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look at that

A NOVEL



## Preface

For publisher F.C., a writer forgetting to note down a full name and address on the envelope containing his or her manuscript before mailing it out, though a rare phenomenon, was not completely unheard of. Having, moreover, been marked by psychoanalysis in his youth, he did not hesitate to diagnose symptoms of parapaxis<sup>1</sup>, reckless action – sending a text to the wrong person, say, or getting the wrong gift for the right one – which is merely a manifestation of both an unconscious conflict and a latent desire of the perpetrator.

He definitely did not, on the contrary, rank in the same category the envelope with the manuscript below which, upon receipt – surrendering to the *look at that* it had as a title – he read in one go.

It was more akin to the basket with the bastard new-born, abandoned in olden days by its unfortunate mother at the doorstep of orphanages, monasteries or wealthy families. And that, mainly because of the content, not so much of the envelope as of the manuscript itself. About what, to start with, it said but also what it contained. Because apart from the main script, there were also comments in the margins - comments which, funnily enough, ended up being an integral part of the whole. The decision to publish the manuscript, exactly as it was – anonymously even – had been taken by F.C before he had even finished reading it.

He wanted to believe that the sender would not necessarily be against it. His printer, probably yes, raising concerns of a more technical nature. There are no dead-ends in literature, however, he would counter. Much like in democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Acte manqué in French, fehllleistung in German.

## Part One

### Chapter 1

“Lila had, with a certain amount of commotion to be sure, shut the door upon exit - not out of anger or vexation probably, but then again he couldn’t swear by it. It was, you see, one of those heavy, reinforced ones. Barely a minute later, and after whichever characteristic sounds – due to her high heels and wheeled suitcase, and his apartment building’s **elevator** and entrance door – were to echo, echoed, he saw her from his window emerge out onto the sidewalk. There was nothing in her figure or gait that revealed whether some thoughts were going through her head at that moment – Babis<sup>2</sup> taking for **granted** that they were anyway –, and if so, which ones?

If anything was revealing, it was her great haste to make the next train in time. Seconds later and she would be out of his line of sight, maybe even forever.

Suddenly, he felt alone in the now vacant-of-Lila-and-her-stuff house.

Without anything else intervening, he felt blue. He wiped the two or three teardrops that rolled down his cheeks with his sleeve. It might have been silly, but they were **due** to the comment she had left him with just moments before: “It’s so silly, I know, but if there’s something that brings tears to my eyes the most about leaving you, it’s that I’m never going to taste that seafood pasta of yours again.”

- He’s such an ass for not waiting by the door till she got on the lift.  
- But she just dumped him.

Or rather credited as it will eventually turn out.

Ask a neuroscientist too to be sure.

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<sup>2</sup> Greek male name (pronounced Bubish not babies :-).

## Chapter 2

From the moment he had glued himself in front of the computer screen at daybreak, he must have read that same paragraph about fifty times and it still wasn't up to scratch. He had been struggling with it for a month now. He had sweated blood to set it on the right path but it was all in vain. It persistently resisted his every attempt to humanize it a little, even if he accommodated its every whim. Frowned at a noun? He'd serve it with another. Not impressed with such and such adjective? He'd sacrifice it there and then without a second thought. Fussy about this verb or that? He'd turn it into a gerund or switch from present perfect to past perfect in seconds. Pouted at this phrase or that? He'd beat the daylights out of it. And the trouble writing it in the first place? Indescribable. The importance he had given it, especially when his novel was nothing but mere paragraphs, was completely disproportionate to its actual size. Not, however, to its position. It was, you see, right at the **forefront**, and therefore capable of jeopardizing the rest of the paragraphs, depriving them, and by what right, of their right to exist. Perhaps for that reason – realising the burden of its responsibility – it carried to the nth degree every demand and caprice the others had. That's why it was required being as squeaky-clean as a shop owner keeps his window display.

And rightfully so, because the **publisher**, briefly glancing over his debut novel, would not hesitate one bit to throw it in the **bin** if it was “full of holes” from the very first paragraph. Yet, on the contrary, especially if the paragraph got a “look at that!” out of him, it would so sweeten him that he wouldn't be able to resist reading the rest of it immediately.

The aim, in other words, was to grab the publisher's attention, in the same way that someone might, thanks to a pickup line, attract that of the snooty stranger he had a crush on. And not because, in the crucial moment of addressing it to her, as inventive as it may be, she's stunned by his repulsive breath.

A very thorough combing of the first paragraph, and a bit of brushing and gargling with a mouthwash solution were therefore essential before he sent his novel out into the world. It wasn't, however, as if it was destined to be the first one up. That it happened to be so was due to the violent ousting of its predecessor, which was deemed incorrigible and to have bitten the biscuit. Not only did that one carry with it like a scourge the stigma, the adolescent acne and complexes of a newly **fledged** writer, but, as it was written to lead the dance, it also carried the stage fright from all **eyes turned on it**.

Or maybe at the ringside?

- Yeah, right. As if the publisher doesn't have better things to do than read whatever rubbish people send. He/she is probably going to pass it over to one of the junior employees.  
- Well, all right. It's not being sent to Patakis Publishers though, is it?

- What if it's in pdf format?  
- Metaphorically speaking, give me a break.

“Of a still fledgling writer” you mean to say.

“Already carrying the stage fright from all the not yet turned on it eyes,” more accurately.

Time for it to bugger off. For the story's sake, here's what that paragraph was:

“Lila had just shut behind her with a lot of commotion – on purpose? by accident? he would never know – his heavy house door. Immediately, the click clacks of her heels echoed as she stepped down the stairs, until the sound faded. Why hadn't she taken the lift? Was it busy? He was never going to learn the reason why either. What followed was the **thud** of the entrance door of the building closing - perfectly audible, with the apartment being on the first floor. He drew the curtain aside slightly and saw her emerge onto the sidewalk, pulling along her equipped-with-wheels **bag**. She was probably already heading for the subway station when a police car zipped down the road at great speed, its siren blaring, something that, under normal circumstances, Babis would have ignored. But in this particular conjuncture, he was reminded of an example from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (the difference in that case being that it was about an ambulance), which he had recently read, about the Doppler effect. Whether or not he was 100 % aware of what the writer claimed, that supposedly the piercing sound of a siren became more condensed as the vehicle got closer and more sparse the farther it went and despite not completely comprehending why in physics something like that was defined as a “change in the frequency and the wavelength of the moving object in relation to the **observer**”, he nonetheless had more than enough confidence in Hawking to accept that example as proof that the universe is not static, but – just like a balloon that inflates – it expands, resulting in, for example, two galaxies, distancing themselves from each other with a speed of approximately seventy kilometres per second. As quickly, that is, as it roughly took this godsend thought to bring him – reminding him how irrelevant and meaningless everything was in comparison to the **universe's** infinity – back to his senses. He wiped the two or three tears that had rolled down his cheeks with his sleeve, when, only minutes before, he had been about to lose Lila from his line of sight possibly forever. It was in moments such as these, when astronomy stood by him in its own way no matter what blows fate had in store for him, that he kicked himself for not having **studied** it.”

Reading the paragraph over again, he couldn't help but to admit, it was so bad, that its successor, regardless of its shortcomings, was clearly, if not better, certainly less irritating. If nothing else, it didn't, from the very beginning, tire the reader with Doppler effects and other such crap, while at the same time ushering him/her smoothly into the novel with its IKEA-style minimalism. It was inheriting of course – since disclaiming your inheritance in that case was not foreseen by law – all of the disadvantages that came with its now new position, yet, all the same, it also maintained whichever

Thud? Are you sure? Get your ass over to the ground floor to check, right now!

1) It's called a wheeled bag and 2) it can't be that a) she's pulling the bag down the stairs, and you can hear the click clack (?) of her heels, and b) whether she dumped him or not, why doesn't he carry it down for her?

- How's it possible that, as you say further down, he's got a degree in Physics, but has no clue what the Doppler effect is all about?  
- Is that the problem, now? I'll just have him be a Greek Lit major.  
- No way. I want him to be a Lover of Science.

Delete that now. Says Coelho from a mile away.

It's not so bad after all! Maybe reconsider?

advantages came with the stress-free act of not being written as the very first. That had to count for something. With his morale somewhat high, he continued to read the text, commenting on it every now and again in the margins. He was on the verge of sending his novel to a publishing house.

## Chapter 3

An hour earlier, the first forkful of his steaming red-sauce seafood pasta was already entering his wide-open mouth, when he heard the key turn in the lock. As soon as he saw her, while simultaneously congratulating himself on his sauce – the excess juices were discarded, the finely cut parsley still maintained its aroma, the mussels, prawns and squid had thankfully not been overcooked and the ripe tomato added a certain hint of sweetness – he could tell from her sour expression that something was wrong. He attributed it however to her exhausting journey and, after the initial greetings, somewhat flavourless on her side truth be told (though all of these, as well as her silence to his text offering to pick her up from the airport, he only analysed in retrospect), having made sure that she'd had dinner on the plane and wasn't hungry anymore, he set his sights on his eagerly awaiting pasta, explaining apologetically from a distance that it was getting colder by the minute and then tough toodles. By the time she came back after a quick stop in the loo, Babis had already worked through half the plate and was pressing ahead unremittingly. The explanation his male instinct was already foreboding and anticipating like a goalie in a penalty shootout took no more than five minutes. During them Babis was presented with the tragic dilemma of whether or not to continue devouring the rest, although those who knew him well would comment that not even a nuclear explosion would force him to put his fork down, and they would not be far from the truth.

Her first phrase, practically mandatory in such circumstances for the speaker to receive the appropriate response without coming across as discourteous, was more than enough for him to understand what she was driving at. It contained however no other major news, apart from the fact that she wanted – she said – to talk to him - a singular form which, as opposed to the plural one, de facto excluded any prospect for negotiation. She was leaving him, she continued, after the classic introduction of how difficult it was for her to express all that was about to follow. She was sorry of course because, yes, she did love him a lot, some tears shedding at that point, but she had met someone and “something had happened” between them. That's exactly how she put it, she must have prepared it during the flight, giving – coincidentally? – rise to a multitude of possible interpretations, virtually begging the question of whether they had “done” it. He couldn't stomach this verb, truly, but in order not to be crude, yet intelligible, he had to avail to its services - it was, in any case, attributing the exact shade of meaning he was aiming for and was a perfect match with “happened”. No, no, she was quick to soothe him, without necessarily the zest to convince. He didn't in-

It's all riding on the third chapter, so do your best. The publisher probably thinks, “he'll give it his all in the first and second chapter, so I'll catch him out on the third.”

Plus, the pasta was al dente.

- Oh, so he's got a car too? Then why – if he considers himself a gentleman – didn't he take her and her bag home after she dumped him?  
- How do you know she was going home?

- Isn't it the female gender that's supposed to be renowned for its intuition?  
- Yes, OK, but men aren't complete dimwits, come on now.

+ With both impatience and anxiety, in other words.

+ Just like you don't ask someone on the street “Where the heck is Kolokotroni street at?” or go to a restaurant and say to the waiter “Get me a tzatziki!”

Ipso facto I would say.

- Have him say: “All right, I know where you're driving at with this. Don't waste your breath.”  
- Leave it. This isn't an autobiography.

+ thus begging the question of whether she loved him tout court

Further down he says much worse; is it the “have they done it” that bothered him?

sist. On the contrary, he carried on chewing, in a way at least to hint that it was a chore for him to do so. It was all in vain in the end however; the seriousness of the situation, plus the fact that Lila quite likely considered that any other biological function apart from breathing at that precise moment was condemnable meant that the only thing he managed to do was to infuriate her, until she sarcastically observed: do try at least to hold back the tears!

The relief she had found in drawing up enough courage to talk to him about something that she dreaded he would take badly was totally spoiled by his not taking it so badly after all. An even as a matter-of-form, healthy dose of **stupefaction**, garnished with plenty of disgust, stuffed with despair, accompanied by a sauce full of devastation, the whole of it laced with hysteria and maybe a sprinkle of amok on his behalf, was something that as much as it didn't suit her – by filling her with guilt for the **rest** of her life for having dumped him – she would still have appreciated. And, she wasn't going to buy the far-fetched conspiracy theory that he was not about to fall to pieces – seeing as she was leaving him anyway – just out of the goodness of his heart or because he generally hated making a scene. The normal, but also **proper**, in her opinion, thing for him to do would be to go mad at the fact that she was leaving him for another man and, completely disregarding the reason why (she was leaving him), to mourn **her loss**.

Either way, the worst part was that, strangely enough, he thought she was right. So: “What are you saying?” he reprimanded her, thinking all the while, “What on earth do I say to her?” And indeed, what was he supposed to say?

That he too had the same doubts? To admit, in other words, something that, if it was up to him, he would not only never approve of, but also never allow? Something he himself condemned as out of place and time?

