

**HAPPY DEATH
&
A LETTER**

Vangelis Provias

translated by

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Vangelis Provias was born in 1973 in Volos, Greece. He works in advertising and runs creative writing seminars. He is currently living in Pangrati, Athens.

The two stories published here are taken from Vangelis Provias's first collection of short stories, *Black Parade Shoes*¹. They were chosen for their distinctive perspectives: an eighty-year-old woman realizes how much of her life she has sacrificed in order to care for her son, and a young man writes a letter to his father in prison about his new-found camaraderie with a local political faction.

1. Βαγγέλης Προβιάς, *Τα μαύρα παπούτσια της παρέλασης και άλλες ιστορίες*, Αθήνα: Ολκός 2014.

HAPPY DEATH

At eighty years old, Areti was slightly overweight. Her eyes snapped open despite the quietude of the night. It was odd for her to wake so suddenly. In fact, she could not remember the last time she sprang fitfully from a night's sleep. Perhaps not since her son was young, only a few months old. She never got used to it, continually agonized over it: her misfortune. His misfortune, really. Nearly forty years had passed since then.

This time Areti was different. She was calmer. She looked at the clock on the nightstand next to her bed its digital numbers glowing 4:20 far too early to get up. She must go back to sleep. Areti was a regimented person. She yawned, made the sign of the cross over her gaping mouth, and turned over, settling into the blankets, quickly falling back to sleep.

When Areti opened her eyes again morning had arrived and was pressing on ahead. It was 8:30. "Oh dear me", she cried. First the atypical awakening in the middle of the night and now she had overslept by an hour. It worried her, these deviations from routine, especially at her age. They made her uneasy. She got up, put her robe on over her nightdress, and slipped her feet. She made the sign of the cross and went to the kitchen.

It was a clean, simple house. The furniture was relatively modern, from the eighties, with brown couches and a matching love seat. In one corner of the living room sat a shabby gas stove that ended in a hole in the wall. She thought about turning it on but the day was not so cold. Looking at the stove a sudden memory gripped her, one that she had forgotten entirely: her son was around eight years old and stood in the very same spot howling in pain. Areti had lost sight of him for just a minute or two and in that time he had managed to put his hand on the scalding burner. She remembered how her husband ran the child to the hospital and the way the doctor, before they had explained their son's situation, asked, "How did this happen? He's much too old for such accidents. Doesn't he know better than to touch a hot stove?" She recalled seeing the young, callow doctor redden when they explained that no, their son, despite his age, could not understand. He would not be able to understand that the stove was hot, he would not be able to tie his shoes, or go to the toilet by himself, or speak. Another doctor, a specialist, explained to Areti that, com-

pared to other cases, hers was not so bad, her son was “more developed”, “higher functioning”, if those words can describe her Lambros.

She opened the cabinet, took out what she needed to make coffee, and switched on the radio. Thankfully today she didn't need to bathe, what with her late start she would not have had the time. She had a very tight schedule to keep to and there was no straying. Her day began at seven and whatever she wanted to do for herself had to be done before nine o'clock when Lambros woke up. She bathed every other day, but lately had let it go a little longer. Maybe she should start setting the alarm earlier to be sure to have enough time before nine. Now she had some time though. There wasn't much to do: dress, wash her face, drink her coffee.

She had learned to get it all done in a jiffy. Even now, burdened with her eightieth year, despite every year that passed, no, every month, she had felt as if she still had the energy of a fifty-year-old. But this was no longer much comfort. She felt her agility abandoning her. Her bones ached, she had dizzy spells now and then even while seated. Her mind too was not unaffected: she was forgetting things and had moments of absentmindedness that lasted for more than a few seconds.

But she could not complain. Better old and grey with all the snags of old age than like her poor husband: one day he was a strong tireless old man and the next he was gone. A factory accident. Yiannis and two others were killed. There was only Areti to inherit his pension and they gave her double his salary because of Lambros and his needs. And because they had a child they were eligible for the workers' housing lottery and won this very apartment. Luck amidst her unluckiness.

She sipped her coffee from a white mug with faded red flowers and listed the things that had to be done. Nothing particularly interesting. Maybe bathe her son in the evening and go for an afternoon walk down the lanes of the workers' quarter. It was nearly deserted; as soon as people could scrape enough money together they moved out to better neighbourhoods with spacious houses. The walks had begun to dispirit her.

