

Giota Tsiliki

SCHUBERTA





Giota Tsiliki lives and works in Athens. She observes the world around her assimilating whatever it has to offer her. She believes that every day opens a secret door to this earthly and great world. Some of her works have been awarded, others not. Some have been published, others not. *This is how life goes*, she says. What matters, however, is to leave the communication channel wide open.

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To Georgia,
the warm note of my life

Schuberta bounced a few times up and down on her bed - which shrieked displeased - and went out in the garden skipping along. Her name wasn't really Schuberta, but she preferred it over her Christian name. Just like her grandmother, she adored Schubert, Chopin, and all the classical composers. Whenever they came into contact with them something magical happened. A transparent carpet full of drawings gently positioned itself under their feet, and lifted them up in the air. Their tea never got cold, nor did it spill during those undulating trips. These were their best moments. A happy smile spread across their face and everything around was so peaceful and full of joy. Before she died, her grandmother had confided in her some secrets, 'My little girl, don't you ever forget that you are a Schuberta. So you shall always have what the others seek. What you need. And if, one day, you lose your way do not fear because a true Schuberta shall never get lost'. Then she leaned her head and fell asleep. Forever. For quite some days she didn't wish to get out of her room, or to speak to anyone. Her parents respected her will until one day they dragged her to a silly birthday party of a cousin she had never met. Sitting on a rock, she thought about it - and about much more - and felt like a tiny, tiny dot, so insignificantly small that a huge giant could blow her away into nothing. She wasn't surprised when the rock sighed along with her. Instead, she stroked its back and asked what was unbearable in this life. The rock sighed again and answered that no matter how heavy the people sitting on it, it didn't feel the weight. Neither does it care about the winter winds that whip it, the snow that covers it or the sun that burns it. What is unbearable is to lack a door in its soul. Schuberta pondered for a little while but didn't say anything; she only caressed its back and stayed like this until the sun went down.

One day before autumn, Schuberta decided to go out in the garden to try the swings. She was bored and the grown-ups were sleeping. She briefly tested the ropes to make sure they were ok, and climbed up. She vigorously tilted her legs back and forth so that the swing spread out

higher and higher. Every time she went up she took a close look at the back of the leaves. They were silvery, with a thick string in the centre. Some of them bore marks. One was being eaten by a caterpillar. She wondered whether its bites would hurt it; maybe if she was a leaf she would understand. The tree sighed and told her that an offering is no pain. Failing to understand, Schuberta frowned her mouth. She asked it what was beautiful in this life. It bent a branch unveiling a maggot that was turning into a butterfly. She reached to catch it but the tree softly lifted back the branch making the butterfly fly away. Winter had arrived bearing clouds and rain. Darkness fell early. One sleepless night, Schuberta kept on tossing and turning in her sheets. At last, she got up and sat on the window sill. The shadows lurking outside didn't frighten her. She wished she could catch them. She stretched out her arm and a shadow came to sit in her palm. Try as she might, she failed to capture it. The shadow laughed. 'Shadow, you are so flexible', she said, 'I can't catch you'. 'I wish I could have you whenever I want'. The shadow laughed again, shifted position and made itself comfortable on her wrist. She kept staring at it in an effort to understand what she could do for it. She asked it what is that a shadow needs. The shadow replied that shadows are indications, a mere mark in people's mind to measure their existence by. 'So what is it that you need?', Schuberta asked again. 'I told you I'm a shadow', the shadow grew angry. 'Oh no, I didn't mean that. What I'm asking is whether you have a need'. 'My need is greater than desire and smaller than light'. A silver beam shone by the moon made the shadow stretch, expand, and slip outside.

Her mum yelled that they were late and she should not forget to take a thick jacket. She was in no mood for those Sunday strolls; she found them boring and the children of their friends silly. Imagine that they had fun eating ice cream and pulling each other's shirt making hideous faces. And they still pushed each other to climb first onto the plastic little horse that moved back and forth whenever you inserted a coin in its belly.

Besides, she felt like she didn't belong neither alongside the grown-ups nor the children. She sighed and took her jacket, nevertheless. Perhaps, as grandmother would say, that stroll reserved something nice for her. She asked the car seat if it was pleased. It answered that yes, it was, why not? Its leather was still young and flexible and its springs were right on place. Just like a young, sturdy man. Schuberta thought she had posed the wrong question and got so silent that her dad turned to see her. At that moment a strong metallic boom was heard. She awoke wrapped up in bandages and her hand in plaster. Mummy told her they had had a car crash and it was a miracle to be alive as the entire back seat had been compressed. As her mum described the incident, she felt sad for the car seat that a while ago was taking such pride in being young and shiny, and it left a bitter taste in her mouth. She asked for a choux that she liked so much. They told her she was not allowed to eat anything, let alone a sweet. She felt the need to wrap up into her grandmother's cape, but it wasn't possible given she was in hospital. She asked when they would be going home and they said 'not yet'. The doctor looked somehow grim, with a thick moustache, but when he spoke his voice was soft. He held her hand and took her pulse. Without even asking, he answered her thoughts. 'Everything is wisely arranged', he said. 'Should we upset things, we would disrupt harmony'. Then he softly patted the back of her palm and asked her what she likes. Hopeful that he would bring her something, Schuberta started to reel off how much she liked ice cream, roasted corn, bullace plums and, of course, games. She didn't have the time to say which games, as the doctor smiled and handed her an electronic chess. 'You can play with it by yourself', he said. She asked him how could someone play alone and enjoy it. The doctor folded outwards the end of his shirt and sat at the foot of the bed. 'It's a technique that helps us discover an unknown world, our own world', he added. She looked him in the eyes and asked which was the greatest discovery. 'The one not yet made', he told her moving a pawn before leaving the room. Although

winter brought a lot of cold, there were some nice sunny days. They would go out in the yard and walk up and down talking and breathing on their hands. She liked those sunny days in the heart of winter. During the first break, she would always have slow walks. It would help her understand whether the day was going to be good or not. At the other breaks she didn't mind, she could skip around and play even for a few minutes after the bell. One day, they announced that during the last hour they would not be going out in the yard because an important visitor had come to the school, a wise man, so educated that would dedicate an entire hour of speech discussing his achievements. The headmaster presented his biography with great enthusiasm and then the wise man took the microphone and began to speak. Everything Schuberta heard was unknown and interesting, but made her nervous as that man seemed to live for himself, since he was constantly speaking in the first person. She bent her head over the desk and gave up listening until the boy sitting next to her nudged her saying the speech was over. She lifted her hand to ask a question but the wise man said he had no time. She ran to catch him up in the yard. She asked why the wise people wouldn't take questions and, after scratching his head while giving her a stony look, he said that at her age she should learn to listen. She wondered whether she should visit an otolaryngologist. The headmaster, who had heard their conversation, reproved her that she ought to obey the courtesy rules. Schuberta got confused with all the listening and obeying, and reached the conclusion that she wouldn't become wise and that the headmaster wouldn't be on the list of the people she would be friends with once she grew up.

