

# Between Heaven and Earth



## The rope ladder

Since early morning Florentia had been in a very bad mood. Nothing was right. She went busily round and round in the nest, and the outbursts of her anger each time had a different goal.

The first person, who felt her anger, was Iason.

– Stop this horrible screaming, I can't bear it anymore. What's gotten into you and you keep screaming?

Between you and me, Florentia was right. In fact, from time to time, Iason uttered such terrible screeches, that were sufficient to shatter the nerves of someone who had far greater patience than Florentia.

– I'm learning to warble, was the calm reply.

– Nonsense, Florentia declared categorically. Sparrows do not warble.

Iason did not give up easily. He had inherited the virtues of his mother.

– Don't you always say, mom, that the will is what matters, and through perseverance anything is possible?

The argument was unassailable, and Florentia preferred to change the subject. She was forced to use the tactic: "*surprise by change to an unrelated topic*". An effective and infallible tactic, because as long as the opponent tries to understand what the relationship of the new theme to the previous one is, where there is no relationship at all, he is so perplexed that with a bit of "hammering" you can confuse him totally.

– And you would do well, instead of lazing in the nest, to provide for the construction of your own, considering how old you are.

As we have said already, Iason had inherited valuable talents. The speed of his thought had no equal.

- But you didn't build the nest yourself. You got it from the swallows, he said, with the air of a chess player who declares "*checkmate*".
- That's not the point, said Florentia, because she had to have the last word.

In reality, however, she acknowledged her defeat. With deep joy indeed. She adored her son, and her joy was indescribable when she saw the skill with which he used the gifts that she had endowed him with.

After all, poor Iason was not to blame. She had just released her anger on him, anger which had a completely different reason. Florentia knew exactly what the cause of her bad mood was. Iason had just reminded her of it without meaning to, when he mentioned the story of the nest.

Florentia couldn't say for sure if the story of the nest caused her pride and joy or anger and grief. Perhaps all these together. It was not a minor thing to live in the bell tower. "We, in the belfry" she often said, when she met the other sparrow women at the well, and saw their tails tighten with envy. And especially in a swallow's nest! There is nothing that can compare with the beauty, the grace, the comfort, the strength, the security, the dryness of a swallow's nest.

"Whatever you say, these horrible creatures know how to build nests". Florentia preferred to not mention the name of anyone she did not like. And she had every reason not to like the swallows. Pretentious, snooty, haughty, snobbish. They pretended they didn't notice the sparrows, which lived next door. Frivolous and vain, they were able to risk their own lives, just to impress you.

"Hooligans, thugs, kamikaze," swore Florentia. It was enough just to see how they threw themselves down when they came out of the nest. They jumped headfirst into the void, as if they were about to slam into the pavement of the churchyard. And actually, they almost got to this point. Only at the last moment did they

spread their wings, shrap! and with incredible speed, begin to rise again. Without flapping their wings, without any effort at all.

– They convert the kinetic energy into dynamic, Polykratis had told her.

Yes, those were the sort of things he said that made her admire him without reservation. Florentia was still as much in love as on the first day. "Converting kinetic energy into dynamic". What a wonderful phrase! "I need to remember it to tell those crows at the fountain", she thought. The females who Florentia didn't like, that is all of them, she used to give them other names.

– What is energy? she asked, so as to be prepared in case of any questions.

Here however, Polykratis, instead of giving one of his beautiful answers, began to squirm. He scratched his plucked head, coughed, mumbled something about transformation into different forms, and at last said:

– Neither can it arise out of nothing, nor dissolve into nothingness.

Florentia formed the definite opinion that Polykratis didn't know what energy was. But she didn't care. What her Polykratis didn't know, nobody else could know. At the first opportunity at the well, as a swallow flew narrowly over them, "they convert ..." she began, but stopped suddenly. Really, how was it? Convert the dynamic into kinetic or the kinetic to dynamic? Imagine if she'd said it wrong! She preferred a diversion.

– We, in the belfry, she said casually, we often talk about energy.

The stupid expression of the others rewarded her completely. Later in the nest she asked Polykratis:

– What did you say these horrible creatures do? Transform the dynamic energy into kinetic or the kinetic in dynamic?

– Both, said Polykratis. When they fall, they turn dynamic energy to kinetic, when they climb, kinetic to dynamic. Incidentally, it is the same thing. Their sum total would remain constant. If there was no conversion to heat, this would be repeated endlessly.

Florentia was satisfied. This happened often. When Polykratis explained something to her, she believed that everything was clear. Later, when she reflected again about it, she realized she still had a lot of questions. This time it was the same. As she thought about it again, she wondered what the heat had to do with all this. She preferred, however, to put it out of her mind. Now she had others to think about. She had enough problems caused by this loathsome owl.

"This loathsome" wasn't an owl. She was Céleste, the female swallow from the neighboring nest. And the problems were not new. They had existed ever since they had moved into the swallow's nest.

What a crazy idea this was! Only Polykratis could think of something like that. Of course, the nests of swallows remain empty in the winter. Dry, warm, sheltered from the wind, especially when all the birds are shivering wet and cold. But which other bird goes to live there?

– We must find a way to get into it, Polykratis had said. We need an invention.

The "invention" he said for fun, new ideas, however, were his passion. He could torture his brain for hours, to find an original solution to a problem that most times he posed to himself, and that usually wasn't useful for anything. Florentia acted as if it bothered her. In reality, however, she watched him with infinite tenderness, patience and admiration, and she even helped when necessary.

The problem, however, with the swallow's nest was real. How do you get into a nest, where you only have access, if you yourself are a swallow? The answer is simple: you don't enter. This is the reason why this nest was so secure. No other bird or snake or cat can enter. If you're not a swallow, then you can't get in. Finito!

Polykratis was ready almost to burst with rage. It was not only so much the desire to utilize the nest, but the desire to solve the problem. He began to analyze the problem to Florentia. This trick was often effective. The solution usually came after such discussions. Perhaps because in order to explain he was forced to organ-

ize and clarify his own thoughts, or because a remark by Florentia helped him out of the impasse, where he was stuck.

– The problem is not so much that the entrance is so small. It is that it is located directly under the roof. You can't reach it by walking, and if you fly near you bang your wings on the roof and hurt yourself.

– And how do the swallows come in, asked Florentia. She had seen it a hundred times, but had not paid attention.

– They come with great momentum from below. Long before arriving, they stop beating their wings, but they continue to climb...

– Because of kinetic energy, Florentia hurried to complete his phrase.

– Exactly. They fold up their wings, just before they reached the entrance of the nest, they go a bit further up, and when their kinetic energy is consumed, and their speed is zero, then they are motionless in front of the nest for a moment. They extend one leg and cling to the nest, or they slip right into it. Only, you have to be a swallow to do this. You must be able to calculate very accurately your position and your speed. Otherwise, if you come a little too fast, you hit your head on the ceiling, if you come a little bit too slow, you will begin to fall before you're in position to reach the nest.

– Unless you hang on to a twig as you fall, and then you climb up, said Florentia absentmindedly.

Polykratis said nothing. He was absorbed in his thoughts. The swallows were gone. The nests were empty. "Now I have the opportunity to do something", he thought, as he later flew aimlessly about. What had Florentia actually said? "Unless if there is a twig". But where the swallows build, there are no branches that reach up to the nest. There is no other point of support except from the nest itself. "This twig, he thought, must have been hanging out of the nest".

Thoughtfully he continued flying, when his attention was caught by a strange shape on the roadside. It was much too thin and too long to be a worm, and most probably was not even edible. But Polykratis wouldn't be Polykratis, if he did not further

investigate what had aroused his interest. He landed, came closer and began to peck at it. It was a piece of string, caught between the blades of grass. Polykratis pulled it and freed it. A broken dry twig however was so well caught in the middle of the string that Polykratis dragged it along with the string. There was also a much smaller piece of wood caught on the end of the string.

Polykratis continued playing and pulling the string, then he suddenly froze. His eyes got a strange expression. He had the solution to the problem right in front of him!

– I have it, he said aloud. I wedge the little stick in the entrance of the nest and I leave the large twig hanging from the string outside.

Florentia heard the announcement of the great discovery with mixed emotions. The idea was definitely crazy and really doomed to failure. This was something to which she had become accustomed. But Polykratis was so excited and so happy that Florentia not have the heart to resist. Anyway, she was curious to see what a swallow's nest looked like from inside. Who knows, maybe the idea would succeed. It wouldn't be the first time that Polykratis' crazy ideas bore fruit. She gave her consent.

"Operation rope ladder", as Polykratis called it, lasted two days. The first day was needed to raise the string up to the parapet of the belfry. A hard and exhausting task, especially when the string escaped his grasp or snagged somewhere. A hundred times Florentia suggested he give it up. But Polykratis refused to hear about it. He didn't look it, but he was incredibly persistent.

On the second day, however, he needed all his reserves of tenacity. To attach the cord to the nest, he had to flutter in front of the nest, beating his wings and knocking his head on the roof, while all the time holding the little stick in his beak and dragging the whole string with the twig. Each attempt cost him a couple of feathers from his already bald head.

Florentia had completely lost her patience and shouted at him that he should give it up. Convinced that she did it for his own good, she believed that the more she scolded him, the better it would be for him.



Polykratis had reached the end of his tether. Exhausted by the fatigue and the pain of his martyred wings, dazed from the blows to his head and Florentia's cries, embittered by her unjust accusations while he struggled for the common good, he realized that he wouldn't succeed, and all their efforts would be in vain. His ability to aim declined. His aim at the entrance to the nest became all the more inaccurate. He was ready to give up.

Then ... in one such poorly targeted attempt the stick came to the edge of the entrance, and instead of falling again, as always, it turned and hooked itself firmly to the inner surface of the nest. Polykratis knew he had done it. It always happened like that. You torture and torment yourself for hours and nothing happens. There is no progress. And then suddenly, without warning, comes success, tack! and you're done. You need to do nothing more.

He tested its strength by pulling the string with all his might. Hanging on with all his weight. The string held. He dropped down on the parapet, came and sat next to Florentia, who was watching the "ladder" swinging as if asking her to climb and get inside.

- Want to go first? asked Polykratis.
- You first, my dear Polykratis, replied Florentia with such sweetness in her voice, as if she were not the same person who had recently spoken to him so rudely.

To enter the nest was now child's play. Florentia loved it at first sight. Clean, dry, warm, secure. That evening they sat beside each other in the nest and from the open entrance watched a beautiful sunset of heavy red clouds fringed with gold. Polykratis' chest swelled with joy and Florentia leaned her head tenderly on his shoulder. They were so full of love for one another.

Lightning and thunder woke them during the night. The beautiful red clouds had produced a terrible storm. Accustomed to having to look for shelter, they jumped up half asleep and it took some time for them to realize that they didn't need to seek a safe place to hide, since they were already in the most ideal retreat that anyone could ever dream of. When they heard the wind whistle without a single breath reaching them, and when they saw in the light of the lightning, the stormy rain lashing down without a sin-

gle drop reaching them, they could hardly believe that such a thing could be true.

– The storm can also be beautiful, said Florentia thoughtfully.

But soon she shuddered. She realized that if they had not been in the nest, they would be clinging to the cornice of a house now, wet and shivering, trying to hide under some tile.

– Happiness, she said, is not being wet and not being freezing in the storm. Why don't you say something? she turned to Polykratis.

– I am thinking, he replied. I think that maybe even more important than not getting wet and not freezing, is to realize how beautiful it is, not to get wet and not to freeze. I can imagine that if you constantly live in such a nest, you might get used to it, and then it makes no impression to you anymore.

Life in the nest was really wonderful. Florentia spent countless hours cleaning it again and again and putting it in order. That was something that Polykratis could not understand. Although he knew very well that he would get some bitter response, not at all flattering for his mental abilities, he couldn't restrain himself at times, especially when he had to wait for Florentia so they would go out together, and asked, "What's taking you so long? Didn't you just tidy it?". And of course he got the answer he deserved.

Their installation in the bell tower proved to be very beneficial also from another point of view. From time to time Papa-Manolis, the pastor, or the church servant, Kyra-Martha, came into the courtyard and threw crumbs or grains in a corner of the paved area next to the fountain. And indeed, the more winter progressed, the more often they came.

Florentia believed that they were doing it for the sake of the pigeons. She could not understand why people liked pigeons so much. Perhaps, she thought, they like them because pigeons are so stupid, and people feel superior to them. Or perhaps because they walk in the same way, and instead of hopping with both feet, as is the normal way, they march by putting one foot in front of the other and move forward like swaying boats.

This interested her little, anyway. The important thing was that they hadn't missed their food for a single day. It's enough, that when you hear the side door opening, you immediately come down on the branches of the orange tree and wait for Papa-Manolis to throw the bread crumbs. Before the pigeons arrive walking, you jump down and grab the crumbs. Even if a pigeon is very close to a crumb, at the moment when it bends down to grab it, you can come under its neck and snatch the crumb away. And it's very funny to see the pigeon looking puzzled to the right and left and trying to understand what happened to the crumb, which it thought it was already holding in its beak.

– Happiness, is having something to eat every day..., she started but then stopped suddenly. I know what you are thinking, she continued. That more important than having food every day, is to understand what great happiness it is having something to eat every day.

