

"What a gorgeous weave this novel is—somehow, with the lightest and most precise of touches, Bakopoulos reveals how lives, families, and countries fall together and apart in this thing we call life. In this one summer in Athens, love and death and art and politics all shimmer and quake, lifting and breaking the heart in equal measure."

—**STACEY D'ERASMO**, author of *Wonderland*

"Bakopoulos writes of expatriates and exiles, immigrants and refugees, with such intimacy, tenderness, and wisdom, intuiting as she does that these are all states of grief. The stoicism with which her characters bear their various losses—portrayed in limpid, pensive prose reminiscent of Rachel Cusk's work—is deeply affecting."

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"*Scorpionfish* is transporting, a finely tuned story about art and friendship and the weight of history. Against the backdrop of the Greek economic crisis, Natalie Bakopoulos depicts Athens and island life with grace and accuracy, telling a story of return at once deeply personal and universal. A moving novel with an unexpected undertow."

—**CARA HOFFMAN**, author of *Running*

"*Scorpionfish* dazzles, fierce and tender in turn. The clarity of its insights about love and loss and grief will break you and remake you. Savor it, and it will leave you changed."

—**JESMYN WARD**, author of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

"*Scorpionfish* is a riveting, elegant novel keenly observed in the manner of Elena Ferrante and Rachel Cusk. A divine, chiseled stunner."

—**CLAIRE VAYE WATKINS**, author of *Gold Fame Citrus*

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Published by Tin House, Portland, Oregon

Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bakopoulos, Natalie, author.

Title: Scorpionfish / Natalie Bakopoulos.

Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, [2020]

Identifiers: LCCN 2020000753 | ISBN 9781947793750 (paperback) | ISBN 9781947793859 (ebook)

Classification: LCC PS3602.A5933 S36 2020 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020000753>

First US Edition 2020

Printed in the USA

Interior design by Diane Chonette

www.tinhouse.com

SCORPIONFISH

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TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

For Jeremy

Our entire body, like it or not, enacts a stunning resurrection of the dead just as we advance toward our own death. We are, as you say, interconnected. . . . In the most absolute tranquility or in the midst of tumultuous events, in safety or danger, in innocence or corruption, we are a crowd of others.

—ELENA FERRANTE, *Frantumaglia*

PART ONE

1

Mira

The small two-bedroom flat where I lived until I was five is on the northern slope of Mount Lykavittos, between the neighborhoods of Ambelokipi and Neapoli. Back in Athens for the first time since my parents' funeral a few months earlier, my arrival felt both unreal and more real than anything I might have imagined, as though my porous, jet-lagged self had emptied itself into this space.

Aris was working in Brussels for the week, and though I still could have gone straight to his place, I didn't. Though I'd planned to live with him, I had to spend some time cleaning out my parents' flat before I'd rent it out. When I'd come for the funeral I couldn't bring myself to go near it. I expected Aris to object to all this, but instead he'd only asked, "You sure you want to be alone there?" I told him I'd be fine, but really, I wasn't sure.

In fact, it had been so long since I'd been to this apartment that when the cabdriver hoisted my bags out of the trunk, he must have

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noticed my disorientation because he asked, “Is this the right place?” I told him yes, but hesitantly. Then I recognized the flat on the ground floor, which, as when I was a child, had its shutters open to the street. You could have jumped right in from the sidewalk.

I held my jumble of keys like a lantern. It was growing dark, and for whatever reason—crisis, negligence—all the streetlights were out. The key to the apartment itself, a big, old-style safety key, was obvious, but I couldn’t seem to locate the one for the building door. The others were for Aris’s place, the house on the island, and who knows where else.

A light went on inside, and a tall man, perhaps in his early fifties, wearing headphones and running clothes, came down the staircase. He opened the door for me. I thanked him, acting as if my hands were simply full. Noticing, he helped me haul my suitcases up the first few stairs from the foyer to the elevator on the first floor. Even now, I remember the soapy smell of the rhododendrons by the mailboxes, the hint of his grapefruit cologne.

I followed him, then stopped at the foot of the marble stairs. He, whom I’d later know as the Captain, placed my bags in the elevator and asked me which floor. I told him the third, and a look of surprise crossed his face. “Oh,” he said. “We’re neighbors.”

How had he seen me upon this initial meeting? How had I seen him? I struggle to remember how many of these details I had truly noticed or have simply inserted now. We must have spoken in Greek, though later we’d use English as well. Did I hear the thin music from his headphones? I recall something I had until now forgotten: in that first interaction, I felt a flash of recognition, of some silent acknowledgment, a feeling of both surprise and inevitability.

