

ANNIA LEKKA

The Unfolding

Heinrich bends close to his wife's reclining body, places his ear on her chest and closes his eyes – he's been watching her sleeping and hasn't seen her moving much.

He straightens his back as far as it will uncurl and places his fingers on her arm – aged, thinning skin, so fine it's almost purple, the colour of her veins – and strokes her delicately. His wife doesn't move. Her eyes remain stubbornly closed, her lips tight, frozen in a pale line.

His hand still rests on her arm as he glances at his watch – 12.45pm – time for him to start preparing lunch. Heinrich hesitates a moment before bringing her hand to his lips. He caresses her wispy white hair, so feathery and weightless it looks like candy floss.

Holding the edge of the bed, he rocks back and forth a few times building up the strength to stand. Groaning he rises and almost falls backwards, but finally manages it. He turns to look at his wife.

'I'm going to make lunch, Ilse. I'll be back again soon.' He gazes at her immobile body, his shoulders sink to his chest. It won't be long before she isn't in their bed any more. He fixes his eyes on the door, moves towards it. One slow step after another, he shuffles his way to the kitchen, his arms hanging limply by his sides. It's too much effort to let them swing.

In the corridor he pauses to catch his breath, notices the framed black and white photographs on the wall. Shots of himself and Ilse at different opera houses and concert halls, posing next to one renowned conductor after another, photos of him next to his Steinway concert grand, the black-lacquered maple wood reflecting his image almost to perfection. There had been no time or desire for a family. Music was their life. His eyes rest on a picture of his wife in a dark dress barely covering her shoulders. A row of diamante beads hangs diagonally on her left breast. A flat material bow accentuates her petite ribcage. She holds her arms in mid-air, as if pleading to some higher power above, her heavily made-up eyelids closed, pain etched in the crease between her eyebrows. *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore, non feci mai male ad anima viva!* Heinrich can almost hear her voice – his very own Tosca. He takes the frame off the wall, blows away the thick layer of dust and wipes the glass with his arthritic fingers.

Once in the kitchen he places it on the table and moves towards the old Siemens fridge. His hand shakes as it turns the metallic handle of the door and there's nothing he can do to stop it. It's been years since he could control the shaking of his hands. He picks up the only thing in there; a tray of skinless chicken fillets. Cold breathes out of the opened door, circles its way around his body, crawls up his sleeves and chills his neck. He takes the chicken out of the fridge and closes the door behind him. He'll boil the fillets, make a soup; their juice might give her strength.

He fills a saucepan with water, adds the chicken and places it on the unlit cooker.

He heads to the cabinet for some rice, but the jar is empty, so he moves towards the cellar. He pulls the dangling chain at the entrance and light flickers along a row of exposed bulbs.

Each step he takes down the cellar stairs makes him wince; walking is no longer easy. Ten little steps, that's all it is, but it feels like hours. Heinrich looks around, not wanting to make any unnecessary movements, spots a box of rice on a shelf. He stretches his arm out to grab the box and loses his balance. He collapses onto an old wooden chest. With eyes closed he bends his head, expecting sweat to appear on his forehead from the scare, but no sweat forms there; he's too dried up. His hands caress the top of the chest. The wood is cracked in places and chipped patches of varnish scratch his palm. He pulls it away, opens his eyelids and looks down. He hadn't realised which chest it was until he'd touched it, but now he knows what it contains.

He stands to face the wooden trunk, all thoughts of rice now completely gone from his mind. Heinrich lifts the heavy cover and peers inside.

Just as he had remembered. It's full to the top with theatre costumes that his wife had worn from the operas she'd sung in. He rummages through the pile of dusty, mould-scented costumes until he finds one that makes his back rigid. He tugs at the dress, lifts it out of the chest and holds it between his hands. The dark red velvet has been eaten by moths in places, the once-white lace has turned stiff and yellow. He shakes it and dust creates a cloud in front of his face. The weight of the dress, with its voluminous amounts of material, is too much for him to hold up for long. He pulls it close to his body, embraces it. A sob wells up in his throat but never makes its way out, his chest rises and sinks as he clutches the heavy material. No tears run down his face; they have dried up years ago along with his sweat. As quickly as his silent sobs begin, they end; and he stands still, breath held tightly in his lungs.

With unsteady hands he holds the dress up and feels it stir in his grasp. Heinrich lets go of the material, expecting it to fall to the ground.

But it doesn't.

