

DIASPORA

by

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Dear Aunt,

When something big happens to you, something you cannot explain, something beyond the limits of human perception, you need time to process it. You need months, maybe years, until you are sure you are sane. I am sure I am sane now. And I am happy. My name is still Harmony—you are my godmother, after all, so you know the importance of names. I am so excited that in a few hours, I am going to see you again after such a long time. I know you have a lot of questions about Notes on Diaspora, my “surreal” interview with Venus de Milo. Soon, everything will be clear. Just don’t say a word to grandma and grandpa yet.

With deep love,

Your niece and godchild

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September came, and I would finally fly to Paris. I told nobody the real reason for my trip. “I really miss Jacques, and I want to see him before I apply for *The New York Times* internship.” That was easy. At least I told them I wanted to move to New York City, provided that I could secure an internship at my favorite newspaper in the world. Everyone was proud of me and hugged me, because they could see how disappointed in myself I had been for the last few months. They all respected that I needed a change of scene, a new place to live and work rather than the pubs at Phoenix, Arizona.

I spoke with my grandparents and my aunt in Greece over the phone. I really wanted to tell them what had happened to me, what a godly mission I had assumed, but I hesitated. I kept it all to myself, for the time being at least, I thought.

* * *

Paris, finally.

As I left the airport, my eyes fell on a newspaper in a dustbin. It was *Eleftheria*, the leading Greek-Cypriot newspaper published in the UK. Its name means “freedom.” I stood still for a few seconds, thinking of my Greek history lessons as a child, of my grandmother and my grandfather explaining to me in simple words what freedom had meant for Greeks throughout the centuries. My heart started beating fast. I took the newspaper in my hands. A Greek-Cypriot, living in the UK, had bought this newspaper, travelled to Paris, thrown it in a dustbin, and continued with his life. In how many places have Greeks had to adjust throughout history? I closed my eyes and thought of Venus, the Goddess of love, born in Cyprus, created from the sea-foam produced by the fall of Uranus’ genitals into the sea.

* * *

Jacques, my boyfriend, was waiting for me in front of the airport.

“Harmony!” He called out my name with his warm, French accent before I saw him, as I was looking around, feeling a bit lost. I loved my peculiar name every time I heard Jacques utter it, either softly or out loud. And I say “peculiar” because I was around twelve when I first started having existential thoughts about identity and also wondering about names and naming. Around twelve, yes, when I unwillingly left childhood to enter puberty, while beginning junior high in an American school, a school I wanted so much to embrace, but of which my grandparents were still suspicious.

* * *

During my first week of junior high, I came home from school cheerless one afternoon and sat on my grandmother’s lap. “Granny, who on earth names their child Harmony? The kids at school laugh at me. Is it even a Greek name?”

The kind woman laughed and hugged me.

“You know, my dove, harmony, balance, or meter was a really important value for our ancestors. It’s the opposite of extravagance; it’s the true beauty and meaning of life, to live in harmony with yourself, with the community, with nature, with God. Harmony is music and life and earth and spirit. I gave birth to your mother on Milos, in a bathtub, and named her Lefkothea, like the sea nymph that gave a handkerchief to great Odysseus and saved him from an inevitable drowning. You know, history often favors men, but women are the invisible protectors and nurturers. Your mother gave birth to your older sister in the traditional way, in a hospital, but with you, she wanted to try the water method. You came to life like foam, the way the goddess Aphrodite did, and for this reason, your parents called you Harmony. It’s not a coincidence that Harmony was the name of Aphrodite’s favorite daughter, the goddess of love and beauty. It is also not a coincidence that love breeds balance. So cherish your name, because it is unique, and I hope that you can maintain this harmony when you grow up.”

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I walked fast towards Jacques. He hugged me tight in his arms. “I’ve missed you babe,” he whispered in my ear, like the old days. A long-distance relationship is hard work, and we needed to make up for lost time. I hadn’t seen him in over five months, ever since he moved from Phoenix back to Paris.

We had met while I was doing my summer journalism practice at *East Valley Tribune*, the biggest newspaper in Arizona. I was 20, and he was 25. He was just a bit taller than me, his eyes were warm, and he smelled like ocean and jasmine. I noticed the angles in his face and his slight French accent; he had an intellectual air that attracted me from the first moments. He had done his master’s in California a couple of years ago and then decided to try working in the States. I asked him if he liked it, and blushing a bit while looking at me, he told me that yes, he really did. His mother was American and his father was French, and he was born in France. My parents were Greeks, and I was born in Arizona.

