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Red Ink

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17 DAYS SINCE

"You okay in there?"

I locked myself in the bathroom two hours ago.

"Yeah." One syllable is all he can have, otherwise he'll think we're mates.

"You're very quiet."

"I'm fine." Two syllables. He should think himself lucky.

My name is Melon Fouraki. Let's get that out of the way, straight off. Some kids get their parents' jewellery or record collections as hand-me-downs. Mum gave me this name. It is one of her memories – she was brought up on a melon farm in Crete. I'd rather she'd given me her old CDs. She also gave me Paul. Living with him is like wearing clothes made of sandpaper. Every move I make, I'm on edge. He watches so much it hurts.

The bathroom is the only place to get away. I can hear him fidgeting on the hall landing outside, pretending not to be there. I can hear him bothering the floorboards. He's listening through the door for the sound of a fifteen-year-old trying to slit her wrists. I am not going to slit my wrists. Paul is a social worker, so he thinks everyone my age runs away from their care home, sleeps on the streets, turns to crime, gets taken back into care and then tries to kill

themselves. He can't get his head around the fact that I am well-balanced. They worked with each other, Paul and my mum, only they ended up shagging. He would say they were partners. 'Partners'. Idiot. He thinks they were proper boyfriend and girlfriend but he's deluding himself. Mum only hooked up with him because she thought it would freak out the rest of Social Services if the Greek woman and the black man got it on. It's not as if they were living together or anything. Now Paul has moved in to look after me. How ironic. How tragic.

My mum is dead. Seventeen days ago it happened. Paul thinks I need sympathy and care and time and asking every five minutes how I am. I don't. Just because your mum is dead that doesn't define you or anything. I am my own person.

Paul is still outside the door. I can't concentrate on writing in my book with him there.

"You'll turn into a prune if you stay in much longer." He is trying to sound casual and funny, as if me being locked in the bathroom is the most hilarious thing in the world and not a total crisis. He is picturing me collapsed in a bath of pink water, a razor on the edge of the tub, my eyes rolled back in their sockets. I'm not even in the bath. I just ran the water so Paul would hear and not question what I'm doing.

"Yes. All right," I yell back. Three syllables. Bugger.

I double-check the bathroom lock, make sure I fastened it, just in case Paul wigs out and decides to burst in on some kind of rescue mission. Mum fitted that hook-and-eye lock. That's why it's wonky and why the screws haven't

been pushed in all the way. If you lean on the door, it opens up a crack, like our front door with the chain on. If Mum was ever outside the bathroom wanting to know what I was doing, she would shoulder the door and stick her nose through the gap. Paul won't do this, not unless he really gets a real panic on. As far as he's concerned I'm naked in here, and he's a middle-aged social worker who's dead cautious about doing anything that might seem dodgy.

I was at Chick's house when the police came knocking. Chick's real name is Kathleen but everyone calls her Chick because she's little and scrawny and kind of sweet at the same time. No one calls her Kathleen to her face, except for grown-ups. Kathleen's a geek's name. Mum was always moaning that I spent far too much time at Chick's. She never liked Chick's mum, Mrs Lacey. She thought she acted all superior just because she has a part-time job making up the names for emulsion paint. You know, Pistachio Dream, Cerise Sunset, Arsehole Brown, that kind of thing. Mum said it was a 'pointless' job, but I thought it was kind of cool to be paid to do something so, well, pointless. Anyway, I was at Chick's house when the police came looking for me and I wonder whether Mum sub-consciously did it on purpose, chose to get knocked over that evening just so she could prove her case about me spending too much time around Mrs Lacey. That's the sort of thing she would do.