She stopped again. "Really, she thought, how long is it since I thought about how lucky we are living here so warm and dry?"

The winter was ending and Florentia felt as if she had always lived in the nest. It seemed to her quite natural and obvious to lie warm, dry and protected when the other birds trembled wet and helpless. But another thought had begun to come to her more and more often. This happiness was coming to an end. The days were growing longer and the swallows would definitely return.

The thought of the inevitable end choked her. In a strange way she combined this idea with the inevitable end of life. The thought of death had tormented her since she was a toddler. She remembered how, still in the nest of her parents, she woke them in the middle of the night and said, "Please tell me something, so that I can forget that I must die".

It was not just the fear of death.

We fear, because we assume that something bad might happen. This was a thousand times more terrible than fear. It was not a hypothesis, which would possibly not even be realized. It was the absolute certainty that it will necessarily happen.

She was not afraid that she might die tomorrow or the next day. It was something else that brought her breathing to a stop. The thought of the final, irrevocable condemnation to death.

She had to die anyway. Whatever she tried, she could not prevent it. The moment would come, when she necessarily had to leave her life. There was no way to avoid it. She wouldn't breathe any more, no longer see, no longer hear. She would cease to exist. The world would take its course without her. Sooner or later. The "when" played no significant role. What was terrible, was the "certainty". This thought choked her and forced her to try to think of something else. This time also, she led her thoughts not to the distant and indefinite, but to the immediate and concrete arrival of the swallows. She ran to Polykratis.

– We must leave, she said imperatively. The swallows are coming soon.

– I'm thinking that maybe there is a way to stay, said Polykratis, who felt again the obligation to find an unconventional solution to an insoluble problem.

– What way, said Florentia starting to get upset. Do you think that swallows are stupid like pigeons, and you can cheat them? They are a hundred times faster than you.

– I'll talk to them, said Polykratis hesitantly. I'll tell them about freedom, equality and fraternity.

– What will you do? Florentia flared up at his stupidity. You will speak to the swallows? Don't you realize that they are blind and deaf war machines? When they attack, they'll prick your eyes out, before you speak a single word.

– I shall explain to them..., Polykratis said in an uncertain voice.

Florentia's patience was exhausted. His boundless naivety sometimes brought her to despair.

– Wait until the swallows are here, and they'll explain it to you, she threw at him, and began full of dark foreboding to tidy the nest once again, as she always did when thoughts suffocated her. She had to find a way to force him to leave, before the swallows returned.

Polykratis remained alone with his thoughts and his doubts. For a long time he had started to wonder whether the whole plan was quite silly. And this time the danger was real. He did not care for himself. He found it absolutely logical and fair that the person who sets up a stupid plan, will bear the consequences. What made him tremble was that something might happen to his Florentia, who was not to blame if he himself was a patented idiot. He decided to work again with great care on the speech he was preparing. But, there was no need for that...

The swallows arrived. That same afternoon, there appeared in the sky the first black lightning flashes from the sword-play of their wings. And the next day, from early morning, the whole area was full of them. Wherever you turned to look, everywhere there were swallows. Up, down, right, left. They flew with their amazing speed, climbed, descended, twisted with their skillful maneuvering, shouting with joy, to be returning to their nests.

Only in front of the sparrows' nest the voices weren't cries of joy.

— Get out, shouted two angry swallows. Out immediately, it's not your nest.

With constant screams and repeated attacks they rushed menacingly towards the entrance of the nest.

Polykratis with the feathers of his neck upright, for there weren't any left on his head, opened and closed his mouth, uttering some incomprehensible sounds which resembled a cough rather than words. He felt his swollen tongue stick in his dry mouth and while he struggled to speak he tried to understand why his legs trembled so strangely.

Florentia determined for everything, was preparing for battle. If someone dared to hurt her Polykratis, she would become a falcon and dismember him. This time, however, the matter was very serious. She would need more than some sharp words. It would be a battle, a real battle. Then, she would join in. She would show what she was capable of to those invaders who came to occupy her nest. Her peculiar logic did not allow her to think that she was in fact the one who had occupied the poor swallows' nest.

Like a good general, she was studying the details of the field for the coming battle, when she suddenly realized another advantage of this amazing nest. The nest was impregnable! The entrance was so narrow that it gave the defenders an incomparable advantage. The intruder had to squeeze through the entrance. No matter how capable he was, he would be utterly helpless for a moment. He would be at the mercy of the defenders, with his head inside, and his body wedged in the entrance, unable to use his legs or wings. With full freedom of movement, they could attack him from all sides with claws and beaks, while the invader could not even turn his head.

All this of course was theoretical, because in practice, Florentia knew well there was nothing certain in a confrontation with the swallows and their cursed speed. They could pass the entrance, before you had time to jump aside. In any case, they would soon find out. The screams and the attacks of the swallows were more frequent. Their charge would start any moment, and the battle would begin.

Then, amid the deafening din of the swallows, some words of Polykratis could be heard.

– ... the supreme good of freedom ... equal opportunities and equal rights for all citizens ... if we do not feel like brothers, how would we live in a society ...

And suddenly the incredible happened. One of the swallows stopped the attacks.

– Let them stay here, it said to the other. It is a pity for the poor things. They can't build a nest themselves. They made such a clever invention to get inside. And they speak so beautifully. We could build a new nest next to it.

It was Céleste.

## The taut wire

From that day Florentia's troubles began. A thousand times she regretted not having reacted at the proper time. When she was ready for battle. But this loathsome owl had understood that she wouldn't have an easy time with Florentia and preferred to act the generous one. "*Let the poor things live here*". What a bitch! To call her "*poor*" in front for her own nest. Such effrontery! "You are the poor one, you and your whole family", she should have answered her. She should have provoked her to come in, and deal with her. Instead she allowed her to go and install herself right next door. "*Let us build a new nest next door*". Why next door? Was there not room enough anywhere else in the belfry?

But Florentia knew what her purpose was. She had her eye on Polykratis. She did not hide it from the first moment. "*What clever inventions they make, and how beautifully they talk*". She meant Polykratis of course, because she, Florentia, had said not a word.

And this Polykratis, he understands nothing at all. So many times she said to him: "Be careful how you talk to her. You do not need so many intimacies. It can be misunderstood". He stays in his world. "*How are you doing madam Céleste?*" and "*How's monsieur Roberto?*" That was as long as they were still talking "in a formal way", because now they are on more familiar terms: "*How's it going my dear Céleste?*" This "*my dear*" why it is necessary, can you explain it to me?

How could he understand the female wiles? If the most bow-legged wagtail wags her tail and says: "*How nicely you talk, Mr. Polykratis*", he will immediately find her sympathetic and want invite her and all her family to the nest. "*What nice kids, let's invite them one evening*". For Polykratis, of course, it's all very simple. Where should they be invited? To the nest where they don't have enough space for themselves. And who cleans up? This counts as nothing for him. He can't recognize the difference anyway, if the nest is tidy or upside down. "All right, replied Florentia, we'll invite them some time". What should she tell him? He wouldn't it understand anyway.

But with this owl things were serious. She was there day and night, effectively inside the nest. Only a thin wall between them. The slightest noise you make, they can hear you next door. From what was heard from them, better not to mention it. Everything! She shuddered when she thought what they were doing when they made these sounds. And she's so shameless. She doesn't care in the least. What if she does it on purpose, so that Polykratis can hear her? From such sluts you can expect everything.

Why, do you think, she brought her nest here and stuck it directly on ours? They couldn't build it a little further away? She has not even built an entire nest. It was only a half. A half-moon shape, which formed the nest by using Florentia's nest as a base. So they finished it within a week. And now she is living in it and is only separated by a very thin wall and spies on everything.

And that stupid Polykratis doesn't understand anything. "*What nice kids, and how hard working, how fast they built such a beautiful nest*". Florentia was forced to talk to him.

– This loathsome owl does all this for you. She wants to seduce you.

– Me? Polykratis laughed, she must have fallen in love with my bald head! Have you not seen what a handsome, young and strong lad Roberto is? Haven't you noticed my wretched condition lately? Anyway, swallows do not care about sparrows.

– Bah! Roberto! said Florentia with extreme contempt. He is only interested in speed. He cares only for dangerous dives and sudden turns. He is so foolish that he could even be a human, racing his car and doing wheelies with his motorbike.

People were on the lowest level of Florentia's "*value scale*", together with snakes and owls, or generally most females. "Neurotic" was her verdict. You can't explain it otherwise. Because they are so misshapen, fat and weak, they have complexes. They can't stand on their legs, and therefore they are obliged to sit or to lie. Because they can't move, they have built these horrible machines that make a terrible noise and stink abominably, so they can be transported in a sitting position. Some may even be transported lying down. Then they make even more noise.



– Ambulance, explained Polykratis. They are sick and they are taken to be healed.

– But the noise will make them worse. Everyone knows that the only thing that the patient needs, is quiet.

It was impossible to get out of her mind, that the problem was their complex and nothing else. They don't like their body and cover it with all sorts of rags of all colors. Worse than swallows. Constantly trying to make an impression. With the colors, the speed and the noise.

– But Papa-Manolis, he is so nice, Polykratis tried to argue.

– Leave him out of it, all the black he wears. He is like a flock of crows, when the wind blows his robes. He scares me to death every time he suddenly appears.

When Florentia flared up, it was better not to contradict her. With her ability to jump from one topic to another, to replace one argument with another or even the next moment to support just the opposite of what she was defending until now, she didn't leave you much space for discussion. Anyway, on the subject of humans she had formed her opinion and nobody could change it.

– The only thing they have in mind is how they can hurt each other. It's enough to look at their faces when they sit in their diabolical machines and look at each other from the window. You would think they're ready to eat one another.

Florentia has never seen such a thing happen. But she was quite convinced that it happened anyway. Not on the road, but definitely somewhere else. On the road they only hit one machine against another. If a man was hit too, then this other machine came with even more noise, and he was carried away lying down. Maybe they would eat him where they took him. Birds and animals hit by cars, were left dead on the road, and then the other cars drove over them and flattened them until they looked like dry husks.

Birds and animals were what people very often ate in their homes. Florentia saw their bones in the waste. Even more food they ate in these special places, where many were gathered together and ate incessantly for hours unbelievable amounts of food. This had to be a ritual, because often there were also songs to

hear, as in the church, where some of them gathered together on Sunday. Florentia has never seen them eating worms and caterpillars, and flies, it seems, they did not like at all, because they made such a racket when they found one in their plate. Weird things.

But the weirdest thing was their haste. Whether racing with their machines, or trying to walk with their short fat legs, they were always in a terrible hurry. They bumped into one another, whether on foot or in cars. They became more aggressive and tried to run even faster. This was, of course, very difficult, because the faster they ran, the more they hindered each other.

– They run to grab the food first, they are afraid that it will not be enough for them, she told Polykratis.

– Food is something everyone has in our country, more than he can eat. In Africa ... Polykratis froze. What was he going to say, the idiot? Now she would ask him from whom he learned what happens in Africa.

– What did you say? In Africa?

– I didn't say: "Africa" ... I wanted to say: how "frightening" the human behavior. They don't run after food, they run after money.

People's interest in money was what Florentia could understand the least. Some were really cute. Small shiny metal disks with designs on. Several even had birds drawn on them. Repellant ones, of course, mostly eagles and owls, Florentia hadn't seen sparrows drawn, but in any case birds. The magpies like such glossy trinkets. They would steal them where they found them and carry them to their nests. Absolutely useless, of course, but still cute. The other money, however, the papery type, some dirty and wrinkled, Florentia couldn't see it's use.

– Where they do find it anyway?

– They take it from each other.

– Ah, so they steal it like the magpies. And why do they want it?

– They like to amass it. Sometimes they exchange it to get food.

– But since they have more food than they can eat, why do they want more money?

Here, not even Polykratis knew the answer. Pleased to have escaped the pitfall "Africa", by replacing the suspicious word "Africa" with "frightening", he preferred not to continue the conversation.

He had a different opinion about humans than Florentia. But he knew that there was no point in trying to change her mind. There was no power on earth that would be able to convince his Florentia. Besides, many things in human behavior, as this love for money, were completely incomprehensible to him. And he was racking his brains to understand how such foolish behavior could go hand in hand with their abilities. Because, Polykratis was quite sure, people had skills, they were not idiots, as Florentia said.

You cannot on one side admire the swallows because they can build their nest in the belfry, and on the other think that the people, who built the tower itself, are stupid. And their machines are also incredibly effective, even though they may make terrible noise and stink. There is neither bird nor animal which could lift such a weight and move so fast.

But how was it possible for them to be so hostile to each other? This was completely incomprehensible. Here animals with much lower intelligence live in peace and love one another. It is as if people had lost something that everyone else knew. As if they had lost their way somewhere and could not get back to it. Maybe that's why everyone ran about so desperately. To regain what they had lost. It's a secret that I will discover, thought Polykratis. But I need more information.

– I'm right to have them on the lowest rung of the assessment ladder, insisted Florentia.

Polykratis could not restrain himself.

– You know, don't you, that they believe themselves to be the best in the world.