That his own self who basked in the **bondage** of their relationship all this time – bondage which, now that he was not enduring he was dramatizing, though he had put up with it just fine before – had heard the news and not only rebelled against it all but also was up to no good? Without even asking for his permission? Like the previously voiceless and dejected masses who flood the streets, celebrating in the centre of the square the fall of a despot? That he wasn't asking – he said – that much? Just to admire, to flirt, to enchant, to taste female bodies? That he was now free? And that there was no time to lose?

Let her in on all of that?

Inconceivable.

Make it shock instead for more accuracy.

Too ambitious.

Redundant because what's normal is proper as well.

You mean to say that, if she was leaving him because he had driven her up the wall and not for another man, he'd be wailing in desperation? Don't give me that.

- “In the bondage” will definitely raise some eyebrows.  
- But I'm describing this from his own self point of view, which, as we all know, is much less unfiltered. Besides, I've got a question mark at the end.



To keep up appearances, he called **him** to order: he wasn't asking that much. Just to keep up appearances. Did he not realise that his attitude was provocative? Was he that brainless? So hopelessly irredeemable that he would fall into the same loop every time he was about to split up with someone? Instead of shedding tears of **sorrow**? Your stats are laughable, he reminded his self, three years on average before you **get with someone again**. What makes you think that it'll be any different this time around?

He had never got him any in the past, he wasn't about to start now, the *other* replied. Namely, that finding his joy was about searching and not finding rather than finding and not searching anymore and thereby losing any hope of ever finding again. A thousand times better not to find, so that he could keep on hoping. As far as Lila was concerned, who in the meantime was in the process of gathering her belongings, she can **exit stage left**, he added. Deep down, he was actually in her debt for, by her own initiative, ridding **him** of the unpleasant duty of a breakup sometime - if unbeknownst to him when, possibly even never.

This is who he was, this is what had become of human relations, *the first* continued to ponder. The partner, with whom he had only experienced moments of joy, was bailing out on him, and he was away with the fairies.

Well, what do you expect me to do, his *self* responded. Slit my wrists? Who ever asks me for my opinion, anyway? If you imagine that what I'm feeling, or not, is in my control, then you can think again. Poor little me, I'm just a cog in the wheel, he moaned. Not that he hadn't gotten along just fine with Lila, he admitted. They had had lots of fun and laughter together, they enjoyed each other's company, and they never argued, not even as a joke. Granted, maybe they didn't have many things in common, he continued in a fit of honesty, but the necessary convergence and compromise were sought out and achieved by both. They were never at each other's throats over politics or, say, whether they'd eat out or not, who'd do the dishes afterwards etc. Both were free to come and go with whomever, as they pleased - it wasn't a criminal offence for example for Babis to play **tennis** with a lady friend, or for Lila to go to the movies with a male acquaintance. By the way, when the two of them went to the cinema, a simple mutual exchange of looks was enough to get up and leave half-way through a nonsensical avant-garde film which, after a long stretch of negotiations, they had decided on (she based her choice on the cast, he on the **directors**). As for the holidays, the otherwise stressful dilemma of mountain versus sea holidays had never caused a division between them, while the customary dispute of their exact destination was for the two of them a piece of cake. And when it came to sex, it was as sa-

- Him is his own self, right?  
- No, the guy next door.

Don't make him out to be more of a creep than he really is...

Even though it's controversial as of late, put, "or at least you score."

Might want to reconsider. We're going to end up getting egged.

As if he'd ever do that himself. He always assigns you the task.

- Tennis in the middle of economic crisis? Are you mad? Change it to ping pong, forthwith.  
- What crisis? We're talking turn of the century, the good ol' days.

- Sexist comment.  
- Sexist or not, it's a fact.  
- Really? Did someone do a census and never tell me about it?

tisfying as it could be after two years of living together, he concluded with a certain *fatality*. He would miss Lila, there was no denying that. How much? Only time could tell.

OK, but did they love each other? Both Babis and the *self* asked synchronously.

If there was something to that question that had always made them both nervous (Babis and *self*) it was the pure mule-like stubbornness of the person posing the question, refusing to accept any answer other than a yes or no. Deep down they'd rather it was never even posed, because nothing good ever came of it (it could ruin a relationship far more effectively than any seductress), only bad (it made everyone involved stress over whether they met the prerequisite requirements). He relied on the naïve point of view that humanity needed, after four *million* years of uninterrupted presence on the planet, billions of romantic relationships since then, ten of which give or take in Babis's life, to fall in love in the same exact way, regardless of time and place. Regardless, also, of any scientific discovery. Like the one, for example, about the heart being nothing but a pump circulating *blood* after all.

Anyway, did they love each other, yes or no, they asked again.

Not in the strict sense of the word, I guess, they jointly admitted. The way that she was abandoning him, the way that he had allowed himself to be abandoned, the way he had abandoned every effort to stop her from abandoning him, well, whichever way you look at it, these were, if perhaps not conclusive indicators, sufficiently nevertheless *prima facie*. Now, in the broad one...

Even so, he had no intention of shedding crocodile tears because she was leaving. That's why, when Lila, after bidding him farewell, truth be told without any unnecessary melodramatics, shut the heavy door of his from-now-on bachelor pad, he welcomed those *few* with open arms, almost a bow. Had he placed an order for them, they wouldn't be more to the point. No one then would ever dare accuse him of letting Lila go unmourned.

- As if you've looked it up.  
- No, but just going on what I've heard here and there.

Is it really that much? Are you counting Neanderthals as well?

Crude materialism.

Write "non crocodile" because they were spontaneous.

## Chapter 4

The next morning – possibly because, with the bed being all his again and having no one else to hog all the covers, going for a pee, **snoring** and whatnot, he had slept like a baby the night before – found him much more cheerful than what he would've liked. So cheerful, in fact, that for a moment it made him cheerless. What really bothered him was that he did not really seem to be bothered by the thought that Lila might be laying in the arms of someone other than Morpheus. On the contrary, knowing she was happy to finally be with her beloved rid him of any unnecessary concern that he would undeniably have had, had he been the one to **dump** her. Because, imagining her missing him badly, her image – eyes swollen from crying, scrambling to piece her broken heart back together, prey to the darkest of thoughts, considering even suicide – would haunt him like Maenads **Orestes**. It never occurred to him for a single moment that all the worries that he did not have for her, she likely had for him - something which would to some extent limit her own happiness. He had always, you see, considered women so much more crafty, efficient and unfeeling when they broke up with someone, but crushed, inconsolable and miserable when **others** broke up with them, which was why he'd long preferred – sometimes giving things a slight push himself – being broken up with rather than being the one to do the breaking.

The day had barely begun and he could already taste that perishable commodity he would do well to enjoy before it turned into a drama: solitude. For as long, that is, as those little joys – offered suddenly in sizeable portions whereas before in dribs and drabs – continued to be something far more special than just **simple joys**. Or, to put it differently, for as long as they wouldn't be carried out as mechanically as shaving or brushing his teeth, but rather, consciously and greedily. He had discovered them because, like an office worker, a jailbird doing life, an asylum inmate, an anchorite in the **desert**, a stylite on his pillar, he needed them. These, purely as an indication, were things like leaving his dirty socks lying about; licking the sauce off the plate at the end; sipping noisily on his coffee and soup; reading for hours on end in the toilet with the door open, or even **letting one off** every now and again. The bad thing was that these had an expiration date, beyond which they became toxic or, in any case, ineffective.

So, when exactly he would – like a terrorist who'd just been released and was making sure he wasn't under surveillance anymore – activate all those networks, which during the relationship had gone into hibernation, was just a matter of time.

She's not even forty years old yet and she snores? Yeah, right. Are her adenoids inflamed or what?

Enough with this verb, now. Aren't there any other ones you can use?

Why, is Lila his mom? And secondly, are you sure it's not the Furies? Do look it up now. Don't want to make a fool out of our selves.

- Even if it's true, which we can't be sure of, you can't say something like that publicly, so delete.  
- It's not me saying it, it's what Babis thinks.

- Cram this in too: "Simple joys that were as close to true joy as "love you loads" is to "I love you", but small joys nonetheless.  
- Cram this in, cram that in; it's going to come undone at the seams. It's a novel, not a Samsonite

Add, "and a troglodyte in a cave".

Extreme naturalism. At least put a full-stop at "open".

In particular, when would he:

Get back together with his bachelor buddies.

Show signs of life to all those other women, whose acquaintance had been put in parenthesis, inverted commas or under square brackets, or those with whom business had been left in limbo, in infancy or in the stage of *innuendo*.

Frequent popular bars and raucous parties again, while he had never in his life been much of party animal or drinker; highly touted art exhibitions that meant nothing to him; labyrinthine museums that never before took his fancy.

Take up tango, which he would be as graceful at as a northern *European* doing a belly dance; yoga which, much like meditation, he could never stomach; cooking lessons in order to learn recipes he'd never try out; join the neighbourhood gym and hardly step a foot inside.

Re-join a reading or film club, even though the books he'd read and the films he'd watch he would never get to pick himself; a walking club where he'd develop lumbago from all the walking; and possibly regardless of being allergic to every form of organization, become a member of an NGO.

Renew, last but not least, his subscription to dating websites where he would continuously be looking for a romantic partner without ever finding one.

The fact that he had chosen to start at the bottom of the list was not only due to how limited his options were this early in the morning. He somehow felt like something was grabbing him by the arm, like a dog whose nostrils flare up at some female's pheromones, will pull and tug on its owner's lead when out on a stroll in the park. *It was* his dating profile that had been tired of being kept so low-profile, and *craving* to get back out there. To be let loose, that is, again on cyber-space. Though theoretically speaking still *active*, since, when he first got with *Lila*, he had, mostly out of laziness than *any other reason*, neglected to activate the *inactivate* command, let alone the *delete my profile* one, but in reality – being outflanked by other more active than itself – *inactive*, it would have sink to the *unnoticed* and unavoidably to the *unvisited ones*.

So, before he had even put the coffee on and made up some toast, he jumped in front of the computer, turned it on, – the few minutes of loading time seeming annoyingly protracted – searched for the all-too-familiar website and with a single click (having set the login details to *remember me* in the past) went straight to his profile page.

Idea: Even though, all those who (he thought) were giving him the look while he was still with Lila, he considered as a sure thing as the spearfisherman the fish who will coolly approach him when unarmed, but will flee at the first sight of a trident.

If nothing else, completely racist.

+ Do fish swim?

- Had been craving.  
- I already put that with "tired of being kept..." Again? I refuse to sacrifice aesthetics for meaning.

+ while he had set it up long before he and Lila got together.

+ because, truth be told, while he was with her, he never allowed himself even the slightest messing around.

- You mean to say that English is the dating sites koine like French is that of diplomacy? But it's something that even the stones know.

- The stones definitely not, just those in the know.

## Chapter 5

Babis never really thought much of dating websites. The idea of finding a date on one of them was as degrading as finding a wife through the traditional marriage agencies. He wanted his **conquest** to be of his own merit, without the help of some social media, just as he wanted to get a job, not thanks to the mediation of an acquaintance, but because of his skills and qualifications. For as long as he resisted their Siren's song – exactly because you resist something that you disdain, otherwise you'd give in to it without a fight – he drew not only the satisfaction of one who insists on living (but for how long?) without a car, TV, mobile phone or internet access, but also the pride of one who would, not even as a joke, never ever consider going to a brothel, despite not having had sex in ages.

He was forced to give in, however, when he realised the following basic things: That firstly, just like when women go to the beach with swimwear not much different to their underwear, or will not care at all if **their** knickers show when loping around a tennis court whereas in other circumstances they would make a big fuss out of it, as soon as they go on a dating website, they reveal three basic pieces of information that they normally would only confide in to their best friends: they are alone, they can't stand being alone anymore, they are looking for a **man**. Big deal, rightfully so, some would say. But not Babis who'd spent a lifetime racking his brain to figure out whether this girl or that was taken or not, or still searching to the point where he'd be prepared to hire a detective to find out. Because, knowing that before making a pass at **her** would either give him the necessary strength to go through with it, or would deter him, saving him from almost surely getting pied off. An experience whose bitter taste would only get milder if he came to know it after hitting on her.

Secondly, these websites were abundant with the type of women who, in his personal circles, were conspicuous by their absence. The unknown. Because with the known ones there was no attraction whatsoever. It was as unthinkable to see them romantically as his own sister. He knew them inside out, thus he had no craving to get to know them better. Seeing them so frequently, the miracle he was waiting for from an encounter would never happen: that is to shake him up when he was least expecting it, to stir him up and turn his world upside down. But why wouldn't it happen exactly where there was nothing but strangers? Strangers, in point of fact, of a different kind, who would neither keep their mouths on lockdown and plug up their ears with headphones, nor cover their eyes with sunglasses. Strangers who, unlike the occasional distant princess sitting next to him on the bus, don't require you to turn your brain

It's not called a "conquest" in this day and age. It's not a fortress, for heaven's sake.

- Borderline.  
- Blame it on political correctness.

Generalise it a bit, make sure it includes LGBTQI.  
- Is there no other way to get with someone besides making a pass at her?

