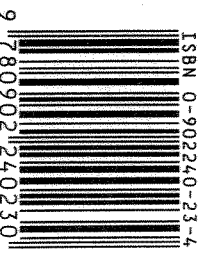


...It is impossible not to be cheered up by this volume. There is no sign of blinkered privilege here, and no enslavement to arid theory, just an invigorating engagement with the attention-getting tricks of the Ancient Mariner.'
Jill Paton Walsh in her introduction

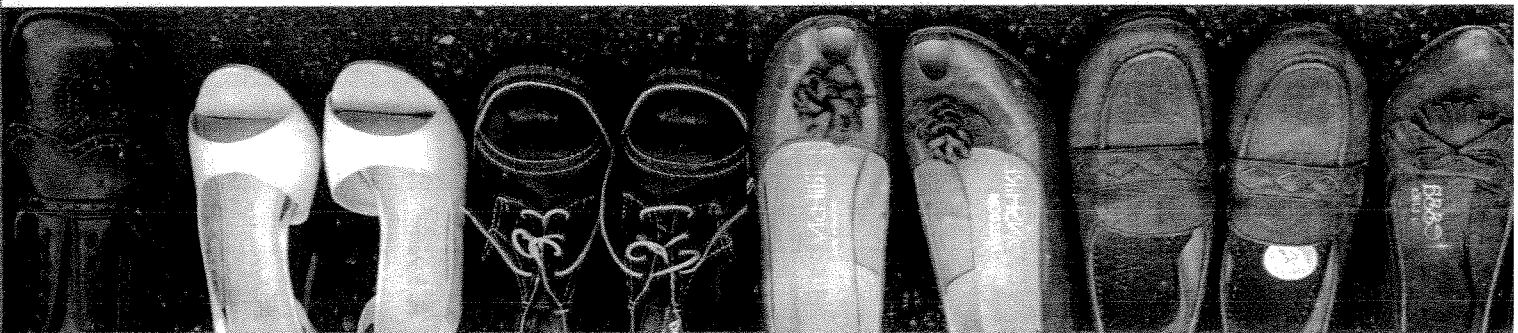
Eleven stories by undergraduates, postgraduates and recent graduates from Oxford and Cambridge, collected together in one unique anthology.

Also in the same series: *the May Anthology, Oxford & Cambridge Poetry 1997*
Selected and introduced by Christopher Reid

Fiction
Price: £4.50



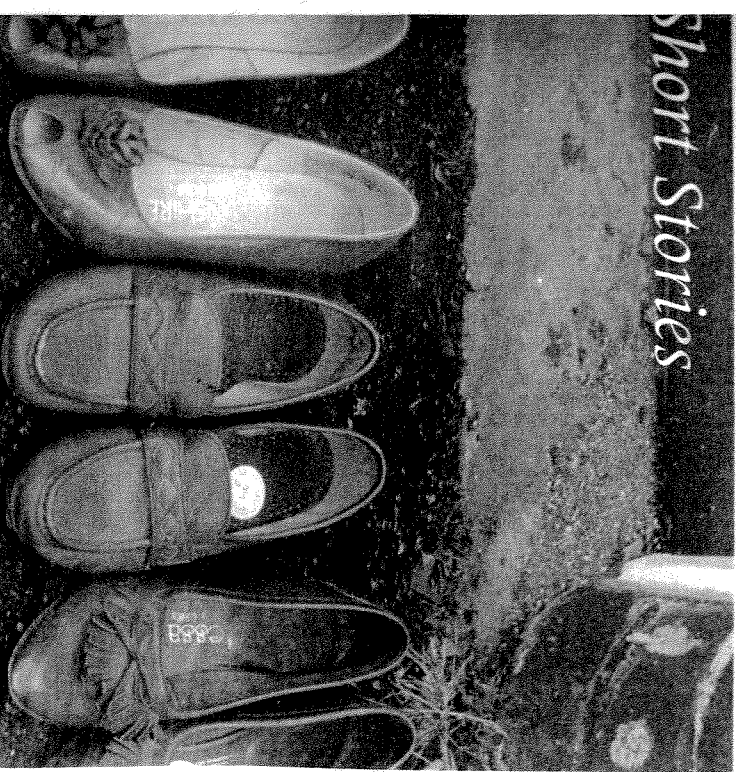
Cover design:
Michèle Kitto



the May Anthology 1997

of Oxford & Cambridge

Short Stories



ected and introduced by
Jill Paton Walsh

Contents

Greg Norminton	<i>The Siege</i>	1
Katharine Whitfield	<i>The Little Finger of the Left Hand</i>	7
Arthur Burke	<i>Eddie</i>	15
Suzanne Dieter	<i>Theodore's Freckle</i>	21
Gill Saxon	<i>Stains, Rubbish and Bone</i>	41
Rishi Dastidar	<i>Being There At Bedtime</i>	49
Adam Macqueen	<i>The Kingfisher</i>	55
Nicole Miller	<i>Nurse-Mouse</i>	65
Zadie A Smith	<i>Mrs Begum's Son and the Private Tutor</i>	89
Zadie A Smith	<i>Picnic, Lightning</i>	115
Alastair Laing	<i>Empty Stages Set</i>	123

Rishi Dasidar (Oxford)

was born in London in 1977. He was educated at Bushey Meads School in Hertfordshire, the alma mater of George Michael and Andrew Ridgley. He is reading Modern History at Mansfield College and is currently Arts editor of *Cherwell*. He still holds the belief that Evita would have won Oscars were it not for Jonathan Pryce's performance.

Adam Macqueen (Cambridge)

is the youngest of six children, born in Bristol in 1975. He is currently in the final year of an English degree at Emmanuel College. Before and during his university career he worked at several children's adventure holiday centres in the Scottish Highlands and Wales as a group leader. In his time at Cambridge he has written a regular column for *Varsity* as well as editing and contributing to the sometimes controversial Emmanuel student magazine. He directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1995) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1996), as well as acting in a number of productions.