One day he drove me home from work and brought up the topic of ancient Greek art.

“You know, my homeland in Greece is in Milos, where the statue of Venus de Milo was found,” I bragged.

“Venus,” he replied, smiling. “Well, that explains a lot.”
I joked about my looks and continued talking to avoid blushing.
“Yes, Venus. The same statue that now lives at the Louvre.”
“Lives?” he asked curiously.

“Well, I meant that it is placed there. My grandparents always talk about Ancient Greek statues as if they are living organisms.”

“Hmm, that’s an interesting perspective. As if the statues take human form when visitors and guards leave them in peace, can you imagine?”

“That would be so fun, I wish there was a keyhole in the door so that I could see what they were doing.”

“I haven’t seen them talking or moving though so far, and I have visited the Louvre more than three times,” he laughed.

“Oh, have you? And how was the experience?”
“A bit sad to be honest, all those beautiful monuments taken from their homelands.”

“My whole family thinks the same thing; that all the marbles and statues taken from Greece during or after the Ottoman period should return to Greece because now, in contrast to the past, we have the facilities and the museums needed to host them. But I don’t know why they make it such a big deal. Art is a thing that cannot be contained in a place, and ancient statues are mankind’s cultural heritage, not Greece’s or France’s or America’s.”

“They did not choose to be taken from their homelands, though.”
“Now you are talking like my grandparents,” I mocked him.

He laughed. “Nobody asked Venus de Milo or the Parthenon’s marbles if they wanted to be taken away.”

“Did someone ask you if you wanted to have a French father and an American mother? Did they ask you whether they should get a divorce or whether your mother should move back to California?”

“No, they didn’t.”

“Well, nobody asked me neither if I wanted to have a Greek name and an American education. If I wanted to speak English but celebrate all the Greek Orthodox traditions every year. And above all, my grandparents and my aunt, my favorite people in the world, did not ask me four years ago if I wanted them to leave Phoenix for good and return to Milos after twenty years of living in the States, did they?”

“No, they didn’t,” he replied a bit shocked.

I felt embarrassed. He had known me for only a few months, why did I start saying these things? Why did I expose my deepest and most embarrassing thoughts? My ambivalent feelings towards Greece? My simultaneous love and hatred towards my relatives?

He said nothing, just hugged me suddenly and patted my shoulders, looking at me with his warm smile. On that day, I liked him a bit more.

Our fragmented identities bonded us, and there was no awkwardness in our communication. One evening, he offered to drive me home from work. I was about to open the door of the car, say goodbye, and leave. He came closer, looked at me, and kissed me.

We were inseparable ever since, until this March, when he left to go back to Paris, having secured an internship at *Le Monde*. He asked me to follow him, but I was too confused with my post-university crisis, that I decided to stay back and grew distant.

* * *

It was my first time in Europe, and Jacques tried to make sure it would be unforgettable. He took some days off from work to focus on me. We did a lot of sightseeing, we visited museums and galleries, we dined at cozy restaurants, I met his friends, family, and coworkers, and we joined a few parties. As a journalist at *Le Monde*, he had a lot of acquaintances. He introduced me to all the important editors and journalists who worked for English-speaking or bilingual blogs and newspapers in France. He was also keen on introducing me to media and television people.

I took him aside at a party. “I know what you are doing, mister.” I tapped at his shoulder. I was sort of drunk already.

“What am I doing?”

“Well, trying to show me how cool it is to work in France? Introducing me to all the editors you know? Telling them about my studies and work experience? What experience? Does working at pubs late at night count as work experience?”

“Don’t be silly, and do not underestimate your potential, hun. I am not trying to push you to do anything. I am just informing you of your options.”

“Options? Are you trying to promote me to French media? Are you my pimp, maybe?” I laughed hard. Maybe I was a bit too drunk. He blushed.

“No, Harmony, I am not trying to pressure you or embarrass you in any way. I admit it; I really want you to move here, at least for a few months. I have missed you. I have told you so many times. I might not be able to return to the States for another couple years.”

“Well, mister, I am here on a mission, a holy and sacred mission to be honest, and you will not distract me with *your* plans for *my* life.”

“A mission? Harmony, what are you talking about? Is it *The New York Times* thing?”

I was being stupid, and I knew it. I could not keep my mouth shut. I got dizzy. I dropped my glass of wine on my shoes and tripped on him.

“Take me home,” I whispered, closing my eyes while embracing him.