- How? Her making a pass at you?  
Don't hold your breath.

to putty to try to find a way to strike up a conversation. And, who wouldn't stubbornly ask for something completely unrelated to the nature of the **medium** through which they had got together, and also untimely towards Babis' mood. Something which he couldn't, for the time being, unfortunately offer or want to receive, but for which he might one day get an appetite the more spontaneously the less it was posed as a prerequisite: **flowers** and love.

Thirdly, and most importantly, these women weren't scattered across the four corners of the world, with the likelihood of ever meeting them being next to zero but instead, permanent residents of the biggest gathering of singles, male and female, throughout history. The more important question that arose therefore was not why all these people were on these sites in the first place, but, rather, why wasn't everybody else rushing to join as well? Were they that dumb?

- Vague.  
- Yes, well, it's so romantic to meet on a dating website, isn't it?

You're proving even the worst of clichés about men true: emotionally disabled, sexually insatiable.



## Chapter 6

The fact that the realisation of the ultimate goal, that is finding, **schematically** speaking, his match, relied on the achievement of many different – granted, less outrageous – objectives, the first being the **extraction** of a face to face drinks date, a necessary requirement first and foremost for it to be actualized but also for a suggestion, during it, of a second one for dinner to be tabled, which, if approved, would open the way for a critical third, where finally all roads would be open, was something that Babis suspected when, about ten years **earlier**, he first registered on a dating site.

Yet, he had the premonition that, due to the proverbial female aversion for fast-track procedures, which would have been done in a jiffy indeed had it been up to the men, such an extraction was anything but a formal procedure.

He could never have imagined though that its comparison to the first section of a space **rocket** detaching moments after its launch was, aside from hackneyed, overly ambitious, since, as he'd eventually find out, it fitted well not only to all the stages that would intercede but to all their intervening phases as well. Each, of course, with its own rules, pitfalls and **prerequisites**. Their common denominator? To gain, each time, on behalf of the one who made the first move – usually the man – the albeit tacit female consent to move things ever so slightly further. Like in dates of days of old.

In other words, Babis stupidly considered – much like a high school graduate will work his butt off to enter university, hoping that afterwards it's all smooth sailing up to the diploma – that hard times were behind him and that from thereon women, as though recognizing how much of a self-transcendence it was for him to register on such a site, would fall at his feet. Otherwise there was no way to explain either the complete absence of pictures on the profile he put together in no time, nor the following response to the site's **prompt** "describe yourself":

"Hi everybody, in order to describe myself I first have to know who I am, which is far from obvious because, as Socrates put it (and I agree), *"all I know is that I know nothing"*, though he at the same time advised everyone to *"know yourself"*, which is a blatant contradiction of the former statement, unless that is what he meant. One way people deal with the problem in 9 out of 10 profiles is to avoid it by describing not who they are, but what they **like**. For instance, if one claims to be absolutely mad about, say, kitesurfing, then I, who reads it, what am I bound to conclude? That's why I would rather limit myself in describing the only thing I am still in a position to ascertain, that is, not what I like but rather where I be-

Totally schematically speaking though.

- Elicitation or educement wouldn't be better? Because extraction reminds, apart from that of a tooth, of extortion.  
- And rightly so

Mid-90s, let's say?

- Are you sure you want the rocket example?  
- No matter what.

+ but also, its asterisks.

+ (a "prompt" in a manner of speaking of course, as essentially it was nothing but a chore, hard as it was to write a self-description)

Definitely add, "because not only has it nothing or very little to do with who or what I am, but also mainly because I might like something I don't even acknowledge to myself and not like what I think I like."

long, and I ask you to do the same please: so, I belong to the branch of Metazoa, kingdom of Animalia, phylum Chordata, subphylum Vertebrata, class Mammalia, order Primates, family Hominidae, genus Homo, species Homo [sapiens](#).

P.S. Though not desperate at all, I am here to desperately look for my alter ego in spite of the fact that, deep inside, I hardly believe that such a thing exists any more than the notorious soulmate, not to speak of the so-called [Mrs Right](#), let alone my [match](#). I am nevertheless open for communication to female representatives of all tribes (I would appreciate those to be of the same species) including [mine](#).”

It was a script however that – since there’s no way there had been anything like it before in public view – he deemed to be, if nothing else, original, and cherished the hope that, upon reading it, women – forgiving its lack of photographic content or, rather, considering that, with such high-level writing, outward looks cease to matter anymore – would drop dead in admiration. Local and foreign alike, to be sure, as it was an international site – hence the use of English – and, in terms of a turnout, allegedly the biggest on the planet. Yet, that this wouldn’t been the case for all of them without exception – was, after all, among other things, the desired effect. The text was intended, that is, to act as a deterrent, filtering those who remained apathetic, unmoved or incapable of getting his humour. All those, therefore, with whom things were never going to go anywhere anyway. For the remaining select few though, it would constitute exactly what the profile photos would normally be considered: his flagship, his profile’s main attraction, a distinguishing mark, his battering ram, his professional Barker pulling them in. It would also be – it already was – the first act in the mating ritual which, like so many species in the animal kingdom, from the peacock to the seahorse, he would perform. The banal ploys of other males would pale in comparison to that. It would also make it very clear to its female readers, from the very beginning even, that its author was not born [yesterday](#). But mainly, and without meaning to, while he had claimed that there was no describing him, maybe, just maybe, he might’ve actually described who he really was deep down and with whom they were dealing with.

Provided of course that, as brilliant as it may be – in contrast to a star that glimmers brightly whether visible to the human eye or not – it was read. The real rub though was that nothing seemed to indicate that happening, since his profile had not welcomed a single verified viewing. The type of viewing, in other words, that is logged, a notification sent to the profile owner, and the consequences of said viewing assumed by the visitor. On the other hand, though, because, either penetrating anonymously or having a look from

Also put down, Homo neogracicus.

- Anything but “so-called” since, for reasons unknown, Mr Right is the only established form.  
- That’s too bad, seeing as the definition of what’s “right” differs depending on the sex.

+ less so of my significant other.

- Translation? What about all those who can’t speak English?  
- Come now! Who doesn’t know English in this day and age? Plus, there’s always Google translate.

He’s so incredibly modest, what can I say...



outside, it was not necessary to visit the site before entering, nor to enter before visiting, there was no ruling it out completely. Now, the fact that he had not received even the slightest instant message was the only tangible – though insufficient as to provide a strong proof – evidence. And that, not so much out of stinginess but because it would look bad for a female, likely branded as *desperate*, to “ante up” for an upgrade – if not to a golden member that granted you and your future contacts full rights, at least to a silver one that withheld them for its own self – there were very few of them who weren’t on a free account. So, the only ones who were allowed to send him a message never did so, since either his profile left them indifferent, or they ignored its very existence. Out of all the rest, it might have captured the interest of a few, but in order for him to take notice as well, the only free method left, seeing as they weren’t able to contact him directly, was through a recorded visit on his profile.

That even only a percentage of those who got the aforementioned idea would put it to effect had not, as we have seen, happened. And indeed, that the ladies who had put pictures up on their profiles would ever check his out was likely a pipe dream. They probably thought it humiliating, and considered the gentlemen having chickened out of doing so – even if they were golden members while themselves not even silver – with the same dislike and suspicion as a law-abiding citizen the marginal one and classed them collectively to a miserable lumpenproletariat that they had better have nothing to do with. Because even if they had nothing *blameworthy* to hide, the mere fact that they felt the need to hide the fact that they were *there*, was blameworthy in itself. They were definitely shamed for being members of the site and therefore it was as if they called out those who, in contrast had no inhibitions about that – otherwise, they wouldn’t, so boldly, have uploaded their photos – with the question: “have you no shame?”

What did more him nut however was to find out that even those ladies whom he expected to show some measure of understanding – ladies, that is, with whom he had in common the stubbornness not to put any photo and/or the shame to do so – had blown him off.

Even so, no matter how much their attitude *served* him with mute *εμπάθεια*, instead of the empathy<sup>3</sup> he felt duly entitled to, he understood them perfectly well. They had obviously, like himself, much better things to do than waste their time looking at profiles whose neurotic owners did not even manage to include any pictures.

+ like a passer-by who checks out the menu posted outside a restaurant

- Why not use the Greek word *απελπισμένη* for desperate?  
- Because it doesn’t have the same ring to it, sorry.

- If the reader makes any sense of this, I’ll eat my hat.  
- Oh, come on now. It’s not exactly rocket science.

Idea (even if St Augustine’s already stated this about time): even if when asked they would be unable to explain in words why, while, as long as the question was not posed, they probably knew deep down inside.

- I wonder whether this word is compatible with serious literature  
- Who told you a) I am doing literature and b) that it is serious?

+ like the biblical, “Instead of manna, you have given me gall, instead of water, vinegar”

<sup>3</sup> *Εμπάθεια* (empathia): malevolence, is in Greek the exact opposite of empathy in English.

He had, therefore, no other choice but to let loose on all of their profiles in order to inform all those female entities of the site who he had a crush on that a) he existed and b) there were no technical obstacles, either to their desire to get in touch with him at any given moment, nor to his readiness to respond. Nevertheless, that would only prove to be meaningful if a) he upgraded to a golden membership and b) uploaded pictures on his profile. And yes, he was taking a risk, but, in the dire situation he was in, to not risk to risk and so get cut off from that large family of both those with photos and those would could not bear the thought of uploading them was an even greater risk, one that he could not afford to take. After all, as it were, the photos did indeed play a very decisive role. And it was decisive because, to some extent, there was something fascist<sup>4</sup> underlying the selection criteria and their selection as well. What else would you call being cast into the pit of disregard and contempt of hundreds of thousands of people whose only fault was a mediocre or hapless appearance, premature old age, a bit of a bald patch, a grey hair or two, a few extra pounds, wrinkles and/or a double chin? But even so, or rather because of that, was it not simply stupid to be deprived of their services? What did he have to worry about after all? That instead of joining forces with his profile description for the common good, they'd ruin everything with a mediocre or hapless appearance, premature old age, a bit of a bald patch, a grey hair or two, a few extra pounds, wrinkles and/or a double chin? Was he going to gain anything anyway in the end by hiding them, since choosing not to upload any photos would increase suspicion that indeed he possessed those? Wouldn't the truth come out finally? Was it after all so improbable that among the few women he would attract, there would at least be one he'd like?

Or maybe that wasn't even what he was afraid of, but rather the possibility that, sooner or later, they would come to the attention of a colleague who in no time would shout it from the rooftops at work; or of one of his ex's best friends who in turn would convey it all to her without fail; or, even his ex herself who, adding insult to injury, would deem his grief over their break up as way too short-lived before he threw himself back into the mix. Well, then let them come to. Yes he was alone, yes, he should not be, he did not deserve to be, it didn't suit him to be; yes, he sought human communication; yes, he missed the female warmth; yes, he didn't think it all demeaning to be here on the site, and no, neurotics and clinical cases were not the people who had gathered here, but rather, the kind who, while they were all alone and couldn't stand it, and it didn't suit them, and they didn't deserve it, it never crossed their

Any synonyms of "to have a crush on"? You used it already.

Idea: "like the tennis player who's used to playing from the base line and decides to come up to the net."

Throw in some love handles too.

+ because mathematically, even if he were Quasimodo, which he wasn't, it was not possible not to attract any at all.

- Whose? Lila's?  
- Generally speaking.

But how could she possibly since they would have been mutually caught red-handed?

+ even though he could bear being alone, and he wasn't exactly sure that he truly wanted to stop being.

<sup>4</sup> Wordplay between αποφασιστικός (apofasistikos-decisive) and fascist.

minds. So, what was the problem? None whatsoever. As a matter of fact, he would upload them whether he wanted to or not.

You'll see, Babis cajoled himself (or rather it was his *self* that **cajoled** him), it's not such a big deal. Like a vaccine shot that you have to have for your own good and that feels worse before you have it than in that moment of being injected, or less even after it's done. But, since he was going to upload them, why limit himself to just one, which would have been the same as playing roulette and betting on only one number? Why not upload as many as possible, the more successful ones balancing out the less so, and averaging out on how he really looked?

And let the terms and conditions for the expression of **interest** be completely silent as to what exactly the best ones looked like, their naïve authors (apart from moralists, because the only thing they were worried about was the photos being indecent), deeming, apparently, that a photograph, by definition, should represent its object faithfully.

And let Babis suspect that no matter how many photos he had taken, none fully "captured" how he imagined himself to be which he trusted more than the image the photos portrayed of him.

And let him continue tirelessly to take more of them until he achieved the desired results, but they couldn't care less.

Say he did succeed. Who's to say that the photos he liked would also be liked by all the women **he liked**?

There was already a good lesson to be learned with just a quick glance at the female profiles. The choice of photographic content for some was truly calamitous. It was as if it were intentional. To sow, that is, the seeds of doubt over whether the beautiful ones were indeed that gorgeous in reality, those that looked sweet - sugary, while the placid ones - deep down pure evil. Some photos even managed to make a mildly unattractive member look plain ugly, having probably been chosen at the expense of many others that showed it in a slightly better light. Based on the sole criterion that the one doing the picking or her friends, the people, in other words, least suitable for such a task, liked them.

