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# 1

*No one else's behavior makes any sense.*

That's it! The end of a continuous struggle for meaning since the third grade. That's when I took a long look at the Brownie pledge. "On my honor I will try . . ." noble and uplifting; ". . . to God and country . . ." I feel like saluting. But then the ending . . . "especially those at home." Sappy and rambling. I sent off my rewrite to National Headquarters and told them they could use it *gratis*—a word I may have misspelled. No reply yet, but you can't expect an organization that sounds like chocolate cake to make snap decisions.

The site of this revelation is the charter terminal at Heathrow, where we're spending the morning en route to Athens. Icarus Air warns you there's a price to pay for flying on a shoestring. "Be there three hours before takeoff," they command. *Three hours!* Whatever happened to "catching a plane"? (I have a little problem with time, which I blame on skipping first grade. "She can already read," they told my parents. They forgot to mention that first grade is where you learn to tell time, and maybe even understand it.) Nor am I thrilled to be flying with a company named for the only air disaster in Greek mythology. Icarus was the fearless god who flew so close to the sun his wax wings melted. I'm not afraid of flying either. Landing, maybe.

I look over the check-in choices and pick Anthony, sympathetic and snappy looking in a uniform that blends nicely with the ticket counter and carpet. With my French roast and Viennese beans, my pepper mill, yoga mat, and summer reading, I'm probably way overweight. As I get closer to Anthony, I do some tai chi balance shifts and practice sending waves of love in his direction. I also run my fingers through my unruly curls and drag a few over one eye in an attempt to look more vulnerable. And I pocket my sunglasses so my grandmother's startling blue eyes can destabilize him. Meanwhile my lower mind takes in the drama unfolding between him and the slim-limbed miniskirted French bombshell in front of me.

"May I see your visa for Greece, madam?"

"See my *what!*?"

Anthony blushes and clears his throat. "Do you have a visa for Greece?"

"Ah . . . *Oui*." She nods her blond sheaves vigorously. "I 'ave one *partout!*"

He smiles a weary, lost-empire smile. "You have a *passport* for everywhere. A visa is something else."

"Something else?" She turns to me bewildered. "*Comment?*"

"*Autre chose*," rises from the ruins of my eighth-grade French.

"*Pourquoi* something *autre?*" She turns back to him, impatiently licking her fingernails in time with her stiletto heels.

He reflects, scribbles something, and announces: "I think your French driver's license will be acceptable."

Yes! Anthony's my guy. What's a little overweight compared to illegal entry?

"Accept a table?" she turns again and practically shouts at me.

"*Acceptable?*" I try, though I know French cognates are the undergraduate's Waterloo.

"You are American, no?" she demands. Rude, and crushing. Lots of people think my accent is Parisian. Admittedly they all live in San Francisco.

“I just want to help you,” I say in a soft tone I reserve for crazy people.

“So do I,” Anthony chimes in, picking up my technique of short simple sentences.

“I just want to check in!” says Alex, right behind me. She turns her wheely bag around.

“Where are you going?” I ask in perfect English.

“To a line of my own.”

Alex (*Alexandra*, if she thinks you’re not taking her seriously) decided to come along at the last minute. But it was Julian’s idea that I take this unscheduled vacation. Julian is my partner in a West End theater company. Our affair ended the same week our play closed. I knew the play had a limited run, so that wasn’t a surprise. As for the Sarah and Julian show, I ignored the critics and willfully overlooked the dwindling returns. Which brings me to the painful conclusion that I’m better at acting than at casting.

Julian thinks it’s a happy coincidence; we can take a break from each other without hurting the business. I think it’s karma, and karma is a rolling stone; better to roll with it than stand in its path. So I’ve been planning a few weeks of *uncluttered* renewal on a remote Greek island. Uncluttered as in empty beach, cloudless skies, time alone to meditate, work on a novel, and finish an overdue magazine article. *Renewal* as in retina. Plus I thought I’d made it clear to my friends that Pharos doesn’t rhyme with Mykonos, Jackie O never slept there, and the nearest mojito is a five-day sail. No burgers, no discos, and as for getting a torn nail repaired, claws would grow first. Whereas the incomparable charms of Pharos I’ve been keeping to myself. So I’m not sure what’s inspired Alex to come. Could it be she’s more tuned in to the state of my heart than I am? Asking would only introduce logic into our relationship—a cheap tactic I abandoned long ago. Is there any chance she’ll last the month? No way, say our friends, who’ve never agreed on anything before. I suspect they’re placing bets; I just wish there were some way to get into the pool. Thanks to Icarus Air, she now has time to plunder in Duty Free. I find her swinging a full basket.