* * *

I woke up with a slight hangover, feeling embarrassed about the previous night. I didn't remember what exactly I had told him, but I felt the urge to apologize. I found him drinking his morning coffee by the sunlit window. He didn't let me do it though. He apologized instead for pressurizing me, for not supporting me enough with my decision to apply to *The New York Times* internship, for posing so many dilemmas to me and putting his own ego, needs, and desires above mine, and for generally acting like a jerk boyfriend.

I kissed him.

“I wish the definition of egotism and self-centeredness was just what you are doing right now.”

He laughed. “So, tell me. What do you wish to do today?” I lingered a moment. “We haven't been to the Louvre yet. But, you have been there three times already, so you could just skip it, and I could go by myself.”

“Actually, I have been there four times,” he joked. “But of course I want to do it with you, too. Do you remember this conversation we had back in the beginning? About the secret lives of the statues after the visitors and the guards leave them in peace? Maybe we could get a glimpse of that sight together.”

“Maybe we could...” I said, sinking into my thoughts, contemplating how little I knew back when we had had this conversation.

* * *

That evening, I entered the Louvre for the first time. We spent hours wandering the different rooms, admiring all the statues and the works of art and playing art critics. I left the object of my obsession for the past few weeks, Venus de Milo, for the end. I had taken a history of art class in college, so I tried to apply my academic knowledge to understand this piece of art better. But my academic knowledge failed me, so I just stood there gazing at this magnificent statue. Tall, impressive woman, missing two arms, but still glorious.

“How do you feel about finally meeting your ancient mother?” Jacques laughed.

“Mother?” I was a bit lost. “What do you mean?”

“Well, wasn't Harmony Venus' daughter? Say hi to your mommy.”

“I thought that was just your pick up line when we first met.”

“Pick up line? Oh, like flattery? I never flattered you, I just spoke the truth.”

“To be honest, I am not actually Venus' daughter, but Venus herself. We were both born out of foam. Have I told you the story of how Uranus was castrated? Poor guy.”

I tried to speak normally, though my mind was scattered. He laughed. Then his phone rang, and he moved into the next room to take the call. I closed my eyes and remembered waking

up one morning, my parents speaking loudly with my grandparents over the phone, my father holding the February issue of the German magazine *Focus* in his hands, which showed Venus giving the middle finger. I was a subscriber to *Focus*, and it came directly to the States for me from the German printing press.

And then another memory, a more recent one, from about two months before. A memory that will haunt me forever. I gazed at the statue one more time. My heart beat fast. I closed my eyes to invoke the memory.

* * *

August in Phoenix can be hell. My folks were at their monthly meeting of the Arizona Greek community. I had stopped attending those meetings ever since my grandparents and my aunt returned to Milos. They used to fill me with a sense of belonging; they were among the fondest memories of my childhood and adolescence. But after my grandparents and my aunt left, the thought of attending filled me with an existential void, an anxiety caused by the lack of a clear idea of who I was or who I was supposed to be. So I waved my parents, my sister, my brother-in-law, and my baby nephew goodbye as they entered the car to leave.

“Next time, if you plan a trip to the Grand Canyon with the rest of the Greek clique, I might join you,” I told them sarcastically.

I spent the weekend sinking into the big chair on our porch. Luckily, as we lived a bit outside of the city, we had the luxury of a suburban life, with a small but beautiful garden. I was happy to have the whole house to myself for the weekend, able to make the video calls I wanted and also look for job opportunities online.

My eye fell on *The New York Times* internship opportunity. I was so thrilled; working there had been my dream even before I entered university. The only requirement: to provide them with an original and creative interview. Oh God, who could I interview? How could I impress my potential employers? Maybe contact a professor I had in the past? Maybe the mayor of the city who my parents happened to know? Maybe... my folks in Greece? I was absorbed in my thoughts. And then it happened.

As I sunk into the big chair and stretched my arms, dizzy from the sun and parched from the heat, I saw a bright figure in our small garden, approaching the stairs that led to our porch. I didn't expect any visits today. The plan was to stay by myself and contemplate my future, maybe write a mocking though reflective article for my online blog, an article I could name *After College: Now What's the Plan, Dude?*

I shaded my eyes with my hands to see the figure more clearly. She was a tall, slender woman with a red dress down to her feet and impressive curves. She had golden-blonde hair that looked unreal, so rich and long, and she wore golden sandals. Her shoulders were covered with a black scarf, hiding her arms.

I fell to the ground. “Who are you, woman?” I asked, terrified.

