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## Agis and Mary

She gathers the crumbs from the table. With her palm she drags them to the edge. A chain hangs from her wrist. *Mary*, with etched lines, and under it, a mobile phone. Agis looks at her. No, he doesn't want to help her. He looks away. He knows what is about to happen. All the crumbs fall. And as they fall they form a drizzle of wheat crumbs. Then a lake, maybe a plain, perhaps a knoll, from meaningless bits of bread. Mary stands with her back slightly bent. Agis stares at the floor, "Leave them there, Mother. I'll sweep them up." Mary drags her slippers into the living room. Agis leans his elbows on the table. The sharp crumbs prick at his naked arms.

Mary sits on the worn sofa. She waits patiently, arms crossed in her lap. Agis suspects why. He gets up from the table and turns the TV on. Another life embraces them. Mary gets bored easily. Agis sits next to her. He has made a video of advertisements from the 1980s for her. She likes advertisements. They fascinate her. His eyes close. His unemployment check isn't enough for both of them.

Agis gives Mary a bath. He shampoos her hair with his gnawed fingers. He chews at their tips from anxiety. He rubs her skin with the sponge, "Am I hurting you?" Mary doesn't say. Only her eyes are vaguely lit. She likes the water, it reminds her of something familiar, something from her past. Old age disgusts Agis. The hands stained with brown splotches, the body that shrinks like gathered cloth. He takes a deep breath and dries her back.

Mary smiles because somewhere inside she knows the order of things and what will inevitably follow: "A ride, a ride." Agis nods to placate her.

He helps her get into the car. Mary knows the car well. How its seams are torn, its metal dented. How it belches exhaust. She knows it with a knowledge that accompanies her always. Agis is tied to that "always" and its small changes that signal something won't be reversed. Small changes that upset him. The engine groans. He changes gears. His father's car won't wear out. Metal lasts, a man doesn't. His stamina is like a seam. It frays, like the leather seats. The car speeds up.

Mary likes the countryside. The trees that tower above her. The flowers that change with the seasons. The greenery that never has the exact same shade. Mary likes TV and the countryside. Agis walks close to her. Always two measured steps behind. If something happens, he'll be there to catch her. Old people are always falling, their bones snapping like stale bread. Mary leans against the trunk of a tree. Agis watches her. There by the tree she looks like a crone. She could live forever, just to torment him. A breeze is blowing. It might rain. Old people sense changes in the weather. That's probably why they talk about it so much. Mary's anxious. Her look meets his. Agis comforts her, "Let's go home." Mary leans on him for a bit. Then they take the road back. Mary in front. Agis behind. Always two steps behind.

Now it's raining like crazy. Now and then, the distant rumble of thunder can be heard. Mary is afraid of lightning. Agis pushes a pill into Mary's mouth, "It'll pass." He gives her water to swallow down the pill. Mary

refuses it. Fear parches her mouth, the pill won't go down. Agis presses her jaw with his fingers to close her mouth. Old people sometimes forget to breathe. From stubbornness perhaps. Agis doesn't insist. Only as much as she can take. He strokes her hair. Her stamina is inexhaustible. Mary swallows the pill.

She sleeps in her room with the door half open, never closed. Agis sweeps up the crumbs from the floor. Later he washes the plates and straightens up the small mess that two people who live with very little can make. Mary has nightmares often. Agis understands. The more you forget, the more you struggle to remember. And nightmares wake up the memory, yanked as they are from nothing to become something larger. Mary breathes quickly. A bad sign, someone sleeping so wide awake. Agis sits on the couch and turns the TV on.

It's approaching three. The small hours of the night pile up on him. He can't sleep. He prefers the night. Then, when Mary's asleep, he has the impression that he's even more alone. He changes channels. Mary winces in her dreams. She calls out a name, "Pantelis, Pantelis." No, it's not him. His name is Agis. "For Christ's sake!." He kneels next to his mother, "I'm here." Mary opens her eyes and looks at him gravely, "Pantelis." Agis knows that he's not and never will be her Pantelis. It's a torment to him, this misfortune to resemble him. He takes her hand in his. Mary falls back to sleep. Agis sleeps on the couch. With the light on. He turns it off a little before dawn. Many times he fears that dawn won't come. Then he leaves the light on. His fear can be measured in the nightly kilowatts of the power company. The nightmares that live inside him like

mice. They gnaw at him, along with the electric wires. He rolls over, along with the day.