– Is that possible? Are they really that stupid? Can they not lift their head to see where the birds are and where they themselves are? Then I'll have to create an even deeper level especially for them and their stupidity. Because snakes at least don't believe themselves to be the best that exists.

The discussion had stopped there, and there Florentia chose to let Polykratis believe that he had tricked her with this "frightening". The poor man, he thought he had fooled her. Yes, Florentia was the sort to swallow something like that! There was something that had to do with Africa. Something that Polykratis tried to conceal. Something that was connected with this damn scarecrow next door and her comings-and-goings to Africa every year. She would find out.

But now she had other things on her mind, other terrible unheard of things, concrete facts and not suspicions. She had seen them with her own eyes since early morning and was about to go crazy. And she snarled at her poor son who was trying in his youthful enthusiasm to learn to trill.

All morning Polykratis kept stretching his tail out of the nest, made a dropping and immediately turned and popped his head to look out. The "neighbor", with eyes half closed, had her head in the entrance to the nest and was watching supposedly casually. But Florentia did not miss the slight trembling of her neck feathers.

Crystal clear. He showed her his tail!

Things had gone so far. Right before her eyes. And she had no idea. They were very advanced. He did not care even for the child, who was no longer so young, and could understand something. Florentia did not know what to do. How to handle such a situation. She had heard about the problems of other couples, but never expected that such a thing could also happen to her. She already knew that most females had nothing else in mind other than planning how to seduce foreign men. Polykratis however, despite his boundless naivety, would never get this far. So she believed. But now ...

Now the utmost caution and care were needed. She had to pay special attention to what she said and what she did. Above all, what she said. She was afraid of her uncontrollable tongue.

– Dear Polykratis, she said as tenderly, as she could, is there perhaps something wrong with your stomach? I've noticed you all the morning... Do you have diarrhea?

– No, said Polykratis, but I have nothing else to drop. I think I've made a very important discovery.

His expression was distracted and distant, but at the same time excited and happy. Florentia already knew that expression well. He had it every time he was occupied with "the major problems", as he called them. Had she perhaps misunderstood him in the final analysis?

– I made some very important experiments, continued Polykratis.

– I love it! Experiments with droppings! Iason butted in enthusiastically. We should stir them up, as well.

– You should talk with more respect to your father, Florentia cut him off.

This lack of respect of the new generation was very annoying, and she wondered why Polykratis tolerated it. What good can you expect from a world when the children cease to respect their parents? "*Love is more important than respect*", Polykratis had said. But she didn't agree. One is independent of the other. In order to love your father, it is not necessary that you are rude to him. She turned back to Polykratis:

– What is this discovery of yours? she asked.

– I think I have proven that *everything that happens, happens as it should, and if you observe carefully, you will find this to be so.*

Polykratis stood there and stared at her with shining eyes. He seemed impressed and happy about what he had just said. Only Florentia did not understand. What was the meaning of this "as it should"? What happens, happens as it happens. Why is "as it should" necessary? She looked at him puzzled. Polykratis understood.

– Have you ever thought why a bird dropping falls, the way it falls? It can't move right or left, up or down. There is only one way in which it can move, and it is obliged to follow it.

– But, Florentia objected, droppings fall everywhere. The other day I dropped one in the laundry basket of Kyra-Martha. You should have seen how upset she got.

- But if you always drop them from the same place?
- They will always fall on the same place, I suppose.
- This is exactly what I've proved. If you let a bird dropping, or whatever else I guess you have available, always fall from the same place, it will always arrive at the same point. It can go nowhere else. You can predict that and show how clever you are.
- That's what we shall play when we have visitors, Iason interrupted again. We'll say, let your droppings fall from this point, and we can predict exactly in which spot they will fall.

This discussion began to shock Florentia increasingly. She thought it was indecent, talking so much about droppings. Polykratis however couldn't let it go.

- It is one of the most important things that happen. Now I know why we can understand the world. Because there are laws that govern it. There is causality.
- And because of the laws and the causality in the world, we can understand what is happening, and we can predict what will happen, added Iason, whose reasoning progressed by leaps and bounds and who did not need to construct his thoughts step by step.
- Exactly. Because there are laws. Otherwise we would be condemned to ignorance and superstition. Instead of thinking, we would have to make spells and incantations.
- I'm crazy about spells and incantations, declared Iason.
- And how do you conclude that there are laws? Florentia asked, more to show that she followed the discussion, as she could not quite understand what Polykratis meant, and why he was so excited.
- Because every time the same thing occurs. It does not happen once this way and at another time differently. Everything that happens, evolves exactly as it is necessary that it evolves. Necessity requires that it happens just like it does. There is a reason, a law for that. You might not know it, but it exists. And since it exists, you can search to find it. And then, if you find it, you will know!

Polykratis was in such a state of excitement that Florentia was convinced that she had misinterpreted his actions. His eyes had the glow of fever. He was unstoppable, he talked incessantly. Usually he was taciturn. Even if others were there, he would sit without speaking in his corner, and only occasionally would he ask a question. These were, of course, questions that embarrassed others and brought their babble to a stuttering stop. He himself, however, spoke only rarely. Now, however, he did not want to stop.

– Since every time the same thing happens, it means that behind it there is a law that determines exactly how anything should happen. That which we call *logic* is nothing more than the recognition of the existence of this law. Don't you find it logical that droppings always fall downwards?

– Of course. That would be all we needed, if it were otherwise.

– Imagine what would happen if sometimes they would come up! That would be really funny, Iason was enthusiastic at the idea.

– The law does not allow it. The movement of the droppings is exactly predetermined, it is not random. I do not yet know what the law of this movement is. But I know that it exists, therefore it can be found if you do the right experiments. In my experiments, the distance is always the same, and I believe that the time is always the same. Until I turn to look, the droppings have just reached the ground.

– Maybe you have to do experiments from different heights, intervened Iason again, with a yawn.

– You're right, and I need to find a way to measure accurately the distance and the time it takes the droppings to fall. Meanwhile, however, I know something else very important. The droppings move in a straight line!

– What is a straight line? asked Florentia, in an attempt to divert the discussion from the continuous reference to droppings.

The result of her intervention was indeed impressive. Polykratis' chatter ceased, as if chopped off with a knife. He began to cough, scratching his head and muttering sundries. "I guessed right, he does not know, thought Florentia. Even though he knows

about so many complicated things, he is always perplexed when I pose such a simple and basic question".

"One of the three dimensions of space", muttered Polykratis. "Imagine a taut wire between the butt of the bird and the center of the earth". And then, as if he finally came to a decision: "The shortest path between two points". He stopped again. "Here, in *the shortest*, I fear that involves the concept of time", he said as if talking to himself and sank back into his thoughts. He spoke no more.

Florentia stopped talking too. She was tired from thinking all day long. Dusk had fallen and a deep red light, like fire, mingled with the shadows in the nest. Iason was already asleep. She snuggled close to Polykratis. She remembered the telephone wire at the site of the "secret rendezvous" where they liked to sit at the beginning of their acquaintance.

Hours they spent there, talking at first about trivial topics, even though they both knew that the discussion was only a pretext, and that in fact all they wanted was to be close to each other. Later, they began to talk about more serious issues and forge plans for their future, as they imagined it. They had still managed it in the end. Now they could live together.

It was now completely dark, Polykratis had already fallen asleep. She herself was also so tired. She was in this sweet phase, just before falling asleep, when you feel you are dissolving into a cloud.

Polykratis turned in his sleep. It must be because of the taut wire, thought Florentia. Imagine you've got a stretched wire in your butt. It must bother you terribly. And that it reaches to the center of the earth. And why does it stop there and not continue further? To emerge from the other side? In countries where I've never been.

She saw the dark forest of the foreign country full of unknown dangers. She was afraid, but she wanted to see what these shadows were that moved in the dark reddish light. They had big red eyes, curved beaks and big hairy ears. They hopped on their short fat legs with the long toenails, and they were talking or singing. Demons, Florentia thought with fear, where am I, actually?



"This is Africa, the demons screamed. Here Polykratis' wisdom does not apply. Here is valid neither law nor logic. Here happens only what our totem wills. Our totem is almighty. It is not subject to laws. It does what it likes and what we ask of it. We will dance our magical dance, we will do our incantations, and it will fulfill all our desires".

They circled around a fire that was burning in the midst of the clearing in the forest, and beside the fire Florentia noticed a large thick stake standing upright with carvings on it and the shape of a bird's head on top. What did this shape remind her of?

"Our totem is good, sang the demons, it knows that we love it and are willing to endure any sacrifice for its sake. Our Totem does what it wants. Here is Africa. Africa".

Their voices gradually disappeared. The fire with the dancing demons moved away in the dark forest. Strangely, the further the totem moved away into the darkness, the clearer its form became.

It was the form of Céleste.

## The white down feather

Florentia's screams could be heard throughout the neighborhood. Even Papa-Manolis came out into the yard to see: "What is wrong with the blessed birds, and they are screaming so early in the morning".

– What is the feather of this shameless creature doing in my nest?

Were a snake to have got in, she would not have screamed louder. Furious, she went up and down in the nest, but took care not to approach the spot on the side where a small white downy feather was leaning against the wall.

– I'll go and pluck all the rest of her feathers, to finish with her once and for all. If your husband is not sufficient for you, she turned to the dividing wall screaming even louder, go and take a cold bath to cool your ardour, and don't try to seduce mine.

Polykratis huddled in a corner watched her turning his head right and left, without daring to make a sound. He knew that sooner or later the storm would break on him, and he tried to make himself invisible. His bitter experience had taught him that every time Florentia was angry for some reason, he had, in the end, to bear the blame. He patiently waited his turn, and inside he envied the prudent Iason, who looking ahead as always, saw the storm approaching and at Florentia's first cries had flown the coop.

From the adjacent nest there was no sound to be heard. "Let's hope that they're gone, thought Polykratis, we will become a laughing stock". And he might even be right, since the swallows usually went out very early and came back quite late. The humiliation however could not be avoided. There was no need to sit in the neighboring nest to hear Florentia's screams. The whole village could hear them. And in the village, Polykratis was very afraid that gossip had already begun.

The other day, those rascals in the square were nudging one another, as he passed, and giggling. "But she is a good-looking one that neighbor, eh John, you have to admit it", quipped one. Polykratis acted disinterested and moved on. Fear, however, tied

like a knot in his stomach. What did they already know these layabouts? Had they perhaps once sneaked behind him and seen something? They had plenty of time for spying, as they lazed around doing nothing all day long in the square.

Polykratis did not care about himself. He cared little whether they criticized or mocked him. What he feared was that his Florentia would hear something and would be sad.

He could not expect her to show understanding. Here, for no reason at all and she ...

– Now you tell me, how did this down feather get in here? thundered Florentia finally.

– How should I know, Polykratis was now forced to answer. Accidentally, I guess.

– Ah, accidentally! hissed Florentia. So, do accidental things happen in the world! Just so, without reason, without cause? What you told us about necessity and the law that governs the world that is all nonsense, eh? The law does not apply to that bitch's feathers!

– But how do you know whose feather it is? It could come from any one. Maybe it's one of ours, attempted Polykratis.

– From us, one white downy feather! Can you show me another one on us with such a color? It is from her belly, and I know exactly from where. I can smell it. Take it immediately and throw it out. I feel ill just seeing it, let alone touching it.

Without another word, now was not the time for words, Polykratis picked up the feather, stuck his head out of the nest and dropped it. He watched it fall. If you can call it a fall. The feather rather flew than fell. At first it seemed to fall, but once it increased speed, the curved part turned down and it began floating almost horizontally as a boat. It twisted right and left. It made a slight dip, then immediately rose again. Soon it turned behind the northern side of the bell tower and he could not see it anymore.

Polykratis was watching distractedly when the feather once again appeared much higher swirling rapidly and climbing further up. For a brief moment it came near to him. If he wasn't standing at the entrance, it could possibly have got back in, and then who

would listen to Florentia. "The north wind, he thought, that is the cause. When the wind blows, it can not only delay your fall, but it can even lift you up. Isn't it the wind that carries up so much rubbish and sometimes brings it even in to the nest, causing Florentia to scold? Certainly, the wind had brought the down feather in. From where, who can know that".

The feather had meanwhile turned again on the leeward side of the bell tower and had resumed its "fall". If somebody can call this movement a *fall*. Turns to the right, turns to the left, shaking, moving here and there, flying, hovering. Polykratis continued to follow the movement of the feather with an increasingly vacant look, while doubts began to mount in him. What had Florentia said? "Necessity was nonsense". Really, what law governed the fall of the feather? It did what it wanted. It twisted here and there. Its motion was nothing but curves. What straight lines and taut wires? This movement was entirely random.

The regular, neat, causal, logical world of Polykratis began to collapse...

"Repetition, he thought in despair, the replay will show us the truth". He looked frantically around to find a feather. It was funny just to think about it. To find an abandoned feather in Florentia's spotless tidy nest! Without a moment's hesitation, he pecked a feather from his belly and with a sudden jerk of the head ripped it out. The pain from the de-rooting was nothing compared to the pain of the destruction of his philosophical edifice.