“Why are you buying all this stuff you don’t need and so cleverly didn’t pack?”

“C’mon, Sarah. I thought this was a vacation?”

“It is.”

“Fine. See you.” She slides away.

“And raise you . . .” She doesn’t hear. It isn’t the first time I’ve talked to a wall. But it *is* the first time the wall replied: *GIVE UP trying to understand other people.*

(It’s an odd thing about revelations. I’ve meditated at the best places: Ashram in India, hot tub at Esalen, beside the lake in Pokara . . . and I can’t recall the great Aha! hitting me at any of them. Here I am at Terminal 4. Why go anywhere?)

Alex reappears, an outbreak of plastic bags blooming on her carry-on.

“Did he say Gate Fourteen?” she says, chewing on a giant duty free Toblerone bar. “I think they’re calling our flight.”

“I wish I knew,” I say, breaking a piece off the end.

Heathrow’s the summer school for places that teach English as a second language; articles are optional and, interestingly, there’s no future tense. Plus its PA system is a holdover from the Blitz. So the odds of making your plane are roughly the same as colliding with a neutrino. We find another carpet-coordinated employee who says “Leaving! Porto 14!” Alex races me to the gate, where we stand panting in a line that takes forever to board.



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We’re flying in Europe, a continent of smokers who’ve recently been banned from lighting up on planes. Everyone around us has the DTs; they’re desperately uploading caffeine and wishing they could just step out on the wing for a puff. The guy on our aisle is shaking his foot and studying the Icarus Air evacuation cartoon . . . In my opinion they should

let people light up and drink from takeoff to landing. All this pent-up fear and deprivation would certainly mess up an orderly ditching at sea.

*Give up trying to understand other people*, I remind myself. Why, I wonder, has this revelation taken so long?

At thirty-nine thousand feet I look around at my fellow man with a new lightness, the enormous burden of comprehension abandoned at Duty Free. They're all digging into a mysterious seafood starter. Icarus is an airline that serves food for revenge. Fortunately I have the picnic skills to meet this challenge.

"Alex, let's have our banquet before the headwinds hit."

I detect a little hostility from the guy on the aisle, sawing uselessly on his seeded roll as Alex lays out our smoked salmon, pumpernickel, Brie, and Chablis. Unless it's an involuntary reaction to the cheese, with its whiff of socks left out in the rain.

"Would you like some smoked salmon?" she asks him.

"*Signome?*"

"No. Salmon," says Alex, squeezing the lemon.

"Alex, *signome* is Greek for 'excuse me.'"

"Oh."

"*Thelete ligo*—would you like some . . . ?" I try. But the word for salmon escapes me. I point at it.

She looks back. "Pointing is Greek?"

"*Oxi, epharisto.*" No, thanks. "*Eime hortophagos.*"

"He's a vegetarian," I explain to Alex. "And the Brie is ripe enough to moo, so let's skip that."

"We ought to offer him something," she says, displaying her notorious generosity.

"He can have my entire Icarus lunch." I say in an attempt to imitate her—though you could hardly call this a test.

"*Oxi, epharisto*—no thanks," he smiles discerningly.

I pour him a cup of Chablis.

When dessert comes around it's Turkish delight, in celebration of the three-thousand-year blood feud between Greeks and Turks.

“God, that looks terrible,” she says.

“Not as terrible as it tastes.”

She brings out our crème brûlée. During which I share my revelation, inspiration deleted.

“You mean to say you’ve been trying to understand *everyone*?”

“Well, not Charles Manson or the Spice Girls . . . but as a rule, yes.”

“What a wild idea.” Alex puts down her spoon. “How’s it turning out?”

“I’ve just given it up.”

She raises her cup of Chablis. “How do you say ‘bravo’ in Greek?”

