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A Heat Wave in Athens

Lillie Schmidt

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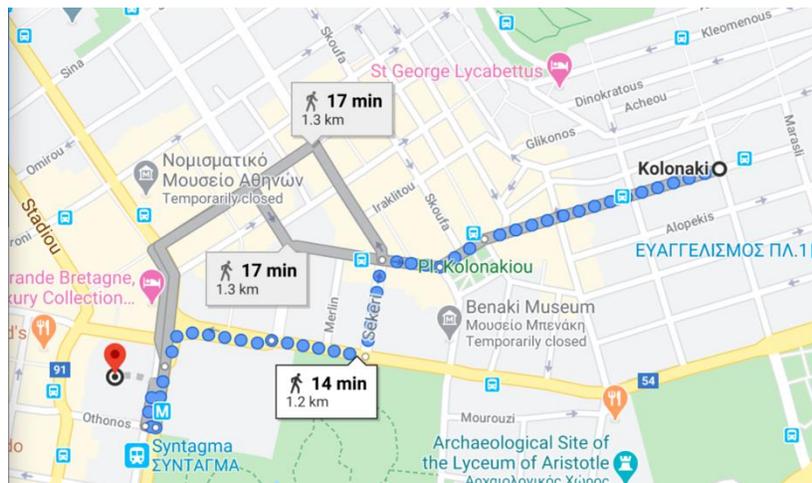
Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

A Heat Wave in Athens

Lillie Schmidt

Memories tie us to that place.... It's personal, not interesting to anyone else, but after all, that's what gives a neighborhood it's character.

Abigail Brown
Kolonaki to Syntagma Square



Abigail Brown stepped onto the sidewalk, blinking her eyes furiously in the afternoon sunlight and wrinkling her nose at the faint smell of urine. It was one of those sweltering June days when, no matter how little you wore or how short a time you spent outside, you were bound to be dripping with sweat in minutes. Abigail knew from the moment she left the cool, air-conditioned shade of her top floor apartment that she would regret walking all the way to Syntagma Square, especially in her best navy suit, but she had no choice. The metro workers were on strike, and she refused to let their pettiness stop her from the strict schedule that made up her everyday life. Anything or anyone that got in her way was an inconvenience, and she *hated* inconvenience. Abigail pulled out her iPhone and checked how long the walk from Kolonaki would be, hoisting her briefcase up onto her already-aching shoulder.

“Fifteen minutes,” she muttered, laughing in disbelief that the most direct route could take so long and starting to walk briskly towards Syntagma. It was just like Athens to fuck her over like this, but she was used to it after the series of events thrown at her in the past year- her “shit year,” as she liked to call it when she was on the phone with her mother, who was back in Long Island. Sometimes she missed her childhood home- a sprawling, clean suburban haven.

As a girl, she would take frequent day trips into New York City. She ached for the simplicity that contrasted so deeply with Athens. Each street there had a number, ascending as they moved north, and she could get around without directions. She also knew of every borough and neighborhood, and the implications that came with each (she considered herself a Tribeca girl, but wanted to live in the Upper East Side at some point in her life). It was easy to navigate, and she never felt as gravely affected by strikes or protests. Public space was public space,

private space was private space; you wanted to spend time with a bum from Queens, you went to central park. You wanted to be shut off from the trivialities and unpleasanties of the city, you retreated to your apartment. New York City felt mathematical to her, full of boundless opportunities, a system that was predictable and easy to use if you knew how to use it, and she did.

In contrast, the labyrinth-like streets of Athens had been shocking, winding and turning and making it hard for her to delineate old from new, historic from modern, rich from poor, neighborhood from neighborhood. Her ex-boyfriend Demetrius would say that all you needed was to understand pieces of a place to love it, but it bothered Abigail that she had to struggle to understand this city in a series of fragmentary impressions. One summer night, Demetrius had brought her to Exarchia, and told her about the citizen-led takeover of the square. Whereas Demetrius saw it as a success, something that he, as an urban planner, could learn from, she only saw failure of the government to keep order and *another* confusing layer she had to try to understand the city through. *That* would never happen in America, she was convinced, and it only made her ache more for the simple cities back home, before the awful year in Athens.

The shit year had started off alright, she supposed. In December, her architecture firm had secured a large project with a major American redevelopment company that made millions flipping old European city blocks into luxury hotels. For a while, Abigail was consumed with exciting proposals and permits and plans. It wasn't until February when things started to fall apart; first her father, a New York lawyer, had passed away unexpectedly from prostate cancer. Her parents had been divorced from an early age, and she rarely stayed at her father's Manhattan apartment, but all the same she wished she could have been home when it happened.