Once when we were in Crete visiting Granbabas, one August when it was so hot you couldn't breathe without cracking a full-on sweat, she made me sit with her in the cashpoint lobby of a bank in Hania, just because it had

amazing air-conditioning. We looked such losers, sat in those deckchairs we'd brought with us, the kind that make your knees touch your chin when you sit down. The locals came and went, swiping into the lobby with their cash cards, getting their money, giving us weird looks, wondering if we were the bank manager's mad relatives minding the cash for him. Mum sat with her legs stretched out, her head tipped back, like she was sunbathing indoors. She kept doing these big, long, God-it's-so-hot sighs even though it got quite chilly in there after about half an hour. I would have given anything for a stroppy bank clerk to have moved us on, but it was Sunday. No staff. We stayed there for three hours. Mum fell asleep and, because she'd kept her sunglasses on, I never noticed her eyes were shut.

Paul still won't shift from the door. "Well, I wouldn't mind a bath later, so . . ."

"So?"

"So, don't use up all the hot water, please, Melon."

He's still there, waiting. I get up from the floor, kneel over the bath and swish my arm in the water. I hope the noise will prove that I'm still breathing and all my main arteries are intact. I listen for Paul's feet on the landing. There is a creak or two, a pause. He's thinking about saying something else, I can feel it. Nothing. Then the *crunch*, *crunch*, *crunch* of the loose boards under the stair carpet. He's gone. At last. I sit on the mat with my back up against the bath. The side of the bath is carpeted. Old mauve shag-pile. The bathroom suite is green and there is a limescale stain from the bath taps down to the plughole, like tea running down the side of a mug. Mrs Lacey's bathroom is beige with a sandstone mosaic.

Now that Paul has gone I can write things down. That's why I'm in here. I don't want Paul to see what I am doing. He will think that it's a 'positive step'. He will think it shows I'm 'coming to terms with everything'. He will think I am close to embracing him in a big, old, do-gooding hug. Basically, he wants me to cry. I do not want to cry. I don't need to cry. 'It hasn't hit you yet,' he'll say. And I'll make some joke like, 'No, maybe not, but it's definitely hit Mum though, hasn't it?' Ha ha ha ha. And he'll pull a face and look like he is trying not to blub. This is mean of me, I know, but I just want to be left alone. If Paul can't understand that, he'll have to face the consequences. If only Mum had waited one more year, I'd have been sixteen and allowed to look after myself.

I can hear the scrape of a saucepan bottom against the hob coming from the kitchen downstairs. Paul is a noisy cook. A show-off. He has been cooking all evening, in between his panic attacks outside the bathroom door. He is always cooking for me. He thinks he's filling the gap left by Mum, but she never used to cook much. Frozen stuff, pasta sauces, lots of things on toast, that's what I'm used to. Tonight it is homemade soup. I don't want to have these meals with Paul. He tricks me into them. He'll ask, all casual, 'Do you like soup?' (or risotto or bolognese or whatever) and I can hardly say no otherwise I'll never get to eat that particular food in front of him again. So I go, 'yes,' and he goes, 'good, because that's what we're having for dinner tonight,' and that's it, I'm stuck with it.

"Ten minutes until dinner, Melon." He always gives me these countdowns. We did this book in English a while back

about what the world would be like after a nuclear war, so I've given some thought to what I might do if we got a real ten-minute warning. I wouldn't eat soup.

I push my sleeve up and put my arm underwater to pull out the bath plug. The water has gone cold. I ran hot water so that the boiler would make the right chugging noises for a proper bath. I am excellent at pretending. I even put in some of Mum's bubble bath to make the right smell. It reminded me of her getting ready to go out somewhere. There was this one time, she went to the Social Services Christmas ball with Paul (which did not sound like the biggest night of fun on earth) and we had a massive argument just before she left the house. We didn't speak for a week. Or rather, I didn't speak to Mum for a week. She was useless at holding grudges. I am an expert.