Nicole Miller (Oxford)

is a first year MPhil student in Victorian Literature at Lincoln College. She attended high school at Choate Rosemary Hall in Wallingford, Connecticut, and received her AB with honours in English at Columbia University in New York which is her native city. She spent her third year abroad studying English as an undergraduate at Girton College, Cambridge. At Columbia, she worked under the supervision of two American novelists, Jill Climet and William Tester in her final year, and was awarded The Joseph and Ann Pearlman Prize for Creative Writing upon graduation. In addition to coursework and acting at Oxford she writes book reviews for the *Palm Beach Post*.

Zadie A Smith (Cambridge)

I find modern life a thrill. I abhor any musical written after 1960. I despair of mid-day television programming across the four channels. I get really het up by modern novels about men crying at night in the city. I can't stand Amis. I prefer Rushdie's short stories. I prefer short things in general. But not men – not short men. And Middlemarch is another exception. I love, I adore, I will forever admire James Stewart (6'3"), particularly in a 1940 Cukor film called *The Philadelphia Story*, which you should watch if you get the chance. Both Woody Allen and Michael Jackson used to be big heroes of hers. I hope the Marx Brothers don't turn out to be posthumously paedophile. *Lolita* is a work of genius, though.

I find infuriating precious ideas of Culture – think a culture industry, well run, efficient, profitable, sounds like a v. good idea; I think this is what I'll try and get up and running when I'm grown up. This is my third appearance in the *Anthologies*.

Alastair Laing (Cambridge)

Of Scotch origin, Alastair Laing currently divides his time between his home in Wokingham, Berkshire, and his university residence at Cambridge; he is studying English in the first year at Jesus College. Though educated at the Emmbrook Comprehensive School he did however attend Eton for a period of ten days, and upon graduation he intends to sell coffee.

grass. His own sigh surprised him as he compared the scene on that fresh day in 1982, before the trudgey of middle age set in, and two lovers still found the energy, time and desire to run out to meet the joy of living. They were so happy they could have held each other in their arms and danced across the face of the water, watching the bright dart of azure and orange burst up against the ecstatically brightening sky. Neither was superstitious, but they both agreed then that the bird was a sign, a portent, arranged just for them to shine like the pure flashing joy of their love. And it was more for the sake of the magical bird than the man at her side that Anna said Yes, at that moment. Yes, I will, yes Jack. Marry me now.

Without speaking she had arrived beside him. They stood for a while watching Amy pattern out some intricate game of her own on the meadow, chattering shrilly to herself, then imitating a hoarse booming voice. What's she doing? he asked Anna. Families. It's her new thing, she replied. She plays it with her Sylvanian Families, and then by herself in the garden. The deep boom happened again, modulating intermittently into Amy's own reedy treble. That's you, Anna smiled, and, keenly observing her profile, he felt his own mood raise. Me? The daddy anyway. It must be you. -It doesn't sound like me. Mmmp, she muttered dismissively and with a half laugh, and together they wandered over to where the child was playing. As they neared her words became audible. You silly woman! I am not a silly woman! - Oh yes you are! - Oh no I'm not! - Is that what we are, he chuckled, Punch and Judy? Perhaps we are, she said, and she was only half joking. But that half at least was a start. Come on Sprog, he summoned her. Let's get some lunch. The family walked off across the field.

Nurse-Mouse

Nicole Miller

It was a very young thing to think. I knew it was medically impossible, but I thought it anyway. My grandmother fell one day when I was seven. In tears, on the floor, trapped under plastic nursery-room shelves, Yiayia gave me the fright of my life. Bruised, but not broken, Yiayia sobbed and sang to herself in village chant for three hours. When she saw me looking with my hands pressed to my ears, she called to me. I shook my head. I closed my eyes. The blockade of one sense brought on the barrage of another. I heard her now, "Dorothea, Dorothea, Koukiauou," I gave her my hands. She kneaded my fingers, and kissed my palm. She said she'd never walk again.

I believed her.
But then, children are known for taking the world that way - literally, I mean.

Cheese moons, Loch Ness monsters, reindeer, Easter rabbits, roly-poly men in scarlet who fly down the chimney once a year. And what if one didn't have a chimney? I worried constantly over that. Thank goodness my family always left New York for the holidays. We went to stay with my Greek grandmother, Yiayia, in a house with a chimney in the Connecticut woods, so the presents showed up under the tree in the morning: a volcano of shiny red boxes that had erupted all over the living room carpet, threatening to flow out into the dining room at any second.

Before we could open them, Yiayia took us to the pantry to untie the strips of rags she had used to bind my sisters and my

hair the night before. She knew that the pipe-curls pleased our parents; we looked like "kouklas" – little dolls, she said. And because the un-binding smarted a little, she always gave us something for our pain. A rhinestone tiara for me, screw-on faux-amethyst earrings for my sister, frosted grape and strawberry-flavor lipsticks that set off our chestnut coils. Then, she led us to the foyer to show us traces of the ashes from Santa's boots, from when he landed in the fireplace the night before and tiptoed across the creaking oak to the tree.

After we opened everything, and sat among all the debris of wrappings and cardboard-rubble, Yiayia called us back into the kitchen to bundle us up in ill-assorted and itchy scarves, mittens and snowsuits. Then she sent us outside to look for hoof-prints.

My sister and I always rolled down the glass lawn to the driveway, where we took turns standing on the pumpkin-cart until we had assigned every hoof to a specific reindeer. By the time we were through, and had resorted to licking the icicles dripping under the porch, Yiayia called us back in. The living room was clean again and supper sat on the table.

Yiayia was like that.

Every day when the teacher dismissed us from class and we lined up behind the door monitor at the Dewey School, I thought of what Yiayia had said the day she had fallen under the shelves. It was the reason I never wanted to be the door monitor: I never wanted to be first to reach the street level to see her waiting to pick me up. So I dawdled with my pencil case, announced all of the sudden that I needed desperately to go to the bathroom when my classmates had already marched down to the library-level; or I forgot a book on purpose when we got to the kindergarten landing, and had to go back up to the second-grade classroom. If the way Yiayia had moved that morning frightened me enough, I would even go so far as to sign up for sewing classes so that I had an activity that lasted until five; or on days when no activity was offered, I fibbed to my teachers – saying I didn't do homework that I had done, or that I left it at home – just to earn myself a detention. Then I would be forced to stay after school, and to call my mother at work to get me when she finished her

work at the bank. By that time, I knew my grandmother would have been on her way to meet my sister at her school on 89th street, and I would have postponed the knowledge of any crisis for at least a few hours.