Then, in May, Demetrius left. That had hit her hardest, for sure. They had been together ever since college, and she had moved to Athens for him. She had been in love with everything about him; his slight body, thick Greek accent, the wild black hair that surrounded his head like a cloud, and now he was somewhere in this city without her. Sometimes she wondered if they would ever run into each other in the crowds of Monastiraki or the quiet green of the National Gardens on one of his aimless walks throughout the city.

No! Don't think about him! Abigail told herself. Her briefcase slipped off her shoulder as she stepped over a street dog lying on the sidewalk, its thick fur stinking in the heat. She felt suddenly sick with the sun pounding on her shoulders. A group of young Greeks stood at the corner, watching her as she turned down Sekeri Street, yelling and laughing; “Έχεις σχέδια για απόψε; Έχεις όμορφα μάτια!”

Abigail could see the neo-classical facade of the Benaki from the next square over. It was one of her favorite buildings in Athens, a contemporary nod to the past, nothing like the monotonous blocks of grimy polykatoikia that she had come to despise. She heard Demetrius's voice in her head explaining the polykatoikia's inherent authenticity, how they derived from Le Corbusier's Dom-Ino system, how beautiful it was that the city grew to accommodate the influx of its citizens by way of the very citizens themselves. He tried hard to make her love them, appreciate them, as much as he appreciated every balcony and erker, the concrete and repetition, but by the end it made Abigail hate them all the more.

Abigail ducked under the low-hanging orange trees along the street, quickening her pace. A woman on one of the apartment balconies was hanging sheets, and the cold water droplets hit Abigail's face. She flinched, but it was sweet relief from the heat. On another balcony, a man was singing to a woman across the alley; the woman laughed, squinting up towards the balcony to locate the singer. Abigail could hear the low sound of a couple fighting from another.

Sometimes, it was hard to tell what was private here and what wasn't. The private sphere melted into the public sphere, and it was a constantly blurred line that she wasn't particularly comfortable with. She glanced down towards her screen for assurance that the minutes until her arrival were still counting down, slowly yet steadily. Seven minutes.

Abigail hadn't wanted to meet the American clients in Syntagma, but they had insisted. Every time she had met them to discuss the project, they chose a different cafe and would order enthusiastically, grimacing theatrically at the harsh taste of ouzo, then laughing like toddlers at each cat that brushed by their legs. Abigail scoffed at their wild-eyed, naive obsession with the city. They obviously had not been here as long as she had.

Their enthusiasm reminded her of Demetrius' attitude towards Athens. It was his home, where he had grown up, but his love for the city had run so deep that sometimes it had made her jealous. He loved the sour smell of the city on hot days, the refugee children running between the benches of Omonia Square, the overwhelming graffiti. If Abigail was totally honest with herself, at first she had loved it all too, because *he* had loved it so intensely, but that too slowly began to fade. Their first fight was after she petitioned for the demolition of No. 17 and No. 19 on Dionysiou Areopagitou Street, and after that, nothing had been the same. The city became a point of contention, a tool to make her jealous or to hurt him with. If the city had brought them together, she was convinced it had torn them apart too.

Abigail stepped out onto Panepistimiou Street and waited impatiently for the light. The horns of the taxis screamed as they rushed past, weaving between the lanes, wild as ever. Maybe she should have taken one, but then again, she never trusted the drivers. Abigail looked to her right and saw the purple mountains stretching up between the dull polykatoikia, and to her left she could just make out the Grand Britannia shimmering in the sweltering distance. Her phone said 5 minutes until Syntagma, but the sidewalks were thick with people now, and she knew it would take longer. In front of her, she could see police lounging near their vans, the riot shields resting, forgotten, against their shins as they laughed together. A small group of protesters stood near the fence, holding bright signs; Είμαστε απαραίτητοι! Χρειαζόμαστε και δικαιώματα! She wondered with annoyance why they insisted on making their pain public, when pain was meant for private spaces. Invulnerability should be hidden, not advertised.

