkled him with blossom. He

reached for his gun, forgetting he had left it behind to make running easier. Only an hour earlier he had believed in the holiness of the war, shared the convictions of the militia, taken heart from Zlatko's example, now he was helpless, cut off from everything, a shade in an endless night. If he had the gun he might have shot himself there and then, but he grasped the cross around his neck and sank to his knees. When he raised his forehead from the tree's gnarled roots, the moon appeared through the black branches, higher than before and haloed in red. He must have cried for some time, for he now felt exhausted, numb, indifferent to those he had left behind in the compound.

At daybreak he found himself in the village-square, greeted by a three-legged dog that barked a few times and hobbled away. The place looked deserted, most of the houses were in ruins, but there was no anger left in him any more, for he recalled the Albanian villages they had emptied, the mosques and minarets they had mortared. The church in which he had been blessed a few months ago had taken several direct hits: part of the roof had collapsed and the facade had crumbled, with only the arch above the entrance somehow still intact. His uncle's house had fared better than most, though it appeared to have been looted. Picking his way through a few rooms, he located his suitcase and some clothes left behind before joining the militia. A jet screeched directly overhead, shaking the foundations of the house. He rummaged about in the kitchen, found a few cans of food and a cigarette lighter, and left with a vague idea of reaching Belgrade, knowing that NATO was still pounding the city. In the yard he remembered that his wallet with cash, credit card and driver's license had gone missing the day he waited outside the mosque. It had been in his overcoat when he took it off, but the fellow who borrowed it swore he knew nothing about the wallet, insisting his hands had been busy elsewhere to bother with what had been in the pockets. That night a balaclava had been passed around the compound and everyone made a donation, even though money wasn't needed in the militia. As for the credit card, he had dismissed it as being of little use to anyone in the chaos engulfing that part of the world. His passport and the donation were enough for the present, he thought, and once in Belgrade he would see about cancelling the card and getting another.

On the way to the main road he was once again drawn to the church. A few jackdaws scattered at his approach. He thought it proper to pass under the precarious arch in entering the remnant of the nave. A fallen section of wall retained a fresco with the face of the Virgin. He cleared away the shattered plaster and set it upright in a shaft of sunlight. Her head was covered in an aubergine shawl and the sorrow in her eyes was vast, as though her own child had been slaughtered with the innocents and buried in the rubble. Bowing before the Virgin, he thought of the old monk who had given him the cross and of John on Mount Athos. He then changed into his clothes, pulled the baptismal font from under some bricks and beams, placed the paramilitary uniform inside, and set it alight.

They didn't look at each other as Stefan spoke, with their gaze fixed on the assembly of staring skulls. Paul straightened up, let out a protracted sigh, and tapped his friend on the knee.

- What can I say, Stef?
- There's nothing to say.
- I've been sentenced to death and you to...
- A life of guilt.

- What brought you here, Stef? Penance through becoming a monk?

- I don't know, he replied, staring at his palm. My insides were ripped out in Kosovo. I was afraid, confused, desperate for a friend, someone to show me there was still a grain of goodness in the world. I needed a place away from things Serbian, somewhere to clear my head and heal the wound in my heart.

Twisting the cross around his neck, Stefan stood and walked thoughtfully around the room. The flame in the lamp quivered, swaying his gauze-thin shadow on the vaulted ceiling. He picked up the crucifix from the table, felt its weight, and then looked directly at his friend.

- What should I do, Paul? he asked.

Moved by his plaintive tone, Paul considered the question for a moment. He wanted to encourage his friend, say something that wouldn't sound bookish, but he sensed the inadequacy of words in the face of such brutality.

- You could always return to Kosovo, he finally said, going to the table. Make a confession to the War Crimes Tribunal.

Stefan nodded in a manner suggesting he had been wrestling with that for some time. Paul's face suddenly beamed and he offered to accompany him. He was in no hurry to do the tourist thing. Since visiting the hermit he felt an itch to do something worthwhile before it was too late. Winking, he said it was better to be safe than sorry in matters of eternity. Stefan embraced him and thanked him for his friendship over the years. His friend's hand and cheek were cold and he suggested they leave the damp ossuary and warm up outside. As they climbed the steps bright with sunlight, Stefan noticed the swallows circling the dome. Yes, Easter was a good time for making decisions.

Striding through the forest's thick shadows, John was barely able to keep from breaking into a run. The air was fresh with verdure and rotting leaves as he breathed in the three short syllables of Kyrie and breathed out the longer syllables of Eleison. This morning he pushed himself harder than usual on the winding uphill path, hoping the vigorous exercise would disperse the confusion of thoughts and feelings. Only a week ago his future had seemed certain: he was prepared for his coming tonsure and could read from the Philokalia with the same focus and concentration that had capped him a Doctor of Philosophy. But since then storm clouds had gathered over his emotional landscape and filled him with a sense of foreboding. In leaving the monastery he had resolved to tell the Elder everything and place himself entirely in his hands. Yes, he had been troubled by his father's arrival on his previous visit to the Elder, but so far his presence wasn't as unsettling as expected. The news of his mother's illness was a blow, yet this, too, he accepted with surprising equanimity. He would write to her at the first opportunity, explaining his reasons for not being able to return to Australia, and promising to pray for her every day before the Virgin in the chapel, which would comfort and encourage her to face what lay ahead. Yes, he could cope with these tensions; in fact, he sensed that his prayers for both Paul and his mother also served to strengthen his own faith. But what was he to do with Mara? She had disturbed him in a way that even his prayers were of no help. He had broken one of the Mountain's abiding laws in concealing a woman in the monastery. What would the Elder say about it? Instruct him to tell the Abbot? And then what? Expulsion? More than likely, for the Abbot was under extreme pressure from Father Nikitas over his liberal ideas. And then if the zealots got wind of it their outrage would tear the monastery apart. But what if he didn't tell the Elder? If her presence remained concealed for another day or two? She would leave disguised as a man and nobody suspect that a woman had been harboured in the monastery. What was his moral obligation in the matter? To help a woman, a human being, at a time of desperate need, and by his transgression restore her to wellbeing through the intervention of the Virgin? Or uphold the long-standing prohibition of woman on the Mountain? Should Christian charity over-rule monastic tradition? How many men had come to Athos having been summoned by the Virgin in dreams in visions? Was Mara's case any different? She had also dreamt of the Virgin, who instructed her to seek health and happiness on Athos. Surely that was reason enough to intercede on her behalf, to shelter her for a few days in a way that her femininity remained concealed from everyone. Yes, perhaps Christian charity might sanction his actions if they were truly selfless, but he knew there was more to it than simply helping a person in need. He enjoyed nursing her back to health, felt a lightness of being in her presence, yielded to the gravity of her eyes. And last night he had admitted the obvious to himself: he loved Mara and didn't want her to leave. He had always taken pride in being above such feelings, but her tender helplessness and the vast suffering in her eyes had opened his heart. He had shunned relationships in living for his science, he had turned his back on society in living for his faith, and now a frail girl had come along and plunged him in blood's turbulence. He was in love, that was the truth of the matter, and what he must now confront. But did he have the strength to tell the Elder? What were his options? Remain in the monastery and renounce Mara, or follow her back into the world? There was no other course of

action. What would the Elder advise? What could he possibly say to help him out of his present turmoil?

Earlier that morning he had taken Mara breakfast. She looked better than on the previous night: her gaze was stronger, clearer, and she ate with appetite. Her boots were near the heater, their toes darkened by moisture. Had she been out? No, she replied, it was water from the washroom's temperamental tap. She had to pick her moment to use it and then in haste. He implored her not to leave the room, for everyone was uneasy over the mysterious appearance of a symbol on the chapel wall.

- What kind of symbol?

- Some say it's the sign of Islam.

She spread quince jam on a slice of bread.

- It's been drawn in blood, he said.

He observed her slender hands: her fingernails were short and appeared to have been bitten back almost to the quick. The flap of her backpack was open, revealing a toiletry bag containing sanitary pads.

- Tomorrow I will leave, she said, turning to him. You have been good to me, John. With the Virgin's help I will return to Serbia and start a new life.

- Yes, Mara, she understands the world's suffering, especially at Easter, when she mourns her dead son.

- As only a mother can cry for her child.

A shadow passed over her face, but only for a moment, and then her jaws set and her eyes shone with a sharp light. The knot in his stomach tightened at the thought of her leaving. He reached out and took her hand: it was soft and warm from the cup. She didn't pull away, as he feared, and he was once again holding the blue-grey pigeon of his childhood before releasing it to a clear sky. He bowed and kissed the back of her hand.

- Help me, Mara, he said.

- Maybe you do not belong in a monastery.

- Then where do I belong? he asked, scraping his chair closer.

The question had struck hard at his silent achievements over the past two years, at his very purpose in being on Athos. Yes, there had been misgivings prior to this, but they were due to a kind of intellectual doubt that caused a passing ripple on the surface of his being. His present uncertainty was stronger, more emotional, with the potential to undermine the foundations of his faith. At a time when he seemed to be withstanding the various forces pulling at his heart, this woman had entered his life disguised as a man, and her very helplessness had the charm to draw him from Athos.

- The Virgin will guide us, she replied, slipping her hand from his.

She put down her cup and caressed his cheek. It would have been so easy to yield to her touch, to have denied everything he had believed in and accepted her affection, but he desisted and drew back, saying he was needed in the kitchen.

The meadow surrounding the Elder's cottage was spotted with bright poppies which had sprung up since John's last visit. The sun was shining broadly, fruit and nut trees were in bloom, and a rich warmth rose bodily from the earth. On the far side of the meadow the Elder was hammering under a flowering pear tree. John observed him for a moment, forgetting the anguish that had brought him there, taking heart from how the old monk shouldered a sagging limb while propping it with a stake.

Born on Patmos, the island famous for the Book of Revelation, it seemed the Elder had been destined to become a monk. In conversations with John he would often recount his past in an open manner, particularly his childhood, which always brought a wistful smile to his face. Children were like happy bees, he once remarked. Their first encounters with the world were tentative, but they gathered a store of impressions and experiences that would sustain them in later life. In the Elder's case his father had set out for America when the boy was five and disappeared forever, as though swallowed by a land whose very name fill the child with unease, like those strange-sounding places that had kept Odysseus from his wife and son. He and his mother lived with his paternal grandparents in a house his grandfather had built with his own hands, spitting a blessing on each stone before laying it in place. His grandmother was illiterate, but she could read coming rain in the flight of seagulls. Unable to count beyond the last knuckle of her little finger, she could knead the big-bellied dough and pull out thirty children for the oven. She knew the religious significance of each day of the year, starting with New Year's Day, when Saint Basil came from distant Caesarea to join in their songs and celebrations, partaking of the warm pie with the lucky coin concealed in its crust. On hearing the cuckoo's first call in spring, she would offer the boy a sweet from the jar reserved for guests. But she could also be parsimonious to the point of stinginess. Once, when toy watches were popular with the boys in the neighbourhood, he went to the village shop and bought one on credit, telling the owner his grandfather would square the account. When he got home and announced he could now tell the time, she scolded him to tears and demanded he return it at once. Just then his grandfather arrived in the courtyard with the mule. The shouting and crying could be heard from the village-square, he complained. Before she could complete her explanation, he silenced her with a stern 'Woman' and pointed out that a boy needed to tell the time. When she protested it wasn't real and the arms didn't move, he replied they were right twice a day, enough for a boy of his age.

The Elder couldn't recall whether he pined for his father, or whether he even missed him, for the coarse cheeks and thick moustache quickly faded, like the words of a flimsy letter left in the sunlight. Still too young for school he was happiest being with his slow-moving grandfather, who liked to whistle church tunes in working the small plots scattered around the island. They harvested fields bristling with barley, and beat branches with long sticks until the punished trees rained olives on their head. At night he would sit on his knee and listen to stories from the Gospels. But how could five loaves feed a thousand hungry people? Smiling, he would say miracles were more common in those days because faith was fresher than bread just out of the oven.

One morning his grandfather set him on the mule and led the way to the terraced vineyard near the monastery of Saint John the Theologian. Crowning the island's highest point, the fortified structure had imposed itself on locals and pilgrims for more than a thousand years. The day was hot and large bells tolled wearily from above, announcing the Assumption of the Virgin tomorrow, for which his mother and grandmother had been preparing and fasting all week. His grandfather whistled, the mule snorted, and he gazed at the distant monastery: its sandy-coloured walls rose from the surrounding rock, some vertically, others at steep angles. But he was frightened of the monks who lived up there: whenever one walked through the village a strange smell lingered in the air and some of the older boys whispered it wasn't safe to step in their shadows. He now asked his

grandfather what they did in that place? They prayed day and night, even in their sleep, and if they stopped praying the world would come to an end. And what was in the building just below the monastery? The Holy Cave where the Book of Revelation had been written. What was the Book of Revelation? His grandfather whistled for a moment. A book that explained when Christ would come again. When, tomorrow? It couldn't be far off because the world had been waiting almost two thousand years.

As his grandfather hoed between the vines, he sat in the parched shade of a fig tree, striking white pebbles and sniffing a thunderstorm in each spark. Suddenly, drawn by the thought of the Holy Cave, he slipped away and soon found himself a few terraces below the dazzling building. In scrambling up the hillside he tripped and skinned his knees, but where the trickle of blood would have concerned him on any other occasion, he now wiped it with a fig leaf and continued up to a level clearing with a high wall on the far side. A few crows eyed him suspiciously then hopped away as he made for a partly open gate. Had they forgotten to lock it or was someone inside? He followed a sandy path and descended some steps to a courtyard with a chapel like the one in the village cemetery. The entrance was decorated with bright flowers and an icon glittered in the wall above the lintel. A cool breath from the open doorway beckoned him inside. He was apprehensive about entering. Stories of caves and vampires came to mind. What if a monk should appear and tie his hands with a knotted cord? Bracing himself, he entered. The interior was dim and smelt of damp earth. A host of candle-flames stirred and twisted as he walked past. From a small window on the left he could see the small harbour and the horizon. The right side of the chapel consisted of natural rock. Several large icons leaned against the rugged wall, while lamps hung from hooks in the ceiling. Just above the ground a silver wreath surrounded a depression in the rock which, he would later learn, was where Saint John had rested his head in beholding the apocalyptic vision. His grandfather's words echoed in the cave. Tonight he would ask him to read from the Book of Revelation. But he was now tired and decided to rest a while before the journey down. He sat on the stony floor and lay his head against the wreath. Just as a pleasant feeling began to course through his body, a bearded face suddenly breathed on him. Before the monk could utter a word, he leapt up, brushed past him, and scurried out. Once on the steps he glanced over his shoulder: the monk was standing in the doorway, almost filling it with his girth, crossing himself slowly as though he had seen the devil.

John walked through the grassy meadow, careful not to crush the bright-cupped poppies humming with bees. The Elder greeted him with a blessing and asked for his help. The hanging limb was blistered with sap and John managed to push it up with his back as the Elder secured the stake. It was like a crutch to an old man, smiled the Elder, picking up a few tools. The tree was probably a hundred years old. He wanted to save the limb from snapping under the weight of the coming fruit. Yes, he should allow the tree to die gracefully, but its pears were sweeter than those of the younger trees.

They went to the house and climbed up to the weathered verandah. The Elder brought out a bowl of hazelnuts and two glasses of water. He was saddened to learn of John's mother and offered to pray for her wellbeing. Her faith was strong, said John, and she would meet whatever lay ahead with a prayer on her lips. And how was his father? Restrained but still obviously resentful of the situation. The Virgin would open his heart to his son's coming tonsure, the Elder assured him, and took three small sips from his glass.

Some years ago he had met a Greek-American who vehemently objected to his son becoming a novice, yet in the fullness of time he came to Athos every year with books and clothing for the young monk, and would stay months cheerfully helping around the monastery. John doubted his father would undergo such a change, but the Elder repeated his assurance, adding that his very presence here, at Easter, indicated a softening in his opposition. His resentment was due to a paternal pride that could be steadfast as a mountain, but such pride yielded to the Virgin's grace, which flowed through the stony hearted like a swift stream. He then asked about Paul and was pleased to learn the young man was less anxious after visiting the hermit. When John told him about the chapel wall, the Elder became thoughtful and fastened his cardigan with a safety pin, as though a chill had passed through him. But in all this, John had skirted what really occupied his mind, while strengthening his resolve to seek advice. Noticing an unease in the novice, the Elder now folded his hands on the sunlit table, leaned forward, and asked if anything else were the matter. Like many of the older monks, his knuckles were also thick with calluses from a lifetime of prostrations. John cracked a hazel, only to find a shrivelled kernel.

- There is something, said John, uncertain of how to commence.

The Elder caught his eyes and held them for a moment. Encouraged by the gentle look, John took a breath and plunged into his confession, disclosing Mara's presence in the monastery, her reason for being on Athos, and his feelings for her. When he finished shame flushed his face and his palms were sweaty from the warmth of the sun absorbed by his clothes. Two white butterflies circled the table, stopped on the Elder's stringy beard, and fluttered off again, happy in their flirting. John removed his woollen hat and bowed penitently. The Elder shook his head and let out a protracted sigh.

- A woman on Athos is a serious matter, my boy.

- What should I do, Elder? Am I meant to be a monk? How can I follow the thorny path of asceticism if I can't control my own feelings? How does one practice sobriety when the heart breaks loose and can't be restrained with a prayer cord?

- Has anything happened between you?

- No, Elder.

- She must leave at once.

- And my feelings for her?

- Use them to determine where you belong.

- How, Elder?

- We're all here because of powerful feelings, my boy, not ideas and abstractions.

Dispassionate men don't set out on the monastic path, and those who attempt the journey soon enough turn back. Our life isn't an intellectual exercise. How could it be? In the cool light of reason and common sense our existence is wretched, without value to society, a kind of living death. Why then are we here? Why have we renounced our manhood? Passion, my boy, an overflow of emotion, a blind love that cures us of our blindness. You say you've fallen in love with this woman - that's only natural for a young man. You're thinking of leaving the monastery for her - well and good. Your heart's rebelled and you've been cast into blood's turbulence - excellent. Would you have it any other way? One doesn't become a monk through deliberation and study, but through turning sighs into prayers, and suffering into psalms of joy. As the Virgin's Garden Athos is permeated by the numinous presence of women. You say this woman has come here for her salvation,

but maybe she has come for yours as well. After all, is her presence here just weeks before your tonsure nothing more than coincidence? Yes, you could have become a monk in mind through the same determination that made you a Doctor of Philosophy, but she has ignited your emotions and now you must decide: use the fire to become a monk in spirit, or be consumed by it and follow her. Yes, my boy, carnal love is a fire: for most it's an end in itself, for others a means to rising above one's self.

His voice was sweet, melodious, and John noted how Greek seemed more musical than English - a music that came through especially in times of sorrow, when it soothed the troubled mind and comforted the grieving heart. The Elder looked up from his fingers crossed on the rough table. His dark eyes were always slightly moist, as though on the verge of tears. Sitting forward in his chair, he took another three sips and said he felt compelled to confide in John an incident that happened fifty years ago. It was the end of the Second World War, he was twenty-five and had just completed his service as an officer in Intelligence, where he devised communication codes and deciphered messages intercepted from the enemy. He could have remained in the army after the war, but the misery he had seen in a number of Macedonian villages crushed his heart and he set out for Athos, intent on decoding God's alphabet and making sense of human suffering. After his novitiate in the monastery of Xenophontos, he joined a small community of monks living under a devout spiritual father in the wilderness of Karoulia. By this time the Civil War was tearing Greece apart and Communist units were making incursions on Athos, raiding monasteries for food and supplies. One such unit occupied a dwelling not far from the community, took everything from them, and forced the monks to take up residence in the monastery at Lavra. The Elder refused to leave. It was the beginning of summer: the vines needed tending and the vegetable patch watering. Perhaps recalling the smell of aubergine fried in olive oil, the bearded leader of the unit, who was no more than thirty, allowed him to stay.

One afternoon he was hoeing in the patch when a Communist soldier appeared from the surrounding scrub. It was hot and the Elder's cassock was hitched in his belt, his sleeves were rolled, and his head was uncovered. The soldier stopped at the fence and demanded a watermelon. Taken aback, he crossed himself, for the soldier turned out to be a woman of about twenty. She took off her hat and shook loose a thicket of hair. The Elder said the melon wasn't ripe, at which she pulled out a pistol and ordered him to pick it. A moment's standoff followed as she cocked the trigger and aimed, while he braced himself, holding the hoe across the back of his neck.

- Is your life worth a melon? she asked.

- Is your soul worth my life?

She replaced the pistol in its holster and flashed a smile.

- You shouldn't be here, he said.

- As a Communist?

- As a woman.

- Do you know what, little monk, we'll open Athos to all when we win our revolution. First we'll banish the King, then his protector, God, and then we'll turn the monasteries into hotels for the workers.

Shielding her eyes, she asked for a drink of water. He dipped a tin jug into the cistern used for watering the patch and gave it to her. As she drank her neck muscles

moving powerfully and water trickled down her cheeks. They stared at each other for a moment, as though in a test of will. Her shirt was unbuttoned to a point that revealed her cleavage. He continued hoeing.

- We'll chisel Marx's features up there, she laughed, pointing to Athos's summit.

- Why are you doing this? he asked.

- For the same reason as you, little monk. Your faith's based on the myth of God, mine on the need for justice here and now. Your God's a fascist sympathiser, little monk. You monks lived like lords while the rest of Greece struggled under German occupation. Is it true a delegation of Athonite Fathers petitioned Hitler to protect the Holy Mountain? And is it true he agreed? He wasn't that bad after all, at least not for the monks of Athos. Take off your cassock, little monk. We'll give you a uniform to serve humanity.

She laughed again, loud and strong, and her laughter echoed in the valley, perhaps as no woman's voice had done in more than a thousand years, and it went through him like cold water on an empty stomach. For an instant it seemed as though the sky were somehow broader, the sun closer, the vine leaves greener, and the watermelon almost ripe for picking.

- That's mine, she said, teeth flashing. I'll come back for it tomorrow. Who knows, I might even share it with you if you decide to join us.

He was unable to get her out of his mind for the rest of the day, and when a sea breeze sprang up in the evening he heard her laughter in it. As the sun set in a crimson blaze he found himself staring at the watermelon. He flicked it and reckoned it would be ripe in a couple of days. He spent the night on his knees, in a losing struggle between the image of the girl and the icon of the Virgin. The following afternoon she came again. He was on a ladder securing the vine, and his heart leapt at the sound of her voice.

- Hello, little monk, she winked. Are the grapes riper than my watermelon?

- They've ripened early this year.

- Give me a bunch.

He snipped a cluster and gave it to her without climbing down from the ladder. She ate several, commented on their sweetness, and added they reflected his nature. He blushed and turned to the vine so she wouldn't notice.

- Have you thought about joining us?

- And have you considered your immortal soul?

- Where's my soul, little monk? Is it under my tongue? Between my breasts? Or somewhere further down?

- Why have you come?

- Look at you, alone in the prime of your manhood.

- I'm not alone, he said, his words sticking in his dry throat.

- No, you're not, she smiled. God's everywhere, isn't He?

And then, as though losing her balance, she braced herself on the ladder. He jumped from the top rung and asked if she were you all right. Too much sun, she said, her eyes rolling. He took her by the arm and helped her inside, seating her on a divan in the living room. His hand trembled in extending a glass of water. She moistened her lips, removed her hat, and undid the top button of her shirt. He advised her to rest a while and made for the front door, at which she unbuttoned her shirt fully, drew it apart, and in a soft voice called on him to stay. The icons glowed in the late-afternoon light, but the lure

of her eyes prevailed. He removed his cassock, placed it over an icon of the Virgin, and went to her as she reclined on the divan. When they stood an hour later he left the cassock on the icon and went to the vegetable patch. She joined him, tightening her gun-belt.

- Well, is there a soul, my dear monk?

Pierced by her words, he couldn't say a thing. Jackdaws screeched against the fierce sunset. Having failed to live up to his ascetic ideal, he now felt estranged from the person he had been just an hour ago, and not least because he hadn't been outdoors without a cassock in years. Her hand touched his shoulder, but he moved away, wishing that a flock of jackdaws would descend and pluck his heart to bits, that the dry earth would open and swallow his miserable body, that darkness would fall and extinguish the last vestiges of his soul. And then, in a voice full of child-like simplicity, she asked for her watermelon. The unit would be moving on tomorrow and it would make a nice farewell gift. Dazed, he pulled it from its stem and gave it to her, avoiding her eyes and her hands.

- Flesh is stronger than faith, little monk, she laughed. And blood's thicker than your communion wine. Come on, you've denied your God, there's no longer any reason to remain here. Come on, leave this foolishness, join us in making a heaven on earth for mankind. You see, little monk, I set out here to test your faith, and you've confirmed my atheism.

The Elder turned from a few swallows darting over the meadow and nodded at John's look of incredulity. He never saw her again after that, though he still often thought of her. Yes, he had stumbled and fallen, but the encounter had also strengthened his faith. When the community returned to the house, he sought permission to dwell alone in a hut further up on the slopes of Athos. And there he lived until God saw fit to turn his bitter sinfulness to the sweetest of joy. John was surprised by the Elder's frankness. The confession related to his dilemma, but what exactly was he intimating? Yield to Mara as a way of strengthening his faith? Or use his feelings for her to test the strength of his faith? John thanked him for his openness.

- You spoke without a hint of shame, he said.

- Shame passes when men touch the earth with their forehead.

- What should I do, Elder?

He took John's hands and held them in his warm from the sun.

- What can I say, my boy. Yes, the woman must leave Athos without delay, beyond that rope your heart with the Jesus Prayer and look to the Virgin for enlightenment. We're living in a time of war, atrocities, retribution - just like fifty years ago. Be strong, my boy. Tell Stefan to be watchful, and may God comfort your friend Paul. I'll pray for you all.

John stood and wished him a 'Good Resurrection'. The Elder poured the bowl of hazelnuts into the pocket of his cassock, saying they would help to sustain him through this long day. With much to do in preparation for this evening's service, John hurried across the bright meadow, but on entering the thick-shadowed forest he was suddenly puzzled by the Elder's reference to his friends.

Stopping on the steps of the guesthouse, Professor David Brooks checked the time, adjusted the pack bulging on his back, and breathed deeply of the warm air scented with eucalypt. He had spent a sleepless night planning everything, going over his movements in precise detail, and now, as though stamping his plans with its imprimatur, the sun banished from his mind the last shadow of doubt. The courtyard was quiet, as he had expected, for it was the time of day when most monks retreated to their cells to rest and meditate, and visitors, having little to do, retired to their rooms to read or nap. From the moment he had first heard of the rare icon of Christ Dancing his imagination had been gripped in way material possessions got the better of others. He had researched it assiduously for years and knew that no scholar had managed to examine it scientifically in order to authenticate its age. Father Daniel had stubbornly refused permission for it to be carbon-dated, for he believed in its antiquity and that was sufficient for him. David had renounced religion in his youth, replacing it with honest scholarship and an aesthetic attitude to the life. In relation to the icon, though, he had formulated his own ethical and proprietary beliefs. Was there any doubting he had given flesh and blood in his painstaking study of the icon? No, for he had haemorrhoids as proof. Could anyone dispute he was the foremost authority on the Byzantine artefact? No, for he had been the first to see the golden rectangle in its dimensions. Dividing the icon's length by its width, he had made the wonderful discovery of 1.618 - a figure that conformed to much ancient Greek architecture, and which also arose from the ratio of consecutive numbers in the Fibonacci sequence which had intrigued him in his youth. And he had written a paper on this aspect of the icon, arguing it wasn't a coincidence, but a fact known to the original iconographer and used by him for subliminal effects. Christ as his subject, the artist had sought a subtle, almost Cabbalistic, fusion of mathematics and religion. But his paper had pushed this argument even further: a Platonically ideal form, the golden rectangle was perfect for framing the eternal nature of Christ. On another level, however, the icon was a three-fold representation of gold as a symbol of eternity: the golden rectangle, the golden circle of the halo, and Christ, whose name in Greek echoed with gold. And wasn't it a fact beyond all fiction that he had dreamt of the icon countless times, though sometimes it resembled a window and other times a mirror? Yes, for he had made a point of relating his dreams to his wife. Well, then, taking all that into consideration, it followed with syllogistic logic that he more than anyone, including Father Daniel, was the rightful owner the icon. Besides, what would become of it once the monk died? If he didn't take it with him to the grave, which was still a strong possibility, he would more than likely pass it on to some undeserving pupil. Yes, he was about to commit a crime, but the icon's long-term welfare justified the means. And now, his heart beating against the camera hanging from his neck, he made his way to Father Daniel's cell with a discernible spring in his heel.

In approaching the eucalypt the Professor noticed Father Akakios sitting against its smooth trunk, dozing, perhaps dreaming of breaking mirrors, for his eyebrows were flitting like swallows and a smile twitched the corners of his mouth. The spindly, ragged monk had his knees up, with one bare foot on top of the other in the manner of a child, and his favourite cat lay curled on his lap. A shaft of light streaming through the tree filled

his hat upturned on the ground. Stopping a few paces from the sleeping figure, the Professor removed the camera from its case, focussed it on his subject, and took a shot.

At that moment Father Nikitas was sitting on a sagging balcony, his chin on the wooden railing, watching proceedings with his hawk eyes. He liked to sit there in the quiet part of the day and watch over the monastery as a kind of guardian and protector. He winced as the camera snapped. No, he had never liked academics visiting the monastery, especially those from the West, for he believed Athos was a place for piety not research. And now this Professor's surreptitious shot of foolish Father Akakios struck him like a barb. He was certain the photograph would find its way into a book or magazine and serve to further misrepresent Athos, portraying it as a place of misfits and eccentrics, without relevance to the modern world. Yes, he had often spoken out against cameras entering the monastery, but the well-read Abbot had reproved him for his unfounded concern, arguing it wasn't necessarily a bad thing to be depicted as eccentric, for it served to keep away those who might otherwise come for the wrong reasons. No, thought Father Nikitas, rubbing the stump of his finger. The fellow had no right to photograph Father Akakios, especially as the latter was unaware of what was happening. When the Professor replaced the camera and continued toward Father Daniel's cell, no doubt on his way to photograph that heretical icon, Father Nikitas was struck by a brilliant idea. Of course, he thought, biting the calluses on the back of his knuckles. If the Professor considered himself proud and superior in his knowledge of cameras and icons, he would soon enough be taught a lesson in humility, for the serpent's sting was always in its tail.

As the Professor was being watched from the balcony, Father Theodore observed him through the flowering lemon tree humming with bees. Having followed him from the guesthouse, the monk now stood outside the refectory, pretending to inspect the black-eyed knots in the semantron. Something in the visitor's manner (perhaps the way he had looked covetously at Father Daniel's icon, seeing it as an object of intellectual value rather than veneration) had initially troubled him, then filled him suspicion, and he was now convinced the fellow was scheming something, for he was off to the icon painter's cell packed and dressed as though about to leave the monastery. Suddenly, at the thought of his sister and how she had died trying to save icons from corrupt hands, he recalled last night's dream him with startling clarity. They were in a snow-covered courtyard, manoeuvring a ladder against a wall. Vera was going to climb to the top of a dome and secure a cross that looked ready to fall, but the ladder's feet kept sinking and they couldn't find a firm base. The semantron, he thought, and the next instant the board was under the ladder and Vera was on her way up. As he waited below, anxious for her safety, a small child appeared from nowhere and began crawling around the foot of the ladder. He couldn't tell whether it was a boy or girl, but its blue eyes glistened with tears and its face was pink from the cold. It has escaped the slaughter of the innocents, he thought, noticing a red mark on its brow. The child crawled away and began eating from a pile of ash heaped in a corner. Should he hold the swaying ladder for his sister now almost at the top, or attend to the starving child? He had awoken with a start, his knees numb from prostrations, blood pulsing in his ears.

The Professor cased the camera with a look of satisfaction, stepped around the sleeping monk, and continued toward the east cloister. Father Theodore was about to set off after him when Father Nikitas appeared beneath the eucalypt tree. Not wanting to get

caught up with the overly zealous monk, he thought of the tower above the monastery's entrance. With the gatekeeper's binoculars he could see right into the icon painter's cell, whose window was always open on days such as this. He hurried off around the side of refectory, keeping close to wall, passing under a ladder missing a few bottom rungs.

As Father Nikitas scowled at the monk snoring in contentment, the cat peered at him with a green eye and twitched a triangular ear. Cats, he grimaced, and jabbed it with his walking stick. It sprang away, startling Father Akakios, who scrambled to his feet. Father Nikitas chastised him for sleeping at a time when vigilance was needed, just as Christ's disciples should have been more vigilant in the garden of Gethsemane.

- And if they'd remained watchful, replied Father Akakios, stretching in a dozen directions at once, we wouldn't be in this monastery.

- What's that supposed to mean? he asked pointedly, though curious to hear what the Holy Fool had to say, for he had often been surprised by the occasional apothegm that saw the light of day from the darkness beneath his heavy tongue.