But today, my usual schemes wouldn't work. Because of my recent delinquency, I was one detention away from being sent to Mrs Littlewig. Mrs Littlewig was the assistant to the headmistress of the lower school: a refined amazon of a lady whose nylon knee highs met me at the nose. Though only a secretary by title, in reality we all knew she was Mrs Bigley's bodyguard: a bun of burnished gray hair stuck out like a pewter bulb from the middle of the back of her head and ceramic cranberry earrings dangled from her ears. Supposedly, Mrs Littlewig was the keeper of the secret tests for uncooperative students. I had been told the questions involved excruciating math that only high-schoolers could do, unlabeled diagrams of amoebas, the history of Siam, and the geography of the South pole. If you failed the tests, which all "baddies" did inevitably, you were moved down a grade, and into the "B" section. This would shame my parents, and I thought they would surely pull me out of Dewey for it and send me to the nunnery until I was of marriageable age. They'd make me cut my braids off, so that all my hair would be the length of my bangs, and I would live in a cell in a scratchy burlap sack, where the Prioress would feed us twice a day on rice pudding, whole-wheat bread, and radishes.

And yet, the vision was not all distasteful. It would ensure my distance from my Greek grandmother. My parents would come to visit me, and bring me Yiayia's Easter breads and her hard-boiled, blood-red Orthodox eggs; and she would stay away, while my parents passed her "tilts", or kisses, to me.

No more broiled fish on Fridays. No more telling me to "close" the lights, or "slow" the TV. None of her snarling snoring in the middle of the night. The stomach turning smell of coffee and cauliflower in the morning never to fill my nostrils again. I would hear no more about her rickety joints, her new prescription for bifocals, her muscle ointments, her unmarried brother in Boston, the grubby doctors of Ellis Island, the kitchens

she accidentally suffocated in a suitcase, and the boys that tried to pinch her behind the chicken coop when she lived in the village. I would not be there when the two-block trip to and from school made her wheeze. If dismissed from Dewey now, I would leave before I was commissioned to make the dolmathas -- she insisted I get the grape leaves from the garden in Connecticut and the feza from the Greek specialty store on Bleeker Street. I wouldn't need to mash her breakfast melons when her teeth fell out.

Cloistered and wimpled, I would be safe.

From a distance, I could not be responsible for pushing her in her chair when she was too weak to walk. By going away, my nightmares would go away. Her legs would not turn blue, and if they did, I wouldn't see it. I would hang up on my parents when they called to tell me about it, and I would rip up the letters from home that showed up in my pigeon-hole at the convent.

* * *

On this particular day, Yiayia was taking me to ice-skating class. I had been crossed off the list for the afterschool Dewey van because I had killed the class lima-bean plants by forgetting to water them for a week. My home-room teacher had written a letter to my parents requesting they take responsibility for getting me to my extracurricular activities until the time I showed a greater sense of responsibility.

This afternoon the teachers had even gone so far as to assign me "a corridor buddy". They put a brown sticker on my forehead and told me I had to hold hands with Titania Button: a plump, giggly girl whose uniforms used to fit her like a small shade over a large lamp, and whose teeth always retained vestiges of celery floss and triscuit crumbs many hours past recess. Approximately once every two weeks, the nurse sent Titania home for having been caught scratching her nest of gnarled llama's hair. As Titania was faulted for starting all the lice-plagues at Dewey, no one would ever play "Little House on the Prairie" with her after school.

So there I was, trying to look nonchalant, walking down the stairs like I had two free hands and wasn't bonded by badness to the lower school pariah. I kept my head turned away from Titania and ran my fingers over the walls of orange cinder block. In truth, I had no vacant moment to worry about being seen with this girl, or to vex myself over the fantasies she just then rasped in my ear.

"You know Doty, you don't really have the longest hair in the class. I do. If Goober (Ms Gooder was the school nurse), let me wear it loose, and I combed it out, it would go to my ankles."

When I ignored her threat, she added that if I took off my penny loafers and she took off her buster-browns, I would measure a whole inch shorter than she did on Mrs Bingley's yardstick. Her claims had no power to touch me. It disconcerted me far more to know that only one flight of steps now separated me from my grandmother.

When we reached Mrs Littlewig's landing and the teachers were busy counting heads, I wriggled my left hand out of Titania's sticky grasp and crushed it into my right. I hid my hugging fingers under my cardigan and searched for a light to focus on.

My eyes spotted the electric candles of the great chandelier above the stairwell. I stared hard, and sent up my orisons.

Please, please, not today God, not just now. I'm not ready yet. I forced myself to imagine Yiayia waiting by the ivory double door, in her twilight-colored coat, looking sturdy and straight. That's the picture I wished to see, but it didn't last. Suddenly I saw something flash silver by the bench where the mothers waited: a knife of sunlight cutting the rod of a wheelchair. My fear took over, and the arms of the chandelier began to stretch out, swallowing the light, and depositing darkness like a black widow. My throat filled with air as tight as Styrofoam. My ankles ached. The raviolis from lunch were coming up. I was going to fall, like my grandmother fell when she had tried to dust my Spanish ladder figures and the Swedish crystal owl.

In my head, I saw the episode all over again. I watched the hem of Yiayai's Gimbels' house-dress catch on the step-ladder,

before it squeaked like a rat and pinched shut. Her veal-gray elbow swept the high shelf she was cleaning; the plastic bookcase slid from the wall, and hit the wicker desk. All the china figurines knocked against the glass animals, before they bounced, and broke into pieces. I found my grandmother weeping into her apron, trying to fit the severed unicorn head to its shattered body, and the porcelain lamb to his shepherd. I began crying too, pleading her to stop, picking glass snail antennae and miniature gilt crooks out of her hair. I lifted the lightweight bookcase off her legs easily, but needed my sister's help to stand her back up. She insisted we leave her there, bring her a dust-pan and brush so she could gather all the glinting splinters and glue them back together again. Then we were to leave her to let her die, for she said she would never get up again.

"Dotymou, I've broke my legs and my hips," she said.

"Yiayia, it's not true. Don't say that."
"I can feel them. I've broke them all over. Forget about me. Bring me my chandra (purse) in the closet."