She responded in a soft voice. “*Do you know that Harmony was the name of the sweet daughter of goddess Aphrodite?*”

I shivered. Was this for real?

She continued. *"It was a joke. I am not Aphrodite, she never existed. I am just a good old statue, Venus de Milo. Your boyfriend waits for you in Paris. Go and meet him. And meet me as well, in Montmartre. Who is more suitable to give you the interview that you want than the statue from your homeland?"*

She winked and spoke no more. I tried to articulate a word but failed. She dropped her scarf to reveal her bare breasts and missing arms. I closed my eyes, afraid to face the goddess, thinking of a story from the New Testament my grandmother used to tell me, about Saul who became blind at the sight of God and then became Paul, the apostle. This biblical story used to fascinate me. Am I a modern-day Saul? I fainted.

* * *

Jacques returned. "That was my mom. She's coming to Paris from California for a few days. She wants to see you; she hasn't seen you in a year, and she misses you. We can meet her tomorrow morning in Montmartre. Are you okay with that?"

I could not utter a word. I stood there, gazing at the motionless statue. For the past few weeks, my revelation had been haunting my mind. I didn't hear what Jacques said. Only the word *Montmartre*. The place where Venus wanted to meet me.

"Harmony, are you all right? Let's go, the guards will kick us out. Or do you want to hide behind Venus until the lights are off, so you can peep at the secret lives of the statues?"

He laughed by himself. I couldn't listen to him. He saw that I was distracted and did not force his humor upon me.

"Yes, yes Montmartre tomorrow, sure," I nodded.

"Let's go then, hun." He held my hand and started walking towards the door. I followed him, still looking at the motionless marble.

"I came for you," I whispered to the statue. "I will get this interview."

* * *

We had an appointment with Jacques' mom at 11 o'clock in the morning. Meeting point: the certain cafe in Montmartre where mother and son used to have lunch back in the old days when the weather was nice.

I didn't sleep a wink the whole night. My visit to the Louvre had confused me. I expected the statue to give me some guidance about the way she wanted us to meet. She had told me, "Montmartre," but when? And how? I had no clue. The statue stayed still, like anyone would expect from a statue. Why had I come to Paris? Why did I waste all my savings? Why did I trust my whimsical imagination? Had I really seen Venus during that hot midday at my porch? I was sure I did, and I would get very angry if I revealed it to somebody and they laughed at me. But now I started laughing at myself. Why me? Why Arizona? Why did I have to go all the way to Paris? Why didn't she give me this interview back in the States? Sure, I desperately wanted to see Jacques, but why should Venus get involved with it? Maybe she would never meet me, now that she had persuaded me to move to France. I often questioned my sanity after the revelation on my porch. What was truth and what was not? And how could I know? Who could provide me with a truth-meter, which I could use to tell imagination from facts?

Jacques found me in the kitchen, sunk in my thoughts, drinking a hot cup of tea.

“Mom wants to meet up with you first for a morning coffee. I guess I will meet the two of you later for lunch. I hope she is not considering willing me out and willing you in instead.” He laughed. His mother, Miranda, was a slender, fashionable lady. After divorcing Jacques’ father in France, she moved to California and started working there as an editor for a publishing house.

I left the apartment early to take a walk around Montmartre. A street musician played a melody with his violin, and this melody reminded me of a lullaby my grandfather used to sing to me as a child. I tried to think of Miranda and not Venus. I sat at a bench around ten o’clock and tried to focus my attention on the different people who walked around me. It was lovely outside. Parents with their strollers, children playing, seniors reading their morning newspapers. Lively and happy on the outside, like everyone else around me, who could imagine what was going on inside me?

My phone rang. I had a text from Miranda. I opened it.

“Sorry, hun. I will be one hour late, something urgent came up. I hope you are not already there. See you at *Au Clairon* at noon.”

Great, two more hours to walk around. I was about to put my cell phone in my bag when a message from an unknown number popped up. “*Stay there my darling, I am on my way – V*”

Oh Lord, was this Venus?

I tried to picture the form in which Venus would appear. Would she present herself as the mutilated statue I saw in the Louvre? No, that would be too far-fetched. A marble exhibit that walks around freely would immediately attract the greedy eyes of journalists. I began inspecting every female pedestrian, afraid that I might miss her. Devastatingly, I realized that hundreds of women were passing before me; tourists, students, and career girls were pacing up and down permitting only a glimpse of their elusive outlines. How was I supposed to discern her divine nature? Why did she choose one of the most touristic places in Paris as our meeting point? Was she lying to me? Did she even speak to me on my porch, or was our brief encounter a mere product of my imagination? How did she find out my telephone number, and how did she text me, if she had no arms?