- Well, Father, if the blessed disciples were watchful, they would've seen the Pharisees coming and alerted Christ to make his escape. Right? And so, Father, there wouldn't have been a crucifixion and a resurrection. Right? And without those events we'd have no Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Right? And so this monastery wouldn't be here. Why? Because, Father, the stones of our church aren't the ones on which the good disciples lay their sleepy heads. No. They're from the rock that covered the mouth of our Saviour's tomb. And as you well know, Father, water wasn't used to mortar the stones, but the blood of our crucified Lord.

Father Nikitas followed the argument with falling eyebrows.

- And if Christ had escaped, Brother, would He have lived to a hundred years or a thousand?

- Ah, Father, he replied with a cavernous yawn, that's asking too much. I've lost my sense of number since coming to Athos, especially those beyond ten.

Unsure of whether he was being made a fool by the Holy Fool, Father Nikitas poked the tree with his walking stick.

- Be alert, Brother, he frowned. Strange things are happening in our monastery.

- Sleep's heaviest in strange times, replied Father Akakios.

- Look at yourself, he said peremptorily, pointing with his amputated finger.

- And see the Evil One? No, dear Father.

- But there's a question of appearance.

- Yes, you've trimmed the hairs in your nose since yesterday.

- Listen here, Father Akakios. What do you think of photographs?

- They're worse than mirrors.

And Father Nikitas proceeded to explain he had been photographed while sleeping, and his picture would appear in magazines around the world. Yes, it was easy to shatter a reflection in a mirror, but his image in a glossy paper on the other side of the world was a different matter. Father Akakios thought for a moment, grimacing in trying to accommodate what he had been told. And then his face lit up and he clapped the soles of his battered shoes.

- What's the harm if I can't see it?

- Harm? You'll be ridiculed the world over.

- Better ridicule than praise.

- But you don't understand Westerners, blessed Brother. They've got an insatiable curiosity for new and exotic things. Your picture will attract young men wanting to emulate your deeds. You'll be surrounded by noisy followers. They'll write a book about you and call it Holy Fool.

Alarmed by the prospect of so much admiration, Father Akakios pulled his hat over his ears and walked around the trunk three times, on each occasion spitting lightly over his shoulder to ward off the Evil Eye.

- What's to be done, Father?

- You must retrieve your image.

Father Nikitas blocked his way with the walking stick and outlined his suggestion: when the Professor emerged from Father Daniel's cell he should demand the return of his image. If he refused, as was more than likely, Father Akakios was within his rights to seize the instrument and smash it on the steps. His agitation subsided and he considered the advice. Yes, some sought God in knowledge, others in saintliness, but he had chosen to seek Him in foolishness, in ridicule and scorn. Now, in an unguarded moment, the Professor had stolen his image and would portray him to the world as an extraordinary monk. No, he wouldn't permit it. Better a smashed camera than a doomed soul. He kissed Father Nikitas on the back of the hand, thanked him for his watchfulness, and scurried off to the cloister, where he positioned himself beside the steps, concealed by several potted oleander shrubs whose buds were about to burst.

Father Daniel greeted the Professor, who was quick to remind him in broken Greek of the arrangement they had made yesterday. Holding a brush whose fine bristles were tipped red, the monk invited him inside and pointed to his work on the ouzel beside the open window. Yes, he liked to paint in natural light, unlike those who preferred to work with candles and lamps. Had the Professor heard the story about El Greco? When asked by a visitor why he had been sitting in a dark room, the great artist replied darkness intensified his vision. Unlike the Cretan, who abandoned the austere gold of the Byzantine tradition and adopted the lurid forms and colours promoted by the Catholic Church, he had always believed in the primacy of natural light in all creative exercise.

As for the Slaughter of the Innocents, he continued, indicating his present work. It was seldom painted these days. He pushed back his heavy, black-framed glasses, which kept slipping down the bridge of his freckled nose. The icon had been commissioned by a group of women from the town of Kastoria, where on certain mornings one could hear the roosters of Albania, which were said to have the brightest combs and the loudest calls, perhaps because the country had been the most repressed and was still the poorest in Europe. The women had agreed that such an icon would best commemorate the children who had been abducted during the Civil War and sent off to Eastern bloc countries to be raised as good Communists. They had sent him some heart-rending literature, not to influence his painting style, which they knew was set by tradition, but to give him a woman's perspective of what until then had been told by men. Accounts of girls sent out to pick camomile and never seen again, so that the sweet-smelling tea became bitter ever after for their mothers whose grief was greater than Demeter's, because the goddess could at least brush the darkness from her daughter's hair for six months of the year. Stories of children plucked from the edge of fields which their mothers were harvesting, not hearing

their cries due to the white scarf around their head and the shrill of cicadas, and who thereafter dyed those scarves black and cursed the cicadas with every third breath. And other stories of infants being torn from the breast, whose mothers could never again look at an icon of the Virgin and Child.

Wiping the brush, Father Daniel offered to make his guest a coffee, but the latter politely declined, for he appreciated how busy his host must be and how fleeting the hours. Not at all, smiled the monk, his eyes flitting about the room. Only those who painted the ephemeral were subject to time, he painted the eternal and therefore had all the time in the world. The Professor explained he would photograph the icon and leave, for he had to make it to Daphne for the ferry back to Ouranoupolis. As he assembled a tripod and mounted the camera, the monk brought out the icon, removed it from its covering, kissed it reverently several times, and set it on a lectern. The Professor asked whether he might treat it for termites before taking a few photographs. The monk nodded and plucked at his beard as the visitor produced a can from his pack and sprayed the surface with an odourless mist.

- Are you sure it's safe, Professor?

- It will preserve the icon for another thousand years.

He positioned the lectern close to the window, checked the light meter, and proceeded to flash shots from various angles. Satisfied, he thanked the monk for his patience and began dismounting the camera. Father Daniel crossed himself before the icon, kissed it again, and wrapped it in the velvet cloth, licking his lips as though the spray had left a sweet taste on the surface. He was about to take it to the other room when the Professor asked about his ancestors, saying it was important for his research. More than happy to chat with such a knowledgeable man, Father Daniel sat beside the window, embraced the icon, and licked his lips in answering his guest's questions. After about ten minutes, however, the monk's eyes grew heavy, he nodded a few times, and fell asleep. The Professor asked if he was all right, and receiving no reply bolted the door. He tapped the monk on the shoulder. Satisfied that the spray had taken effect, he opened the pack and removed an icon of the Crucifixion, which he had declared to the authorities upon arriving on Athos, saying he wished to have it blessed. He unscrewed a panel on the base and removed a bare tablet of wood concealed in the hollow cavity and packed tightly with foam to give a semblance of weight. A bee flew in through the window and made straight for the ouzel. The Professor pulled the icon from Father Daniel's embrace, removed it from its covering, slipped it in the cavity of the Crucifixion, and secured the base. He then wrapped the tablet in the cloth and placed it under the sleeping monk's sunlit hands. The bee hummed and hovered over the freshly painted figure of a slain infant. After a few steadying breaths, he unbolted the door and roused the monk with a small bottle of ammonia.

- Yes, Father, he said, strapping his backpack. You come from a very long line of icon painters.

Perhaps not wanting to show he had nodded off for a moment, Father Daniel thanked his ancestors for maintaining the tradition, and returned the icon to its hiding place in the other room. The Professor promised to send him whatever came from his research and set off along the corridor. On the steps down to the courtyard he was startled by Father Akakios, who leapt at him from behind the oleanders, pointed to the camera,

and demanded his image back. Bewildered, the Professor attempted to sidestep him, but the dishevelled monk blocked his way.

- Sir, you've got no right to make off with a man's image.
- It's only a photograph.
- Yes, but you'll show me to the world.
- I'm in a hurry, Father.

The monk seized the camera and a tussle ensued, until the Professor realised the scene might draw other monks and possibly the Abbot. Not wanting to risk a delay, for there was no telling when Father Daniel might discover the swap, he relinquished the camera and set off across the courtyard. Father Akakios opened the case, examined the contents, and removed the lens cover, only to be confronted by his convexed image expanding as he peered closer. Horrified, he shattered the camera on the steps, gathered the pieces in his hat, and ran to show them to Father Nikitas.

Father Theodore had seen everything through the powerful military binoculars stamped with the Nazi swastika. They had been given to Father Maximos years ago by a German ornithologist who came to study a particular type of buzzard. When he was younger and more energetic the gatekeeper would climb the tower and observe passing vessels, though always careful to avoid tourist ships that came in summer to within five hundred metres of the peninsular, for they were full of scantily dressed women, many with their own binoculars. Angered by the Professor's daring and cunning, Father Theodore's first reaction was to rush up there and catch him red-handed, but he quickly checked himself: his sister had reacted in that manner and paid with her life. No, his beloved sister's death wouldn't be in vain. He would confront the Professor, yes, but on his terms, in the presence of others, and expose him as a thief. With Vera's face before him, he ran down the cob-webbed stairs and returned the binoculars to Father Maximos, who was sitting in the doorway, polishing his newer pair of shoes (one of which was worse for wear) for the important services ahead. He was about to dash to Stefan's cell and ask for assistance, when the Professor suddenly appeared in the portico.

- Well, squinted Father Maximos, you're now more of a mule than a man, because a mule always walks faster in going than in coming. And why are you leaving in such a hurry? Is our bread too hard or Father Theodore's mallet too loud?

- I've got a ferry to catch, replied the Professor, breathing heavily.
- We've all got a ferry to catch, laughed the gatekeeper.

Father Theodore asked about Father Daniel's progress on the icon of the Innocents, at which the Professor adjusted his pack and replied it was a very moving work. He then turned and, winking at the gatekeeper, told him to be quick with the routine search of the visitor's pack. Alarmed, the Professor took a few steps toward the gate, but the others blocked his way. Many priceless objects had gone missing in recent years, said the gatekeeper, and the Abbot had insisted he carry out a through search of everyone leaving the monastery. His face now tinged red, the Professor protested he would be late for the ferry, but the others assured him it wouldn't take a minute. Again, anxious to avoid a scene, he placed the pack on the bench beside the gatekeeper's door. Both monks inspected various items, until Father Theodore pointed to something wrapped in a yellow towel at the bottom of the pack.

- You've no right to delay me like this, he snarled.

- What's in it, sir? continued Father Theodore, enjoying the game of cat and mouse.

- An icon I bought in Salonika.

- Can we see it?

Muttering under his breath, he unfolded the towel, invited them to look, and produced a certificate verifying its purchase. At this point Father Akakios and Father Nikitas entered the portico. The former was still carrying the shattered camera in his hat, though the film had been removed from its cartridge and the plastic strip dangled from the belt around his waist. The newcomers crossed themselves at the sight of the icon, and Father Nikitas commented it was a fine example of the Cretan School of painting, which he preferred to the Macedonian, because it had resisted the influence of the Italian Renaissance. Perhaps seeing an opportunity of distracting his inquisitors, the Professor promptly agreed with the monk and added with enthusiasm that a good icon always screened the personality of its painter. Nevertheless, it was more than apparent to him that Theophanis the Cretan, who was in fact a monk, as were his two sons, possessed far more religious feeling than Panselinos the Macedonian. The latter was a professional artist, gifted no doubt, but only in expressing physical beauty, whereas the works of the Cretan master radiated a spiritual presence. Warming to the subject, Father Nikitas picked up the icon and commented on Christ's elongated form and how, though nailed to the cross, it resembled the dove of the Holy Spirit. The Professor gushed in agreement, denouncing Panselinos for betraying the Byzantine tradition and turning his attention to the carnal West. Father Nikitas had approached the entrance wanting to castigate the man for his interest in a heretical icon and his disrespect for the sleeping monk, but his views on icons disarmed him. In fact, he was about to apologise for Father Akakios's excessive zeal toward his camera, when Father Theodore asked what lay concealed in the icon. Turning to Father Nikitas, the Professor appealed to his knowledge and asked him to explain to his inquisitive Brother that icons concealed nothing, for their sole purpose was to reveal, just like an open window.

- That's not true, said Father Theodore.

- What then does it conceal? asked Father Nikitas.

- Father Daniel's icon, he replied.

The Professor dismissed this with a contemptuous laugh, but Father Nikitas winced, for the very mention of the icon was like a thorn in his side. Curious, the other monks gathered over the icon, the film crackling as Father Akakios moved.

- Brother Theodore, said Father Nikitas, would you please not mention that heretical icon, especially on Good Friday.

- It is heretical, echoed the Professor. Yes, I was taken by it yesterday, but examining it again today I realised at once it's nothing more than a work of shameless impiety. Yes, I photographed it, but I saw the error of my ways the instant I stepped out. And when the good Father here demanded my camera, I soon enough gave it to him.

Father Theodore examined the icon's base and asked the gatekeeper for his pocket knife, at which the Professor protested at his disrespect in even thinking to use a knife on an icon of the Crucifixion. But the monk backed away and took Father Maximos's red-handled Swiss knife. Flaring in outrage, the Professor insisted the icon had been legally acquired and waved the certificate of purchase. It was his property and nobody had a right

to inspect it without a search warrant. He snatched back the icon and wrapped it in the towel.

- But I saw it all, Professor, said Father Theodore.

- Saw what, Father? What did you see?

- You stole Father Daniel's icon and placed it in that.

- The fast's made you light-headed.

- Well, then, said Father Nikitas, we can do one of two things: visit Father Daniel or allow me to examine the icon.

Realising the only way out was to continue his bluff, the Professor was about to make another appeal to Father Nikitas's anti-Western sentiment, when Father Akakios snatched the towel from him with the deftness of a cat and scurried across the courtyard. Faster than the others Father Theodore set off in pursuit and caught him beneath the eucalypt tree. He took the towel from the panting monk, used the knife to slip open the base, and pulled out the stolen icon. Father Akakios crossed himself as though witnessing a miracle.

- A true resurrection, he gaped. The dancing rising from the dead.

- Don't say a word, whispered Father Theodore.

He concealed the icon of Christ Dancing behind the tree, replaced the base, and wrapped the Crucifixion in the towel. When the Professor arrived the monk returned the icon at once, apologising for the Father's misguided behaviour. Striking the cobbles with his walking stick, Father Nikitas appeared, looking distraught. Father Theodore considered the situation for a moment: should he expose the Professor as a thief? The thieves crucified on either side of Christ came to mind. Should he give him the opportunity to repent of his crime? But how without creating a stir? The monastery was already unsettled by the sign on the chapel. No, Good Friday was a time for concentration and inwardness. If the Professor were exposed the police would come from Daphne, the monks would be distracted, and the significance of the day lost in the affairs of the world. Better to let him go thinking he had succeeded in his crime. Repentance might come when he discovered that a few foolish monks had outwitted him. He might even see it as a miracle: the icon escaping and returning to its rightful owner. The last thought pleased Father Theodore and he bowed to the thief.

- Sir, I've made a great mistake, he said, and I'm truly sorry for my accusation.

Momentarily taken aback, the Professor turned from Father Akakios playfully rustling the film, to the older monk struggling to catch his breath, to his contrite accuser. But he quickly composed himself, said he had a ferry to catch, and left with a very upright carriage, as though expecting a knife in the back. When Father Nikitas asked what it had all meant, Father Theodore went behind the tree and held up the icon. Father Akakios clapped and danced in delight, while the other steadied himself on the walking stick. Father Theodore thought of his sister, delighted the matter had ended without the need of force or violence. After his initial shock, Father Nikitas assessed the situation and saw it as an act of Providence: at last the opportunity had presented itself to rid the monastery of the cursed icon and so remove the thorn from his side.

- You did well, he said, forcing a smile. But don't imagine it will end here. No, Brother, the West will not be satisfied until it has ridiculed Athos and portrayed us as zealots and navel gazers. Yes, that Professor has gone thinking he has got the better of us,

but you can be sure there'll be others just like him, drawn here for that very icon. If we're to keep the likes of the Professor away from Athos we must destroy the object of their attraction.

Father Theodore hesitated in giving up the icon, until the gleam in the old monk's eyes sent a shiver down his spine.

- Shouldn't we report the matter to the Abbot?
- I'll take full responsibility, he said.
- And Father Daniel?
- Leave everything to me.

Father Nikitas slipped the icon under his cassock and hurried off. Father Akakios rattled the camera pieces in his hat and said he was pleased to have smashed the black Evil Eye. He asked Father Theodore what he should do with the fragments. The eye was now well and truly harmless. In that case he would throw the pieces off the pier.

- Why go to that trouble, Father Akakios?
- To teach it a lesson.
- What sort of lesson, Father.

- A lesson in humanity, my boy, he grinned. You see, the eye is cured of lusting after the things of the world through the salt of its tears. The sea was formed from God's tears for the world, so if this Evil Eye is thrown into God's tears it might be cured of its evil by an eternity of stinging salt.

And with that he skipped off toward the entrance. Father Theodore reflected for a moment, questioning his compliance with Father Nikitas. Should he report the incident to Abbot and so avert the icon's destruction? But that would no doubt precipitate a conflict between the two long-standing antagonists? Perhaps it was also a question of siding with the West or the East, and in this the Abbot was the former, while Father Nikitas was the latter. He recalled Dostoyevsky, who had been his favourite author as a younger man, and his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, which had aroused his interest in monasticism. The great writer had been critical of the West, urging his fellow Russians to look to the East for their salvation. This was enough to calm Father Theodore's unease, and he went to return Father Maximos's knife.

The evening service commemorating the Passion had started when Father Maximos braced the ironclad gate on an unusual twilight. A keen reader of clouds, like those black-shawled crones of his boyhood who interpreted the swirls in coffee cups, the gatekeeper had observed that twilights such as the present occurred on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, when the only tongue that tasted olive oil was the flame in the icon lamps. In the east, above a sea retreating from green to grey, wispy clouds had blazed with what he could only describe as an apocalyptic character. He had rubbed his left eye sore and red trying to ascertain whether the forms were really a feature of the clouds, or nothing more than fantasies evoked by the punishing day-long fast, which had restricted him to a flask of water mixed with vinegar, and this devilishly tart due to streaks of fermentation.

Having been in progress several hours, the service was steeped in sorrow, and an air of mourning weighed on the congregation. More hunched than yesterday, old monks leaned heavily in their stalls, eyes hidden by overhanging veils. Those gathered around the colourful canopy stood with heads bowed, hands buried in sleeves. The choir underscored the Reader and the self-effacing Father Evlogios, who officiated at the altar with gestures that were hesitant, almost slow motioned, in keeping with his manner of speech. His vestments stiff and glittering, he had read passages from the silver-coated Bible in a nasal voice, jingling the smoking censer in walking the length of the church, sprinkling all with sprigs of basil dipped in holy water. A few choir members nodded on each stressed syllable, waiting for the moment when they would sound the moving hymns of grief. Crowded in corners and wherever a space could be found, visitors followed proceedings with intense looks and stomachs grumbling at belts pulled tight. The smell of shoe polish and camphor from robes folded for the occasion mingled with the scent of flowers and spent summers turned to candle-wax. More black and purple ribbons had been tied in bows on the icon-screen. Standing beneath a small lamp suspended from the candelabra, the Reader turned a page and waited for his queue. The middle-aged monk had already delivered a number of lengthy Psalms, and commenced in a voice that seemed to rise from a deep well.

- All creation mourned when it saw Him hanging naked from a tree.

The Abbot was still upright in his stall, having avoided the curved armrests from the outset. From time to time he observed the proceedings reflected in a sphere hanging from the candelabra. Everything in the nave had its image there, except the sphere itself. He found this suggestive, reminiscent of Herculitus, though he didn't know why. Yes, he could entertain such fleeting thoughts because the service was unfolding smoothly. Father Evlogios had managed to find a little more voice for the occasion, the visitors had been attentive, the chalices and candleholders gleamed, and, despite the demanding fast, the monks conducted themselves in a grave yet dignified manner. Now, like every year, as the choir shuffled in preparation for the Hymn of Lamentations, the Abbot recalled the girl who had passed through his life during that summer on Crete. He tried not to think of her by concentrating on the icon of the Crucifixion set in the canopy, but he could also see the icon of the Virgin immediately to the left of the altar gate. Her pale hands were raised in a gesture of offering and Her eyes overflowed with the joy of Easter Sunday. His memory of

the girl's features had faded over the years, but that icon of the Virgin, especially when seen through the canopy during this service, recalled both her image and the emotions he had experienced at the time, which seemed to become sweeter and more tender each Easter. He thought about salvation and the resurrection of the dead, and a black knot tightened in his heart at the fact that she had been Communist and atheist. As on every night for the past twenty-five years, the Abbot prayed for the welfare of the girl's soul, only this evening, perhaps due to his talk with the visitor Kosta, his prayer was especially heart-felt. At one point tears blurred his vision, so that monks, visitors, flames, candelabra, saints – everything became one in the strength of his emotion. He had listened with deep compassion to Kosta's story, convinced he wasn't responsible for the symbol on the chapel wall. In the end, moved by the fellow's love for his Muslim wife, he had permitted the ring to remain before the Virgin. Yes, the circumstances of her death were tragic, just like the girl he had loved, and he now also prayed for the salvation of her soul, even though she hadn't been a Christian. He felt for poor Kosta, but there was a sweetness in his sorrow, for tonight, more than any other time of the year, he confronted death with an open heart, as Christ had carried his own cross, as the Communist girl had met the tanks in Athens, as the Muslim wife had faced the sea. Another swell of tears moistened his eyes, blending martyrs and men, crosses and candles, until the flame above the Virgin appeared to rise from its chalice and take a life of its own. In an instant it absorbed all the other swaying flames, became fuller and brighter, and moved toward him. Was this the Uncreated Light experienced by ascetics in moments of intense prayer? Was it the radiance of God's nearness? The glow embraced him in its warmth and dissolved him in a love of God not unlike his feeling for the girl.

- The sun drew in the day, stars withheld their light; the earth trembled in fear, seas rolled back their waves; the lettered stone crumbled, graves gave up their dead.

When the Reader concluded his passage those in the stalls stepped off the low wooden platforms and everyone stood a little straighter. Father Sophronios signalled to Panayoti, who shyly left his father's side and limped to the choir in the south transept. The illness that had burdened the chanter in recent months, causing him to walk with a stoop, appeared to have lifted, for he now stood a head above the others and his large hands conducted the chanting with newfound strength. Yes, he had chanted on a number of occasions during the service, always in a firm and resonant voice, but it was obvious to those who knew his true pitch and range that he was saving himself for the Hymn of Lamentations. The flush that gradually suffused his ashen face now lit his cheekbones and spread to his ears. When the moment came he tapped the boy on the shoulder and the two sang the opening verse.

- When life was laid in the tomb, O Christ, hosts of angels were astonished and glorified your descent.

Their words resonated in the nave, rose to the dome, filled the narthex, flowed through to the outer narthex, and spilled into the courtyard, moving the moths in a ragged dance around the portico's lamp, stirring the eucalypt's long leaves, attracting a host of stars to the pupils of Father Akakios's favourite cat huddled under the Russian bell. The words rippled through the assembled, until everyone took up the Hymn, some in full voice, others in a whisper, a few under their tongues. This was one of the few hymns the congregation was permitted to sing with the choir, so, having sung it all their lives, most

were familiar with its numerous verses. For Father Sophronios the Hymn had always expressed the very essence of Easter: its mournful lines were carried forward by a lively rhythm, and this he interpreted as the crucified Word being resurrected through the miracle of melody. And now, perhaps because his health was deteriorating and he sensed this might well be his last Easter, the chanter's voice rose from his old body as never before. In sounding Christ's suffering he somehow transcended his own, in singing Christ's death he overcame the fear of his own death. Yes, this might well be his swan song, for in chanting the Hymn he sensed a purity of being, an excess of soul that dispelled all doubt and buoyed his ageing body. But this evening he was also heartened and encouraged by Panayoti: where the chanter's voice was an old bell, tarnished by time, yet still capable of reverberating far and wide, the boy's was a small bell, sharp and clear, full of light and innocence. Yes, he would instruct him in psalmody and pass on the best part of himself before leaving this earth. Providence had sent him a songbird: the boy would also glorify God, just as he had done in more than fifty years of devotion.

And then Father Sophronios recalled the widow, who always came to mind most clearly during this particular service, for her Rembetika song had woven itself into the texture and melody of the Hymn. They had corresponded for some years after his tonsure: sober words of mutual encouragement, with exhortations from the lives of the saints, written on paper thinner than skin peeled from one's shoulders after sunburn. At first he had found it difficult to keep his feelings from spilling onto the page, but eventually succeeded by writing with his left hand, which required greater concentration. When her letters stopped he learned she had left the nunnery and gone to Australia, intent on establishing a convent in that distant land. The abbess wrote that an Angel had appeared to the nun and instructed her in a beautiful song to go abroad and offer spiritual comfort to young, unmarried women migrating there, many of whom became lonely and desperate and ended in a bad way. And that was the last he had heard of the woman for whom he became a monk.

- O Life, how can you die? How can you dwell in the tomb? You have vanquished the kingdom of death and raised those who were dead in Hades.

Self-conscious of the prominence accorded him, Panayoti sang with eyes closed, hesitantly at first, and then with growing confidence. Many marvelled at how well the crystal-like pitch of his voice complemented the chanter's mellow tone. As the Hymn flowed from him more effortlessly and his vowels became longer and more mellifluous, the boy glanced at Father Sophronios, delighted at the prospect of being instructed by him. At that moment, he was more determined than ever to become another Koukouzeli, of whom he had heard from the chanter. Yes, he thought, let other boys his age dream of becoming pop singers. His hero would be the young chanter who renounced the riches of the Byzantine Court and became a goatherd on Mount Athos so his voice might become worthy of praising God. Had Koukouzeli thought of his poor mother while chanting? Did her presence grow stronger at the height of his hymns? As he couldn't yet separate his nascent feeling for God from the love that tightened his chest at the memory of his mother, chanting served a twofold purpose: it gave him wings to aspire to God, and raised the dead to commune with the living. At that moment, singing as never before, he sensed his small body would have levitated but for Father Sophronios's large hand resting on his shoulder. And then he glimpsed his mother in the form of a female martyr painted low on

the back wall. Wearing a light blue dress, she was barefooted on the edge a cliff, humming a Turkish lullaby. As his being rose with the Hymn of Lamentations, she was also drawn from the shadow, and they were reunited in the dome through the miracle of song. Yes, he was a small child again, safe in her arms, protected from the king of cicadas who came to steal his voice and take it to his fortress in a cypress tree.

- The sun and moon were darkened, O Saviour, but your servants remained faithful, wrapped in mourning robes.

Standing with a group of visitors at the back of the nave, Kosta whispered the words as his eyes brimmed with tears. His decision to come to Athos was fully vindicated by the glow of his son's face and the purity of his voice. Was he another stern Abraham, intent on sacrificing the boy's life, as some on Corfu had warned? Was he denying him the freedom to experience the fullness of life? And what constituted this fullness? Wasn't it a product of popular culture? The fads and fashions that went through the young like a fire through forest? No! What most called the fullness of life was in fact an illusion, a means of exploiting youth by those who sought to make their lives fuller and richer. He had seen it all on Corfu: the young were mesmerised by tourism and the proliferation of bars and nightclubs. They ran roughshod over their parents and trampled on traditional values in their frenzied pursuit of Western culture. No, thought Kosta, proud of his son. He wasn't sacrificing him to an Old Testament God, nor denying him what society called freedom. The fullness of life was here, in the monastery's rituals layered with meaning from centuries of practice, in its hymns sustained by the faith of nameless ascetics, in the surrounding silence where being could expand like a circle in a pond. There was another swell of tears at the boy's dark hair gleaming in the lamplight and those arched brows that reminded him so much of his dead wife. Yes, guided by Father Sophronios, his son would become a great chanter, a selfless voice that would praise God and serve as a golden thread between earth and heaven. And Kosta crossed himself in a slow, deliberate manner, as though sealing his resolution: on Monday he would return to Corfu, sell everything, and take up residence in the monastery, to see out his days close to his son.

- O my sweet springtime, my most beloved Child, where has your beauty sunk?

Not knowing the Hymn's words, Stefan hummed the melody so it barely rose from the back of his throat. Coaxed by the tradesmen, he had taken a position in the inner narthex, together with some visitors and the dozen or so monks in the stalls. The two young Albanians stood beside him, alert to the proceedings, crossing themselves slowly and with reverence, unlike the hurried gesture of their Greek colleagues. Their hands were grey and callused from years of handling mortar and stone, and yet there was a certain gentleness in them, possibly due to carrying Albanian granite, which was known to be the most tolerant in the Balkans, for it never winced when struck by a pick and always kept its sparks in check. The young men had been in the monastery several months and one was thinking of becoming a monk. Stefan envied the fellow's purpose, for he had been here almost a year and was still no closer to deciding whether to remain or leave. He had felt less burdened after confiding his Kosovo experience to Paul, but it hadn't resolved his inner conflicts. And if he were to leave what should be done? Return to Australia? Or confess to the War Crimes Tribunal he had watched as men were shot and women raped? Yes, he was guilty by association, and a year of living like a monk hadn't extinguished the fire of that guilt. Perhaps Paul was right: a confession might be the best course of action.

Maybe the thorns of conscience would lose their sting only when he opened his heart to those who had suffered at the hands of the militia. A chill passed through him and he focussed on an icon called 'The Virgin of the Sweet Kiss', set on a curtained stand beside the entrance to the nave. The small flame in the lamp was blunt from attentiveness. Mother and Child were cheek to cheek, in a moment of mutual tenderness. The Virgin's eyes suddenly reminded Stefan of the church in his father's village. He had remained in Belgrade a month, until the bombing stopped, then returned to the village as the locals were picking through the rubble. Many weren't sure whether to rebuild or leave for Serbia proper, for there was no telling how life would be in the new Kosovo under NATO control. A few days later, on the eve of his departure, a group of men had gathered around a solitary candle in his uncle's house. They were stubbled, hunched, and their vacant stare fell on a plate of pickled cabbage sprinkled with pepper seeds. After a few glasses of slivovits the old gusle player took up his instrument and sang of the Serbian defeat at Kosovo Field, when crows picked the eyes of the Serbian dead and the Ottoman sharpened his Crescent Moon to a sickle on the tongues of the living, harvesting Serbian sorrow for centuries to come. The words flew from his grim mouth like jackdaws, and the assembled wept tears in which lesser men might drown. But Stefan sat impassively, his gaze alternating from the pointed flame to his reflection in a knife. Don't cry, brothers, the singer consoled them, and related an ancient story of a monk in the monastery of Hilandar, a painter of icons who mixed his powders with tears and produced works whose very glow turned suffering to joy. As he resumed his song against the shriek of a NATO jet, Stefan experienced something like a vision of Mount Athos and decided there and then to visit Hilandar. He interrupted the musician and asked how he might visit the famous monastery. The old man had been there when his teeth were all intact, taking the gusle with him, not knowing musical instruments were as forbidden as women. But before setting foot on the holy peninsular, he had removed the single string, threaded a small wooden cross, and wore it around his neck, leaving the instrument at an inn at the coastal village. Stefan recalled Father Clement, the monk who had stayed with them in his childhood, and his desire to visit Hilandar intensified. His uncle pleaded with him to return to the safety of Australia, but Stefan thanked him for everything and promised to write once he reached the Holy Mountain.

- Like a heifer lowing for her calf, so the Mother cried when she beheld her Son hanging from a tree.

Wearing the black cap Stefan had given to him, Paul stood at the back of the outer narthex, his gaze straying from bowed monks with shadowed faces, to wide-eyed visitors straining for every word of the Hymn, to the upright figures painted on the walls. He was particularly taken by a young beardless saint holding a stylus in one hand and a book in the other, perhaps because he had spent most of the afternoon touching up his story, for on reading it again certain parts had sounded flat. It had been quiet in the cell, warm from the sun, and when he finished a feeling of drowsiness came over him. He lay on the divan, thinking about his condition, the two main characters in the story, and his night with the hermit. An hour later Stefan's return woke him from a deep sleep. His head was heavy with dreams, but he couldn't remember a thing, though something was almost within reach. Now, as he stared at the saint, the dream began to compose itself around the green stylus. He was in the ossuary, sitting on a chair, with the pages of the story on his lap. The

flame in an overhead lamp swayed, became a tongue, and flew off into one of the skulls. Suddenly he was sitting before an assembly of accusers, to whom he had to justify himself. The flame spoke from the gaping mouth.

- What have you done with your life?

Before he could reply it leapt to another skull.

- What have you to show for it?

And then to one whose left socket was twice the size of the right.

- Your story is blasphemous, the work of vanity. Destroy it.

- Burn it, shouted a black skull.

- I've died for my faith, exclaimed a yellow cranium. What will you die for?

The questions were like barbs, but before he could utter a word the other skulls took up the cry and soon a chorus arose, chanting for the story to be burnt and its ashes scattered. Were they right? Was the story an exercise in intellectual pride? Did it lack sincerity? The skulls on the surrounding shelves were now clattering, demanding the story be burnt.

- Burn it and save your soul.

- Renounce the devil's work.

- Humble yourself before the flame of its destruction.

