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An Almost Guinea Fowl

*Translated from Greek
by Karen Emmerich*

FOR KAY

Telis came home that afternoon in high spirits. The crisp air had relieved his headache. The atmosphere in the small apartment was pleasant, if a bit stuffy. Everything was orderly and peaceful. It was perfectly quiet, Maro must have taken the baby for a walk. He opened the balcony door and stepped outside to admire his plants. He had arranged the pots in the best way possible on the narrow balcony. Of course it was a northern exposure, and the adjacent buildings cut down on the light, and since the apartment was on the fourth floor the wind was often strong. But thanks to his calculations, before long they would have a little jungle out there.

He leaned over the railing and looked down. The traffic on the avenue was dense and chaotic. He went back inside and closed the door. It was April now, and though the days had grown perceptibly longer and the trees along the street were bright green, with heavy, lustrous leaves, this week had brought a sudden stretch of bad weather. As he walked past the mirror in the hall he smiled. The cold spell allowed him to wear a sweater under his jacket, which made his tie sit better. For a young lawyer these things mattered.

He went into the kitchen to get a beer.

Babe, I bought you a very special guinea fowl. I won't be late. I LOVE YOU, read the note on the table.

They had gotten into the habit of leaving one another notes in the early days of their relationship, or rather after they had silently agreed that things were getting serious. Maro had started calling him “babe” after the baby was born. At first it

amused him, but then it started to get annoying. “But don’t you see, it’s because the baby hasn’t changed *anything* between us,” she would say.

“A very special guinea fowl,” he said to himself as he opened the fridge. That meant it had cost more than they could afford.

He was drinking a beer in front of the open fridge door when the idea took shape. The telephone rang. Without hurrying, he went into the hall, carrying the can of beer.

**Babe, I bought
you a very
special guinea
fowl. I won’t
be late. I LOVE
YOU.**

“Christos, I was just thinking about you,” he said.

“I was about to call.”

“..”

“Maro bought a guinea fowl, she got it from a hunter.”

“..”

“Free range, it’s been doing somersaults in the hills and dells.”

“..”

“You two should come for dinner. We can watch the match, too.”

He winked at Maro, who had just gotten home and was pushing the door open with the stroller.

“Great, around eight-thirty,” he said and replaced the receiver. “Christos and Jeanette are coming for dinner,” he said, unbuckling the baby.

“He’s fussy today,” she said a while later.

They were getting the baby ready for his afternoon nap. He laid him down in the crib while she put the powders and creams back in the cupboard with the diapers. He often thought that this was their best moment as a family. The two of them with the baby. A parenthesis of peace and autonomy.

“There’s something I should tell you,” Maro began, hesitating. “It’s not a guinea fowl.”

Telis looked at her incredulously. “You’re joking.”

“I’m serious, it’s not a guinea fowl.”

Her expression said that offense was the best defense.

“What kind of game are you playing?” he asked, his voice rising a notch.

He went back into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and took out the bird. Its skin was yellowish and pimply. He kneaded it with both hands, then sniffed it.

"It's a chicken, a plain old chicken," he heard her say behind him.

"Why did you tell me it was a guinea fowl?" he asked, trying to keep calm.

"To make you happy, like that time with the frog's legs."

"What do you mean?"

"I just cut the wings in half. I dipped them in batter and fried them."

Telis was silent for a minute. Maro looked at him and he thought he saw the shadow of a small triumph in her eyes.

"You'd better find a guinea fowl by this evening."

He grabbed her wrist and twisted until the skin was red, the knuckles white.

"Let me go!"

"This is the first time we're having them over since the baby was born."

Telis walked the baby around the apartment until six. Finally, around six-thirty, he managed to put him down. He opened a beer, made a sandwich and sat down in front of the television. At seven Maro came back weighed down with grocery bags and went straight into the kitchen. Telis drained his beer and followed her in. Four birds lay in a row on the table.

"Duck, goose, turkey, pheasant . . . I couldn't find a guinea fowl," Maro said, on the verge of tears.

They all look more or less alike, Telis thought. Only the turkey still had its head. A plucked skull with glassy little eyes.

"There's this, too," Maro said, pointing to a shrink-wrapped package. "Rabbit, already butchered. I paid with the money from the store," she added, as if answering a question. For a few years she had been part owner of a small bookstore. After the baby was born she'd sold her share.

"Which should we choose?" Telis wondered.

He put an arm around her shoulders and they bent together over the table.

"Which should we choose?"

"They look so defenseless," Maro said after a while, drawing her index finger along the turkey's back. As she leaned over the table to look at the birds her ass showed round and tight under the thin fabric.

"Shhh . . ." Telis whispered. "They're vultures . . . come on, follow me . . ."

He took her hand and led her into the bedroom. He pulled down her panties and entered her from behind, gently and almost indifferently, as if he had something else on his mind. Then he gave a few hard thrusts, waiting to hear her breathing grow short, to deepen and change. He pulled out, then started to move in and out quickly and rhythmically, maintaining the greatest possible distance between them, so that the tip of his prick sank into her for a fraction of a second before slipping back out again.