"No, Yiayia."

"You listen to me. Kalo koriche (good girl). I'll pay your College now. You write out the check-money and you sign it, my name."

"Yiayia, you can stand up. You haven't really hurt yourself."

"Kako. Kako. Bad. Dotymou, They can't fix me. Don't take me to the doctor."

"No, we don't need to take to you to the doctor. You're fine. You need to lie on the couch and rest."

"You take me to the hospital, and you'll see. They don't fix old people. You'll see, Doty. They'll bring back Yiayia, but they'll cut her first. You'll have a YaYia with her legs cut off. Kouklamou, you'll push me in my chair."

"No." I went shrieking out of the room.

* * *

Before I collapsed on Dewey School stairs and was trampled by the herd of pin-stripe jumpers, a second of scientific calculation saved me.

The doctors couldn't have done an operation that quick. Yiayia stood while making me breakfast this morning. They would make her stay in bed. They would keep her in the hospital at least one day.

Titania's wet hand wrapped around my own, and squeezed.

"I'll tell Ms Canary you let go," But I wasn't paying attention. I had seen the silver flash again – the metal face of an expensive watch, twisted around the wrist of a Fifth-avenue mother. The Styrofoam turned to saliva, and the ravioli settled back into my stomach. There was no wheelchair in sight.

When I got to the door, Yiayia kissed me with her brown lip-stick lips. Titania let go of my hand to laugh.

"Tee-hee, you're a dirty girl. You've got mud on your cheeks."
I wanted to say, "Titania, you don't know anything," and stick a carrot in the gap between her two front teeth, but I wasn't that type of child. I hooked my hand around Yiayia's violet belt and pushed her towards the sidewalk. But Yiayia wouldn't see any of her grandchildren shamed.

"Come here, Tatanna," my grandmother said.

"My name is Titania."

"You're freshie, you know that."

"My mommy likes me fresh. I'm fresh; that's better than being spoilt. Doty is spoilt and her food is spoilt too. It must be Greek."

"Greek is good."

"Greek is greasy."

"You're really freshie."

I pulled Yiayia's belt. Titania's insults were getting to me. It was true that I had my grandmother and Greek cuisine to blame for my recent embarrassments at meal times. I recalled our last first-grade field trip to the apple orchards of upstate New York, and the agony of having to name what I was eating to sour-faced onlookers. I had asked for what the normal parents give their children: fruit punch in a kids-size squeezable carton and peanut butter and fluff sandwiches. Instead, I had gotten a container of Breakstone cottage cheese – washed out, but not totally – the curds replaced with egg noodles the size of chicklets, which had grown caked and crunchy in a tomato sauce cold since half-past seven that morning.

"What is that? Is it foreign?" they squealed, noses scrunched, fat fingers pointing.

"It's a Greek dish," I had said, trying to act as if I had specially requested it, "A dell-a-kissy, in fact."

"What's it called?"

I wanted to make up something savory-sounding, but all the ogling blocked my wittier reflexes. And the truth came out, against my better judgment.

"Helopetas."

"What? Heel-or-pee-taste?"

"Yes, that's close."

"No, that's gross. That's the *grosser* thing I've ever seen."

And so it seemed to me, also. The pasta was so hard it could have tasted no worse had I eaten it out of the box, uncooked; and, as the lid of the container had cracked open during the ride, a rivulet of red sauce had trickled down my bookbag, staining the bottom, and streaking the bus floor by my feet with scarlet. I never took the "dolmathas" out (ricotta and mincemeat rolled in grape-leaves) for fear I would be associated with the stench the bus-driver had located in the back five rows. I could not even find solace in my canteen. As it turned out, Yiayia had filled it with her ingenious fruit-punch substitute – strawberry gelatin and water which congealed into Jello somewhere between Yonkers and White Plains. So, Tifania was making an ally of my stomach – I only had to think a moment of how I had come home dehydrated after sipping Jell-O for a whole day, when choruses of "Greek is greasy" shouted in my head.

"Yiayia," I pulled again, "I have to go to ice-skating."

Tifania flicked her matted pony-tails, "Why aren't you going in the school bus with everyone else, Dotty?"

I felt the buttons were going to fly off my too-tight Peter Pan collar.

"Mrs. Sockpockoloops (her surname was Paskapopolis), your grand-daughter is a bad flu on the school. Did you know? Our teacher has kicked her out of our class."

"Tatanna, you yap. Shush you. I bring Dotty something to eat before she goes."

Yiayia eyes were solid, brown, and believing. She did not think I would ever deceive her.

Heedless of Tifania's squawking, Yiayia pulled a fuschia beret and rabbit ear muffs out of her coat pocket, and adorned my head for the cold. Under her breath, I could hear Yiayia muttering "kako koriche, kako koriche" and wagging her basil-smearing fingers.

I worried for Tifania. The word, "kako" meaning "egregious" in Greek was the certain expression of my Grandmother's disgust: the smacking lips, a precursor to the pointed spittle of contempt. Without waiting for the expectorate missile to drop, I considered quickly what I had to do. I yanked at Yiayia's dangling scarf, dragged it off and started up the street. She started after me – calling for me not to soil the fabric, when I was making a point of doing exactly that to distract her. While still in sight of knee-socks, blue blazers, and the green plaid kilts, I kept her anxious by balancing myself on the narrow railing that wound up the block from the ivy double doors of Dewey. No one could make me like Tifania Button, but knowing Yiayia's judgment to be my own sentiment with a Mediterranean accent was more than I could bear.

We walked over Park Avenue, past the corner delicatessen with the big packages of fruit cake in glossy pastel paper and the pyramids of stacked Toblerone candy bars. That was where I went when I had a dollar and a quarter of my own – but Yiayia wouldn't hear of it – too expensive, too processed. She would make better things at home for me, she said, with hands that had baked bread since age six on the farm in the village. But I wanted the things one could buy in a store, that didn't come from home – anything sold in foil and plastic was authentic American; anything at home was alien and invalid. I began to veer towards the deli now, and whimper. As she opened her wrinkled purse mouth, and spoke down to me, I could feel her black coffee breath condense on my eyebrows.