Luckily the Christmas holidays arrived and she enjoyed her morning sleep and walks with her mum in the decorated city. Like today that they went out for shopping. They stopped to admire the crib in the square. Next by, was waiting a man dressed up like Santa holding a bell in one hand and in the other the rope of a pony, calling them to take a

picture. The horse's mane was long and fell down onto its sullen eyes. Schuberta got closer and caressed its forehead making it snort softly as it enjoyed the stroke. It even took a sugar cube from her hands giving her a deep, plaintive look. She knew that she couldn't do anything to spare it from its miserable life, because she was little and had no money. But it would be nice to dedicate to captivated animals once she grew older. Maybe she could build a refuge or do something to give them back their freedom. - 'Would you like to be free?', she whispered to it. - 'Free? I don't know what this is', it replied. 'I would like not to feel this way, though'. - 'How do you feel?' - ' Like they aren't truly interested in me. In fact, what they think is whether they will take nice pictures'. She caressed its snout once more and took note in her head that her refuge would only house animals to cure and feed them before being freed into nature. She just left a margin for animals that might be needed in people's works, although this was a big problem. Now they had to shop for Christmas gifts. Municipal workers were hanging huge bright decorations in the street. She lifted her head to admire them. - 'Mum', she said pulling her skirt, 'why are they hanging decorations in the street?'. - 'Because it's Christmas', she said. - 'Ok, but why in the street?'. - 'What should they do with them?'. - 'Give them to children that don't have any'. - 'Oh, you're weird my little', she said with a sigh. 'That's how the world goes, some people have things and others don't'. - 'I don't like that', she said stomping her foot obstinately. - 'Like it or not, that's it. Could you let go of some of your toys? Believe me; you'd feel the true spirit of Christmas. Provided you really want it'. Schuberta thought of her giant bear Geeno that she had since she was little, the doll with the rope hair, her carousel, the two wooden little frogs, Pinocchio, and of course her beloved lady dressed in period costume. Then, there were some stuffed animals, the board games she played in the past, two or three coloured pebbles, the box with the leaden soldiers and the other box with the dinosaurs. The little car and the helicopter together with the ship she had assembled,

adorned on the shelf since a long time, a few jigsaws she was fed up with and which she had placed back in their boxes. A tiny loom was buried somewhere, along with a melodica and some glass marbles. Her electronic games were a whole different category. Suddenly she felt puzzled. She liked them all and she wanted to have them, even though she didn't play with them. So why did she feel so bad at the idea of giving them up although she wasn't using them? 'Mum, is it difficult to let go?'. She laughed and replied in one word, 'Always', stressing the word. Schuberta insisted on learning more. They sat on a bench. Her mum straightened her cap explaining that although everything is a whole, men lost their orientation because they mainly pursued material things without caring about what happens around them. The more they get the more they desire. So they destroy the gifts they were given and in the end they will end up destroying themselves. Schuberta couldn't help but ask what gifts were given to men, and by whom. Her mum told her that the most important gifts are the faculty of thinking, deciding in freedom and, of course, evolving by wisely managing earthly goods. 'The one offering the gifts', she added, 'some say it's God, others say it's nature'. Holding hot chestnuts in her hands, she decided to let go of several toys and try not to ask for things she didn't really need. On Epiphany they went to the seaside. Every year on the same day they would swim and keep up the family tradition. She didn't care much about the custom, but she loved to swim even when the water was cold. Her daddy always said she was a duck. Of course she wasn't a duck, but she accepted that expression because ducklings were cute and quite independent, plunging with elegance and re-emerging where you didn't expect them to. By observing them, she learned how to take plunges and move her body under the water. She recalled with a smile that one time she had mistakenly chased the feet of a seagull. When she emerged through the foam, she got scared for a moment at the sight of its curved beak; but only for a moment. She asked what was it doing and when did it get there, and it replied that it

had come to clean and had begun to work a while ago. It took a plunge and when it surfaced it croaked: 'Don't you know that seagulls are experts in recycling?' Of course, but she wished to learn how it was possible for a bird to recycle given a lot of people didn't. The seagull rushed to whisper that the difference between men and the other creatures is that the latter are aware of their role. Then it flew away in circles and her mum was relieved that the bird hadn't hurt her.

At the theatre she carefully observed the actors. Almost everyone knew their role apart from a young lady who stumbled and seemed to be unsure of what she was doing. The old lady next to her commented that beautiful as she might be, she was not fit for the stage. The other lady who accompanied her agreed hesitantly adding that she may lack experience. So when the show ended and they headed backstage to congratulate the actors, Schuberta told the young actress that if she really wanted to be an actress she had to speak to the seagull. The girl laughed and striking her head she replied that people don't talk to seagulls. Schuberta squinted her eyes and decided that the beautiful girl wasn't fit for the stage; she lived in delusion as the old ladies had ascertained.

She often went to the carpenter's workshop, owned by a friend of her grandfather, to see him take care of the furniture that the years had warped. This is what mister Menios did. He sanded old furniture and fixed the pieces that had been damaged by time. In his hands he held a plane, a tool that everyone who wants to transform planks into art pieces ought to have; this is how he had described the plane to her. The dictionary, of course, provided another interpretation for the word 'plane' that now she didn't recall exactly. She liked to rummage into the sawdust that smelled either like resinated wine, either like wet soil, either like something she couldn't describe. Within the sawdust and the wood chunks she found a leg from an old chair which she twiddled in her hand for a while. She found it impossible to understand how a rough piece of wood full of knots can transform. 'What is art mister Menios?', she said while he offered her

a Turkish delight from a wooden box. She took one and listened carefully that art is to be able to take a material and turn it into something else. Not just something else, but something useful, for instance a spoon for eating or a book for feeding your soul. Moreover, art is to make the lifeless come alive, to use your imagination. Then he took back the plane sinking in what he did as if he were alone in the world. However, when Schuberta was reaching the door, without lifting his head, he said to inform her aunt that the writing desk was ready.