I closed my eyes to relax and breathe. I was in Paris, the City of Light, and everything would be all right. I thought of Apollo, god of light, trying to call him to my mind. I opened my eyes. What was I doing? Venus revealed herself to me, yes, no matter how insane that sounded. I was standing in the middle of Montmartre, waiting for her to show up at any moment. This didn’t mean though that I had to start invoking all the gods in a pagan fashion. After all, it was 2010, and people would think I was at least mentally unstable, a madwoman, a modern-day Bertha Mason, just not confined to an attic.

All of a sudden, I felt a calm breeze behind my back, as if a kind wind blew on my skin. I turned around and there she was, a common girl in her late twenties.

The woman who had been haunting me for weeks was finally in front of me. Venus de Milo, the same woman who visited me on my porch.

She was more impressive than I remembered. She emitted an intense aura, like a Hollywood star, a diva, a femme fatale.

However, she looked like a humble mortal, her golden hair was covered underneath a scarf, and she wore a simpler dress than the red one she wore when she revealed herself to me on my porch. There was a black scarf around her shoulders, covering her nonexistent arms. Only her shoes, rope sandals, were reminiscent of her ancient Greek origins.

Oh my God, she is here, is this for real? She is even wearing dark sunglasses trying to be incognito, I thought, feeling proud that she came all the way from the Louvre to this square, just to meet me.

She kissed me on my forehead, the way my Greek grandmother did when I was little, and then proposed going to a nearby café for our much anticipated interview.

“The woman you are waiting for will be a bit late, so let’s take advantage of these two hours,” she told me in perfect English.

How could she know about Miranda? Venus looked at me and smiled, as if she knew what I was thinking.

We talked about my travel to France and my stay in Paris. I told her about the sights I had seen so far and about the few French phrases I had picked up. She spoke French perfectly, having lived in this country for centuries. But with me she spoke in English.

“An Englishman sailor taught me English for the first time,” was her response after I inquired how she spoke English so well.

Then she said something in Greek I could hardly understand.

“We don’t speak like that anymore,” I told her. “I mean, I can understand Greek but not really speak it, but you speak in a version of Greek that people do not use anymore.”

Suddenly, she became sad. She was more vulnerable and sensitive than I expected, yet her aura was amazing. A normal, moody woman, from cheerful to sad, I thought, internalizing all the sexist discourse that I have heard throughout my life.

She looked at me and smirked.

“Wait, can you read thoughts as well?” I was a bit shocked.

“I can, and I cannot,” she replied laconically.

“Your outfit is fantastic, how did you secure it?” I asked in a cheerful tone, to change the subject.

She giggled. *“It is called an extramarital affair, as I have been informed. Our main curator, a middle-aged woman, is involved with a security guy at least fifteen years her junior, and she has a small wardrobe in the storage room. She’s always confused when I borrow an outfit. She thinks her husband probably hired a detective to spy on her. At least she has a respectable sense of style, lucky me.”*

I laughed hard.

We entered the café, sat down, and a waitress came to take our order. Venus still had her black scarf on. I ordered a Greek coffee, and she ordered a French one, and we decided to share an omelet and a bowl of yogurt with cereal as brunch.

“Fetch me a straw along with the French coffee, please,” she inquired.

The waitress looked puzzled.

“Madame, a hot beverage and a straw do not match.”

“It is mademoiselle and not Madame,” she replied pompously. *“No man has ever met my expectations, and therefore I am free from the burden of an unworthy husband.”*

She avoided explaining the straw part to the curious waitress.

“Her hands are shaky, you don’t want to see her drop the glass,” I replied instead.

Venus looked at me with gratitude. *“You should become an actress, my dear,”* she said after the waitress had left. I laughed and thanked her.

“And you? No man has ever met your expectations? You are a modern Jane Austen.”

She giggled. I assumed she was aware of the author’s work. Our order came, together with the omelet and the bowl of yogurt.

“Oh, there is no straw for those,” she smiled awkwardly.

“But there are spoons and forks and knives,” I tried to cheer her up. “Do not worry, lady, I have a baby nephew, I know how to feed.”

“Call me Venus.” She opened her mouth to receive her first bite of omelet.