Abigail felt a drip of sweat roll down her back as she reviewed the pitch in her head. This project was her brainchild, and she was proud of it. She had spent a sleepless month coming up with her final proposal draft, throwing herself into her work even more furiously to avoid thinking about Demetrius or her father. The new hotel had to be something wealthy foreign tourists would be fighting to get a room in- opulent, luxurious, large-scale, something a mere renovation of the existing apartments couldn't provide. The view of the Acropolis was going to be the main selling point, but the building had to match the view. "*Why spend millions trying to fix the grimy, out-of-date block when you could tear it down and make something new? It will dwarf the buildings around it,*" she planned to tell the Americans, "*It will be a slice of New York right here in Plaka!*"

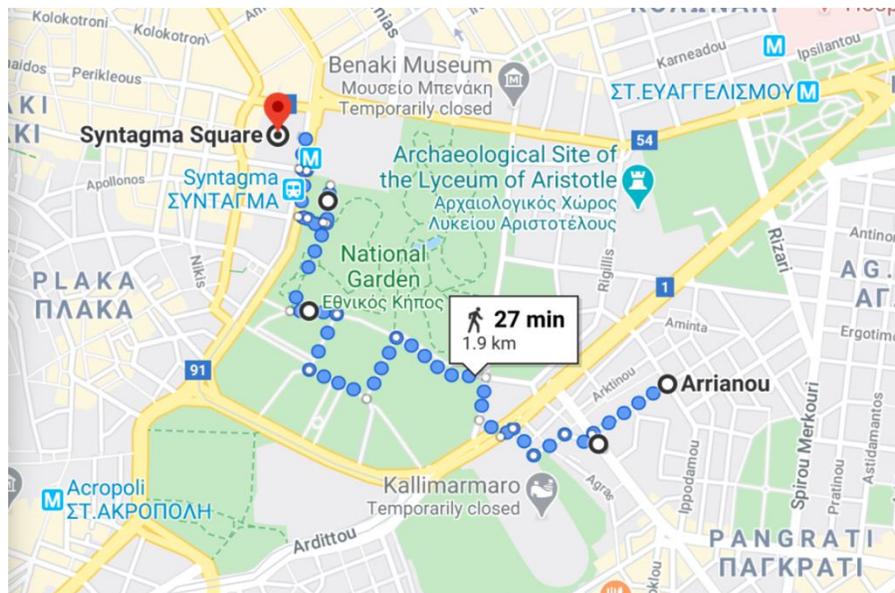
She could hear Demetrius scoffing at her in her head. He had told her that the city didn't need fixing, and even if it did, the American way of creating exclusive developments that formed miniature cities in themselves would only fragment the city further. *Athens is Athens*, he had said, *we don't need to make it L.A!*

Abigail passed the back of the Parliament building, gleaming orange in the heat, and felt an ache of nervousness and something else she couldn't quite identify. *Deja Vu*, perhaps. And then she remembered- the last time she was in Syntagma, she had asked Demetrius to move back

to America with her. She had some hope in her head that it wasn't their differences tearing them apart but the city itself. He had looked out over the bustling square for a moment before telling her that he could never leave, and just like that, it had been over. Tears tickled her eyes and she wiped them away.

The heat was making her hair stick to her neck, and she tried to breathe deeply as she turned the corner and crossed over to the Grand Britannia, then crossed again and found herself at the top of the steps leading down into Syntagma Square. She wrinkled her nose as she looked down into the square. The stench of sweat and smoke and urine was magnified by the heat, and she watched the beggars and pickpockets weave in and out of the crowds spilling from the metro entrance. She pulled at the collar of her suit, and the world went hazy as the heat overwhelmed her and she swore it would be the last sweltering June she spent in Athens.

Nicholas Andino
Pangrati to Syntagma



Nicholas Andino loved heatwaves in the city. He didn't care for the hot June months when he had been at the base in Crete, or when he visited his parents in Chios during the summer; the heat didn't seem to change much there. The farmers still worked in the fields, the fisherman still boarded their dinghys each day, and the small towns still trundled on in a sleepy rhythm. But in Athens, the heat drove people outside from the small, dark rooms of their unconditioned apartments. On the hottest days, the city pounded with life, its image shimmering from the heat waves rising off the concrete in a mirage. The colors rebounded off of each other like some wild Ghika painting. People who usually didn't mix sat side by side in the parks and gardens and squares, dripping the same sweat and dreaming similar dreams. Athens became a vertical space for interaction as neighbors yelled and sang and sat, sunning, on their balconies. The city was unchangeably real in the heat of June, and that was the beauty of it.