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I thanked him, and when he left I sent the suitcases up—the elevator too small for both me and the bags—and took the stairs. Everything looked smaller than I remembered, but walking up those strange yet familiar flights engaged some sort of homing instinct. As if my arms were moved by some force outside myself, I turned the clunky safety key in the lock and pushed open the door.

Forgetting that my mother had begun remodeling before she died, and that it had looked different even before then, I had expected the apartment of my youth. There was still the airy living room, those high ceilings, the honey-colored parquet floors. A new coat of paint—a soft beige accented with white crown molding. Sheer curtains over the glass doors to the balconies, new shutters. Once closed in and rather dark, the kitchen had been redone in a more contemporary style, as a pass-through with stools and a serving bar, opening up to the dining room. The cabinets were new, white and shiny, and there were new butcher-block countertops. The refrigerator was also new, but affixed to it were a few magnets from takeout souvlaki places, touristy ones from all over the country that my mother, rather inexplicably, had collected.

I remembered more paintings and photographs on the walls, but now only two things remained: a framed print of the entire *Divine Comedy*—all one hundred cantos printed in tiny, barely legible font—and a large painting of Nefeli's. The piece, one from a series of variations on an old church near the sea, had once hung in our dining room in Chicago and now hung here, over the dining room table. The last time my parents came to Greece, they'd brought it back with them. The large door of the church was open, and in the doorway stood a woman with a dark mane of

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hair, her back to the viewer. Almost unnoticeable, blending into the darkness. From afar it looked like a dark painting of a church and nothing more. Sometimes I imagined the girl moving; at one point I had convinced myself that she appeared only to me.

Despite my annual visits, I hadn't been back to the apartment since my father's older sister, Haroula, was alive and living there; over the past seven years I'd always stayed with Aris. After Haroula passed, my parents rented the place; they primarily came during the summers and preferred to stay on N., the island where my mother was born. But last summer, perhaps in anticipation of spending her golden years moving between N. and Athens, my mother began to renovate, as if making these improvements would convince my father to return them to Greece. To her, assimilation was equivalent to death.

I called Aris in Brussels to let him know I'd gotten in safely. He apologized again for not being there. He asked about the apartment, and I told him about the new kitchen, the fresh paint on the walls, the simple furniture. He seemed relieved.

As we were hanging up, he blurted, "Hang in there," which I might have taken as strange, had I not still been mourning my parents. His familiar voice soothed me, though it felt thick with a sadness I attributed, at the time, to the wrong thing.

Few reminders of my parents remained. There was the record player, a smaller version of the one in Chicago, and several end tables. But below the bathroom sink I found a collection of mostly empty liquor bottles—my mother's cashed-out arsenal. I picked one up, unscrewed the metal cap, smelled the thin trace of vodka. I turned around quickly, feeling as though she were watching me. My mother, always the subtext.

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I moved through my old apartment as though I could walk through walls, my past and present and future selves all negotiating the same space, bumping shoulders, tripping over feet.

The closets were nearly empty, except for a few storage bins. I was surprised to find papers and notes from when I had been a graduate student in ethnography, taking oral histories, talking to the inhabitants of the island who lived through the Nazi occupation, through the dictatorship. It's how I met first Aris's father—the novelist—then Aris himself. That first meeting with Aris, and what came after—that is the love story most would want to hear.



My next exchange with the Captain happened the following day.

Jet lag had kept me in bed most of the morning, and I felt oddly cold. I could not figure out how to turn on the heat. The thermostat seemed purely decorative. A large monstrosity sat in the corner of the living room, some sort of space heater, but I didn't know how to use it. The relentless chill of a winter in Athens was nothing like Chicago, of course. I'd expect it in January. But this was early May.

When I finally made it out of bed, I slid open the door of the balcony and stepped out into the late-morning sun. The apartment was on the third floor, but because the building was built into the side of the hill, the courtyard plunged down five or six stories. From here I could peer down into the treetops—a pretty space filled with lemon trees, bitter oleander, and *mousmoulia*, the loquat-like fruits that most reminded me of my grandparents' home in Halandri. The space was spotlessly maintained by the

elderly couple who occupied the bottom two floors of the building. The man was sweeping the courtyard, and I could hear his wife talking from somewhere inside. I recognized the cadence of her voice and realized that they had been living there for nearly forty years, if not more. Since I'd been a child. From another apartment I heard a quiet, measured conversation, and from another building the shouts of children playing and the steady pound of a hammer. But street traffic was nearly imperceptible, and it was surprisingly quiet—the rustle of leaves, the chirping of birds.