And then the skulls became the helmets of ancient warriors converging on him. He tried to flee but his legs were knotted. Overcome by helplessness he cried out the story was blasphemous and deserved to be burnt. At the sight of his tears the skulls retreated, resumed their formation on the shelf, and adopted a different tone.

- We have no eyes to cry with, said one.

- He's crying for us, remarked another.

- A tear for the eyeless.

Moved by the strong emotion he had felt in the dream, he now questioned his reasons for writing the story. He recalled the Russian writer Gogol and how he had come under the influence of a monk in the last year of his life. The writer was suffering from a debilitating illness when the monk instructed him to burn the second part of his novel *Dead Souls*, the first part having been hailed a masterpiece. Persuaded the work was an outpouring of vanity, an obstacle not only to his physical wellbeing but the salvation of his soul, Gogol acted on the monk's advice and burnt the manuscript. Paul had attributed Gogol's action to a kind of religious mania, but now, after his own illness and the events of the past few days, he saw matters in a different light. Brilliant as the work may have been it had nevertheless failed to comfort the writer in his hour of need and to dispel the darkness in his soul. Yes, he could now empathise with Gogol: in burning his manuscript the Russian was in fact liberating himself from deceptive words, removing the obstacle between himself and the Word. Of course, scholars and lovers of literature could never see Gogol's point of view because they set their sights on the brilliant shimmer of his words, on ephemeral trends that did nothing more than entertain and titillate curious minds. But in that last year of his life Gogol had shifted his gaze from the page and fixed it on a point at infinity, on the Word, which lay beyond all words and appearance, and was best apprehended in those moments when one confronted one's own death. Yes, perhaps the skulls were right, Paul now thought. His work, like Gogol's, had also sprung from vanity. Why had he written such a story? Would it lessen his suffering and make dying easier?

Maybe the touchstone for all great literature lay in that question. Yes, he would show John his story tomorrow, though not for praise or confirmation of his talent, but simply to hear from his friend what the skulls had said. And then he would burn it and set himself free to face the future, stripped of all illusions, light-hearted and light-headed as the hermit.

- O light of my eyes, my beloved child, why are you now hidden in the grave?

At the conclusion of the service John and a number of younger monks picked up the canopy and followed the priest, the Abbot and the choir outside. The night was still and the clear sky was reflected in the courtyard as the candle-bearing procession walked around the church, stopping here and there for prayers and chants. When they came to the chapel John's heart quickened. On his return from the Elder's he had asked Father Evlogios whether the chapel could be opened after the evening service: a visitor was desperate to kneel before the Virgin for ten or fifteen minutes. The fellow was unwell, he had explained to the priest, and had come from Serbia for that very purpose. After the incident with Kosta's ring, Father Evlogios had at first frowned at the request, but when John told him the visitor had exhausted all other hope of recovery, the priest relented. Mara had received the news with indifference and simply nodded to his arrangements, which surprised him, for he had expected something else, perhaps a flash of delight or an expression of gratitude. Still, there was a certain charm in her thoughtful, preoccupied look, and he had wondered whether it intimated her feelings for him. Pressed by preparations for the service he had decided to find out after their visit to the chapel.

The canopy was brought back into the church, another short service followed, and then the congregation was dismissed. John hurried to Mara's room and found her dressed and ready. They went to the chapel, where Father Evlogios unlocked the door and led them to the icon, before which several lamps glowed perpetually. The priest crossed himself slowly three times, kneeling and touching the floor with his forehead on each occasion. They followed his example and Mara was left alone with the icon. Pricked by his deception of the soft-spoken priest, John prayed for forgiveness, while justifying himself that a soul was being saved from darkness and despair. Ten minutes later, back in Mara's room, he turned up the flame in the lamp as she removed her cap and coat.

- The Virgin will help you, he said, working the knotted chord.

He could no longer withhold what had been on his mind for the past few days: she had distracted him from his nightly prayers, from the important events of Holy Week, from his preparation for the coming tonsure, from his father's presence and his mother's illness. It was now time for openness and a decision concerning his future. He positioned a chair directly before her on the edge of the bed.

- We've got to talk, Mara, he began awkwardly. You've stirred new feelings in me. I kept my heart in check with this cord before you came, and now it's running riot.

- The feelings will pass, she said in a cold manner.

- No, Mara, they won't.

- Then offer them to your Virgin.

- They're for you, he said, stung by her reply.

- So, you would deny Her for me?

- Please, don't torment me.

- I didn't come here for love, she said, fixing him with a sharp look. I'm leaving tomorrow and by next week you will forget I was ever here.

She went to the window and sat in the alcove, facing the night made thicker by the forest's backdrop. Stunned, not knowing what more to say, he finally managed an apology for having placed her in such an awkward situation. Her silence was like an accusation and he left feeling humiliated.

Thoughts and emotions in turmoil, he tried to compose himself by saying the Jesus Prayer, but couldn't count past a dozen knots. In the courtyard he recalled the Elder's words and the story he had been told. How could he use this humiliation to strengthen his purpose in coming to Athos? How could he feel anything but worthlessness at the thought of having so easily betrayed all his beliefs? Passing the stables where the mules were kept, he noticed Father Akakios holding a lamp near the woodpile and poking at something with a stick. The old monk raised the object to the lamp and chuckled that his favourite cat had pulled it out of the pile. John drew closer to what appeared a bloodstained bandage, only to be startled by a woman's sanitary pad. When the monk announced his clever friend had found the source of the symbol on the chapel wall, John was quick to reply one of the workers had cut his hand a few days ago. Father Akakios grimaced in disappointment and tossed it back onto the pile. He then hung the lamp on the wall and, calling his cat to follow, set out across the courtyard. The pad plunged John into deeper confusion, for it could only ~~have~~ come from Mara. But was she responsible for the symbol? Was it a kind of pagan blood ritual? Or had someone, perhaps a visitor, found the discarded pad and used it to cause a mischievous stir? He prodded the pad with the stick, wrapped it in a hand-cloth, and once back in his cell burnt it in the heater.

EASTER SATURDAY

1

The snow on Athos gleamed in surrender to the midday sun, every leaf in the forest shone in celebration of earth and light, pebbles chattered expectantly in the backwash of each wave - despite this, the heaviness that had been gathering over the monastery now pressed leaden and dull. Perhaps feeling the effects of the gnawing fast, the monk crossing the courtyard struggled with the pull of his shadow on the uneven stones. Their domes securely built from scraps of winter and strands plucked from beards, fewer swallows now darted over the church, as though mindful of the occasion. Bees were restrained in drinking from the magnolia's chalices, for they had already tasted the darkness of the six-cornered cell. Visitors in the foyer were slow-eyed from lack of sleep, their voices low and lifeless. Some had taken communion after the morning service and now savoured their coffee, while the more enduring sipped on water, determined to go the full distance by taking communion after midnight's Resurrection Service.

Peter Rados entered the foyer with a bag in each hand, looked around sullenly, and went to the window table where Kosta and Nico were sitting. He was in no mood for conversation, and the only reason he sat there was to look out for the vehicle that would take him back to Karyes. His stay in the monastery had been miserable: the bed was uncomfortable, the other occupants snored, the services were too long, and the Lenten food left him hungry an hour after eating. But worse than this, and what now rankled him most, was he had come here confident of winning back his son, only to meet with failure. Perhaps sensing all wasn't well with novice's father, Nico offered to make him a coffee, adding that he and Kosta were still abstaining as they had yet to take communion. Peter accepted, saying he took his sweet, and Nico shambled off to the kitchen. Kosta asked him a few questions, but backed off at his pointed replies. No, Peter disliked everything about this place and he wanted to leave right away.

Earlier that morning, after taking communion for the first time in many years, and then only to please his son and make him more receptive to what he would say, he had gone to his cell in a final attempt to persuade him to return to Australia. He had decided to hold nothing back this time. The soft approach had played right into his son's hands, and it was now time for more directness, stronger emotions, for only through this could he hope to shock him back to his senses. Yes, just as in countless business deals, he had gone there determined to get the better of the other party. His son had looked especially preoccupied as they sat opposite each other at the table. Peter had taken this as a positive sign, for it meant their earlier conversation had made an impression on him, and the gravity of his wife's condition might yet prevail in drawing him home.

- Is this to be your life, son? he had begun. Fasting and prayer? You'll be skin and bones before long. Why have you chosen to blacken your youth? Why have you given up your studies and the opportunities in Australia for this emptiness? Come back home with me, son. Don't fill my old age with bitterness. I left Greece and my parents to make a better life for you, and now you turn your back on paradise for what? The years of hard work, the business, the properties - what good are they if you're not there to enjoy them? They're yours, son, everything's yours if you come home. Things aren't looking good for your mother, boy. I'm not blaming you for her relapse, but she took your leaving hard, even though she kept it to

herself. She hasn't got long to live - six months, a year. Come home, boy. Make her dying easier. And when she's gone, what will become of me? I don't want to end up alone. Is God to be found only on Athos? Is there no God for us in Australia? I'm not saying give up your faith. No, boy, not for a moment. You could become a priest back home. Why not? We'll find a parish church for you somewhere in Melbourne. And if nothing's available I'll sell a couple of properties and build you one. As a priest you could marry and have children, which would make things easier for your mother when her time comes.

His son had listened with an impassive look, head bowed, working the knotted cord. Peter had felt a swell of anger: he wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake him out of his detachment, this condition of being in other world. As a father he had been concerned when his son entered adolescence, fearing he might mix with bad company, become rebellious, and drift into the drug scene. But he was relieved and pleased to discover the boy's only vice was a passion for reading and study, which eventually took him through what could have been a turbulent period without so much as a word of protest. At that moment, gazing at his son's fingers tangled in the cord, Peter regretted having counted his blessings too early: this madness for religion was as destructive as drugs, for it also was a kind of narcotic that lead to living death. And once again he implored him to leave the monastery and return home, but by then he had already sensed the futility of his words.

And now Peter Rados felt the anger and frustration he had experienced earlier that morning. He resented the monks and the monastery for their grip on his son. How different was Athos from those fringe religions that recruited young people and filled their impressionable heads with all sorts of nonsense? How far removed was this place from those extreme sects whose charismatic leaders convinced their followers that salvation lay in mass suicide? And weren't his son's actions a form of suicide? There was nothing at all life-affirming in this place. It was all misery, wretchedness, and the slow killing of the body through fasting. Was it natural to bury your youth in black? Was it right to deny your loving parents? Was it rational to turn from the world's pleasures when you had the means to enjoy them? His blood pressure throbbing in his ears, he turned to Kosta in the hope of a little diversion.

- Your son's got a good voice, he said. You must be proud of him?

- He's going to be a great chanter, beamed Kosta, just like Father Sophronios.

Pointing into the courtyard, he continued the boy had been miserable when they first arrived but was now happy as a songbird. Panayoti was sitting on the steps of the refectory, smiling as Father Akakios entertained him with his cat, which jumped over the monk's extended arm. Nico returned with the coffee and water.

- Have you been here long? asked Peter.

- A week, friend, and I thank God we made the journey.

- One can't thank God enough, said Nico, feeling the objects on the cord around his neck.

- I'm leaving on Monday, Kosta added, but only for a short while, just long enough to cut my ties with the world, and then I'm coming straight back to be close to my boy. You see, friend, he's going to attend the school at Karyes and then remain to become a monk and a chanter.

- What about your wife? Peter asked, taken aback by the fellow's joy.

- She passed away last year, God rest her soul.

- Yes, God's merciful, intoned Nico, crossing himself slowly.

- You want the boy to become a monk?
- Aren't you pleased your son's here?
- Pleased? I've come to take him back to Australia, but he won't listen.

Kosta and Nico exchanged glances as Peter sipped his coffee.

- My boy twisted his ankle the other day and your son carried him on his back all the way from the forest. It seems Providence brought them together. If it weren't for him my boy wouldn't have met Elder Kyrillos. The old hermit bandaged his ankle and left a deep impression on his tender soul, like dough stamped with the holy disc.

- Monks and hermits! My son gave up a promising career in genetics. He could have worked on a cure for cancer. He could have helped humanity in so many ways, but he threw it all away to become a useless monk.

- Open your heart, friend, Kosta admonished him. There'll be others to work on a cure for cancer. Your son's been called to devote himself to God, and there's no higher calling than that. Knowledge and fame are nothing compared to the blessing that flows from a life devoted to God.

- Yes, that's exactly how it is, said Nico. Blessing flows from those who are called, and that blessing heals humanity as surely as medicine.

- And it will flow to you, Kosta said, tapping Peter on the arm. Mark my words, it will flow. The world values knowledge and fame, but what use are they in your hour of greatest need? Take heart from your son's calling, friend. Yes, you're disappointed now because you think you've lost a son, but give it time and you'll appreciate his calling. He'll stand out like a candle in the dark, just as my boy will chant clear as a bell. No, friend, open your heart, invest your son in God, and God will return him to you with interest.

Both fathers became thoughtful for a moment. Rubbing his finger where his wife's ring had been, Kosta gazed affectionately at Panayoti sitting with the ragged monk beside the semantron glowing in the bright sunshine. Peter stared at his reflection in the coffee cup. Perhaps feeling uncomfortable in the protracted silence, Nico drew his chair closer to the table and cleared his throat.

- If only I were young again, he said.
- And what would you do? Kosta asked.
- Resist America's temptations, remain in Greece, become a monk.
- It's not too late, brother.
- It's much too late, he sighed.

He had spoken to the Abbot several times about this very thing, but was advised monastic life would prove too demanding at his age. The rejection was still painful, for he had come to Athos with that in mind. Still, he accepted the Abbot's wisdom and was grateful for his extended stay in the monastery. Peter noticed the coin around his neck and commented he hadn't seen one of those in more than forty years. Nico turned from one to the other, ascertained something, then replied he had worn it from the time he was Panayoti's age. He hesitated, smiled bashfully, and continued as though prodded by expectant looks.

After almost forty years in Chicago Nico was no better off than when he had left Greece. He had never married, flitted from job to job, and spent too much time in a few run-down Greek cafes that catered for the elderly, the unemployed, and those who followed the horses that followed the horses. Harboring a melancholy that caused his eyes to moisten from time to time, he had drifted through the city with a navy blue cap on his head and racing guide

under his arm - until Good Friday last year. On that occasion, as on the previous thirty-five Good Fridays, he had taken it upon himself to walk the streets and collect donations for a children's clinic. It wasn't an organised appeal, but something he had dreamt up, which soon wove itself into the fabric of his uneventful life. Struggling against a cold wind, he had rattled his collection can since morning, determined not to return to his room in the boarding house until he had bettered his best sum. And so, as evening slipped from the slate roof of a nearby church, he had felt a sense of desperation at not having collected anywhere near enough. Recession, unemployment - they were no excuse, he had told himself. More assertiveness was needed. The smell from Greek and Chinese restaurants reminded him that he hadn't eaten since morning, and for an instant he thought of stopping for a meal. No! Hunger wasn't what he felt just then. There was something more compelling in the pit of his stomach: a knot the size of a fist, which had become tighter as daylight contracted.

He climbed a dim stairway and entered a cafe that hadn't changed in fifty years. The owner was on a chair adjusting the clock whose hour hand had been bent for as long as Nico could remember. Two elderly men were playing cards at a corner table. He pushed the cap from his eyes, forced a smile, and extended the can between them.

- At it again, Nico? one of the men chuckled.

- A good deed once a year doesn't count, said the other.

But they made a donation and he turned to the door, dismissing their sarcasm about placing the proceeds on another losing horse. As the owner got off the chair Nico noticed a patch on the wall where a large skin of paint had peeled away. It had been like that for years. Often, sitting there with nothing to do, nowhere to go, he would gaze at the bare plaster and see in it the outline of a small whitewashed chapel.

Nicolaki followed the cat up the basement steps, into the dazzling morning. In the furthest corner of the yard his father and uncles were shovelling lime into a trough, preparing a mixture for whitewashing the house, the stables, the walls surrounding his boyhood. The cat slipped across the yard, down a lane, and disappeared in an abandoned house. He stood before the gaping entrance and looked for the cat among the stones, broken beams, flourishing ivy. This place had always made him feel uneasy, especially at dusk, and no amount of sunlight could dispel his grandmother's dark words. Something bad had happened there years ago, his grandmother had whispered through her black shawl, and it was now the home of vampires and evil winds. In hurrying away he scratched his knee on a thorny rosebush growing from a crack in the wall, but didn't stop until the open area overlooking the village-square, the red-roofed church, his primary school closed for the summer holidays, the fields golden and ready for harvesting. He snapped a twig and began tracing the outline of his hand in the fine dust. On a nearby balcony a woman flapped a coloured mat, scattering a flock of jackdaws. A pair of large boots appeared out of the blue and trudged over his outline. Manoli, the dwarf, who may have been five or even ten years older than him, was singing in a loud voice, the words garbled by a thick tongue that didn't like the darkness of a closed mouth. Despite the heat, Manoli wore an oversized coat with a sprig of white oleander in the lapel. Without stopping he invited Nicolaki to go with him. Where? Creasing his narrow brow, Manoli shook his head, grinned broadly and bit his tongue. Nicolaki sprang up and trotted behind the shambling figure whistling more clearly than a nightingale.

As they walked along a dusty path away from the village, Manoli said he had recently caught a bus to the coast all by himself. Nicolaki had never been to the beach, but often listened

to the ocean's whisper in the large shell they kept above the fireplace. Was it really bigger than the eye could see? It was a living body bigger than both eyes could imagine, replied the dwarf. It had shuffled after him and tried to catch him by the ankle, but he managed to run away. When he learnt the nature of its movements, he caressed it and drank a mouthful, only to spit it out because it was saltier than the water used for sore gums. Who put so much salt in there? The dwarf laughed, scrambled over a wall into a field of clover, and began picking yellow flowers. When they had each gathered a bunch Manoli raised his to the sun and called on his companion to follow. Having never ventured this far from home, Nicolaki hesitated, but another gruff cry from the dwarf dispelled his apprehension and they were soon climbing the side of a rocky hill. As the incline began to level off, the dwarf pointed to a small white cottage on the crest and swaggered toward it, whistling in perfect pitch.

The night had become bitterly cold, misty rain swirled against the orange streetlights, and Nico's knees were beginning to stiffen. Sheltered in the disused doorway of a Greek restaurant, he jolted the can at passers-by sharp in their profiles. Some were obliging, others lowered their eyes, most quickened their step. Tangled in an elm's black branches a cassette reel streamed in the wind. He glanced in the restaurant: on the back wall a tourist poster displayed a bell hanging from an arched tower.

Black with dirt and sweat, Nicolaki's feet were now slipping in his sandals. They stopped at a rocky outcropping overgrown by a blackberry bush. Manoli picked a handful of berries and filled his mouth, grunting that they were delicious eaten like that. He copied him, the dark juice staining his shirt. When they reached the white cottage, the dwarf rattled the latch on the front gate, then told him with a purple tongue not to be afraid. His heavy boots crunched the pebbled path. Above a small blue door, under the sharp angle made by the eaves, there was a cross and bell. Manoli peered through a window in the door and entered. It was just like the village church inside, only smaller. The walls and ceiling were painted with similar scenes and figures. As they walked past a candle-stand, a host of yellow tongues stirred and hissed. A wooden crate stood on two trestles in front of the altar screen. Manoli turned to him and whispered he must do exactly as he did. After placing their flowers among others on the floor, the dwarf took a candle from a sheaf standing upright in a glass, lit it from a chalice, and stood before the crate. Nicolaki followed his example and stood beside him. His flame trembled. A girl lay inside: she was about his age, dressed in white, her arms folded on her chest, embracing an icon of The Virgin and Child on which several coins had been placed. Manoli crossed himself - touching his left side then his right. Nicolaki knew it should have been right then left, but did the same, thinking customs must be different in this small church. After planting his candle among others in a tray filled with sand, the dwarf first kissed the girl on the forehead and then the icon. Nicolaki leaned over the crate's edge: it contained clothes, embroideries, socks, shoes, slippers, combs, and a mirror. He recognised the girl from school: she wore a white ribbon in her hair and her forehead was cold. In kissing the icon he noticed a coin with a hole which had fallen into a slipper. The dwarf stood with head bowed, eyes closed, chewing his tongue in what sounded like a prayer. Nicolaki picked up the coin with the intention of placing it on the icon, but his fingers contracted to a fist.

A dark overcoat dashed past Nico, high heels picking the footpath. His sudden appearance, with the cap's visor low over his eyes, must have startled her. It was getting late and he wasn't helping his cause by springing at people from the doorway. He shook the can: it sounded three-quarters full. Again he felt the knot of desperation. He hurried to the front of a

brightly-lit cinema, where a young woman was teasing a tune from a violin, her velvet-lined case smiling with silver. Bible raised in one hand, a man was denouncing cinemas as snares set by Satan to catch unsuspecting souls. Nico stood between them and rattled the can. In the cinema's foyer a boy was carrying a cup brimming with popcorn.

Nicolaki followed the dwarf to a creek, where they washed their faces and cooled their feet. They returned to the village-square during the hottest part of the afternoon, just as a bus stopped in front of the cafe, on its way to the provincial town. Without a word Manoli jumped aboard and in an instant the bus roared off in a burst of blue smoke. The coin was sweating in his fist when he stopped at the grocer's shop. He thought about buying an ice cream, but his reflection in the window startled him and he hurried off. The house was empty, even his grandmother was out. He ate a bowl of cold lentil soup left for him on the table and went to his room. Exhausted, he lay on his bed and examined the coin, looking at the ceiling through the hole in the centre until the room dissolved in his drowsiness. A bell tolled slowly, faintly, as though from another world.

With the crowd emerging from the cinema, Nico ran up and down the front steps, asking with a thick accent for small change, shaking the can in startled faces, almost accosting people. But his efforts drew little generosity and suddenly the lights went out and he was alone with the vapour from his mouth and a pounding heart. He couldn't possibly return to his room having collected less than last year. The children in the clinic depended on him. He had to fill the can for her.

Nicolaki woke to the cries of jackdaws. Someone had come in and drawn the curtains as he slept. Had it all been a dream? No - the coin was still in his fist. He got up and went to the kitchen. His grandmother was at the stove, popping corn.

- Ah, finally decided to get up, she said, wiping her brow with the corner of her black shawl. And where were you? I was beginning to think a vampire had carried you off.

He scooped a handful of hot corn from a bowl sprinkled with salt. Through the small kitchen window he could see the crimson twilight above the distant mountains.

- Granny? he began, but faltered.

- Yes, child?

- When people die...

- When they die?

- Why are things put in the coffin?

- Same reason people fill their suitcases in going to America.

He ran his finger along the scratch marks on his knee.

- And what's the money for?

- So the dead can pay their way to heaven.

A knot tightened in his stomach.

- And if they haven't got enough? he asked, clutching the coin.

- Their poor soul's stranded between heaven and earth.

As she clattered a sooty poker in the stove, he dashed out of the kitchen and set off after his heart racing toward the small church on the hill.

Nico was now at a intersection splashed with neon colours, tapping the windscreens of cars stopped at red lights, jolting his can in a kind of frenzy. A driver put out an arm just as the lights turned amber. He scrambled around for the donation, when a car surged from nowhere and knocked him aside. The can crashed and coins scattered in the dark. Like happy children

running home, he thought, reaching for the cord around his neck, his being filling with darkness. And then he was running through deepening twilight, thinking of the girl and her soul being swept about by the wind. The white church stood out against the sky's mauve kilim, just like the one that was hung on the dining-room wall at Easter time. He removed his cap and stooped under the low lintel. His head now almost touched the painted ceiling. A bearded figure gazed fiercely. He approached the coffin and bowed over it. The girl's face was golden in the candlelight. He removed the coin from the cord and placed it on the icon. A small mirror caught his attention, but there was no sign of his reflection. He wasn't surprised when the girl stirred, opened her eyes, and smiled at him. Coins tingled as she rose from the coffin. The next instant she took his hand and led him out into an evening warm and scented with lilac. From the steps of the chapel she pointed down to the village. Stony houses huddled together from the encroaching dark, their small windows glowing with the joy of hard-earned rest. That was where he belonged, she said. And when he replied they would go down together, she opened her left hand: the coin lay in the hollow of her palm. He understood at once. She smiled and went back into the chapel, and he set off home.

On regaining consciousness Nico's first reaction was to reach for the cord around his neck, but a nurse taking his pulse whispered it had been removed on his arrival. A plastered leg and pinned hip kept him in hospital for weeks, during which, perhaps because of the girl (no, his vision had nothing to do morphine, despite what people said), he decided to return to Greece and see out his life in the village.

- And so, brothers, when I got there they told me the chapel was destroyed in an earthquake ten years ago. I climbed the hill anyway and fell on my knees among the rubble and said a prayer for the girl. I wanted to bury the coin there and then, but something held me back, as if the time wasn't yet right to part with it. In the cemetery I found the girl's grave: her name was Paraskevi and she was only seven. Something gnawed at me for the next three months, until I heard about Elder Kyrillos and his insights into matters of the soul. He advised me to spend a few weeks in the monastery, to clear my heart with prayer and fasting, and to ask the Virgin for guidance. And She's been kind, brothers. I swear, She has. Yes, it would've pleased me to see out my life here, but the Abbot knows best.

He twisted a button hanging by a thread and swallowed hard in keeping back a chestful of emotion. Moved by his story the others offered words of encouragement. Peter asked whether he intended to return to America, at which he raised his eyebrows, saying there was nothing for him in that place after his uplifting experience in the monastery. And the village? Could he see himself settling there? He turned to the window and looked down at Panayoti and the ragged old monk playing like a child. Peter urged him to be easier on himself, for he had more than made up for the coin by his deeds America.

- Brothers, Father Kyrillos was right, and it happened just as he said. Last night, after the service, the blessed Virgin came as my comforter and guide. Yesterday I was a lost soul, and then, in a flutter of an eyelash, I dreamt of little Paraskevi. She arose from the rubble on the hill and in the sweetest of voices asked if I would rebuild the chapel.

In relating this his features underwent a sudden transformation: his ashen face now beamed and his eyes glistened with the spring sun filtering through the window laced with cobwebs.

- Yes, the Abbot's right, friends. I'm too old to become a monk, but not too old to build a chapel for Paraskevi. The old one was dedicated to the Prophet Elijah - the new one

will be named Saint Paraskevi, in honour of both the girl and the young woman who gave her life for her faith. I'll use my pension from America to pay for its construction, and then the girl and I will rest easier.

The man's sincerity and deep feelings affected Peter in a way that brought a lump to his throat. Where formerly he would have dismissed such people as weak-willed and unable to meet the challenges of life, he now realised all those houses and apartments he had built, the wealth and property he had acquired, the success valued by the circle in which he moved - all that hadn't given him a fraction of the joy felt by this fellow at the thought of building a small chapel. He felt ashamed before this emotional man: he had amassed a fortune and held it in a clenched fist, while this fellow, who had nothing but a pension, was moved to spend all he had because of a few words heard in a dream. Suddenly, feeling a pang of remorse at how he had left his son, Peter wished both men well in their endeavours and hurried off to the guesthouse kitchen, where John was putting away a delivery of supplies. Alarmed by his father's excited look, he braced himself for a desperate, last minute bid to be drawn back to Australia.

- When's your tonsure? Peter asked.

John replied in a guarded manner, apprehensive of his father's intentions. Still under the influence of Nico's story, Peter looked affectionately into his son's eyes and promised to return the day before the ceremony.

- To stop me from becoming a monk?

- No, to invest you in God.

A vehicle's horn sounded.

- Do you need anything, son?

- A pair of shoes, Dad, maybe a new gown.

Peter recalled how proud he had been at his son's graduation ceremony. The family portrait taken that evening stood on the sideboard in the dining room. If only his wife could see this moment. Holding back his emotion, he embraced John, kissed him on each cheek, and promised to return with a gown and shoes. In the courtyard he greeted Father Akakios, tapped Panayoti on the shoulder, and hurried past the squint-eyed gatekeeper, to the four-wheel drive beneath the chestnut tree.

Paul waited for John in front of the church, holding the thin exercise book containing his story's evolution, from the initial idea scribbled before leaving Melbourne, through the various drafts and dead ends, to the penultimate version written in a cursive script verging on calligraphy. Yes, he was satisfied with story's shape and form, but it was still the penultimate version, and would always remain so, no matter how many drafts, for words were no different from an icon-screen, coming between the writer and the ultimate Word. John had offered him use of the monastery's computer and printer, but he declined, saying the personal touch was most apt for what he had in mind. Another tremor passed through him. Had he pushed himself too much in the past week? The specialist had advised him to relax on his trip, to avoid stress and fatigue, but did it really matter in view of what he must eventually confront? Better to go burning with fever, than fade away cold and indifferent. He was pleased John had arranged today's visit to the library, as few outsiders were allowed to see the valuable collection, and then only with letters of introduction and permission from the Abbot. The circumstances couldn't have been better scripted: the library was ideal both for John to read the story and for what would follow. Having made the decision last night, he now felt lighter, clear-headed, as though his journey into death would be easier through a partial shedding of what he valued. But why was he still so keen for John to read his story? Wasn't it best to destroy it before he arrived? What did he expect from his friend? Praise? Assurance the story wasn't blasphemous? Insistence it was brilliant and worth publishing? No, the more he questioned his motives, the more encouragement he took from Gogol's actions, for even the Russian had read sections of his manuscript to friends before using it to light the breakfast stove. The hermit had impressed him, and he could almost grasp his words about using death as a powerful force toward enlightenment. The stormy night in the cave had tempered his resentment of God, made him more accepting of his condition, but there was still something compelling in the idea of taking a stand against an unjust God. After his night with the hermit he had thought long and hard about ascetics and suicides: the ones venerated by the Church and the others condemned by it were in fact separated by nothing more than a breath of hope and a measure of time. The former shed their body through a lifetime of punishing self-denial, while the latter achieved the same thing by a quick leap into the abyss.

John arrived looking tired and thoughtful. He apologised for not spending more time together, explaining the guesthouse was demanding at this time of year and he had just farewelled his father. Paul assured him he had needed to be alone in order to finish his story. He showed John the exercise book, then asked if he had managed to resolve anything with his father. Initially, no, but he had left on a conciliatory note, with a promise to return for the tonsure ceremony. Yes, his show of affection before leaving had surprised him, and he was still sceptical about his motives, but he sincerely wished Elder Kyrillos was right in saying his father's stay in the monastery would open his heart and make him more understanding. But beneath all this, and what John didn't disclose, was his gnawing preoccupation with Mara. He had wanted to see her again after the morning service, but the feeling of humiliation was too much, so he placed the tray at her door, knocked, and hurried off

before she opened. Yes, she had rejected him in an icy manner, and rightly so, but there was still something unsettling about her, an evasiveness whose source he hadn't fathomed. When he returned to the kitchen he had been tempted to go back to her room. Perhaps a final talk would relieve his heartache, solve the mystery of the symbol on the chapel, result in some understanding before she vanished from his life. But he had managed to hold back, telling himself it was better like this: no good-byes, no last words, only the thorns of his humiliation.

Located above the church's outer narthex the library was accessed by a narrow stairway with marble steps worn by generations of readers: monks and men who were heavier coming down than going up, for when read properly, with the right degree of reverence, each word was deemed to be worth more than a gold florin. Father Haralambos, the recently appointed librarian, had been a promising novelist before settling on the Holy Mountain five years earlier. Disillusioned with fiction and the growing cult of the author, he abandoned what he saw as the pursuit of empty words and devoted himself to serving the Word. The move didn't extinguish his feeling for books; on the contrary, having found the eternal Word he became passionate in protecting and preserving the ancient texts in his keeping. Not only this, upon first entering the monastery he had been quick to take up calligraphy, maintaining it was better to dedicate one's life to producing copies of the original Word, than writing clever novels concerned with entertainment rather than enlightenment. And so, with the Abbot's permission, he now spent most of his time in the library, giving the light of his eyes and the sureness of his hand to making copies of parchment texts, some of which were on the verge perishing. As the collection was among the finest on Athos, the librarian had instituted several measures to safeguard against would-be biblioklepts - a word he coined for those who came to Athos intent on stealing books and selling them on the black market. It pained him to think of how many had gone missing through the naivety, negligence, and in some cases outright nefariousness of former librarians. On assuming his position he had seen to it the ironclad door was set with three separate locks, whose different keys were kept by him and two other monks. Yes, all three needed to be present in opening and closing the library, but it also tripled the obstacles for thieves. Over the past year, with computers pushing into the monastery, he had been considering the possibility of recording the texts on disc. Unlike the more conservative monks he wasn't against the use of computers: as extensions of the printing press they would help carry texts deep into the new millennium. But what of his calligraphy? Wasn't it threatened by the new technology? No at all, Father Haralambos had explained to Father Nikitas. Computers could digitise texts and produce replicas, but such copies would always be inferior to those crafted by hand. Yes, they might serve as good records, but they would always lack the nervous energy of the human touch, the subtle expression of spirit that permeated calligraphy and infused it with life.