He let it fall exactly from the same spot from which he had previously dropped the white feather, and watched it with rapt attention. The feather initially "pretended" to fall, but then twisted with the curved side down and began the "dancing". Curves to the right, turns to the left, flying up, hovering down. The same hopelessness as before with the white feather. However, on a completely different path. It soon disappeared behind the south side and then reappeared far below to start rising soon after.

"Maybe the color is to blame", the idea passed through Polykratis' mind. Ruthlessly he pulled another feather out and another and then another and another. In vain. Each feather was following its own unexpected, different path, nothing at all similar to the

way of the previous feathers. What had he said to Florentia? "If every time the same thing happens, it means that there's a law". And if the same thing doesn't always happen, then there is no law? Polykratis did not know what to think about it and continued to pluck his downy feathers and throw them down.

Soon a whole bunch of feathers twisted and flew up and down like a swarm of flies in the area of the bell tower. Polykratis pursued them with a dull look. Each had its own motion, but all together they showed a common behavior. They flew together pushed in the same direction by the wind, they whirled together, they flew up together. "I see the movement of the air rather than their motion", thought Polykratis. "And the law of falling? What happened to it? Is it valid only for droppings and it doesn't apply for feathers? Just when I thought that we could understand the world. I'm going to go crazy".

He felt that he would burst from his disappointment. His head was throbbing and ached. His chest too ached and was stinging. Chest pain from grief, he had heard of it. But stinging? He leaned to look. Bright red, naked, swollen, his chest and his belly was a single wound. "Ultimately, I really am an idiot", thought Polykratis.

Florentia, absorbed in her thoughts and her anger, had not initially paid much attention. She went up and down muttering, while her fears assumed a more concrete form. It was obvious that some evil plan was underway. A plan that could only be directed against her and her happiness. A plan in which Polykratis participated, let's hope unintentionally. Her Polykratis, whom she believed belonged to her alone, and now ...

Really, what was Polykratis doing there? He was pulling out feathers from his chest and belly and throwing them after the feather of this shameless bird, which she had just made him throw out! Florentia's astonishment was so big that she lost her speech. As if illuminated by lightning, she saw before her the scene from the dream, which she had completely forgotten. The dance of the demons saying that they are ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of the deity they worshiped.

"Sacrifice, she thought, he brings her an offering. He sacrifices his feathers, because he could not keep hers, and he sends his own to meet hers". She actually saw the white feather surrounded by Polykratis' gray downy feathers that danced around it. Exactly like the dance of the demons in the dream. She choked. Thank heaven, that the child was not there to see these obscenities.

– Clear the way a moment, please, I want to get out.

She pushed Polykratis aside and flew away. Where should she go? She had no reason, no cause to fly out of the nest. She simply could not breathe in there anymore. She wanted to get some air, to come out, to fly high. They no longer flew high. Only the swallows flew around up there. The sparrows roamed only near the earth. Really, how long was it since they had gone to their favorite phone wire, the place of their "secret rendezvous"?

Certainly they did not need it anymore, since she was with Polykratis all day long in the nest together. But even so, to go there once without a reason. Should there always be a reason to do something? Just to fly there, to remember the old days. This, however, you could say, would still be a reason.

Is it perhaps so, as Polykratis says, that there is always a reason for everything we do and everything that happens?

Unconsciously, her flight led her, where else? To the telephone wire. When she saw it from afar after such a long time, her heart leaped. Her happy memories mingled with her present unhappiness and choked her. She relived the days of her happiness. Back when only love filled her heart and not a cloud darkened her thoughts. She saw herself sitting for hours on the wire next to Polykratis without speaking and only now and then touching him "accidentally" when she had to rearrange her wings.

The closer she came, the more clearly she saw them both. There, she and Polykratis sitting side by side on the wire. "My eyes deceive me, she thought. I'm starting to have hallucinations. Florentia, wake up before it is too late". But the closer she came, so undeniable was the fact. There were certainly two birds there. Side by side. A sparrow ... but the other one? She couldn't see it well, it was sitting behind. But it wasn't a sparrow. What could it be? What bird sits side by side with a sparrow?

– Dear God! Florentia almost let out a scream. What else will we see? A swallow next to a sparrow!

The sight was so unexpected that her curiosity made her forget everything that had bothered her previously. With careful movements, she began to come closer noiselessly, invisible from behind. The fact that in front of her a swallow sat directly next to a sparrow, seemed so incredible that she would do anything to find out more. She did not yet know that the most incredible of all the incredible things, which this day had in store, shortly awaited her.

When she arrived close enough to distinguish features, and realized who the sparrow was, her astonishment was so great that she would have collapsed, if she hadn't managed to grab the branch of an olive tree. There was Iason side by side with Roberto and they were chatting.

Whatever disaster Polykratis' philosophical edifice had just suffered, the same disaster came to Florentia's world. Iason, her Iason, the tenderest and purest creature that exists in the world, in company with the cocky husband of this shameless bird! And what had the two of them to talk about? Iason actually was doing the listening, Roberto was talking constantly. Who knows what dirty words he was teaching him, or other disgusting things. She did not dare come closer, so as not to be seen, so only fragments of their conversation reached her ears.

– ... you stretch out your wings and you lift your tail abruptly..., said Roberto.

"There we are! I guessed right. He is teaching him dirty things". Florentia felt confirmed in her suspicions. "I must find a way to intervene". Suddenly Roberto left the wire to make one of his stupid dives head down until he almost touched the ground, and immediately returned to sit again next to Iason, who followed him carefully, full of admiration, that was obvious from his attitude. Florentia decided that the best thing to do was to continue monitoring unseen, to learn much more. It was necessary to learn as much as possible, in order to help her son in the danger that threatened him.

Meanwhile in the nest Polykratis' drama continued. Puffing and muttering he walked up and down racking his brains to under-

stand why there was this difference between the droppings and the feathers.

– So, let's take the matter from the beginning, before we go completely mad, he muttered. Is there a law for the fall of droppings, yes or no? There is, and we have proved it by the experiment. If all repetitions bring the same result, and if you can predict that something which falls will arrive in such a time at such a distance, then there is a law and no one can deny its existence. Very good.

– Now, can the law apply only to some things and not to others? This is nonsense, and we don't need to discuss it further. Either the law exists or it does not exist. If it exists, then it applies to all things. Very good, we have clarified that. Now, why do the feathers behave so strangely? Oh, this pain in my stomach is killing me. I definitely ate something stupid and have an upset stomach.

– Does it hurt a lot, my poor dear? Céleste's voice sounded from the neighboring nest. You know very well that the pain is not from indigestion, but from the merciless plucking you did to your belly.

Polykratis froze. As he was pacing up and down in the nest talking to himself, he suddenly stopped, petrified, like a pillar of salt, with open mouth.

– Ar ... have you been here for a long time? he barely managed to mumble.

– I didn't go out at all today, I didn't feel very well. Roberto went alone with Iason, who wanted to learn how to make the vertical dives.

– And ... and you have heard everything? Polykratis asked with a trembling voice.

– How could I not! Laughed Céleste. But I do not mind. Now I know Florentia. She is not a bad girl. Her jealousy just shows how great her love for you is. As for the feather she is probably right. It has very likely come from me. I have been molting a lot recently. I think we will soon have babies. This feeling of sickness ... And the downy feathers falling from my belly ... I've already started to cover the nest with them.



- Eh! That's it, Polykratis shouted enthusiastically. I can imagine how happy Roberto must be.
- He is going crazy. He is already planning the great acrobatic tricks and dives which he will teach them. Meanwhile however, he has to be satisfied only with Iason.
- I shudder at the thought of Florentia finding the two of them together. We will have terrible trouble.
- I fear it too. But still better to see Iason along with Roberto than to catch you with Roberto or, even worse, you with me.
- You know, my dear Céleste, I think we should stop these meetings for a while. I fear that we have been seen. I wouldn't want anything to come to Florentia's ears.
- But we will have to stop anyway. If it is so, as I suspect, I will no longer be able to go to the "secret rendezvous". But now it would be better if we stop chattering before Florentia comes. And you would do well to cool your plucked breast at the well to ... "*cool your ardour*" ..., I mean to take away the pain.
- Ah, you see? You're annoyed after all and you provoke me now.
- This has already hurt me a bit, admitted Céleste. But don't be angry if I tease you. It is because I haven't been feeling well recently. And if I do not tease you who you're my friend, who else should I tease? Come on, forgive me and go freshen up, you will feel better. What a stupid thing to pluck your chest!
- But I had a very serious problem to solve. I need to find out if there are random things happening in the world. It is very important.
- I know, but this is not a reason to pluck your chest. I think Florentia is right when she scolds you. But just go, I beg you. If Florentia meets Roberto without me, she will surely conclude that I am in the nest, and it would be better if she doesn't find you here too when she comes back.
- You're right, said Polykratis as he flew out of the nest. Say hallo to Roberto from me. You both have all my love and all my wishes for what is coming.

He flew directly to the fountain, drank a few sips and immediately jumped into the water. He shivered as the cold water touched his belly and chest. The beneficial effect of the cool water was instantaneous. The pain disappeared like magic, and only a slight numbness remained. He splashed about for a while, also ducked his head into the water a few times, he liked to make his bald head wet, and he felt much better in general. Was it the break he made speaking to Céleste or the freshness of the water? He felt that his thoughts became clearer.

"The first thing I have to do, he thought, is to understand what I mean when I say *random*". At that moment, the side door of the church suddenly opened and Papa-Manolis came out and went to the fountain. Polykratis was surprised and frightened flew onto a branch of the orange tree.

"What was that now? he thought. Papa-Manolis came out randomly? The fact that I was surprised gives me the right to say that Papa-Manolis came out randomly and accidentally went to the fountain? Certainly not. First of all, Papa-Manolis followed a plan in doing so. He had a reason for this action. And secondly even I could have foreseen this, if I weren't so confused today, since I already know that he comes out every day at this time, to water the flowers. If I am alert and not a total idiot, I can even predict his movements. Now he will bend down to pick up the watering can and fill it". Indeed Papa-Manolis stooped down, took the jug and began to fill it at the fountain.

"If I can predict an event, can I call it random? And again, if I can't predict an event because I haven't enough data, or because I'm indifferent, or because I'm a patented moron, have I the right to call it random? Or again, can the same event be considered causal for the one who was interested and studied it, and random for the other, who was indifferent?"

"And if I am increasingly interested, and I study the phenomena more precisely and make exact experiments, would I find at the end that whatever happens in the world has to happen exactly so, because the law requires it? And when I say *random*, I am just describing my ignorance? And probably there is not only one law, but there are more than one and they interact with each other.

That's why I cannot understand the movement of a feather. If I were to squeeze it so that it became a very small ball, would it not fall just as a dropping? Whew, I'm confused. If only Florentia was here to discuss it with her, I could untangle myself. Really though, what is she doing flying around so long? Soon it will be dark".

In fact, the light was fading. Polykratis flew off the branch and rose into the air. The super-clear, crystalline atmosphere allowed him to see very far. He searched the horizon. He soon discovered her. Florentia was approaching from far beyond the village. He could not see any details, but that was not necessary. He knew the way she flew. Among hundreds of birds he would have recognized her with eyes closed. So many years of love had united him so strongly with her that he did not even need to see her. He just felt where she was. As if she was a part of him, his wing or his foot. He did not need to see, he knew where she was.

But tonight there was something heavy and slow in the way she flew, as if she was carrying an unbearable load on her back. Dark forebodings surrounded Polykratis. Florentia came from the direction of the school, the place of the "secret rendezvous". He flew to meet her. The closer he got, the greater were his fears. Florentia was not just angry as usual. She wasn't playing a tragic role. She was, she was ... the only correct word would be "wounded". Surely she had seen them.

– What happened to you, I was worried, where were you? Polykratis tried to make his voice as lighthearted and carefree as he could.

She did not answer. She did not even turn to look at him. She continued to move her wings slowly. She flew straight into the nest. Polykratis followed a short distance behind without daring to make the slightest sound. When she entered the nest, she said:

– You already know everything ...

It was a question and an irrevocable decision, complaint and condemnation. All this together.

– I ... what ... not ... was the only thing Polykratis managed to mumble.

Florentia went straight to her corner. She hid her head under her wing, as if she wanted to sleep and remained motionless. Polykratis crouched beside her, without the courage to say a word or even to touch her. When Iason came later, he probably realized that no one was asleep, but made no noise and withdrew silently into his corner. That night no one should have slept really deeply.

Next door were heard some unusual comings and goings and strangely mute groans. Someone was suffering.

It was the birth pangs of Céleste.

## The big secret

Early in the morning Roberto's cries wakened them from their troubled sleep.

– My son is here! The most daring and capable acrobat ever!

He flew screaming in front of the nest, and at the same time he performed self the most dangerous acrobatic feats that were ever seen. Quite a few swallows from neighboring nests rushed to share his joy, flying in formation and doing "*synchronized maneuvers of utmost precision*".

Céleste had stretched her head out of the nest, and was watching them. She was obviously exhausted but at the same time obviously incredibly happy. She smiled tolerantly at Roberto's antics and her face beamed. The signs of the effort, the torment and the pain were still visible, but a light enveloped all of her. She was radiant.

"Looks like she has met God", the thought passed through Polykratis' mind.