“The baby’s birth changed him a lot,” Maro said as she made a salad.

“That’s how it goes,” Jeanette replied, blowing smoke.

They were sitting in the kitchen, to keep an eye on the guinea fowl roasting in the oven. The whistles and shouts from the match mingled with the noise of the exhaust fan over the stove.

“He’s become very possessive. I have no time to myself anymore.”

“The problem with men,” Jeanette said, “is that they can’t tell their ego from their superego.”

Maro set her knife down in the strainer with the lettuce leaves.

“And you know what happens if you have a superego as big as an Olympic stadium and an ego as small as a punching bag . . .”

She filled her glass with wine and drank it down.

“I have the feeling I’m going to start smoking again,” Maro said, reaching for Jeanette’s cigarettes.

“We lost by three points,” Telis said.

He was clearing all the books and things off the desk so they could set the table. Maro stood there waiting for him, holding the plates and silverware.

“Who wants wine and who wants beer?” Jeanette asked.

“You’ve had enough already,” Christos said.

“Could you cut the bread, please?” Maro asked.

“How about I bring in the wild bird?” Jeanette giggled, then did a pirouette and ran into the kitchen.

“I don’t believe it,” Christos said.

“Come on, let the women have their fun,” said Telis.

The desk was clear and he spread the checked tablecloth, smoothing the creases with his palm.

“The baby’s crying,” said Maro. “Can you take the plates?”

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“A guinea goose with gooseberries,” Jeanette said and stood up from the table.

“They were prunes,” Maro said.

“I was joking,” Jeanette sighed, sinking into the couch. “Who’s going to pour me some wine?”

“Wonderful, delicious, pure ambrosia,” Christos said, stretching in his chair.

“You ate it all, you cannibals,” Telis laughed. “What are you doing, smoking?”

“Just for tonight,” Maro said.

“I want wine,” Jeanette said again.

The two men carried the dirty plates into the kitchen. Maro took the bottle of wine and sat next to Jeanette on the couch.

“Something’s happening to me. I have a little ball with feathers in my stomach,” Jeanette murmured.

“You want me to help you to the bathroom?” Maro asked.

“No, pour me some wine.”

They sat there silently for a while, their heads resting on the back of the couch.

It must have been after midnight. The hum of the avenue had died down, the building was quiet. Every once in a while they would hear the elevator wheezing as it headed for other floors. The heat had gone off hours ago and the apartment was starting to get cold.

“I only like cooking for friends, like the two of you,” Maro said. “Otherwise it’s such a bore.”

She glanced over to see if Telis was listening.

“I only like cooking for Christos,” Jeanette interjected with a little laugh, the tone of her voice tender and ironic.

Christos coughed to clear his throat.

“My father and I used to go hunting sometimes. When he was alive, I mean.”

He had sat back down in the chair. His elbows were resting on the table and he was looking down at them, his head in his hands.

“We would shoot woodcocks, wild ducks, occasionally a rabbit. I don’t remember any guinea fowl.”

“You know how I feel?” Jeanette said excitedly. “Like that time we smoked pot on vacation on Santorini.”

“I think the baby’s crying again,” Telis said, looking at Maro.

“Do you want us to leave?” Jeanette asked, half rising from the couch.

“It’s still early, we haven’t had dessert,” Telis said.

“My father was a great hunter,” Christos said, as if he were talking to himself. “and a fisherman, too. In the summer he would set trotlines and—”

“Your father was a jerk,” Jeanette interrupted, throwing a leg over the arm of the couch.

“The baby’s crying, don’t you hear?” Telis asked.

Maro lit another cigarette from Jeanette’s pack and blew the smoke between her fingers.

“I think it’s your turn,” she said, her voice flat.

“What did my father ever do to you?” Christos asked.

“He made you really boring,” Jeanette replied. Then her voice grew more animated. “Guys, I feel like I’m high.”

“You’re drunk, that’s all,” said Christos.

“What are we celebrating today?” Jeanette asked Maro.

“What are we celebrating?” Telis repeated, coming into the living room. “My lovely little wife wanted to cook me something exotic and . . .”

He looked at Maro, waiting for her to finish his sentence.

“Why don’t we play a game?” she suggested.

“Cards,” said Christos.

“Biriba,” said Telis.

“Truth or dare,” said Jeanette.

“Truth or dare,” echoed Maro.

“Dare?” Jeanette said, pleased. “Okay, take off your pants and your underwear—that is, if you’re wearing underwear,” she said, laughing, “and walk around the table three times saying—”

“Forget it,” Telis cut her off.

“Come on,” Maro egged him on.

Telis licked his lips and looked at each of them in turn. Then he started to unbutton his pants.

“Say ‘I was a good boy today, ma’am,’ and run around the table.”

“Happy?” Telis asked.

He was down to his underwear and socks.

“Are you kidding?” Jeanette said.

“Then I’ll take truth,” Telis said half-heartedly.

“Guys, should we accept?”

“That’s cheating!” Maro shouted.

“Just this once, it’s fine,” Christos said.

