

*Elena Lelia Radulescu*

*THE EYE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HEART*

For months Maria Bratu had been contemplating her return to Romania. The thought -- fleeting, nostalgic, and intense -- came and went in waves. She kept the longing to herself, as a child might keep a treasure box, to be taken out only at moments of loneliness. But the day she paid a visit to her friend, Zephira Bogosian, Maria almost let the words roll from the tip of her tongue: "I want to leave America for good."

"Now I can sit down and enjoy your visit," Zephira said, pouring Turkish coffee into the small white cups. The strong aroma wafted from the *ibric* and filled the air. For a moment, Maria closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar smell.

Zephira looked at her and smiled as she reached for a cube of Turkish delight. "If we don't pamper ourselves, nobody will."

She pushed the plate of sweets toward Maria, and that simple gesture stopped the other's words from coming out. No. She could not bring herself to talk about leaving, couldn't do that to her best friend.

"Maria, what's wrong? You look so lost in your thoughts." Zephira leaned slightly toward her.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," she said between sips of coffee.

"Drink it slowly and think only of important things. We'll see what the cup has to tell us," Zephira said.

Maria laughed. "Our fortune teller has spoken."

"Don't laugh. You know that my coffee reading is a serious business. I don't do it very often, only for my closest friends, but when I read a cup, I put all my heart into it. Ulma, the Tatarian woman from whom I stole the gift of foretelling, did it for money. People came to her house from as far as Galatzi and Braila. Merchants, fishermen's wives, betrayed husbands, women who had lost at love, and even desperate parents with sick children at home crossed her threshold. I saw them all. I was there helping with the coffee."

Maria had always doubted the existence of that old woman with slanted eyes and a dry, taut face, selling time-not-seen-yet in a God-forsaken fishermen village by the Black Sea. Nevertheless, she went along with the exotic stories, each time embellished with a new detail. Privately, Maria believed that Zephira had learned her wizardry from books, but she needed a legend, as one may need a license, to practice her skill.

“You can prepare your cup for reading now,” Zephira advised.

Maria tilted the cup sideways so the dregs of coffee would paint intricate, minuscule designs on the inner walls. She turned the cup upside down on a saucer, and waited for Zephira to find her glasses, who, when the spectacles were perched on top of her aquiline nose, said, “I see a trip taking shape in the house of your soul. See?” She pointed to the interior of the coffee cup, her index finger, slightly crooked from arthritis, drawing an imaginary line from the bottom to the brim. “Are you planning to go home?” she asked.

They had never ceased calling Romania ‘home’, although neither of them owned houses or land or anything else there.

“Oh, no, I don’t think so.” Maria lifted her hands from her lap, palms turned outward in a tacit attempt to keep the inquisitive stare away from her body.

“Maybe you don’t know about it. Not yet. There is a seagull here with wings spread over a boat: the traveler’s sign. Look, I see another boat, a smaller one,” Zephira said, rotating the cup in the nest of her palm.

Maria frowned. “How can I leave my family now when they need me the most?”

Her family. The reason for being in America. Her pride worn like a new outfit Sunday in church. Once, while slicing sweet bread for the after-mass gathering, Maria had realized that she never answered for herself when friends greeted her, but always: “We are doing fine, we are healthy, thank God,” as if she were speaking for a team before a competition, waving a cheerful plural.

“Family or not, be ready for a journey. What I don’t like here is this dark mark at the bottom of your cup: a black eye half closed and half watching you.” Zephira pulled the reading glasses down on her nose, looking over their thick rim. “Is everything all right with you, Maria?”

Maria flashed a smile. “I’m all right. When I went to Chicago for Easter, Mircea made me go for all kinds of tests at his hospital. He said that I have a little high blood pressure, but it can be controlled with medication. I take a pill in the morning, and I’m fine all day.” She sensed Zephira’s eagerness for more stories, but she didn’t say anything else.

Mircea, her son, an endocrinologist, was her life’s most luminous point. In her overstuffed purse, between store coupons and grocery lists, Maria carried newspaper clippings bearing his name in print. Often she would take out the tattered pieces of paper and show them around. In her mind, the scientific articles belonged more to her than to him. They were documented proof that she was a good parent, one who had successfully completed a laborious mission, who had earned the right to enjoy its fruits. She wished she had pictures of his wedding, or his children playing with the family dog on a manicured lawn, but Mircea had remained single. For a while, she had tried to fix him up

with her friends' daughters, or with newly arrived Romanian girls. She had even asked Zephira to arrange an appointment with an Armenian matchmaker from Long Island.