She was only allowed to enter her father's library after asking for permission. It was a room with heavy drapes, a whole lot of books placed in order and a huge desk by the window. Given she was in the last class of elementary school, Schuberta had now a computer, but she still liked the smell and quiet of this room. She found it exciting to browse the old books in leather covers. Her mum whined about having to open the room – the museum, as she called it – and asked her to wait for her father. And he didn't spoil her fun, of course. He took his coffee and picked the book she needed from the shelf. Her hand quickly counted the pages with the index and skimmed through the words. As soon as she found the word 'plane' she stopped for a while to read and took note on a piece of paper of the difference from the tool's interpretation. It was shocking how different their meanings were. However, now she was interested in the other explanation she found in the form of the following entry: a. a particular standard or level of existence, consciousness, or development <The poet's treatment of the subject lifts it to a mystical plane>. b. to skim across the surface of the water <The birds planed over the water at high speed when taking off from the lake shore>. Her father leaned over her notes with a 'hmmm', which meant she was free to ask him if she wanted to. She didn't miss the chance and asked to know whether what gets smoothed by mister Menios' plane is essential. She carefully listened to the reply which agreed with what she had thought herself. But now she had to learn why the other kind of plane could be unessential. Her father

held his chin, a sign that he wasn't so certain; however he offered his own interpretation. 'In our language words', he said, 'are like feathers. They have a different meaning depending on their use. Feathers like those making the birds fly, feathers like those inside quilts to keep us warm. We also say that people grow feathery wings when they are excited'. 'What creates excitement?' asked Schuberta. Her father, who was always diplomatic in his replies, said that excitement is whatever incorporates essence, the *entheon*, which means the divine. They spoke a little more. Then he took his cup in one hand and the room key in the other, meaning the conversation was over for the moment. Back in her room, she put on the cape her grandmother had weaved and fell asleep coiled in her bed. A bizarre weariness had wrapped her, so much that she forgot to eat. Upon waking she recalled – without being absolutely certain – that she dreamt of her grandmother and felt good and sad altogether. Since her grandmother's death she hadn't had the chance to make any more trips on board of the transparent carpet. The truth is she hadn't tried. Maybe she could try today or tomorrow after the school trip.

They all sang in the bus and the mood was happy. Their teacher wore sneakers and sweat pants, and the way she had her hair in a ponytail made her look very young. The trip included a visit to the planetarium. At entering the room nobody spoke because it was so impressive that everybody's mouth gaped open. The sky came down so near that Schuberta thought she heard a strange –loud, but not annoying – music. Instead, so much her body vibrated to the sounds that she felt like she was born within them. She asked the man in charge of the planetarium if the stars have music. He informed her with great pleasure that Pythagoras – as they say – listened to the music of stars. 'And it might be even true', added the man with pride, 'because we know that Pythagoras built the rules of music'. Satisfied, she thought that it was high time she learned a few things about music and Pythagoras as well. For the time

being, though, she was hungry and happy to hear that they would go to the beach to play and have lunch before going back.

End of March: her twelfth birthday approached. She secretly smiled upon hearing her parents planning her party. She went to her room and opened the secret notebook. Her grandmother had told her to open page 12, should she arrive at this age. Tense and her heart pounding, she turned over the numbered pages until she got where she was supposed to. At a first look she saw a blank page and felt crushed with disappointment. But when she paid more attention she discerned some little marks on the top left corner. She took a magnifying lens and discovered something written in tiny calligraphy letters. '1. The value of things lies on how you see them. 2. Does distance define time or does time define distance?' Schuberta felt something sweet flow inside her, without knowing why. Then she silently regretted not having her grandmother to explain her such a difficult thing. She hovered again the magnifying lens over the tiny letters and kept reading. 'We can't always be helped in our queries. We are meant to seek certain things on our own', and she finished with her usual evening greeting. 'May the moon be in your bed and the sun in your footsteps. Goodnight!'. Great! Now she had to solve the riddle too. For the time being, she took a pencil and noted down her guests. They were plenty. Most of them would ask her what kind of present she wants. She scratched her head and finally concluded: No presents. At the party there was plenty of food and sweets but no drinks. Soon a guest asked for a glass of water but unfortunately not a single drop would come out of the tap. Fuss arose immediately, an uncle said it was probably a malfunction, another one offered to go and buy a few bottles, some ladies wondered how the dishes would be washed and whether the damage was extended, somebody thought aloud how he could wash his car the day after in case the shortage had reached his home. Schuberta fetched a big jar of fresh water. When it emptied she placed it in the centre of the room and asked them to make her a small offering. Everyone

would throw in it whatever amount of money. Everybody laughed; someone said when she grew up she would become a banker; another said they would pay gold for water. Finally, everybody threw in something. Silent, Schuberta emptied the content onto the table. She asked her mother's cousin, an accountant, to estimate how many bottles of water they could buy with that money. The estimate was that approximately 300 people could have drinkable water for one day. Silence fell on the room. During that long silent moment in Schuberta's ears echoed a soft music and a happy smile spread across her face. Someone admitted to have never thought of the value of water. She had received her gift.