"Always you want new things: new, new, new. Even Jacqueline Kennedy knows, it's better to make everything at home. If I had my eyesight better, I would make all your clothes. The things you buy nowadays are so cheap. I'd buy the patterns

and cut the fabrics. You'd look so cute. Like your mother. All the boys chased after her. I made all her clothes."

"Yes, Yiayia, I know."

"You know you left your skirt at home, under the bed? What was it doing there? What could you do if I didn't get you and take you today to ice-skating? They'd make you skate in your bloomers."

No, that hadn't been my plan. Before leaving the house in the morning, I squeezed the home-made red corduroy skirt with the candy-stripe border between the mattresses of my bed. Consequently, at school, I would have been barred from ice-skating. Mom would have picked me up at the front entrance after work. After a day of fruitless search, and another missed lesson, Mom would finally respond when I requested a skirt from the mail-order, active-wear girl-scout-gymnast-ballerina catalogue.

Yiayia gave me an old disposable grocery bag, still sticky from past use, with the handles tied in three or four knots.

"Here. You don't deserve it. I should have left it home – let them send you to the principal. Doty, you don't take care of your things."

I wanted to tear the skirt there, then use it for a rag, to dust the cemetery of defunct figurines. Yiayia had made it for me by hand from what she could salvage out of some party-dress pattern-paper that I had used to wrap a birthday present. The skirt never had fit quite right.

Yiayia and I were reaching Lexington avenue, past the Chinese restaurant, D'Agostino's and Mortimer's – the latter being the place where the fashion designer's daughter, Felicia, had her birthday parties and fed her friends on huge golden artichokes. I had been invited in past years, collecting rose pencils and thumbnail jars of pretty ochre beads, but this year looked doubtful. I didn't have what the other children had, and that was getting more noticeable. Yiayia wouldn't heed to "Hello Kitty" pencil cases and conceded to one, but not both, the smelly and the puffy sticker phase. I had to pinch my allowance and my dad

to get \$3 rainbow rhinestone bracelets; and even he wouldn't let me buy the 20 cent black rubber wrist-bands that every 'cool' Dewey schoolgirl needed. But I wanted something for my shame – some tangible piece of recompense. A sense of worth I could hold in my hand.

I was thinking over my ideal retribution when Yiayia stopped in front of the corner pharmacy.

"Yiayia, where are we going?"

"Happia (pills), I need to get some tonight."

"Can I have a candy bar?"

"Doty, you won't eat your dinner."

"A grape soda?"

"No sothas. Poisho for a young girl."

I huffed into my scarf and narrowed my eyes.

"Okay. You want to be like your Yiayia? I didn't eat right when I was a young girl... candies, I always had candies. And what happened? They cut Yiayia open. You wanna go to the hospital? You want them to sew yo stomachy?"

"No." I did my best to cover my ears with my hands. Yiayia saw me, asked me if I had an earache.

"No," I said. "I'm cold."

I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to see it again. The purple snake of a scar across her middle, where they removed her gallbladder at age 35. I slunk to the far side of the toothpastes and got behind the drugstore window display. Below, a village of paper-mâché cottages glowed amidst cotton balls and plastic holly garlands. Towering over the houses, massive mute dolls caroled in red velveteen: twisting in their pedestals, lifting their fur muffs and electric candles, lowering their songbooks, and batting their curled eyelashes. The great playmate-size dolls were not for sale, but the village and its tiny villagers were.

I yearned to reach my hand down and pick up the gentlefolk in the lane, the frilly children in the buggy, or the bonneted farmer's wife with accompanying butter-churner. But I knew not to touch what we couldn't buy. When I saw Mrs Darling however, I couldn't help myself. The pretty cottager floated over the flour of snow in green hoop skirt, and overcoat, with bags of

pea-size packages in her fitted gloves. I held her in my mitten and brought her up to my eye so that I could examine her speckjewels and satin bows. There could be no question. "Mrs Darling" was the most magnificent miniature mouse in the window, in all the drugstore windows I had seen, in fact. At \$6.99, she was the most expensive, too.

That year, "Nice Mice" were the preferred toys for New York schoolgirls of the Madison Avenue academies. The glamour-rodents were life-size – two and 1/2 inches of grey felt, pink paws, tiny shiny black eyes, and pin-head noses. I had two at home – a clown in polkadot party hat and a doctor, complete with headband and satchel. But they weren't really mine. Another little girl had played with them before me – pulled off their pompons and plucked their whiskers. Some months before, Doctor mouse and Clown mouse had arrived in one of Reva Lord's Bloomingdales bags of unwanted clothes and toys.

At age seven, Reva was my only life-long acquaintance outside my family and our cat. Eight years earlier, our mothers had met at the counters of the mid-town Manhattan baby boutiques, under the rainbow-mobles and violet crib canopies. Effy Brown and Reva Lord shouldn't have met in the same shops – but as would become the custom of her life, my mother was browsing beyond her means. When the children were born, however, and the time came for house-calls and baby parades, Mother Effy shied from inviting Mother Reva to the Greenwich Village apartment, and Mother Reva noticed. One summery spring afternoon, Mother Reva dropped by the apartment with the object of enticing Mother Effy to go strolling in the park. She found Yiayia and the baby at home watching Sesame Street on a jaundiced TV set, in a room where the second-hand sofa and chairs were covered with needlepoint blankets, lamps sat on crates, and window sills served for bookcases. The next day Mother Effy found a box by the door – brimming with the nearly new dresses and stuffed animals of Little Reva. Even when finances improved, we could still expect a bag from the Lords at least four times a year with the change of seasons and change of Little Reva's wardrobe.

Reva Lord was a classmate of mine at Dewey. For relinquishing the toy phone and the cake-maker when she demanded it, I was invited to her birthday parties at the 21 Club and the first screenings of all her new acquisitions. When we went to different nursery schools I didn't think much of playing with Reva's things. I reflected little on the past owner, and had no qualms of picking my favorite toys out of her rejected ones. But, one day in kindergarten at Dewey, Yiayia had packed me Reva's white sweater instead of my own. When Reva saw me wearing it, she started screaming and crying and pulling my pigtails – Miss Flint had to put us both in the corner (separate ones). She called my mom to bring me a different cardigan, and Big Reva to confirm to which child the sweater belonged. If indeed it was discovered that I had taken it on a play-date, I would have been forced to visit Ms Gooder for a talk about bad behavior and candy consumption. After the incident, whenever I hesitated to hand over anything she desired at the play-maker kitchen counter, Reva would trill, "thief, give me back my toys," and twist my sweater buttons until I gave up my turn and my Romper Room rights. In shaming my honor, Little Reva secured my compliance, until the far-off day that the Brown family could fill charity bags for the Lords.