He has difficulty waking up in the morning. It's not that he can't. It's that he doesn't want to. Just before he leaves the apartment, he pauses at her door, "I'm leaving and I'll come back." Mary opens her eyes. He listens in on her struggling to lift herself from the bed. He unscrews the kitchen fuse. Then locks the door. It's tiring to search for his mother on the streets. He prefers her to wander between four walls. Mary cries. Her crying is heart-rending. Like a stream rolling over sharp rocks. The sound of Mary's tears reminds him of gargling when he was a boy. And his swollen tonsils that were never taken out. He always thought they would blossom. Then he grew up.

Agis stops at the neighbourhood lottery shop. He doesn't gamble. He's learned to make do with very little. And that little that he has is greater than the probability of winning at those games you play with five or six numbers. Even the possibilities cost. Agis wanders the streets. Whatever his mother doesn't do, he does. With the difference that, however much he tries to forget, he remembers. He always returns around dusk. A little before six. Regular repetition reassures Mary. When she dies, perhaps he'll miss her.

Agis and Mary always or almost always eat together at six. If not at six, a little before or after. Mary asks, "What time are we going to eat?" Agis answers, "At six." And already it's 6:15. Memory is even stronger than time. They eat together. The crumbs pile up on the plastic tablecloth. On the stamen of the

flowers. Under Mary's plate. She likes bread. She digs motes into the bread. It's the time when Agis falls silent. Her nails dig at the bits of bread like a hoe scrapes the earth. Mary eats very little. She scatters the rest on the floor. Agis feels sorry for the bread that's wasted for some architectural whim. Agis smokes on the balcony. Mary stays in the kitchen. Her hands touch the window. Agis knows that she's waiting in ambush. His balcony resembles a jail. It could be one. The railing is his height. He's not especially tall. Mary put the railing up when he turned five. She was afraid he would be attracted by the height. Agis looks down. How insignificant the world is. Mary hits the glass with her palm. Agis sticks his face into the latticework. When it came time he didn't take down the railing. He couldn't be bothered, He forgot, didn't have the money. And lucky for him, since now, with Mary, it's useful. Mary pounds the glass with both her palms. Agis puts out his cigarette. The order of things has an internal rhythm. His mother has swallowed the order of things. An alarm clock that permeates her and strikes like an electric current, without warning.

Agis makes like he is reading. Mary watches TV. Agis reads. It's easier to read than to pretend to be reading. Mary urinates on herself. It doesn't happen often. Only now and then. Agis sets his book down. He peers at her. Her few white hairs. Bony face. Sickly body. The TV is on. Another life embraces them. Agis bends to pick her up. Mary resists, "No." It's not yet time for bed. Agis pulls harder to lift her up. It shocks him how resistant her skinny body is. He raises her up into his arms. Mary's fists press his chest. He tugs at her hair. The television plays on.

A bath, in Mary's language, implies a ride. Two words that go together.

First a bath, then a ride. Their relationship is beyond dispute. Mary raises her head a bit, "A ride?" Agis doesn't have the energy. How to explain to her that this bath has nothing to do with a ride? Instead he shakes his head, "It's late." In Mary's head, time isn't something that limits things. Time lives through things, it doesn't define them. Agis nods his head, "Tomorrow." His promise of tomorrow is closer to today. Mary puckers her lips. Tomorrow, the pacifier.

When the order of things changes, there are consequences. Tonight Mary is sleeping on the couch. Agis is in his childhood room. His clothes constrict him. It could also be the place. Usually he sleeps on the couch. Sometimes with the clothes he wore all day. He changes sides, like Mary changes channels. But Mary is sleeping. He hears her. The tug of breath that hurries to arrive somewhere. Now Agis sleeps and doesn't sleep. The shadows pile up on him, the outlines that his childhood posters left on the unpainted walls. Agis puts them up against the child he was. The man he never became. Sleep is a pact. A compromise with what he did during the day. Agis, for days, nights, years now, hasn't managed to sleep. Because of the things he didn't accomplish, and those that he could have.