Easter came early this year, the weather was rainy. The schools hadn't opened yet and she was bored. She didn't know what to do, the day passed by slowly as if someone had stretched its rope. She wasn't allowed to go out because she had a little cold and she coughed. She measured the house with her small feet; at times quietly, wearing slippers and scaring whoever saw her appearing from nowhere, at times stomping the wooden floor in her mother's high heels so they would yell that she's making too much noise. Sometimes the grown-ups were unbearable. She couldn't understand them the least. She sat by the fireplace gazing at the tongues of fire dancing around. Suddenly she recalled a phrase that her dance teacher had said. 'When I dance there is no time, no space'. She tapped her fingers and jumped onto her feet. 'I got it!' she said like another Archimedes. She ran to her room and re-read her grandmother's message. With this and that she hadn't thought about the riddle. She read it again and wrote down in tiny letters: 'Distance and time depend on mood'. She was sure that her grandmother would read it and smile, and would answer back. Pleased, she closed the notebook and went for some tea with honey. Besides, from the kitchen came the aroma of apple-pie and she couldn't resist but have two slices. 'Naturally, naturally' repeated the teacher when he wanted to stress something. One day she couldn't keep herself but ask. 'Sir, why do you repeat this word over and over

again?'. The teacher smiled and held his pencil up in the air for a while. 'You're right', he said, 'it might seem like this word doesn't suit a lot of contexts, but what if it does ultimately? What if, like many words, we use it to state that something is as much certain as all the natural things around us? Let's talk about it for a while'. There was fuss in the classroom, a few whispers here, a few laughs there, until Alexandros, her companion, said that even plastic things are certain, although not natural. Everyone laughed at the thought of their classmate but instantly frowned when the teacher assigned this problem as the week's homework. Schuberta was attacked by her classmates, calling her a nerd and a trouble-maker, since they'd have more work to do because of her; however, she didn't care because the problem was quite interesting and, as was custom, she wished to solve it as quickly as possible. When she got home she threw her bag in the hall and ran to her computer. After gathering a lot of information that created further confusion, she began observing the objects around the house. The truth is that there were a lot of plastic things that were as certain as the natural ones. The problem seemed unsolvable. She was tapping her fork on the table without eating her food. Her mother's look brought her back in order. Lunch time was sacred for the family and everybody ought to behave respectfully. Today more than any other day, since they had a guest; it was a colleague of her father who taught philosophy at the University. Of course, he wasn't as young as her daddy; he had grey hair and a lot of wrinkles. Her honey-tinted eyes lit up, she carefully put down her fork and simply asked: 'Perhaps you know whether besides natural things, plastic ones are certain as well?' The man swallowed without chewing and looked at her astonished. 'No philosopher was ever able to answer that with certainty until today. However, I guess the question has to do with whether we feel sure about whatever encircles us'. 'So, men', he said gulping a sip of wine, 'feeling the need to explain the world around them needed to hold on to something. They concluded that whatever we define as nature is real and certain. It's

the world of perceptible things. At that time plastic things didn't exist, so we can't include them in what nature creates by itself. Consequently, we may say that natural things connote the concept of certainty and reality. This is one aspect of things. You have time to look for the others as you grow up'. Schuberta thanked him and retired into her room to ponder. She didn't know whether she liked the explanation, although it made sense.

She closed her eyes and focused on the hues she discerned underneath her eyelids as the sun hit her face. She fell asleep. She dreamed of waking up and walking in a strange place. The colours were more intense, the air fresh – you could almost grasp it - like wearing a silk dress –, the butterflies were big and the trees all green and shiny, to the point you had to squint your eyes to see them. As she gazed she hit a rock and unconsciously said 'ouch', but surprisingly she realised she wasn't hurting. As if her foot had passed through the rock. She tried again and joy made her dance until she levitated. She felt great; from all over she could hear sounds of an invisible orchestra. This music reminded her of something, so she began to murmur a tune she knew without knowing it. She didn't feel like she was alone and her body was deluged with incredible bliss. And while she was wrapped in clouds of happiness, she instantly woke up because someone poked her hard. She had fallen asleep on the carpet, over the big cushion. She got up and climbed onto her bed discontented. The grown-ups always ruined everything. It would be difficult now to re-enter that dream. Someone switched off the light and said goodnight. In the morning she heard her mum say to her dad that *she was worried about their girl* – they meant her without realising she had gotten close – and continued in a low voice. Mum said *wasn't possible it happened again*, and that *they had to do something*, while daddy laughed and stroked her hair, telling her not to worry as children have got innocent hearts and unexplainable gifts. Then mum turned around towards her and screamed 'oh!' frightened. She told her in anger that she's not

supposed to eavesdrop and 'I don't want any excuses', she added, 'you're grounded this afternoon; you won't go over to Anna's to play'. Schuberta lowered her head – it was pointless to explain that she wasn't eavesdropping – so she simply had her breakfast, besides when mum lost her temper she didn't tolerate any talking. She said to herself that it's not even worth to be sad about it, nor mad, as grown-ups sometimes would interpret things to their liking. While eating without appetite a slice of bread with strawberry jam, she asked how many explanations can there be to something, but her mum's mood was still bad and she got a 'would you at last eat your breakfast, you won't make it to catch the school bus'. When her mum left the kitchen saying 'ugh, that girl will drive me insane with her bizarre questions', her daddy winked at her and with a conspiratorial air said that something might have one to endless explanations, that's why we ought to keep an open mind and examine all the possibilities until we find the cause. He said that pointing towards the direction of her mum. She whispered something in her ear and Schuberta smiled. So everything had several explanations, the cause was evident now, mum was expecting a baby.

In the house there was some sort of fever in the air. There weren't few the times she would faint out of the blue, so dad stayed at home more and her aunt had also come over to help. Schuberta didn't know whether she was happy or sad or scared, since she probably felt all of it at once. She looked at her mum, who seemed somehow different, as if detached, and didn't talk to her like in old times; although she wasn't as tense as in the beginning, she now liked to sleep for hours or amble out in the garden chatting with her sister. Sometimes they spoke unintelligible things and would instantly change subject as soon as she approached. She saw the baby in a black and white photograph – was it a baby, really? Some semi-circular patterns, some vague triangles, that no matter how hard she tried couldn't make her scream 'oh, oh!' in awe, like they did. She preferred to stay in her room most of the time to leave them alone, and she wondered