I rake a wet hand through my hair to make it look like I've been in the bath. I can't get used to my hair being short. I grab for the ponytail at the back sometimes and forget that it's gone. I admit the haircut might have been a mistake. The fuss it caused was brilliant, but the haircut itself is rubbish. The front bits go proper frizzy if I sit in a steamy room and I get this fluffy halo around my face. Mind you, that used to happen even when my hair was long. Nothing stops it. Chick got her hair permed once – she actually chose to have curly hair – which I thought was total madness. I have big Greek curls. I have a big nose, big thighs, a big backside and big boobs. The boobs are an especially great thing to have when your name is Melon. Mum always said she was the real Greek but I was the one with the 'Greek woman's body'. This is a polite way of

saying I'm a bit fat. I'm not fat, I know that really. I'm not like Freya Nightingale who believes she's an elephant and always goes to the loos to puke after lunch. I just take up more room in this world. Mum was skinny all over, except in the right places. Real boobs that looked fake. She was a dinky person who looked like she would fit in your pocket. I look like I would split the seams.

I might look Greek but I don't feel it. It's a fancy-dress costume I can't take off. Mum took me to Crete every year but the threads that joined me to that place have been snipped, or they were never there in the first place. Mum tried to fix her threads loads of times but I don't think she succeeded. The family didn't forgive her, not really. She never got that into her head. Now there's hardly any family left to visit. It's because of the curse. All the Fourakis family die young.

My dad still lives there though – Mum said. I've never actually met the man. She never delivered a living, breathing dad to me. I have a name, that's all. According to The Story he is called Christos Drakakis. I say it to myself sometimes, test it out. *My dad is Christos Drakakis, and my name is Melon Drakaki. How do you do?* Except I hope I wouldn't have been called Melon if Christos had stuck around. He would have stopped Mum being so stupid and I would have been given a proper name with a saint's day, just like every other good Greek girl. I would have been called Sophia or Alexandra, something normal like that.

"Five minutes, Melon."

There are five minutes until the nuclear holocaust: what do I do? Find the epicentre and run towards it. I don't

want to survive with all the destruction and deformity and radiation sickness.

The pong of soup hits me when I step out of the bathroom. Cooking smells have a set path through this house – up the stairs, a swirl in one corner of the landing and then on to collect in my bedroom. It must be the way the draughts work in this place. Mum's room never gets rid of that woody vanilla smell.

I go downstairs, stepping around Kojak, who has taken to sleeping in the middle of the staircase. He's not been the same since Mum went; he's gone mute. Before, he would be miaowing around my ankles and following me into the kitchen. Now he stays put – a big, grey ball with one eye on the front door, as if he's expecting Mum to walk in any minute.

I stop on the stairs and lift him up into a hug, but he freaks out. He bends his spine backwards and twists out of my grip. He can't scarper upstairs fast enough. His claws pop and splutter against the stair carpet. He doesn't want attention from me. He goes to Mum's room.

Kojak's really old now. Maybe the heartache of it all will finish him off.

In the kitchen, Paul is listening to Jazz FM and wearing Mum's apron with the big purple flowers. Paul likes lift music and doesn't seem to care about looking like a girl.

"Sweet potato and pea," he goes, turning from the stove to look me up and down. He's checking for wrist cuts or signs of an overdose, no doubt. "Sit down."

He has set two places at the kitchen table, opposite one another. I sit down at one of the four chairs that doesn't

have a place set. I don't want to eat with Paul *and* have to look at his face. Paul comes over with a full bowl of soup. He doesn't react to my choice of seat, just slides a placemat over to me and sets down the bowl. The smell is strong, spicy. He has put a dollop of something white on top that looks like bird poo. Paul ladles himself a bowl, adds the bird poo and then comes to sit down. There is a basket of bread with dead-fly olives running through the middle.

"Nice?" he asks. Paul is always fishing for compliments.

"Not tried yet."

I reach for bread, start tearing strips off and putting them in my mouth one by one, chewing thoughtfully, trying to delay the tasting of the soup. He'll have to wait for the next ice age before I tell him he's a great cook.

"You know, Melon, you don't have to lock yourself in the bathroom."