Mircea had declined all her offers with a laugh. "Ma, stop worrying about me. Why would I need another woman's love when I have yours?"

"A dark point doesn't mean bad things for you," Zephira continued. "Maybe your brother, or one of his sons, is sick or in trouble. You'll find out once you're there, in Romania."

"That could be," said Maria, "but I told you, I have no intention of traveling."

She felt compelled to bury her secret under small details, as one covers the roots of a fragile plant with dead leaves for the winter. She spoke in great detail of her grandchildren and their first summer camp, which was just two weeks away. She called to mind the image of her house, the yellow splashes of marigold at the edge of the front lawn and the purple petunia overflowing the pots by the entrance door. That image chained itself to another one: the herb garden in the backyard with its countless shades of green from the light color of the lovage bush to the dark of the peppermint leaves. She saw herself there too, pinning clothes on the line; arms stretched high in an effort to tame the bedspreads gone wild in the wind. No, she was not going to leave all this to move back to Romania. What had gotten into her lately? An invisible shudder rippled across her shoulders.

"Oh, I see now. This dark spot in the middle of your heart is not an eye, but a black star dragging a trail of words from your past," Zephira said, peering into the coffee cup. "I don't like this darkness. I've never seen this before in your cup." Zephira pronounced this looking deep into her friend's eyes.

"I too don't like the word 'darkness'. As a child I was afraid of the dark. Any kind of it: of the night, the cellar, even the grayish dark at the start of a summer storm," Maria said and sighed.

"You've never told me this before."

"I have never told anyone."

"Sometimes," Zephira said, "it's good to share your fears with a friend. It takes away half of the burden you carry with you through life." She sighed and returned to her reading.

"I see a group of people entering your house, Maria. Maybe you'll have guests or a party. I can't see it clearly."

"I don't think we'll have any reason to celebrate," Maria said.

"It's a very strange gathering. I see lots of people under a big umbrella. I... don't know how to put this into words." Zephira covered her mouth with one hand.

How can she see all this in the dregs of a coffee cup? Maria wondered. How can she look into my soul and talk of a dark eye in the middle of my heart and journeys

home? Nonsense -- but she trembled slightly as she remembered another morning, almost fifteen years before, when Zephira pointed to the shape of a ring forming at the bottom of her coffee cup. Nora's wedding ring. At that time she hadn't been ready for her daughter's marriage -- not the way it had happened, in a hurry, as if Mark was on some kind of military leave, about to return to the battlefield.

That Sunday afternoon, when Nora brought her boyfriend home for the first time, Maria had hidden her bewilderment (a man in her daughter's life? since when?) behind a curtain of words.

"Please, have some peach tarts -- I just baked them. Coffee? Yes, it's strong, Turkish style. Sorry, we don't drink American coffee, but if you want, you can add milk."

Mark had filled the initial moments of his visit with small talk, telling stories about his stay in Italy as a foreign student. He began with a story about espresso coffee he'd sipped one night in a bar in Trieste. Then he'd lectured them on Roman ancient history and romance languages, as if his knowledge of Europe would make him a more eligible suitor. Looking from across the table into his white, slightly freckled face, Maria thought that beauty was definitely in the eye of the beholder.

She had noticed that Mark spoke louder when addressing her husband, as if Tudor were hard of hearing rather than less proficient in English.

Nora hadn't touched her coffee, just nibbled a crust of tart while pulling and wrapping around her index finger a thread from the hem of the tablecloth. Impatiently she'd interrupted Mark in the middle of his journey to the south of Italy:

"Ma, Pa, we're getting married this coming week."

Her words had fallen on their table like shards of cast iron. Tudor had recovered from the blow first, turning to his wife as if she, the mother, had spoken the words. Then he had looked at his daughter, waiting for an explanation.

Nora repeated her words, this time in Romanian: "*Noi ne casatorim saptamina asta.*"

The silence, that followed, had been metallic, or maybe the humming of the refrigerator in the kitchen had a metallic sound, a shadow forever fastened to the memory of Nora's wedding announcement.

"But... you haven't finished college yet," Maria had said. She had whispered to her husband in their native language, "Please, say something!"

Tudor, pushing the plate away from him, had left the table with, "What you want me to say? She's your daughter, after all. Besides, it's too late to do anything."

"Mr. Bratu, I love your daughter very much, I really do," Mark had mumbled as a wave of crimson color spread from the corners of his mouth to his temples. Horrified, Maria had watched her husband go to the pantry for a bottle of *tzuika*, the strong Romanian plum brandy. All her married life she had dreaded these moments of weakness

when Tudor had to numb his anger and disappointments with alcohol.