how the baby would be and what she had to do. It wasn't bad that she would have company but she was a big girl to play with baby toys. She wanted to take care of the baby, but they wouldn't let her, because babies aren't dolls as they had told her. They didn't trust her, although she was sure she was able to hold it in her arms without any problem. No doubt everyone would be engaged on the baby. Already, before the baby was even born, everyone talked about him or her and she felt as if she was invisible in her own home. At these thoughts, hot tears rose and sobs made her body tremble. Later she calmed down and she scolded herself that she made up all that in her fantasies. She reassured herself that she was big and capable to look after not only the baby but her mother too. Then she felt proud and after counting her allowance she diligently calculated what she could buy with it. Maybe a little blanket, or a toy, or those tiny clothes. One day mummy took her hand and placed it on her swollen belly. Schuberta felt something move inside and her surprise was so big that her eyes bulged and she tapped her mouth with her palm so she wouldn't scream. Then she put her ear and tried to listen. Mum told her to speak so the baby could hear her, and it was truly amazing because she truly felt like they were connecting. Every afternoon she spoke to their baby – this is how they called it now, 'our baby' – since it was already a member of the family. Given her mum was so sensitive during this period, she asked her aunt about the pregnancy details. The aunt explained to Schuberta that it's a miracle, something only a woman can understand, the utmost emotion, that's how she called it. Moreover, she said that the bond between mother and child is a silver thread reaching heavens. Now Schuberta could understand a little bit why her mum was so anxious about her as much as about the unborn baby, and she felt the need to become sweet like a ripe peach. The months rolled by in the sweet expectation of birth. Schuberta had gained enough height; she now went to junior high school. After quite a while, she sat at the piano and, after striking its smooth surface with her fingers, she opened the lid and played

a bit with the keys. She hadn't played for a long time; she couldn't after her grandmother's loss, besides she thought she had forgotten how to play it. In a while she focused and the melody filled the space. So dedicated was she to the music that she didn't realise the time had passed. Miss Mantin, an English lady living close by, had come for the English lesson and she stood eyes shut in a corner enjoying the music. She nodded to continue. Her mother was smiling in the rocking chair while her aunt served tea to everyone moving ethereally into the house. From the half-open window entered a soft breeze that rhythmically animated the curtains. Everything had such a serene and weightless aspect that Schuberta felt like floating through the music waves of the piano. She kept on playing but now the magic was gone, something was wrong. She turned her head and realised the room was empty. She left the scores at the mercy of the wind and went to look for the others. Her aunt was leaving a small suitcase by the door while her dad was sweeping dirty water from the floor. Mum showed up with an expression of contained suffering on her face. She tried to smile at her but she only ended up making a face. The baby had decided to come earlier and now they had to rush to the hospital. Their car crossed the city honking and soon they arrived. A nurse in pink uniform took her mum somewhere they couldn't see her. The doctor told them to sit in the hall and wait. The room was packed with people. Some paced up and down, others chatted in preoccupation, someone was nervously browsing a magazine and every time the door opened everyone jumped up. Tears arose in her eyes. Someone took the remote control and switched on the tv. They watched without interest until they heard the leader of the country decided to abolish the national television. They let go of their anxiety about mum and the baby, like everyone else in the waiting room, and commented on what happened and whether things were bad for the country or there was a coup. Schuberta got confused with all these tensions and the only thing she understood was that someone wants to tap people's mouths. She

thought that if this person tapped the baby's mouth at birth, the baby wouldn't be able to take his first breath and cry. The baby would asphyxiate. That thought led her – since everybody was focusing on the country's situation – to slip out and get into her mum's room. A nurse spotted her at the last moment and reassured her that the delivery was proceeding well. As a matter of fact, she gave her a green apron to put on and lifted her in her arms to see through the glass. At that point mummy screamed and a few seconds later she heard her brother's cry. Then she passed out and at waking up she was in her father's arms telling her not to give away the fact she went into the delivery room because the personnel would be in trouble. Schuberta promised to herself that she wouldn't let anyone tap her brother's mouth and to her dad that she would keep the secret. Then she asked how it's possible for one person to tap everyone's mouth and dad told her that if we don't respect ourselves and our fellow men, that one person gets stronger seeking to be the only one whose voice is heard. Schuberta calmed down because she knew this is not possible. Later they went in the room to visit the baby who cried carelessly about that one person, since he couldn't speak yet. «En archē ēn ho Lógos» ['In the beginning was the Word'] cited an underlined phrase of grandmother's book. Initially she puzzled over it but she finally realised that the first thing to be ever created in the world was logos [word]. She pictured a world of mute people and she hardly liked it. However, as her aunt explained, logos had a slightly different meaning from what it seemed. Before being able to speak, her aunt added that logos was not only voice but the beginning and birth of everything: ideas, things, and whatever else surrounds us. This is why we ought to protect it like a precious stone, use it for the good and create. Luckily the aunt was going to stay a little longer with them until mum overcame the tiredness of delivery. Besides the aunt was unemployed, although Schuberta didn't agree with the term, because with so much work she did she couldn't be called unemployed. However she wasn't getting paid and appeared in the

list of unemployed people along with many others. As she said herself, she wasn't but a tiny bit of the 30% unemployment rate, one more number in the calculations of the Troika. It sounded like from outer space to her, she didn't quite get it but it wasn't any good. Her dad disagreed with that affirmation because people aren't percentages and numbers, 'it's not possible to bare people off their potential', he said, 'using generic terms'. Following an intense and long conversation, the aunt finally agreed with him. Then Schuberta, who also wished to say something important, said that numbers aren't necessary, but they cut her off scolding her that she shouldn't break in when grown-ups talk. She bent her head as she remembered that we are supposed to speak whenever we have something important to say and not to be simply noticed; nevertheless, she couldn't help but feel as if she had swallowed a bitter almond, since she wanted to say something but didn't know how. Ultimately, she chose silence. She had taken her brother into her room to look after him. After gathering everything perilous, she let him toddle on the carpet while – as usual – she sat on the window sill. It was a beautiful day outside with a blue sky and a few white clouds. It had rained a bit in the morning and everything gleamed under the bright sun. She slightly opened the window to enjoy the air. She took a look at the baby that was chasing the carpet's drawings in circles. She laughed thinking that happiness is plain and easy when you're innocent. She wished she could too regain her innocence, although it wasn't easy. She had already told a few lies to her girlfriends to avoid an unwanted situation. Of course, she knew it wasn't right and wondered why she did it. She was sure that if she spoke the truth they would mock her and perhaps they wouldn't invite her back into their group. 'So what?', she said aloud. 'It's not possible to live alone, it's sad', she added. The baby took a tumble and suddenly burst into crying. She abandoned her thoughts and dashed to lift it up. His fingers clinged onto hers and at once she realised that people live together to support one another. The baby took his first steps squealing

with joy. She ran to tell her parents. They would certainly long to immortalise the moment. But the moment had passed and the baby was sitting again on the carpet chewing a toy. They told her not to be sad about it, there would be other opportunities. Besides she was very lucky that the moment chose her to fill her with joy. She smiled and promised to herself to live treasuring every moment.