Iason, despising all the "*rules of secrecy*", came and mingled in the dance of the swallows. Of course he could not fly with them, but Robert noticed him, rushed to him and flew right next to him to give him the feeling that he was participating in the celebration.

– And how do you know that it's a boy? asked Iason.

– I don't know it. Nor does it matter, but I just have to give a form to my joy. Come on, leave that and do one of those dives that I taught you, so that my friends can see how well you manage it.

Iason's jump would classify him as a sparrow in the "category of star athletes and heroes". Even the swallows praised him: "Look, how well the kid does it!" Iason however was certain that they were doing it for the sake of Roberto. Under other conditions they would not even have noticed him, if they didn't actually mock him.

Roberto was loved by everyone. When they talked about him, their face lit up. They didn't just love him, they adored him. All,

old and young. The older seemed to rejuvenate in his presence. And the children did not want to leave his side, because he always played with them and performed all the acrobatic feats they demanded. Probably they all loved him, because he loved them all.

Always optimistic, cheerful, merry, funny, willing. There was no way that if someone wanted something from him, he did not immediately hasten to fulfill any wish that had been expressed. The most remarkable thing, however, was that, wherever Roberto was, joy and mirth prevailed. Even when there had previously been a bad mood and sadness, it was enough just that Roberto appeared, and immediately joy and cheerfulness spread. As if he entered a dark room, bringing with him a strong light.

Most birds trusted him with their most secret personal problems. They knew that he would listen, not indifferent or with feigned patience, but with genuine interest. Not out of curiosity or desire for gossip, you could never learn anything from him about the affairs of others, but with the intent to share another's pain and help him carry the weight.

And the birds felt it and they trusted him completely. They knew that he would understand. It was as if only the fact that they were talking with him, removed the burden from their shoulders. Perhaps it was being loaded now on Roberto.

– Too much pain, he once confessed to Iason.

A very close bond had developed between them.

– It's your fault, Iason replied with his usual impudence. You go and take on all the sufferings of the others. Instead of taking care of yourself you always take care of others. You do nothing for yourself, and whatever you do is always for someone else.

– But I do it just for myself. It's what you do for others that gives you the most satisfaction. Have you not noticed that when you make a gift, you are happier than when you get a gift? Do you understand now that I am happy, because I care for the happiness of others? Happiness is to give, not to take. That's the big secret.

- But can you keep giving constantly? In the end, there will be nothing left for you, and you will have nothing more to give to others.
- First, there are things that you don't lose if you give them. For example a smile and a good word. And secondly, it doesn't bother you at all to have less if you're happy. Because the most important thing is not what you have but who you are. The less you are, the more you want to have. The more you are, the less you need to have. And by giving material things, what you have may diminish, but what you are, increases. And if you're happy, you have everything, even if you have nothing.
- Did you come up with all this yourself? asked Iason admiringly.
- I have heard many things from Plato, replied Roberto, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.
- What! Iason rolled his eyes, have you talked with Plato?

Just the name of Plato was enough to get goosebumps. The little rascals got the bellyache only by hearing his crowing. "Just wait until Plato finds out." threatened the mothers to keep the little ones good. And you can be sure that Plato would learn it anyway. There was nothing that Plato didn't know or would not learn.

Even the adults avoided coming near him. He didn't want anything to do with them, either. He lived alone on the edge of the forest. It may be that he was not a hundred years old, as the rumors said, but he was very old. Ravens do live so long anyway. He didn't fly very much, because one wing didn't quite spread open. And when he walked he used to limp on one leg. When you looked at him, you could not tell if he could see with his left eye as it was so torn up.

He must have sustained this in the legendary battle he fought against a terrible cat, which finally was forced to flee. In truth, it was with the help of Aspasia, who was still living then. He must have been through a lot in his life. Even two years in a concentration camp, he had endured together with Aspasia. And he had managed to escape alive from this "*research institute*", as people call it, where they imprison birds and animals and submit them to incredible tortures until they kill them in the most horrible way.

- I'll take you there to meet him, said Roberto. He's not as horrible as he looks. Under his frightening appearance there hides an incredibly tender heart and boundless wisdom.
- It's easy for you to be happy, said Iason thoughtfully. When you have heard such teachings and when you have a partner like Céleste. Think however of someone who has never heard all this in his life and who has a nagging companion, or even has no mate, and shivers at the thought that he could end up with a grouch.
- You're right, I can say nothing against it, Robert admitted. I confess that I am extremely lucky and privileged in my life. But on the other hand, I think, maybe you should do something yourself for your happiness, and not expect everything from luck. Wisdom is actually free for everyone who bothers to open his eyes and ears. And everyone can find his own Céleste, or help his wife with his attitude, to become a Céleste and their relationship to become like my own with Céleste. Perhaps a Céleste lies hidden in each one, even though he knows it not, and it takes just enough confidence to open up. You know that many are walking around with a hard shell, simply because they are afraid to show the pearl hidden underneath.

They had both plunged into "deep philosophical waters". But now was not the time for that. Now was the time for celebration, with shouts, joy, laughter, jumps and dives.

Florentia had stretched her head out of the nest and was watching all speechless. She listened without fully understanding. The pain had made her apathetic. She couldn't find the strength for scolding Iason or Polykratis because, Florentia was sure, he was to blame for everything. The glass of anger and unhappiness had overflowed inside her already. It couldn't take any more. Only an infinite sadness filled her completely. As if she did not mind any more if the whole world saw their shame.

Or, maybe it was better if Iason was seen openly with this clown and the other good for nothings, instead of the two of them being seen hiding in the place of the "secret rendezvous".

She still couldn't believe it: At the site of the "secret rendezvous"! Where only she had the sole right to go. What she had seen and heard was enough. It was obvious, this was not the first meet-



ing of her Iason and this buffoon. They had been meeting for quite some time. The teaching of acrobatics they pretended to do was certainly only a pretext to trick the innocent Iason. Undoubtedly that bitch's husband was up to some other mischief.

She had done well, not to be seen. Better they didn't know that she had got wind of it. What slowly became clear to her was that she should better understand the role of Polykratis in the whole story and especially the role of the so-and-so. Polykratis' guilty expression let you suspect everything.

Polykratis had spent most of the night sleepless. Only towards morning had sleep come to him a little. His head was throbbing from his thoughts. He saw the disaster approaching. Now that Florentia had found an opening, she wouldn't stop there. Sooner or later she would reach his own "secret rendezvous". He thought whether it would be perhaps better if he confessed all himself.

It would cause a terrible storm, that was for sure, but he could not stand this situation with the secrets any longer. It was unbearable for him, to keep something secret from Florentia. Of course he did it for her sake, so as not to embarrass her and who knows, perhaps she would show understanding. She could perhaps understand that the main motivation for Polykratis was his insatiable curiosity. Perhaps, however, the whole idea of the confession was absolutely idiotic and would lead to disaster. Everything would depend on Florentia's mood at the time. He had to choose the right moment. There was no reason to hurry, but he could not hesitate long. He would see.

The thoughts in his numb brain danced like moths in the light of the lamp. One moment one stood in front and was lit, only to disappear afterwards when another irrelevant thought took its place. In the midst of his concern for the coming revelations - whether he himself voluntarily confessed everything or Florentia found out herself, the result, that is the hurricane that would break out, would be the same - in the midst of all this, he suddenly remembered the problem with determinism.

"So, in the end who rules the world? he wondered. The laws exist and cannot be doubted. We have already clarified this. When I say "accidentally", I describe just my ignorance. When Florentia

asked how the white feather came into our nest, and I replied: "accidentally", I have only manifested my ignorance. I didn't know at that time that it was actually a feather from Céleste. I didn't know or I hadn't thought that the north wind could bring into the nest a feather you had recently dropped. If I had followed its movement from the moment Céleste had thrown it out, and had known the law of its motion and the law of the motion of the air ... There's such a lot I need to know, but that does not mean anything".

– The law rules the world. Concluded once and for all, he said aloud. The law specifies exactly what will happen, how each phenomenon has to happen. If I do not know the law ...

He stopped abruptly. He looked around. The nest was empty. "Ah, we are going very well", he said to himself. "I've already started talking to myself. I'm gone completely loony. Instead of sitting down to think and decide whether to talk to Florentia about the "secret rendezvous", I worry about the question of who rules the world. It is the law, we have said that already. It defines what will happen and how exactly it will happen. Whatever will occur is defined by the law. And what has happened until now was also dictated by the law. Thus, he paused, you can exactly foresee everything that will occur if you are not such a big oaf like me and if you knew well enough the law".

"That means that everything that will happen is predetermined, decided in advance. The fact that I don't know it doesn't matter. And whether I talk to Florentia or not has been decided in advance. I just do not know that and I think I'm free to decide. Freedom and rubbish. Goodbye freedom. Everything is predetermined. There is no freedom. It's only an illusion. I delude myself if I believe I am free to decide something, because I do not know that it has already been decided long ago. Unless, *freedom is the recognition of necessity*. Bravo Polykratis. You have come to some nice conclusions. You've lost your mind totally. You are irrevocably and completely mad. Where is this Florentia? I could analyze the problem to her, and perhaps she could bring me to my senses".

Florentia had followed Iason and Roberto, when they stopped the nonsense in front of the nest and began to fly to the edge of

the village. This time, however, they did not fly in the direction of the place of the "secret rendezvous", but in the direction of the forest. Florentia followed them full of concern and curiosity. She was determined to find out more. Her son was threatened with real danger. She wouldn't hesitate to do anything to protect him. But where were they going now? No other birds came here. This was Plato's territory! He could appear any second and catch them.

And indeed, with a terrible cawing that made Florentia's blood to freeze in her veins, Plato appeared. Iason and Roberto instead of flying away and disappearing immediately, went boldly towards him. That is, Roberto did, because Iason seemed at the ready to fly the coop. But he followed Roberto and approached Plato. They started chatting. Mainly, of course, it was the loquacious Roberto who did the talking. Florentia didn't dare to come closer and couldn't hear what they were saying. But even if she could hear, that would not change much. Her amazement and her fear couldn't have been greater, no matter what she heard the three of them saying.

There, in front of her, Iason was chatting with Plato! That was incomprehensible! Now Plato talked constantly. Iason listened and seemed to have no fear. Florentia did not know what to assume. But one thing was obvious. Iason was not in immediate physical danger. Plato did not seem to want to attack them. The moral hazard was what Florentia feared now. Certainly this old fool would tell them some immoral things. Despite her fear, she came closer and tried to hear more.

— ... they are not stupid. They invent fabulous constructions that cannot be made by stupid people. But sometimes they are not able to understand the simplest things, said Plato. This "Research Institute" for example, is full of the most complex instruments and devices of incredible ingenuity and precision. They have not realized however, that while they believe that they can study us there, in fact they give us the opportunity to study them.

Florentia listened and did not understand anything. What was he saying? Of whom did he speak? Where are the immoralities, she expected to hear? All this was more like the "philosophies" of

Polykratis. She came closer and cocked her ears again. Her curiosity outweighed her fear, as usual.

– ... they had set a glass cylinder upright, on the bottom of which was a small basket with food so far down that you couldn't reach it with your beak. Beside the cylinder they had placed two pieces of wire, one straight and one bent like a hook. They took us there separately, sometimes Aspasia sometimes me, and waited to see if we were smart enough to use the bent wire to pull the basket out, or whether we would toil in vain with the straight wire.

Florentia had begun to follow with interest. It was clear that Plato was relating an incident from his adventures in the "Research Institute". His narration was referring to humans.

– Of course, neither of us wanted to participate in such childish games, continued Plato. So we just sat there and waited until they brought us back together. After a few days, when they had decided that crows do not use tools, suddenly a young assistant said: "Why we don't put them together? You see how close they are. Maybe they lose their good humour when we separate them".

– Not a complete jackass, this assistant, interrupted Iason, who now had no more fear at all. He had recently heard the word jack-ass and he liked it very much.

– They put us together. First went Aspasia. She pecked the bent wire with her beak, she "fished" the basket with the food and offered it to me. The joy of the people was indescribable. They screamed, they applauded. "*We should call the professor*", said one. Soon a tall thin man with bushy disheveled hair came in. "*Repeat*, he said, *we must repeat the experiment*".

– Ah! Like my father, interrupted Jason again. He believes that you can only learn the truth with repetition.

– They filled the basket with food again and again. Aspasia gave it to me. I almost burst from so much food. "*Eat something yourself*" I told her. "*You know that it's no fun*, she answered me. *It's only worth it if I'm doing it for you. You get something for me, and then I'll eat it*". I took the bent wire. It was not easy. In the cylinder, you can't turn your head. And I do not see so well with my left eye. It was difficult to reach the basket and I dropped the wire

into the cylinder. "Ah", came a cry from the people. "Take this one", said Aspasia to me. She picked up the other wire, the straight one, from one end, she pressed the other end with her leg, bent it like a hook and gave it to me. I got some baskets out for her.

– Very clever idea of hers, thumbs up, interrupted Iason again. Apparently he felt as if he could speak as equal to equals. And the people, what did they do?

– They went mad. They hopped around screaming, they clapped their hands. The professor worst of all. He seemed ready to do somersaults. Like a little child. I do believe he is still a child. His manner was in general that of a child. "They have made a tool! He cried. *Repeat, repeat*". They took away the wire we had just bent, leaving in its place a new straight one. We had to bend it again each time.