So, I wanted compensation for my past pain, and I decided I wanted it now. The pharmacy's Mrs Darling mouse would be mine, as the Doctor and the Clown could never be. When I brought my genteel rodent to school and made her a bed of Kleenex in my desk she would be as much my toy as when I placed her under my pillow and wished on each one of her well-kempt whiskers. Prompted by the sweet visions of possession, I kept her behind my back until the pharmacist gave Yiayia her pill bottles; when she turned down to count the coins in her purse, I hid Mrs Darling between the smoky cylinders of medicine, then ran to the asthma aisle, and held my breath. The mouse would have been swept in the bag by the clerk, and I would have known to dig it out once we got home – if Yiayia had not come up two dollars short at the register.

"I apologize, Missus. I must have left the right purse on the counter in the house."

The heat of guilt prickled me all over. That was Yiayia's standard excuse for not having enough. There never was any other, fuller purse.

"I need to put something back – I'll come back and get it later. Can you help me read the perscriptiums? Doty come read the perscriptums for Yiayia."

But there was no need. The clerk was faster than both of us.

"Mrs Paskapolis, did you mean to get this mouse?"

"Huh? Doty, come here."

Much chagrined, I emerged from the rack of therapeutic socks.

"Pondkia, Doty? Why, pondkia? I catch one in the yard for you, if you want."

"Yiayia, we don't have a yard in New York."

"Nevermine. You don't need mice. They dirty up the house."

"I do need one."

Here was the clerk's opportunity.

"We have some on special for three dollars in the display. I'll put this one back. This one costs extra because she's fancy. Let me bring you another one."

"You really want one, huh? I have three dollars, Doty. Will you be good? Listen to Yiayia and your mother?"

I didn't respond, but watched as the clerk went to the window, and turned over every villager to read the tags on their feet. After some minutes, she returned triumphantly – four gray tails hanging from her fist.

"We put a couple on sale. They're very popular. The children love them. Guess in New York, they don't see too many mice."

The clerk opened her hand and set doctor mouse, two clown mice, one in a yellow balloon suit, the other in orange, and a nurse mouse down on the counter. She began to nudge them with her fingers to make them move,

"Look, Doty, pick one of these. Look a doctor, a nurse. Cute."

I took a breath and blew my bangs off my forehead.

"See, they're good. They slide."

Sliding was not one of my criteria. The saleslady gave me an expectant glance. It was my turn to do the maneuvering. I reached up my hand, but I didn't have the spirit to engage the

quintet of rodents, and when I prodded them, they toppled over like furry dominos. While the clerk pained to set them upright and uncrease their outfits – I whispered to Yiayia.

"Then thelo tipota." (I don't want any.) I did not go into why – it was no use telling Yiayia, I already had a clown and a doctor from Reva, and that the nurse was to me too much like a human nurse with her red-cross hat and white shoes. My heart began to throb from visions of hospitals.

Yiayia grinned her gummy smile at me. I had answered her in Greek and that pleased her. But as always, she felt obliged as always not to offend the person who had gone to the small trouble of showcasing the merchandise.

"Not even the Nurse? You will be my little Nurse, Doty, won't you? When Yiayia can't pick you up from school anymore, you'll push Yiayia around in a wheelchair. Won't you?"

When the clerk giggled, I was ready to scold Dr Scholls to scratch her. Having taken the cue, she had already moved towards "walking aids," which began at the other side of the counter.

I could not stand any more suggestion – Yiayia was about to talk about her legs again.

"Yiayia, Yiayia, I'm hot."

"Come here, I'll take your coat off."

"No, Yiayia, I'm really hot. I need some air." I pretended the episode with the mouse hadn't happened – that I hadn't seen it, that it didn't exist – I was about to ask for cough drops to divert my grandmother, but then focus would go to the purse again, and inevitably what was to be done about the furry Florence Nightingale. I turned away and walked to the door, ignoring the last time my grandmother would ask me if I wanted the Little Nurse.

Outside the store, I counted the stripes of the awning until Yiayia paid the lady at the counter, and added the pharmacy's bag to the others wound up unnaturally at her elbows. Yiayia looked satisfied, but feigned sternness.

"You are a good girl, Doty. You never ask too much. You think always of what you need. The Americans spend, spend,

spend. You know what I used to get for Christmas in the village? Nothing. No gifts at the holidays. No buying. No silliness."

"Yes, Yiayia. Because you got things at the New Year stuck in the bread."

"My mother cooked coins in the loukoumathes for good luck, put some change under the plate, to save. And you know what I want from you kids?"

Yes, I knew. But she would tell me again anyway.

"Nothing. Just listen to your Yiayia. Do what your Mama tells you. When Yiayia can't move anymore – soon, kouklamou, soon, Yiayia's older now..."

I had this trick of shrugging my shoulders up to my ears, swallowing hard, and letting my eyes blur the world when I didn't want to hear or see anything. Inside my head, I yelled as loud as I could and tried to think gentle thoughts of fawns, bunny rabbits, and parakeets. The parakeets were not a usual image, but the inspiration of a pet-store we were just then passing on the way to the ice-skating rink.

"Yiayia," I said, side-tracking her pessimistic train, "Yiayia, we're out of fish food, and cat food too."

"Let the fish die – they don't do any good. Not for eating. Too small. Too oily. Too many bones."

We didn't really need to go to the pet store. The goldfish I won at the Dewey Christmas fair the week before were bellying up hourly by the scores, and there was no point in nourishing them unless we intended to invest in a filter, aquarium, and algae-eater as well. I was motivated only by the prospect of bringing home a mouse tonight. If it couldn't be the dainty Mrs Darling, then it would have to be pink-tailed, snow-white snake-fodder, on special, three for five dollars, or two dollars each – cardboard carrying case with breathing holes included.