I look down at the steam rising off my soup, watch the edges of the bird poo spread.

"You can have your own space."

I reach for more bread, tear off a crust.

"What were you doing in there, anyway?"

"Mind your own business."

He shuts up, starts shovelling soup into his mouth, three big mouthfuls straight after one another like he hasn't eaten all week. Only after the third mouthful, does he go, "Ooo, hot." Idiot.

I put my spoon into the soup. I can't really put it off any longer. I can feel him watching me while I blow on it, then slurp. My skin aches from all the watching I get. He waits for a comment. I carry on spooning. He nods, smiles.

He has taken my carrying on as a compliment, which it is not. I'm so angry I could tip the steaming lot all over his head. But I'm also bloody hungry.

"How was the session on Tuesday? You still haven't told me how it went."

This is the fifth time he has asked me this. I am counting.

"Was it helpful?"

"S'okay."

"Did you talk about the argument?"

This is a new one.

"What argument?" The lingering smell of the bath bubbles kicks me back to the night of the Christmas Ball again, the argument we had that night.

"Did you talk about the argument you had with your mum?"

"Which one?" I keep eating to prove I don't care what he knows.

"The one just before she died."

Hot soup clags up my throat. I turn cold.

"I just thought that it may be troubling you and that it would help to talk to someone about it."

"How do you know about that?" I say. I don't look at him. I keep my voice level so he understands that it's definitely not an issue.

"We used to talk, you know," he says. "Your mum and me."

15 DAYS SINCE

I don't talk about the argument at the session. Why would I? That's not what the session is about.

I was expecting an old man, grey, in a suit. Leather furniture. A desk. A couch for me to lie on. I get none of this. I get Amanda. Everything about her is nice. Which is unfair because I really want to hate her. I get a plastic chair in an upstairs room with white walls and a sandy coloured carpet. I suppose it's all meant to be calming. I just want to scream.

Amanda sits on the only other piece of furniture in the room, another plastic chair, smoothes down the sides of her hair (a pointless thing to do, she is as frizzy as me), then switches on her very best sympathetic voice.

"Hello . . . Melon."

There is a pause between the greeting and the name. I am used to that pause. Amanda pulls her face into an exclamation mark and double-checks her notes.

"I think Social Services have misspelt . . ."

"No, it is Melon."

"Oh." She hides behind her folder.

"My mum called me Melon."

There. I cross my arms as an end to it.

Mum.

Amanda stiffens at the word, like an actor who's been given the wrong line and is forced to jump ahead in the script. I stare at her, working my chewing gum, realising this is what it feels like to be cocky.

"Melon. Gosh! How lovely!"

My chewing gum squeaks on my teeth.

"I'm Amanda." She thrusts her name badge at me and holds it there, on the end of its neck chain, waiting for me to say something. What can I say about her 'Amanda-ness'? I nod.

"And I've got here as your surname, Fu . . . Fu . . ."

"Fouraki."

"Is that . . . ?"

"Greek? Yes."

"How lovely!"

I wince.

"So!"

Amanda draws in a big, meaningful breath to begin, then stops. Her faces changes, as if she's just remembered something awful. Has she left the iron on back home, the gas hob blazing? No. It's tissues. She's forgotten tissues. She gets up and grabs a box from the windowsill. Then there's a horrible moment where she can't decide where to put them because there's no table and it seems a bit weird to put them on the floor. After faffing around for an age, she decides to plonk the box on my lap. I want to die. If I don't sob like a baby now, I'll be for it. So I do this little laugh. Amanda cocks her head at me, switches the concerned face back on.

"So how are you feeling today?"

"All right."

"Your social worker explained why you've come to see me?"

"Poppy, yeah."

"Poppy?"

"I mean, Barbara."

"You called her Poppy."

"That's what she calls herself. Barbara Popplewell. Poppy for short."