When Paul and John entered the library, Father Haralambos was seated at a table with several books, an assortment of pens, and a number of small bottles of coloured ink. Expecting their visit, he promptly put aside his work and welcomed them warmly. John translated for Paul as the librarian escorted them around the spacious room, pointing out parchment manuscripts with imperial seals, illustrated Psalters and Gospels, various menologies bordered with bright figures. He provided detailed information on each item and went on to say he had chosen to settle in this monastery because of the library's location. In other monasteries the holy books were housed in buildings separate from the

church, while here the Word was in its rightful place. They then went to his table, where he showed them his present work: a copy of an eleventh century lectionary which had belonged to a Byzantine emperor. They admired his calligraphy and Paul commented on the selfless nature of his art. John added his friend was an author and had only last night completed his latest story. The librarian turned in surprise and asked about it.

- The story's examines the dialogue between science and religion, Paul replied.

- Both worthy topics, he smiled. Far better than the self-indulgent outpouring passing for contemporary literature.

He had been drawn to the Muse of literature the way other young men were drawn by women, but that now seemed a world away. He took Paul's exercise book, flicked through it with ink-stained fingers, and commented on the neat handwriting. Having little English, he suggested John might one day translate it for him. Yes, he used to write a lot of fiction, but that was before he discovered the Word.

- And this is my last story, said Paul.

- Are you thinking of becoming a monk?

- No, but I've had a calling of sorts.

- From God?

- His brother, Hades.

The librarian frowned and teased his sparse, boyish beard.

- I've been summoned by death, Paul continued.

- The Romantics used it to stimulate poetry, and we monks as a way to the Word.

- No, Father, my death's not an abstraction or a philosophical question for making mileage. I feel it seeping into my being like the night into a still room, taking first the colours of objects, then their outlines, and finally their very presence.

- I'm sorry, said the librarian. May you find strength in God.

He invited them to browse for as long as they wished and returned to his work. As they stood over a glass cabinet containing a variety of incunabula, Paul asked almost in a whisper if John would read the story there and then, for he had written it essentially for him. His thoughts still circling around Mara, John was in no mood to concentrate on a work of fiction. He was about to ask whether he might read it later, in the quiet of his cell, but Paul's look of expectation prevailed. They sat beside a grilled window looking out onto the chapel. Nico had been sparing with the whitewash, thought John, for the symbol's outline was still faintly visible. He took the exercise book, noticed the tables of arithmetic on the back cover, and began reading.

The story, titled *The Second Coming*, was set toward the end of the third millennium, when every aspect of the earth had been digitised and a World Government established, whose supreme Head was neither a military dictator nor a religious reformer, but a scientist, more precisely, a geneticist. The citizens of the new order had no knowledge of concepts such as God, suffering, death and soul, for these words, together with a host of other abstract nouns, had been culled from their common language. The first person singular pronoun had also been eradicated, replaced by the plural, which had engendered a greater sense of community, thereby eliminating all the anguish that had formerly arisen from the notions of identity and individuality. In addition, the grammar of the new language didn't permit the construction of past and future tense, which meant the citizens dwelt in a present that was unbounded and limitless.

The Head was an old man, perhaps a hundred and fifty. His ashen hair was swept back in a wave, exposing a steep forehead etched with several parallel lines. Deep-set eyes sparkled with compassion and intelligence, dimming occasionally with what might be taken for thoughtfulness, certainly not melancholy. Stem-cell therapy had preserved him well, for he was the last blood and bone member of the Assembly of Scientists – a senatorial inner sanctum that instituted the present system. Upon their death (an event kept from the world with the utmost secrecy), the others had slipped into a complex matrix of being, from which they continued to govern the world through the power of the image. And when the Head died he would also take his place in the pantheon of virtual reality, directing the course of mankind until such time as the furthest star was named by a number.

The Assembly had elected him Head because he more than anyone had engineered the new Adam. At first there were moral and ethical objections to his creation, but they were soon silenced, for good and evil were categories pertaining to the old Adam. In a world shining with innocence, where the fruit of all trees glowed with fulfilment, it wasn't long before those words lost their meaning and fell from the language. From the outset of his professional life, when the human genome had just been mapped and a new universe was seen in the cell's nucleus, the Head's research was driven by a profound love of humanity. Through genetic engineering he succeeded in eliminating sickness and disease, modified crops and animals to yield abundant food, and restored harmony between nature and man. Never again would a mother's heart contract at the sight of her deformed infant; never again would the young be cut down in their prime by cancer; never again would a son watch his father sink into the oblivion of dementia. Unlike faith, which merely comforted the sick and consoled the dying, Science celebrated life and replicated the miracles the old religions were never able to repeat.

The Head had performed his first conversion in a country whose citizens were technologically advanced and ripe for revolution. The results were stunning and soon other nations renounced their sovereignty and clamoured for his miracle. Almost overnight science became humanity's liberator and saviour. Moved by its promises people stormed palaces and parliaments. National identity was exposed as a means of subjugation. Mosques, churches and synagogues were destroyed, their objects of veneration heaped before the Head, who accepted the offerings with genuine humility, saying he was nothing more than the servant of the spirit of science. The first generation, those with memories of the old order, marvelled at the miracles and saw the world as the paradise promised by the old religions. The second generation replaced the altar with the laboratory and lost all sense of the past. With the maturity of the third generation science had become the new God and the Head its sole prophet.

In his many scientific sermons the Head explained in a soothing voice that genetic engineering had freed humanity from the grip of determinism by circumventing the process of evolution. What might have been achieved through ten million years of natural selection - ten million years of untold struggle and suffering - had been attained in three generations. Mankind was now free to script its own destiny, thereby realising the universe's hidden purpose. It appeared he underwent a transformation at such moments: his eyes shone with conviction, purity glowed from his face, and an aura emanated from his body, which had never known a woman. In these talks he referred to the old theory of

evolution as a process that started from earth and, under the action of blind chance, spiralled outward without purpose - a process that reduced humanity to insignificance. At the same time the old creationists began with heaven and descended to earth, placing humanity under the command of an omnipotent God. The new order rendered obsolete the argument between evolution and creation: through genetic engineering humanity had overcome its dependence on maternal matter and broken free of heaven's pressing paternity.

At this point the story examined the Head in greater depth. What had compelled him to undertake this mission? How did he benefit from his position as leader of the new order? Living frugally, even ascetically, he wasn't motivated by power and possessions but simply by compassion for mankind. Perhaps the seeds of this were sown in him in the seventh decade of the twentieth century, when, as a boy of ten, his wonder had been aroused by a religious instruction teacher who told the class Christ's Second Coming would be witnessed by everyone in the world. At the time he questioned how Christ could be in all places at the same instant, and when the teacher replied all was possible through the power of the Holy Spirit, he thought deeply about Christ, the way other boys were intrigued by Superman. And later, as a bright adolescent, he was especially stirred by the fact that Christ had come to alleviate the suffering of mankind. He couldn't understand concepts like the redemption of sin or the salvation of the soul, but he could grasp Christ's miracles because they pertained to the physical world, and he saw in them the power of mind over matter. Christ became for him the reason for the Big Bang and the supreme attainment of the unfolding universe. If blind chance detonated the Big Bang, and breathless chance stretched and warped and curved spacetime, and playful chance juggled the atoms of hydrogen and helium to form stars, and curious chance mixed a cocktail of elements from which life emerged, then Christ represented the end of the reign of chance. Christ alone vanquished chance and through him matter was brought under the dominion of mind, and mankind was raised above suffering and death. In his youthful idealism he admired Christ and dreamt of emulating his deeds. But instead of going to church (the bread of the sacrament was never crispy and fresh, while the wine was always too sour to drink), he became an acolyte in the temple of science. He saw in Christ the supreme scientist: the selfless hero who gave his life for the betterment of man. And there was no greater proof of the mind's ascendancy over matter than in Christ's crucifixion, for it revealed the victory of free will over matter, gravity, determinism.

In the end science accomplished all that Christ had promised, realising a heaven on earth without crusades and holy wars, without threats of eternal damnation, without the fires of the Inquisition. Still, throughout his long life, the Head retained his youthful admiration of Christ. In many ways he was the only person on earth still to feel love and sorrow as they had been known a hundred years earlier, for the citizens of the new order knew nothing of suffering and their tears ducts had dried and become obsolete. Alone at night, he would sometimes cry a tear or two, not because the world wasn't as he wanted, but because of certain childhood memories. Of course, he kept this to himself, along with certain books and artefacts not destroyed in the great purges that cleared the way for the new order.

As he grew older the Head found himself dreaming of Christ, and always over three consecutive nights. (Genetic modifications in the new generation of citizens had

eliminated the subconscious, and with this the propensity to dream, thereby freeing them from the irrational) Waking on such occasions, he immediately recalled his grandmother, who came from what had been a Greek background. She would sit the fair-haired child next to her, peel an apple in one strand, and tell him stories and superstitions, among them that a dream seen on three consecutive nights was certain to embrace the light of day. His feelings as a boy returned and he began to wonder about her words. What did the dream signify? Had he outlived his usefulness now that the machinery of the new order was in motion? Was it time to appoint a successor, one of the new breed, a person who could truly represent the new humanity? Or was it perhaps a sign he didn't really belong in the new world? Moses had led his people to the Promised Land, only never set foot in that place himself.

As a result of this recurring dream, and perhaps from a subconscious wish to fulfil his grandmother's words, the Head was gradually possessed by the idea of using Christ's DNA to raise and restore him to the light of day as a computer-generated image. This would be his final experiment, the last work before his ascension into cyberspace, for despite his injunctions to the contrary he was certain the grateful citizens would elevate him to a status accorded to only a handful of people in the past - Christ being one. To this end he used a large piece of the Cross, which had come to him from the monastery of Xeropotamou on Mount Athos. Struck by the nail hole, he had saved it from destruction during the purges and kept it in his secret collection. He examined the hole and extracted minute traces of what appeared to be blood. DNA analysis revealed it was from a male of Semitic origin who had lived at the time of Christ and died in his early thirties. Assembling a comprehensive profile of his subject, he used a computerised hologram to generate a three-dimensional, life-size image of a man who, although bald and beardless, still bore a striking resemblance to an ancient icon he had saved from the purges.

He spent hours each day alone with the image, modifying its features, projecting it at different ages, until the idea of cloning the subject began to take hold of him. Keeping his intentions hidden from everyone, including those working with him in the laboratory, he succeeded in stripping a cell of its DNA and inserting it with genetic material replicated from a speck of blood. As all conception in the new order occurred through in-vitro fertilisation, he selected a young woman whose ancestors were from Palestine and implanted her with her own egg, in which the augmented cell had been inserted.

Nine months later a healthy boy was born, whose subsequent growth and development the Head secretly observed. He was a dreamy child, not all gregarious like others of his age, and liked nothing better than sketching abstract forms. The Head studied each drawing assiduously, looking for a sign of unusual insights. A few things intrigued him, among them what appeared to be fish with extended wings, but he couldn't be certain whether they reflected the boy's insights or the state of his own mind. The boy's father was a violin-maker, his mother a singer, and both tried to reason with him when, as an adolescent, he began to lose interest in everything except writing poems based on what he said were visions that came to him in his sleep. They took him to medical specialists, who attributed the condition to a rare, incurable genetic disorder last reported a generation ago. Medication was available to repress the visions, but the young man wouldn't hear of it, preferring to live with this mysterious source of poetic inspiration than settle for comfort and wellbeing.

At twenty he left home, wandered around, and then spent ten years living in solitude on the edge of a desert, where, as his followers would later relate, he learnt the language of light. He returned to society with a substantial book of poetry based on his experience: a work rich in image and metaphor drawn from the natural world, but resonating with a strange music, symbolic of what the Head could only describe as not of this world. Though barely comprehensible to readers, the book opened in them an awareness of the infinite - not a spatial or mathematical infinite, for which they had theories and equations, but an infinite glimpsed through chinks in their very thought. He gave public readings outdoors, singing his verse, giving of himself in each word. A group of fervent admirers followed him wherever he went, as did suspicion and resentment. Parents complained to the authorities. His words were unsettling impressionable minds, luring them from the purity of mathematics to the swamps of introspection. The book was promptly banned, copies burnt in public denouncements, and the poet imprisoned as a threat to society.

By means of a microchip implanted between the poet's eyes at birth, the Head had been able to monitor from a distance his movements and to some extent his thoughts. But after thirty years of daily surveillance, he decided the time had come to confront the poet and resolve the matter of his identity. Ignoring the guards' warnings, he entered the cell alone, taking only a glass of water. The poet bowed and apologised for having distracted him from the affairs of the world. His clean-shaven face and scalp accentuated the darkness of his eyes. A small round table had been placed in the cell for the occasion. They sat opposite each other.

- Who are you? asked the Head.
- We are who we are, replied the other, as though reading from his palms.
- Are you the author of the book?
- Visions come to me in the dead of night.

The Head moved his finger slowly around the rim of the glass, wondering whether the poet's visions were nothing more than obsolete dreams, or whether he was in fact receptive to something else.

- And after a vision my eyes drip with salty water.

His face contorted for a moment, as though a child struggling for words, but then he smiled and hummed a slow tune. The Head was instantly reminded of his boyhood and the hymns chanted on Good Friday night.

- That tune won't save you, he said.

The poet tapped the table three times and resumed humming in a pleasant manner, while the Head pondered his identity. If he were the one, restored in body, was there a divine aspect to his nature? Could he perform miracles? How could he be tested? Ask him to turn the glass of water to wine?

- You're a throwback to our primitive past, said the Head in a firmer tone. Your visions and poems have no place in society; in fact, they pose the greatest danger to the wellbeing of our citizens. Give me a sign why your life should be spared.

Again they stared at each other: the Head with the eyes of an eagle, the poet with the gaze of a lamb. At that instant the old man sought the flash of a soul, an intimation of the divine, something that would point to a reality over and above the paradise he had brought about on earth. But the poet's eyes were sorrowful, the colour of freshly dug

earth, and he was reminded of his black-shawled grandmother and parents. And that question gnawed at him again, as it had throughout his long life: Does God exist? Perhaps his faith in science, his hope in the perfectibility of man, his miraculous achievements - perhaps all that arose from trying to come to terms with that question. And now, facing this man with protruding brows, he needed an answer as never before. Was it from fear at approaching the end of his life? Or from being in the presence of this mysterious person? Suddenly, he was moved by an overwhelming compassion for the man, and through him for all the generations of humanity that had lived in the shadow of death, and in that instant he glimpsed something in those dark eyes, a possibility, no, nothing more than a promise, a hope, for which he was prepared to risk the new order. Reaching across the table, he touched a tear glistening on the man's cheek and brought his finger to his lips. He then stood and instructed the guards to release the prisoner.

Alone in the cell, the Head pondered his decision. Had he acted wisely in freeing an obvious threat to the new order? If the man were just a captivating poet, the citizens would hold firm to their present harmony and his strange words would eventually lose their charm and fall on deaf ears. But if he were the one, and this was the Second Coming, those words would prevail and take root in the hearts of all, until bright souls blossomed from bone, and humanity was restored to God. At that moment sunset blazed through the window and the water in the glass turned crimson.

John spread his hand flat on the last page and looked up at Paul, who had been studying his face during the reading. The skewed shadow of the window-grille fell over them and the table. On the other side of the library Father Haralambos's pen scratched the textured paper.

- Is he the one? asked John, visibly moved by the story.

- What do you think?

- The Second Coming won't be engineered by science.

- Why not? Isn't there a wonderful paradox in it? Science proclaims itself God and then, through intellectual pride, unintentionally subverts itself and opens the door to the true God. Let's assume the poet is Christ and he succeeds in drawing humanity to him, would the world be better than it had been under the Head? Or would suffering and death return through him, as it had through the first Adam?

- Consciousness is born of suffering.

- Is consciousness a cure or a curse?

- It's our crown of thorns.

- Why did you turn your back on genetics, John?

- After that brush with death in the village I realised our strands of DNA weren't a spiral stairway to heaven. I needed to believe in something faster than the speed of light. Our reason's nothing more than a tool, an instrument, which always comes between the knower and what's to be known. Do the models of quantum physics and cosmology bear some relationship to reality? Is mathematics a universal language? And as for the permanence of science: Copernicus replaced Ptolemy, Lobachevsky extended Euclid, Einstein superseded Newton, which leaves the Creator as the only universal constant.

Paul took the book and asked John whether he would be permitted to burn it in the library. Taken aback, John attempted to talk him out of it, but he persisted, saying it had been on his mind before coming to Athos. To their surprise Father Haralambos was more

than eager to assist in the matter. As a former novelist he could empathise with the visitor's need to burn what had been written with an eye to the world, for such works always rang false when sounded against the Word. He commended Paul on his courage: it was an exemplary way to purge vanity, overcome the world's conceits, and embark on a quest for the Word. He took down a lamp that hung before an icon of the Virgin and placed it on the heater. Paul asked if he would perform the ritual, but the monk assured him the feeling of liberation would be stronger if the story were burnt by the hand that penned it. Lighting the corner of the book on the lamp, Paul waited for it to flame and dropped it in the heater.

- It's done, said Father Haralambos. And may Christ now light your way.

They thanked the librarian and descended the stairs to the courtyard. John wanted to spend a little more time with his friend, but he was also desperate to see Mara, so he managed an awkward apology and hurried to the guesthouse. Paul set off for the jetty, to clear his thoughts and decide a few things. The librarian was right, he thought, brushed by the gatekeeper's broom. The way forward already felt lighter.

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Shoes squeaking like a pair of blackbirds, Father Theodore strode toward Father Nikitas's cell, but his purpose failed him on the stairs and he hurried to the end of the corridor, where he concealed himself in an arched recess overlooking the church's leaden roof. He had spent a restless night thinking about the icon of Christ Dancing. Had he acted rashly, perhaps foolishly, in surrendering it to Father Nikitas? And what had the grim-faced monk done with it? Burnt it, no doubt, in an act of faith. He felt another pang of remorse at the thought of Father Daniel. The icon had not only linked him to a chain of ancestors going back to the first icon painters, it also imbued him with a joyful reverence that touched everyone around him. Yes, he had pondered the matter long and hard during the night. Was the icon heretical, as Father Nikitas maintained? Had Father Daniel shown excessive reverence toward it? And did that reverence verge on worship? If so, the painter was guilty of idolatry, for icons weren't meant to be objects of worship, which had been the very argument used by the Iconoclasts in their destructive purges. And yet how was one to distinguish between reverence and worship? If the faithful risked damnation by mistaking the image for the reality it represented, then wasn't it best to dispose of images altogether, as other religions had done? And from this it followed that Father Nikitas had saved the painter from sin by burning an idol, just as Moses had done in breaking the Golden Calf. Perhaps in the absence of images a higher faculty might be awakened in monks, a purer faith, through which one might draw closer to the nameless, formless God.

In looking at religions from the ancient Egyptians onward, Father Theodore had been struck by a kind of evolution in the manifestation of the divine: a gradual shedding of stone, marble and gold; a movement from matter to mind. And where would this reductive process lead? Perhaps to a God of pure abstraction, not unlike a mathematical theorem, transcending race and gender, art and science, time and space. But there were dangers in an abstract God: where holy images evoked a sense of the religious, their absence was exploited by advertisers who filled the vacuum with images that enslaved the mind through greed, fear and vanity. No, after a night of soul-searching, he had come to the conclusion that mankind wasn't yet ready to worship an abstract God: better an icon of Christ than an advertisement of a block of chocolate or a packet of cigarettes. When one contemplated icons, even those depicting obscure martyrs, the feelings they evoked were infinitely more uplifting than the objects deemed desirable by advertisers. As mankind still needed images to make sense of the world, better an image that elevated the spirit than one that stirred base desires. And so, having come down on the side of the icon, he now felt responsible for its destruction. In his remorse he thought about visiting Father Daniel. But what would he say to him? Obviously the theft had yet to be discovered, for it would have been announced by now. He chastised himself for succumbing to the overly zealous monk. What should he do? Confess all to the Abbot? Or spare Father Nikitas, and himself, by attributing the icon's disappearance to the Professor?

Stung by the thought of his sister dying for those icons in that remote Russian convent, Father Theodore was about to set off for Father Nikitas's cell when the two Albanians appeared from behind the church dome, carrying a ladder by each end. He watched in trepidation as they made their way along a narrow parapet and manoeuvred the

ladder against the cupola crowning the dome. One of them then held it in place while the other climbed nimbly onto the roof, pulled himself up to the cross secured by several wires, and commenced scraping off rust with a wire brush. Impressed by their daring and deftness, he wondered whether they had volunteered to clean the cross in readiness for Easter Sunday, or whether the Abbot had requested it.

He turned to the sound of a door opening: Father Nikitas stepped from his cell. His first reaction was to approach him and discuss the icon, but there was something in the way he looked left and right in locking the door that checked this impulse and held him back. With his left arm pressed to his chest as though broken and his walking stick tapping every odd step, the old monk made his way along the corridor and down three flights to the courtyard. In the portico he exchanged a few words with Father Maximos, then set out in the direction of Karyes. Father Theodore followed at a distance, passing a few visitors admiring the Russian bell, one of whom remarked it was large enough to shelter a man on a stormy night. As the gatekeeper addressed one of the frescoed saints, he lightened his step and slipped out unnoticed.

Father Nikitas marched uphill at a brisk pace, now and then striking the road with his walking stick in a punishing manner. He cursed these new thoroughfares between monasteries and tried to avoid them, but when this wasn't possible he walked on them as though on hot coals. At the sight of a path veering off to the left, he secured something under his cassock and lengthened his stride.

After Thursday's incident with the Professor, the guardian of monastic tradition had returned with the icon to his cell and laid it face down on the table. There was no place for this heretical image on Athos, he had told himself. It made a mockery of Christ's suffering and had to be destroyed at once. He lit a handful of kindling and paced the room for a few minutes, only to find a little smoke instead of the expected fire. This surprised him, for the wood was dry and the initial flame appeared strong. He tried again, this time sustaining the flame with his breath, but it wouldn't take to the thicker branches, and he felt light-headed from blowing. This had never happened before. He took another match, the last in the box, knelt before the heater, and struck again. In that flaring instant he was taken back more than fifty years to that fateful night. He struck the match and lit the cloth soaked in oil. The flaming bottle flew again through the dark like a demon and exploded in the chapel. And once again he waited with his rifle pointed at the door. But this time, instead of shooting when the soldier ran out, he lay his weapon on a gravestone and stepped out.

- Brother, it's me, he said, opening his arms.

- You've committed a great sin, said his brother.

The chapel was now blazing, the smell of burning oil filled the air, the faces of saints were blistering and peeling. His brother's words fell heavily upon him and he dropped to his knees.

- What can I do, brother?

- Make up for this desecration.

- How?

- By becoming a defender of icons.

He nodded and his brother reached out for him in a gesture of forgiveness. In extending his hand he was surprised and relieved to see his finger intact. They embraced in

the warmth of the burning chapel, and then his brother held him at arm's length and said he must join the others.

- Where are you going? he asked. We'll go home together. Father will be pleased.

As though he hadn't heard him, his brother walked away and was soon swallowed by the cold night.

The match nipped Father Nikitas's amputated finger and he blew it out. His heart was beating hard and he laboured for each breath. He picked up the icon and studied it for a moment, subduing his long-standing resentment. Yes, perhaps this was his way of coming to terms with what had happened so many years ago. The thought of doing what his brother had asked unburdened him, filled him with a sense of lightness, not unlike the time he had danced around the fire in the village square after throwing his father's wooden leg in the flames. Christ was also happy in the moment of dancing: his face had a halo of joy, his arms were spread wide, one foot was in the air, the other barely touching the ground. He was in the centre of a circle of dancers. The bride and groom were sitting at a table set with food, while a man was pouring wine from a large jug into a smaller vessel. Suddenly, he saw his brother's features in the face of Christ and his eyes filled with tears. No, he couldn't bring himself to burn the icon, but neither was he fully reconciled to it. He resolved not to destroy it, but tomorrow, at the first opportunity, he would take it to the forest and bury it where it would never be found. Meanwhile he wrapped it in a white pillowcase and hid it beneath the water trough.

Cursing the new roads lacerating the peninsular, he was pleased to follow this ancient path whose smooth stones were not totally covered in scrub. These humble paths winding through the forest had served monks, men and mules for a thousand years. Yes, he thought, they would have served another thousand years, but for Europe's plan, in league with the Catholic Church, to pollute the Holy Mountain with traffic and tourists, destroying the solitude that nourished the soul. He abhorred Europe's comforts and conveniences, seeing in them the cause of moral and spiritual decline. There was more honesty in a drop of sweat than in a sea of petrol. To walk was to sweat, to be conscious of one's body, and to overcome it through spirit.

Father Theodore watched from behind a thorn bush as Father Nikitas stopped before a tap trickling into a stone cistern. The overhanging branches of an oak shimmered with small light-green leaves. After a moment's deliberation the old monk turned abruptly and shuffled through last year's foliage to the base of sheer cliff, where he took out a white parcel from under his cassock and concealed it between the rocks. When he had retraced his steps back toward the main road, Father Theodore sprang from his cover and removed the parcel. He slipped the icon from the pillowcase, crossed himself in gratitude for its preservation, and gazed at it for some time, drawing on the happiness of Christ, whose arms were outspread not in the pain of crucifixion but in the joy of dancing.

He recalled reading about the Khlysts, a Russian sect to which Rasputin was said to have belonged. Outlawed by the Orthodox Church, it grew in the early part of the twentieth century to include poets, intellectuals and members of the aristocracy. In its original practice men and women gathered in barns and basements, and sought union with God through rhapsodic dancing, which often culminated in an orgiastic frenzy. They sought to overcome the flesh through the excesses of flesh, to subdue sin through plunging into sinfulness. For them, as for the followers of the pagan Dionysos, the

individual had to be submerged in sensuality in order to attain liberation and a state of transcendence. He studied the figure of Christ. Yes, He was dancing, but there was nothing licentious or even excessive in His manner; on the contrary, He was the all-seeing, all-knowing eye at the centre of the storm, the reminder that man was made for happiness, and that music and movement symbolised the union of body and soul. Perhaps the Khlysts had gone too far in their search for meaning, but their dancing, like the controlled movements of the Dervishes, could be seen as prayer in motion. Yes, musical instruments were prohibited on Athos, but when Father Sophronios sounded a hymn wasn't the soul stirred? Didn't it dance like a moth around a flame?

He wrapped the icon in the pillowcase and considered the best course of action. Should he return it to Father Daniel and tell him what had transpired? But that would further strain the relationship between Father Nikitas and the Abbot. The present tension between the pro-Europeans and their opponents was another in the long history of conflicts on Athos. First there was the schism between the inward-looking, meditative Hesychasts and those inspired by the worldliness of the Renaissance. That was followed by the fiery clashes between the Uniats, who sought union with Rome, and those who objected to Papal authority, twenty six of whom were burnt to death in the tower of the Bulgarian monastery Zographou. Then there was the divide between the communal coenobitic system of monastic governance and the more individualistic idiorrhythmic rule. The latter led to many excesses, particularly at the time of Ottoman rule, when the Sultans granted Athos a certain amount of autonomy and exemption from heavy taxes. Wealthy men came to the Holy Mountain and dressed in monastic black simply to avoid paying taxes. They purchased hermitages and land, lived in relative comfort, and employed poorer monks as servants and field workers. No, Father Theodore didn't want to exacerbate the tension in the monastery, especially during Holy Week.

Suddenly, he was struck by the thought of using the icon in a constructive way, so it might serve not only to subdue Father Nikitas's zealotry, but reconcile him to Father Daniel. Miracle-working icons had been a feature of the Holy Mountain since the first monks set their bare soles on the rocky peninsular. There was the icon of the Virgin which escaped the wrath of the Iconoclasts and sailed upright over the waves to the shore of Athos. When the monks of the nearby monastery housed it in the security of the main church, the Virgin advised one of them that She had come to protect, not to be protected. The monks responded by building a humble chapel beside the main gate, in which the icon had resided ever since, except for the morning of Easter Tuesday, when it was taken for the annual procession around the monastery walls. In another monastery a raw tablet of wood was locked overnight in a newly built church which had yet to be dedicated. The following morning, when the monks assembled for matins, they were astonished to find the tablet painted with the figure of Saint George, after whom the church was rightly named. A little while later a visiting bishop who doubted the story touched the Saint's cheek, only to find he couldn't remove his finger from the icon's surface. The tip was eventually severed and it remained stuck to the cheek, though doubters and sceptics saw it as a knot in the wood or a concentration of paint. Fervently defended by generations of monks, such legends had become as much part of a monastery as its mortar and stone.

Excited by the idea of creating the semblance of a miracle, one that would foster harmony and goodwill on the eve of the Resurrection, Father Theodore tucked the icon

under his arm and dashed off, though not along the path he had come on, but through trackless scrub, occasionally picking his way between brambles and nettles, and then crossing a stream on mossy rocks that saw his left shoe fill with water. The last time he had exerted himself like this was in his youth, when together with Vera they would play in the forest surrounding the town, fleeing imaginary pursuers at dusk, especially Baba Yaga, the old crone who abducted children and ate them for supper.

And so he now pushed himself for the sake of his beloved sister, determined to carry out his plan. Lungs burning, his left hand scratched from pushing through thorny bushes, he came to the spot where the old track met the newly excavated road, at which Father Nikitas would soon be arriving. He took the icon from the pillowcase, placed it on the road so it faced the track, and crouched behind a shrub. A few minutes later, just as the old monk reached the road, a shaft of sunlight streamed through the canopy of branches and illuminated the icon. Father Theodore could barely contain his delight at the look of astonishment on the monk's face. He pointed at the icon with his walking stick as though warding off an apparition, proceeded warily toward it, then removed his hat and went down on his knees. He crossed himself three times, touching the reddish dirt with his forehead after each, and kissed the icon.

At that moment Father Nikitas was certain he had witnessed a miracle. But why was he, a fratricide, chosen to witness it? He who had denounced the icon and sought its destruction? He thought of Saul on the road to Damascus and tears trickled into his thick beard. But then, as though in a flash of revelation, everything made sense, and after more than fifty years of guilt weighing on his body like a heavy chain, he suddenly felt light and his breath came easier. Yes, this was a miracle: a sign of God's love and forgiveness. His brother was no longer the dead man he had turned over in the cemetery, but one of the dancers around Christ, and he now recalled how much his brother liked dancing around bonfires in the village square. And for an instant Father Nikitas was a youth again, in that square on Christmas Eve with his brother, dancing in a circle around the happy flames and the crimson-faced villagers. Tears fell onto the dusty road, and when he stood his heart was a dove in flight. He slipped the warm icon beneath his cassock and headed for the monastery, with a spring in his step.

Delighted with the outcome Father Theodore waited until the monk was out of sight before emerging from his hiding place. He wiped the scratches on his hand with the pillowcase, wondered how best to conceal the evidence of his contrived miracle, then buried it beneath a rock and hurried off to see how his machinations would unfold.

Once in the courtyard Father Nikitas made straight for Father Daniel's cell. He raised his walking stick to knock on the door, but used his knuckles instead, and for the first time felt no pain in his amputated finger. The icon painter opened and invited him inside with a smile broader than the doorway, his heavy black-rimmed glasses poised on the tip of his thin nose. His faded apron was spotted and streaked with colour. He had been sitting beside the window, in a prism of sunlight, adding the finishing touches to the icon depicting the Slaughter of the Innocents.

- What do you think of it, Brother? he asked, pointing with the end of a brush which appeared to have been gnawed.

- A brutal subject, replied Father Nikitas, bristling with excitement. Can it evoke anything but horror?

- We bow and kiss the brutality of the Crucifixion.

- Yes, because it prefigures the Resurrection. What does the death of all those children prefigure?

- The inexhaustible love in maternal grief.

- Fine words, Father Daniel, but a bloody price to pay for such love.

The painter sat down and resumed his work, adding it had to be finished by Saint Thomas's Day. His visitor studied him closely as he dipped the brush in gold, rested his hand on a rod just above the surface of the painting, and delicately touched the scaly armour of a soldier tearing an infant from its mother's breast.

- You know, Brother, said Father Nikitas, and paused to feel his chest. There's something to be said for icons that depict happiness, even dancing.

Father Daniel turned and, biting the end of the brush, considered his visitor over the top of his glasses.

- Brother, would you show me your icon? he continued.

- You want to see Christ Dancing? asked the painter, warily.

- And bow in apology for my former attitude.

Father Daniel was uncertain of how to interpret this softening in someone he had always known as a hardened zealot. Was he perhaps scheming something on the eve of the Resurrection? But he chastised himself for his suspicion and brought out the icon. When he unfolded the velvet cloth and beheld the bare wooden tablet, he gave a short gasp and steadied himself on his visitor's outstretched arm.

- My icon, he faltered, running his hand over the pine board.

- Sit down, Brother, sit down.