The spray cans clicked in his backpack and his camera hit against his chest as he checked to make sure there were no cars coming and crossed to the other side of Arrianou Street. Nicholas didn't really have a destination in mind when he left his small flat in Exarchia that he

shared with three of his university friends. He thought he might wander and see what inspired him. It was no surprise that he had ended up in Pangrati; he had loved the neighborhood deeply since he was a boy, when he had lived with his father and mother in a modest flat across from St. Spyridon Church. Every Sunday morning, he had gone to mass and watched the glittering mosaics of golden saints, and heard the singing, well after mass was over, drifting up to his bedroom. He would get his hair cut at the small barber shop on the corner, and then his family would stop by the convenience store owned by the old Indian couple for *pasteli* and their homemade *jalebi*, still hot from the fryer. He had known every cat, every stray dog, every migrant- even made good friends with the Albanian boy that lived with his large family in the bottom flat. Then, the year he turned nineteen, he was sent to the naval base in Crete and when he returned years later for university, everything had changed.

Nicholas could see the shining yellow facade of the church, glittering in the intense sun, and walked to the top of the stairs leading up from the street to the church. It looked picturesque, almost impeccable except for the *FUCK AIRBNB* scrawled in messy black graffiti on one of the yellow walls. The church had once seemed as big as a palace to him as a boy but was now dwarfed by the Goulandris museum next to it. The simple space in front of the church, where neighborhood teenagers and local beggars had traded stories at night, was now a complicated layering of manicured grass and geometric walls. The overall effect was aesthetically pleasing, but it was quiet and empty, except for a few young people leaning on the facade of the museum, their employee badges flashing in the sunlight. He took a quick photograph and turned his back on the museum.

Nicholas looked up at his childhood flat. The entire apartment building had been painted a bright white, nothing like the comforting dull grey spattered with colorful graffiti of his youth. He had looked up his address online once, and saw it was now an Airbnb costing sixty euro a night. When he had come home, his parents were struggling to pay the rent of both the flat and his father's small storefront on Eratosthenous Street, where he worked as an icon painter.

Πρέπει να σας πούμε κάτι, Νικόλαο, his mother had said to him as they watched the pigeons crowd their feet on a bench in Syntagma. It had been only a day after he arrived home from Crete, flushed with the excitement of the city, when she broke the news to him. She told him that the Albanian family had been forced to move to a small basement flat in Omonia. The rent rose quickly, and his mother and father decided to move back to Chios, where his mother had grown up on the family *mestiho* farm. Nicholas knew his father was ashamed to work for his wife's family- he felt as though he had failed to provide, in a way- but now they seemed happy enough. Life was slower there, and his mom could take care of his grandparents without worrying so much all the time. As for Nicholas, he knew he couldn't live without the harsh bustle of the city, the guerilla gardening, the anonymous street art, and the public performances in every square. Although he did miss Pangrati with every fiber of his being, he still loved the wildness of Exarchia, where he lived now. He spent a lot of time in Exarchia Square, creating public art installations or helping with the community garden. When his parents asked him why he loved it so much, he would tell them that he felt invigorated by the pure democracy of the space, and they would laugh and call him, lovingly, *Μικρή ανταρσία!*

Nicholas walked down the stairs and stopped at the edge of Eratosthenous Street. There was a gap in the endless stream of taxis, and he darted across the street, dodging a stray motorcycle and laughing as the rider yelled *Ante gamisou!* after him. He walked past his father's old icon shop and the Indian-owned convenience store, now a coffee shop and a stationary store, their window displays glinting attractively. Nicholas slipped up Ivikou, a thin side street, passing

a seafood taverna and a lively bar, young people chatting and laughing at the outdoor tables, until he got to a quiet bend in the alley way. Colorful graffiti crept up the sides of the polykatoikia- *Happy Leftist!*, a crossed out swastika, and *Smash the Patriarchy* above a neon pink vagina. He reached into his bag and took out a small stencil, stained in a rainbow of colors from multiple uses. He held it against the wall with one hand, and with the other pulled a black can of spray paint from his backpack, covered the stencil in paint until he pulled it away and left two small words glaring on the wall: *Fuck AirBNB!*

He started off again, running his hand in the orange trees and making kissing noises at the white cats that lurked in the shadows. He continued up Efforionos until he got to the stadium, its beautiful marble gleaming white in the heat, and took a couple of photographs. He loved how he could capture private or shared moments, and make them repeatable forever. It was his way to show the city to others who didn't quite see it the same way as he did. Families and couples lounged in the square among the panting street dogs, eating sandwiches from the nearby stalls. Tourists, their foreheads shining with sweat, snapped pictures of the far-off Acropolis rock, barely visible in the smog. He loved this wild mixing that happened in the public spaces like this.