– That must have been a real torture, was Iason's comment.

– It was not really torture, because we made it into fun. Besides, to bend the wire was rather something of a game. Sometimes we held it with our feet, sometimes we wedged it in the soft base of the cylinder and bent it with our beaks. "*Publication, publication*", cried the professor. *We have to write an article. Did you count how many times each took the basket, and how many times it ate the food?*". "*The female took it the most times, but the male ate the most*". "*Okay, then we write that females are smarter and more diligent and males lazier and more selfish*".

– What a great jackass, that professor, concluded Iason. He understood nothing.

– You're right, he did not understand. He did not understand that the motivation for our every action was love. That everything we did, we did it for each other. But it seems that humans in general cannot understand this at all. Their whole way of acting is based on selfishness. They think the more they do for themselves, the more stuff they acquire, the happier they will be.

– Jackasses all of them and as blind as bats, they don't want to see beyond their own noses, Iason was influenced by the views of his mother about humans.

– I would not say that. It is not that they have no interest to see and to learn. On the contrary, they have many interests as a matter of fact. They observe continuously. They have constructed devices with incredible features that are able to see things no bird and no other animal could distinguish. But they often come to the wrong conclusions.

– Strange, isn't it? Roberto joined in the conversation. Since in your case they had understood that each of you separately had no interest in doing anything only for itself. How did they come to such a wrong conclusion? I'm afraid they're not happy, he added thoughtfully.

– No, they are not, answered Plato with certainty. I lived with them, and I know it. Besides, how could they be happy when they do not know the big secret? When they are only concerned with themselves.

– Is it possible that no one knows the secret? Roberto wondered. They do not know about love? They don't love? They spend their lives without ever loving?

– There are some who seem to know the secret, or to guess it, like this young assistant. Most humans, however, I think they do not know it, or they have it forgotten, or they are convinced by others that it is worthless. It is not that these people do not love at all. They love, but in a primitive, rudimentary, imperfect, limited way. Everyone loves his wife and his child with the same kind of love as he loves his house and his car. Because they are his property, because they belong to him. Their love is limited to what they have, or currently aspire to own. Their love is associated with property. Property is for them the most important thing.

– But that's not love, that's selfishness. If you do not love the other for his own sake, but only because he is yours and only on the condition that he belongs to you ...

Florentia was getting tired. Her limbs were numb standing so long on one foot, with her head turned to listen, hidden behind the leaf of the sycamore. Maybe she didn't like either all that she heard about love and ownership. She decided to leave. She turned around and flew back to the nest. She had no need to wait to hear from them what love is. If anyone knows what love is, that is her-

self. When it comes to love, then you should ask her, Florentia, to tell you how she loves Polykratis and Iason. She doesn't love them because she regards them as her property. She loves them and cares about them for their happiness.

And if she sometimes opposes their wishes, and tells them what they should or should not do, and if necessary scolds them both, that's just out of concern for them, in order to come to no harm or not to become a laughing stock. Do you think she does this for her own good? And if Iason wants to meet Roberto, what's that to her? He can do what he wants. He is old enough to know what is right and what is wrong. After all, Roberto seems not to be a bad boy. And there is nothing reprehensible in their discussions.

Before Florentia had the time to wonder about her last thoughts, which stood in stark contrast to her earlier views about the swallows, a small voice inside her said: "*And if Polykratis were to meet with Céleste in secret?*". Florentia pretended as if she had heard nothing. "*And if he told you that he loved her?*", insisted the little voice. "*Is it not natural, if I don't want to lose him?*", replied Florentia. "*Ah, here we have the property issue! said the voice. But do not worry, you will not lose him. He will love you both, Céleste and you, as you love both him and Iason*".

— Get lost! Florentia said, this time out loud. And the little voice fell silent.

When she arrived at the nest, she found Polykratis, huddled in a corner looking blankly into space. "He is occupied with those big problems again" thought Florentia and her heart filled with tenderness. The balloon of anger boiling inside her seemed suddenly to have run out of steam completely, without her having noticed. "Here, that's love, she thought. Am I rejoicing now about myself? I am happy for him, seeing how he is concerned about things that others never thought about in their whole life".

She sat down in her corner, immersed in sweet and tender reflections. As if she wasn't the same Florentia, who yesterday was furious, full of rage and sorrow, about the possible involvement of Polykratis in the "desecration" of the place of the "secret rendezvous". "Pretty nasty thing, anger, she thought, how miserable it can make us". It was as if the words of old Plato and Roberto

about love had changed her from one moment to the next. As if a seed had been planted in her, which grew at a terrible speed. Such a great change should in reality be visible. But she couldn't see anything on the outside. Perhaps these human devices, which see invisible things, could see it inside her, in her soul. "Perhaps it is so, because I learned the great secret", thought Florentia as she slowly fell asleep. Almost with something like compassion and tenderness she heard the soft moans from next door.

There again the pains of Céleste.



## The three small eggs

Day by day three small eggs were born in the neighboring nest, and incubation began. Of course Céleste sat on them most of the time, and Roberto stood at the entrance of the nest or flew around in front of it, to keep her company. Sometimes, however, Céleste came out to stretch her legs, or to eat something. Then Roberto sat, and it did not bother him that his friends gathered in front of the nest and teased him: "Have you become a clucking hen, you poor thing". He knew it was said out of love for him, to keep him company now.

Florentia, now with obvious sympathy, followed the developments in the neighboring nest.

- How devoted they are, and how well they work together!
- But, you used to be ..., Polykratis dared to mumble.
- I am a mother and can understand, Florentia stopped him.

Polykratis was pleased that "*good neighborly relations*" had been restored. He hoped that it would remain so even when the little birds hatched, and their shouting and the comings and goings of their parents to feed them began.

But a new problem now preoccupied his tortured brain. He remembered when the first egg was laid, that Iason had asked Roberto, "*and how do you know it is a boy?*". Of course, Roberto couldn't know it. The problem was not that. The problem was whether an egg "knew" it would bring a boy or a girl. Really, how did the egg know that it should be a male or a female? Was it pre-determined, or random? And how did it know that it had to be a swallow and not a sparrow? Eggs were almost identical. He had seen their shells, discarded by the parents after hatching. He had also seen broken eggs that had fallen from the nests, and from which spilled a sticky yellow viscous liquid.

Really, how could a whole bird come from this fluid? The question came suddenly to his mind and hit him with the force of lightning. He was stunned. How was that possible? He had never thought about it until now. He considered it as completely natural

without asking questions. When Iason was born, his preoccupation for Florentia, who was suffering, and his concern if Iason would be a perfect bird, don't let him think about the "big problems".

But now the problem fell on him with all its weight and crushed him. From a small amount of a totally amorphous liquid an entire bird is formed! That was unbelievable. That the bird was whole and complete within the egg, you could see at the moment of hatching. But previously what was there? This yellow liquid should obviously have been the same bird in another form. The egg was hermetically sealed. Nothing could enter or leave. The material from which the bird was made, was the same material as the yellow liquid. Simply the components were arranged differently, and instead of the amorphous fluid, we now had a complete full functioning bird.

This reminded him of the game which Agni, the niece of Papa-Manolis, sometimes played in the yard when she came to visit him in the summer. There was a bag full of small plastic pieces in various shapes, but you could not understand what they were for. Agni sat patiently, studying a little book, took one piece after another and joined them together. Finally they formed a boat or a car or an airplane. If you linked the parts in the wrong order, thought Polykratis, nothing right would come out. This booklet, which Agni had studied, surely included the instructions, how the parts were to be joined together.

And all very well, in Agni's game we know that she was putting the pieces in the correct order. But in the egg, who joins the particles together properly? He set out to explain the problem to Florentia.

– God, who else, she replied carelessly.

Polykratis was not satisfied. This answer was far too convenient and easy. Wherever we don't know something, we say, "God" and we are done. It is no longer necessary to go to the trouble to search, to worry, to rack our brains, to try to find an explanation for why and how. He was sure that the answer was in the egg itself.

And he was sure about something else. These particles didn't get in the correct order by accident. These particles must be very

small, because nothing in the yellow liquid reminded you of a bird. You couldn't see a little bit of a wing, a small piece of beak. The yellow liquid was so homogeneous that the particles had to be invisibly small. If the parts were bigger, if you could see a body, a head, two legs, two wings separately, you could hope, that one day, by chance perhaps, they could attach themselves in the appropriate order to form the bird.

Here, however, the parts were so small and therefore so numerous that the number of combinations with each other was innumerable and, therefore, the probability that they were randomly linked in the right order was negligible. You could forget this possibility of creating a bird by chance. That meant there must be a plan for the "assembly" of the bird, and this plan was in the egg. It couldn't be anywhere else.

"Which part of the yellow liquid is the plan and which is merely material for the construction of the bird? Or maybe the plan is located on the inner surface of the shell? wondered Polykratis. If I could make some experiments. If I could remove a different part of the egg each time and see when it ceases to form the bird. But where can I find so many eggs and how can I see exactly which part of the liquid to take away each time?"

– I envy the humans, he said to Iason, who had told him about the devices that were able to recognize things that were invisible to the naked eye.

– You don't need to envy them, because despite all their devices they are not happy.

– What does that mean? The one thing is independent of the other. The devices are not the reason, if they are unhappy. The reason is that they do not know the secret.

– Maybe, if they knew the secret and were happy they wouldn't build these devices, said Iason. I would prefer to be happy rather than find out where the plan is for the assembly of the bird. They, in their attempt to make themselves happy by acquiring more and more things, they strive as well unceasingly for more and more knowledge, and of course they find themselves further and further from happiness.

Polykratis did not answer. He admired the unorthodox way Jason's sharp brain worked and was always amazed by the surprising, subversive conclusions to which he came. Sometimes however, he couldn't agree with him. In the present case he could not challenge the value and usefulness of knowledge. And if people had lost their way and instead of approaching happiness, were increasingly departing from it, this wasn't the fault of knowledge.

The fault was that some people managed to sell the humans the "big lie" instead of the "big secret". That they would supposedly be happier the more things they amass. And so, the poor things, they run, and they fight, and they strive, and they tear each other's eyes out in the attempt to grab it first. And when they have ultimately managed to get what they seek, without of course in this way becoming happy, there has been already produced in the meantime the next thing, which they have to chase after, because now "this will surely bring the desired happiness". And they have pinned on the walls beautiful, colorful posters which "prove" how happy whoever manages to possess it will be.

"I pity them, thought Polykratis. If only they could understand in what a plot they are trapped! Perhaps knowledge could help them to escape, when they understand how they have been fooled from some crooks".

He had forgotten that he had just said he envied humans.

The days of incubation passed quicker than you could imagine. Soon three huge, wide open, yellow, mouths filled, incessantly screaming, the swallows' nest. Céleste and Roberto did not stop carrying food all day, from morning until evening. In vain, you would think, because there was hardly any time to see the food being stuffed into a mouth and then it was open again, screaming frantically. Florentia followed everything, full of tenderness.

– What loving parents! she told Polykratis.

He opened his mouth to answer, but he closed it again. What could he say? Florentia's attitude towards the swallows had changed completely. And "how are you my dear Céleste?" And "how are the kids?" And "you are very tired my dear Roberto". What can you say to that? Unfathomable the soul of women!

Polykratis though was bothered still by the mystery of the egg. These huge mouths came ready formed from the egg. And the lungs which made these horrendous screams, and the stomach with the whole digestive system that processed this colossal amount of food, and the legs, and the claws, and the wings, and the head, and the eyes, and the ears, everything. Everything made from the rearrangement of the material that formed the yellow liquid. And this rearranged fluid moves, cries, sees, hears, feels hungry, has desires, feels fear, is happy, thinks, loves. In a word: it's alive! And all of this because inside the egg there was the "booklet" with the instructions for the proper arrangement of the material. It's a miracle! If you don't use the word "miracle" now, when else are you going to use it?

- There must be an explanation, he said to Iason.
- There is, Plato told me, replied Iason who, since Roberto was always busy, visited Plato alone. And it is exactly as you suspected. This "booklet" with the instructions as you call it, Plato uses a strange foreign name, actually exists in the yellow liquid. And that is the whole secret of life. The humans have found it and they managed to read it. It describes in every detail, how to put a bird together and how it will work afterwards.
- This "booklet" must be huge. How does it fit into the egg?
- Huge is the "amount of information" it contained, as Plato calls it. It itself is tiny, not visible to the naked eye. It uses as letters some things that are indescribably small.
- Just as small as the particles of the bird in the yellow liquid, said Polykratis thoughtfully.
- Yes, something like that. But why are you always looking for an explanation? Why aren't you content with the admiration? Just watch and enjoy the miracle of life, since you are already one of the lucky ones who has understood that this is a miracle. Because you know that there are others who have no idea in what an incredible miracle they participate. Do you not fear that the explanation may dissolve the magic and you will lose the beauty of the miracle?

– Why should the magic be lost? Not only will I keep my admiration for the miracle, but my admiration for the explanation will be added to it, said Polykratis confidently.