“Maria, don’t fret over my sayings. Sometimes my reading can be a little off. It all depends on your thoughts at the time of your drinking. If you don’t stay with your heart wishes, the cup will show your future mixed up with other people’s needs.”

“Don’t waste your time and your eyesight on my cup,” Maria said. “What’s meant to happen will happen.”

“The future is a book written by God, and only He can read it for us,” said Zephira philosophically, pointing to the ceiling. With a sigh she rose from her chair, collected the cups on a copper tray, and went into the kitchen.

Through the lace curtains, the midday sun cast rectangular patterns down between the Bukhara rug and the anthurium pot by the window. Silence enveloped Maria. She closed her eyes, trying to remember how many times Zephira’s predictions had come true. Her first job interview? Mircea’s successful placement with the hospital of his choice? Moving into her house in Forest Hills?

On a rainy morning one week before Tudor announced the buying of an old house in Forest Hills, Zephira had said: “Your soul is under the signs of renewal: a butterfly coming out of its cocoon.”

The house had been a run-down place with sticky patches of mustard-colored carpet on the first floor, cracks branching out from a dent in the ceramic tiles above the kitchen counter, and the banister to the second floor hanging by two rusted nails. Walking from room to room with grayish November light slipping through the dirty windows, Maria had fought hard to hold back her tears.

“This is a solid brick house. It needs some repairs. Give me three-four months, and I’ll turn it into a jewel. Trust me, Maria. You’ll see.”

She hadn’t said a word then, or later. She hadn’t asked about the engineering license exam Tudor had once considered taking.

“What I was in Romania is another story. Here, I am what I am, take it or leave it,” had been his words to his sister, Rita, when she asked him about his plans in America.

Nora hadn’t accepted her father’s change of career, not even after they all moved into the house with its sparkling bathrooms, lemony wooden floors, and two hydrangea bushes bursting into magenta blossom under their living-room windows.

There had always been tension between father and daughter, like a tightrope about to snap any moment. Maria moved between the two of them with the skill of a diplomat, taking sides, pulling the ends of that invisible rope, shifting the pressure until peace was restored in the house.

Once, that fragile peace, so carefully built, had shattered to pieces so badly Tudor almost hit her. It had happened on a Saturday morning, one of the few weekends when he didn’t work, and right after Mircea’s departure to Chicago for his medical internship

program. They'd eaten breakfast in the dining room. Maria had laid her best silverware on the white linen tablecloth as if an unknown holiday was there to greet them together with the sunlight coming through the open window. Tudor had finished his coffee while reading the newspaper. He'd found a funny article in the paper and wanted to share it with the two of them. He'd read aloud, stumbling over words, mumbling and omitting the last syllables.

Nora had laughed. "Why don't you take some accent reduction classes, Pa?"

"Accent reduction? What in the world is that?" Tudor had asked, folding the newspaper.

"You know, a class to improve your pronunciation."

"I thought that only breast size could be reduced. Now I hear that, in America, everything can be sized down or up." He had stared straight into Nora's eyes, dark and piercing eyes, a mirror of his own. "And why do I need to improve my pronunciation, may I ask?"

"Ah, Pa! In America, people judge you by the way you look, the way you speak."

"And who is judging me? My crew understands when I say 'plywood' or 'insulated walls'. Are you judging me? You? With these very hands I put food on your table and clothes on your back. If you are ashamed of my accent, get the hell out of my house!"

The rest of the words, thrown back and forth across the table, had turned into a gray, blurred funnel drawing Maria in, pushing her body against her husband's wide chest. What was left of that morning had stayed with her for weeks: Tudor's finger marks bunched on her upper arm, a cluster of ripe mulberries slowly fading into an ochre hue.

Zephira interrupted Maria's musings with an invitation to lunch. "You must be hungry, Maria. Let's eat together. I have pilaf and tomato soup with dumplings. It'll take me two minutes to warm up the food. Thank God for microwaves."

"I wish I could stay and eat with you, but I have to prepare dinner for the kids. Another time, I promise."

How she could sit at her friend's table with her secret billowing inside her like a tide in the wind?

"When will you stop thinking of others and do something only for yourself?" Zephira asked gently, touching Maria's hand as they kissed each other good-bye.