“I think it *is* Greek.” And we click.

A few hours later we cross the Corinth channel and drop into the haze of Athens. The landing gear bangs into place. Moments later a stewardess comes over the speaker. “We’ll be coming through the aisles to collect unwanted items. Please fasten your cups and throw away your seat belts.”

Sometimes I wish I could follow directions.



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## 2

We get in with barely an hour to catch the ferry. I quickly search the cab rank for a zippy-looking driver who isn't eating breakfast behind the wheel and whose car has only minor contusions.

"Where you go?" says the winning cabbie.

"Piraeus—THE PORT. The ferry to Rhodes, quickly please, and please start the meter."

He turns to us, shocked. "No fix price?"

"No thank you . . . Vassilis," I say, squinting to read his mug shot. We ricochet into traffic without incident, but it's a long ride.

(I love bargaining in Egypt. All the shopkeepers are Zero Mostel. Buying anything from an Indian is exhilarating—you just need stamina and a bottomless capacity for tea. Then there's Nepal, the Buddha's eye over the doorway. The price . . . well, what is *anything* worth? You stand there together, drenched in mystery. But in Greece it's no fun. Maybe they're still smarting from the Trojan horse deal.)

"Rhodos, eh. You see Anatolia from there." Vassilis has some opinions about the latest Turkish provocations. Alex sees an opportunity to sleep. Whereas I'm saying the mantra and watching for death. The road to Piraeus has an unmarked middle lane where everybody drives.



Eventually we turn a corner and beneath the suburban haze the dock tumbles out at the bottom of the hill. Where's Fellini's folding chair, the camera towers, the boom mikes? Fruit sellers, hat sellers, canary sellers, nut vendors, street jugglers, dogs chasing cats, panicky chickens, hippies looking for the sixties, happy drunks sitting on half-submerged pilings, flocks of nuns, soldiers squatting in their boots, smoking and shooting dice, enormous families crying out to someone who waves from an upper deck.

Vassilis is cruising, looking for our pier. "The ferry to Rhodos?" he asks as he sideswipes an old man pushing a cart of apricots.

"You ignorant son of a—" word I don't know—says the vendor as he stoops to retrieve some rolling fruit. "*Eki*." He points to a line of trucks disappearing into a cavern on the dock opposite.

We jolt to a halt. Vassilis jumps from the car like a calf-roping cowboy. Alex opens her eyes.

"Will he carry our bags?" But she's still dreaming.

Haggling with Vassilis over the tip, I lose Alex behind some walking beach chairs.

"Alex. Wait!"

People with TVs, beach umbrellas, inflatable boats, whole hams are streaming around us. I finally catch up to her.

"Where are these people going?" she asks.

"To Mykonos, Naxos . . . this ferry stops at all the islands along the way."

"But if they need all that stuff . . ." she says, eyeing our relatively modest load.

"They don't. But they read Homer, and according to *The Odyssey* the islands are rocky wastelands."

"You mean the Homer who's been dead a thousand years?"

"He's still in print, though." I say this with a touch of envy that Alex gracefully ignores.

We wait for a family of six to clear the gangway, each of them carrying a tire.

"Good idea," says Alex. "Something to cling to when we go down."

From Rhodes we catch a small caique to our destination. The island of Pharos is a cluster of arid volcanic rocks off the Turkish coast, with about two thousand inhabitants not counting cats and goats. I discovered it four years ago in the Classical manner (*viz. The Odyssey* above) when the boat I'd chartered with friends pitched up there by mistake. It was me on the dog watch, steering by a star, and it set. Just a slight navigational error; slight! We didn't end up in another language.

It doesn't matter that I'll never live it down; I've found my native land. The days are mild, the water warm, the sky an unfiltered blue. Pharians are by nature generous and embracing. Any visitor who makes the slightest attempt to speak their impossible language is practically adopted. Life here is intoxicating in its simplicity. No airport, it's too remote to attract many tour boats, and you'd have to be lost to just drop by. Though its face changes in August. Then the old men desert the *tavernas*—their backgammon boxes mold under the bar; farmers stop coming to town for an *ouzaki*; no goat herds trot through the village churning the streets to dust clouds; the fishermen stow their nets and turn their caiques into beach ferries. But this is May. Take a deep breath.