Babis would have none of that. He would act in opposition to both his own intuition, as well as that of his friends.

Who's to say who was cajoling who, the way they made a mess of things.

+ and submission of offers  
- No, no, that's too much of.

+ wouldn't it be as though he were demanding for them to, like he did, go crazy over the latest Woody Allen for example?

## Chapter 7

Before they bid each other goodbye with a handshake, they both made a promise that they'd undeniably meet again, without ever clarifying when. Both were sure that was never. Then each of them went their separate ways. The date had been concluded only minutes before at the usual coffee shop on Exarcheia<sup>5</sup> square. That's where he typically set them up. Not only was it more convenient from a commuting point of view, but also that way he didn't have to think of a place every time he was asked the question "where should we meet?" The waiters must've clocked onto him by now. He was so predictable. Supposing that the police took a statement regarding the unidentified body of a male discovered nearby, here's more or less what they would say:

"He used to arrive first. He'd sit at a table for two with a clear line of sight to the entrance so he'd be able to check who came in. After a short while, the *belle*, a different one every time, would arrive. The common denominator to all of them, if there was one, could only be defined negatively - what they *weren't* like in other words. And they were neither skin and bones nor obese; neither posh nor vulgar; not too butch nor very petite; too young or too old; not drop-dead-gorgeous nor ugly as sin. Somewhere in between. And certainly, they were nowhere near to one of those women who elicit, either with a positive or negative tone, a "where *the hell* did he find her!" Oh, and none of them smoked either. It was obvious the two of them recognized each other. In spite of that, maybe because they hadn't seen each other for years - except if they had exchanged photos - there was a certain uncertainty about their identity, noticeable with the naked eye and a bit more pronounced with the woman, who was suddenly arriving, bewildered, into a crowded room, in contrast to the strategically-seated man, who actually monitored just an infinitesimal percentage of those who came through that door. An uncertainty, until of course he gave her a little wave and she, visibly relieved, quickly went over to *him*. They greeted each other with reservation, usually with a handshake. He always ordered his usual. Mint tea. No sugar. Hers was different each time, depending on the person. In our presence any chat whatsoever ceased. It was obvious that they didn't want us to partake, even in passing, to their conversations, as if they were scared that had we overheard even a single word, we'd figure everything out in lickety-split. The meeting rarely lasted more than a couple of hours, during which there were never any of the intimacies more common to other

"or, rather, how a crime novelist would adapt their account". So people can't say (even if you don't say so) that neither waiters nor police officers talk like that.

- Derogatory for women.
- But it's the waiters talking.
- Then derogatory for the waiters to say.

I didn't know you could use that word in a positive tone too.

Why not also: "Relieved that he hadn't stood her up, that he wasn't one of those ugly as sin types, or that, he didn't take to the hills as soon as he checked her out? It was too soon to tell."

<sup>5</sup> Neighbourhood in Athens renowned for being the venue of radical and political activism.

couples, not even the slightest physical contact. In any case they sat opposite, never next to, each other after all. The entire thing was somewhat reminiscent of a [tennis](#) match, a match they had arranged to play for days now, on a trial basis though, to see if they were both on the same level, and which they were now playing, exchanging the ball with each other as comfortably as possible without keeping score, and without the stress and the competitiveness that entailed. Hence why the conversation was always civilized and courteous with neither party ever so much as raising their voice. Observing them, one would say that basically they were discovering (or re-discovering?) each other. And, while you normally look in the direction of the person you're speaking to but not really staring at them, otherwise you'd make them feel slightly nervous, they kept looking and staring at each other the entire time, regardless of who was speaking or listening. The awkward moments of silence were combated immediately - it seems the ever-changing duet had not developed the necessary familiarity to keep them from happening, or, if they had, not to be bothered by them. It was quite clear anyway that they had a lot to talk about. Generally, you'd get the impression that two simultaneous interviews were being conducted, aiming to fill in some kind of vacancy probably, but where the roles of interviewer and interviewee constantly traded places. They strongly resembled a couple of people on the [unemployment](#) line who hadn't landed an open-ended contract in ages, just a few small jobs here and there, and who only go to their job centre meeting, not because they're hoping that something will actually come out of it, but because they don't want to lose their benefits. Characteristically, also, when she would get up to use the ladies' room, he'd transfix his eyes on her behind searchingly for about [ten](#) seconds, which in all probability he wouldn't have done if they had been together for years, or at least a few months. It was never the other way around though. The atmosphere varied from cordial and cheerful, to cold and depressing. He usually sorted the bill out himself, even if his date insisted on paying. What they did afterwards was a different story. Did they "get laid"? God knows. We rarely saw him again with the same girl though. We'd always say, "Where in the world does he find them?", and rated him as a proper player."

The specific date must have been his one hundredth, give or take. On average, that was the equivalent of about three or four per week. Or, to put it differently, it equated to about thirty texts per date. Things were as different as night and day, in comparison to how they were before. It was Mitsos who had first opened his eyes to it. If the tram door on Aggelopoulou station had closed but a second sooner about a month ago, they would've never bumped into each other, which wouldn't have mattered at all had they not both served in the same unit in the army. Ever since the army days, whenever he

Idea: although, the fact that it wasn't anything but a match aiming to a match would only be picked up by a highly trained eye.

Both tennis players and unemployed?

Did you time it? Make it two or three, it's more than enough. In ten the entire coffee shop would realise.



and Mitsos got together the hot topic was always chicks. Never cars and football. Only chicks. Customarily, they'd bad-mouth them. They even had their own codes so they both knew what was on each other's mind straightaway. What he liked about Mitsos, or rather had in common with him, was that, while generally he wasn't averse to telling a little lie every now and again, as far as his record with women was concerned, you simply knew he wasn't full of hot air. Therefore, when he claimed that he "scored" about fifteen a year, and both knew exactly what he meant by that, like two Nazis talking about the "final **solution**", Babis trusted him. They both belonged to the familiar category of men for whom the permanent and **normal** state of things, though not always by choice, was being single and having a temporary and unusual fling with someone, rather than the exact opposite like normal people. Something else that was clear through their narrations and at the same time very telling about the two of them was this: whenever in their life they had attempted to give their all to a woman, or conversely chickened out in the last minute and refrained from doing so, they fell tragically short of her true desire.

As of late, they'd fallen out of touch. Babis was currently catching him in between *blind dates*, Mitsos informed him. The one earlier, somewhere on Fokionos Negri square, hadn't gone very well. He'd ended it much sooner than expected with the excuse, which more or less was the truth anyway, that an urgent meeting had come up. Her worn-down face despite her youth and a couple of extra rolls in the abdomen area, which he had guessed through the cover of a cardigan, were enough to put him off there and then, he said. The cherry on **top**? The view of her thighs when she got up to go to the toilet. She had barely scored a two. Out of twenty, he clarified immediately. Her photos were promising something completely different. She must have taken them at least five years ago. If he wasn't by nature well-bred, he would've left her stranded after the first quarter of an hour. But no, he sat there and put up with it, or her rather, for a whole hour. An hour that felt like an eternity. Any conversation was forced. Let alone how much she jarred him with the "so, yeah..." that, lest of the awkward silence **looming** over them, she threw at him every two seconds. Then, when they asked for the bill, she didn't even take out her wallet for the sake of pretence. What had she ordered? A measly cappuccino after all, that's it. "And don't get me started on her intellectual level," he added. In her own words, the only book she had ever read in her life was *The Alchemist* by Coelho.

He didn't seem especially disappointed though - the same way, for example, that a real estate agent or salesman wouldn't be after a fruitless meeting with a customer. He expected more out of the next one. It was to be with a counselling psychologist with a Master's

Border line.

Redundant, since normal people define what is normal, not normality defining who's normal.

- There is a Greek equivalent for blind dates (ραντεβού στα τυφλά).  
- Find me one person who says it and I will put it.

Have him adding: Or rather the cake under the cherry?

- By nature well-bred is a contradiction in terms.  
- But is Mitsos talking not Babis.

+ and which the "so, yeah" only intensified and expedited.

What does Mitsos know? He's never even read *The Alchemist*.

degree from a UK university, who seemed mighty scrumptious, but I'm not counting my chickens just yet, he explained, because he had met a lot like her before and every single time they had turned out to be mare's **nest**... The rendezvous was for a coffee shop at Skoufa str. Hold on, where the hell do you get all these dates from, Babis asked full of curiosity, thus hinting at the fact that in comparison to the sheer number of women Mitsos had dated, it didn't matter how in the world they looked. I've worked my ass off and still haven't managed to **land** a single one, Babis completed, leaving out the part that after becoming so desperate he had no other choice but to join a dating site. It was as if deep down he believed that their existence, but mainly joining one, albeit a sad affair, was a deterministic necessity as soon as the first signs of a **social life** appeared on a given planet. I've sent thirty messages, can you imagine that, he added, certain that that would leave him stunned, and continued: And not just any kind of messages, mind you. Tailor made for each one. Took me an hour each to write them. The end result? Neither hide nor hair, he concluded, already all ears for that same old **lecture** his friend was shortly about to serve him with views Babis, while far from sharing, would be swayed to not only approve of but endorse as well: Mate, I'm telling you, they've all gone off the rails. We've only got our idiot selves to blame though for spoiling them, for raising their stock so high, blah, blah, blah.

Instead, the other one, jerking his palm in the shape of a fist as if he was **whacking off**, depreciated everything he was saying completely. "Which thirty are you talking about? Are you nuts?" he scolded. "Unless you mean thirty messages a day, and that's still not enough," he commented. "You want my advice? Keep on sending them till you've fed them a crapload. What've you got to lose, anyway? It's free." Babis never managed to ask if he should copy paste all of them; Mitsos got off at the next stop. Logically, he'd have to, he determined. Otherwise, he'd be sitting there all day.

That same night he sent out about a hundred messages which he'd obviously both copy-pasted and made the effort not to make it evident that he had, which he hoped would not only become apparent but would be accordingly appreciated too. The pace picked up impressively over the next few days. The only thing that pulled the brakes on it was the finite, if now relatively greater, number of possible recipients. And how wouldn't it be, since Babis was no longer addressing those whom common sense, against all logic, was pointing out, those in other words who generally were accepted as beautiful and by law he had to like, but rather all those who, at least partly, seemed to be adequate, up to the periphery of the large mass of all the rest, whom he didn't even need to meet to see if they were the right match for him or not. Because the bad thing about the former, the good-looking ones, was that despite the fact that they

- I think "fool's gold" would be better.  
- I can't imagine Mitsos saying that.

- You've used "land" for an open-ended contract, now for a date and later for a woman.  
- It's a multi-tool kind of verb, I can't do without it.

Or simply life.

- Put "music to his ears".  
- Enough with the ears.

It might not be clear enough for those lacking the relevant expertise as to which gesture we're talking about exactly. You should describe it more graphically.

constituted a slight minority of the whole, the overwhelming majority of them appealed to the absolute majority of men whose tastes while rarely coincided with those of [Babis](#), here, for his bad luck, concurred perfectly. However, the chances that they'd be interested in the sender of the message, by checking his profile out, or even that they'd reply to it was as high as them caring about whoever had wolf-whistled at them when going past a construction site and then striking up a conversation with the bricklayer in question. The chances of the first getting a date out of them? The same as of the second: only in those Finos Film<sup>6</sup> classics from the sixties that is.

Their presence on this site was even more perplexing than those whom nature had, looks-wise, done wrong unless, to their own surprise as well as to that of their *entourage*, with men being too scared nowadays to approach them, they were completely run out of options. On the internet, however, where the concept of men getting pied was more relative and its taste incomparably less bitter, they were inundated daily, according to the "well, you never know" logic, by dozens of messages, 99.9% of which simply went down the drain like the myriads of spermatozoa surrounding the egg the moment the quickest or coolest, or the most opportunistic one penetrates it.

Hope lied with the second, the so-so ones, who, having lost all hope, weren't hanging around online anymore till someone took [notice](#) of them and as a result were brushed off by both the more recent, and still optimistic, arrivals and the old-timers who had set up camp there. Having gone unnoticed for such a long time, they felt disheartened and were therefore willing to make discounts, to some extent of course – as they had no doubts about their self-worth whatsoever – for someone who, like a football scout hunting for talent in the local neighbourhood, would discover and appreciate them in the right dimension.

The sure thing was that they would match, maybe even surpass, his joy to finally receive a [message](#), as well as the anticipation to open it, read it all in one go, click on his profile, examine it inside it out, stare at his photos again and again, enlarge them, imagine him, fantasize over him, and read, psychoanalysing and deconstructing the text that complemented it all. Well, that was quite something yet definitely not quite enough, if, in the meantime, with horror, they discovered his answers to the accompanying [questionnaire](#). Because it wasn't bad enough that he had put down atheist for *religion*, he had also noted "no way" and "definitely not" to the *marriage prospective* and *children* questions. Yet, would the world explode had

+ it only would take one look at the weekly list of bestseller books or box office movies to prove that.