Amanda looks all sorts of confused. "Oh, I see. Lovely." But she's thinking it's unprofessional, Barbara using another name, I can tell.

"Because it's been," Amanda goes back to her notes, "just over two weeks now." She doesn't carry on and add a 'since' and finish the sentence. Am I meant to do it for her, like some twisted version of Family Fortunes? *We asked 100 people the question, 'It's been just over two weeks since what?' Our survey says the most popular answer iiiiis . . . 'Your mother got whacked by a bus and was turned into tarmac.'* Round of applause. The set of matching suitcases is yours.

"Yeah," I say. "Fifteen days. Not that I'm counting or anything."

Amanda tilts her head again, sends me a silent *poor you*. I ignore it, look out the window behind her. In the distance, two school teams are playing football in fluttering bibs. Small cries and a faint whistle come through the glass.

"So what feelings have come up for you since then?"

The correct answer here I presume is sad, lost, suicidal, fetch me a noose. Something along those lines. *Our survey*

says the most popular emotion in the wake of your mother's death iiiiis . . .

"I'm a bit pissed off."

"Mmm, mmm." Amanda is nodding like crazy. In TV dramas when the counsellor does this the other person finds they can't help but carry on talking. Before they know it they've confessed everything. I don't want to spill my guts, not here in this old house that was probably, long ago, someone's stately home. It seems wrong that a building like this is where the sad and the mad hang out. I am in the wrong place.

"Mmm, mmm." Amanda is still a nodding dog.

What feelings are coming up for you? I can't think of anything to say. Should I literally do what the question asks, stick two fingers down my throat and vomit up the strange, dark monster that has made its home inside of me? We could interrogate this creature instead.

Amanda keeps at it. "And what do you think is making you feel, like you say, 'pissed off'?"

You, I want to say, and Paul and Chick and Mrs Lacey and everyone else who can't get over the fact my mum is dead and it's no big deal. I don't say this. I raise my eyebrows.

"Sorry that was a . . . I mean, obviously we know what's making you 'pissed off'. Obviously we both know that." Amanda drops behind her fringe to think up some new questions. "I mean, I just want you to explain a bit more about why it's that particular feeling for you. Let's look at where these feelings are coming from within you. How are they making you behave?"

I go back to watching the school football.

When I was thirteen, our whole class had individual one-off sessions with a community school nurse in the medical room at the back of the sports centre. Everyone lined up alongside the breeze-block building and waited their turn for what our teachers were calling a 'Year Nine Health Check'. We'd all expected some routine head-lice examination, but Chinese whispers came down the queue as each person came out. We were going to have to talk about our problems – even the boys, and boys, as everyone knows, don't have problems, apart from the fact they're boys, of course. The school nurse had decided she was going to weed out the drinkers, the druggies, the vomiters and the starvers, the arm-slicers and the promiscuous slappers. Each of us girls was questioned to cringing point on all areas of 'female troubles'. Elaine Wilkie was not chuffed to be told she could get thrush if she kept on wearing those thick tights of hers every day.

But that session was different to this. The school nurse hadn't been very good at prodding. She'd tried to get me to talk about something private, I'd squirmed and she'd backed off. I felt embarrassed that I didn't have anything sleazy to keep hidden. Not like Kayleigh Barnes. She'd been trading blowjobs for weed with her brother's mates since Year Seven.

In comparison to the school nurse, Amanda's heavy-duty compassion is like drowning in jam.

"That's it really," I say. "I just feel pissed off."

"Can you explain exactly how that feels for you?"

"I just feel pissed off."

"Why is it *that* particular feeling that is coming up for you?"

"Don't know. Just is."

"Okay, well let's, um, let's break it down, Melon."

Why do adults always use your name when it isn't necessary? There is no one else in the room. Of course she is talking to me. They do it all the time, adults, name-check each other. They do it to prove they haven't gone senile yet, to show that they still have enough of their brain left to remind someone what they're called. It's pathetic. It just sounds patronising.