“But you have to stay in your underwear,” Jeanette said, “and tell me quickly, the truth, have you ever cheated on Maro?”

“Never.”

“The truth!”

“Never . . . while we were married.”

“Who was she?” Maro asked.

“He only has to answer one question,” Christos said.

“Who was she? Tell me who she was.”

“I feel that little ball in my stomach again, it’s like it has feathers . . . or corners, sharp ones . . .”

“If it has corners, it’s not a ball.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I’m dead tired. Let’s go.”

But he didn’t get up.

They were alone in the living room. Telis and Maro had gone into the baby’s room.

“I’m sure it’s a ball. Do you think I have cancer?”

“Tell me, do you know anything about Telis?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“What, are you stupid?”

“I want you to tell me who she was,” Maro repeated.

She was leaning over the baby’s crib, changing his diaper.

“They’ll hear us,” Telis whispered.

His cheeks were burning. The room was lit only by a nightlight and he hoped she couldn’t see his expression.

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll tell them it wasn’t a guinea fowl!”

Telis laughed nervously. He was still in his underwear and felt ridiculous.

“Tell them,” he said listlessly. “Tell them, if it’ll make you feel better.”

Maro started to cry, little sobs that kept getting louder. Her tears fell on the baby, who woke up and wriggled around in the crib. She picked him up and pressed his forehead to her wet cheeks. He was warm and very soft, almost spineless, and every so often his little body would give an irritated jerk as if shot through by an electric current. Suddenly he let out a loud shriek and hit her face hard with his head.

“I’m going back,” Telis said.

She stood there in the half darkness, with her back against the door and the baby in her arms. They were both crying, pressed up against each other, and the sound of their breathing, fitful and erratic, pierced the milky light of the room.

Christos and Jeanette were holding hands on the couch. They had brought the dessert in from the kitchen, eaten, and left their dirty plates on the floor.

“Come and see my plants,” Telis said as he entered the living room.

He’d put on a new pair of pants and was buckling his belt as he walked toward the balcony door. He wasn’t sure whether they’d heard the fight and the plants seemed like the best distraction.

“I couldn’t possibly move,” Christos said.

Jeanette stood up and Christos lay down on the couch.

Out on the balcony it was biting cold. Telis stepped aside to make room for Jeanette.

“This summer we’ll have gardenias,” he said, bending over a flowerpot where a little shoot was peeking out.

Jeanette looked up at the leaden sky and stretched, about to take a deep breath. But she stopped midway and he heard her exhale impatiently.

“Are you going to tell her?” she asked.

“Are you crazy?”

He turned toward her jerkily and stumbled. They were so close that the scent of her body lotion hit the roof of his mouth and he felt as if he were swallowing wheat and honey.

“Do you want me to tell her?” she asked, squinting her eyes as if searching for some distant star.

Her voice was colorless and strained.

Telis took a quick look into the apartment. Christos was sleeping on the couch, his mouth hanging open. The apartment was a mess. Someone had knocked over the stroller in the middle of the hall.

“Come on, be serious,” he said and grabbed her hand.

In the few centimeters that separated them, he felt that her body was a familiar yet threatening thing, and if he came any closer, if he touched her body with his, he would collapse altogether.

“Come on,” he said again, “you’ll get cold,” and pushed her gently inside.

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The next morning the sky had cleared and it was still cold. Telis got up early, feeling as if hadn't slept at all. He had fallen asleep on the couch without a blanket and had shooting pains in his back. The ashtrays were full, the wine had gone sour in the glasses and stank. A war zone, he thought, looking around. For some reason, instead of depressing him, the previous night had lifted his spirits. He began to clean, mentally dividing the apartment into three zones: kitchen, hall, living room. Hope, desire, disappointment. He started with the living room and worked his way in. Hope, desire. He washed the dishes, dried them with a clean cloth and put them away. He felt that the previous night had taught him something, and, as he methodically cleaned, he tried to figure out what it was. The message was there inside him, but it kept slipping away. Fragments of thoughts sat in his mind without moving through it, without leaving traces. But his mood remained light, natural, pervading his movements, as he brought order to the chaos around him.

At around seven-thirty the hot water started to come up through the pipes, passing into the radiators with restrained momentum and a hollow purring noise. Telis paced as he drank his coffee. Should he be feeling guilty about this little inspection? The house was now neat and sparkling clean, just as he had found it the previous afternoon.

The baby gurgled in his crib.

Babe, he wrote, it wasn't anything serious, I love you. He hugged the baby to him and kept writing. *A near-betrayal, believe me. We're going out for a walk. Is it worth throwing everything away over an almost guinea fowl?*

"An almost guinea fowl . . ." Maro read.

She had woken up with a headache. The kitchen smelled like bleach.

She walked barefoot to the fridge and opened it. The birds were all lined up on the second and third shelves. Only the rabbit was gone. She closed the door and sat down in the chair in front of the note, but didn't reread it. It was freezing. She looked at her bare feet on the tiles, which were still wet. On her pale toes, the round nails with their red polish shone like ten glossy little beaks.

I'm on alert, she thought. She tore up the note and went back to bed.