- Can you stop giving the impression that all you care about in a woman is her looks?  
- First of all, we're talking about Babis here, and secondly, who said that looks for me is just about how you look? After all, even Camus said that everyone is responsible for his face.

+ after all, they had realised how, that way, they were completely being degraded.

+ over the fact that they had received a message.

How do you expect the reader to know that you're meant to complete a questionnaire as well when setting up a profile page?

<sup>6</sup> Finos Film: film production company that dominated the Greek film industry during the 60s and the 70s.



he at least put down “agnostic”, “maybe” and “nothing is excluded” respectively? More importantly, was it such a big deal, instead of admitting to his actual age so uninhibitedly, to subtract, especially when everyone said that he didn’t even look it, five or six years from his age? For, because he didn’t, it might have been to his advantage to stress it everywhere else except for here where it was to such a degree **one’s** trademark and branded him, eclipsing the rest of **his** features as fully as the indelible tattooed number on a **Jew’s** arm in Dachau.

That was the only point he radically disagreed on with his friend Matina, who, out of principle and female solidarity, was against even the smallest of white lies. A proper relationship, she claimed, can only be built on absolute honesty and transparency.

Whereas meeting Mitsos was purely accidental, to Matina he had gone intentionally. She was the first person who came to mind to take on the role of nightmare on **his** profile’ kitchen which was more or less falling apart. Her advice was always particularly important and valuable, and not just because of her Master’s degree in counselling, completed in **England**. After all, even the dogs in the street knew that dating websites were her middle name. A quick autopsy was enough for her to suggest a diagnosis and treatment. And, just like is always the case with repairs, (where you start with the odd jobs and, without even realising it, you end up with a full-on renovation in the spirit of “well, we’re already doing it, might as well go all out”), she didn’t take long to change it from top to bottom. Any possible objections he might have had she quickly bypassed with the unshakeable argument that she was a woman and, well, she knew better.

Generally everything about his profile, she felt, had a taste of staleness and seventies Greece. Even his references to this favourite sport, football, which she inexplicably considered extremely unromantic, didn’t manage to survive her destructive fury. Neither did all those **Lanthimos**, **Angelopoulos**, **Milan Kundera**, **Emir Kusturica**, **Aki Kaurismäki**, **James Jarmusch**, **Francis Ford Coppola**, **Andrei Tarkovsky** and **Rainer Werner Fassbinder**, who, ticking the relevant boxes on his supposed artistic preferences, festooned his profile. Not even his username, which she changed from **baklavas007** to **No1Stud**. Unfortunately, it was the same with his well-known text<sup>7</sup>, which, from the get go, had turned her stomach so badly that she had him change it to:

Hi there and thanks for visiting my profile. First of all, I want to assure you, in case you have doubts, that I am really real. Laid back,

<sup>7</sup> See pg. 20

+ Newspaper headlines are proof of as much: 48year old shot down in Piraeus execution style, the 65year old paedophile now facing the inquisitor.

Throw in the following link as a footnote, in support to everything that you’re saying:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/08/dutch-man-69-starts-legal-fight-to-identify-as-20-years-younger>

- Too much.  
- Everything’s too much for you. I truly wonder how anyone can create literature with you.

- Are you sure your reader has seen the Greek version of Kitchen Nightmares?  
- Ramsey’s Kitchen Nightmares, definitely.

- Are you not going to say anything about her forthcoming date with Mitsos?  
- That’s a whole other novel.

Lanthimos? I swear, in early 2000 he hadn’t even graduated from Stavrakos Cinema School. Take him out immediately, besides his Dogtooth stuck in my craw anyway.

upfront, down to earth, outgoing, easy going and easy to get on with guy, alternately serious and funny according to the demand, a perfect listener and an epic conversationalist is how people normally describe me. Cheerful, caring, reliable, non-judgemental, relationship-minded, family-oriented, children-led, ambition-driven is how I see myself. I like also to think that I am spiritual, intelligent, smart, witty, brilliant and modest (ha, ha, ha). I am eager to meet an interesting and interested woman-friend who might one day, if we hit it off, become more. I will refrain though from listing the perfect one, being myself far from perfect. Besides, I by no means need a perfect [one](#).

She added that he had taken up yoga recently, was partly a vegetarian again, had a diving certification and had volunteered for the conservation of the Mediterranean seal *Monachus monachus*, as well as the *Caretta caretta* sea turtle.

She knew her stuff, all right.

Also add P.S: hook-ups, ONS, NSA or FWB are an absolute no-go for me + footnote for the laymen: hook-up: any form of intimacy with a member of the preferred sex you don't consider a significant other, ONS: one night stand, NSA: no string attached, FWB: friends with benefits.

- She tells you to lie when she was the one telling you off for doing so in the first place?  
- Supposedly she has me doing all of these too.

## Chapter 8

Indeed, Matina knew her stuff, Babis said to himself, making his way to I. Drossopoulou str. Her contribution to his evolution, ever since she had taken him on exclusively, was catalytic. As was Mit-sos', to be fair. Regardless of the fact that he hadn't, as of yet, managed to **land** a girl. In the meantime, heading towards the bus stop, he didn't stop analyzing his stance during the date that had just taken place. It was crazy how much it depended on his fellow banqueter. It was like a **tennis** match where the better your opponent plays (but not to the point that you're in awe of his or her skills), as long as they are sending the ball where you'd expect them to, the more you do your absolute best to match them. But if instead their game is completely half-assed and has you constantly chasing after the ball where you least expect it, out of courtesy, if nothing else, you end up imitating them to the point where an observer would wonder whether you're that same player whose game, under different circumstances, used to be "pure art". He suspected that there was a biological explanation to the phenomenon, having recently read about the milestone discovery of mirror neurons and their role in imitation learning. If the little monkey learns how to peel the banana by watching its mother do it first, it owes it to those same mirror neurons. The problem possibly rested with both imitator and imitated, therefore, if a social get-together, romantic or not, went completely south.

And, boy, had this specific one gone downhill alright. First of all, it had started with the worst of omens. The seemingly innocent phrase "I am looking for a man who shares my interests" on her profile (even if by "interests" she didn't actually mean the material ones), negatively predisposed him as much as she didn't elaborate on them. As did her quirk of saying *poleos* (πόλεως) instead of *polis* (πόλις<sup>8</sup>) that made her sound, at the very least, rather **right-wing**. Even more alarming was the fact that, in stark contrast to Aphrodite who nagged him to meet up as early as possible so they could get it over and done with, which they did that very morning, Penelope – that's what this one was called – had practically made him jump through hoops to get her to agree to the date. There were the extra photos she had demanded, as the original ones, she said, were somewhat blurry, and then the extra exchange of messages she required to get to know each other better, and finally – listen to this

Basta with that old chestnut.

- Here we go again with tennis.  
- But it's been democratised, get with the times, and after all, table tennis isn't suitable for literature due to smaller range of movement.

Idea: Something that for Babis was the equivalent of, talking about colonels' dictatorship and their coup d'état, saying instead The Seven Years and revolution accordingly.

- What does Babis care? He's looking for a date, anyway.  
- Oh, he cares, all right.

<sup>8</sup> In Greek there are two ways of saying the same thing, town(πόλη) in the example above, the one being the archaic form (katharevousa) and the other the vernacular (demotic), forms whose choice finally end up denoting their users' political views.

- the phone-calls she went out of her way to make in order to “hear his voice”. Where one adhered to the “talk is **cheap**” school of thought, the other got chills at the idea of **meeting up**, even in a neutral space, with a man she did not know. Had her parents gone a bit overboard when she was little with the whole *never-talk-to-strangers* sermon? Did she sit in front of the TV for hours, watching police news reports and thrillers? Had she lived through some kind of traumatic experience? Who knows? Either way, it was as though – like the one (what-was-her-name again?) he met up with at Syntagma Square, or the other one (her name was on the tip of his tongue) before Easter at Psyri<sup>9</sup>, and what’s-her-face who finally agreed to a date at **Gazarte**<sup>10</sup> the day before yesterday – she believed that she was surrounded – that’s what she seemed like to him – if not by serial killers, by at least rogues and scoundrels, who feared neither God nor man, and who, just to be on the safe side, she made sure she warned through her profile: “don’t even think of playing games with me.” It was evident that this was the first time she’d ever been on a date, that’s how flustered and reserved she looked as soon as she walked through the café door. It was also clear that this was the highlight of her entire year. Maybe this was one of those New Year’s resolutions (being that January was coming to a close) to do everything in her power to finally mate. The minute they had arranged the date, she probably shouted it from the rooftops. Her mobile phone bill must have skyrocketed from all the chatter with her friends, whom she expected to offer guidance, especially those far more savvy in such matters, on how to move, how to handle the situation, what to say, what not to say, what to put on and what to take off. It wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to think she might have even discussed this with her psychologist.

He realised how **poncey** she was in the first five minutes, sitting opposite each other, from the emphatic French manner she pronounced the **r** talking about her third cycle, that’s how she put it, Doctorat on **Derrida** in the Philosophy department at Nanterre, which she had already alluded to in writing, following her graduation from the School of Philosophy at UOA. Currently she was trying to get a teaching position at one of the national universities. When he told her that he had just about managed to get a degree in Physics at the University of Ioannina and that, due to not having a penny to his name, even a Master’s degree was definitely out of the question, or – worst of all – that he was currently doing some after-school tutoring to make a living, her disappointment was apparent.

+ and strike while the iron is hot

- Do you think people would get “intercourse”?  
- Unless they’re a complete doofus...

- You said they’d only meet up at Exarcheia square.  
- Supposedly, some, like the chick in question, have been quaking in their boots from watching too much TV and would never be caught alive there.

- Have you realised that all your female characters are just laughable?  
- Geez, you’re just clueless, and you’re the one writing all of it. Babis is the laughable one, who finds something wrong with all of them. They’re all perfectly fine ladies.

+ as if gargling

A fan of Derrida and a far-right wing is oxymoronic; if she’d read him, she wouldn’t have been one. Pure and simple.

<sup>9</sup> Gentrified neighbourhood in Athens known for its restaurants and live music bars.

<sup>10</sup> Art and culture multiplex in Athens.

A disappointment that only became exacerbated when she finally dragged out of him that not only had he not been in a relationship with someone for over a year and had never **had** a relationship that lasted more than a year, but that he lacked any experience in cohabitating with the opposite sex as well. As far as his own disappointment was concerned, which he felt from the first tenth of the second when he first saw her come into the coffee shop, and which even a post doc at Sorbonne wouldn't wash away, he made sure he diligently kept it under wraps. Fair enough, you wouldn't, even as a joke, classify her in the category of women with otherwise redeeming qualities but in which **men** stereotypically tend to lump all those there's no chance in hell they'd ever go to bed with, not even on a deserted island. She was no **Penelope** either though, for whom Odysseus left Calypso and her enchanting isle never to return. They shared something in common though. Every time that, during the conversation, she managed to weave a positive representation of herself, she couldn't wait, like her famous homonym, the shroud she waved, to undo it with an inappropriate word or movement, his sensitive antennas picking it up immediately.

And some minutes later, same story again.

Take for example her deconstructing – and rightly so – of the then **Prime Minister**, the malice and grimaces that came out in the process warped her face. Imagine we went steady, Babis – who had never voted for his political party and was never planning to – thought in terror. It would only be a matter of time before they targeted me.

The final nail in the coffin was when, upon asking the question of what in the world she meant by *deconstruction*, she went all professor-like. Under different circumstances, we might've even liked each other, he thought, studying her, so missing half of her explications. If only we had met, for example, like George Thalassis and Katerina<sup>11</sup> in a resistance organization during the Occupation. Or like Vangelis and Nana did on that cooking competition on the Mega Channel. Anywhere else, that is, where the question of whether we liked each other so much that a second date could be justified would not be posed under such intensity to be answered there and then. And that very question would never be posed because it wouldn't have been, in contrast to here and now, “of the present moment.”

- What about Lila?  
- We're having a flashback to the pre-Lila era, wake up, dude! The time when Babis was messing around with dating websites.

Let's not exaggerate. Women do that too.

I don't recall Homer ever presenting Penelope as a hottie.

- Who are the readers going to think of immediately? Tsipras.  
- Only if they have a brain tumour. I'm talking about Simitis. In early 2000 Tsipras was practically still in diapers.

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<sup>11</sup> Characters of a famous Greek cartoon (Little Hero) about Nazi occupation.