And so I fed the statuesque diva with a weird sense of satisfaction. I always thought that we are shaped and mentally fed by our roots, our past, our traditions, our history, our language, our ancestors. Now, this ancient symbol, allowing me to nurture and protect it, made me think that we also shape and feed our past.

I had spent the past few weeks brainstorming questions I could ask her when the interview time finally came. And finally the moment had arrived. Why did she appear just to me? What’s the connection between her daughter, Harmony, and me? How was her life in Milos? Does she like being a captive at the Louvre? Does she see herself as a hostage, an immigrant, an asylum seeker? How does she feel about the fact that she was a cover in a German newspaper, as a way for certain Europeans to mock Greece? Does she feel Greek? French? A citizen of the world? A cosmopolitan woman? Does she feel cursed or blessed? Would she rather stay in the present or go back to Ancient Greece? Is she Venus herself, or a version of Venus? How many Venuses exist, after all? How does she feel about the fact that throughout centuries people have associated her with sexuality and prostitution? Why did she choose Mars, the warrior god, as a lover? Do love and war necessarily go together? Does she prefer being called Venus, Aphrodite, or Afroditi (the Greek pronunciation)? Does she consider

herself a goddess, a power, an emotion? Did she live on Olympus when she was in Greece, or mostly on Milos?

My notebook was full of fancy questions, and my cell phone was ready to record all her answers. I was sure that after such an interview, *The New York Times* would certainly hire me. But Venus stopped me.

“You know that you cannot record my voice, it will not be captured. And you know that you cannot tell The New York Times that you interviewed the actual Venus de Milo. They will certainly believe you are mad. Let’s just talk; listen to my story, and then write it down the way you remember it. Don’t take notes. Tell them that it is a fictional interview. They will appreciate your imagination and creativity, I am sure.”

And she winked. So I put my cell phone in my bag and closed my notebook. Back in Arizona, I would tell my folks that I had this amazing idea when I was at the Louvre: that I would write down an imaginary discussion between me and this controversial goddess, the goddess that Paris chose to give the apple of Discord to, thus igniting the Trojan War. I waited opposite Venus for a few seconds.

“Who are you?” I asked her.

She lowered her eyes, closed them for two seconds, and then, with her deep melodious voice, she started talking.

“I was born on Milos, like your ancestors, about a century before the Common Era.”
“Common Era?” I interrupted her.

“Yes, hun, Common Era. Do not expect me to say Before Christ. I do not believe in the twelve gods, to be honest, but I never received any Christian education either. So, as I was saying, I was the favorite child of my father, the sculptor, everyone admired me because I looked so impressive, but I vowed to master the art of humility, the opposite of what one would expect from the lustful Venus.”

“The art of humility?”

“Yes, my dear, the most difficult of all arts. You see, it is not easy to construct a statue after the goddess of love and lust, and this is what I have to make clear. I am not a goddess, I never lived on Olympus, I never married Hephaestus and I never had Mars as a lover. In fact, I am a virgin, believe it or not. I never gave Helen to Paris; I never ignited the Trojan War. In fact, I never ate any apples. Harmony is not my daughter; I have no children whatsoever. Myth and history are two different things. The life of the goddess began in Paphos, Cyprus, out of foams. My life began in Milos. And the life of Botticelli’s Venus began in Italy, centuries after my birth. We are different; we are not the goddess, simply portrayals of the goddess by humans, with our own lives, stories, and desires. Do you understand, my dear?”

“Yes, everything is so much more clear now, Venus, thank you for your clarification. So tell me, how was your life back then?”

“I spent my free time, when nobody could see me, with my sisters and my friends. I felt loved and cherished. And then, suddenly, for some reason I will never know, I fell into a coma. I

don't remember much from this period, just a smell of moisture and dirt for centuries around me, as if it wanted to drown my marble lungs."

"A destruction maybe? An earthquake?"

"Maybe, who knows, I was buried deep in the embrace of Earth, almost dead. I have no memories of this period. And then one day, during a nice, warm morning, I saw the light of the life-giving sun, and I thought, 'At last! My eyes will see the light again, and my nostrils will not breathe in wetness anymore.' It was intense."

"Oh, this is amazing! And then?"

"I was thrilled, and I looked around me to locate my sisters, my friends, and my beloved father. Not Zeus or Uranus of course, but my sculptor. Everything had changed though. My homeland was not the one I remembered, no familiar faces around, and it felt like I was in the middle of a weird linguistic Babel."

"What do you mean? What did you see?"