"I'm not really upset enough for you, am I?"

Amanda looks taken aback and I'm just about to notch up a point for myself when I notice the spark in her eye. I've been tricked into saying something she wants to hear, I can sense it.

"I mean," I jump in, "I mean, I feel, I feel . . . But I'm just . . . I think people think that . . ."

Amanda's frantic nodding returns, as if what I'm saying makes absolute grammatical sense.

"I mean," I raise my voice, try to stop Amanda's neck from working loose. "*You* think I should be more upset?"

"How do *you* think you should be behaving?" Amanda shoots back, triumphant.

Ten points to the counsellor.

Exasperation is fizzing on my tongue. Amanda reminds me of Mum, that self-satisfied face. I feel like I'm listening to *her* again, talking about the troubled kids at her job, boasting about her work as if it's curing cancer or something.

"Giving them easy ways out? No – this is not my job," Mum would go, lecturing me, as if I had started the discussion, as if I cared. "No. I find ways for teenagers to make the sensible decisions."

"What if I said, fuck it, I'm going to keep selling drugs on the estate, it keeps me in nice trainers," I'd say back.

"Well, what I am asking you is this: how else you make this 'trainer money'? How else you do it and not go to jail?"

"And what if I said, but this is simple."

"I would say, now is the time! Now! Now is the time to rewrite your history. You plan to do this all of your life?"

"Yeah, why the fuck not, got a problem with that?"

"Melon, do not say this f-word."

"That's what it's like on the streets, Mum."

And so it went on.

Amanda waits for an answer, wearing her last successful piece of strategy like a pony rosette. I go back a couple of moves.

"You think I should be crying."

"There are no 'shoulds', Melon, just 'is'."

"Right."

"The idea of us getting together is so we can work through the issues that are troubling you at this moment in time."

"Right."

"So we only have half an hour today for an initial assessment, but I think I should perhaps book you in for some more regular sessions with me."

I want to run out the room.

"Or one of our other therapists here?"

I can't look at her.

"And you could try writing it all down. Your teachers tell me you're a really bright girl."

I wonder if my teachers would have said that if Mum hadn't died.

"Putting it down on paper is one way of getting it out." Amanda has slipped on her best Blue Peter voice. "The tears you talk about are just another way of releasing the grief."

I try to torture Amanda with a weighted silence. Then I say: "What would I write?"

"Whatever you want."

There is that spark in Amanda's eyes again. She is going to ask me what I feel like writing.

"What do you feel like writing?"

"Dunno. What would you write?"

"That's irrelevant. We all experience grief differently. This is about you and what you feel."

I roll my eyes, look at the carpet, grip the edge of my seat. I have an urge to hit Amanda in the face, hard, to stop all this stupid talk, to make her understand. How will writing some kind of school essay get rid of the brick lodged in my ribs? I concentrate on holding onto the chair, reining myself in, stopping it from all coming out. Amanda doesn't get it. The something inside of me isn't grief, isn't loneliness, isn't anything that Amanda can stick a label onto. I snap.

"It's all right for you dishing out the advice." The voice I'm using doesn't sound like mine. It's vicious. "You're not the one with the dead mum, are you?"

I wait for Amanda to pounce on my words, but she is

still and calm. She closes her eyes, blinking away what I just said. She's not going to retaliate. She smiles a painful smile.

"No," she says, rising above it all. "You're right."

Amanda has a dead mum.

Amanda has a dead mum.

She looks beaten, soft at the edges, like another human being all of a sudden. My grip on the chair loosens. I shrink back. I feel something like guilt creeping up inside. I want to say sorry but the word won't come out.

"Right," I say, instead. I start nodding. "I'll do that. I'll write it down."

THE STORY

1

On an island far, far from here, where the sea is woven from strings of sapphire blue and where the sunshine throbs like a heartbeat, there once was a farm.