Fearing the sudden shock might prove too much for the slight monk, Father Nikitas pulled the icon from under his cassock and displayed it with the smile of a magician. The painter sprang from the chair, clasped it to his chest, and performed a little jig around the easel, saying he didn't understand a thing, but it was all right because in one instant his heart had sunk in a grave and leapt back to life at the sight of his icon. Moved by the painter's joy Father Nikitas clasped his hand and related how the icon had been taken from the Professor, who had stolen it by sleight during yesterday's visit. When he explained what he had wanted to do with it and how it had miraculously appeared on the road, both Fathers invoked the Virgin's name, crossed themselves, embraced, and wished each other a happy Resurrection.

When Father Theodore entered the portico he was stopped by Father Maximos, who complained the gateway had been busier than ever, and at a time when both monks and visitors ought to be indoors, contemplating the significance of the coming night. And then with a dexterity that belied his years, he swiped across his face and caught a fly.

- The first of the new season, he beamed, raising his fist. Nothing escapes Father Maximos's left eye, and nothing enters without his permission. Now then, Brother, is this fly male or female? If it's the latter, of course there's no place for her in our house, but if it's the former he's more than welcome to share the stable with brother mule.

- How can you tell without opening your hand? asked Father Theodore.

- The same way light knows dark, grinned the gatekeeper.

- But there's nothing faster than light.

- Therefore nothing slower than darkness.

- Except a black hole, said Father Theodore, enjoying the playful banter.

- Exactly, beamed the old monk. That's why the pupil of the eye is round: to catch light as surely as I've caught this fly.

And he proceeded to give an account of the gender of flies on the basis of their speed and the straightness of their line of flight. After which he stepped outside the gate and opened his fist. Father Theodore went to the Russian bell and lingered there a while, eager to confirm his hunch that Father Nikitas had in fact gone directly to his adversary's cell. At the other end of the courtyard the Albanians leaned the ladder against the cloister wall and walked toward him. The cross on the cupola now glowed in the sunlight. Feeling pleased with what he had achieved, and keeping an eye on the stairs leading up to the painter's cell, Father Theodore congratulated them on a job well done.

- I'm surprised the Abbot allowed it today.

- We insisted, said the one who had done the painting.

- We've been planning it for weeks, added the other.

- It's not right to have a rusty cross on Easter Sunday, said the painter.

- You risked your life up there, said Father Theodore.

- An Albanian life, what's it worth, Father? Everything's based on the exchange rate. We're as worthless as our currency. A thousand Albanians for one American.

- I'm good at climbing, smiled the painter. You have to be to survive in Albania - it's full of mountains. Even as a kid I made a living climbing peaks in search of eagle's eggs. They used to bring a good price on the black market, in the black days of Enver Hoxha, may the black earth swallow him forever. He turned the country into a concentration camp and made us believe we were living in paradise.

- We in Russia fared no better under Stalin, said Father Theodore.

- That's atheism for you, Father, said the other. Hoxha took the place of God. His statue was in every public square, greeting us with his right hand, strangling us with his left. His photograph was in every house, smiling like an angel, but scheming like a devil.

Paul entered the courtyard from outside and nodded in approaching them. Aware of his connection to both Stefan and John, Father Theodore addressed him in English. The painter commented Americans were blessed never to have been oppressed by a Stalin or a Hoxha, but the monk pointed out the visitor was Australian.

- Afstralia goot, Afstralia goot, said the painter.

And then, addressing the other in Albanian, he cursed his own language, saying it was good for nothing, it had no similarity to any other languages, and if they wanted to get ahead in the world they should endeavour to learn more English, for it was the language of opportunity. He then asked Father Theodore to convey to the visitor that if God granted him one wish it would be to live in Australia. Having spent the hour musing on the edge of the concrete jetty, Paul now found himself in a strangely exalted mood. In burning his story, he had also burnt the part of himself that still hoped for something from the world, perhaps a little recognition of whatever talent he possessed, a desire for his name to be stamped in print, so it might survive his body by ten or twenty years. Swayed by sea's gentle roll he had thought how effortless it would be to slip into water, and he might have done it but for the thought of his friends. So now, when the young painter expressed his yearning for Australia, Paul looked him directly in the eyes and, through the monk, said he wasn't God but he might be able to realise his wish. He then told them of

his condition and how there was nothing for him back in Australia. Perplexed, the others looked on as he unzipped the pouch around his waist and took out his passport and return airline ticket. He pointed to his photo in the passport, then at the painter. He had been bearded and longhaired when the photo was taken five years earlier.

- Paul Scott, he said. You now Paul Scott. Go to Australia.

Father Theodore explained to the Albanian what was happening. Paul extended the passport and ticket to the wide-eyed fellow, who, perhaps expecting a sting of some kind, reached out tentatively, his hand spotted with gold paint. There was a moment of silence, suspicious looks darted here and there, the Albanians whispered in their language. The monk glanced at the stairs: still no sign of Father Nikitas. Paul repeated himself, offering his identity with greater animation, until the painter grasped his sincerity and beamed in gratitude.

- Tenk you, tenk you, he said, shaking Paul's hand.

- Mate, I wish you a long and happy life in Australia.

- Afstralia, tenk you. Afstralia goot.

He turned to the cupola, crossed himself three times, and they left in a buzz of Albanian, ignoring the gatekeeper muttering complaints.

- God give you strength, said Father Theodore.

- I'd prefer eternity, Paul smiled.

- What's your name?

- We're all shadows cut from the same cloth, he replied and walked away.

The monk watched the visitor pick up a few eucalypt leaves, rub them between his palms, and disappear behind the church. He was still trying to make sense of what had just happened, when Father Nikitas descended the stairs, tapping each step twice with his walking stick. His bearing and demeanour indicated everything had gone according to plan. Delighted, Father Theodore was keen to approach him and ask what had become of the icon, but was distracted by a white cloth resting on the semantron. He waited for the old monk to turn toward the east cloister then went to the sounding board, startling a speckled dove crooning at one end. It was the pillowcase, there could be no mistake, for it was stained with his blood. He looked this way and that. Had he been followed? Was this an attempt to contrive a miracle on him? He dared not think how else it might have found its way here. Concealing it under his cassock, he hurried off to catch up with the old monk, passing Father Akakios dozing on the steps to the wine cellar, a smile twitching on his crooked lips.

After leaving the library John was on his way to see Mara (her features were constantly before him, even as the flames had coloured Paul's pale complexion) when Father Gregory stopped him in the foyer with a stern look. The guest-master reminded him of his duties, pointing out he had recently been spending too much time in other activities. The rooms were full of visitors, the kitchen was in constant demand, and he was hard pressed to meet everyone's whimsical request on his own. Some of the visitors had taken residence as though in a hotel: they expected coffee on demand, smoked on the balcony like Ottoman Pashas, left their ashtrays for him to empty, and gossiped until all hours of the night, forgetting to turn off the lights in the foyer. John was about to excuse himself yet again, saying an urgent matter needed his attention, but managed to check the impulse and followed the guest-master's thick-soled sandals to the kitchen.

Washing coffee cups thick with black sediment, John wondered whether he should see the Abbot about Mara. As a rule, in this monastery and in others, novices and monks were expected to discuss their spiritual progress and slippage with the Abbot. In his case, however, perhaps sensing an affinity between the novice and his Elder, the Abbot had granted special dispensation for him to visit the latter for additional guidance. Still, this didn't mean he should disregard the Abbot. Yes, he was reticent to see him about the present matter, but he was also acutely aware of violating a basic monastic law, namely, the vow of obedience, which demanded he confide in him and accept his advice. Tomorrow, he determined, rinsing out unread futures, recalling his mother's aunt, who went from house to house deciphering the script in coffee cups, extracting births and deaths, weddings and funerals, fortunes and failures. Perhaps he would have more courage on Easter Sunday. Meanwhile, what did he hope from sheltering her another day? That she might reciprocate his feelings and make his decision easier? Or that she would leave in the morning and fade like a dream in sunlight? And his feelings for her - this ache in his being? Would that also fade? No, he would never forget loving her and sheltering her in the monastery. The thought of her would gnaw him for the rest of his life, perhaps deny him all hope of living his monastic ideal. He had deceived himself believing in the strength of his convictions. As a youth, inspired by the great scientists, he had avoided emotional upheavals through a sort of pride in the strength of his intellect - a strength that was never really tested before now. And on entering the monastery he had aspired to the feats of the great ascetics, again foolishly believing in his ability to subdue his emotional life. Now here he was, on the threshold of becoming a monk, yet unable to come to terms with his feeling toward this mysterious woman, for whom he might yet decide to leave the monastery. Yes, he must confess everything to the Abbot, despite the risk of being expelled from the community, for only then could he redeem himself in his own eyes. But seeing Mara's sorrowful face in a coffee-stained saucer (the same stain had been a saint and then the Virgin), he wavered in his resolve, rationalised a different course of action, and fell again into blood's turbulence.

Expecting John at any minute, Mara quickly packed her belongings and smoothed the wrinkles from the checked blanket. In reshaping the pillow she recalled a childhood warning: impressions of one's head left on a pillow invited bad dreams. She strapped on

the backpack, peeped into the corridor, pulled the cap low over her eyes, and set out in a resolute manner, marching through the noisy foyer with eyes fixed on the stairs. The courtyard was empty, but in passing the mouth of the cellar smelling of wine she was startled by a loud snort. Father Akakios was sleeping on the steps, head resting on his misshapen boots, sniffing the air in his lively dreams. As she quickened her step, the ragged little monk untwisted himself, turned onto his other side, and settled into a more comfortable position. She entered the monastery's east wing, climbed to the third floor, and paused for a moment in the wide corridor shouldered by heavy beams.

A caller at this hour was unusual, thought Stefan, placing a lighted lamp on the icon shelf. He opened the door and was surprised by the young man whose taciturn manner around the monastery had aroused his curiosity. The visitor asked in Balkan-flavoured English whether he might come in for a moment on an urgent matter, before setting out for a neighbouring monastery. Stefan pointed to a chair at the table, but the other declined, saying he would be brief. He took off the backpack, placed it beside the door, and stood with arms crossed.

- You are Stefan Vekovic, began the visitor, glancing from beneath the visor.
- Do we know each other, friend?

The fellow continued with an account of Stefan's Serbian background, the name of his father's village in Kosovo, and his address in Australia. Stefan acknowledged the details and demanded an explanation. The other took out an Australian driver's license and placed it on the table. Shaken by his heart's double-fisted blows, Stefan was about to ask where and how it had been found, when a gun jabbed him on the back of the head and forced him closer to the photo, which had been taken when he first got his license.

- Who are you? What's this about?

He attempted to straighten up, but the barrel pressed harder and the hammer clicked back. Australia flashed to mind: the night when the card-player held a gun to his head. On that occasion he had reacted from the strength of his convictions, but he felt none of that now. Sensing this was related to his involvement in Kosovo, he whispered several Kyrie Eleisons and braced himself for the shot.

- What's this about, Vekovic? I will tell you and then splatter your Serbian brains all over your icons. Remember the village of Kachanik? Remember the Albanian woman you raped in the mosque? Remember? Don't move, Vekovic. This place of yours has stood against Muslims and women for a thousand years, well here I am, Vekovic, a Muslim and a woman, ready to send you to hell for what you did to me. But first I will pour out my hatred, Vekovic. To lighten my soul and make yours heavier for the grave. I was choked by hatred when I first saw you in the courtyard. The symbol on the wall of the chapel, the Crescent Moon, I did that, Vekovic, Tamara Arifi, using my own menstrual blood, as a way of easing the hatred until the time was right. Don't lift your head from the table. Listen to how I suffered because of you.

Stefan had sensed something unusual about the visitor from the very outset, and the fact that he turned out to be a woman shocked him more than the gun. He wanted to protest he had not raped anyone in Kosovo, that she had mistaken him for somebody else, but words failed him at the memory of that time and the guilt with which he had lived for the past year. Tamara removed her cap and dropped it on the table. She spoke slowly, her words measured, as though she had said them to herself over and over again.

She had just turned nineteen when war shattered Kosovo. As Albanians were being forced from their homes, the men of her village became even more defiant in their determination to stay. It was April, fruit trees were in blossom and there was a touch of warmth in the air, but instead of swallows the clear sky was shredded by NATO jets bombing Serbian positions, as they had been doing for over a month. One morning, when the temperature dropped suddenly and winds from the north sharpened their knives, a Serb militia pounded her village with mortar and machine-gun. The men fought back with their bony rifles, until a group of soldiers in black balaclavas stormed the burning village and captured the resistors, among them her father and two brothers. She had watched from a hill overlooking the village, together with others who had chosen not to flee, but as the men were herded at gunpoint onto a truck she recalled recent executions in neighbouring villages and ran out to stop the truck from leaving. Two masked Serbs restrained her and laughed at their catch.

- Remember me now, Vekovic? she asked, prodding him with the gun. You told the other Serb to wait in the jeep and then dragged me into our mosque destroyed by your guns. You forced me onto a prayer mat and raped me while holding a gun to my head. Remember, Vekovic? I will never forget that red cross on your mask and your eyes sharp as broken glass. You crushed me and swore you'd fill me with Serbian seed to make up for the death of Serbs at the hands of Muslims. I struggled and cursed you, Vekovic, but you crushed me. And as I struggled I took this from your overcoat.

She threw his wallet under his eyes and continued in a voice broken by sighs and sobs. In crushing her body he sang in her ear lines from the poem about the defeat of Prince Lazar on Kosovo Field. And then he got up, threw a silver coin for the health of his Serbian child, and left her on the mat crying and shaking like a newborn lamb. When NATO pounded Belgrade and Kosovo came under UN protection, the living returned to ruined village to bury their dead, including her father and brothers, whose bodies were found in a ditch, covered in rotting oak leaves.

- I fell pregnant to you, Vekovic, she said, raising her voice.

Stefan was unable to muster a word of protest in his defence. The fact that he wasn't the Serb in the mosque didn't matter, for he had been there in the village. And if he wasn't directly responsible for the crime against this girl, he was nevertheless guilty by association - guilty of becoming a savage for Serbian nationalism, guilty of taking up arms, guilty of intending to enter the mosque on that fateful day. Yes, these were crimes against humanity for which there was no defence, only the silence of guilt.

Her mother had insisted she abort the child, for there could never be a place for a Serb bastard in their house. Not only this, with the men of the family dead Albanian custom demanded that she, the only daughter, take on the identity of a man in order to run the household under a male name. She must deny her womanhood, seal her womb, bandage her breasts. From now on she must dress as a man, behave as a man, become a man. This had been the way of things for generations, and this was now her fate. She must follow the example of her great aunt. When the men-folk in her household had been killed as Partisans during the Second World War, the woman dressed in a man's suit, took up smoking, and went daily to the cafe, where she played cards and clicked her father's amber worry beads. Tamara assured her mother she would observe tradition and exchange her womanhood for the life of a man, but not just yet, for she was determined to give birth to

the child. Her mother chastised her, threatened to disown her if she went through with the birth, saying it would blacken the memory of her father and brothers and bring shame upon the family. If that weren't enough, the villagers would talk if she didn't abort the child. They would say she hadn't been raped, but had gone willingly with a Serb at a time when others were being shot. She didn't argue with her mother, but remained defiant and silent. As spring coloured the brown countryside, and Serbs were brought to their knees by almost three months of relentless bombing, she nurtured a black hatred that grew and began stirring in her womb. Despite her mother's daily harangue and cries of shame, she remained silent, concealing her pregnancy from the villagers. Nine months later her reluctant mother acted as mid-wife, cutting the cord with a bread knife and holding up a boy with a strong cry. The child was washed and cleaned and swaddled in an old sheet. That afternoon, still weak from the labour, she sneaked out with the infant to the creek on the outskirts of the village. There she unwrapped the child and raised him naked to the winter sun struggling in stark oak trees. This was not her child, but the hatred she had nourished for nine months; not an Albanian, but the offspring of the black-masked Serb; not a life crying for her milk, but a demon that must be destroyed. And so she picked up a smooth rock and smashed its blue-veined head, which splattered like an orange. She then threw the tiny body in the icy water, just down from where a few white geese were squawking, washed her hands, and left to commence life as a man.

Stefan shuddered and groaned faintly in accepting responsibility for the infant's horrible death and the girl's savagery. Words failed him in the face of such hatred, but he didn't need them to know he was just as guilty as the one who had raped her. What then should he do? Accept the bullet in silence? But would that atone for his crime and lessen the girl's suffering? He could plead for his life, though not for his own sake, but to save her from another crime, yet another spike in her already tortured soul. His shoulders fell and forehead touched the table.

As Tamara continued with growing intensity Stefan could feel the tremor of the gun. That evening she cropped her hair, dressed in her younger brother's clothes, and adopted his name. She then set out in search of her rapist, Stefan Vekovic, whose wallet she had slipped from his overcoat as he crushed her on the floor of the mosque. His father's village wasn't too far from hers. There, posing as a Serbian friend of Vekovic, she learnt from his uncle he had gone to Mount Athos, perhaps to become a monk.

- I'm sorry, Stefan managed to say.

- This is my Holy War, Vekovic. Your death's my passport to paradise.

- My death won't achieve a thing. You'll be caught and jailed for life. Give me a chance to make up for your suffering.

- You Serbs didn't spare my father and brothers, and you showed no mercy in the mosque.

- I'm not after mercy, Tamara. You've been through hell.

She pushed the barrel harder against the base of his head.

- May God forgive me, he whispered.

- And Allah reward me, she retorted.

The door suddenly opened and Paul froze at what confronted him. Tamara tightened her grip on the gun and ordered him inside, threatening to blow out Stefan's brains if he tried anything. He didn't know what to make of the situation, but the gunman

looked desperate and he feared for his friend's life. The words "greater love hath no man" flashed through his mind. And again he thought of the ascetic in the cave, who spoke of using death to overcome death. His dark words now rippled through Paul like a melody, quickening his heart with their charm, until his entire being opened to their meaning as though to a declaration of love. Yes, this was the moment for which he had come to Athos. Suddenly, he saw time not in terms of black-numbered days belonging to a world ruled by necessity, but in the intensity of a heart beat that throbbed for another world, in the concentration of being that overcome necessity, in a feeling that Providence had placed him this situation. No, he wouldn't exchange the promise of this instant for anything. He glanced at the small flame before the icon of the Crucifixion: its glow was rich and still, one with the late afternoon light nailed to the bare floorboards. He smiled and stepped toward the table.

- Don't move, Tamara threatened.

He staked everything on the toss of a coin: the fellow would either pull the trigger on Stefan or raise the gun at him. He opened his arms wide as if to say: I'm ready to embrace my death.

- Stop! she shouted.

- Paul, this is between her and me, Stefan called, his forehead pressed to the table.

At the word 'her' Paul hesitated, looked directly into Tamara's eyes for a moment, then continued forward. The shot was muted by the gun's silencer. A dull thud jolted Paul's head to one side and he fell backwards. Stefan snatched the gun and pinned her face down on the floor. He strapped her hands and feet with his belt and went to his friend. Blood flowed from his right temple and his pulse had already gone underground. Stefan crossed himself three times. Then, not knowing why, he dipped his finger in the blood and drew a cross on the back of his left hand. He remained on his knees for some time, assessing the situation, as Tamara thrashed about behind him. Should he inform the Abbot, who would of course call the police in Karyes? Tamara would be taken away, charged with Paul's death, and imprisoned. Should he add to her suffering? Again he felt a pang of guilt at what had happened in Kosovo. No, he couldn't surrender her to the authorities. She must be spared further suffering. His friend's face was tranquil, the smile still on his lips. Suddenly, everything became clear. Yes, Paul had accepted the bullet openly, willingly. He had come to Athos with death in his heart and what he had called 'the ultimate expression of freedom' in mind. Tamara pulled the trigger, yes, but his friend had courted the bullet with a clear mind and a loving heart. His wasn't an act of suicide. No, he had moved away from that since visiting the hermit. The smile intimated he had given his life to save a friend. But would the authorities understand this? He didn't want to subject Tamara to a harrowing trial in which Paul's intentions wouldn't be considered. Yes, Paul had sacrificed his life for him, and now it was incumbent on him to spare this girl further suffering. Surprised by his lucidity, he saw in a flash exactly what must be done. He wiped the gun clean and placed it in Paul's right hand, as though he had taken his own life.

- It's not your fault, he said, untying Tamara. He took the bullet for me. Listen. I'll get you out of here, but you'll do exactly as I say. Got it?

She stared at him in bewilderment, not knowing what her enemy had in mind. He gave her the cap, helped her with the backpack, and checked the corridor. They hurried to

the wine cellar unseen by monk or visitor. Frenzied swallows were weaving above the courtyard. Evening light had climbed the uppermost branches of the eucalypt tree. Father Akakios's boots were still on the steps, but there was no sign of him. Knowing the little monk's whimsical nature, Stefan pondered a moment, then led her down to the ossuary. He lit the lamp on the table and noticed she turned pale at the audience of skulls.

- You'll be safe here until I come back, he said.
- What's going on, Vekovic?
- Let's say it's my way of making up for Kosovo.
- It's too late, Serb!

She spat at him and rushed forward in a rage, swearing and punching and kicking. He took her fury for a moment, then caught her in a bear hug and squeezed until she groaned in pain and relented. Pinning her against the door with his knee, he removed his belt and wrapped it around her wrists. Her burst of hatred shook Stefan. No, he couldn't remain silent about Kosovo, and not because he wished to absolve himself of guilt, but because he now felt duty-bound to Paul.

- Listen to me, Tamara, he began, holding her by the shoulders. I didn't rape you. I swear on my friend's death, it wasn't me. Yes, I was one of the two men who stopped you at the truck, but I waited outside as you were being raped. The other man had my coat. Why didn't I tell you when the gun was at my head? I felt responsible and was ready to pay with my life, but Paul's paid for me instead. I'm sorry for what happened and sorry for what you did to the child. But I'm not going to allow Paul's sacrifice to be for nothing. God knows you've suffered enough, Tamara, and I'll be back soon to get you out of here.

Fearing she might still try something desperate, Stefan left her strapped and extinguished the lamp. He bolted the door from the outside and remained in the tart-smelling cellar for a few minutes. Should he find John and disclose what had taken place? He considered his coming tonsure. No, he didn't want to place him in a situation where he would have to lie to the Abbot about the circumstances of Paul's death.

Stefan found John sweeping the stairs of the guesthouse. He drew him outside and explained he had just left Paul in an agitated state. Their friend was excited and talking about the act of absolute freedom again. He feared for his wellbeing and needed John's assistance to settle him down. John mentioned Paul's strange behaviour in burning the manuscript on which he had been working since coming to Athos. Catching the gist of their conversation, Father Theodore stopped and related how Paul had given his passport and ticket to one of the Albanian workers, saying he had no further need of them. Alarmed John gave the broom to the Russian monk and dashed off with Stefan, running across the courtyard in a manner that reminded each of their cross-country races at high school. Stefan opened the door of his cell and feigned shock, while John turned away in horror. After a moment Stefan knelt and checked Paul's neck for a pulse.

- We're too late, he said.
- What's he done to himself? John cried.
- I shouldn't have left him in that state.
- Why, Paul? Why?

They stood over the body for some time, deep in thought, as a fishing boat droned over the slate-grey sea visible from the window. Stefan then knelt, dipped his finger in the

pool of blood, and traced over the cross on the back of his hand. Numb with disbelief, John followed his example, and they both crossed themselves slowly.

- He came here for this, said Stefan.

- And there's a smile on his lips, John heaved.

They hurried to the Abbot and reported what had happened. Half an hour later two police officers arrived from Karyes. They took statements from Stefan and John, collected Paul's belongings, wrapped the body in a black zip-up bag, and carried it on a stretcher to their jeep in the courtyard.

- He'll be taken to Salonika for an autopsy, said one of the officers.

- Where will they bury him? asked John.

- Depends, replied the officer. It's expensive to fly a corpse to Australia? More than business class.

The officers then questioned the Albanian workers, who quickly enough produced the ticket and passport. They then asked the Abbot about the foreigners. Was it possible they had murdered the young man in order to steal his passport and ticket? But their suspicion was allayed after interviewing Father Theodore, who swore he had been present when the deceased handed the items to the Albanian. It was dark when the officers drove off with the body. Father Maximos closed the gate after the jeep, reminding himself that the last suicide in the monastery had occurred during the Greek War of Independence, when a Turkish garrison had been stationed there. One of Turks had stormed off in a rage to desecrate the icon of the Virgin, only to be found at sunset hanging from a flowering magnolia tree.

- Well, mused the old monk, bracing the gates. An infant crosses its feet at birth, while a man's arms are crossed at death, and between one and the other there's a lot to be said and even more to be imagined. May God forgive him.

Stefan and John returned to the cell, cleaned the floorboards, and sat on either side of the dark stain in a kind of wake.

- I should've pressed him to see the Elder, said John.

- We took him to the hermit.

- The visit excited him too much. The Elder would've calmed him.

- It's not your fault, said Stefan, feeling for his missing belt buckle. In the end death gripped him by the heart and drew him away.

They fell silent again, both gazing at the stain as though perceiving a semblance of their friend. At one point Stefan was moved to confide the circumstances of Paul's death, but desisted, not wanting to draw John into an awkward situation. He had to hold on for a few more hours, when he would take Tamara from the ossuary and escort her back to the mainland. For his part John's thoughts vacillated from Paul to Mara. He had visited her room just before Stefan's arrival in the guesthouse, only to find it empty again. Convinced she had left the monastery, he now felt hurt and betrayed. Where he would have kept this to himself only a few hours ago, the death of his friend endeared him to Stefan, evoking a need to reach and confide in him. No, it wasn't shameful to tell him about the girl. A confession would lighten his heart and prepare him for his tonsure.

- We've known each other a long time, he began, looking up from the stain.

- A lifetime, my friend.

- Can you see me becoming a monk?

- Has Paul's death made you doubt it?

- I'm not as strong as I thought, he said, pausing to examine the dried cross on the back of his hand. As a youth I considered falling in love a sign of weakness, and I took pride in remaining aloof and focused on my studies. The same pride was at work here, until a few days ago. Stef, I've been sheltering a woman in the guesthouse. She came disguised as a man, burning with a fever. I looked after her, not suspecting a thing, and then I discovered her identity. Her name's Mara, she's Serbian. I became infatuated with her, Stef. I questioned my calling. But she left today, vanished without a word.

- What did she want here? Stefan asked, noticing the darkness outside.

- She was traumatised by the war in Kosovo and came to pray to the Virgin.

- Did...anything happen between you?

- No, but I was tempted.

- You'll never see her again.

- I see her everywhere, Stef, even in that stain.

- But you stood firm when it counted, just as others have stood firm against temptations. Paul's death mustn't be in vain. He died for us, John. For you to become a monk and me to atone for what happened in Kosovo.

John thanked him for his encouragement and said he must prepare for the midnight service. Placing a hand on his friend's shoulder, Stefan remarked they were now brothers in death, a stronger bond than brothers in blood. They embraced and wished each other a good Resurrection. Stefan closed the door, stepped over the stain, and crossed himself before the icon of the Crucifixion.

It was almost midnight according to watches geared to the West, while faithful to Byzantine tradition the monastery's community of clocks had already picked through the starry darkness and now opened their arms to embrace Easter Sunday. With the Resurrection service in progress almost an hour, a sense of expectation simmered through the church. Unlike other services, when monks were excused because of their duties, this evening everyone was present, including all the visitors, many having come to Athos especially for this most important of services. A stout member of the choir read from the Book of Psalms in a voice that stirred the flame in a nearby lamp, together with a host of shadows.

- I acknowledge my offense and my sins have blackened me. Cleanse me with hyssop, that I may be purified; and wash me, that I may be whiter than snow.

In a stall at the back of the outer narthex, beside the bronze gates opening to the loggia, Stefan gazed at the swirls in the floor-tiles, seeing sheets of flame unfolding as infants, mosques rising from the rubble of churches, and Paul's features alternating with Tamara's. Earlier that evening, after John had left, he paced the room for some time, wondering whether to take the girl from the basement and leave the monastery at once. But the courtyard was full of monks preparing for the midnight service and it would be impossible to open the front gates without being seen. Still, he might have taken the chance if it weren't for the Resurrection service. Having fasted and fulfilled all the requirements of Lent, he considered it only right and proper to complete the forty-day observance. Besides, courage was needed to help Tamara and present himself to the War Crimes Tribunal – and the source of that courage lay in the meaning of tonight's service. On top of this, he couldn't leave the monastery without paying his last respects to Paul by lighting a candle and saying a prayer for his soul. And so, deciding to slip out after midnight, he took a torch and hurried to the basement. It was dark by then, with extra lamps burning in the courtyard and monks coming and going from the church. He unbolted the ossuary door and shone the torch here and there, without a sign of Tamara. Fearing she might attempt to scurry out, he stood in the entrance and warned her not to try anything, for she would never get out of the monastery without him. She sprang up from crouching beside the door and made to escape, but he caught her by the jacket and drew her inside. Her hands were still strapped behind her back. He pinned her against the wall with one hand and held the torch close to her face with the other.

- I'm here to help you, he said, easing his hold. You'll have to stay here a few more hours. The gates will be opened after the midnight service and we'll leave without arousing suspicion.

- Why are you doing this? she asked, squinting from the light.

- We've all suffered enough, he replied.

- What about the man I shot?

- He died for us.

She pondered this for a moment, then asked if he might light the lamp, for the place was darker than a grave. He considered her request. What if she had come here on a sort of holy mission, prepared to die a martyr for her Muslim faith? After all, if she could

kill knowing escape was impossible, she might be capable of using the lamp to burn the monastery and herself in the process.

- Don't worry, I am not on a jihad, she said, as though reading his thoughts. If I were, this place would have been in ashes by now.

Sensing she was perhaps beginning to accept his account of events in Kosovo, Stefan lit the lamp and left her in the musty company of skulls.

- Free me from blood's bondage, the Reader continued, that my tongue might praise your justice. Accept my sacrifice, O God: a heart made humble and contrite.

Panayoti stood confidently beside Father Sophronios, eyes shining with pride, perhaps because he was now wearing an ankle-length black cape, which had been cut and tailored that afternoon from a robe belonging to the ailing chanter. Despite the choir's rich harmony and the boy's voice like silver thread in a brocade, the hymns this evening were not as melodic or moving as those chanted last night - a fact which had always puzzled Father Sophronios. He reasoned it had something to do with the all-too-human emotion of grief, which was expressed in the hymns of Good Friday, while this evening's service celebrated something essentially distant and otherworldly. From earliest times mankind had voiced grief in powerful ways. Ancient Greek tragedies were chorals of unrelieved suffering. The dirges he heard as a boy at graveside gatherings on Corfu were outpourings of raw pain. The young widow's moving Rembetika song, whose echo still woke him in the dead of night, remained for him the purest expression of human love. Yes, humanity could relate to the Crucifixion and burial, and the hymns commemorating these events were full of the sorrow of this world. But the Resurrection was a different matter: it transcended mankind, who was left astonished in the tomb. Without direct experience of such a miracle, humans had no precedent for approaching it. And the hymns this evening expressed this inability to fully grasp and comprehend what had happened. Yes, there was hope and joy in them, but they were centred in a different realm, far from this human condition that felt the heart-ache of young love, the body-ache of old age, the soul-ache of striving for a distant God. And now the old chanter straightened to his full height and sang together with the boy.

- Lord, my God, I praise your sacrifice with hymns and funeral dirges. Your burial has opened the door of life; your death has vanquished the kingdom of Death.

John should have been in the nave, savouring the sweetness of the occasion, drawing on the mounting excitement, looking forward to greet the Resurrection with a joyful hymn. On entering the church, however, he had decided on a stall in the outer narthex, not in consideration of visitors, who sought to observe proceedings at close quarters, but from a sense of unworthiness to stand before the altar. Though Mara had slipped from the monastery unseen, without arousing a hint of suspicion, he was nevertheless still acutely conscious of having transgressed in sheltering her. Together with this, he had also felt a need to be close to Stefan, who would occupy a stall in this part of the church when he arrived. The service would be a kind of requiem for Paul, and it was only fitting they should be together in paying their last respects.

And now, glancing across at his friend, he tried to still his thoughts through prayer, but couldn't help wondering at the coincidence of Mara's sudden departure, Paul's horrible death, and the fact he had shot himself just minutes after Stefan left him. As he twisted the knotted cord around his fingers, he was suddenly struck by something he had

completely overlooked in the shock of discovering Paul's body. It might be nothing more than his over-wrought mind making far-fetched associations (as a researcher he had always followed his intuition, sometimes with unexpected results), but he was certain there had been a red cross on the back of Stefan's hand before he dipped his finger in Paul's blood. He hadn't registered this detail at the time, but now all sorts of ideas flashed through his mind. (A panelled fresco of Saint Sebastian caught his attention: wearing only a loin cloth, the young man was tied to a blossoming tree, his body pierced by countless feather-tailed arrows, as though transformed into a bird that would fly to paradise.) Had Stefan discovered their friend's body at an earlier time? But why the subterfuge? Unless he had assisted him in realising his ultimate wish: a bullet in the brain as a denial of God and a final expression of free will. No, Stefan wouldn't have sanctioned suicide, no matter how persuasively Paul argued for the morality of euthanasia. He rebuked himself for admitting such an idea and made a conscious effort to subdue his thoughts flitting about like fireflies by focussing on the hymn.