"People around me were wearing weird clothes, each one speaking in a different language. Farmers and villagers speaking in Greek or in Turkish, and then others with better clothes, more official ones, more bourgeoisie, a word I later learned. Most of them looked at me in an odd and lustful fashion. I was scared. I was ashamed. I was half-naked. I started crying. My body was nothing to them. I felt like a war captive, a concubine, a sex slave."

"A sex slave? What do you mean?"

"There are so many different dimensions to the immigrant or refugee experience, honey. Somebody from the small crowd suggested I was a statue representing Aphrodite, another one laughed and touched my intimate parts. "Oh, so this is how touching a cheap woman feels like." They all laughed. I have never felt so ashamed. Negotiating a price for me, men deciding my future and where I should end up, treating me like a cheap piece of furniture. A sex slave, exactly what you heard, that is how I felt."

"And then?"

"I wanted to move my palms to my eyes and clean my tears, but I realized I had no palms and no arms attached to my body. My head, my chest, my ancient cloth, were all in different places. Scattered in a million pieces, I lay there half dead from the intensity of this barbaric excavation. I fainted. When I woke up, I was in a sanctuary, in the healing hands of Hippocrates, or a more modern version of him. Someone mentioned the word "embassy;" I didn't know what this meant. All I knew was that I was being treated after a tough surgery. When I managed to stand on my feet, I went and looked at myself in a mirror. Somehow I looked like the old version of myself, less colorful now though, but my arms were forever mutilated. I felt castrated without them and wept."

"I am so sorry... And then?"

"A kind sailor approached me and stood by me. I had allowed none of these people to see the human version of myself, the way you see me now or the way you saw me on your porch, in

contrast to the way you saw me yesterday at the museum or the way you have seen me in books and pictures. I saw something kind in him and allowed him to see the real me. He started teaching me English. He was fair and young, and reminded me of my brother, a statue of Apollo that I would never see again. Soon, my journey started: a journey that nobody had informed me about, or asked my permission for. People speaking different languages were fighting with each other about who was entitled to have me. Not everyone had the same opinion, but in the end, those who took me must have had the biggest influence of them all. It is better this way, somebody whispered to me in broken Greek but with an accent with which I would soon become so familiar: French.”

“How was this journey?”

“The journey was long, and I felt sea-sick. I wasn’t used to such travels. I would often vomit marble, but at least I had the English sailor by my side, speaking in his language to me and caring for my wounds. I was sad when we parted ways forever. The last I heard about him was that soon after, he moved to the West Indies. I arrived in France safe and sound, and I entered the museum that was meant to become my home ever since. Never had I seen such a large and impressive building. I was sad, and still in pain, but years passed, and I allowed the time to heal me. I started feeling happy again, or at least less sad, as I gained some amazing new friends I could speak to in either Greek, French, or English.”

“New friends? You mean the visitors?”

“Oh, no. The visitors, the guards, and the historians who often visit the museum helped me, without knowing it, to acquire the French language, become a true cosmopolitan woman. But it was Marcellus, the Gladiator, the Victory of Samothrace, Artemis, and other residents of the museum who became my dear friends. We managed to overcome our sorrows together; we bonded, helped each other, and healed our wounds. Victory, or Nike, as I call her, has never seen me, as she does not possess a head, and I have never hugged her, as I do not possess arms, but she is nonetheless one of my dearest friends.”

“Oh that was such a sweet description... So you managed to adjust easily?”

“My life was rolling along well, and I slowly felt more desired than ever. Like a woman awakened from the past, from the ashes, from the ancient dust and rust; a woman who has not been worn down by time, but instead has become tastier and more delicious, like good wine. Men and women would observe me, adore me, take pictures of me, and want to know more about me and more about my homeland.”

“Maybe there is a fragment of the goddess inside you then, because of the love the sculptor carved you with. So how do you feel in general about living at the Louvre? Ever miss your island?”

“I often feel confined by the walls of my room, by the walls of the museum. I, too, have a soul, and I want to release it. I miss my homeland with its nostalgic odors; I miss the sun that bathed me and adored me, the sun I secretly had a mystical relationship with; I miss nature and all the stars I used to gaze at; I miss Milos, my island, where I occasionally allow my spirit to wander, allowing the part of me that lies underneath the marble skin to travel in different cosmic frequencies. Here, at the Louvre, I often feel that I am just a piece of marble available for exhibition. But in Greece, I was a wild and disorderly offspring of nature, which

the chisel of the ancient artist fell so deeply in love with that the gods pitied him and gave me shape, form, a heart, and breath. But that was how my life was meant to turn, and I am grateful to the Fates. Complaining about my life would constitute hubris, and my ancient father taught me that this is the last thing I should ever attempt.”