Nicholas entered the National Gardens and watched the couples kissing in the dappled shade, the weed dealers smoking cigs near the benches and the kids chasing birds. It was an odd space to him in the city- a haven, an in-between. He felt he knew the city pretty well, the rules and lack of rules, the labyrinth of streets that he loved to feel lost in. Even when he was lost physically, he knew how the city operated- the levels of social class, unspoken but known; the constant flux of money and investors that pulled the strings behind the scenes; the hierarchy where the bottom rung was refugees and migrants, like the Albanian family he had known as a child. It was obvious how each architectural space dictated these social relationships, who was allowed to interact and who wasn't, who belonged and who didn't, and this was an urban reality Nicholas accepted, to a certain degree. But in the gardens, he was in some fictional realm that made it difficult for him to see between the lines, a public space where private events went on but lacked any built environment that he had come to learn the city through.

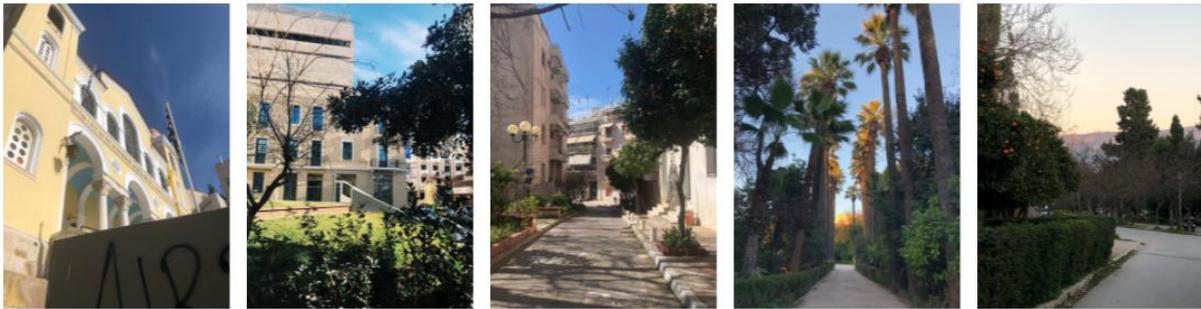
He was approaching Syntagma now; he heard the low rumble of crowds and street performers as he got closer. Through the fence, he could see a woman walking briskly and impatiently in a dark blue suit, dodging the dogs and people in the heat and checking her phone every couple of steps; it was obvious that her individual agenda and experience was greater than the community in which she lived. Sometimes he wondered how someone like this could exist in Athens.

As he exited the garden, and with it, the beautiful honey-sweet smell of the leaves, the full glory of Syntagma stretched up before him, the epitome of a vibrant public space. It was pulsing in the heat, a wild dance of people and animals, sounds and smells. There was a homeless man sitting on the marble steps, head resting on his knees, his arms dripping with sweat. Beside him sat a group of university students, watching a woman selling roses below them. Beggars sat on the low walls, smiling in the warming light as they ate *koulouria*. Toward the metro station, he could see the last remaining protestors, their signs gleaming in the bright sun; *Οι περικοπές και οι δημόσιες συγκοινωνίες θα σταματήσουν!* Couples danced, laughing and shining red in the heat, as an older man played Zorba-dance on the accordion. A group of suit-wearing professionals stood under the shade of a tree, watching the people around them with wild-eyed fascination, almost innocence. Children chased the birds, and dogs chased the children. The buildings stretched up around the square, and to Nicholas they looked like a wall of

safety, protecting Syntagma from the never-ending realities of a constantly changing city. For now, it was perfect. In this heat wave, everything was perfect.

He made his way down the marble steps, smiling at the little boy playing in the sprays from the fountain, and found the bench where his mother had told him, three years ago, that she was moving away from Pangrati. Another couple was sitting there- perhaps Americans- fanning themselves with their hats.

“Μπορώ να καθίσω εδώ, φίλοι;” he asked. They smiled and moved over, creating a damp space for him to sit. As he did, Nicholas felt the cans clink in his backpack, and rubbed the well-worn, now-black stencil in his pocket, closing his eyes and listening to the sounds of an authentic and uninhibited June day in Athens.



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