## Chapter 9

Since the SMS from a certain [Thalia](#), which, despite the hubbub on the bus, he noticed from the vibration on his rib, “sorry,” it said, “but, you’re not my type”, immediately followed with his own text to Aphrodite, “sorry, but you’re not my type”, in reply to her asking if he wanted to meet up again sometime, up until the minute that Babis, finally getting home, down in the dumps after his meeting with [Penelope](#), activated, cursing his luck, the *inactivate* command on his profile, it took at most a quarter of an hour, and a week before he, after philosophising over it, reactivated [it](#). As to the point when, beside himself, he first pressed the “delete my profile” button, and out of mind clicked *yes* to the standard question “are you really sure?” so maniacally that the whole keyboard nearly split in half and finally, as to the question of why, berserk, typed “even if I had wasted an entire lifetime on your friggin’ site, I’d never even manage to land so much as a female cat, let alone a female, not to speak of the woman of my dreams,” it was more than a year later. Here is, anyway, what intervened that morning less than twenty-four hours after Lila walked out on him and, well, a word to the [wise](#):

As soon as he logged onto his profile, the first thing that caught his eye – and there was no way that it wouldn’t have – was that there were about [ten](#) messages in his inbox. Incredible!!! The photos he uploaded of himself a short while before he’d met Lila – the ones of when he was rafting in Achelous River and mountain biking at Parnitha<sup>12</sup> – must have definitely played a part. Much like, he thought, the accompanying [text](#) would’ve:

Note to those interested: If by chance you are not Miss universe, Miss Greece, a top model, one of the Forbes world’s 100 most powerful women, the IMF or a multinational company’s or a bank’s managing director, a vulture hedge fund’s or credit rating agency manager, a general prosecutor, an attorney general, a political party’s secretary general, an antiterrorist unit, terrorist organisation, riot police, special forces, religious sect, jet set, skinhead squad member, a secret services agent, a drug, gamble, electronic games or Facebook addict, a vegan extremist, an unscrupulous meat-eater, a voracious man-eater, a fashion victim, a perpetual victimist, a weight lifter, a bodybuilder, a sexual abstinent or a promiscuous [hypersexual](#), then you are welcome. But even if you are one of those, I am prepared, because you never know and nobody is perfect, to give you a chance. Bye and catch you soon then.

<sup>12</sup> Mountain close to Athens.

+ as a reply to his request to meet up again.

Add the following without delay: “who had not yet given any signs of life, thankfully, as with a heavy heart – because he never failed to reply to a message – he would have to take the wind out her sails”.

- FYI: this phrase contains 115 words which, by UK and US standards, is quite far from the mark (25 on average and 75 as upper limit).  
- Ok but mine is quite far from the mark of *Les Misérables* and In search of lost time’s longest phrases (815 and 865 respectively).

A word is by no means sufficient until you make clear that before he reached the end of his tether and pressed Delete, Activate and Inactivate were his bread and butter.

How about thirty?

Text which as you may remember was fiercely censured from all the sites you put it.

It’s called nymphomaniac.



Then again, such a big turnout?

Either way, his first reaction was to quickly open them all, and that of the website – to stop him in his tracks, until he – without of course putting a gun to his head, his choice if, having weighed all the pros and cons, he chose to remain a basic member, knowing full well all the consequences – coughed up 59,99 euros.

At that point, truth be told, he had to pause **and think twice**. Because paying out, on the one hand, 59,99 whole euros, when he no longer had the same delusions as before, nor had forgotten everything he had gone through so far, well, wouldn't it be a proper rip off? Abandoning on the other hand, such a crowded assembly, for a measly 59,99 euros, especially now that, by not having the same delusions as before and going through everything he had gone through, he had got the hand of it, well, wouldn't it be just pure madness?

After all, the prospect of those messages left unread was unbearable. He didn't have either the luxury of walking past them or the guts to ignore them. But also, in anticipation of all the future ones, lacking the strength to deprive himself forever of the moment when, his eyes sleepily halfway shut, he opened them one by one. A moment that brightened up his mornings, even if reading the messages or not even receiving any, darkened them. Were it up to him, he would prolong that moment indefinitely. A moment that in order to extend it ever so slightly, and with it the hope that a single message would be enough to change his life, he had in the past registered on a dozen other such websites he recollected nostalgically and took his credit card out of his wallet.

If not hope, the first message bore something of Christopher Columbus' promise to his crew, on the brink of a mutiny, that the coveted land he promised would appear any time now, Babis thought, opening it. It was from Linda from Columbia, plus her photo with three or **four** rug rats. She had been astounded, she wrote, by his inspired profile and couldn't wait to meet him in person. Aliona from Irkutsk, Siberia, was sending pictures of herself in a bikini at Lake Baikal, probably to prevent any objections he might have had about being way too far away. Godswill from Nigeria and Gogo, a transsexual from **Perissos**<sup>13</sup>, suggested sharing, the former the inheritance her (his?) uncle from America had left, provided he would first send five grand for the **formalities**, the latter magical moments at her place, while, God knows why, a couple of twenty-year-olds, Boubou and Beba, preferred to come to his instead. The rest were pretty much the same.

- Have him be a little more hesitant.  
- Can't you see, he can barely restrain himself.

Change it to five or six.

Why don't you put Nigrita in Serres Region to match with Nigeria?

That's racist, even if it's happened to you before for real.

<sup>13</sup> District in Athens.

That very night, he dreamed that he was defending a doctorate on “Dating Websites: a deconstruction” at the school of Philosophy. Apart from it being extremely realistic, so much as to ask himself, all the way through it, whether he was really **dreaming**, it was one of those dreams that is startlingly literal in nature, just like when you dream of making love to the hottie you’ve been longing for all day but was way out of **your** league. You see, Babis had long supported the idea that it was a disgrace for social studies to not have zealously researched, at least in the way he thought it should have done, a phenomenon that more or less mirrored all the dead-end roads in relationships between the two sexes. That’s one subject, he used to say here and there, that, were it up to him, would most certainly be treated. A more in-depth analysis, thanks to his more intimate experience with the subject, in the Günter Wallraff<sup>14</sup> model, he assured everyone, would lead to major breakthroughs.

The dream, unfortunately only glossing over his work’s conclusions, was implying that the magnetized audience who had come *en masse* was embracing it completely. The single disagreement to it all was the booing coming from a group of topless **Femen** activists who, unbeknownst to anyone how and why, had gate-crashed the presentation. At the point when one of them, the most butch out of them all, started walking straight at him with hostile intentions, he woke up.

+ that he was dreaming.

- You call that realistic?  
- From the perspective of what he wants, not what he does. In other words, what he wants in his dream is what he wants in real life too.

- Need a footnote on Femen immediately.  
- Don’t bother. Even my granny knows about them.

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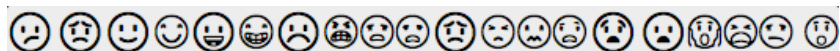
<sup>14</sup> Günter Wallraff: German writer and undercover journalist, famous for his original research methods on lower class working conditions, methods based on what the reporter experiences personally after covertly becoming part of the subgroup under investigation.



## Chapter 10

What, in Babis's opinion, his text message succeeded more or less in conveying was that he may not be excessively interested in meeting her but at the same time, more than itching for such an encounter. It certainly did not help that it suffered from a total lack of humor and imagination, but it didn't do any harm either since, at the present stage, such traits might have surfaced as a show of overconfidence that he had her at the palm of his hand, especially since ending the message with "kisses" already suggested that he thought she was a sure thing.

Not until he changed it to – also testing out in between redrafts the version that omitted it completely – the plain "talk soon - x", and after reading it for the last time, "Hi Lola, it'd be nice to see you again, I'm free this weekend if you're up for it. Talk soon, Babis - x", did he resolutely press on the send button, thus placing himself before a *fait accompli*. The *click* that echoed, within seconds, informed him that the SMS had been sent but not necessarily received. That only happened after the *beep*, but even so, things were still in flux in terms of what that meant: had the message been received by a mobile phone that was as of yet completely switched off, or opened, let alone read, by one that was on, and if so, by whom exactly? Technology as yet didn't allow for an accurate deduction. Besides he wouldn't go out on a limb to say that the phone number she had given him wasn't a made up one just to get rid of him. Where he could put his head on the block though was that if she had indeed, in the complete sense of the word, received the message, then, well, one of the following emoticons must have represented her face:



Whichever one it was (and trust me he would do anything to find out which), Babis was already sitting at the edge of his seat for a reply. A reply which, with every excruciating second that rolled on, never seemed to arrive and whose likelihood of ever doing so decreased the more they multiplied. Right when he started to think, despite the mobile phone company's assurances, which were impossible to confirm, or cross-check, or even hold to account for spreading false information, that his text had possibly been caught in traffic amongst the millions of other ones that were *en route* for their immediate (?) completion, he heard the all too familiar beeping sound. In a rush, that of a gameshow contestant knowing the correct answer but terrified at the idea of being beaten to it by his opponent, Babis violently pressed the relevant button to open the message.

- Thing is, how do we print these in?  
- None of my business.

The sudden realization that what he was eagerly awaiting for all this time had finally arrived led him to brutally underestimate its importance on the one hand, and to hastily overestimate all the possible dangers (seen and unseen), disappointments, romantic or otherwise, rejections, blame-laying, betrayals, accountability, sadness, depression, frustration, deprivation, abandonment, prejudice, subjugation, vilification, inability, instrumentalization, suicide etc., to which from here on out it was about to **expose** him to, on the other hand. Luckily, the message was not from Lola but unfortunately from Thanasis, suggesting a game of ping pong. It was a heavy blow, but he withstood it nonetheless. There was still hope. There you go. Another beeping sound. It would be however a massive mistake, from a strategic and tactical point of view, to show her (even though that could very well not have been the case, but how could he be 100% sure of it, anyway?) that, pending their arrival, he was on tenterhooks; that's why, as there was no way it could have been anyone else but Lola this time, he pressed the button as slowly and lazily as possible. Sadly, it wasn't Lola this time either, but the said company, letting him know about their new package offers. Receiving the two SMS drove him to the unsubstantiated, and, after all, metaphysical **certainty** that, since his mobile phone had entered into a logic of receiving them, well, eventually, hers would lawfully follow after. Hence why he was getting into a stew through a silence which was humanly impossible to tell whether it was that of radio or grave. Had it bothered her that, while it hadn't even been half a week since they met, he had unacceptably rushed to message her, or maybe that he had unjustifiably put off doing so for three and a half whole days? Could she have, additionally, found it to be incomprehensibly simplistic, unusually predictable, unpredictably common, profoundly shallow, deeply superficial, or, on the contrary, somewhat too deep for **her** taste? In all likelihood, she might've even screwed her face up at the sight of the final X, too much familiarity and intimacy wasn't her thing, a "give him an inch and he will take a mile" escaping her, and "hands off" warning him with her muteness. But in any case, if ever she were to read it, which would require her firstly to not only personally receive it, but secondly, for it to be technically both easy-to-read and **readable**, there were only three probabilities: she wanted to reply but couldn't, she could but didn't want to, or she neither wanted to nor could.

It had been twenty-five whole minutes by now though. But, of course! How could he not have thought of this? Why on earth would it take Lola half the time to reply than it took him to write a whole SMS? If anything, the more she delayed the more it suggested that she wasn't taking the whole thing light-heartedly at all. He imagined her frantically typing her phrases on her phone, getting annoyed at her inability to exhibit any originality and imagination, losing her

+ in the off chance that they officially got together.

+ as metaphysical as the one that, after a night pregnant with developments, as soon as he turned his mobile phone on the next morning, her SMS would inevitably pop up on his screen.

Are you pulling my leg?

+ not show up, in other words, as just plain gibberish or gobbledygook.

head with her sense of humor that let her down every time she needed it the most, deleting her words again and again maniacally and finally adopting a more neutral formula to make sure that she didn't give him any reason to misunderstand her or accuse her of being so arrogantly confident that she had him in the palm of her hand, reading it all over again, scared shitless of putting him off with a slip-up.

In the meantime, he checked his own message just in case, because a slip-up was all that he needed now, a tiny [slip of the tongue](#) for example that Lola, thanks to the psychoanalyst hiding inside of her, would not fail to notice and misconstrue to his own detriment.

What if the slip-up, he thought in terror, was not in the content of the message but on the container? On the SMS itself, that is, regardless of what it actually said? In the medium, in other words, and not in the message? Because the medium was the message. And what did it say? That he was scared shitless to call her.

Examples? I don't know, like not capitalizing Lola?

## Chapter 11

Babis, before he had even sent the SMS to her but also afterwards, was very much interested in anything that concerned her, and very concerned with what interested her so if Google was a goldmine mainly for whatever concerned her, Facebook had to be the Ali Baba cave for whatever primarily interested her. Surfing as soon as he got home, through the former, scrutinizing it, he found out that she hadn't been feeding him stories: she was indeed in the Human Resources management team of a well-known **multinational** corporation. He calculated her age based on how long it had been since she'd graduated from **Panteion** University. She was a lot older than he had originally thought, and, therefore, the age difference between them was far less abyssal than what he originally feared. That was something at least. Strange. She hadn't deemed it necessary to mention that she had taken part in tango competitions, the Athens Marathon, or that she had a PhD, from the University of Chicago on the topic of "Ethical Altruism versus Rational Egoism, Laissez-Faire Capitalism and Individual Rights in Ayn Rand; A Meta-Ethical Approach."