Maybe it was time to hire an **aid**. They had had one once, a girl from Georgia, back when migrants were coming in from Eastern Europe and worked for less money. Areti had called her “The Soviette”, though not in her presence. She was a microbiologist back in her home country and helped Areti with the housework, but not with Lambros. He was a teenager then, beginning to develop, and she didn't want there to be any misunderstandings.

She had never had the talk with him... one day while bathing him he got an erection. He looked at her with his vacant, childish smile. At eighteen he was a grown man, strapping, with hair all over, fully matured everywhere but his mind...he took her hand and brought it to his penis and she felt sorry, she had never explained any of this to him. She began to stroke him with the same ease that she would were she patting his back. It only took five strokes in all for him to finish. There was an unnatural amount of semen. He groaned once and his head tilted to the side of the small tub, his eyes rolled back so that only the whites of them were visible.

Afterwards she was horrified. With herself and with her son. She was too ashamed to tell her husband who was still alive at the time. She never did it again nor did she see him have another erection. A doctor gave them some pills to diminish his urges. From then on there were only the remains of night emissions on his sheets.

She loved her son very much. Her whole life was dedicated to his care and she never thought of it as a sacrifice the way her husband did. The year before he was killed he had started to get fed up...but not her. She loved her son. Though lately she had been fighting a creeping darkness, she had to catch herself. "When I die...who will take care of him? Where will he end up?" She started to think of these things more often and it made her anxious; the world contracted in a narrow darkness around these fears. It was the first time in her life she felt incapable and alone, even worse than when the police came to the house with the factory manager to tell her about Yiannis's accident. They were not getting along well then, Areti had dedicated herself to her son and had not spent any time with her husband, not even when he had time off. When he talked about "continuing their lives, of course, along with Lambros, yes, but continuing their lives", she did not understand, she did not want to understand what he meant. She did not know how. She did not notice that Yannis wasn't there at night, did not go to the trouble to suspect that Yannis had found a mistress, nor did it bother her. Not once had she thought of it. Even when he was killed she did not care; she felt guilty even thinking it, but it was true. What did it mean? And, what did it matter now? The dead with the dead... the living here with the living... But the helpless, what would happen to them?

It was after nine-thirty now. Areti got up and went into Lambros's room expecting to find him tossing, floundering on the bed but he was uncovered and still. "I hope he hasn't caught a cold with his covers off like

this", she thought as she walked over. His eyes were open. Awareness hit her so suddenly that she drew back, overstepped, and fell.

She got up and left the room breathing heavily. Closed the door behind her checking the doorknob to make sure it was fully shut. Areti ran to the hall telephone, lifted the receiver, and stopped. Who was there to call? No one. No one was going to take him. It had been months since the phone rang. She went to the kitchen, poured a glass of water, drank it and went back to the telephone. She made the sign of the cross. Her eyes were tearing but she did not feel sad, it was as if she were detached from this body with its leaking, crying eyes. Confusion suddenly flooded her mind. How would she organize her day now? What would she do with the rest of the afternoon? Go for a walk? Mostly, overwhelmingly, she felt boundless relief, an ocean of reprieve from the misery of Lambros who could no longer torture her. Unrepressed she admitted it, she let it out and it became huge, swallowing her. Areti was lost. It was relief.

In the space of these moments she realized how much she had agonized over Lambros's future, how much of her thoughts were consumed by him and how, in vain, she had struggled to ignore this very fact. Now that there was no need to take care of him, she realized just how much had gone into his care. How terrifying it was. How had she gotten out of bed every day, year after year? The realization was staggering. She should take it easy, relax. Areti walked passed his door checking it again because she had the sudden fear that whoever was behind that door was not her son. It was closed. She collapsed onto her bed still fully dressed, she was tired, tired as if she had not slept that night or any night. Relief. At nine forty seven, precisely five hours and twenty minutes after Lambros died, Areti's heart abandoned its routine and ceased to beat.

A LETTER

Diamantis was around twenty, tall, with close-cropped hair, and purpling circles under his wild eyes. Black clothes emphasized his gaunt frame as he sat in the corner of the dreary café. He was the only customer. The place was filled with smoke from the bootleg cigarettes the café owner was smoking, one after the other, fed up with an idling day of too few patrons. On the wall, hung askew, was a promotional plastic clock of some old-time brand Diamantis was too young to know. Its hands no longer moved. Sitting on the far bench the T.V. played a Turkish serial with the sound off. Silence.

