

SHE WAS CROUCHING over them. At a quick glance, they were nothing but four large, quiescent lumps sprouting from the barren wasteland. They weren't just lumps though. Looking closer, little feet led up to little legs, which connected to small torsos with arms and heads protruding from them. The children's faces were hidden by their mother's tight embrace, but there was nothing left to hide her face. An outstretched, contorted jaw led up to her eyes, which were clenched shut. Everything was an ashy gray.

DR. PAFILIS explained that they were fleeing their home in Olympia, near the site of the ancient games, when the flames engulfed them. That those same flames never made it to her home wasn't mentioned though. He pressed the clicker, the next slide appeared on the screen, and he continued lecturing. I diverted my attention away from the projector and Dr. Pafilis to the wrinkled pamphlet jutting out of my closed fist. Plastered on the front cover in bold font was "'Clearing the Smoke: Reflections of a Disaster and the Next Steps Ahead' Sunday October 21st, 2007 at 4 pm in the Vandenburg Room of the Michigan League.'" My name was on the inside of the pamphlet in cursive font, along with the names of the other eight executive board members of the Hellenic Student Association. This was our event to raise money for the forest fires that had destroyed over 670,000 acres of land in Greece that summer, an area comparable to 670,000 football fields.

Dr. Panagiotis Pafilis pressed the clicker again. It was his first year as a professor in the Modern Greek Department at the University of Michigan, and he had agreed to be

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the keynote speaker. In Greece, he had been a biologist and was knowledgeable of the climate and biodiversity of the region. And so, he continued lecturing on the extent of the damage.

This past summer over 3,000 fires erupted in Greece and 84 people lost their lives. Of the total area burned, half of it was in the Pelopennesian peninsula alone. Thousands of olive groves and farms were destroyed, which is expected to affect the economy since olives are one of Greece's largest exports. Over 18 European nations, as well as countries as far away as Canada, sent aid to Greece in the forms of helicopters, water tankers, fire trucks, firefighters and doctors. Turkey also sent a large deposit of olive plants. The Greek government has estimated that it will spend upwards of \$600 million euros to restore land and homes, and the European Union is offering an estimated \$89 million euros in aid. It could take more than 50 years for the ecosystem to recover, and the full extent of the damage is still unknown.

ONCE I WAS in Athens visiting my dad's side of the family. I was nine at the time. My aunt had a newly built white-washed home in the beach town of Oropo, about an hour outside of the city, and we decided to drive out there early one morning, before the temperatures soared to over 100 ° F.

I sat in the back next to a window, since I was plagued by motion sickness, with my Aunt Rena and my sister, Christina, next to me, and my mother in the front seat. A large breeze came through my mother's open window and ruffled my hair. Tired of listening to Greek music, my sister pulled out her large, black fabric CD case, flicked through the pages until she found a CD to her liking, pulled it out of the case, and handed

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it to my mother in the front seat. Moments later, we were listening to Billy Joel as we drove along a meandering, ascending road on the side of a mountain. Even my father, usually the strong silent type, started to sing, his thick, Greek accent resonated through the car.

“We didn’t start the fire, it was always burning since the worlds been turning, we didn’t start the fire, no we didn’t light it, but we tried to fight it.”

And as we sang, we drove past two large cliffs covered by mesh nets, which were there to prevent boulders tumbling down and crushing unsuspecting drivers. I gawked at the massive cliffs. Small rocks were cascading down its side as we drove by. Past the cliffs, the mountain opened up again. I felt a shiver run up my spine, and my father’s thick, Greek accent no longer filled the car. My parents and aunt were talking quickly and quietly to each other. I didn’t understand at the time. Like the toothpicks piercing cubes of cheddar cheese on a tray of hors d’oeuvres, large, black sticks poked out of the side of the ascending slope to the right. I asked my mother what had happened to all of the trees.

“Μαμα, που εχουν παει τα δεντρα?”

“Εβαλαν φωτια αγορι μου, εβαλαν φωτια.” *They set fire to them my son, they set fire to them.*

DR. PAFILIS PRESSED the clicker while he lectured. Fire is a natural process of the Mediterranean ecosystem, and the extreme temperatures allow many seeds to germinate and pyrophitic trees to grow. Greece experiences warm, dry summers and cool wet winters. Due to the age and climate of the region, there is a rich diversity in the area,

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with many endemic species existing. In fact, more than 6,000 species of plants, 407 species of birds, 240 of which nest in Greece, including the *Pelicanus crispus*, which only nests in Greece, 116 species of mammals, 57 of which are endangered, 59 species of reptiles, 37 endemic species of fish, 18 species of amphibians, and approximately 25,000 species of invertebrates have been observed in Greece (Natural Environment of Greece). Forests include birch, Scotch pine, and spruce trees (Natural Environment of Greece). However, these fires, fueled by temperatures exceeding 105 F, and dry, windy conditions, may have been too hot for seeds to survive. The extent of the damage to the biodiversity of the region is still unknown.

MY FRIEND George was in the Peloponnese during the fires in August. He called me one afternoon while he was sitting outside of a café with one of his friends, playing a game of backgammon and drinking frappe from a lid-covered styrofoam cup. He told me he was enjoying the beaches and the stunning women. He also mentioned that he had bought me a shirt that said on the front *2% work, 8% sleep, 90% sex* and on the back *100% Greece*. Still, I struggled to hear him on the phone as he tried to yell above the blustery weather. He told me it was hard sitting outside with the wind picking up dust and debris from the fires. Shielding his eyes with his hands, he could discern helicopters dousing water on thick clouds of smoke rising into the atmosphere over nearby towns, but he was safe where he was. The news said that the winds shouldn't blow the fire his way and that there was no need to evacuate the town. The streets were packed full of cars. People, now homeless, from the towns nearby were driving through to reach shelter.