"What's with this obsession with Ayn Rand!" he yelled, unable to restrain himself.

Lola's Facebook wall belonged in the increasingly widespread category of Facebook walls that was anything but a Facebook wall. It was a dazibao<sup>15</sup> political platform, manifesto, a brochure and credo all in one, with her every post being a position, an opposition, a proclamation, a flaunt, a demonstration, a **performance**, a cry of protest, a **denunciation**, sarcasm, libel, a striptease, an unmasking, a catfight, a pie in the face, but, most of all, a sign which either wanted to say or show something. A signifier that is, behind which the signified was hidden or rather condensed within. And the signifier being more than just a simple word, but a narrative, a storytelling. Alongside her photographs, which by the way reassured him that not only she was not bad to look at, but actually a **sight for sore eyes**, it all told, without boasting though, the story of a self-made woman, who had toiled to get to where she did, and, yes, that meant a career and money, but mainly life knowledge, experience, wisdom and expertise. She didn't owe a thing to anyone and was proud of that, and if everyone else was more like her we would all be living in a far better country, and she would broadcast it, together with her personal worldview, to the whole world. A worldview, which was innovative and unprecedented according to her, but consciously

- What's Babis doing dating someone working for a multinational corporation?  
- Well, he's thinking, maybe if I gave her a chance...you never know...

- Panteion University and working for a multinational corporation doesn't exactly pair up.  
- You're still stuck in the past when Panteion was a hub for rebels

You left out installation.

+ J'accuse, like Zola.

- Now, a sight for sore eyes and working for a multinational corporation, neoliberalist, workaholic etc... something doesn't sound right.  
- Are you kidding me? I'm talking about her external appearance.  
- So am I.

Rude. Just say, et cetera.

<sup>15</sup> Wall-mounted newspapers used in China during the Cultural Revolution.

simple and straightforward, crafted through life, albeit deep down pessimistic about human nature which, being full of greed and self-interest, gave birth to a society in its likeness and any attempts from one or the other to change it were not only doomed to fail, but did nothing but cause trouble as well. There were no more ideologies, Left and Right were but outdated concepts, the only true distinction anymore was between visionary-modernizers and opportunist-dreamers, and it was about time for realism and common sense to prevail, find the solution in the self-evident, blah, blah, [blah](#).

The bad thing was that, just like Lola in their one and only conversation, her wall expressed, projected, seconded and fostered, with adequate subjectivity and malice, opinions of a complete opposite camp to [Babis](#)<sup>16</sup>, or, rather, of a camp that Babis stood right in front of. A camp which ferociously flighted the one whose, although he wasn't even a sympathizer, he was not exactly ready to buy whatever nonsense the first was claiming about it, and in which, as a result he ended up, without anyone asking for his opinion, being [pigeonholed](#).

An hour ago, at the bookshop E...s, given that in a specially designed space there was also a coffee shop, where you could chill out with a book of your choice while other clients, some even with red plastic baskets in hand in fact, were doing their shopping to the sound of pop tunes - the ambiance that prevailed was that of a bookshop, a coffee shop and a supermarket, all at the same time. According moreover to some unverified rumours, a diffuse (but imperceptible to those that didn't even care, or were not of a disposition to feel it) hint of flirtation was floating in the air.

The fact that the above coexisted and unfolded alongside books which, as their titles after all suggested (*Acceleration and alienation*, *Simulations and simulacra*, *Capitalism and schizophrenia*, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, *Symbolic Misery*, *The Society of the Spectacle*, *The ecliptic of sex*, *The Rising Tide of Insignificance*) analysed it, neither seemed to touch nor [impress](#) anyone – like for example the group talking politics or the lonely gentleman enjoying his profiterole, slurping every now and again on his frappuccino – more than the average Athenian who treads on the same streets that Socrates once did.

Babis had become completely distracted, eavesdropping on the conversation the couple behind him were having. “Are you game for Constantinople<sup>16</sup> for Easter?” the woman asked, probably on account of some travel guide she was leafing through. “You’re not right in the head,” the man replied, chewing. “*Forget it!* Have you

+ who however denied belonging to whatever camp

Something that the reader will do with you.

- Why put these in if you've never even read them?!  
- Their titles speak for themselves.

Well, did you expect them to be doing backflips or what?

<sup>16</sup> That's what Greeks call Istanbul.

got a death wish or something? It's by far the most at-risk city for a terrorist act right now," he added, parking a whole mouthful of sandwich into his left cheek, at the exact moment Babis turned around to identify the perpetrator of the comments. "None of that. Staying in Greece<sup>17</sup>. *Forever.*"

"Have you noticed that lately in every phrase you drop in an English word? If you keep this up, it's going to become a habit, I'm telling you. And not for nothing, but you'll be unintentionally contributing to the creolisation of our language."

"Creolisation? *What the fuck?*"

"Don't you know what creolisation is? Have you been living under a rock? Does creole language mean anything to you? **Creolisation.** It's when..."

He missed the next part because Lola, as he would later come to learn her name was, had silently approached within **shooting** range, like one of those modern Stealth pursuers that can't be picked up by a radar. He had already, from a distance, vaguely spotted and sorted her for consideration, but upon closer inspection he became certain that he liked her, a lot - who cares about descriptions since that's all that mattered and was **enough** for him? He caught her – something that certainly did not elude either of them – observing the fact that he was inspecting her. In her eyes, as well as her whole gait, he could read (but then again it might've just been him), along with the fully satisfied confidence that men found her attractive, an awareness of how much of a curse it was in the end that they did, and the fatalistic endurance of their consecutive and intense stares fixed on her, like flies on a cow that flicks its tail to chase them off. What, then, did she possibly read in his stare or maybe didn't even need to, it being so blatantly obvious? His pleading for her to sit at one of the as-yet empty tables next to him and his anxiety, if the stars aligned – whether or not she did it intentionally – of her actually doing so. Something that would doom him, no matter how much he couldn't afford it, in chatting her up.

And yet things would be far simpler had she, seconds after she finally sat down at the table to his left, opened "The Pregnancy Bible". But no, for better or for worse, it wasn't "The Pregnancy Bible" but "The Virtue of Selfishness" by Ayn Rand. He had never heard of Ayn Rand. Here was his chance to get to know her.

After waiting for about ten **minutes** to roll on, just in case Lola was escorted and when he was about to cosy up to her some big dude

- Are you going to explain what creolisation is in the end or not?  
- If anyone really cares, they can Google it.

- But isn't Babis who's going to hit on her?  
- How do you know? Maybe she's asking for it.

OK, but if put that way it will become more than clear that when it comes to descriptions you are completely hopeless.

Make it three, it's more than enough, otherwise he'd miss the boat.

<sup>17</sup> Name of popular tv show about holidays (We stay in Greece, Μένουμε Ελλάδα).



shows up and gives him an angry look like chevalier Danceny did with vicomte de Valmont in the long buried, top left corner shelf, *Dangerous liaisons* by Choderlos de Laclos (pg. 59) he curiously asked her: “Who the heck is Ayn Rand?” His tone of voice implied that deep down, he wasn’t so much posing the question of who the hell Ayn Rand was, as if everyone knew the answer to that, but rather the question of what sort of “political animal” she **was in the end**. He had, you see, thanks to the free internet access the bookshop provided, managed to google her in the meantime. The entry about her on Wikipedia listed her as a Russian-Jewish born American writer and philosopher of the previous century, a libertarian but not a libertine, while simultaneously an extreme conservative even though, albeit a fanatical anti-communist, an atheist, anything but an anarchist however, simply a minarchist, a lover, in other words, of the minimal state, and consequently – though a defender of rule of law (such as to allow nevertheless for an unaltruistic laissez-faire based on rational selfishness, forming a state within a state, radical capitalism) – an enemy of every **Welfare** state. Having common sense as a principle above all else, she was, higgledy-piggledy, in favour of abortions but against homosexuality, the US involvement in Vietnam and World War II, while at the same time publicly in support of Israel and radically against the **Arabs** in the conflict between the two, yet she had not even an ounce of sympathy for the Native Indians and the poor, but a massive amount both for the colonists who took the former’s land and for the wealthy, victims of exploitation of the latter, something that possibly forced Chomsky to describe her as “one of the most diabolical figures of American intelligentsia”, and the liberal economist Fon Mizes as “the bravest man in the country’s history”, while Ronald Reagan swore by her. Man, Babis thought to himself, now we’ve hit the jackpot...

The intimidating “Pardon?” that he first received from Lola, even though elementary, was one of those scenarios, and he had contrived a lot of them, that he had neither predicted nor anticipated, or even prejudged. A “Pardon?” that, even though didn’t enlighten him at all whether and to what extent she had heard but not listened to, **heard** him but couldn’t believe her ears or pretending not to have heard him, in objective terms haphazardly kept the channel of communication open. A “Pardon?” which, despite his initial astonishment, didn’t take him long to realize that, if nothing else, offered him – just like a scratch card does – another free try, which wasn’t exactly up to him whether he’d take advantage of or not, so the only question was how. “Such a spunky devil this Ayn Rand, isn’t she? Don’t you think?” he asked this time, not **giving it much thought**, in no time extorting a smile from her. He was cheering massively within.

Check the page, because you’ve only watched the film.

The phrase “and what sort of beasts were her followers?” would be a perfect fit here, but I can’t afford to add it, can I?

+ to which however she will be forced to appeal to under a pseudonym in her old age.

+ who, even though an anti-racist, she considered to be barbaric

+ or acting like she was pretending not to have heard him.

Even though it’s plain as day that you’ve been thinking about this for months now.

Half an hour later he was also extorting, much like vicomte de Valmont stole one by one Madame de Tourvel's clothes (pg.121), her name, the transition to first-name basis, the promise to see each other again and her phone number.

A little while later, just when they had said their goodbyes, his gaze accompanied her all the way to the bookstore's exit, coldly evaluating her silhouette, not without a certain amount of anxiety just in case, at the very last moment, he discovered any defects. He was relieved to ascertain that the following **phrase** from a novel he had recently read suited her perfectly: "She had a bit of extra meat on her, but, luckily, in all the right places<sup>18</sup>." It would surely be somewhere nearby.

+ funnily enough, the only one that his memory had retained out of an entire 500-page book.

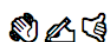
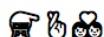
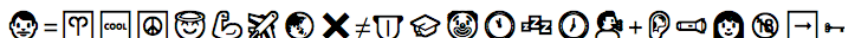
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<sup>18</sup> David Lodge, *A man of parts*, London, Harvill Secker, 2011.



## Chapter 12

It had gone dark outside when the doorbell rang. It was probably the building janitor, such late-night intrusions were his forte. He got up to get the door. The computer screen glowed in the dimly lit living room. Here's what an external observer would discern until it automatically turned off:



In order to realise that it essentially was supposed to be a text, one need not have a very high IQ, just some common sense. The same applied to what sort of a text it was and what it [said](#). With a single glance at the website address at the top of the page, the entire puzzle would come together. Even if one was not an expert. It belonged, you see, to a dating [application](#) – application, not a website – whose reputation had recently well-surpassed the strict framework of those already initiated to such things, to the point where some qualified it as a “[social phenomenon](#)”. Its trademark? (its motto or philosophy?) Looks. Its motto? (its philosophy or trademark?) The faster the better. Its philosophy? (Its trademark or motto?) Brevity is the source of wit. Its internal language of communication? In the image and likeness of that very communication: elementary. The letters, or *symbols* its alphabet consisted of, for example, were the same as, and equal to the number of, words in the app's vocabulary;  and , out of which only  was actually used for interpersonal [relations](#) which  was, on the contrary, set to [discard](#), so that, as an end result, there wasn't a chance in hell for them to take place.

The entire thing functioned as such: in front of the members of, say, ♂ gender rooted opposite a screen, there was a tireless parade of

What if you added its translation for those with an IQ of a fescue?

Would you prefer to use “app” to make it less formal?

+ sociological and societal

+ (☹☹☹)

+ (☹)

photos of members, mainly of the ♀ gender, possibly even the ♂, and why not of ♂ + ♀, on which they would tirelessly click either  or .  and  which, strangely enough weren't ever notified to them, especially the former, as for the latter, exclusively and only in the instance where – as if! –   .

As a result the combination of  +  as well as   +   would lead to a dialogue of the deaf, while only a  +  to a successful one. Rightfully so, the examiner of such a microcosm expressing itself with such peculiarity would observe symptoms of autism.

As if it wasn't enough that it was autistic, it was simultaneously authoritarian as well. Thus, aside from the, by decree and from above, infliction to the voiceless and weak-willed masses of a specific language and the de facto and de jure prohibition of any other ones, its authoritarianism expressed itself through, for example, the forcible, albeit supposedly voluntary, acceptance by each individual member of their so-called geolocation, so that his or her total distance from the rest could be calculated thanks to a geostationary satellite; But also through its – according to rumours – secret algorithm, much like the chemical composition of Coca Cola, on the basis of which the photograph suggestions transpire. The problem wasn't that they were sent out in a cascade, but at will and as it **saw fit to**, which meant that they would be received by the members automatically, regardless of whether they reserved the right – like the lab test chimpanzee that stays fixed in front of the screen in documentaries – to reject or approve them by clicking accordingly.