Rodents were forbidden in the apartment building. Following an episode in which an elderly resident's Persian cat had chased one such creature into her grandson's banana cream birthday cake, the superintendent had put out a notice on pests. Indebted to the animals that burrowed in the brussel-sprouts in the garden in Connecticut, I quite loved any herbivore with fur, and was

willing to give up any number of my bookshelves to accommodate cages for gerbils, guinea pigs and rabbits. It would take months, years perhaps until my savings and my star stickers (from doing chores and reading books) were enough to buy the zoo I had in mind. Before the hour of menagerie arrived, Yiayia would have to move from our apartment in New York back to the old house in Connecticut (for by her own decree, she would not stand to nourish anything she could cook), and I would need to commit to the existence I had already begun, as an elementary-school anchorite. At age seven, I prepared myself to forgo the company of all potential friends among the population of squeamish American city-girls that attended the Dewey school, in order to be wild and Greek in peace.

My bitterness about Mrs Darling, the helopetas, and my crippled keeper inspired me. I looked up at Yiayia, who was fluorescent in the purple aquarium light, and rippled with shadows of gurgling water – and searched for the two unblinking coffee-bean eyes, into which I would pour my fib. Then the scheme began to brew.

"Yiayia, I just found out today we are going to have class tomorrow in the new greenhouse. The teachers said we will be running experiments."

I looked very hard at Yiayia. A tank of sea-horses had curled in a violet halo about her head.

"Ya, Ya – are you listening?"

The scar from the time she had reached over to save my sleeve from catching on fire after I had fallen asleep holding my candle at the Easter mass, and burned herself flashed now in answer.

"Yiayia, do you understand? The teachers told us we each have to buy our own mouse."

"Pondikia? No, no, Dotty. They didn't say real mice."

"They said one real mouse for every person, for the laboratory. The white kind that sell for two dollars."

"Really?"

The shadow of a miniature shark rode over her countenance. It undulated from one side of Yiayia's face to the other. Before passing, the reflection took a nip of her ear, which was already

torn – a mark of the time when I was sitting upon her lap and tired of listening to her complain to the neighbor, and pulled one of her pierced earrings off through her ear lobe to get her attention.

“For homework, we are supposed to keep a mouse at home, in a shoe-box. My teachers said we don’t need to buy a cage.”

It was working: Yiayia’s fingers kneaded her side now for the lump of change.

“Yes, for school. That’s different. If the teachers say, you must have it.”

Yiayia concentrated on her pocket. The nickels and dimes were jingling together with the insistence of a hospital bell.

The money was out. A white-coated assistant bent over Yiayia who stooped over a cage of writhing white mice. The man put on sterile gloves, and grabbed at a mass of soft white bodies. He squeezed each of them like cotton balls, then placed a particularly gauzy, pink-eyed fellow in the palm she had extended to him without meaning to.

“Hey, they are a bit cute.” The man smiled at my trusting Yiayia – his acid green eyes swirled; and encouraged by her comment, he ventured a jest.

“Could’a interest you in a Boa, as well madam? They make good company for mice. Su-per for cuddling.”

Yiayia simpered at his name badge, uncomprehending.

The man laughed. He would get his day’s entertainment from her naiveté. He showed Yiayia how to stroke the mouse along its spine, and pat down its mini marshmallow head.

“They like to be petted, Madam.”

“They do, eh? Dotty, come here, learn something from the nice man.” I heard the joke in his voice. He thought this Mediterranean lady, with her mushroom cap, her bags, and pettifogging granddaughter was very foreign, funny, and gullible.

“Ya gotta pet them every day, and let them runna round a closed space – like y’er bath-tub, or a big kitchen pot.”

“Chicken pot?”

He chuckled, and scratched his jiggling stomach.

“Aw, Lady, this little thing won’t hurt nothing. Make sure ya clean it afterwards.”

“Clean the mouse? With some soap?”

The man quivered all over again. He winked at me. I had gotten her this far. He would take her the rest of the way.

“Ya wanna clean the mouse? Oh yeah, Then you beta buy our special washing solutions – the ones just for animals. Palmolive’s rats’ bane to them. Hold on. Lemme getcha what we sell in the store.”

The man held the mouse from its tail, dangled it before Yiayia, then swung it up like a yo-yo. Yiayia was for a second as white as the mouse.

“Can you do that?” she said, aghast.

“Sure, you can do anything ya like with these. They’re just snake-food.” He now swung the mouse like a pendulum. Yiayia, watched the creature jerk to and fro. The mouse squeaked shrilly.

“They’re super fun, see?” He glanced at me and smirked, “need it for school, eh? Going to dissect it, are ya? Like little doctors? Kids are so zealous these days.”

Dissect? The thought was horrible. In every tiny squeak, a scalpel flashed.

“Ya won’t hurt it, see? Ya just lift it from here, and flip it – watch this,” I awoke from my vision of surgical scissors, to see Yiayia accepting the disturbed vermin in her hand, fooled into torturing it. When she did as told, the mouse squirmed between her fingers, shrieking a rodent siren. In my state, the sound was gruesome. The pitch of metal scraping against metal. A wheelchair.

That was it. I could bear no more.

My first instinct was to faint into the sawdust on the floor, so that I would be carried away, and wake up somewhere else, with a washed conscience and a different family. But, on second thought, I wanted to be as far away from hospitals as possible, and such a swoon would send me to the children’s ward of Mt Sinai, and Yiayia soon after. I looked about me for a way out.

Yiayia backed up into a cage of ferret-like animals. Jolted from sleep, the heap of hairy chaps coiled through and climbed over each other in their corner. Here was my sign: they needed a liberator, and I was their girl. I resolved to do my last bit of

mischief, and my first bit of good – to cancel all I had done earlier in the day. I raised myself on the toe of my buster-browns and rasped in Yiayia's ear.

"I'm going to get the fishfood." Then, before she could object, I was off around the corner to catch my coat in the cage. Seconds after I set out, my calculated disruption met actuality, and a litter of copper-coated weasels scampeted across the floor, and scaled the cockatoo cages. In my perfect mess of loose braids, torn stockings, and new bruises, I began to wail.

"I can't get up. Oh, Yiayia. Yiayia! I feel like my ankles burst!" "Dottymou, see what you've done. Oh, oh, koukla! You hurt yourself! You never listen to Yiayia." My grandmother heaved – her short breaths pushing out tears.