She dreamed of being a sparkle up in the sky, or better into the sky. All around her there were myriads of bright, happy sparkles. All of them had started from one point, the same point, and like a school of fish they moved in a circular undefinable pattern opening more and more to the velvety world. The bright school danced in the cosmic ocean, concentrating and scattering. It was an incredible sensation - she had no words to describe it - but during the voyage she realised that what had to be done was return to the starting point once her trip was over. She kept travelling until she felt she had touched something and when she opened her eyes she noticed around numerous objects that at first seemed unknown. At that particular little moment she felt weak but she quickly transported to the reality of her room, with the familiar smells and colours and objects she could identify. A smile spread across her face. As usual, she opened her notebook and wrote about the strange dream. In moments like this she missed her grandmother. To be true, she missed her a lot because some things couldn't be confessed to anyone else but her. So, as she had been advised, she wrote it all down on her secret notebook.

Her heart was lighter now and she dressed for school. A sweet afternoon she was out in the neighbourhood with her girlfriends. They were old enough now to go out without their parents, provided they were a group of 2-3 so they could take care of each other. They decided to walk and have ice cream and then sit in the square to talk. Everything was quiet until a group of well-built young men started screaming to kick out of the square a bunch of dark-skinned children. The girls observed in

wonder and suspense. When they saw throwing the first punch they panicked and prepared to flee. Schuberta and Aggheliki looked at each other and approached with composure. They offered a handkerchief to the boy whose nose was bleeding and firmly asked why this was happening. The group of sturdy young men looked at them in amazement and considering their age they attempted to admonish them. 'Don't you see the place is swamped with immigrants?'. 'So what?', said Schuberta. 'They take our jobs and by the time you grow up you'll starve because of those dirty bags'. Aggheliki stood on her tip toes to appear taller and said bravely, 'Those children are our neighbours, they're Greeks, they were born and raised here', and she added, 'and besides you have no right to harm anyone, those actions belong to barbarians and barbarians aren't Greeks'. A lady applauded the girls and several customers from the surrounding cafes asked the young men to leave. In the meantime, the dark-haired children, whose mere difference was the colour, had disappeared as well. Most of them went to the same school and the girls knew they had at least one Greek parent, but it wasn't so important, what mattered was that everyone belonged to the human race. On the way back all the girls were silent and preoccupied. One wondered whether perhaps wasn't fair that foreigners took their jobs - besides, this is what that old man said too so he should know something - she added to strengthen her point of view. No one replied but looked at each other and every one headed home. She banged the door fiercely on her way in, which resulted in a ticking-off. Her eyes were swollen with tears she couldn't hold back any longer. Sobs distended her chest. Her mother kneeled before her and asked what was going on. Schuberta didn't want to talk at that exact moment, so she retired into her room. She fell face down onto her bed and burst into tears until she felt relieved. At lunch time everyone was silent and it was obvious that they waited for her to speak. This made her even more tense; she pounded the table with the fork taking it out to the horrible food, the meat full of grease and the

cheese stinking like some people who probably aren't humans. Father poured her some water and stopped with his hand her mum who was about to say something. Schuberta went on saying this is not a proper world where one kicks another, so she'd better take up martial arts than dancing – it would prove more useful in her life – and why didn't they pick a better country for her to live in than here where everything is so difficult and sad, with scared people eating off garbage bins and her not standing to watch the homeless anymore, so is the entire world like this? Words poured out of her mouth like a torrent. She stopped as abruptly as she had started. No one replied right away, a deep silence reigned, and even the baby had fallen silent into his highchair. Father stood up and poured some wine into his glass. He lit a cigarette, which wasn't custom during mealtime, and stood on foot in front of the half-opened window. His eyes had become narrow. Slowly, he brought the glass to his lips and took a sip. Then he paced up and down for a while stroking his chin. Mother was observing everyone with her look. When their eyes locked, he asked her to take the baby and leave them alone. Mother took the little one in her arms without objecting and left. Schuberta had had a lot of conversations with her father. But now she felt a weird fluster. She waited to see what he would say. She was already thinking how to defend herself for the previous outburst. Perhaps that wouldn't be necessary. Daddy was always sweet to her. But if necessary... His grounding tone of voice brought her back to reality. 'Look, my little one', he said pushing his glasses higher, 'this is how the world goes whether you like it or not. Taking it from here, we can discuss whether we can do something to fix it, to make it better. However, you mustn't forget that in such circumstances you need to keep calm so as to convert your anger into something fruitful'. It was impossible for her to understand how he could be so serene before such an issue. She looked at him askance, striving to discern whether he meant what he said or he was simply trying to reassure her. 'It's impossible to do what you say, not to react, it comes from within me'

she said and added, 'such nonchalance you grown-ups show is intolerable'. She spelled loudly the last word. 'You know that hardly anyone left their chair to stand up, as if they were at the cinema, until we approached?'. He nodded and let her describe the event and her feelings. He lit another cigarette. 'Remember that what you saw today is a life lesson. Violence, racism and nonchalance towards this issue may leave men wandering on earth like Our First Parents, naked and exposed. Because it's a sign that lurking evil is in control. Nevertheless, each one of us has the right and above all the obligation to subdue it, to exterminate it. Only then men can climb the staircase to gaze the majesty of the universe. But all this requires sacrifice and battles, both individual and collective. Prepare for it as long as you want it. You are growing up little by little. Welcome to the real world'. He gently caressed her hair and left the dining room. Wow! The world of grown-ups was complicated. She preferred her own but they didn't let her enjoy it, did they? Grown-ups got their nose into children's business a lot of times, usually without asking. Just because they were adults they had the right to take their joy away and puzzle them like this? Oh, no! She would allow her children to live in peace, play and dance, eat whatever they want and be happy whatsoever. If they wish to study then ok, but if they don't it doesn't matter. So everyone will be happy and no one would harm nobody. But wait a second - she said to herself - the day before yesterday she scolded the baby because he broke the vase she kept her jewellery in. She didn't actually tick him off for the vase - ok, perhaps a little for that too - but because she was scared he might cut himself. Could it be fear the cause of all negative things? Perhaps, because if for instance she picked up the glass pieces and explained to the baby he must be careful he might understand her. Now she had scared him too, not to mention her fear of this happening again wasn't over. It's tough to train little people. She didn't know how her parents coped with it. It's hard to answer all these

questions. She'd probably go over to her friend to chat and play a videogame, yes, that'd be the best solution.