\*

The swish of cars and the rumble of trucks moving fast on Queens Boulevard made Maria tired. She walked two blocks down towards Greenpoint Avenue, entering the small triangular park she knew so well from her first years in America. She chose a bench in the shade and sat down looking across the street. She used to live in one of the six-story buildings up the street, in a tiny apartment with the kitchen so small she had to keep her pots and pans nested in a cardboard box under the table.

“In the beginning it is hard. Look at us. We work ourselves to the bone, but we do it for our children. They will have a better life, Maria, think of that,” her sister-in-law said each time Maria dwelt over old memories.

Rita, Tudor’s oldest sister and their legal sponsor, had been the first in their family to emigrate. Every Wednesday she would visit them, bringing picture frames, chairs with the upholstery lightly worn, or lamps with missing parts.

“Here comes the antique dealer!” She made her entrance laughing. “The streets in America are not paved with gold, just some useful garbage on Wednesday nights,” she said giggling.

Even now, Maria smiled at the thought of their heavy coffee table lugged over from the other side of Queens Boulevard. She had wanted to give it up, leave it there underneath the elevated train tracks, but Rita insisted on carrying it home. Exhausted, they’d sat down one at each end of the table, catching their breath in the autumn air. When the Number 7 train wheeled above with a roar, Rita lifted her head and began to curse, uttering a long invocation of misfortune to befall upon those who believed in communism, and those who, in the devil’s name, had invented it. Timidly, Maria followed her sister-in-law with dirty words. At first, she addressed nobody in particular, but she later became more elaborate, swearing at the Romanian government with an evil mouth. After the train noise faded, they looked at each other and broke out into contagious laughter. Amplified by the echo in that hollow space, their laughs sounded mischievous and carefree, as if they were two schoolgirls going home after a difficult examination.

The sun went into a cloud, and the shade brought a shiver across Maria’s back. She thought of going home, where the Granny Smith apples were waiting to be peeled, minced, and turned into apple strudels.

In her mind she heard Zephira’s words: “When will you stop thinking of others and take care of yourself?” Now she was thinking of herself, of returning to the old country. She wondered about her brother and his wife, living on a meager pension, stretching it from month to month. For years, Maria had saved money and sent it to them for medicine, doctors, property taxes, and school expenses for their two sons.

Nobody knew about these gifts. Maybe Nora had guessed the day Maria left a Western Union deposit slip lying on the living room table. Nora had picked it up, read it, and handed to her mother with the words, “Keep it in a safe place. Don’t let Pa see it.”

After her marriage, Nora had moved with her husband to a one-bedroom apartment in Ridgewood. She came to visit her parents once in a while, always in a hurry, always carrying heavy books in a tote bag. Mark was even busier than she was: exams to pass, classes to teach, a thesis to write.

Every Saturday morning, Maria took the Queens Boulevard bus to bring them walnut cakes, sweet bread, and fruit pies still warm from her kitchen. On one of those

mornings, she felt her mouth parched by thirst and opened the refrigerator for a bottle of water. The almost-empty shelves made her cringe, as if the bright emptiness were nothing but the mouth of a strange beast. She acted out a strong headache, so she could linger around waiting for the pain to die down. Nora pulled a chair to the table, offering more than two pills of Advil.

“Ma, it’s not what you think. We’re just passing through a tough period in our lives, that’s all. Mark’s only teaching three ESL classes at night. I lost my full-time job, but I’m still working two mornings at the museum library. We’ll be OK. Please don’t worry, and please don’t ask more questions.”

That weekend Maria pleaded with Tudor to have Nora and Mark live upstairs in Mircea’s old bedroom. First she asked, and then she begged. By Sunday night she threatened to leave him and return to Romania.

“Woman, are you insane? What are you going to do there?” he yelled at her, brandishing a half-empty bottle of brandy.

For a week, she refused to cook or clean. Bits of salami on stale bread, and the uncapped, mustard jar decorated the kitchen table. She kept her word: she wouldn’t move a finger in the house. By the end of the week, Tudor gave in.

Maria turned to Mark and met with him in a bagel shop near Queens College. Secretly, she expected a refusal, a brush-off with dignified reluctance, but he found the move appealing, even necessary.

“That’s a very good idea,” he sighed. “It comes at the right time, when we’re expecting a child. Did Nora tell you?”

No, Maria didn’t know.

“Oh, I see...” Mark mumbled as shades of crimson rippled over his face.

It was not one child, but twins, two boys with Nora’s dark eyes and Mark’s light skin.

Did Nora feel defeated by her move back to her parents? Maria couldn’t tell. The young woman’s disobedience, and her old resentment, melted under a gentle civility, a kind a graceful acceptance of convenience.