He knew, however, that there was a contradiction in what he said. Magic and wonder imply the lack of an explanation. If you know why something happens and what exactly takes place, then there is nothing magical about it, and you have no right to talk about miracles.

"And why should I lose my admiration? thought Polykratis. Is admiration the privilege only of the ignorant and indifferent? So I'll tell you that the more you learn, the greater will be your admiration. And the words "magic" and "miracle", I will continue using them even if I know the explanation. And if the explanation diminishes my admiration and the magic, then I can pretend I do not know the explanation so that I continue to enjoy undisturbed the magic and wonder of this world. And if this should mean that I am contradictory, so I'm contradictory, whether you like it or not! There is not only logic, there is also emotion".

With the same amazing speed they devoured their food, with the same amazing speed the three swallows grew. From one day to another you could see the difference. There was hardly enough space in the nest, and when they stretched their heads out of the entrance, there was a terrible jam and indescribable bickering.

– Tomorrow we will have "fly outs", Roberto said one evening to the sparrows. You should not miss it.

The next day was a glorious bright day. From early morning Roberto tirelessly repeated the lesson and did the demonstration again and again.

– It's nothing special. You just have to jump. No need to do anything else. Don't beat your wings. Let your speed increase. Do not be afraid of it. Speed is our ally. It will keep you in the air. When you arrive at the height of the church roof, spread your wings and lift your tail a bit. You will see that you begin to rise again. Like this, and he jumped down one more time.

The toddlers watched from the entrance of the nest with eyes full of enthusiasm, but also with obvious apprehension. In their

nest Florentia and Polykratis had taken positions with their heads outside the entrance, Iason was hanging on the ladder. All three watched the event with growing interest. Finally the big moment arrived.

– Now we jump, cried Roberto and fell.

None of the kids followed him. Roberto came back. He made a sign to Céleste, who had remained in the nest.

– When I say jump, we jump, he said. Now!

Céleste's elbow caught the first offspring, and he fell headlong down. Roberto flew next to him and tried to convince him, not to be afraid and that there was no need to beat his wings. The toddler was not even listening. He fluttered with such desperation, as if his life depended on it. What speed and what church roof? He hardly went down at all. As soon as he came out of the nest, he began to move upwards, thanks to the wild fluttering. Uncertain and uncontrolled, sometimes this way, sometimes that, but upwards. Soon he was on the roof of the bell tower. He clung to a roof tile and remained sitting rigidly. His heart was pounding fit to burst. Roberto came and sat down beside him.

– Bravo, hurray, yelled the sparrows. That was it!

– That was it, said Roberto too. Now you know how it is. You know that you can, if you wish, climb any time. Rest a bit, and you'll see that you're in the mood soon to try it again, alone.

The kid was so scared that the only thing that interested him was to grip tightly to the roof tile. Soon though, it actually stood up, hopped to the end of the roof and, fluttering in advance, he flew into mid-air, only to return again and sit on the roof. From there on, he could not stop. He left the roof, each time taking an increasingly greater route in the air and came back. The "*baptism by air*" was over.

Céleste's "encouragement method" was applied with the same success to the other two kids. Soon, the whole swallow family flew happily in the space in front of the bell tower. The kids certainly did not have the agility, the dexterity, the elegance, the grace of the movement of their parents. They fluttered incessant-

ly, perhaps only because they were so very delighted to have just learned to fly.

Roberto invited Iason to come along and fly with them. Iason, however, who inwardly would have liked it actually very much, refused with the excuse that he had to visit Plato. He was of the opinion that the kids now that they were just learning how to fly, should have as the only role model the movements of their parents and should not be influenced by his flight.

Flying in front of the nest was now the exclusive daily occupation for the little ones, from early morning until the evening, when their parents managed, with great difficulty, to gather them finally into the nest. Of course, they came into the nest during the day time once or twice for a brief moment, uttered a few short cries of joy and immediately rushed out again to continue flying. The parents were always there, but they kept their distance and gradually left them alone for increasingly longer periods. More and more young from the neighboring nests joined them, since the other nests also had hatched their young. Soon a huge mob of offspring buzzed in the space around the bell tower and filled the whole neighborhood with their screams.

Florentia, who once would have been outraged by the noise, watched them with tenderness and sympathy. "How sweet they are, she said to Polykratis. I can sit here for hours and watch them. They have started to take the most important steps of their lives in the guise of a game. She was surprised at herself. "How strange, she thought, formerly I would have been annoyed by the noise, I would see them with hostility, I would grumble and be unhappy. Now I look at them with sympathy, I'm glad to hear them and I'm happy".

"You can then, with the same external conditions, the same data as Polykratis calls it, which doesn't depend on your own volition, be happy or unhappy, and this depends solely on you. I'm not talking about extreme situations that happen once or twice in your life; about a great evil for example, if Polykratis, God forbid, had an accident, or a great joy, when Iason finally finds a mate. I'm talking about everyday situations that are not at all exceptional but, in reality, constitute the whole of life".



"As now with the screams. I can confront them in a negative way, with hostility, and be unhappy or in a positive way, with love, and be happy. So I can spend my life happy or unhappy, and this depends solely on my decision and on my attitude towards the world! Finally, someone has to be very stupid not to face the whole world with love".

Florentia was not aware that by adding this little word "whole" in her last sentence, she had already taken the biggest possible step in the direction of happiness.

As the days passed and summer progressed, the kids began to fly further and further away from the bell tower.

– We have started with the excursions. We need to prepare for the "*Great Journey*", Céleste said to Florentia.

They had now become friends. Each sat at the entrance of her nest, and they chatted like two good neighbors. And not only that, but they visited each other. For Céleste, there was obviously no problem to fly into Florentia's nest, and she always praised her for her housewifely qualities. "How neatly you keep your nest!" and Florentia ballooned like a peacock. Florentia could visit Céleste too, by hanging on the rough edges of the nest and climbing from the one entrance to the other.

– You know, I was terribly jealous of you, Florentia confessed one day, keeping her gaze lowered.

– I know, replied Céleste smiling. But no need to be ashamed. Jealousy is something quite natural, since babies and dogs, and even people are jealous. It's something primitive certainly, but natural. You can't do anything about it.

– Something like the anger that rises suddenly in me, said Florentia thoughtfully.

– Exactly the same. Anger is also just as primitive. You can't prevent it appearing. What you can do is not let both anger and jealousy lead you to actions that you would later regret. You should ignore it. Rather than paying attention to jealousy, which only brings trouble, it's better to concentrate on love that brings you nothing but joy. The great secret is love.

- Roberto says it differently: the great secret is to give and not to take.
- Isn't it the same? Is it not exactly the same thing? When you love, don't you always want give? Of course if you really love and not in the way most people call love which is nothing other than selfish interest.
- And don't humans ever give anything to each other?
- They do. But why and how? If they give something, they do it not because they like to give, but because they like to receive. Give to get. Give on the condition that they get back something. And not only what they gave but something more. They do the same thing with love. They say: I'll give you two grains of love now but I expect you to give me back three afterwards.
- Well, is it bad to accept something?
- If something is offered to you with love, then it is not only right to accept it, but you've got to accept it. Otherwise you could hurt the one who gives it to you, by depriving him of the pleasure of giving you something. But people do not expect to be given something out of love. They base their relations not on love but on trade and profit, to get more and more.
- Can one ever be happy as long as his relationship with the other is based on the desire to get more and more from him?
- What do you think? You reckon humans are happy?
- They seem to be doomed. But something else, Céleste, can we love everyone? Love even snakes?
- I know that it is difficult, replied Céleste thoughtfully. But you could start by showing them understanding and compassion. Imagine if you were forced to spend your whole life in the dust crawling on your belly.

Florentia did not respond. She was deep in thought. This discussion with Céleste made her think of a lot of things. Even thinking about humans and their relationship to each other. She had begun to have pity on them. Suddenly:

- Tell me the truth; did you meet with Polykratis in the place of the "secret rendezvous"? she asked, surprised that she did not feel the sting of jealousy in her heart.
- Indeed we did, replied Céleste smiling. Sometimes I, sometimes Roberto, sometimes all three of us. You know Polykratis' insatiable curiosity. He wanted to know how people live in Africa, and was afraid to annoy you if you saw him talking to us.
- He once let something slip about Africa, and he tried afterwards to cover it up. What could that have been?
- How could I know? What were you talking about?
- He said that people here have a lot of food, while in Africa ...
- In Africa, there is not enough food. And the strange thing is that people there, even though they live in very great poverty, are much friendlier to each other than here. Except when, I do not know what happens to them sometimes, and they start killing each other in an indescribably cruel way. However, I think this is at the instigation of others.

At that moment, the side door of the church opened. Florentia jumped.

- Papa-Manolis comes out to scatter crumbs. Excuse me, I must run to get some for Polykratis. If I don't take care of him, he is capable of remaining hungry and continuing solve problems.

In the evening, before she fell asleep, Florentia, as usual, ran over in her mind the day's events and her conversations with Céleste. "How much I love this girl", she thought. From next door some tender murmurs were audible.

The little ones were being caressed by Céleste.

## The red car

Since early in the morning it seemed that this Sunday would be a very nice day. The sun was shining brightly, but a fresh breeze kept the temperature from rising too high. A sweet calm prevailed in the area. The people had returned to their homes after the liturgy, the churchyard and the streets were empty. Florentia and Céleste sat alone, each at the entrance to her nest, looking outside and chatting. Roberto had flown out early with the little ones. Iason was who knows where, perhaps with Plato again, and Polykratis was standing down in the street. He had found an eggshell and was studying it.

– He will probably make another great discovery, laughed Florentia.

The beautiful summer day made her mood beautiful and bright also. They talked about the preparations for the "*Great Journey*", and joyfully planned their meeting next spring.

– No one will have to hide anymore when you tell us the news from Africa, Florentia said with a teasing glance at Céleste. How beautiful is life when love reigns! she added thoughtfully.

As they both sat up there, talking carefreely, they could see and follow everything in the far distance, and of course make appropriate comments in each case:

– The baker's wife has become so fat that she looks just like a large loaf.

The clear atmosphere and their high perch allowed them to monitor the whole region. From afar a little red car was approaching fast.

– It must be Agni said Florentia.

Agni had passed the entrance exams for the University this year, and her father had bought her a small car. She often came to visit her uncle on Sundays. She knew the road well and there was no need to drive slowly and be careful. She liked speed very much. When she used to come to the village as a child, and saw the swallows, she used to say: "I want to fly too. When I'm older,

I'll be a pilot". Now she studied pedagogy, but nothing would prevent her, when she had the time, from getting an amateur pilot license. "That's what I will do", she thought as she took the curve to the church.

Polykratis absorbed in the study of the eggshell, hadn't noticed at all that the car was coming towards him. Not so many cars came along here for him to beware of. Only at the last second did he feel something like a shadow charging upon him.

– My God! Florentia shouted out.

A black arrow had shot out from the neighboring nest.

Agni didn't have time to understand what was happening. When she came out of the turn, it seemed to her as if there was something on the road, as if something suddenly came towards her, as if something hit her car. When she stopped, and before Papa-Manolis came to embrace her, she bent down to see whether anything had happened to the little car that she loved so much. Thank God! Nothing had happened. Only a small blue-black feather was stuck on the bumper. Agni scraped it off with her finger nail and threw it away.

Nor could Polykratis understand exactly what had happened. He was sitting on the branch of the olive tree looking around bewildered. As the car was already on top of him, something hit him and threw him off the road. If he had tried to escape alone, he would not have had the time, he would have been crushed. Florentia, who had seen it all, came and sat down beside him.

– Are you all right, she asked, where is Céleste? She had seen just one bird fly in front of the car.

– I'm all right. A little bit scared. But how do I know where Céleste is? Wasn't she with you?

– And what do you think it was that pushed you off the road? she replied severely.

They found her in the ditch next to the road, dusty, motionless, with eyes closed. Her right wing was bent in a strange unnatural way. They bent over her, talked to her. Roberto arrived. He had seen from the other side of the village that something had happened, and with his formidable speed, he arrived in half a minute.

All together they fanned Céleste with their wings, caressed her with the wingtips, tried to brush the dust off her. Celeste opened her eyes. She smiled at them.

– What happened? she asked in a cheerful tone. I've felt that I fainted. It was not so bad. It seems I have been hit. I didn't estimate the width of the bumper correctly. These modern ones are much wider.

– How are you, does it hurt? Roberto asked anxiously.

– No, I'm fine. I can even say that I feel comfortable. Only my wing is slightly numb.

– Sit down and rest awhile.

– It is not necessary, I'm fine. Let us return to the nest. Just let me lean a bit on you.

Very slowly, with many pauses the swallows came back to their nest. Florentia and Polykratis, with bated breath, followed them as closely as possible, without saying a word.

– She saved your life, said Florentia, when they got to their nest.

Polykratis did not speak. Nor did he open his mouth the rest of the day. When Iason came in Florentia told him what had happened. He respected the silence of his father, and asked no questions.

Polykratis' silence continued for the next few days. He answered in monosyllables when he was asked anything, and when he met Roberto, he tried to read the truth in his eyes. Because Roberto continued to take the little ones out, he behaved as if nothing had happened and assured everyone that Céleste was fine. But Polykratis read the worry, anxiety and fear in his eyes. Roberto's attitude was unchanged, his behaviour was still friendly and obliging to all. Polykratis however, recognized some pretence, something feigned in his behaviour.