- He who saved the righteous youths from the fire has been placed in the grave, a breathless corpse, for the salvation and deliverance of we who sing.

Father Sophronios chanted the verse alone, and was then joined by both sections of the choir. Several more hymns were chanted, during which slender orange candles were distributed among the congregation. Going around with a metal-capped rod, a young monk deftly extinguished all the lamps and candles. The church was dark, except for the lamp of the Eternal Vigil in the sanctuary. Standing before the altar, Father Evlogios raised a full-bodied white candle to the flame, turned slowly to the nave, and, face glowing, emerged from the gates in the icon-screen.

- Come and receive light from the unwaning light, and glorify Christ, who has risen from the dead.

A host of raised candles converged to the priest's, like the blind to the source of sight, and in a moment the original flame had opened a hundred golden eyes without itself being diminished. Led by Father Evlogios and the Abbot, the congregation left the church and assembled outside. The night was clear and the flames were as still as the stars. Stefan and John stood beside each other: their candles both for the resurrection of Christ and the death of their friend. With the silver-bound Gospel held before him by one of the other priest-monks, Father Evlogios inclined his candle to the book and read in a voice weakened from the lengthy services over the past few days. He appeared to struggle through the passage about how Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb early on the morning after the Sabbath. At one stage it seemed his voice might break, but he steadied himself and concluded the passage. The choir followed with a protracted 'Amen', with Father Sophronios's voice rising above the others. And if several older monks, Father Nikitas and Father Daniel among them, commented how the chanter had never sung so powerfully or movingly before, it was because he had seen the hand of God in Panayoti's presence. That afternoon he had resolved to live on, even though at times he felt like an old eagle dragging its wings in the dust, and not from fear of death, but from a calling to bequeath a lifetime's experience to the boy. And then, radiant with expectation, the congregation focused on Father Evlogios, who straightened to his full height and commenced the Resurrection hymn.

- Christ has arisen from the dead, vanquishing death by death, and bestowing life to those buried in the grave.

The assembled echoed the verse on three occasions, each time with more emotion and a sense of fulfillment, as though the taste of those words had finally broken the long Lenten fast. Candle in hand, monks and visitors turned to each other, offering the words 'Christ has arisen' with brotherly affection, and receiving the joyful reply 'He has truly arisen'. John and Stefan embraced, touching cheek to cheek, first left and then right. Stefan picked at a drop of solidified wax on his finger and said they owed it to Paul to remain strong. John noticed the cross on the back of his friend's hand and was reminded of his childhood and those windy nights when he would zealously safeguard his Easter flame in a cone made of wrinkled silver foil. If he succeeded in bringing it home alight, without it once going out, good fortune would follow him for the rest of the year. On the front doorstep his mother would reach up with her candle and, using the flame as a brush, mark the lintel with a black cross. His father scowled it spoiled the paint work but, given the occasion, his complaint was restrained and forgotten by all once they sat down to their midnight meal of chicken soup, pastries and red eggs.

The choir sounded another stirring 'Amen', upon which the Abbot and Father Evlogios turned and led the congregation back to the church for the final part of the service. In a moment of brotherly affection Stefan wanted to tell John about Tamara and his plan to leave the monastery this evening, but he tapped him on the shoulder instead, saying he had been too drained by the day's events to see out the remainder of the service. He cupped a crimson hand around the flame and left for his cell. Puzzled by his abrupt departure, John hurried to his own room, placed the candle in a glass (later he would use the holy light to purify the darkness in each room), and made his way to Stefan's cell. He listened at the door: footsteps went back and forth from room to room. Had Paul's death prodded him to return to Kosovo and face whatever happened in the past? Was he now preparing for an early-morning departure? His movements were quick, sharp with urgency, as though he might rush out at any minute. John went to a balcony across the corridor and waited on the loose boards, chastising himself for snooping about in a manner unbecoming of a friend. He attempted to subdue his unease by yielding to the night. The sea surrendered each wave with a low sigh, jackals whined from the forest's depths, while a quarter moon nudged the right shoulder of Athos and silvered its slopes.

The door opened and Stefan hurried along the corridor with a pack on his back, as though setting out on a journey. Was he leaving the monastery tonight, without a word of good-bye? John followed him downstairs and observed his movements from behind the eucalypt tree. The windows in the apse glowed as the choir sounded a string of Kyrie Eleisons. Stefan skirted the courtyard and disappeared down the steps of the basement. Was he going to hide there until the end of the service and leave when the gates were opened for the workers? Or had he been shown a secret passage leading to the vineyard? Pricked by the last thought he set off after him, staying well back as his friend followed a trail of torchlight down the damp passage, stopping at the ossuary. John crouched behind a barrel in need of repair, its pungency recalling a vinegar factory whose redbrick walls they used for ball games in their childhood. When Stefan entered he waited a moment before going to the door. His friend was speaking to someone, though he couldn't make out what was being said, until he pressed closer and was stunned by Mara's voice. Blood

ringing in his ears, he pulled the latch and swung open the door. A lamp's small flame filled the rows of gaping sockets. Stefan was removing the belt from Mara's wrists.

- Stef, he said, pounded by his heart. What's going on?

- We're leaving the monastery together, he replied.

John turned to the girl in the hope of some explanation, but she glanced at him contemptuously from beneath the cap's visor.

- I thought you'd left, he managed to say, crushed and confused.

- I didn't come here for you, she retorted.

He flushed with shame at her pointed tone and barbed look. Suddenly, the skulls were grinning at him: one with a crack in its cranium laughed derisively at his monastic aspirations, which this woman had exposed as nothing more than conceit; another with a few teeth in its upper jaw mocked him for a faith that couldn't withstand the charms of the flesh; while a third, whose left socket was bigger by half than the right, taunted him on his intellectual pride, sneering it was really the foolishness of a child. Mortified, John hid his hands in his sleeves.

- I came to kill him, she continued.

- That's enough, said Stefan.

Noticing John's bewilderment and Stefan's obvious attempt to avoid the subject, she was now determined to push the matter further, perhaps in the hope of discovering what exactly Stefan had in mind.

- Does he know I shot your friend?

- John, I was trying to spare you from...

- Spare me? From what?

Her eyes glinted with malicious delight in sneering she wasn't a Serb but an Albanian Muslim from Kosovo. Her name wasn't Mara, which had tasted bitter every time she said it, but Tamara. And she hadn't come to pray before the Virgin, whose chapel she stained with her own blood, but to kill the man who had raped her in Kosovo last year. Seeing the colour drain from John's face, Stefan was quick to defend himself, swearing on their friendship he wasn't guilty of rape. Tamara added matter-of-factly she had come for him and was forced to shoot another.

- I didn't want you mixed up in my mess, said Stefan.

- What are friends for?

- You'll be taking your vows soon, John. I didn't want to cloud your mind and trouble your heart with...

- Stef, did Paul commit suicide?

- He wouldn't listen, Tamara said. I told him not to move, but...

- He took the bullet for me, John. It was no different from suicide.

- And you made it appear he...?

- She's not to blame for Paul's death. It's my fault, John. My mind was screwed up by all that nationalistic madness. I didn't rape her, though. I swear on the Holy Virgin. But I fought in Kosovo and that's why she's here and Paul's dead.

- What are you going to do, Stef?

- I'm taking her back to Kosovo.

John worked the knotted cord as Stefan helped Tamara with her pack. He then approached her, placed his hands on his chest, and bowed in apology.

- This has nothing to do with you, she said.
- Our Abbot says we live in each other's breath.
- And our Imam says a ladder goes up and down at the same instant.
- Can I help you in some way, Stef?
- They'll open gates soon and we'll be on our way.
- Why tonight? How far will you get in the dark?

Stefan explained his sense of guilt demanded atonement. He and the girl had shed blood and their very presence defiled the Holy Mountain. The night was clear and mild. He planned to head north along the coast as far the monastery of Vatopedi, then cut across to the other side of peninsular, sheltering in one of the many abandoned cottages on the way. In the morning they would descend to the jetty belonging to Zographou monastery and board the ferry for Ouranoupolis. Once in Salonika they would take the train to Skopje, and from there a bus to Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo.

A bell ringing happily signalled the end of the service. John extinguished the lamp and all three followed the torchlight back to the exit. Monks and visitors were emerging noisily from the church, smiling faces made more cheerful by the glow of candlelight. Instructing the others to wait there, John leapt up the stairs, went into the church, and returned with three lighted candles. Tamara was at first reluctant to take one, until he explained it would help them reach the gate without arousing suspicion. There was now a festive mood in the courtyard. Kosta and Nico were talking animatedly, while Panayoti stood between them, testing his ability to withstand pain by catching dripping wax on his palm. Ringed by rosy flames the Abbot smiled through his ginger beard in expounding to a circle of visitors that all social revolutions would fail without the light of the Resurrection. If men were keepers of the holy flame, he added, women sustained it with their breath. Unafraid of mirrors on this the most holy night of the year, which reduced them to nothing but smooth surfaces, Father Akakios held a triangular shard up to Father Theodore, explaining how he should position his slavic tongue in order to say 'Alithos' instead of 'Alitos'. Father Nikitas and Father Daniel leaned on the wall surrounding the fountain, discussing the icon of Christ Dancing. The former asked whether he might see it again at dawn, to bow in apology for his previous vilification. Yes, he felt especially light of soul this evening, as though stepping out of a tomb. And he crossed himself slowly with two and a half fingers.

As the three made their way through the congregation toward the portico, Father Meletios, the clockmaker, asked Stefan the reason for his pack at this hour of the night. John was quick to reply they were going to visit Elder Kyrillos, to bring him the holy light and greet sunrise with him. They stood beside the Russian bell as Father Maximos opened the gates for the workers, whose candles lit the portico.

- Christ has arisen, said John.
- Brother, He has truly arisen, replied the gatekeeper.

Piercing all three with his needle-sharp left eye, he was about to say something when John explained they were on their way to visit Elder Kyrillos, who was waiting for the light of the Resurrection. Tenacious, the old monk wouldn't be denied: he held his weeping candle to Tamara's faces and asked her whether the flame (it trembled at his breath heavy with onion) was male or female. She raised her palms in ignorance of Greek. He explained it depended on one's point of view: seen at night it was female, because it

could bear countless off-spring without the slightest diminution to itself; while seen against a blue sky with Athos in the background, it was distinctly male in that it was also one and indivisible. And then, as though anticipating an objection, he added women were forbidden in the monastery, but the flame was immaculate, and in this it resembled the Virgin, whose presence could be felt all over the peninsular. All three nodded politely and left without a word, stopping a little distance from the gate, beneath the chestnut tree redolent of blossom. In the distance the workers' candles danced on the downward path. His heart still beating hard, John shook Tamara's cold hand and wished her a safe trip. Then, swallowing back a swell of emotion, he embraced Stefan.

- If I can help in any way, he faltered.
- Thank the Abbot and tell him I'll write from Kosovo.
- Will we see each other again?
- We're blood brothers, smiled Stefan.

Tamara said something in Albanian, blew out her candle, and tossed it at the base of the tree. As the pair set off along the uphill path that would take them to the coastal road John was reminded of Adam and Eve, and how they had been driven out into the nameless night beyond Eden. Stefan's flame receded to a point and the figures soon faded into the darkness of the forest. The swell rose in John again. He picked up Tamara's candle and turned back to the portico. Having lowered the large overhead lamp, Father Maximos sought his assistance in extinguishing the old flame and lighting the wick with the new. John offered to help with the gates, but the monk declined and limped to the bench beside the wall. He would leave them open a while longer, which he always did after the Resurrection service, for a monk, especially one as old as he, was sustained more by the scent of hope than the certainty of tomorrow's feast.

In the courtyard John was surprised to find everyone had already retired for the night. Here and there a lamp still kept its drowsy vigil, while from the window of the Virgin's chapel a soft, olive glow spilled onto the cobblestones. A mule snorted in the stable, rattling its halter chain. Too unsettled to return to his cell, he stopped between the loggia and fountain. The cypresses on either side of the church rose like dark flames, their tip pointing to the stars. He breathed deeply several times, lit Tamara's candle from his, and held them so their flames merged as one. The swell caught him again, only this time its current was stronger, rising to fill his eyes. Noticing the cross on the back of his hand, he suddenly began to cry for Paul, for the look on his face as he burnt his manuscript, his blood on the bare floorboards. His tears fell for the terrible guilt that darkened the souls of Stefan and Tamara, and for his mother, who bore her condition in silence, and whom he would never see again. And they fell for himself, John Rados, the son who might have loved a woman and had children of his own; the scholar who renounced a career in genetics which might have contributed to mankind's betterment; the young man who might have experienced some happiness in life. His tears flowed easily, under a gentle gravity of their own, with an accompanying grace that moved the surroundings with a semblance of joy. The rigid angles which defined the constellations yielded and stars broke loose from their geometry, drew closer, and scattered in the happiness of chaos. The cypresses stirred and released the archangels Michael and Gabriel, who unfolded their dark wings as though stretching from sleep. The church rose from its ancient foundations, became buoyant, and swayed like Noah's ark after the flood. And through his tears he saw

that life wasn't determined by the configuration of those stars, as astrologers had believed, or by the combination of bases in a cell's nucleus. No, God couldn't be explained by the twisted ticker-tape imprinted with a language whose alphabet consisted of C, A, T, G. And if many had already heralded these letters as the new Tetragrammaton, the name of the new Yahweh, he opposed their enthusiasm. He had never been a reductionist, even when researching the structure of genes, for he would always stumble on the unknown, the x-factor, which transformed matter to mind. Perhaps that wasn't very scientific, but then his science had always been imbued by the intangible: consciousness in the four-letter alphabet, the soul in the body, God in the night sky.

He found himself standing in the glow of the chapel's window. His tears were still falling freely, but no longer in nostalgia, as though his old self had been washed away. The fateful evening in his father's village came to mind: spiked through the shoulder to the stone floor, he had nevertheless dissolved in a kind of pleasant surrender as saints and martyrs scattered into the moonlit night. He saw again the Elder's face and how it had shone like a lamp in relating the encounter with the young Communist woman. His heart suddenly skipped in expectation, as it had raced for Tamara yesterday, only now it strained for the Virgin in the chapel. Yes, he wanted to devote his life to Her, not through hardship and self-imposed trials, but in the joy that emanated from an unreserved offering. Drops of wax nipped his fingers and set in small blisters. Warmth from the candles' joint flame caressed his face, coursed through his body, opened his heart like a pinecone on the eve of what would be a fine day. And through his tears he realised that Tamara had come not to test his faith, but to lead him to this patch of light from the Virgin's window. The symbol on the chapel's wall was still faintly visible under the whitewash and he instinctively reached out and traced it with his finger. No, there would be no more challenges and tests: from now on he would accept his place in the monastery with gratitude and the humility of being always a beginner, always on the first rung of the spiritual ladder. A faint breeze, nothing more than a breath, stirred the flame and scented the air with lemon blossom. It seemed to come from the open gate, where Father Maximos had gone down on his knees at the entrance, his forehead pressed to the stones. And then he noticed Father Akakios sitting on the steps of the refectory, stroking his favourite cat. His heart flew out to the ragged monk whose faith defied all reason. A tear trickling through his beard found his lips: it wasn't sharp and salty, but pure as the happy streams that broke from Athos's peak. He recalled the climb with Stefan and a ripple of affection passed through him. Suddenly, unbidden, the Jesus Prayer rose to his lips, sweeter than anything he had ever tasted, uplifting in its fulfillment. For a moment it seemed that he was hovering above himself in the bodied glow of the Virgin's lamps, but he knew this was impossible because he could still feel the cobbles under his feet. And then through his words and tears he saw the Abbott and Father Evlogios, both in festive gowns glittering in the lamplight. The former pressed the Gospels to his chest, while the latter raised a pair of small scissors. Monks and visitors appeared from all parts of the courtyard and formed a circle around him. Father Sophronios and Panayoti began chanting the hymn that accompanied the tonsuring ceremony, their voices blending as one. Yes, he was finally ready to shed the old and take on the new, to give up John for Jacob, to become a monk.

- Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison, Kyrie Eleison...

PART TWO

THE EXEGESIS

A POSTSCRIPT

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Yes, it's late, already the third Friday of Lent, and this another leap year. At a time when Father-sun is unable to unite people in a circle of light, Mother-moon has, in the fullness of her glow, decreed that Christians at least must overcome their differences to celebrate a common Easter. The morning is still, pressed by low, leaden clouds. On the street outside my window the pin-oak has commenced its Lenten fast: the uppermost leaves are brown and poised to fall first (pride comes at a price) in the annual act of renunciation. Having just completed a novel set in the Byzantine atmosphere of Mount Athos, I'm now feeling spent, disoriented, unable to focus on the day's demands and the formal requirements of this doctorate. I've lived in the novel for more than two years, sustained the characters with my flesh and blood, invested the monastery with my imagination, and this might account for my present state of mind. Am I experiencing the sense of metaphysical dislocation expressed by W.B. Yeats in his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*?

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling,
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.¹

In working on the novel I've also as it were lived 'out of nature', by which Yeats meant the sensuous world subject to determinism, decay and death. The Byzantine world of Mount Athos possesses a metaphysical dimension and is in many ways what Yeats in an earlier stanza referred to as 'a monument of unageing intellect'. There, time is measured by counting prayers on a knotted cord; the atmosphere is thinner, so one breathes less; men are moved by glowing icons whose spare and simple lines are innocent of depth and perspective; and chanters with golden voices sing 'Of what is past, or passing, or to come'. Yes, having dwelt in this other place for two years, it's now difficult to engage with the 'natural things' of the here and now. In this I'm also reminded of Boris Spassky, the Russian chess master, who likened himself to a diver. In a long, intense match he would descend to the very depths of his being, dwell in that timeless space of pure intellect, then quickly surface at the conclusion of the game. Win or lose, he always felt depressed, unable to connect with others, and often the thought of ending his life crossed his mind. Perhaps there's a touch of Russian exaggeration in this, but Spassky's sentiments highlight the contrast between the inner and the outer, and the difficulty in re-aligning them after a period of intense intellectual or artistic activity.

And so, on this third Friday of Lent, feeling somewhat out of kilter, I'm in no mood to commence a scholarly, academic commentary on what I've written. No, at the moment I'm still very much caught up in a particular way of thinking, in a certain current of thought, in the rhythm and language of the novel, and I have neither the will nor the

strength to articulate differently. Is this feeling a case of post-novel depression? The similarities with post-natal depression are obvious. Perhaps the latter stems from the sudden reduction in psychic energy as the inner becomes the outer: the long-cherished hope becomes a reality, the past is projected into the future, life moves on at the expense of life. In the case of most women this condition passes in a few weeks, when they quickly recover their wellbeing, take heart from their bundle of joy, and rise to the demands of the day. I'm hopeful my present melancholy will take a similar course, and that I'll find the strength to complete the onerous essay.

But why must this reflective postscript assume the form and tone of an objective, academic essay? Why shouldn't it arise from the same source as the novel, so that it resonates with the latter and even reads like a work of narrative fiction? I could write a creative essay, a piece of ficto-criticism, a work in which I interact with hypothetical examiners, anticipate their criticisms, challenge their views, defend my work. In keeping with the creative writing nature of the thesis the essay might even take the form of a short story. Suffering from writer's block, the main character is unable to complete an essay necessary for his PhD, so he employs the services of an acquaintance who writes a brilliant essay. The main character's novel is published to great international success, he obtains a university position, and is thereafter blackmailed for the rest of his life. Yes, I could be playful, like Nabokov in his novel *Pale Fire*, in which he provides two hundred pages of commentary on a thirty-page poem.² On the other hand, I could be post-modern, meta-fictional, and have the essay embedded in the novel. I could do any of this and more, but why? To what end?

It's late, always countless heartbeats later than the time measured by calendar and clock. Having reached the point in life where I'm more past than future, I must confess to questioning the need of this academic exercise. As with my previous work, it's my hope the present novel will be published in one form or another, and that it will find an audience both in Australia and in translations overseas. Unfortunately, the same can't be said of the reflective essay, and that may be one of the reasons why I'm unable to make a start on it. Writers are advised by publishers and editors to know their audience, to target their work accordingly. Who then should be the target of the essay? Certainly not the audience of the novel, for publishers would shrink from burdening the creative work with an academic tract. No, the essay's intended readership comes down to a few individuals, primarily the examiners. What encouragement is there for a writer to devote months to an article knowing it will be read by only a handful of people? After two years of hopefulness (the hope of publication and a receptive audience is as important to the writer as religious hope to the believer), how can I possibly summon the strength and concentration for what seems an undertaking of little significance? Yes, there's the matter of the PhD, I remind myself, in an attempt to spur myself out of this present shadow. And the initial commitments I made to family, supervisors, the University. After all, I wasn't compelled to write the novel under the present circumstances; in fact, I could've written it at my leisure outside the University. (This is one of the arguments often used by those who attack postgraduate work in this area) Yes, I could've undertaken the novel under less rigorous conditions, yet I chose to write it as a PhD, within the University system. Why? So that it might open a door to teaching and lecturing in the area of Creative Writing, which I've enjoyed doing on a sessional basis both at Monash and Victoria University.

Well, then, will the prospect of a PhD and a possible position in academia provide the incentive to commence what now seems like an onerous, if not impossible, task? Or will a less mercenary instinct prevail? Perhaps tomorrow or next week I might suddenly be moved to commence the essay precisely because it will have a small and exclusive audience of no more than five. (Isn't it every writer's wish that their work finds its way under the eyes of thoughtful, critical readers?) And if it's to be exactly five, even better, a proper bonus, because five's a wholesome prime number. In ancient Greece numbers possessed a moral category: the odd were considered better and purer than the even, and the prime purer still because they aren't the product of a multiplicative union. And if this Platonic Idealism doesn't move me, there's always the Christian attitude to hubris and humility - a theme that pervades the novel. What have I taken from the two years spent in the novel if not a growing sense of the vanity of things? Perhaps the hope of publication and a wide audience stems precisely from this vanity. What is fiction, and all Art for that matter, if not a subtle conceit perpetrated by the artist on a receptive audience? Perhaps writing can only be truthful, stripped of vanity, when it addresses a small, familiar readership, and then in the form of an essay verging on the confessional. In keeping with the novel's religious theme, it may be that Saint Augustine's autobiographical work *The Confessions* is the appropriate model for this essay. Here the young Augustine gives a candid account of how he turned from the intellectual vanity of paganism, to the beliefs of Manicheism, until he discovered Christianity. "I had no joy therein [intellectual pursuits], but sought to please men by it; and that not to instruct, but simply to please...I, by deceit, was seeking for empty, swelling praise."³ Or I might adopt Rousseau's frank approach in his *Confessions*, where, among other things, he relates numerous shameful episodes from his private life. Or perhaps Tolstoy's *A Confession* might serve as a model. This is a short account of his three-year struggle with melancholy, during which he questioned art and literature, seeing it as a striving after vanity and detachment from the essence of life. In the end he was saved from hanging himself with his own belt by reconnecting with Nature, and through this with the faith of the peasants.⁴

Yes, examiners, it's late for you, too. You're scraping through the heart of another winter, with the climb to your office becoming harder each year. The growing piles of papers and books have diminished the once broad view from your window. Now, more than ever, you're looking forward to the sunshine of your next sabbatical. Having just finished labouring over my novel, the final Kyrie Eleison echoing in your ears, you're no doubt still trying to come to terms with the unusual book. Good, take your time, reflect in stillness for a moment. I need to envisage you clearly if I'm to summon the strength and enthusiasm to make a start on this essay. A confessional tone is evoked best by a sympathetic listener, one who engenders confidence, not a sharp profile seen through the screen in the confessional box. Whatever form the essay may take (assuming I overcome my post-novel blues), it won't be an exegesis. The word has religious connotations and pertains specifically to an interpretation of Scripture. Yes, my novel is religious, however I'm not so presumptuous to consider it worthy of exegetical treatment. It's been suggested that I write the essay as a kind foreword, with the intention of preparing you, examiners, for the book. The strategy behind this would be to elicit a favourable response to the book. An essay of this nature would anticipate your criticisms, signal my themes and preoccupations, and alert you to possible difficulties in the text. In short, the essay would

take the form of an apology for the book. No! I make no apologies for having written a book that might be considered heavy going and unfashionable. Furthermore, if the novel can't stand on its own spine and meet the examiners on its own terms, if it needs the support of an apologetic essay, then I've certainly failed as a novelist, for the meaning of a novel lies in the work itself, not in a defense of the work. No, examiners! I refuse to see you as inquisitors. Australia in the third millennium is an open, tolerant, pluralistic society; novelists here aren't compelled to justify their books before black-robed academics or defend them against fiery clerics. Besides, as I mentioned earlier, I'm in no mood for polemics, verbal pyrotechnics, and wit. Who knows which direction this essay will take. At the moment my only certainty is the need for a break from writing. Perhaps if I reconnected with the world, I might be more inclined to come to terms with this intractable essay.

In the meantime, though, it's time for a jog – running has a way of dispersing melancholy and clearing my head. Earth's revitalising power is evident in the myth of Antaeus, whose strength arose from contact with the earth. The instant Hercules lifted the giant off the ground he became weak and was vanquished. I also understand how that other giant, Tolstoy, found his purpose and direction in life: he turned from the vanity of aesthetic pursuits and bowed to the earth. His vitality and feeling for life returned when, like a mighty oak, he clawed again the earth with the roots of his being. Yes, it's getting late, examiners. My present is already your past. I need to pound the earth with my feet and breathe deep of this passing day.

+ + +

It's been a few weeks since I last sat down to this essay. The pin-oak's pointed leaves are now scurrying about the driveway like children released from the classroom. My neighbour has covered the fig tree in a net, to keep flocks of raucous cockatoos from its fruit. Daylight saving has ended, and in turning back the clock we've brought the night to our doorstep an hour earlier. I've done a lot of soul-searching during this time, particularly in jogging along the banks of the nearby Yarra river, which has helped to ground me in the here and now. Perhaps young Ishmael in Melville's *Moby Dick* was right: water has a way of driving off spleen and inky melancholy. Yes, I'm still caught in the novel's gravity; the black knotted cord used by monks in counting prayers is still around my left wrist (I slipped it on at the beginning of the project, not as a charm or talisman, simply as an aid to harnessing my thoughts); but now I'm at least sufficiently clear-headed to concentrate on the matter at hand. Having spent my creative juices on the novel, and lacking the enthusiasm needed for another original work, I've decided to make the essay a straightforward reflection on the process of writing the novel. I'll outline how the novel arose, comment on the sources important to its development and growth, discuss its structure together with aspects of narrative and voice, provide an overview of the main themes, and conclude by looking at how it fits in the context of religious novels and its contribution to this field. Does it sound somewhat pedestrian? Perhaps, but then it's the height of conceit to expect divine afflatus in everything one writes. The French writer Paul Valéry likened poetry to dancing and prose to walking with a destination in mind. Yes,

there are times when we must get from A to B by walking in a straight line, especially when it's late and becoming darker earlier.

2. GENESIS OF THE NOVEL

The origins of a novel are often difficult to locate, for they lie in those obscure regions of a writer's being never quite penetrated by the light of day: perhaps a corner of the heart to which hope retreats, too timorous to count on the promise of arithmetic, or the depths of the mind's labyrinth, where reason dispenses with its black thread and always follows intuition. Reflecting on the present novel, I can only hint at several possible dark seeds whose interaction might account for its growth. First, a childhood memory going back to the Macedonian village of my birth, where I spent the first six years of my life before emigrating to Australia. This memory has always been faint as a watermark, nothing more than the outline of a feeling, yet it never fails to move me in the manner that certain melodies take us back to a particular time and place. Perhaps this novel, indeed all that I have written, may be an attempt to understand that memory and the feelings stirred in a five-year-old boy by his first encounter with life's big questions. The shapes of love and sorrow surrounded the family home when my favourite aunt died. As I would learn later she was twenty, and seven months pregnant. Women dressed in black darkened the sun of my childhood; the breeze that flew our kites was caught and stilled in the priest's heavy gown; in the cemetery flowers were ribboned with candle-smoke. She had been fond of me, and her affectionate bite was imprinted on my cheek for days after her sudden death. Another of the novel's seeds may lie in the shadowy region of the unconscious, which finds expression in the peculiar narrative of dreams, in flashes of inspiration, and in that irrational impulse that compelled the first artists to hunt at night with a piece of charcoal. A third might be my Greek-Macedonian cultural heritage. The ancient myths, the Orthodox religion, the legends and stories told in courtyards and cafes, whispered by women and whistled by men – all intended to make sense of our tenuous hold on life, and explain the world in terms of narrative not scientific knowledge. A fourth, the novels read in my youth and experienced more intensely than my physical surroundings, foremost among them Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Youth - perhaps the ideal time for a proper reading fiction, when one can devour and be devoured by the text. With the world yet to impose its demands and set us in the reinforced concrete of social responsibility, we're not grounded in the here and now, therefore free to enter the world of a novel and identify with its characters, for our own identity isn't yet fixed. And a fifth might have something to do with the musings of middle age about what could have been, which Robert Frost voiced with just the right note of pathos in his poem *The Path Not Taken*.

The idea of writing about Mount Athos surfaced during my first visit back to Greece in the late seventies. A few years earlier I had read *The Brothers Karamazov*, which makes reference to Mount Athos, and this more than anything fired my imagination and desire to visit the monastic centre. When I arrived in the village of my birth and explained my travel plans, my grandparents informed me that a distant relative had left the village as a youth and disappeared for several years, until it was discovered he had become a monk on the Holy Mountain of Athos. The monk was now in his seventies, lived alone in

a hermitage, and was said to be welcoming of visitors. This provided further impetus to undertake the journey, despite warnings from locals that the monks there would try to convert me to their way of life. Yes, this first visit was something of an adventure to an exotic place, a journey to a way of life that hadn't changed in almost a thousand years, a pilgrimage to one of the great religious and mystical centres of the world, a way into the world of Dostoyevsky's novel.

Located in the Greek state of Macedonia Mount Athos was officially founded in 963 A.D., and grew under the patronage of Byzantine Emperors, Russian Tsars, Balkan kings and warlords. Despite its long history and importance not only to Eastern Christianity but to the development of a national consciousness among Greeks, Serbs, Russians, Bulgarians and Romanians, Mount Athos remains largely unknown and perhaps misunderstood in the West. This may have something to do with the animosity between the Western and Eastern Churches going back to the Emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. In establishing Constantinople as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, more commonly referred to as the Byzantine Empire, he inadvertently sowed the seeds of discord between the East and West. Relations between the Greek-speaking East and Latin-speaking West deteriorated after Constantine. Initially one among equals, the pope of Rome insisted on a preeminent role in the council of patriarchs formed from the major cities of the Empire. Later the Western Church broke with tradition and adopted the Apostles' Creed in place of the older Nicene Creed. The Eastern Church quickly denounced the Western as heretical for inserting the word *filioque* in the Nicene Creed. In the old Creed the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, by adding *filioque* the West extended this so that it proceeds 'and from the Son'. The Eastern Church saw this as an act of great betrayal and the final schism occurred in 1054. Matters deteriorated even further when, at the beginning of the 13th century, Constantinople was captured and plundered by the Western armies of the Fourth Crusade. The Byzantines regained control of the city, but it was now considerably weakened, and some historians blame the Western Crusaders for the eventual fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453. The rift between the two Churches has persisted into the present. Defenders of the Nicene Creed, the monks on Athos are still openly critical of the Western Church and its attempts at unification of Churches. This suspicion of the Western Church has of course been transferred to mistrust of the West in general, including the European Union.

Accessible only by ferry, and exclusive of women since its founding, the narrow peninsula consists of twenty large monasteries, with a population of monks that has fluctuated over the years. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were approximately 15,000 monks, in the mid-seventies the number had fallen to about 1000, while in the last decade it has risen to about 2000. There are two major reasons for the present revival. First, the collapse of Communism, which has released long-suppressed religious sentiments in people of the former Eastern bloc countries. Second, disillusioned by the materialism of the affluent West, young men seeking alternative values and meaning are discovering the spirituality at the heart of Mount Athos.

I kept a journal during my first visit and recorded my impressions of the Holy Mountain: the visit to the monk who was a distant relative, the condition of the monasteries, miracles associated with famous icons, the chants at matins and vespers, conversations with monks, the natural beauty of the peninsular. What should have been a

four-day visit lasted almost two weeks, during which I contemplated becoming a monk, not as a retreat from the world, but as a place where one could better appreciate the things of value in the world. I didn't become a monk – the pull of my family in Australia was too strong – but Athos left an impression that would remain with me for life. Nothing literary came from that first visit, though I was more certain than ever that something would arise when the time was right. But it was to take another two visits in the eighties and more notes before the Holy Mountain of Athos began to yield the possibility of a literary work.