Tudor seemed to ignore her -- too busy with his construction company to bother with family feelings about past events. He continued calling Mark “the American,” even in his presence.

Each time Mark laughed, replying, “You’re more American than I am. You’re the one who buys old houses, fixes them up, and sells them at a profit.”

“Well, that’s American enterprise,” Tudor admitted, gleaming with pride.

Once, while bringing American coffee down to the basement where Tudor and Mark were building an office, Maria sensed that her job as family peacemaker had slowly died away. Hunched over measurements, their heads almost touching, the two men



seemed at ease with each other, as if the blows of the hammer had also smoothed the wrinkles of their past.

A light wind rustled the leaves in the trees, turning their silvery sides up, bringing to her mind the words of her grandfather: "This is a sign of rain, and rain is good for plants and people. It washes the salt away from heavy souls." The old man was a real reader of the sky. From him Maria had learned to look at the clouds and predict which would bring a storm or carry the icy nails of hail. When was the last time she'd let her eyes wander across the sky? She couldn't remember the day.

"I should go home," she whispered, but she didn't move from the bench. She opened her purse to fish out the bus change, only to drop the quarters into her pocket. What darkness could wait for her at home? Maria trembled. No, this time Zephira had not foretold the right course of events, for she was going to her real home, to the old house behind the poplar trees, back to her childhood town. She would sit on the porch and look at the sky. Hours and hours of sky watching.

*It's a dark point like an eye in the middle of your heart.*

What in the world could happen to her there, where life went at a snail's pace? And what of that "black trail of words coming from the past," she wondered. Nobody's past is perfect. It's always a "what if this would have happened this way, or that way". It's always a question or a regret to gnaw the inside threads of your thoughts like a moth working its way into a wool blanket. You learn to live with it! After all, her life wasn't so bad, she concluded.

Tudor's death broke the flow of things in her house. He died quietly in his sleep during a Sunday nap after a heavy meal of stuffed peppers and fried mushrooms. Mark had called to him from the base of the stairwell:

"Pa! Pa! Let's take the boys to the park. Wake up, Pa!"

Then, the voice he always used when in a panic: "I think he is gone."

"Gone where?" Maria asked from the kitchen sink, scraping left over food from the plates.

After that, only pictures drifted in front of her eyes: the dishwashing machine whirling, the twins opening and closing their mouths, Nora crying, Mark flipping pages of a yellow book. Not a sound reached her ears in that silent, numb world. Her hearing returned when Nora was talking loudly, almost screaming, on the phone, "I don't give a damn about your medical congress, you hear me? Your father put you through medical school, don't you ever forget that. So take the first flight to New York and show your face here tomorrow, not for the burial. Tomorrow, I said!"

She tried to rise from her seat and grab the phone from Nora's hand. Gently, Mark held her back. "Let her deal with Mircea."

The funeral arrangements were made by Rita, Nora, and Mark.

Mircea arrived on the morning of the burial, but the following day he flew to Dallas for “at least the last days of the medical congress.” Maria forgave him; Nora didn’t.

After that, Maria missed her husband’s noisy comings and goings: his muddy boots thrown down into the wash room, the kitchen screen door banging, lids of pots and pans being lifted for a quick peek at the dinner choices, his loud voice telling the twins to lower the TV. She lived with the absence of those sounds as she might have lived with chronic pain -- some days sharp, others dull but still there. Only her grandsons, with their mirror like gestures and their boisterous voices, could lift her spirits. Sometimes, while doting on them, she caught Nora’s dark stare and sense a reproachful tone in her words:” Ma, stop spoiling my boys.”

In secret, even before her husband’s death, Maria had managed to teach the twins Romanian. She used her native tongue as one would use a code, a game played to hide small jokes, innocent mysteries in a house with busy parents.

When he found out about his sons’ proficiency in a foreign language, Mark was delighted.

“Mastering the grammar of any language is an excellent exercise for the mind,” he commented when, at a Romanian restaurant, the twins ordered food and drinks in their mother’s first tongue.

Maria didn’t particularly care about grammar or its beneficial influence on children’s brains. She had moments telling them stories about the dark spirits of the Carpathians Mountains, when she felt closer to her own childhood.

“Grandma, that’s impossible. A wolf would not eat up a horse and a coachman but spare a woman just because she was holding a baby,” the boys protested in disbelief.

“Ah, my darlings” she replied with a laugh, “everything was possible in my old country.”