"Sweet, Yiayia will lift you up, and carry you home. Oh, oh. If only your Yiayia wasn't so old. My good little girl – I'll take you in my arms. Mikroula! (little one), I'll bring you home – you try to stay still, we won't fall together in the street."

My grandmother gave me her rope-rough hands, and pulled me up out of the animal shavings. She did not turn her head from me long enough to see our solicitous salesman chasing his cotton-ball rodent under shelves of Iguanas and over sacks of rabbit pellets. Yiayia ignored the shouts of "weasel" that hailed our exit.

Limping up the snow-thick avenues to our apartment, Yiayia remembered that we had not gotten the mouse. She promised that once I was home in bed, she would run out to the pet-store to go get me one for school.

"But, I won't talk to that man again," she said. "*Ena Kako Anthropos*, Dottymou, *voli kako* (A bad man, a very bad man)." I didn't know she knew the man was any worse than helpful. I flushed red at the revelation – and at the sight of me, Yiayia bounced up from the bed and dashed to the bathroom for a wet cloth. She thought I had a fever. Or I thought she thought that. But maybe she didn't: I never gave Yiayia enough credit for understanding me.

After a hot cup of "vegetem" soup, and some melodramatic moans, I strategically consulted my assignment pad. As I reread the inside entry, I feigned to discover that I had made a mistake.

"It's good we couldn't buy the mouse, Yiayia."

"Why, sweet?"

"The pet-store didn't have the kind the teachers told me to get, see –"

I pointed to the place on the paper where I had drawn a star and scribbled some illegible cursive while Yiayia had been boiling tea in the other room.

"The teachers told us especially that white ones get stained when we do experiments with colors."

Yiayia sighed gravely at my words.

"Oh, I see, Koukla."

"The teachers tell us to order black mice, through the mail."

"Is it too late? Are you going to get a zero in class? You get zeros in school, and then you'll get thrown out. Your mother will shoot me. It's my fault."

Between shivers and hiccoughs, I assured Yiayia I didn't think this would be the case, so as long as I went to school before the homeroom bell the next morning. I would ask Ms Canary nicely if I could borrow George, the class gerbil, until the time my special order mouse arrived.

"You will be brave, Dotty. I am very proud of you when you talk to your teacher, and you are not afraid."

I didn't feel very brave, just bad. That night, I dreamt myself into the Nutcracker Christmas scene of sugar-pines and peppermint presents, but my sense of not deserving such rewards quickly turned the fantasy into a nightmare. In the ballet, I was the little girl beset by the midnight mice – big baggy carpet bodies, short twitching arms and skinny dancing legs. I needed to be rescued, but I woke up before the soft-shoed great uncle with scarves and eye-patch showed up. My mind made my savior my grandmother with berets and peg-leg. She lurched and I panicked. Her knocking neared me. I screamed and struggled and pushed the sound away. But she pursued and enveloped me.

In Yiayia's arms I felt the drum of Yiayia's heart, and the clinging beat of her care. She replaced my pillow of tears with the satin cushion from her sewing chair. I loved it for being smooth, and gold-colored – I had borrowed it often when she

went grocery shopping, and lately plotted to take it permanently. Yiayia set it behind me and sang to me in Greek about babies and lambs until my head slid from her shoulder back into sleep. She carried my little sister to my mother's bed, and lay down in the small wicker cot beside me for the rest of the night. Tossing in guilt, I reached out for her again and again, jarred each time by a different memory of my unkindness to her. I remembered how I had taken her spankopita and wedged it in the hollow of the table leg at the dinner-table, pinched quarters and packets of gum from the pockets of her coats, and dropped a hermit crab once in her slippers. With every memory I choked on phlegmy "sorry, so sorry's" and flung out my arms, wanting to collect all those times back and crush them. Yiayia caught my hands, kneaded them in hers and kissed my fingers. I felt forgiveness in each clasp.

When morning spread over the blinds with apricot light, I told Yiayia that when I grew up I wanted to be married in her wedding dress. I felt her palm on my cheek, smoothing away my sweaty hair. Then she left me. I thought she knew I was all right now, and believed she went to her own bed and wouldn't come back. But, in a minute she returned, and whispered to me to shut my eyes. She loosened my grasp of the comforter, and for the last time that night, she gave me her hand. This time, however, it fit right in my own, and felt softer than any cotton. I didn't let go even when I woke.

When I lifted my head some hours later, my lips were chapped with apologies. I encircled Yiayia's hand and raised it to my face. With my eyes still closed, I traced its knobs and ridges – picturing in my head her ring and veins.

Then I touched something strange.

"Yiayia, why do you have strings tied around your fingers?"

No answer.

"Yiayia, why don't you say? Are these threads? Are you making a dress?"

Nothing but the toots of traffic responded.

"Ya?"

I opened my eyes to see my grandmother was not in the room. The storm gathered in my soul again. Had I been contrite only in

reverie? Had I confessed myself merely to deaf dolls and lamps? Was it only a fistful of feathers, that I had grabbed from the hole in the down blanket, which I held now in my hands?

When I uncurled my fingers, a new knot lodged itself in my conscience. Reclining on my thumb was a tiny gray creature, in a starched white frock and hat. Nurse-mouse.

Watchful even when her plastic black caviar eyes fell out, and the cat got her tail. I didn't ever say I loved her, because I don't think I really did. I wanted to. I wanted to stop yearning for nicer mice and normal grandmothers. I wanted to imagine myself enshrouded in Yiayia's yellow satin, and striding down the aisle with pride for her. I wanted to believe I would combat fire and water to save the mouse she gave me.

For years I dragged the little nurse over the city – to school, the park, the roof playground, the zoo – she lived in my pocket, like penance. One part of me made me keep her with me. This way, she would be there when I converted from what I was to something better. Unfortunately, like everyone else, I had more than one part. During a long day of traveling between Yiayia's house in Connecticut and the apartment in New York, I lost Nurse Mouse on the train. She fell down the cracks of the seats or her dress got caught in an ashtray. Maybe she toppled down the hill and rolled into someone else's backyard, and found a child that appreciated her more than I could. I always hoped the last possibility was the reality. If only I could forget that it wasn't.