Like many I began my literary career by writing more poetry than prose. At the time, thinking predominately in terms of image and metaphor, I attempted to apprehend the world through the prism of poetry. Perhaps youth's energy, rebelliousness and conceit are more naturally expressed through the intense, idiosyncratic language of poetry. David Malouf began as a poet, published his first novel *Johnno* in the late seventies, and has written mainly prose ever since. In a recent conversation with him in Adelaide, I was surprised to learn that he's now working on a collection of new poems. Who knows, it may be that true poets never lose their ear for the siren's song, and that they're irresistibly drawn to it at various stages of life, despite warnings from publishers that poetry doesn't provide one's daily bread. But has poetry ever been a breadwinner? Isn't it meant to provide the glass of red that accompanies the evening meal?

After my third visit to Athos in the late eighties, I knew that my ideas on Athos would express themselves in poetry. I'd been reading Rilke at the time and was impressed by his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, in particular by their allusive, symbolist tone. Under their influence I realised that the sonnet would be the ideal form for what I wanted to say about Athos. The result was a collection titled *Offerings: Sonnets from Mount Athos*. The fifty sonnets were presented in a bilingual format (Greek translations accompanied the English originals), and published in 1994. Two years earlier Les Murray, then poetry editor of Angus and Robertson, recommended their publication, but his decision was over-ruled by what he referred to as the forces of affirmative action, who probably objected to Mount Athos and its monks on the grounds that women were not permitted to visit. In the end, because of my book and a couple of others, Murray resigned his position at Angus and Robertson.

These sonnets are in many ways precursors to the present novel. Taking the activity of monks in and around the monastery, and grounded firmly in the physical world, they are meditations on the immanence of God in nature, reflections on art, and the existential condition of monastic life. The following are examples from the collection.

THE NOVICE [3]

The swallows have come
And faithful to their urge
Added a hundred domes
To the three-domed church.

I fear extinction:
I'm a whisper of smoke
If the skull's not a shell,

The brain its yolk.

The last of my line
I've staked everything
On the flight of the mind.

It's too late to turn back:
I'll withstand instinct
Until my cranium cracks.⁵

The theme of this poem - a monk's withstanding and overcoming his instinctual nature - is explored in depth throughout the novel. One of the central characters, the novice John Rados, is shown struggling with the monastic demand of renouncing one's sexuality. What could be only intimated in fourteen lines is amplified in the novel, with John's growing inner struggle revealed through his thoughts, actions, and dramatic encounter with a woman who enters Mount Athos disguised as a man. At a time when sexuality pervades much of contemporary culture, I was interested in exploring characters who react to Western material values by turning to what might be considered its antithesis: a life of abnegation and self-denial. In exploring celibacy as a way of strengthening spirit, I was also interested in the Freudian notion of sexual sublimation. If the life force, or what Henri Bergson called 'elan vital', is most concentrated in sexual energy, can this energy be turned upon itself? Freud argued this constitutes repression, which manifests in neurotic behaviour. In the novel I postulate that sexual energy can, through ascetic practice, be used to withstand instinct, raising the individual to a state of detachment from the body and the material world. This ascetic ideal flies in the face of everything that Western culture promotes: it denies the cult of the body, the deification of the individual, the notion that a person's worth is measured in terms of material success. In this world the novice must withstand instinct and superficial reason until his cranium cracks in the name of liberation. Yes, such themes are unfashionable, alien to mainstream literary concerns and preoccupations, but there will always be writers who, drawn by the voice of genuine dissent, swim against the prevailing current.

THE ICON PAINTER

At the height of art
I subdue flesh and fear,
Following tradition
Until your features appear.

Inheriting the sleight
Of your clay-covered hands,
I represent you
In the image of man.

But creation has risks:

When the dome darkens
I face an abyss

That's never seen
By those who admire you,
Secure on their knees.⁶

Icons, their significance in the Orthodox world, and the historical dispute between veneration and idolatry, feature prominently throughout the novel. The monastic painter works within the strict tradition of Byzantine iconography, which determines not only subject matter, but form, style and colour. Western religious art followed Eastern models until the time of the Renaissance. The painting of the Madonna and Child by the early fourteenth century Italian artist Duccio displays all the features of a Byzantine icon. The dazzling mosaics in the church of Saint Vitale in Ravenna and Saint Mark in Venice were composed according to similar works on the walls of Saint Sophia in Constantinople. With the Renaissance Western art began to express religious themes with increasing freedom, and this by the introduction of perspective and a sense of drama. As Western religious art moved gradually into secular territory, resorting to living models for subjects, the icon painters of the East have remained bound to tradition and monastic in their practice. For them notions of individuality and artistic freedom are synonymous with vanity and a striving for personal recognition. The religious artist must subsume his personality in order to portray images of the divine. Here, also, I explore a view of art that differs from most canons of Western art.

THE HESYCHAST

Speech, an extension
Of the instinct to survive:
The public prayer sounds
From the infant's cry.

I need a new silence
In which I might conceive
A language of my own
To communicate my dreams;

In which words overcome
The taste of milk clinging
To the bestial tongue.

As it has evolved
The word nourishes flesh
At the expense of soul.⁷

The Hesychastic tradition established itself on Mount Athos in the fourteenth century and has come to play a central role in the mystical tradition. Hesychia is a Greek word denoting inner calm and tranquility – a state attained by inner concentration, adherence to silence, and the cultivation of the soul through continual prayer. I could only hint at one aspect of this tradition in the poem, while in the novel I look at its history and practice within the monastery. It established itself on Mount Athos perhaps as a reaction to the emergence of Western rationalism, scientific thought, and the outward looking nature of the Catholic Church. The Eastern Hesychasts saw the way in terms of mysticism, communion with God, and inwardness. In a sense they sought a personal language for communicating directly with God. These opposing views between East and West are played out in the novel through the debate between Athos remaining insular and exclusive of women, or yielding to European Community pressure and opening its doors to all.

THE HERMIT

I sought you in rituals,
But they insisted on go-betweens:
Candles that blackened prayers,
Icons acting as a screen.

Here, beyond book and bell,
I sense you not by reciting psalms
But by withstanding the flame
That licks my open palm.

Here, only my blood keeps us apart,
And your presence grows stronger
During my forty day fast.

When flesh obstacles my way
I scourge it with thorns
Until I see your countenance in pain.⁸

The ideas in this poem were elaborated in the novel through the depiction of a hermit monk whom the three central characters visit. This monk represents the extreme form of ascetic; living in a cave away from the monastery, beyond book and bell, the hermit lives in a state of religious rapture, in which God's presence is no more than the thickness of a thought away. Where the sonnet suggests an outline of such a character, the novel fleshes the character. His presence acts as a powerful influence on one of the three characters, which in turn leads to the novel's dramatic conclusion.

These austere sonnets caught glimpses of Athos and perhaps the collection as a whole provides an impressionistic mosaic of the peninsular and the monastic way of life. After the publication of these poems, I sensed another vision of Athos: one that would require a broader canvass, a greater range of colours, and that would somehow reflect the themes of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The idea for a novel based on Athos remained vague

and would have to wait six years before it began to seize my imagination. In the meantime, I continued writing drama (*The Drought* and *The Picnic*), poetry (*Inheritance* and *Naming the Number*), and novels (*The French Mathematician* and *The Twelfth Dialogue*). Even before completing the collection of short stories *The Death of Pan* in the middle of 2000, I was already mulling over themes for a new novel. Ideas were competing for dominance over my mental landscape, among them Athos, until it assumed a compelling force that demanded sole attention. Having undertaken *The French Mathematician* as a Masters in Creative Writing, it occurred to me that a novel based on Mount Athos might qualify for a PhD in the same area. Like the Masters thesis, it would also involve considerable research, exploring Byzantine History, Orthodoxy, monasticism, the Balkans past and present, the dialogue between science and religion, and the notion of national consciousness.

3. RESEARCHING THE NOVEL

The amount of research required in writing a novel is determined by a number of factors: the novel's cultural and historical setting, the nature of its characters, and the degree to which it informs the reader about specialist areas. Some novels will of course require far more research than others. My first novel *Raising the Shadow*⁹ is a contemporary story set in the inner suburbs of Melbourne, about a young man who finds himself unemployed. This work needed little 'hard research' as I knew my setting, having lived there for many years, and the characters were based on people drawn from my own experiences. In contrast to this, *The French Mathematician*¹⁰ involved extensive research. In writing what's termed 'historical fiction' I needed to familiarise myself with the social, educational, religious, cultural and political aspects of early 19th century France, together with everything that had been written about my character, both in terms of his mathematical work and aspects of his character. Writing about foreign milieus is an enormous challenge for the writer: the ultimate success of such novels, their ability to draw and hold the reader, depends on the depth of research and how well the setting is represented. Research of this nature can be an onerous task for writers of fiction: the wings of the imagination must be stilled as one engages in the more pedestrian matter of gathering facts and information that will inform the novel. Though constrained by this matrix of fact, some writers find this useful in that it provides a framework for the novel: the skeleton of fact is then fleshed by the art of fiction. My subsequent novel *The Twelfth Dialogue*¹¹ also entailed considerable research. It contains eleven dialogues between historical figures such as Moses and Marx, Homer and Plato, Cervantes and Borges, Saint Paul and Nietzsche, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. A close reading and familiarity of the work of each figure was necessary in order to render the dialogues authoritative and engaging.

I embarked on the present project with considerable experience in assimilating fact into fiction. The volume of reading didn't daunt me, as I knew from my previous work that reading is essential to writing. Ideas, both scientific and literary, don't arise in a vacuum. Just as two components are needed to create a striking metaphor, and two elements to form a compound, so a reader's ideas interact with the those of the text to produce the spark of a new idea, or a glimpse of a character, or the outline of a novel's development. Initially, I didn't have a clear template of the novel, but by immersing myself in the subject, by reflecting on the readings, by making links and associations between my ideas and those

of others, a structure of the type of novel I wanted to write began to emerge. The literature researched was necessarily broad and eclectic, however it can be grouped into three distinct sections.

3.1. WORKS OF FICTION

The works of fiction reviewed below assisted in establishing a context and locus of definition for my novel. Reading around the theme of monasticism served to prepare the soil for the process of writing. By engaging critically and analytically with the work of the following authors, I was at the same time examining forms and narrative techniques that might best realise the vision of my work. A novel grows from within the tradition and culture of The Novel. Consciously and unconsciously authors adopt, adapt and then assimilate elements from this literary culture. (Even those who reject established literary forms in pursuit of avant-garde ideals do so in reaction to this culture) In this process of assimilation disparate ideas fuse to produce themes relevant to the times, existing paradigms are extended to accommodate new narratives, and novels 'morph' from the ethereal substance of The Novel.

The novel of most importance to the present work is Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. This sprawling novel has left deep impressions on the intellectual landscape of the 20th century. Its powerful narrative has caught the imagination of numerous novelists and intellectuals, among them Camus, Freud, Berdyaev and Nietzsche. Camus saw the character of Ivan Karamazov a forerunner of his existential man. Freud adduced the novel, in particular the incidence of parricide, to support his theory of the Oedipus Complex. In fact, he said of the work: "The Brothers Karamazov is the most magnificent novel ever written; the episode of The Grand Inquisitor [A chapter in the novel], one of the peaks in the literature of the world, can hardly be valued too highly" ¹² For Berdyaev, a Russian religious philosopher, some of the novel's characters are Christian existentialists - a paradox that only a writer of Dostoyevsky's genius could reconcile. Berdyaev writes: "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor, in particular, made such an impression on my young mind that when I turned to Jesus Christ for the first time I saw him under the appearance that he bears in The Legend." ¹³ Nietzsche saw it as possessing the most penetrating psychological observations of any novel, and praised Dostoyevsky as "The only psychologist from whom I learned anything worthwhile." ¹⁴

Set in 19th century Russia, *The Brothers Karamazov* contains many chapters featuring monks and monasteries. The nature of Russian monasticism is similar to Greek monasticism as the former arose from the latter. The portrait of the Staretz (Elder) Zossima and the novice Alyosha are fine depictions of monastic types. The novel is imbued with religious sentiments, with characters discussing the nature of good and evil, the existence of God, the meaning of transcendence. The chapter titled *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* contains a powerful examination of Faith and Reason, Science and Religion, Freedom and Determinism. As these were the very ideas and themes I wanted to explore in my novel, Dostoyevsky's powerful analysis might have discouraged me in this direction; however, I was convinced that a contemporary perspective would offer sufficient scope for further treatment. Monasticism in the third millennium is different from that of 19th century Russia, when monasteries flourished under the patronage of the Tsars,

monks were still respected, some venerated, and the Orthodox religion moved the great majority of people. As contemporary Western society has become increasingly secular, with religion retreating from the public domain, I saw possibilities for developing my characters in ways not possible in 19th century Russia. One such possibility was the exploration of the nature of faith in different societies. Whose faith is stronger: the young man who became a monk in society where Christianity was the state religion, or the one who turns to monasticism in an age when secularism rules.

In many ways the debate between Science and Religion, one of the important themes in *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, is more pertinent now than ever before. Perhaps more than the Copernican revolution, which removed the earth from the centre of the universe, advances in genetics and biotechnology are impacting on fundamental notions of life and death, which of course challenge the teachings of religion. Dostoyevsky dramatised this debate in the form of a story written by Ivan Karamazov, in which Christ's Second Coming takes place at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. In my novel I have responded to this chapter through the character of Paul Scott. During his stay on Mount Athos he, like Ivan, writes a story about Christ's Second Coming. His story takes place in the not-so-distant future and is based on cloning and genetic engineering. Dostoyevsky used his story as a polemic against the scientific positivists and socialists who were then gaining strength in Russia. In fact, after his return from exile in Siberia for anti-Tsarist activity, he became a Slavophile and sought to distance Russia from Western influence. *The Legend*, then, is an attack on all things Western: the Catholic Church, which he saw as a transformation of the Roman Empire, the freethinking Socialists, and the morally corrupt culture. Paul's story takes its cue from *The Legend*, but moves into the future to posit the scenario of The Second Coming being facilitated through the agency of genetic engineering and cloning. Unlike Dostoyevsky's this story isn't a polemic against science or the West, but more of a lyrical, suggestive encounter between the opposing tendencies in man: the rational and the irrational, faith and reason, determinism and freedom. As a meditation on science and religion, the story sees the former as offering humanity security through subjugation of matter, while the latter promises freedom through all that can't be digitised.

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The structure and shifting focus of *The Brothers Karamazov* provided a paradigm for my work. Like Dostoyevsky, who empathises with a number of his characters and presents their perspectives with a strong sense of identification, I was also interested in following and developing several characters, without allowing any to dominate the novel. Yes, I was aware of what critics had said about Dostoyevsky's novel: too long, formless, too many narrative strands, a plethora of characters, a lot is crammed in a short period of time, improbable coincidences abound, here and there it verges dangerously close to melodrama. Yes, I accepted all these criticisms, still the inner pressure of the novel, the concentration of being, the range of human types and emotions, those inspired characters who seek to transcend the pettiness of the human condition – all this compensated for the novel's technical shortcomings. The characters that appealed to me and were most relevant to my novel were precisely those who sought to overcome human nature either through intellectual pride or a humble faith.

Dostoyevsky's contemporary Tolstoy also wrote about monasticism in his novella *Father Sergius*. This is a more concentrated work than *The Brothers Karamazov*, and

focuses on a young man who, in a sudden about face, abandons a promising military career in order to become a monk. The story is a powerful psychological study of the type of personality drawn to the monastic life, and as such it proved useful in depicting several characters in my novel - young men who turn their back on careers in arts and science for Mount Athos. A key element of monasticism is the striving for humility and self-abnegation - an ideal that is constantly set against vanity and pride. The main character in *Father Sergius* learns the meaning of true humility only when he realises that his struggle to live more ascetically than other monks is in itself motivated by pride. I examine this notion of vanity in ascetic practice throughout my novel, with characters striving to outdo the deeds of famous ascetics and others burning prized possessions in a test of their faith. One of the pitfalls for a novelist dealing with religious themes is a tendency for the moralist to overshadow the artist. This is evident in *Father Sergius*, for it was written when Tolstoy repudiated the idea of Art for Art's sake and felt compelled to preach against the sins of the world. Despite this, the novella is written in clear prose, gradual character development, and with Tolstoy's unfailing eye for the telling detail and his knowledge of human nature.

Both *Father Sergius* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are written in what might be called the realist style. Even as a moralist Tolstoy never eschewed the qualities of good writing that characterise *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*. *Father Sergius* is written economically, the main character is psychologically consistent, the setting is conveyed strongly, and the plotting reveals the hand of a master-craftsman. Dostoyevsky referred to his own style as 'heightened realism'. In this he strains the notion of conventional plot through lengthy digressions, secondary stories, and improbable coincidences. He sets his scenes with nothing more than a few perfunctory details, then plunges into detailed descriptions of the emotional landscape of his characters. Tolstoy is always the detached, omniscient narrator, moving his characters like pieces on a chessboard, inevitably checkmating his reader through the power of his artistic foresight. Pressured by publishers and creditors, forever working to deadlines, Dostoyevsky too often throws himself into the action of his novels so that characters appear to get the better of him and total chaos seems imminent. And yet there emerges from this turmoil the luminous glow of humanity that redeems both the novel and the novelist.

The Brothers Karamazov and *Father Sergius* represent the two models I considered for my novel. The former is a broad canvass depicting many characters, while the latter is essentially a portrait of a monk. I've been interested in the religious views of these authors for many years, and how each has treated the subject in their literary work. Dostoyevsky's religion is essentially mystical, glimpsed in fleeting moments, perhaps in the instant before an epileptic seizure or while confessing a crime. In these moments his characters rise above the darkness and suffering of life, experience an unspeakable joy, and attain a kind of transcendence that approaches God. I've often asked myself: What's the good in this type of religious experience? How does it better mankind and ameliorate the suffering in the world? Dostoyevsky wasn't a preacher or social reformer; for him religion was first and foremost a personal experience, a flash of lightning after a day heavy with brooding clouds. Many of his major characters, even the fervent atheists such as Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Kirilov in *The Possessed*, are hounded by the idea of God. This idea, as opposed to the lived experience, drives some to madness, others to murder,

and a few to suicide. Tolstoy, on the other hand, at least the author who survived the spiritual crises that brought him to the verge of suicide, embraced a religion grounded in the need for good works and fraternal feelings toward one's neighbour. In fact, most of his stories, plays and only lengthy novel - *Resurrection* - from this period reflect the same religious message: salvation follows when lust and greed are extirpated from the heart. There's much to be admired in Tolstoy's later work, notwithstanding its preaching. Indeed, his powers of observation remained undiminished and much of his work is infused with the same earthy vitality as *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's short story from this period *How Much Land Does a Man Need?* was considered by James Joyce to be the greatest ever written. Yes, Tolstoy the moralist spurned Western notions of Art for Art's sake, and he has been condemned by many liberal critics ever since. But what interested me in this was Tolstoy's view that too much of Western literature, including Shakespeare, was all 'sound and fury signifying nothing'. He maintained that in adhering to Art for Art's sake Western writers had lost sight of their moral obligation to society. They portrayed the perverse and decadent with no other purpose than to satisfy the reader's basest instincts: voyeurism and a kind of vicarious pleasure in evil. After his crises he sought to depict characters who would move readers to examine their hearts and cleanse them of selfishness - the sin from which all others stemmed. In the end I sided with Dostoyevsky in my portrayal of the religious experience, but I didn't shun Tolstoy - my novel contains characters with both points of view.

Hesychasm may be loosely equated with the Quietist movement in Western monasticism. In Eastern Orthodoxy it entails a state of inwardness, meditation, and unceasing prayer. Seen by opponents as nothing more than navel-gazing, the movement has met with resistance, especially from the more progressive quarters of Orthodoxy. Exploring this mystical movement which is deep-rooted on Mount Athos, the book *The Way of the Pilgrim* provides a fascinating account of a man who sets out to live the Hesychastic ideal. Considered a classic of Orthodox literature, it chronicles the adventures of a poor wanderer as he makes his way from village to monastery, across the breadth of Russia, in search of spiritual enlightenment and understanding of Saint Paul's injunction: Pray unceasingly. The identity of the 19th century author has never been established. Written in the first person, the style is simple, confessional, yet engaging, very much in the manner of the later Tolstoy. The book's ingenuous tone is set in the charming opening lines: "By the grace of God I am a Christian man, by my actions a great sinner, and by calling a homeless wanderer of the humblest birth who roams from place to place. My worldly possessions are a knapsack with some dried bread in it on my back, and in my breast pocket a Bible. And that is all."¹⁵ In my novel John uses the anonymous pilgrim as a model in his monastic endeavours. At one point he attempts to match the pilgrim by undertaking to recite the Jesus Prayer thousands of times each day. In its abbreviated form The Prayer consists of the words: Kyrie eleison - Lord have mercy.

The novel *Landscape Painted in Tea* by the contemporary Serbian writer Milorad Pavic is set partly on Mount Athos. Several chapters are located in Hilandar, the Serbian monastery. [A fire swept through this historic monastery two months ago and destroyed several wings.] The protagonist travels to Athos not to become a monk, but to unravel the disappearance of his father who went there to escape the Germans during the Second World War. Here, as in my novel, the consequences of war in the Balkans are played out

on Athos. Apart from this, the novel provided an example of a literary style that I had been keen to explore. Pavic uses a form of playful magic-realism that blends the secular and the religious, the naïve and the intellectual, the banal and sublime, all to startling effect. For instance in comparing Cenobitic (communal) and Idiorrhythmic (more individualistic) monasteries he writes: "When they travelled, the idiorrhythmics carried their own plates under their caps, a foreign tongue in their mouths, and sickles under their belts, because they set out on their journey individually. The cenobites, on the other hand, always went in groups, carrying a kettle in turns, a common tongue between their teeth, and a knife under their belt."¹⁶

Wilton Barnhardt's sprawling novel *Gospel* contains a lengthy chapter set on Mount Athos. As with the previous novel, this also is an adventure story, with the protagonist visiting Athos in search of an apocryphal Gospel. Though erudite and full of biblical references, the novel does not explore monasticism or spirituality; in fact, Athos is nothing more than a stepping stone to further adventure and intrigue.

The following novels were important in providing a more Western perspective of monasticism. As historical fictions (a genre I considered for my work) they treat monastic life with a degree of circumspection, cynicism, and outright censure. *The Monk*, by Matthew Lewis, was written in the 18th century and is considered a classic of the gothic genre. Set in Spain during the Inquisition, it is full of secret passageways, cross-dressing, and monks who yield to the temptations of the flesh with fiery consequences. As with the works of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, the novel broaches themes of pride, power and humility, though in terms of the macabre and the fantastic. *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* is itself a story written in this vein, but in this case the fantastic is no more than a device for bringing the two characters together, and is subordinate to the ensuing dialogue. A feature of this novel that interested me was the occurrence of women impersonating monks in order to enter the cloisters. In my novel a young woman disguises as a man (women are not permitted on Athos) in order to track down a Balkan War criminal.

A contemporary work with similar qualities to *The Monk* is Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. This international bestseller of the early eighties is essentially a gothic crime novel set in a medieval monastery. Monks are killed, and a monk-detective – a Sherlock Holmes figure – sets out to outwit the murderer. Eco's novel is more a denouncement of religious conservatism and dogma than an exploration of spirituality. As a post-modern novel it bursts with erudition, allusions and playfulness. Especially relevant to what I proposed was its presentation of the dichotomy between science and religion in a monastic context. Furthermore, its structure, style, and extensive use of church history provided a useful paradigm for my thoughts. Despite the risk of slowing the narrative and wearying his readers, Eco successfully wove a great deal of information into his novel. Encouraged by his approach, I decided to detail my tapestry by incorporate material from the history, art, and psalmody of Mount Athos.

The figure of Saint Anthony, considered by many the founder of monasticism, has been the subject of two contrasting studies. *The Life of Saint Antony* was written in the 4th century A.D. by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who may have used his subject to oppose the Arian heresy. It is a terse hagiographic biography that reads like a surreal novel in depicting the Saint's struggle with demonic forces. Gustave Flaubert's *The Temptations*

of *Saint Anthony* is a curious book from the author of the stylistically precise *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert worked on it for many years, and the final form is a curious mixture of dramatic dialogue interspersed with sections of evocative prose. Overcoming his former restraint, Flaubert revels in playing with new forms, in depicting fantastic characters and situations, and in breaking literary conventions. The action revolves exclusively around the figure of Anthony as he is tested, tempted, tortured in the name of Christ. These books were relevant not as possible forms for my work, but for the fact that young monks and novices on Athos still use Saint Anthony as a guide in their ascetic struggles.

A novel that lies between Athanasius's hagiography and Flaubert's excessively dramatic novel is Herman Hesse's *Narziss and Goldmund*. As a study of medieval monastic life it deals with the struggle between asceticism and action, between love of the world and love of the Word. Unlike the previous works, the struggle is embodied in the two principal characters: one a monk, devoted to study and contemplation; the other, a pupil whose passions can not be contained within the cloisters, who finds redemption through suffering and interaction with the world. The novel is somewhat formulaic in its treatment of characters, depicting them in terms of the Nietzschean categories of Apollonian (rational/intellectual) and Dionysian (intuitive/emotive).

3.2. NON-FICTIONAL MATERIAL ON MOUNT ATHOS

The sources in this section relate to the history, art and religious practices on Mount Athos. I also researched several books by travel writers, and the impressions of well-known novelists. References from these sources authenticated the proposed work and provided strands for a richer, more colourful tapestry.

Useful dates and historical details were found in Sotiris Kadas's comprehensive work *Mount Athos – An Illustrated Guide to the Monasteries and their History*. Translated from the Greek, the book contains a wealth of information on each monastery, including its origins, ethnic background, architecture, manuscripts, relics, and gifts from patrons and emperors. From a novelist's perspective, two especially insightful books were *Athos* by George Zografakis and *Glimpses of the Holy Mountain* by Monk Gabriel of Philotheou Monastery. Their evocative black and white photographs provided suggestive images of the day-to-day life of the monks, their appearance and dress, the architecture of the cloisters, and views of the surrounding landscape. Iconography and psalmody are essential aspects of monastic life, and both feature prominently in the novel. Apart from first hand experience of these elements, I drew valuable information from a multimedia CD featuring the iconography of the famous 16th century painter Theophanis of Crete (a contemporary of another Cretan – El Greco), and from an LP recording of Easter hymns chanted by the choir of Xenophontos monastery.

I referred to several books that focussed on Orthodox spirituality and the experiences of monks on contemporary Athos. They were useful not only in authenticating my novel but in providing glimpses into the monastic mind. *Writings from the Philokalia: On the Prayer of the Heart*, considered a classic of Orthodoxy, is compilation of writings from the early Church Fathers relating to the ascetic life and Hesychasm. Several characters in my novel adopt the precepts and practices outlined in this book. *A Night in the Desert of the Holy Mountain*, by Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, records an

extended dialogue between a pilgrim and an ascetic hermit-monk, and provided material for the depiction of the novel's inspired recluse. In *Saint Gregory Palamas as a Hagiorite* the same author gives a detailed account of the founding of Athos, together with the development of Hesychasm in the fourteenth century under Gregory Palamas, an Athonite monk and later bishop of Salonika. The development and the struggle for acceptance of this mystical movement are mentioned in the novel. *Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain* by Priestmonk Christodoulos contains the thoughts of a contemporary monk presently considered for canonisation. Paisios's openness to science and his epigrammatic advice to visitors from all walks of life assisted in delineating the character of Elder Kyrillos in my novel. *Monastic Direction: A Diary* and *Athonite Evening Prayers* are first person accounts of the rigours of monastic life and the struggle to live up to its ideals. The reflections and meditations of these young, tertiary-educated monks helped sharpen the character of certain younger monks in the novel.

A number of books by travel-writers provided subjective, at times impressionistic, perspectives on Athos and its monks. Sydney Loch's *Athos: The Holy Mountain* is an informative account of several trips to the monastic enclave. The author visited all the monasteries and recorded his experiences and observations in a lively manner. A Scotsman, who came to Australia as a young man, Loch married the Australian writer Joice Nankivell Loch. They lived for many years in the Tower at Ouranoupolis, a small fishing village very close to Mount Athos. He was known and welcomed by abbots and monks, who permitted him access to libraries and wine cellars. His writing is lively, knowing, underscored by irony and humour. Both he and his wife are mentioned in the early part of the novel as one of several links between Athos and Australia. Erhart Kaestner's *Mount Athos: The Call from Sleep* is based on two visits he made to Athos. In contrast to Loch's restrained appreciation of Orthodox monasticism, Kaestner engages with Athos on a more personal level. His journey is that of a pilgrim in search of enlightenment and spiritual sustenance, not simply a Western writer recording the exotic for the sake of a curious public. The book reveals an author deeply impressed by his experiences; his writing is emotional, confessional, always mindful of the connection between religion and art - that both have a common source and move humans in a similar manner. On this point he compares the religious fervour of Athonite monks to the poetic inspiration of German Romantic poets such as Novalis and Hölderlin. I was drawn by Kaestner's engagement with Athos, and found an affinity with his metaphysical reflections on icons, Holy Fools, and ascetics. I wasn't able to relate so well to Robert Byron's *The Station. Athos: Treasures and Men*. The book is essentially the travelogue of a young Englishman who visited Athos in the 'twenties, very much in the manner of a white-suited gentleman visiting one of the colonies. Much of the writing is inflated, opinionated, at times arrogant in that typically English way of looking down on the 'backwardness' of other cultures. Despite this, the exuberant author gathered a trove of useful observations, details, sketches and conversations with monks. His historical information is authoritative, though his commentaries are too often infused with the flush of youth. Like Loch, though more of an intellectual, Byron didn't have a religious sensibility, and his attitude to Athos is that of the adventurer rather than the pilgrim.

Athos appears in a different light when seen through the travel writings of two well-known novelists. In his somewhat fictionalised autobiography *Report to Greco*,

Nikos Kazantzakis devotes a lengthy chapter to a forty-day sojourn on the Holy Mountain with his friend the poet Angelos Sikelianos. The young Kazantzakis set out for Athos in order to convert matter to mind and spirit - the alchemist's quest that informed his entire life and work. An opponent of the Orthodox Church, which excommunicated him for his views, he grasped the possibilities of monastic life with the strength of his aesthetic sensibility. He saw the monk as an existential figure whose isolation could lead to madness or enlightenment. If silence sustained the poetic Word, and the wilderness nourished the prophet's vision, then, for Kazantzakis, the asceticism practiced by the monk might be a way of freeing the spirit from matter's grip. Later in life he went on to explore this theme in a novel based on Saint Francis of Assisi. Patrick White has also recorded his impressions of Athos in his autobiographical *Flaws in the Glass*. Disappointed by the experience, he complained of its frugal meals, rough wine, poor accommodation, and the general impositions and privations of monastic life. Indeed, White was never able to enter the spirit of the place, which may be attributed partly to an ingrained cynicism in his character, and partly to the fact that he went there totally unprepared, hiking from monastery to monastery not only with cumbersome suitcases but with a heavy typewriter! He was also careless with certain details, in one instance referring to Hilandar as a Romanian monastery, when in fact it's Serbian. It appears that the black-robed brothers made little impression on White, for he didn't explore Athos or monasticism in his fiction. Or did he? After all there's much in *Voss* and the protagonist's journey into the Australian desert that resembles those God-obsessed monks who left the decadence of Alexandria for the purity of the Egyptian desert.

The following texts provided useful insights concerning the psychology underlying religious conversion and extreme forms of religious behaviour. William James's late 19th century classic *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* examines this area by extensive use of case studies, including pivotal events in the lives of Tolstoy and Bunyan. Of course his approach is pragmatic and skirts Wittgenstein's silence - the numinous that language is unable to articulate. He sees the efficacy of faith in terms of its positive effects on the individual in the here and now. Augustine's *The Confessions* is an autobiographical work detailing the author's conversion to Christianity. There is much in this book that was relevant to my work: the author's confessional tone, his youthful ardour for scholarship, his struggle between reason and faith, his renunciation of one lifestyle and adoption of another. *Rasputin*, by Rene Fulop Miller, is a study in what might be considered a secular monk. In this the Russian monk Grigory Rasputin is portrayed as a Fool for Christ - a type of monk whose excesses were excused in the belief that they were divinely inspired. Rasputin's use of sexuality to evoke a religious experience was examined in greater detail in the more recent biography by Edvard Radzinsky *Rasputin: The Last Word*.

3.3. TEXTS ON THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN RELIGION AND SCIENCE

The dialogue between religion and science is an important sub-theme in the novel. As this is a burgeoning area of study and research, the texts in this section range from the writings of ancient philosophers, to the polymaths of the Renaissance, to contemporary scientists, theologians and philosophers.

The ancient Greeks, in particular the pre-Socratic philosophers, are important in this context because their epistemology did not distinguish between science and religion. On the contrary, science and religion were inextricably bound. Edouard Schure's *Pythagoras* is a re-creation of the life of the ancient philosopher, whose school embodied the very synthesis of science and religion. In fact, its organisation, rites of initiation, and mystical nature could be viewed as precursors to Christian monasticism. In *The Greeks and the Irrational* E.R. Dodds devotes several chapters to Plato and the manner in which he attempted to accommodate the spiritual and scientific. Plato was essentially a Pythagorean, and there is a direct line between him, the neo-Platonists of Alexandria, and the early Church Fathers, who incorporated Platonic ideas in their theology.