She took her little purse and went out in dancing steps. In the street she saw a lady holding a nice dog from the leash. The lady marched proudly; the dog turned around from time to time to see her and then proceeded slightly before or next to her. She really wanted to have a little dog but she hadn't been able to convince her parents yet. She bent over to caress the dog and the lady asked if number 37 was close by. Schuberta looked at her surprised, but as soon as she saw her still eyes she realised she was blind. The lady told her not to feel bad and begged her to hold her skipping rope low so as not to scare the dog. She was amazed by the fact she understood everything although she couldn't see. They sat on a bench; number 37 was a little further down and the lady had gotten tired. They chatted for a while. The blind lady had a sweet voice and the gift of listening. Next to her Schuberta felt serene, that's why she offered to meet again to walk together whenever she liked. The lady, whose name was Ariadne, accepted with joy and a great friendship blossomed right away. Twice a week, with the permission of her parents of course, she would meet Ariadne outside and walk until they got tired. Then they made themselves comfortable onto a bench or on the park grass eating seeds and exchanging news. What impressed her most of all was the blind lady's talent of perceiving things she couldn't quite observe. For instance, she could listen to the slightest noise and guess that a car or a passer-by was about to cross. Many times she told her how beautifully a flower smelled and Schuberta turned her head here and there to spot it. At home she would blindfold her eyes with a scarf and do exercises. Soon she realised how little she used her senses. It was a nice game and thanks to it one day on the way home from the dance school, she managed to save from injury her friend who was about to run into a motorcycle. The motorcycle had appeared suddenly from who knows where and would have undoubtedly hit them. And one evening the lights went out, she was

able to find the candlestick and lit on the candles very easily. Another time she prevented the meal from burning, since her mom was absorbed in a phone call. She asked permission to invite her new friend home. She prepared the tea herself and waited proudly to introduce her to her parents. Ariadne came right on time, which is weird considered most people had the habit of being late and using various excuses. They sat in the living room and Schuberta took pride in being allowed to act as the hostess, and even greater pride in the fact her mum liked her friend and talked about recipes and other stuff regarding the household. Her mum didn't seem to wonder how a blind lady could cook and do so many things by herself. Perhaps she was being discrete; however, her behaviour was absolutely natural without the slightest pity. Besides Ariadne displayed such serenity and politeness, mixed with confidence, which made her look very pretty. When their guest departed, her mum told her she was proud of her choice and that it's really worth meeting people who can see through the eyes of their heart. She wouldn't mention much Ariadne to her friends - she hardly talked of her - until one day they accidentally bumped into each other. Of course, they were so curious that they started asking one question after the other. She got angry because she wanted to protect her friend from the gossip and told them in a low, firm voice that they had no right to ask things that didn't concern them. Ariadne, however, fully conscious of what was going on due to her acute hearing, very simply and kindly called the girls who gathered around looking in awe. She told them that she needed someone to read books to her - since she wasn't able to do so by herself - a few afternoons per month. That was it all and there was no secret or odd. The girls got quiet and lowered their heads. What Ariadne had said wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either. She invited them along with their mothers to visit her whenever they wanted to read a piece together and then comment on it. When the last girl left, twirling nervously a little branch in her hand, Schuberta said she wasn't obliged to provide explanations to anyone as if she was guilty.

She even added, 'why the invitation to reading evenings?', since most of them would find it boring. Did she think they could all read together? Most of them passed their free time on the computer playing games. Ariadne laughed vibrantly saying one shouldn't push away people but offer them the knowledge they can bear. 'Meaning?', asked Schuberta with great curiosity. 'Oh, it's what Grandfather Aesop did with his tales and Jesus who taught parables so even the most ignorant could understand simple concepts'. At bedtime she brought to her mind her friend's words for a while. After making an overview of the day, she started planning somehow the next one.

Tomorrow would be a tough day because she had to cook alone. She had cooked many times but always with her mom. She had avoided it several times until now but her mother didn't joke about such things. She had clearly spoken: 'After today's lesson you're ready'. Today's cooking lesson was complex and she didn't quite remember what they did. She shifted around several times, like you shift the roast so it doesn't burn, and finally managed to fall asleep. So the moment arrived to pick what to prepare in person. 'I have left money on the table for groceries; buy whatever you need', said her mother. She reminded her again that her father needed to eat light as he was on a diet. Schuberta nodded. That wasn't a problem. But when she heard aunt Lefka would come over for lunch... panic, panic, panic. She held her head without knowing how to put her mind into order. Her father was on a diet, so greasy food was forbidden. The baby needed something very nutritious. Aunt Lefka, her mum's aunt, was a big, smiley lady who cooked amazingly and loved desserts. As for mum, she didn't like overly salty food which always made her disagree with her father who used to grab the salt mill and secretly add it in his dish. As for her, alright, she stood somewhere in the middle and she also disliked eggplants. She erased and wrote back the menu several times, and she finally turned to the internet where she typed recipes for everyone in case she worked this out. In the end, given time