Celeste was not well. Polykratis was sure. And everything that had happened was his own fault. If he had not been such a big idiot, to study this absolutely useless eggshell for hours in the middle of the street... Polykratis' brain that was always looking

for the reason for everything that happened, had decided he was the reason. He was to blame for everything.

On the fourth day, at noon, Céleste's head appeared at the entrance of the nest. Smiling and beautiful as always, but obviously exhausted. Robert had left in the morning with the little ones. They undertook more and more distant excursions as the time for the "*Great Journey*" was approaching and the kids had to be trained. Polykratis, who all this time would only fly nearby, rushed to cling to the branch of the ladder, and stayed motionless, looking worriedly into Céleste's eyes.

– Why are you looking at me like that? What happened to you? Did you swallow your tongue or turn to stone? she joked to diffuse the tension.

– How are you, how are you feeling? Polykratis asked in a low hoarse voice while looking even deeper and even more searchingly into her eyes.

– All right, don't you see? Céleste began, but then she stopped. To you I shouldn't tell lies. I'm not feeling well, Polykratis. My wing, rather than improving, becomes number every day.

– I am responsible for everything, Polykratis uttered the words slowly. And you ... you hurt yourself, to save my life ...

– Ah so? You are to blame! Céleste laughed. Then it isn't my fault that I went and fell like a fool on the bumper.

– If I had not been standing like a moron in the middle of the road ...

– So that's what you are getting at! Then you have to say that Agni was to blame, because she was driving too fast, or because she had decided to visit her uncle on that day. Or rather, that her father was to blame because he had bought the car. Or, better still, that the professors were to blame, because they had given her such good marks in the examination that she went to the university and her father bought the car.

– You exaggerate, to convince me that I am not guilty.

– Do you think that it is easy to find out who is guilty and who is not? So I'm telling you that the engineer who designed such a

wide bumper, was guilty. Or even better, that everyone was guilty who was in any way involved in the design and production of the car! All the workers and all the engineers and even all previous generations of workers, engineers, scientists and inventors who contributed to the design and development of the car.

- You know that you have taken this to extremes, don't you?
- Of course, since I'm doing it on purpose. You however, Polykratis, who cares so much about the relationship between cause and effect, do you not know that the more you search, the more you discover that one event is the cause of the next? And the more you look back and the "chain of causality" becomes longer, the more other chains are added from the side and you'll find in the end that everything is connected to everything else? Oh no, what a chatterbox I've become! I speak so long without stopping. It's because I sit in the nest all day.
- And you, don't you need to prepare for the "Great Journey"?
- I will not be able to participate in the "*Great Journey*". My wing will not allow me. It's the other "*Great Journey*" I'm preparing for.
- What are you saying? You shouldn't talk like that, Polykratis scolded her.
- Why should we not talk about death? I think it is a big mistake, not talking about death. As long as we don't talk about it and try to chase away all thought of it, the more it frightens us. Death is a part of life.
- Is it not precisely its opposite, its antithesis?
- No, it is one with life. It is wrong to separate the two things: on this page life, happy, beautiful, bright, and on the other side death, fretful, ugly, dark. Wrong. They are not two separate things. It is a single one. It's about one and the same thing. Death is inseparable from life. It is just one of the events of life. One of its countless episodes. Can you imagine life without death?
- I do not know ... It would be nice though, if there were no death.



– Then there would be no life either. Life could not exist without the existence of death. The existence of death is a precondition for the existence of life. By the way, you die just in a moment, but in return you live a whole life. The death is the ticket to get into the great celebration of life. Just that you do not pay at the beginning but at the end. Not that you actually pay anything at all. You have just to make room for another to come in. Certainly you agree that life is a celebration.

– Of course, a wonderful celebration.

– So, the celebration ends at some point, and I've celebrated enough. I have had a very long and very happy life, and I do not mind dying. You know, I consider it unworthy to be greedy. Why should I live longer? To be a burden to Roberto, who now has to get food for me, since I can't fly? Ah, enough of my chattering! I wearied you Polykratis. And I'm also a little bit tired, it's the truth. I'd better go in, because it's become quite fresh. Farewell my dear Polykratis, stay healthy. Greetings to Iason and my Florentia. I love you all very much. She turned to leave.

"She is saying good bye to me", the idea slipped through Polykratis' brain. He paused to look at her. Only now did he realize how skinny she was. Her shoulders had "melted", like that of a very small bird. "She probably eats nothing so as not to make any trouble for Roberto, he thought. And the freshness, why did she feel it in the midday heat?".

– Goodbye, get well soon, we'll talk again, he called after her.

Would they ever speak to each other again? He slowly climbed up to the entrance of the nest. "I did not even thank her for saving me" he thought, as he entered. Florentia was waiting for him, quite still, unmoving. She was in the nest and had followed the whole conversation.

– She is not from this world, she is not from the Earth. She is from heaven, as her name implies, she told him looking into his eyes.

Polykratis did not respond. At the thought that he could lose Céleste, a terrible knot choked him.

The next morning Céleste was so weak that she could barely stand upright. Roberto saw her condition, let the kids fly alone and stayed with her.

– It might be better if I died, Céleste suddenly said. I have started to become a burden to you. I tire you out carrying food for me, and I delay your departure for the "*Great Journey*".

– What nonsense is this? said Roberto brightly. You know that I am only too pleased to bring you something to eat. You eat nothing. You will recover, and we will fly all together. We can postpone our departure.

Celeste did not answer. She looked at him with a smile that said: "My poor Roberto, now you know the truth, why do you not accept it?" Roberto was preparing to fly out to get something to eat when he heard a low moan and a small thud behind him. He turned around. Céleste had collapsed in the bottom of the nest. He ran to her. She lay motionless with her eyes closed. He tried to lift her. He fanned her with his wings, he caressed her. Celeste opened her eyes.

– Are you in pain? he asked her.

– No, replied Céleste. What happened, did it come back?

– You've acquired bad habits, Roberto joked.

Céleste smiled, but her breath came with great difficulty. A little later...

– Here, it comes back, she said with her eyes closed.

Her breathing had become a rattle. Roberto intensified the fanning with his wings and the stroking, he felt, however, that all was in vain, and that the end was approaching.

Céleste twitched her wings and her legs a couple of times and then remained completely motionless.

Roberto continued to fan his wings and caress her, while he tried to see if she was breathing and if her heart was beating. Nothing.

Plato's words came back to him when he told him about the episode of fainting after the accident. "You are very lucky that she came back to you, he had said. It is very rare. Usually they do not

come back. Be prepared. If it happens again, you should not expect her to come back".

"What shall I do now?" he asked himself. Up to now he was used to ask Céleste's advice even for the smallest problem. He did not know how to take a decision alone. "The little ones, I do not need to bother them. They will learn it anyway soon enough. The friends next door, I should notify them". He came out of the nest, approached the entrance of the sparrows' nest.

– Céleste is dead, he said.

He felt that it was only at that moment, just because he said it, because he pronounced the words, only in this way did what happen become final and irrevocable. Previously, it might not have been true or might have been reversible.

Florentia and Polykratis were dumbfounded, Iason was absent thankfully. Although deep down they knew that things were not going well at all, however their mind refused to accept it. Florentia recovered first.

– We are coming over, she said to Roberto.

He returned to the nest, he arranged Céleste's down feathers, which were out of place from his fanning, he sat down beside her, immersed in his thoughts. Soon the sparrows came.

– How beautiful she is! Florentia said.

In fact, a sweet serenity had spread over Céleste's face. Roberto told them briefly how it all happened.

– How do you feel? asked Florentia.

– How should I feel? replied Roberto slowly. But you know what fills me at the moment, deeper than the pain and beyond it, is gratitude. I owe her a life of infinite happiness, spent beside her. Where do you think I always found my gaiety and joy?

– Me, what can I say? I owe her my own life. Polykratis managed to stammer hoarsely; he stood there the whole time as if frozen, more dead than alive.

– And I? I owe her the complete change in the way I see the world, added Florentia.

All three remained silent for some time.

- We have to get her out of the nest, Florentia said suddenly. It is better if the kids do not find her when they return.
- You're right, said Roberto immediately, help me push her.

So, as Céleste had become so thin, the two of them were able to push her through the entrance of the nest without much trouble. Polykratis had not even dared to touch her. As Céleste fell a strange thought crossed his mind. "The body of such a heavenly creature falls like bird droppings". He was ashamed of the thought. He found it inappropriate, sacrilegious. He tried to chase it away.

Céleste's body hit on the roof of the church as it fell, bounced up again, as if she was trying to fly once more, and began to roll over the roof tiles. Everyone looked worried. They didn't want her to fall into the yard and be eaten by some cat. She rolled and rolled, until she stopped at the cross that stood at the end of the roof. All three of them stood there watching.

Under the bright midday sun Céleste "slept" with eyes closed and her thin legs tightened on her breast, at the base of the large, white marble cross.

For a long time no one spoke.

- I must check out what my wicked offspring are doing, said Roberto in a voice which he tried to make as cheerful and merry as before.
- We also need to go, said Florentia. They parted.

Florentia and Polykratis barely exchanged a word all day. When Iason came, Florentia informed him in a few words. Nor he did say anything. Only

- How is Roberto? he wanted to know.
- He is making an incredible effort, replied Florentia. He still draws strength from her. Certainly he believes that it is not seemly for someone who had the good fortune to live beside her, to break down, whine and howl; that would be inappropriate for the memory of such a proud creature.

The next days, there was silence in the sparrows' nest. Iason flew away very early and came back late in the evening. Florentia and Polykratis came out just to eat something. They were immersed in their thoughts. These thoughts, however, had to have something except pain and sadness, for they smiled at each other when their eyes met.

"Strange, thought Florentia, what influence this girl had on me. I see everything with completely new eyes. Neither of death am I afraid anymore".

– She is not gone, she can't be lost, she said to Polykratis. She has returned to heaven. She is somewhere there. Above the clouds. Above the stars too.

Neither did Polykratis believe that Celeste had disappeared.

– Her mark is left upon us, he said. In our thoughts and our feelings. It is indelible.

One morning, before Iason had flown out, Roberto came in a hurry.

– I've come to say goodbye. We are off! He managed to make his tone almost as cheery as before. I'll bring you news from Africa, he turned with a roguish grin to Polykratis.

– Au revoir, have a good trip, they called from behind.

– Take care as you go, added Florentia.

She knew that her advice was entirely superfluous for someone who went and came every year to another continent. Too bad, if Robert didn't know himself that they should be careful and was waiting for Florentia to tell him. But she felt the need to tell him. And maybe it was just a different version of the wish, that they wouldn't suffer anything on their journey.

With the departure of the swallows peace spread over the village. The peaceful time of autumn came. Previously Florentia did not like the autumn. It made her melancholic. The only seasons that she liked were spring and summer. Now she found autumn lovely. Maybe it was better suited to her inner feelings.

– I am thinking of flying away, also, said Iason one day. I'd like to see what life is like in the upper village. I guess it will be much

quieter. At least there will not be so many cars, he continued smiling. I've met a girl, he added, almost casually.

– What? How? Where did you meet her? What's her name? Do we know her? When will you introduce us? Where does she live? Is she beautiful? Has she broad wings? Does she have siblings? Are her parents still alive? You must be careful not to catch cold on the mountain. There is plenty of snow in winter. All this Florentia said in one breath.

– All right, Iason was content to reply, smiling.

The beautiful autumn days alternated with days of rain. Polykratis, who used to stare at the sky more often lately, increasingly observed the clouds and wondered if their movement was random or predetermined. Whether, by accurate study, he could predict the weather or even where exactly a drop of rain would fall.

– I miss the swallows, said Florentia nostalgically.

– Next year, they'll come back, he answered.

– Next year we may have our own grandchildren, said Florentia thoughtfully.

Polykratis looked at her. Her eyes were wet. Of late the eyes of both of them were often full of tears for no reason.

– It is our age, or an allergy, Polykratis offered the explanation.

But Florentia knew. It was not their age or an allergy.

It was the sweet memory of Céleste.

## Confessions of the author

The author feels the need to confess that most of the thoughts that you have read, do not belong to him. He borrowed them from others. Either deliberately, as for example Polykratis' reflection on causality which is borrowed 100% from Marcus Aurelius and the relationship of freedom to necessity which comes from Hegel, or mostly without realizing it, because he was influenced by readings and discussions

Many pictures are taken directly from life itself.

The invention of the "rope ladder" is real. In one of the many swallows' nests, which are located on the balcony of the author's apartment, there lived one winter a family of sparrows, who utilized a handful of dry grass, which was wedged into the entrance, to come and go from the nest.

The story of the ravens who made a tool to take out the basket of food, is published in Science 9 August 2002 297: 981 and republished, among others, in Spiegel online - 09 August 2002 at <http://www.spiegel.de/wissenschaft/erde/0,1518,208692,00.html> from where the photo below is taken.

At the address

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeQppJmOWJA>

you can see a little video that shows the attempts of one of the birds.



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[P. Bekiaroglou](#)