The boat docks just after midnight. Stavros, bent like the new moon, older than Charon, is there to meet us. In these narrow lanes his wooden pushcart is the only means of transporting our stuff, the donkeys having bedded down at sunset. He's happy to see us, his only customers tonight.

"*Harika na se dho*," I tell him, a phrase learned over the winter. Until then what I'd thought meant "Happy to see you" was actually "I'm so thrilled to see you I could jump into bed with you right now." Which may explain my popularity on Pharos.

Stavros hugs me and smiles at Alex. He's not too old to notice the waist-length chestnut hair, dark eyes under darker lashes, the sculpted angles and curves of a workout maven. He steps back, surveys our pile of bags, shakes his head—a Turkish rug dealer agreeing to a ridiculous price.

"It's no more than last year," I tell him.

"But me, I'm a year older." His crow-bright laughter echoes across the shuttered port.

A boy appears from the moonshadow of the street lamp and picks up a suitcase.

“Costas, my nephew.” He’s twelve or thirteen, lean and wiry with dark hair and darker eyes, stooping to be invisible. I’m looking at Stavros, how many years before, waiting for his life to begin. Will he leave as Stavros never did, as eager to be gone from here as we are to arrive?

“Welcome,” he whispers, eyes down.

We set off under a black sky pricked with stars. The streets are narrow, lit by a half-moon falling on high whitewashed walls. As we climb out of the port to Kastro they taper to twisting passages no wider than Stavros’s cart. We fall in behind, silent, listening to the dogs calling, the night birds, the tinny carillon of goat bells in the valley. I’m thrilled by the stillness, the sharp nightlines, the soft jasmine air. Below us the sea suddenly appears, a skein of rough silk.

“Look,” says Alex, her voice husky with amazement. Far below now, our ferry is rounding the tip of the harbor, its wake a fan of diminishing pleats scattering the moonlight.

# Elena's Baklava

Makes about 36 pieces

## For the pastry:

- 6 cups coarsely chopped walnut halves
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup organic cane sugar
- 1-pound package filo, thawed
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups (3 sticks) unsalted butter

## For the syrup:

- 1 cup honey
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups organic cane sugar
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups water
- $2\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
- 1 teaspoon finely grated orange zest
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 3 cloves

**To make the pastry:** Preheat oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, toss together the chopped walnuts, cinnamon, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cane sugar until combined. Place the thawed filo on the counter and cover with a sheet of waxed paper; place a moist kitchen towel on top of the waxed paper. Melt the butter and discard the foamy milk solids on top.

Butter the bottom of a half-sheet pan. Gently remove one sheet of filo at a time and place on baking pan; brush generously with melted butter. Repeat with 6 more sheets. Spread half of nut mixture on filo and drizzle some butter on top. Place 4 more sheets of filo on top of nut mixture,

brushing each sheet with butter. Add the rest of the nut mixture. Layer the remaining sheets of filo one at a time, brushing each with butter, until all sheets are used. Sprinkle a little water on top with your fingers and brush to even out. Trim the excess filo around the pan. With a sharp knife or pizza wheel, cut the baklava into serving-size triangles or squares. Bake for 10 minutes, then lower heat to 325°F and bake for 35 to 40 minutes until golden brown.

**To make the syrup:** While the baklava is in the oven, mix all the syrup ingredients in a saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium heat, then lower to a simmer for about 10 to 15 minutes, or until the syrup is thickened and coats the back of a spoon. Remove cinnamon stick and cloves. Allow the syrup to cool until just warm. When the baklava is out of the oven, allow it to cool for 5 minutes, then pour the syrup evenly over the baklava. The baklava should cool at room temperature, allowing the syrup to settle in for at least 6 to 8 hours. Do not refrigerate.

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**Tips**

- It is best to buy walnut halves and chop them by hand.
- Keeping the melted butter in the top pan of a double boiler makes it easy to use throughout your preparation.

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**Embellishments  
and variations**

You can use almonds or pistachios in place of walnuts. Or substitute 1 cup cranberries for 1 cup walnuts.