The Captain and I shared adjoining back balconies that overlooked the courtyard, separated by a wall of opaque thick glass, an architectural veil behind which I heard him now moving from one side of the balcony to the other. I could not see him but felt his presence. He sighed deeply, and for a moment I thought he was going to speak. But it was my voice that first bridged the gap.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said, in my most polite Greek. "But can you tell me how to turn on the heat?"

"There is no heat." The building had voted to not pay for heat this winter, he explained. The costs were too high. "But this cold is very rare for this time of year," he added reassuringly, noting it would warm up again in the next few days.

He could tell by my silence I did not find this comforting. "I have a few space heaters," he added. "If you'd like them."

"There's one in my living room," I said. "But I'm afraid of it."

He laughed, then apologized, offering to come have a look.

Moments later, the Captain hesitated at the threshold, glancing around, focusing on my table: coffee gone cold, a half-finished beer, a bar of chocolate, my books and pens and papers and laptop.

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My two suitcases, one of them thrown open in the middle of the dining room. He was taller than I remembered. I realized I looked a little ridiculous, my hair covered in a navy beanie, wearing my father's too-large fisherman's sweater that I had found in a drawer.

His eyes were drawn to Nefeli's early painting above the table. "She lived here, years ago," he said. "A friend of my father's. A well-known artist."

I did not reveal my connection to Nefeli then. I can't say why. Though much of it I would later discover he already knew. How my father and Haroula, Nefeli's lover, were siblings. How Haroula had hid her sexuality from my grandparents, despite the years that she and Nefeli had lived here, in this apartment together, a fact I suspect they'd nonetheless known and simply refused to accept. Though I admit a hazy understanding of Greek inheritance laws, I do recall that children should inherit property equally. Some divide it up among themselves, assume ownership for this or that. Haroula died with nothing to her name. She wanted no property. She was against it. "Penniless like Sotiria Bellou," Aris's father, the novelist, used to say. There's a photo in his house on the island of the three of them: he and Haroula and Nefeli dancing around a table, Haroula with her head thrown back in laughter, a black curtain of hair concealing Nefeli's face.

I offered the Captain a drink, some coffee, but he declined. I showed him the contraption in the living room.

"Kerosene," he said. He explained how to light it and I stood back while he did so, as if it might charge us like a wild animal. Then he moved across the room and opened the sliding glass door that led to the balcony. "You have to leave this cracked," he said. "Not safe otherwise."

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“Carbon monoxide,” he added, in English.

I peered into the heater, at the flame, as if to see how close I could get without getting burned. I rubbed my arms, hugged myself. “Maybe I’ll just wear layers for now.” I spoke in English now. His use of it had been an invitation.

“It’s really fine. Just leave the window cracked, for venting. The whole place will warm in no time. But again, this cold snap will pass.”

As he was headed toward the door, I asked how long he’d lived here. He hesitated. I had not expected it to be a difficult question. “The apartment has been in my family but I’ve only recently moved back.”

“Me too,” I said. I did not ask from where, and neither did he. I thought about asking again if he’d like a drink, in the Greek manner of asking—insisting—a million times, but I did not.



I could not come and go discreetly in this building, and the afternoon was backgrounded by the echo of voices and footsteps on the stairway, the hum of the old elevator, the loud clatter of keys. The jet lag felt really terrible this time, and I could barely move my body, stuck in some sort of torpor. I wasn’t ready to see anyone just yet, not even Nefeli—as if I were waiting to first see Aris before anyone else, as if Aris was my link to the rest of the city. Eventually, though, I decided I should leave, if only to spend a little time outside the apartment before the sun disappeared. It was warmer outdoors than it was inside.

On the way home, I passed the tiny *periptero* across from my building. Not the usual freestanding kiosk, but a tiny storefront.

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Only one person could enter at a time, maybe two. “Myroula?” a voice called out to me, as if I were still my five-year-old self. I couldn’t believe that Sophia, the Italian woman, still owned the little shop. Today she wore purple: purple jeans, purple sweater, purple velvet ballet slippers. Eyeshadow too—purple. She had owned the shop since before I was born.

She kissed me before holding me at arm’s length so she could look at me. The last time I’d seen her must have been when I was in my twenties, visiting Haroula and Nefeli.