Descartes and Pascal both addressed the nexus between science and religion. In his *Discourses on Method* and the *Meditations*, Descartes applied logic and mathematical reasoning to proving the existence of God. For him one could approach God through faith in the primacy of intellect, and through the infallibility of the new mathematics. Pascal's aphoristic work *Pensées* reflects his life-long struggle with science and religious faith. He was unable to reconcile the two, as Descartes and Spinoza had done, until an epiphanic vision seared his prodigious intellect, when he renounced science for religion.

In the twentieth century Albert Einstein often spoke of God in relation to cosmology. His famous remark about God not playing dice alludes to his unease with the theories of quantum physics, which to him appeared predicated on randomness. The God of Einstein is manifest in the mathematical laws that underpin the universe, and thus closer to the God of Descartes than Pascal. Einstein's religiosity and his thoughts on the role of intuition in scientific discovery are analysed by Iain Paul in *Knowledge of God*.

In the burgeoning area of research and scholarship addressing the confluence of science and religion, several academics have made important contributions. The theoretical physicist Paul Davies was recently awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize for his contribution to furthering the dialogue between religion and science. In *God and the New Physics* he argues that, in the light of quantum physics, there needs to be a revision of many theological ideas involving time, space and eternity. Other commentators are more accommodating of traditional religions. Ian Barbour's *Religion in an Age of Science* examines the differences and similarities between religious and scientific truths, and then proposes a fusion of the two. In *One World: The Interaction of Science and Theology* John Polkinghorne, a nuclear physicist turned clergyman, finds that aspects of quantum physics, in particular quantum fields, serve as metaphors for mind/body and Christ's humanity/divinity. Finally, in *God and the New Biology* Arthur Peacocke examines religion in the light of recent developments in the biological sciences. Advances in genetic engineering have questioned and challenged many assumptions concerning God, creation and human nature. This is, of course, very important to the present novel, which contains a futuristic story about the cloning of Christ.

The recently published *A Monk and Two Peas*, by R.M. Henig is a biography of Gregor Mendel, regarded by many as the first person to uncover the laws of hereditary, hence a pioneer in genetics. Mendel's significance to my novel lies in the fact that he was both a monk and a scientist - a fact that endeared him to one of the novel's major characters. Before becoming a novice John idolised Mendel for the manner in which he reconciled the seemingly paradoxical. As a result the young man developed the notion of

living for scientific truth as monks lived for his faith. And later, when he learned that Mendel had become a monk because the particular monastic order provided opportunities for study and intellectual inquiry, John raised his idol on a higher pedestal for denying his sexuality in the name of science.

On a different note Michael Ignatieff's *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* examines the nature of the Kosovo conflict, whose violence echoes throughout my novel. As a Western journalist who supported NATO's bombardment of Belgrade, Ignatieff recorded interviews with both sides in the conflict, and was highly critical of Serbian intellectuals who rejected Albanian separatist claims for an independent Kosovo. These interviews were useful to my novel in that they provided insights into nationalism and the forces that drive rational human beings to become war criminals. Mark Mazower's *The Balkans* presented a balanced history of the region, together with the historical, religious and ethnic factors that led war in Kosovo.

4. METHODOLOGY IN WRITING THE NOVEL

4.1 AIMS

The principal aim of project was to explore monasticism through the vehicle of narrative fiction, and to offer some insights into the emotional and psychological state of the young men who embark on such a course. Many commentators have referred to the pitfalls of the religious novel and the difficulties in producing a successful work. The novel is a secular product, with plot and narrative driven by human conflict, weaknesses and passions. A novel whose characters attempt to transcend the human condition may easily become full of abstraction, with characters that do not engage the reader. As contemporary film and fiction attest: writers and directors find more drama in portraying crime and criminals than saints and sanctity. In fact, it has been said of both Dostoyevsky and Milton that they soared in their depiction of satanic figures but limped in trying to portray angelic characters. Character is revealed through action not contemplation, and to this end I have plotted the novel so that the secular world impinges on the life of the monāstery and draws the protagonist into existential self-examination, struggle, and dramatic action.

Is there a place for the religious novel in contemporary literary culture? In particular, is there a place for a novel set in a monastery? Certainly, this novel goes against prevailing currents and trends. Feminists might object to it on the basis that it's predominately a male book, dealing with a part of the world that has excluded women for almost a thousand years. They might attribute this exclusion to the way women have been portrayed in the Judeo-Christian religion: woman as the temptress and reason for the Fall. Perhaps the novel is out of step with the times, especially when religion is suffering not only bad publicity in the light of sexual abuses within the Catholic Church, which many attribute to the unnatural demand of celibacy imposed on its priests. Also in mainstream culture, in theatre, novels and film – the demand is for the more explicit image, the more violent plot, the more perverse behaviour. This novel deals with a way of life that represents the very antithesis of Western contemporary culture and consumerism. As such I defend it on the grounds that it offers an alternative point of view to contemporary life – albeit a life that only a very small minority will ever embark on in any generation. The fact

that this life-style has persisted for over a thousand years, at times against overwhelming odds, attests not so much to its tenacity but to a mystery that moves young men to renounce everything for a hope.

Perhaps the novel is unfashionable, reactionary, retrograde; nevertheless, it portrays a way of living, and as such it offers glimpses into states of being far removed from those around us. The monasticism on Athos could well be compared to the ultimate form existentialism. Yes, existentialism was predicated on atheism and living in the absence of social constructs, experiencing the moment of one's own making, confronting with nobility the Great Void. But the monk also strips away the illusions of society and lives face to face with the darkness in which God resides. Kierkegaard, often referred to as a Christian existentialist, said of the true man of faith: "Not until a man has become so utterly unhappy, or has grasped the woefulness of life so deeply that he is moved to say, and mean it: life for me has no value – not till then is he able to make a bid for Christianity. And then his life may acquire the very highest value."¹⁷ There is in these words the very essence of that impulse that leads young men to leave the world and take up the monastic life. If the existentialist is one who lives one thoughts, and stakes all on his thoughts, then the monk is the ultimate existentialist, for he sacrifices worldly happiness, the compelling reality of the temporal, the monuments of reason, for a stake in Eternity.

Another important aim was to investigate through narrative fiction the phenomenon of people leaving Australia to settle in the land of their forebears. The novel's protagonist is a young Australian of Greek descent who, in a reverse of the migration experience, turns his back on the achievements of his parents in Australia for the austerity of monastic life. In fact, the incidence of reverse migration among second and third generation children of immigrants appears to be increasing, and would make an interesting research project in itself. On a recent trip to Mount Athos as part of the research for the novel, I met with several young Australians of Greek background. Why did they leave Australia, the Promised Land of their fathers and grandfathers? They replied that Australia more than satisfied their material needs, but not their particular spiritual yearning – a spirituality that entailed living the Gospels not for a few hours on Sunday, but every moment of the year for a life time. They spoke of the great tradition of monasticism on Athos, and of their need to connect with this tradition, and through it with the roots of their ancestry.

The increasing incidence of reverse migration to Greece, and Europe in general, has taken other paths and forms. Young artists have settled in Greece because their work, tinged with Greek culture, didn't register with mainstream Australia. A few academics who taught Modern Greek at various tertiary institutions have settled in Greece because Modern Greek courses throughout Australia have declined rapidly over the past ten years, due to the decline in interest by students from this background. Those who settle there for business reasons see great opportunities now that Greece is fully integrated in the European Union. A Greek parent qualifies these young people for a European passport, which in turns opens job and business prospects throughout Western Europe.

While some young men leave Australia for spiritual reasons, others leave for nationalistic notions that verge on religious mania. During the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early nineties, stories circulated of young men from Serbian and Croatia backgrounds leaving Australia to fight for their respective countries. This

occurred again in the devastating Bosnian War. More recently the war in Kosovo saw young Serbs and Albanians leaving Australia, America and other Western countries in order to join paramilitary organisations.

But it's not only the young and the living who undertake the reverse migration. There's the case of an elderly Greek who made it clear in his will that when his time came he wanted his body buried in the village of his birth. Despite more than fifty years in Australia, with children and grandchildren born here, when his time came his body was flown to what for him must have been paradise: a rocky village with a dozen inhabitants and snakes basking on the warm gravestones.

Another of the project's aims was to weave the dialogue between religion and science into the fabric of the novel, so that ideas are lived experiences of the characters, rather than characters being merely mouthpieces for ideas. In this regard, I sought to extend my successful Master of Arts thesis in which mathematics and literature, often perceived as mutually exclusive, were fused into an engaging novel *The French Mathematician*, which dealt with the mathematical prodigy Evariste Galois. The thesis broke new ground both thematically and academically in so far as it was arguably the first Creative Writing M.A. to come from a Victorian university. It received enthusiastic reviews both locally and internationally, indicating a burgeoning interest in work that bridged science and the humanities. In writing the present novel I wanted to further my bridge-building skills by attempting to link what for many are the two irreconcilable areas of human discourse: science and religion. A number of critics referred to my last novel *The Twelfth Dialogue* as a 'novel of ideas', and I saw the present thesis as an opportunity of advancing my work in this direction by contributing a novel that would examine the dialogue between reason and faith.

Yes, perhaps I was presumptuous in undertaking such a novel, given our cultural critics' indifference, if not hostility, toward fiction that explores religion and spirituality. They constantly proclaim the decline and death of Christianity and quickly condemn as moribund any novelist who associates with it. Who knows, perhaps Christianity, like its founder, must die for faith to flower again. Still, the sense of the religious, whether it's Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Aboriginal, is too embedded in humanity to be permanently eclipsed by the forces of secularism. Venturing against current trends, I undertook this work in the hope of extending the range of the Australian novel by depicting an extreme form of religious life – the ascetic monk. Then again, can a novel be called Australian if the author is a first generation Australian of Greek-Macedonian heritage, and its set mainly in Europe?

4.2 THE PROCESS OF WRITING A NOVEL

Creating a work of literary fiction is like proving a theorem in pure mathematics. Where scientific research requires expensive laboratories and looks to utilitarian ends, mathematics and fiction use only the symbols and grammar of their specific language, and then without thought of material usefulness, though, of course, theorems often find a place in models explaining the physical world, just as novel win prizes and academic honours. When the 19th century Russian mathematician Lobachevsky proposed his new geometry based on curves rather than plane surfaces, he somewhat playfully broke the rules of

Euclid's axiomatic language, regardless of useful ends. A hundred years later his findings were taken up by Einstein to quantify the curvature of space. Poets and writers of literary fiction also play with language (perhaps Shakespeare's genius lies precisely in this playfulness), not to produce something useful, or didactic, or even instructive, but to create imaginary worlds in which there are more than three tenses and where parallel lines meet. By extending the possibilities of language and artistic forms, the novelist contributes to a culture's vitality, reflects society in a curved mirror, and offers new insights on human experience.

The novelist's frustration and joy in working to flesh out a theme through character and plot are well documented. Diaries and journals are replete with notions of groping in the dark, encountering dead ends, discarding drafts, and moments of illumination when the way forward becomes clear and compelling. Is this striving for artistic truth, this surrender of self for the sake of bodying forth something new into the world, any different from the trials and triumphs experienced by the mathematician in seeking to prove a theorem? In *Fermat's Last Theorem* Simon Singh gives an account of how, in 1994, Andrew Wiles proved the so-called Last Theorem, which had tested the greatest mathematicians for more than 400 hundred years. Surrendering to the charm of the theorem, Wiles entered the labyrinth and remained there for eight years. He made mistakes based on assumptions that weren't generic enough, followed lines of thought that led to dead-ends, exposed himself to ridicule and disgrace in presenting a solution that turned out to be flawed. And then, when all seemed lost and defeat stared him in the face, he was struck by a moment of epiphany, a gold pass to the elusive proof. Wiles said: 'It was so indescribably beautiful; it was simple and elegant. I couldn't understand how I'd missed it and I just stared at it in disbelief for twenty minutes.'¹⁸

The novelist's theme and the mathematician's theorem – the discipline and dedication by which one is fleshed out and the other proved is remarkably similar, though this often isn't acknowledged in academic circles, where the former is regarded as easier and less rigorous than the latter. Novelists also carry out what Einstein called 'thought experiments', only their variables aren't abstract concepts but elements such as character, plot, voice, point of view. Aesthetic criteria like form, beauty and elegance are often used to describe mathematical proofs, whose specific and objective correctness transcends language and culture. A work of literary fiction, on the other hand, is more like a solution to an open-ended problem: partial, subject to prevailing trends and tastes, its beauty often very much in the eyes of the reader. Despite this, writers persist in writing, driven by the hope of creating a novel that will meet with critical acclaim, outlive transitory fashions, and perhaps attain the universality of a mathematical theorem.

As with most novels, the present work began as a nebulous swirl of thoughts, images and ideas. After months of reading and research, I sensed the emergence of a centre of gravity: a sort of theme-force that began contracting the chaotic swirl and imposing an identifiable shape. As this theme-force grew, the material clustered to a critical mass, at which point I felt compelled to put aside other books and start writing the novel. Of course, there were countless possibilities as to how I might proceed. At this early stage it was important to locate and reference the novel in time. Once this was done, the next major consideration was choosing the narrative voice. Should the novel be written from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, which would allow scope to

explore character, plot and dramatic action? Should it be written in the first person? Perhaps in the form of a confession – much like Augustine’s *The Confessions*? Or should it take the form of a diary? Yes, this would give the novel energy and immediacy, perhaps a certain lyrical quality, but it had the disadvantage of limiting me in terms of scope and dramatic possibility. Should the novel be written in a multiple-voice narrative, together with shifting time frames and locations? I knew from my previous novels that finding the right voice and point of view was often a matter of trial-and-error, and that sometimes, as with *The French Mathematician*, the right angle of vision isn’t found until well into the novel.

Yes, I could have played safe and written a short lyrical work in the first person, present tense. It could have been the story of one character and Athos shown through the prism of his consciousness – a typically insular story of an intense young man. But I’d used this approach in my previous work and wanted to engage with something more challenging. My first novel, *Raising the Shadow*, has a narrow angle of vision, is modest in conception, and centres on the experiences of an unemployed young man. This was followed by *The French Mathematician*, also in the first person, this time from the perspective of a precocious, conceited, rebellious youth. My next novel *The Twelfth Dialogue* is a third person narrative, though from a point of view limited to the female protagonist. After three novels that focussed exclusively on one character, I wanted to extend myself as a writer by exploring a more challenging narrative technique. From the very outset the two possibilities were always the lyric and the epic: the *Father Sergius* of Tolstoy or *The Brothers Karamazov* of Dostoyevsky. In the end the paradigm of the epic prevailed, despite the attendant risk of the novel becoming something of a ragbag. Yes, I needed a form that could accommodate a variety of characters, a wealth of historical detail, movement from present to past, sprinklings of lyricism and scientific musing, and, above all else, the spirit of Mount Athos.

Once I’d settled on a narrative voice, I began outlining the novel’s general structure and framework. This entailed a chapter by chapter layout containing descriptions of scenes, aspects of character interaction, thematic concerns, and plot development. I wanted the action to unfold during Easter Week (the most intense period in the Orthodox religious calendar), with characters engaging with notions of sin, guilt, expiation, forgiveness, redemption and sacrifice. are echoed in the events of Holy Week. But I was aware that such a compressed timeframe would pose a number of challenges. First, frequent time-shifts would be needed to accommodate back-stories that reveal character. Second, these back-stories had to be sufficiently compelling to allow for interruptions in the narrative of the contemporary story. Third, the action would have to unfold quickly, with characters undergoing major transformation over the space of a few days. Fourth, as my subject and setting are relatively unknown to Western readers, the novel would contain substantial historical and cultural information about Athos. I was encouraged to stick with my structure and work through the obstacles it imposed by novelists who had succeeded in overcoming these very challenges. Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* contains detailed accounts of Medieval Church history, with arcane references to heretical sects. Melville’s *Moby Dick* expatiates at great length on the technicalities of whaling in the early 19th century. While Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* accommodates lengthy back-

stories, essay-type chapters on aspects of Russian Orthodoxy, and a timeframe more compressed than mine.

In starting the novel my first impulse was to begin with a chapter that would be a self-contained story written by one of the characters visiting the monastery. Like Dostoyevsky's *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, which hypothesises Christ's Second Coming during the Spanish Inquisition, my story would look at the Second Coming occurring a hundred years in the future, through the agency of genetic engineering and cloning. The short story quickly outgrew its original framework and conception, and I soon found myself hijacked by the characters and the possibilities of the plot. Several months later, with more than twenty thousand words of what should have been a five thousand word story, I was suddenly forced to think of splitting the original project into two shorter novels: a futuristic work examining the dialogue between science and religion, and the contemporary story set on Athos. In consultation with my supervisors, it was agreed that I ran with the present story to wherever it would lead. When I got to about fifty thousand words into the story, I encountered what proved an insurmountable problem. In following my instincts (or was I hijacked by the characters?), I suddenly found myself in realm of science fiction. Here again I was faced with a decision: invest a huge amount of time and effort in pursuing the story in this unfamiliar genre, or abandon it and return to my original conception. I decided on the latter, hoping I'd be able to salvage some of the material for the Athos novel. In fact, the compact cloning story in the present novel is drawn from that abandoned work, together with aspects of John's character and his scientific musings.

I re-focussed on the original structure and began the Athos novel, negotiating my way between the past and present, historical details and narrative, monks and men. Is there too much narrative shift in the novel from present to the past? I wanted to reveal characters by highlighting significant events from their past – revelation through action. Of course, I was aware of the need to balance these flashbacks with the events in the present, to limit interruption to the narrative flow. On the surface monastic life is deliberately uneventful, governed by fixed rules, and a novelist depicting this would soon tire his readers. The flashbacks in my novel provide glimpses into the wider world; they are ways of incorporating female characters, irony, conflict, drama - the important ingredients of any novel, without which it would become all meditation.

Halfway into what I'd planned, I realised that the novel would be far longer than the 100,000 words outlined in the candidature proposal. This was discussed with my supervisors, who advised me not to be overly concerned by word-lengths, but to continue giving the work the scope it required. More so than other art forms, the novel is an organic entity that grows under its own internal laws and dynamics. The fact that a novel might take two years to write (some take ten years to be fully conceived) often means it evolves in the very process of writing. This isn't to say that novels are written in a random and chaotic manner; on the contrary, they grow as details, elements, unexpected associations aggregate and crystallise around dominant themes and motifs. If the process of natural selection, often proceeding by trial and error, ensures the survival of the fittest and best, then a similar process is at work in the realm of fiction, producing the best possible work. As the novel grew several unplanned sub-plots emerged that added to its texture; characters developed beyond their original conception; themes were explored in

greater depth than anticipated. I completed the first draft in December 2003, and over the next two months pruned, edited, and generally tightened where possible. I deleted several sections, mainly flashback scenes that seemed to interrupt the contemporary story for too long. The result was work of about 170 000 words, at which point I felt ready to submit it to my supervisors for feedback. Both were pleased with the work, described it as a significant undertaking, and suggested a few changes mainly of an editorial nature.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

5.1 IN DEFENCE OF THE RELIGIOUS NOVEL

The novel in a secular society will reflect its fears and concerns, its joys and celebrations, and this may well explain why religious novels are somewhat of an anomaly in contemporary literature. These works tend to be 'novels of ideas', exploring theology and speculative philosophy through narrative fiction. Setting and plot are subordinate to texts and polemics, while characters are merely mouthpieces for ideas. Many of Dostoyevsky's characters discuss and debate the existence of God with unrelenting, at times compelling, rhetoric, but few do anything more than think, and when they do exercise will their actions are somehow unconvincing. They can be passionate, lyrical, inspired in their views and meditations, yet their engagement with the world is uncertain, insipid, as though shadows among stones. In many ways such characters are descendants of Hamlet: their thinking is lyrical, labyrinthine, and so intense it renders them incapable of action. It's as if their psychic energy has been expended on thought, with nothing left for action, and they wander the earth like disembodied shadows. Yes, I was conscious of the fact that in depicting monastic life, with its concentration on the inner, I might portray characters wrapped in a mantle of thought. My way of overcoming this and writing a religious novel relevant to a secular society was through the use of back-stories, in which characters were shown struggling in the turmoil of flesh and blood.

In *The Death of Tragedy*¹⁹ George Steiner argues that the Industrial Revolution killed the notion of God and with it the conditions for tragedy in theatre. The tragedies of the ancient Greeks arose from the conflict between human will and divine law. In the absence of the divine there could still be powerful drama but not sublime tragedy. Can the same be said of the religious novel in a secular society? Does such a novel have any relevance in a society that's losing its feeling for the religious? If Dostoyevsky's novels are essentially religious, he was writing in a time and place when religion was still directed the lives of many people. In many ways Dostoyevsky defended religion against what he saw as the atheistic forces of Western socialism infiltrating Russia. Much of his writing is polemical and aroused a great deal of sympathy and hostility at the time, with some referring to him as a prophet and others as a puppet of the Tsar. How do I defend the present novel in an age where religion has been replaced by a kind of moral relativism? On the grounds of the very pluralism espoused by a secular society. The novel gives voice to a small, isolated community opposed to the values of consumerism and materialism, a community for whom God is still a living reality, and which dares to believe in another way. Yes, the monks on Athos are heretics in the eyes of the West - heretics in clinging to faith in an age where differences are being overwhelmed by the forces of globalisation;

heretics in retreating from progress and the headlong rush to the future along the information super highways; heretics in daring to believe in God when neuropsychologists would convince us that the feeling of the divine can be evoked by stimulating the brain's parietal lobe. But it's secular heretics such as the monks of Athos who remind us of the possibility of something over and above the here and now, who stand in opposition to the forces of determinism, and who, in the face of seemingly irrefutable logic, assert a freedom that says: I choose to follow the narrow path to the summit.

5.2. THE NOVEL'S SIGNIFICANCE

In an age of increasing specialisation, the need for interdisciplinary research is vital to society's harmony, balance, and wellbeing. Like the academic journal, the novel can also disseminate ideas and stimulate debate among a broad cross-section of the community. In this regard, the present work is significant in that links Science and Religion at a time when Genetic Engineering and Information Technology are challenging our notions of God, consciousness and humanity.

The increase in the number of creative writing courses at graduate and post-graduate level attests to a growing interest in this area among students of all ages and backgrounds. The novel will contribute to the discipline of Creative Writing by encouraging students to explore a wider range of themes, settings and characters. Australian literature has come of age in recent years, and authors are now more inclined to write about subjects once considered foreign or exotic. Australian authors are now crawling out of Ned Kelly's iron shadow and writing about French mathematicians like Galois, or Italian artists like Caravaggio.

It's hoped the novel will contribute to broadening the content-range of Australian publishers, who have tended to focus too narrowly on 'things Australian', perhaps as a way of fostering the notion of an Australian identity. This novel may serve to improve the prospects for publication of other Australian writers who draw material from foreign sources and cultures. In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*²⁰ Italo Calvino warned that the literature of the third millennium would face irrelevance unless it engaged with science. His warning applies to Australian literature, with perhaps the added note: our literature must also open its doors and windows to the world.

5.3. RESEARCH TRIP FOR THE NOVEL

I visited Mount Athos in September 2003, just before completing the first draft of the novel. In Ouranopolis, the last town before the restricted border of Athos, I made a few inquiries about an Australian couple who had spent many years in this part of the world. They were featured in a book I'd recently come across, *Blue Ribbons, Bitter Bread: The Life of Joice Nankivell Loch*²¹, by Susanna de Vries. Joice was the wife of Sydney Loch, whose book on Athos proved useful to my work. The impressive Byzantine tower in which the couple lived is situated at one end of the concrete jetty. Several elderly locals mentioned that the couple had been granted the tower as a life-long residence as gratitude for their assistance after an earthquake devastated the region. The tower is now a museum featuring the craft of rug weaving. I spoke with two women who'd worked in the tower

and had very fond memories of the Lochs. They said Joice had been active in the craft and assisted the locals with the sale of their rugs in England. They directed me to the town cemetery, with directions to the couple's graves. I'd included the Lochs in the draft before this trip, but my visit to their graves, together with fragments offered by the locals, resulted in a slight reworking of this section in the second draft.

Having never been to Athos during Easter Week (the novel's setting), I used the trip to confirm and validate certain customs, traditions and practices. The information proved valuable in the latter chapters of the novel, which I'd planned but not yet written. I spoke for some time with a monk originally from Australia - a third generation Greek-Australian, who went to Athos as twenty-five year old in the early eighties. He was born in Australia and had little sense of being Greek, until he was drawn to the monastic life. His was a true reverse of the migrant experience. On arriving on Athos, his first task was to learn the Greek language, which he'd never spoken in Australia. He now translates religious works from Greek into English. He was most generous in answering my questions about how novices are tonsured, the monastery at Easter, and the place of religion in an age of science.

The changes I'd noticed on Athos several years earlier were continuing at a brisk pace. Young monks from Russia and Serbia, and to lesser extent Bulgaria, were reinvigorating the Slavic monasteries, which fifteen years earlier had appeared on the verge of closing. Subsidised partly by EU funds, reconstruction and renovation was evident at a number of monasteries, attracting tradesman and labourers from all over the Balkans.

The following diary entries might help convey the flavour of my visit.

14.9.03

This afternoon I spent a couple of hours with Father J, discussing religion, science, the changes taking place on Athos, and what he called 'the innate sense of the divine' possessed by many Greeks. The view from the balcony looked out onto the sea on one side and the thick wooded hills on the other. He pointed out that a novice is generally tonsured at the end of a period of fasting, and that it's unlikely for a novice to be tonsured in the week following Easter (as I had planned in the novel). Also, a novice wears the cassock, the robe, and the stovepipe hat, but not the veil worn over the hat and shoulders.

16.9.03

It appears that more and more younger monks are wearing the stole of the Great Schema, once reserved for monks who'd proved themselves after years of the strictest fasting and asceticism. In asking Father M – the American monk who converted to Orthodoxy – about this, he explained that the monastery has done away with certain categories of monk. In the past monks were divided into those who wore the Small Schema and those who advanced to the Great Schema. Now, after the novitiate, one is inducted as a full monk and, after four or five years, is elevated to the Great Schema. In this monastery there is no tonsure in the period of the novitiate: the tonsure occurs once, at the time of induction. He also pointed out that there were two cases of sons becoming monks, followed by their fathers. When I inquired why an old, white-haired monk didn't wear the

veil over his cap, he explained that he was a novice, having entered the monastery at the age of seventy-eight.

This morning, after a meal in the refectory, Father T arranged for me to meet Abbot E. The Abbot's wing is most impressive, having been recently refurbished in a manner intended to welcome visiting kings, princes and heads-of-state. (Prince Phillip and Prince Charles often visit this monastery, with the latter coming yearly to assist in a project of clearing the ancient stone tracks) Father M, the Abbot's attendant, presented me with a coffee and sweet, and asked about my background. Though in his mid-fifties, with excellent English, he explained that he'd taken up the monastic life only eight years ago. The Abbot, with fair features and a gingerish beard, welcomed me with a smile and indicated a chair close to his large desk. The room was hung with icons and photographs of Elders and former abbots of the monastery. He asked about the novel I was writing (having been informed by Father T) and whether it presented Athos in a favourable light. Many books had been written about Athos, he smiled, especially by foreigners, who tended to be critical, if not derogatory, of the Holy Mountain. What was my novel about? Did it have a spiritual dimension? Could he read the manuscript before publication? I pointed out that my views on Athos were expressed in my poetry collection, which I'd given to Father T seven years earlier, and that my literary Elders were Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. He nodded thoughtfully and said he would ask Father T for the volume of poetry. During our conversation, several monks came in with messages and requests. One brought in a pile of newspaper clippings and photocopies. The phone also rang a few times. Seeing that he was busy, I stood and thanked him for his time and hospitality. He presented me with a book and a commemorative plate of the monastery. I promised to send him a copy of the novel, though I couldn't say when.

Isaiah Berlin, borrowing from the ancient Greeks, said that the fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one. This may be adapted as follows: the worldly professor knows many things, while the solitary monk knows one.

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The church is literally the house of the Word, for here one reads, prays and chants. There are instants during a service when the silence takes one by surprise.

Matins commenced at 4 a.m. I attended just before six. It was still pitch dark. Lamps lit the more important icons, while here and there a slender candle glowed in the dark. Light reflected off candle-stands, the circular candelabra, silver screens protecting ancient icons. As the choir's chant alternated from one transept to another, I was struck by the fact that the service was more than a blessing and sanctification of the church: this daily ritual was an invocation and preparation for the Holy Light of the sun. Indeed, as the service progressed, as the chants became more melodious, the incense more fragrant, there was an accompanying look of expectation on the faces of the monks. And then the grey of dawn appeared through the small windows high up in the cupola, and the first figure that could be seen, though still only faintly, and still without colour, was that of Christ the Pantocrater (the Ruler of All) painted on the dome's crown. But the Light answered the monks, and more figures emerged, and then the gold of haloes and the colour of clothes

and rocks and small flowers. By the end of the service the church was full of Holy Light and the monks looked pleased in a service done well.

In walking along the beach I stopped on a section of high ground and observed a line of shining ants. Brothers in black, I thought, impressed by the resemblance to their monastic counterparts. One large ant in particular held my attention for some time. It was struggling with a small purple flower - a sight I'd never seen before. The ant carried the flower with its front pincers, at times going backwards when encountering an obstacle or some resistance. At one point the flower was caught in a few blades of grass and the ant worked for five minutes, now pushing, now pulling, turning this way and that, until it freed the flower, without the least interest, let alone assistance, from others scurrying past. The ant hurried off with the flower, as though impatient to present its offering to the Queen. The monks on Athos just like that ant. They also struggle and toil and undergo self-deprivation in order to offer the flower of their faith to their Queen – the Virgin.

17.9.03

It appears that kingdoms and monasteries go hand in hand: the decline of the Russian, Bulgarian and Serbian kingdoms has meant the decline of their respective monasteries. Zographou, the Bulgarian monastery, is an imposing place that once accommodated hundreds of monks and visitors. Sadly, it now houses about a dozen monks and things are in disrepair, with signs of decrepitude. Yes, there are workmen here, too – Romanians and Greeks – but they are few, their task enormous. Still, the monks persist in performing their services and tending to their chores, knowing that all material achievements are fleeting. Who knows, perhaps their faith is deeper precisely because the monastery is in a state of such decline.

In Byzantine orthography words ending in 'os' are often represented with an 'O' followed by a small serpent in place of the 'S'. At times the serpent is coiled around the 'O', at other times it hangs from it.

I mention Australia to the young Romanian, Bulgarian, Albanian and Russian workers, and their faces light up, as though I'd mentioned the Promised Land.

During matins titles for the novel went through my head. It would be fitting, I thought, if one should present itself here and now. I considered many titles, but not one glowed with epiphany.

Perhaps a haiku: fingers black from filling the censer with powdered charcoal, a monk crosses himself slowly.

5.4 POST POSTSCRIPT

Yes, examiners, it's late, perhaps already past the hour for reading. You were somewhat distant and indistinct when I commenced this essay, but after several conversations with

my supervisors you're now closer, almost in sight, which makes it easier to address you. I won't take more of your time, for your remuneration as examiners is low and I've already subjected you to more than what's required, firstly with the lengthy novel, then with this pedestrian essay. Please, don't take this as a pitch for favour and approval. If I were thirty and climbing the academic ladder (rungs and stairs appear frequently in the novel), that might have been the case, but at my age one feels the need for a little openness, especially with those who've shared your thoughts and the product of three-year's work. Yes, I've come through my post-novel depression and managed to distance myself from my creation, but I'm still in a reflective, confessional mood, perhaps more so than when I started this essay because of the sudden death of a very close friend a few days ago. He'd come to Australia as a child and, in reverse-migration, returned permanently to Greece in 1990. He was the basis for the character of Stefan in the novel. His death of a massive heart attack at fifty has filled me with grief and gathered over my head what Thomas à Kempis called a 'cloud of unknowing'. Yes, death has a way of putting things into perspective by bringing about a sudden 'unknowing' of the familiar, and then we stand open and honest, face to face with the unknown. And that's where these concluding remarks stem from: a grief that, despite everything, has a way of making us more human. Isn't this the meaning of those moving scenes in Ancient Greek funereal sculpture? The chisel was warmed in shaping Apollo and Aphrodite, for only then could it raise from cold Pentelic marble those tender gestures of human sorrow.

That's it, examiners, and so be it. I've brought my thoughts this far, like a shepherd mustering his flock into a rectangular pen. Examiners - no, that's too formal for what I've shared with you. At this moment I feel like calling you brothers and sisters, though not in terms of flesh and blood, but in mind and ink. Here I now sit, between the small icon-flame in memory of my friend and the sun nesting in the pin-oak's bare branches. And here I wait, sisters and brothers, still on this side of the deadline.

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