Agis isn't asleep. Outside, the sun rises, slowly, torturously. The two spheres of a buttox form faintly in his mind. Through a diaphonous pair of pants. He dips his hand down the front of his pants. He doesn't take long to finish. He gets up to go to the bathroom. A small imperceptible smudge stains his underwear. He doesn't see it, he feels its wetness somewhere inside himself. He washes his hands well, rubs soap into the small canals that the joints of his fingers make. Agis takes off his clothes and puts them

in the wash. He is naked from the waist down. He stands in the middle of the bathroom. Time flattens out the differences. Time and the setting for the whites. His whites and his mother's at 90 degrees. He wraps a towel around his body. Turns on the hot water heater and sits on the closed toilet seat. Waits for the water to heat up. He counts the bathroom tiles. Again. Maybe in all these years he's made some sort of mistake.

Mary hangs the clothes. Agis stands behind her. With every motion, every small loss of coordination between her hands and her body, Agis is the counterweight. He maintains the balance. Mary insists on hanging the clothes. Agis doesn't understand why. Maybe it's the sound of the wash machine that attracts her. The quiet, monotonous, repetitive pattern. And the temporary weight of wet clothes. Mary gets tired easily. Since she started the job, Agis will finish it. The balances get overturned. Mary sits in a chair. Her eyes follow the motion of his hands. She stands up straight. Agis fears that the most. How she stands up quickly. And the sound of her slippers as she shuffles across the marble floor, what defines the day's tempo.

Agis buys fresh bread. The white bread is already stale after one night. His fingers hesitate over the brown loaves. They have weight, that's how they look piled up there. He asks for white bread. From habit and resignation. Mary doesn't eat brown bread, from habit and because it's not a luxury. The only luxury that Agis knows is the crumbs that Mary scatters on the floor. Crumbs, a luxury only a sparrow would value. Mary waits for him behind the door. She has fallen down. She reminds him of an upended insect trying to right itself. She hasn't broken anything. Agis

lifts her up. Mary leans against him. Agis helps her with her first step. They disagree on the direction. Mary grabs the doorknob. Agis drags her to the living room. Mary cries. Her tears are heart-wrenching. Like a stream rolling over sharp stones. Agis leaves the bread on the kitchen counter. The refrigerator door is open. On the floor are vegetables with the fruit, yesterday's food and the open milk container. Their afternoon meal is splayed all over the floor. Agis puckers his lips. His tears are internal. Like underground rivers that are blocked by cement and debris.

Mary wants to go for a ride. In Mary's head, time isn't something that limits things. Time lives through things, and often, like today, it defines them. Her own time is a demand, it is right now. Agis dresses Mary with her favourite robe. The dark robe shows goodwill on the part of Agis. A step toward reconciliation. Mary's eyes have a vague brightness. Happiness in old age looks like cataracts. One of the big, round buttons is missing from her good robe. Her happiness is so enormous that the button doesn't fit.

Agis drives. The old tape player is useless. There aren't tapes like that anymore. Mary's window is half open. Her white hair reminds him of snow in early summer. Agis changes gears. Mary loves the countryside. The trees that tower above her. The flowers that change with the season. The greenery that never keeps the exact same shade. Agis walks beside her. He takes the bracelet with her name on it from her wrist, and the mobile phone. Now he's walking two steps in front of her. Mary leans against a tree trunk. Agis looks at her from afar. Next to the tree she resembles a crone. She would live forever just to tyrannise him. Agis is walking backwards, "I'll leave and I'll come back." Agis runs. And while he runs he

looks at his hands that are getting smaller. They are awkward fists. Buds that never managed to blossom. Hers are the wise knots you see on tree trunks. She stands there unshakable. Like those branches that won't lean with the wind.

He sits on the worn couch. He gets up and turns on the TV. Another life embraces him. He counts the change in his pockets. Not enough for cigarettes. He shoves his fingers between the cushions. A pin pricks him. Beside it a button. The pain he feels is that thick, round button.