“I was so sad to hear,” she said. “Memory eternal.”

I nodded, thanked her. And because I wasn’t sure what else to say, how to extricate myself from her sympathy, I bought some more chocolate, a few more bottles of beer.

“The Captain bought almost the same things,” she said, handing me my change. “Plus cigarettes, of course.” She looked past my shoulder toward our building, as if the Captain had just appeared. “So hysterical about smoking, Americans,” she added, as if I both were and were not one of them. “You haven’t met him?” Sophia asked. Almost an accusation.

“Not really.” Not exactly a lie. He had not yet told me his name.

“A ship captain, though no longer working. He lived in America when he was young, too. Someplace cold, like you.” Sophia shared everything and nothing. I remembered she had a key to our building, and probably most of the apartments in it, entrusted to her by the tenants. I had still not found the key to the building and realized I’d have to ask to borrow hers.

Sophia was now telling me the other things she knew about the Captain: that he was friendly but reserved, that though she’d known

him for decades he talked very little of himself. He had two children, twins, though they were living with their mother abroad. She stopped speaking and watched my expression. “And you? Children?”

I shook my head.

“A pity,” she said. “Why you girls wait so long,” she added. I’d gotten nearly the same line from the taxi driver, who surveyed me through the rearview mirror to determine my age. “Well. You have time. *Me to kalo*.” I didn’t have much time, if any, at all. I was already now referred to as “childless” as opposed to “without kids.” I’d come to see that as we age, things are measured not in terms of potential but in terms of lack. And here, in Greece, to be a woman of a certain age without children, well. Perhaps this is why Nefeli and I were so close. We understood each other, the thing we never talked about but that bound us together.

My parents, my friends, even Aris: all of them thought I had postponed marriage and children for a career. But how could it be that simple? I liked my work fine. But an academic position, for me, was not my identity. It was my financial stability. I was proud to have just gotten tenure. But it was not my sense of self. What, exactly, was? That was the question.



The Captain, I was surprised to learn, had just returned from N., the island where my mother had inherited our place when I was ten, and where we’d return to when we came to Greece for the summer. My father always left after three weeks, but I’d stay through August with my mother, who, like me, was on an academic schedule. I had always felt bad for him, having to go back

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to work, but now I realize he enjoyed being in Chicago alone, temporarily freed from my mother's sadness.

"The Captain's father lives there," Sophia said, meaning the island. "You have a lot in common," she added.

She took me by the arm and led me outside, gesturing to the cigarette in her hand. We continued our conversation on the sidewalk while she smoked, and soon the Captain came around the corner, holding the newspaper and looking down at the ground.

Sophia looked my way as she blew a stream of smoke away from us, then nodded toward the Captain. "There he is."



I spent the rest of the evening drinking beer and rustling through the closets, which reached up to the high ceilings. There was far more here than I'd realized. I played old Greek records loudly on the old Victrola. I found a box of my baby clothes, as well as three more of Nefeli's paintings, lined up like books on a shelf. I hadn't seen these paintings before, figures of the same long-faced women but with their bodies erotically intertwined. In a little tin I found a bunch of orphaned keys. I threw some things away: a box of old rags; chipped mugs and dishes; some soft linens that smelled a little of mold; the baby clothes.

Excavating these remnants of the past, I felt neither nostalgia nor a particular connection. I felt newly empty. But when I tried to pinpoint the source of this haunting emptiness it was not clear. Grief had become a part of me, like another layer of skin. But I think, now, I was grieving both the things that had happened and the things that would come.

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One of the last boxes I opened held a collection of dolls dressed in intricate, traditional Greek costume. When I was a child these dolls had sat on my dresser, and at night I thought I saw their arms moving, their legs ready to march. They frightened me. Once I had taken several of them on a boat ride with my parents' friends. My parents, for all their love of the sea, were uneasy on boats, and my mother had been preoccupied with my falling overboard until she became too nauseated to worry. When no one was looking, I reached into my backpack and removed the dolls, which I'd fitted with parachutes made of my father's embroidered handkerchiefs noosed around their necks. One by one, I began to hurl them into the water. I must have thrown four of them out before my father noticed what I was doing and stopped me. After, the two of us watched them bobbing in the water, his embroidered handkerchiefs floating atop them, or spread out behind their heads. Still, these dolls seemed to be a common gift, continuing to accumulate over the years. There were at least a dozen of them lying haphazardly in the box. I returned them to the closet. It was too hard to discard something with a face.