"Dad, I've found my calling. Don't worry, I'm done with the crazies and the bums. My life's got a purpose now: to defend my country from the traitors and scum that threaten to annihilate her. I've quit hanging around the streets. I go to bed early and get up early and go to the central party office for classes, to be educated."

He ordered an iced coffee, strong, lots of sugar, lots of milk. Diamantis took out a clean sheet of paper and placed it on top of the filthy plastic tablecloth with its kitsch print of red roses. His skin stuck to the grime that was melded onto the plastic but he did not seem to notice the filth, the smell, or the tacky design. He had to write a letter to his father. In prison. Diamantis went to visiting hours once but he wasn't allowed to see him. They didn't tell him why. They just said that if he wanted to write him the letters would be passed along.

"The other guys said how I was a fighter for justice, a warrior like Leonidas. The group leader talked afterwards and said that if they were all like me, true-blue patriots, our country would not be endangered by these vermin who ravage and destroy her from the inside, vermin like those we crushed the day before."

He struggled to begin the letter; it had been a long time since he had written. He did not know what to say to his father, what words to use. After a while it occurred to him that he should write as if his father was here in front of him, as if they were across from each other, talking in the visitor's room. Diamantis hunched over the paper and began, slowly, stilted at first, then faster, more fluid.

As he filled the page a memory that had been buried deep in the troubled waters of his young life suddenly surfaced. It was just before his mother fell ill. He sat on her lap at the kitchen table of the cramped little house. It was paltry but nice, nicer than the houses he lived in after she died. She guided his hand as he followed the curves and shapes of the letters he was copying. You have to write some words with double letters like, grass, granddad, bumblebee, noon. His mother laughed, stroked his hair, and explained: but "robin" doesn't have a double 'o' or a double 'b'. Now, as Diamantis boasted to his father about last night's triumph, he recalled this lesson and a feeling that he dared not call tenderness welled up in him, a feeling that puzzled him.

"We wore black shirts over the ones with the party symbol so that no one would suspect anything. We met up in a narrow ally near Syntagma Square and then split up taking different routes to the festival where the degenerates were gathering. I was one of the first to arrive. It was repulsive; I was disgusted by the people around me. Some were doubly repellent: paedophiles and fags. They set up stalls and handed out flyers with propaganda promoting their perversion and AIDS. A transvestite sang on stage. Some homo kept smiling at me. He walked alongside me and I thought I was going to puke. But I caught glimpses of my group among the crowd and drew strength from their presence."

He asked for another coffee, a stronger one. The café owner rested his cigarette on a rusty metal box and brought over the grimy sugar container. Outside, the weather had worsened. It was raining and windy.

"Just then I heard the crack of a flare being shot off. That was our signal. All at once we took off our black shirts revealing our party's emblem! The symbol terrified the fags. With wild screams we kicked down the stalls, tore up their banners, and shredded the revolting propaganda. The vermin just watched; they didn't know what was happening. One or two tried to stop us but we grabbed them and beat the shit out of them."

The café door opened and in with the cool fresh air came three middle-aged men with worn clothes soiled with dirt. Construction workers. They sat down greeting the owner. Laughing, he said something to them and they laughed in return. Diamantis turned his chair, kept his composure and did not even lift his head to look. All of their conversation was in Albanian.

"Just after we had started our attack, I had an idea. I told the other guys what to do and we smashed the electric generator connected to the square. We could do our work better in the dark. It was my idea, Dad, and everyone

knew. Our commander said that Greece could use more men like me and that I had to join them next time too when we show the immigrants a lesson."

The three customers and the café owner were still talking; now and then laughing loudly. The fog of cheap cigarette smoke sat more thickly about the room now. Suddenly, a sound like a breaker shorting came from somewhere outside and the lights went out. The shop owner uttered a curse in Albanian and disappeared into the back of the café. Quickly, anxiously, Diamantis folded the letter and stuffed it in his back pocket. Without paying, he got up and, in the darkness, headed towards the exit. Leaving, he slammed the door hard with the intention of breaking it, to break it into a thousand pieces, and then disappeared into the rain.

"The homo who had been smiling at me was standing on the edge of the square, I saw him as we were getting ready to leave. He looked over, helplessly, that smile wiped off his ugly mug. I ran up and socked him in the face: faggot, you bring shame to Greece! As he bent down to get his glasses I threw another punch, landed it in his ribs. Let the traitors spit blood."