was passing, she ran to buy her groceries to make it. She came back loaded and began to place the ingredients on the counter. While crying over the onions, she thought how it's possible for a mum to do this tough job every day without compensation, quite the opposite in fact, and often with people telling her that this or that is missing, or pushing the plate aside. Then she decided to make a dessert her mum liked, provided she would make it right. She managed to prepare two dishes and a dessert. And, of course, a colourful salad. The difficult part was the mountain of pans and pots into the sink. 'You have no order, you have no order my little one, you threw the little key into the well', her grandmother echoed in her ears. How right she was saying that. How could she forget? If she washed the dishes as soon as she used them, everything would be spotless by now and she would be enjoying the fruit of her work. It was a good lesson and, apart from this setback and the dessert that came out a little shapeless and stunted, nothing else went wrong. Aunt Lefka was very smiley. She wouldn't stop saying 'marvellous, marvellous', either for the flowers in the vase, or the décor, even for the coffee cup. She seemed to be enjoying her meal and wine at the table since she said 'excellent' instead of 'marvellous'. Schuberta was still anxious because the aunt was easily pleased but she didn't know whether everyone liked the food. So when she heard mother saying she had done a great job, she felt taller. The dishes were collected and the little hostess served her dessert. Aunt Lefka got serious at once and offered her some advice for the dessert that wasn't lacking in flavour but a bit in presentation. Her tone of voice wasn't judgemental, besides - as she said - we first eat with our eyes and then with our mouth. On a paper, she took note of aunt Lefka's tips while the grown-ups talked about the importance of proper nutrition. The only thing she retained from the rest of the conversation was that nature has foreseen to guide us by the colours of foods and that we should eat all the categories every day. She noted down that as well. By the universal truth, that was a nice trick she wouldn't forget about. She had learned enough

for today. Now she wanted to go to her room and rest and chat with her friend in Skype, since Aggheliki would be cleaning today. Could it be their mums had conspired?

That's how time rolled by, summer arrived once again with its heat and sea smiling at us. Vacations weren't on the plan this year. It was the first time her family couldn't afford to go on vacation due to the financial recession. That's what they told her and Schuberta comprehended although it cost her a little. You see, they were all happy and relaxed during the holiday period, staying together all day long and living light-heartedly. What's more, every year they visited a different place to know more of their country and Schuberta had thus met many people. As her father said, you haven't lived unless you have travelled. They couldn't even afford to go somewhere in a tent because the tickets were costly. She had to plan her summer. It was comforting that several friends of hers wouldn't go anywhere either, so she would have company. Some of them were lucky to visit their village, but she didn't belong to that category, unfortunately, although she would have liked to. The phone rang and she heard her mum, happy, speaking to Ariadne. Then she lowered her tone of voice and said 'no, no we can't, thank you very much, it's very sweet but we can't'. She spoke while twisting a curl of her hair, a sign she was concerned. She couldn't resist but ask what they were talking about. Her mum, apparently dissatisfied, replied 'grown-up things' and left in search of dad who was sitting absent-minded in the garden with an open newspaper on his knees. She saw them talking lost in thought and worried that something serious might be going on. In the evening they announced that, if she wanted to, she could go to Ariadne's village for a few days and they would make sure to spend three days with them. Schuberta jumped around with joy and hung around their necks.

The road was ascending and full of turns so the car proceeded slowly. From time to time a rock fell down; the driver said it was caused by the goats that grazed high above. After a long time the village finally

appeared through trees with thick leafage. At the time the sun was beaming on the river that crossed the valley. It gave it a silvery, gleaming tint. She couldn't wait to arrive. The house was made of stone in the outlying part of the village. An elderly woman was sweeping some leaves off the yard and stopped as soon as she saw the car approach. She cleaned her hands against her apron and dashed to meet them with a smile. The days rolled by like the river water, fast. Ariadne took her for walks in and out of the village and in the evening more people gathered in the yard. The older women made grilled corn and told stories of ghouls and fairies, witches and elves. When one got tired, another one continued and around midnight, after spotting the moon, they took the sleepy children in their arms and wished a good night's sleep. Schuberta learned a lot of things: how to make cheese, when to water the patch, and which were the ripe tomatoes. She made new friends who knew extraordinary things about nature. She didn't seek after her electronics not even for a moment because here she explored. She also learned not to be afraid of snakes, how to protect from nettle, and a whole lot more. But most of all, she learned that the people living in the village didn't need to learn two things. One was recycling and the other was exchanging. Ariadne explained to her that it was a city sickness that hadn't contaminated this place. As far as recycling was concerned, it was simple. Crumbs and leftovers were thrown to chickens and the piglet. Eggshells were used in the vegetable garden to help plants grow without fertiliser. Tins of oil were turned into flower pots, as well as several plastic cans that served the same purpose or helped bring water to animals. Few things were thrown into the garbage, so few that the bin would empty only once a week. Exchange, on the other hand, was something totally natural since, for instance, someone who had melons would give them to a neighbour in exchange for courgettes. What's more, she learned how to make canned fruit, how to preserve several foods to pass the winter, and how to collect seeds to have for next year's planting. She adopted a kitten although the

elderly women laughed at her for calling it a stray. There kittens and puppies were being adopted by the owners since they were free and picked the home they would come and go to for food. Everything was so different from the city. There might be a certain lack of comforts but no one seemed to bother. As for Ariadne, she was happy and passed the day taking care of the garden or talking with the neighbours. Several days rolled by until the day of the fair arrived. Then her family came too. Her mum had the chance to cook for the feast in a big cauldron together with the other women, and her dad to light-heartedly drink his coffee in the square where everyone called him 'the professor' and he scolded them softly asking to be called by his name. Unfortunately the three days passed and they had to return to the city. Sorrowful, Schuberta thought that she would no longer listen to the cricket and cicadas, nor watch the night sky believing she could grasp the stars if she stretched her arms. Perhaps when she grew up she could build a house in the village, next to that of Filippus who promised to help her build. They left the village behind and soon approached the city. From a distance it looked grey and menacing. As they got closer this feeling slowly faded. She sighed and thought that this is the place she was born and raised. She loved the city no matter its disadvantages; there were beautiful spots and interesting things to do. Besides, in this concrete city there was her home, her refuge, her school, her friends – how were they, really? – and she would stay there until she decided where she really wants to live. Until that moment that hadn't preoccupied her at all. She opened her notebook and anxiously noted that she had to take care of that eventually. In her ears echoed the last words of her grandmother: 'My little girl, do not ever forget that you are a Schuberta. So you shall always have what the others seek. What you need. And if, one day, you lose your way do not fear because a true Schuberta shall never get lost', and she calmed down at once. Then she read few of her grandmother's notes among which she wrote that everyone must be a citizen of the world. She liked that a lot.

She marked it in her mind. It was getting dark outside. She let the music play and for the first time after her grandmother's death she climbed onto the transparent carpet and travelled alone wherever it took her. All around her myriads of sparkles looked like a bright school of fish swimming in the ocean of the universe.



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