DR. PAFILIS pressed the clicker again. This time, he focused on the future of prevention and sustainability in Greece. Planting trees that are more resistant to fire is imperative for the future, especially since forest fires are likely to increase due to global warming. Still, despite fires like this, European forests as a whole are still growing by approximately a half percent per year. Dr. Pafilis pressed the clicker one last time and finished lecturing. As he walked off of the stage and people applauded, a slide show that we had made started playing. There was an image of a helicopter-rescuing people from the top of a home amidst the fire in Prasadaki.

THEY WERE SCREAMING and waving from the rooftop as the helicopter flew overhead and a rope ladder dropped down. The ladder shook violently with each blistering gust, as the five people on the rooftop tried to reach the safety of the helicopter. From the rooftop they could see another villager sprinting from her burning home, yelling for help. She was a short, plump woman in her thirties, and she clutched her white cat as she ran out of her home. She didn't make it to the rooftop though; a wall of fire surrounded her. The burning canopy above her prevented the men on the helicopter from dropping the rope ladder. Her bone-chilling shrieks pierced the grimy air as the helicopter ascended away from the rooftop. How had the fire spread so quickly through the village that the people did not have the time to evacuate?

Earlier that day one of the evacuees was relaxing in his air-conditioned living room, enjoying an iced frappe and watching the news on the television screen. The news channels covered nothing but the fires, but the fires were all miles away, so he assumed

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he had nothing to worry about. He did have something to worry about though. Strong gusts were feeding the blaze nearer to his home. Eventually, his television and air conditioner went out as the fire engulfed the power lines. As he peered through his window, dark clouds of smoke were visible rising above homes nearby. Running into the bedroom, he hurriedly grabbed as many valuables as he could and tossed them into his black handbag. He unlocked his older-modeled Alfa Romeo, chucked his black handbag into the backseat, opened the door, sat in the drivers seat, started the car, backed out of the driveway and headed to his mother's house, which was in the area the clouds of smoke he had just saw were coming from.

As he drove nearer, his hair and back became drenched with sweat. Flames danced along both sides of the two-laned cement road. Passing cars honked furiously as he continued to drive toward the fire. Squirrels and sheep spotted the road ahead, and he swerved to avoid as many as he could. Flaming tree branches dropped onto the windshield, and, turning on the window wipers, he watched them shoot off of the car. He was now soaked in sweat, as if he had jumped into a swimming pool. Further ahead, he could see the turnoff to the short dirt road that led to his mother's house. His car could go no further though; the crimson tomato plants and the white lilies that once blanketed either side of the thin dirt road were ablaze. The white walled one-story house at the end of the dirt road was also up in flames. One by one, the tires of the Alpha Romeo popped from the heat. He got out of the car and ran toward the burning house. Flames shooting into the sky replaced the crumbling roof.

“MAMA, MAMA!! ΠΟΥ ΕΙΣΑΙ?” *Mom, Mom, where are you?*

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Shielding his eyes from dust and embers racing through the air, he realized he could go no further.

“Περικλή, εδώ ειμαι. Τρέχα!” *Pericles, I’m over here. Run!*

His mother, along with other villagers trying to escape the fire, was standing on the roof of the home next door. He ran along the dirt road with his arms, which were covered in blisters from the flames, shielding his face from the burning tomatoes and lilies on either side of him, through the gates of the house next door, and up the stairs to the roof where everyone else was, including his mother. And as they watched the fire destroy their village, all they could do was wait and hope to be saved somehow.

PRIME MINISTER Kostas Karamanlis declared that Greece was in a state of emergency and called for three days of mourning for the 84 people who lost their lives. A one million euro reward was offered to catch the arsonists. Greece has had significant problems with arson. Development is prohibited in forestland areas, however, Greece suspiciously has no land registry, which is like a birth certificate, to prove what the land used to be, so people burn down and destroy land in order to buy it cheap and develop it.

Karamanlis believed there were too many fires ravaging across Greece at the same time for it to be a coincidence.

A fire raged out of control 30 mile south of Athens near the Lagonissi resort. People reported hearing explosions in the woods near their homes. Soon after flames appeared, suggesting arson.

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The Socialist leader, George Papandreou, accused Karamanlis of poorly combating the fires. There was a large public outcry to this effect, similar to George Bush and Hurricane Katrina. Public opinion was especially important at the time because elections were to be held on the 16th of September. Accordingly, members of Karamanlis' conservative Nea Demokratia party said that socialist radicals could have started some of the fires in order to ignite and fuel a turmoil that would be associated with the conservative party at the upcoming elections. The damage was already done.

THE SLIDE SHOW continued to play. In one of the images, a woman from Olympia was standing amidst the rubble that once was her home. Sunlight illuminated the tears that fell on her left hand, which covered her mouth. In the background, firefighters were sifting through the debris looking for bodies. Off to the side was the woman's six-year-old daughter. Her ruffled clothes were stained an ashy gray; she was playing with her Barbie doll in the debris.

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