At first glance it was like any other smallholding on the Akrotiri peninsula. There was a tiny, stone cottage, its uneven walls washed white. There was a tidy yard with a wire fence where a goat held court to an army of chickens. And beyond the cistus bushes that oozed their lemon scent into the breezy air were endless slopes of turned, brown earth – soil given over to the growing of fruit. But this was no ordinary farm – it was a magical place. Here was where five-year-old Maria Fouraki fell in love for the very first time.

Maria's Babas worked hard for his crop. Bow-backed, a crucifix of sweat across his shoulders, he deposited seeds in carefully tilled holes. Babas was a large, round man, and the years of toiling in the relentless sun were written dark on his skin and silver in his hair.

"Just a week is all it takes," Babas explained to his daughter, his only child – a precious gift. "*Agapoula mou*," he called her,

"peristeraki mou." My little love, my little dove. "Just a week," Babas told Maria, "and the growing will begin."

Maria listened, her brown eyes wide, to Babas's stories of germination and natural selection. *Only the strongest seed will survive*. She could not look away from the dark soil at her feet. She wanted the miracle to happen that minute. Babas, meanwhile, tilted his face to the sky, checking for subtle hints of the weather to come.

"If God be good and the summer fine, we shall soon have a new family of watermelons right here."

During the days that followed, Maria thought of nothing but the seeds. Why could she not see them growing?

"Be patient," said Babas. "It's all going on under the surface."

Maria imagined that the seeds were sleeping. Maria's Mama would watch from the kitchen window as her daughter went to each of the hills of earth in turn, put her cheek to the soil and whispered, "Wake up, wake up," in a voice no seed could refuse. When the strongest seedlings eventually burst free of their muddy blankets, Maria believed her soft words had made it happen. The melons would be her babies and she must look after them.

The vines started creeping, spreading, and Maria helped Babas check each morning for darkling beetles, melon aphids and yellowstriped armyworms. After a rainfall she would prune away overhanging leaves to make sure no mildew set in. She ran down the gullies between the crops, continuing her bright words of encouragement. She placed small hands on the rounding balls of green melon flesh, feeling the warmth that they had soaked up from the insistent Greek

sun. She imagined the fruits breathing, in and out, in and out. She tenderly instructed them to grow, to take up more space in this world.

One morning Maria was helping Mama feed the chickens when she heard a curious noise. She looked up to see Babas working his way along the highest slope, reaching under the melon plants and creating a sound –

thud thud

The noise echoed around the yard. Maria felt her heart join in –

thud thud

She raced up the hill to where Babas was down on his knees in the soil. "What's wrong?" she panted.

"Listen carefully, *agapoula mou*." He knocked soundly on the skin of one of the green fruit that rested, bloated, on the soil.

Maria creased her forehead, the same way Babas did and the way his Babas had done before that. A pinched 'w' of skin – the Fourakis look of concern.

"That sound," said Babas with a smile. "You hear? That is just right."

"Just right?"

"*Ta karpouzia ine etima*," announced Babas, expecting Maria to share in his delight. "The watermelons, they're ready."

"Ready for what?" Maria asked, her tiny hands clasped together as if in prayer.

The melons were piled in a perfect pyramid on the back of Babas's truck with no net or tarpaulin to hold them in place. Babas drove away at a snail's pace, and would maintain that

steady crawl all the way to Hania. Maria trailed the truck to the first junction, her eyes prickling with tears. She whispered more words of encouragement, this time urging one of her green children to topple from the truck. But Babas had done this journey many times before and was wise to the bumps in the road. The melons did not listen to Maria. The impossible structure of fruit stayed strong.

Maria stood on that dusty path and watched the truck disappear. She felt the ground fall away from her perfect summer. She was only five years old but already, here it was, her first lesson in how to love and lose – a toughening-up for the future. A horrible something took hold of Maria's heart and gave it a painful twist. Her only thought: *how will I love anything more than I loved those melons?*