It hovers in front of him for a second, suspends itself in front of his eyes, then slowly starts to drift away, up the cellar stairs and out of sight.

He breathes softly, afraid he will break the magic. He stands fixed to the spot for a minute, his right hand twitching continuously, the veins at the side of his neck pumping harder than ever. He tries to move towards the cellar stairs, but his legs are rooted. He steadies himself against the wall and manages a few steps forward. He's going to the bedroom where his wife lies sleeping in their bed, but first he has to do one thing.

The living room is dark. Heinrich stumbles to the window feeling his way along the furniture, and pulls the pink damask curtains aside. Light floods the

room almost knocking him over. He raises his arms in front of his eyes, and waits, until he's comfortable with the amount of light that has filled the room after many years of darkness. Everything comes into focus – the fireplace, the armchair with its worn arms and footrest, the round walnut coffee table next to the armchair. His eyes rest on the oak gramophone, its oversized steel horn open like a Morning Glory flower. He walks towards it, takes hold of the goose-neck needle arm and lifts it. He wipes the shellac record that is lying there with his sleeve and looks at the black shining disc – his breathing growing more pronounced the longer he stares. He turns the crank at the side of the oak cabinet and places the needle arm onto the record. It crackles and skips a few grooves but pretty soon the sound of a piano and a soprano voice surrounds him.

His knees give way and he falls forwards, his full weight resting on the armchair. He hasn't heard this music for years, perhaps even decades. It's the only instance of them performing together, a unique recording he has of himself playing the piano and his wife singing. Puccini. Ilse's favourite composer. A piano score of one of the arias from *Madama Butterfly* – a duet, performed in the empty concert hall they had just rehearsed in. Their secret performance.

The music overflows into the room, touches every piece of furniture, every painting and every clump of dust, from the ceiling to the floor, and with each note that rings out, his body becomes steadier, grows a notch straighter.

Heinrich seems to glide down the hall towards their bedroom, the notes consuming him, guiding him, pushing him along. The curtains are open, the room radiant with golden light. He doesn't recall opening them. He turns to look at his wife.

She's where he had left her, lying still, in bed. But she isn't alone; the dress is hovering parallel above her sleeping body, scanning her for signs of recognition, signs of life.

He stands by the bedroom door, mesmerised, as if watching her perform once more. The dress floats down and fuses with her flesh, covering her body like a layer of skin. Heinrich focuses on his wife's face and notices slight changes taking place – a warm pink flush spreads across her cheeks, her lips swell, all creases disappearing from the edges. Her hair loses its ghostly white halo and turns auburn, thick and shiny, full of the wave and spring it used to have. He looks at her hands, sees the knuckles plump up with flesh, lose their purple under-hue. Her chest increases, starts rising, the skin over her shoulder blades stretches and glows.

He walks up to the bed, stands above her and gazes down. He sees her eyelashes, now grown long and dark, twitch. Her eyes move beneath her shut eye lids. They flicker a bit before she opens them, blinks and settles her gaze on him.

At first, her face expresses a mild confusion, but the longer she stares at him, the more he sees the bewilderment disappear, and remembering enter in. He

touches his head and feels a light film of sweat on his temples. Only then does he notice his own hands. He holds them out in front of him, as if warming them by the fire, sees the strength in his slim fingers return, the sickly grey colour no longer present. He glances at his clothes which no longer sag on his body as if he'd borrowed them from his older brother, but fit snugly. Heinrich looks back at his wife, who's now smiling, a row of perfect teeth showing through. She pats the side of the bed next to her.

He sits at the edge. His wife's fingers touch his arm, gently pulling him closer and he succumbs to that pull, lies on his back, turns his head to look at her. She props herself on her elbow and smiles down at him.

'Amore mio,' she whispers, and rests her head on his chest.

Heinrich wraps his arms around her body, closes his eyes. If this is Death, he'll let it guide him. He'll follow it anywhere.

He pulls his wife closer to him and lets the music swallow them whole.

***Annia Lekka** was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, but grew up in London. She obtained a BA in Theatre Design from Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design and was awarded a scholarship by Royal West of England Academy for research studies in Nepal. She has worked as a set and costume designer at Athens Concert Hall. In 2008, she gained an MA in Creative Writing (with Merit) from Lancaster University. In 2009, one of her short stories was published in the Year Zero anthology. Annia lives with her husband and three children in Athens and is currently working on three novels set on the Princes' Islands.*