Her old country. Soon she would return there for good. In her last letter to her brother, Maria had asked: “Is the park still there by the river? And what about the black locust trees swinging their pendent flowers over the benches? Was everything there in the same place where she had left it thirty years ago?” In that park she had strolled as a young woman holding hands with Tudor, he as a fresh graduate from the politechnical institute, she a legal secretary at the court house. What had happened to those young people? Maria wondered as a tender wave softened her heart.

The midday sun pushed the shade of the trees away from the sidewalk. A wing of warm air brushed against her face. She felt the heat rippling over her body in small tides. With the heat came a headache pounding at her temples. Vigorously she massaged her forehead. “The pill. I forgot to take my pill this morning,” she said to herself. In her mind she went back over the moment after breakfast, over the image of the small bottle with her name printed below the cap, over the glass of water by the sink. “Yes,” she sighed with

relief; she had taken her medication.

“You should go easy on salt and coffee, Ma,” she remembered her son warning her. They had been sitting in his sparkling, Clorox-bleached office, he behind his desk, she, a patient, facing him.

“If I won’t eat salt, then who will be the salt of the earth?” she had joked in English, searching her son’s face for a trace of a smile. Mircea’s face had remained immovable.

Sitting on the park bench, Maria tried to hold in her mind the memory of their arrival in America: two small children, lost in their oversized winter coats, accompanied by two parents holding big Manila envelopes in their sweaty hands. Picture after picture rolled in front of her eyes. Sometimes a frame kept repeating itself, like the one of her husband in front of the television, only three channels working, yet one of Rita’s best acquisitions. More often, it was the image of her children around her at the kitchen table doing their homework. Maria cherished this vision the most, since there she was their equal, their partner in learning. After Mircea had entered high school and Nora junior high, Maria’d had a real job interview with a utility company. Impressed by her writing skills, the lady from Personnel had commented on her English. Right there, in the stuffy office crowded by file cabinets, Maria could hardly contain her urge to show around a photograph of her children.

Her children. When had they started drifting away? She couldn’t pinpoint the landmark moment in a string of events, mostly holiday meals or birthdays parties at a Greek restaurant on Skillman Avenue. Lately, sitting across the table from Nora and the twins -- Mark, between evening classes, had his dinner at odd hours and alone in the kitchen -- she sensed a distance swelling, pushing them apart. Many times, she thought that the language she had been using while talking to Nora was the simple language of plain necessity, a handful of verbs in the immediate tense of habits, a net of phrases woven to cover up that widening distance between them.

One afternoon, Maria waited for a moment alone with her daughter, longing for a long talk. Of what, she couldn’t tell -- couldn’t explain what deeper words she was craving for. She went upstairs to Nora and Mark’s bedroom with a plate of toasted slices of rye bread topped with crumbled pieces of halvah.

“Look here, *uite aici*,” she said. “This used to be your favorite treat when you were a little girl. Remember?”

Nora turned her book with the pages down and smiled.

“Thanks, Ma, but you don’t have to wait on me. You’re doing too much already. At your age you should enjoy retirement, take a senior citizen trip, visit with friends, just rest...”

Nora’s Romanian was slightly altered by an accent, as if a rough current ran underneath the words, pulling them down, melting them into a harsh music.

Hurt, Maria returned to the kitchen, where, between two measuring cups of flour and three beaten eggs, a vision of herself waiting patiently to board a plane overlay the blackness of pots and pans and rose from the mist of frying onions.

A breeze quivered the leaves in the trees down on Greenpoint Avenue. Warm air carried the sweet smell of linden trees in blossom. A linden tree, here in Sunnyside? Maria didn't recall having seen one when she lived in the neighborhood. She closed her eyes, letting the fragrance embrace her nostrils. As a child she had picked up the yellow bouquets, spread them on old newspapers in the guestroom, and waited for them to dry. For weeks, the fragrance had reminded them of winter mornings when steamy cups of tea warmed their hands and lips.

Sharp and nauseating, a migraine clenched her head.

"I should go home," she mumbled to herself. She tried to read the time on her wristwatch, but the honeyed scent of linden flowers seemed to take her will away. Again she closed her eyes, breathing in the fragrance, cocking her head to one shoulder. Under her closed eyelids a linden flower unfolded its star-like petals. More corollas followed, bigger, brighter, bursting with sparks of fireworks. The explosion of flowers on the dark background of her mind was doubled by a pounding sound coming from inside her temples. Soon the yellow scintillations fused into a globe of fire, as if her whole body was pushed into a risen sun.