“This is a wise perspective... How did you react to the *Focus* magazine cover?”

“Centuries passed. Then, one day, I heard that things back home were not smooth anymore. Things are solved with politics nowadays and not with wars, they say. And then a German newspaper used a picture of my body on its front cover without my permission, manipulating it to perform vulgar gestures, with an arm I no longer had, an arm I lost forever ago. Are people laughing at my disability? Have we stooped so low as a society that we establish our superiority by reaffirming the inferiority of others? Or has this been a practice since ancient times, to establish a sense of civilization and humanity by pointing at what is not us? Were Europeans saying that certain Greeks, by using their arms, something that I can no longer do, grabbed public money from the citizens of the country I was born in? I have been sad ever since, and that’s why I allowed my spirit for the first time in my museum life to visit you on that hot day on your porch and ask you to come see me. I have wanted to speak to a mortal for so long. I have always felt a connection to Greeks in the diaspora.”

“What do you miss about Greece? And how do you feel about your homeland?”

“I miss my land, I miss the air, and the smell of the dirt after rain. I miss the sun and the vast seas. But I also miss something that I experienced back then and have not felt since. Today, only a sweet and innocent nostalgia remains to soak through every particle of this marble heart. I am a refugee in France, an asylum seeker, an economic immigrant, a captive, a sex slave. I am all of these things; I cannot yet define my identity. Still, I am a remnant from the past, and at least I am secure, I can talk and comment on situations and facts based on what I hear, not on what I experience. I have gained a distance from people and from things. For centuries I have lived abroad, away from the country that gave birth to me. I am a Greek of the diaspora, just like you. The last thing I remember from Greece is a group of people from different nationalities, backgrounds, and interests gathered around me, negotiating around my presentable corpse-like body, treating it as a way to gain riches and elevate themselves socially. My old compatriots after all, whom I have so much idealized, will have to fight against the demons and the nightmares of the past.”

* * *

My phone rang, waking me from a trance. It was Miranda, and she was waiting for me inside the café where we were supposed to meet.

I looked at Venus. She stood there shivering, quiet, as I fed her with the last spoonful of yogurt. She wept. If she had hands, I would hold them tight and kiss them. In a few moments, she would return back to the normality of the museum and would regain her statuesque mood, so I tried my best to help her feel a bit more human for the time that remained; to activate her senses a bit more. I stood up and sat very close to her. I put my cheeks next to hers and left my tears fall over them.

* * *

I met Miranda in a nearby café, and an hour later, Jacques joined us, and we went to a cozy restaurant for lunch. I tried to look normal and give logical responses to Miranda's questions about what I did while waiting, or about why I did not feel like eating much. I was distracted like never before. Finally, I excused myself and said I would return home while they spent a couple hours downtown.

Back home, I opened my laptop and started writing feverishly.

I was about to email my application package to *The New York Times*, but I lingered a bit more, my finger resting hesitantly above the "Send" button.

And then I changed my mind.

I called my grandparents and my aunt in Milos, announcing that I would go visit them next week. I would see Greece for the first time in my life. They didn't hide their sobbing.

When I hung up the phone, I changed the title of my piece from *Exclusive Divine Interview* to *Notes on Diaspora*, and added my aunt to the recipients list, along with those responsible for the evaluation of my application package.

I smiled and finally pressed the "Send" button, feeling more alive than ever.

* * * *

I was in junior high school when the scandalous representation of Venus de Milo on the front cover of the German newspaper Focus made the news. Since then, I have often thought, What if the statue could speak? What if I could interview Venus? In my short story, Harmony, the protagonist and a young Greek of the diaspora, contemplates different immigrant experiences and thinks about different places that Greeks have ended up. I wanted to give my story an international scope and touch upon themes of history, roots, tradition, belonging, womanhood, cultural heritage, ancestry, immigration, freedom, the refugee experience, citizenship, cosmopolitanism, globalization, art, politics, ideology, values, and mythology. I did not want to have a human embodiment of the goddess, but rather use the statue of Venus-Aphrodite as a tool to discuss the idea of portrayal and human constructions, and to link that with ideas of culture, national enclosure, borders, and a borderless world. Venus is somehow a character from the past that comes to our time and talks about the experiences in her time, but with the knowledge of all that has happened until now, somehow like an undead woman whose goal is to shape Harmony culturally.