Therefore, in order for Babis to trample on his oath to never again go on a **dating** website, he must have found some advantages to this particular one, even if it was but an app. And which the rest of them did not offer. A change of paradigm for example<sup>19</sup>. What exactly did it imply? Quite simply the fact that it kept **its** members, regardless of gender, in complete ignorance as to how many times they had actually got pied, when, why and, most importantly, by whom.

**And** what about Lola? Well, with Lola, Babis was past the point where every minute that went by without her reply to his SMS either first advanced and then delayed its receipt, or where in its own that very minute consisted of a new message to be decrypted. On the contrary, he was at the point of 1) thinking about what he would say, if anything, to her, and how would he confront her if and when, he happened to run into her at the bookstore (to which there was no way he wouldn't ever **go** again just because of her) and 2)

- Saw fit who ?  
- The app itself, who else for heaven's sake?

- I don't remember him taking an oath  
- Of course he did. When he permanently deleted his profile

Rather "the hence forth unbridled members".

You forgot Lola.

+ out of shame

<sup>19</sup> Wordplay as in Greek paradigm and example(παράδειγμα) use the same word.

crossing his fingers lest Lola, whom already through deconstruction demystified or through demystification deconstructed, finally sent it to him, now that a date with Lily, which for some time now – in anticipation of her SMS – he had arranged as a backup plan, was imminent.

Of course, that he would ever receive the infamous SMS was something he by now had completely ruled out, whereas his own – so that it wouldn't be a constant reminder of his embarrassment – he had deleted, as well as her number, just in case he got carried away in a moment of weakness and called her out of the blue, like the other day when he got her automated messaging service. Her voice still chimed in his ears. It was one of those voices, he **thought**, where the shittier things were in general the more common it was – as annoyingly velvety as the one for his mobile phone company commercials. Like a suit and heels, it was the voice she wore to work. Nothing like the one, more casual and, in the end, more human, at the bookstore. While the former verged on kitsch, at least in the way Kundera defined it as “*kýč je absolutní popření hovna; v doslovném i přeneseném slova smyslu<sup>20</sup>*”, the latter was full-on vernacular, and from time to time even scatological. Thus, the words “I don't give a shit”, as well as a “they can go do one, those shits”, plus a “they are in deep shit” Lola must have uttered about three times each during the conversation, without hiding the fact that she enjoyed it so much that it was like she kept them on standby in order to insert them on purpose as soon as the opportunity arose. This was something that incidentally also applied to anything in her crosshairs, no matter how slightly or completely irrelevant they were to the **context**. And what was in her crosshairs? Whatever belonged to the euphemistically-called – disjointed and topsy-turvy as it was – camp that we were previously talking about. Which whilst, like Ancient Greece in relation to Rome, had been overwhelmed on the battlefield, it triumphed – purportedly – at an ideological, aesthetic, moralistic and symbolic one, governing over consciences. The vilification and belittlement of Ayn Rand's heritage, the distortion of who she was and what she wanted, was nothing but one of the epiphenomena of its dominion, which for the country's sake, thank the heavens, according to Lola, was in its last days.

Where she blew him away though was when, among other things, she claimed that if capitalism meant a free market, and since the real market, at least in the way that Ayn Rand meant it, was neither a market, nor free, we therefore lived in a capitalist society only in

+ and for him to think of that so spontaneously and directly, it must mean that that's exactly how it was

+ and, something even more annoying, no matter whether it was not in the crosshairs of her interlocutor too.

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<sup>20</sup> “Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word” (Originally in Czech).

name. “Hold on, this reminds me a bit of the USSR that wasn’t united, soviet, socialist, or even democratic,” he couldn’t help himself but commenting, having up to that moment chosen to keep mum. “Ok, but following that logic” – he really went in on her now, completely disregarding the fact he would, that way, possibly lose her favour altogether – “we can’t get far. Because, eventually, your faith in Rand’s theory ends up much like that of left-wings in Marxism since, no matter what, both are in the clear, with the argument that up to now both theories had never been applied to the letter but only as a misprint, Capitalism being a fake and Socialism a monstrosity. So then, hypothetically the former is as much a far cry from what Ayn Rand envisioned, as the latter was from a communist manifesto. That’s why she is probably turning in her grave, just like Lenin in his mausoleum. And may I add?” he concluded. It was his turn to go in for the kill. Who knows, maybe he could still win her favour that way. “The Lefties do have a *point* though, because the Socialism which was established, under orders from Moscow, was a replica of the Soviet one. Whereas Capitalism...”

“Bullshit” she rebuked him, which, like the affectionate “chill, you dick” from his friends, he rather liked. Where the one made him feel like he was eighteen again, it was as if the other one brought them closer. “What’s this guy saying?” she asked, addressing an absent third party, maybe even Ayn Rand, who would confirm the baselessness of all she had heard, before adding: “What about Capitalism? Do you doubt that it’s compatible with human nature, whereas Socialism a completely alien concept to it? Because for me that’s where the essence of it all is and everything else is nothing but hot air” she said, positive that she was going to have him eat his words. What – as everything indicated – was a habit of her, apart from interrupting him mid-sentence, to skim over his arguments or judge whether he was right or *not* on the basis of those alone, had already started – he would analyse in retrospect – to get on his nerves. Even more than her opinions, what really drove him *crazy*, was her certainty that they were the only valid ones.

- You were saying something about the creolisation of our language...  
- But I too am both a victim of the former and an offender of the latter.

+ like a customer who will deem the product to be faulty just because the seller had a lisp

- Why is he chasing after her then?  
- True.

## Chapter 13

When he opened the door, the first thing that struck him, seeing her standing in front of him, was her smile. It wasn't as enigmatic as – according to the **experts** – Gioconda's. On the contrary **in fact**. For – assisted by her body assuming the appropriate stance (something akin to an askew Latin question mark) – she might, much like Da Vinci, have condensed in it a whole list of messages, demands and projects except that they were obvious to see, even to far-sighted Babis, without **his** glasses on. And it made clear to him, first and foremost, that she was in no mood, as though it weren't plain as day already, to be interrogated. If pressured, she would exercise her right to remain silent. And also, OK, she might have, wrongly of course, kicked him to the curb for someone else who was promising her the moon, the difference being that had he done the same, she would have blacklisted him. OK, maybe now she was coming back to him with her **tail** between her legs, OK, she realised that, because of the precedent created and the *res judicata* force attached to it, it would be a piece of cake for him to just call the whole thing off on the first sign of trouble. OK, he could have, had he been seeing someone else, closed the door right in her face. OK, maybe, no matter how much she had missed making love to him, he was vastly inferior to the other guy in sex. OK, maybe she had missed him, but she'd be stupid to confess that to him because it would go straight to his head, especially when he would never say something like that to her, and so on and so forth.

He stepped aside to let her come in. She fell into his arms, searching for his lips. He didn't deny them to her, on the contrary he tucked into hers. They started to undress each other feverishly, their movements, although clearly influenced by movies, full of sincerity in their passion and lust, lust which however, while the two bodies were separate, seemed hidden away, needing them to be in close proximity to resurface. Did not the precarious and, therefore, incidental nature of the whole thing not shed, if not a lot, at least some light on the mechanics of desire? In other words, from the minute that the stimulus, let's say the steaming plate of **pasta**, stopped being but a mere idea or a vision and transformed into an existing sight, the hunger, which up to that point was nothing but a manageable worry, suddenly became gigantic, displaying demands that could not be postponed, Babis reflected, while he vainly struggled to undo her bra, until she had to lend him a hand herself. Only seconds earlier, he had his own close to her bust, sliding it under her **blouse**. His certainty that only a few inches higher and he would touch her two **mounds**, at the top of which the two nipples stood erect from the excitement like a couple of lightning rods, seemed,

- Isn't it you who says that?  
- If it is, it's because that's what they say.

- You've not said who she is.  
- Even better. Creates a bit of suspense.

+ You could plainly see here how effective for the learning and understanding of a foreign language, its grammar and syntax, apart from a total immersion in it, the pillow method was.

"like a killer returning to the scene of the crime" probably, as it is a crime to dump someone out of the blue.

Something similar, add here, happens with going for a wee too when you're within shooting range of the toilet.

There goes the bra. He should have just slipped his hand in from the top.

+ (they were small in size)

due to an extended period of erotic **abstinence** relatively groundless. Sort of like a surgeon, who, when vacationing in an exotic destination, is urgently called upon to operate on a native and, despite everything he had learned in medical school, is overtaken by an unreasonable doubt of whether or not his scalpel has penetrated the expected **organ**.

Finally naked, they literally rushed towards the bedroom and literally dove into the familiar bed with the patterned sheets that they had bought together, on offer, from IKEA.

He would shut the computer down as soon as Lila jumped into the shower in a little while, he thought, just in case.

- Oh, come now. How long had it been?  
- Definitely about a year, at the end of the day.

- Potentially racist.  
- Take it up with the surgeon.



## Part Two

## Chapter 14

“The commotion of the door closing and the tap tapping of her pumps in the corridor had barely dwindled, and already, an idea about how from now on he would fill his – who knew for how long, maybe even forever – lonely life began to take shape and form in his brain which, to such blows – and, believe me, he had experienced many – reacted by reflex like, *mutatis mutandis*, Pavlov’s dog’s salivary glands at the lighting of the red lamp. This time, however, instead of the company of the typical female who would only in a matter of time fall in his snare, he fantasized being invited on Vassilis Vassilikos<sup>21</sup>’ talk show “Axion Esti” on ERT3. He could feel his nostrils fill up with the scent from his pipe. He was wearing his trademark hat. Albeit of a certain age now, he still maintained that characteristic witty spark in his eyes intact. He was reading out a phrase from **his** book which he had previously noted. Despite being his own, it was a newfound experience to hear it from a **third** party, especially his favorite writer who, obviously, was finding pleasure in its melody. There was no way; his salivary glands would definitely feed the oral cavity with abundant saliva. Reaching the end, he lifted his eyes from the text and, with his inimitable smile, gazed at him triumphantly, as if he had written it himself and, like right after a joke, was asking, “That’s a good one, isn’t it?” That’s it, he would start writing, Apostolis decided.”

That’s how (more or less, ok? It **still** needed a bit of legwork; For example, the tap tapping of her pumps might actually have been, aside from not audible at all, closer to a puff, puff, the term “**female**” reminded you of a different era, “gazed at him triumphantly” was too pompous, while the phrase “an idea began to take shape and form in his brain” would likely make a neuroscientist freak out) his novel’s first paragraph would be Babis concluded as soon as **Alexandra** was out of sight and, strangely enough, the thought of writing it sometime, which had consumed him since he was a beardless **boy** and, while the first white hairs nested now in his temples, still remained a blank letter, all of a sudden seemed less of a stinker. Actually, it began to mature with the speed of sound, hearing her telling him, but also his own voice vainly refuting it, the following: enough was enough, she was tired of his grumbling and his digs about her extra kilos, her nutrition, the books she read or didn’t **read**, the films she watched or those she didn’t **watch**, the

You know what I fear the most?  
That the soldering, by force, of the second part with the first will be as artificial and odd as that of the New testament with the Old.

- Whose book? Yours or V.V.’s? It doesn’t make sense.  
- We’re supposed to be dealing with an intelligent reader, right? Otherwise, we might as well close up shop right now.

And do you expect the reader to consult an oracle in order to know that the first is Babis and the second his own self?

Legwork? You’re pulling my leg, more like, implying that supposedly I’m only writing for the glory.

+ as well as the snare in which she would fall

- What about Lila?  
- She had ever so subtly done a runner. How could she ever put up with him?

- Further down, you’re saying that it didn’t.  
-It did, all right, but he had repressed it.

+ but ought to read

+ but ought to watch

<sup>21</sup> Greek writer, known for his novel *Z*.

exercising she didn't do, the internet she was permanently glued to. She had had it up to here, she added – and drew an imaginary line on her forehead with her finger – that for every comment she made, he would turn around to say that things were far more complicated than she thought them to be (despite not ever bringing home to her what their complexity finally consisted of). That deep down, (although not so deep after all since it was as clear as daylight) – and this was the most offensive part she spat out with tears in her eyes and that dramatic tension which always colored her words – he believed that he deserved something better. Yes, exactly like that, she was even certain about how he worded it all in his mind, because ok, he had enough tact not to blurt it out squarely - “something”, as if she was a thing, an object. Words could not describe, she continued, how pissed off she was every single time they were out walking together, guessing from the ecstatic expression in his eyes (like an astrophysicist guesses at the existence of an exoplanet based on the decrease in luminosity of a star, when one passes by in front of him, thought Babis unintentionally, fully immersed in writing mode) that he was doubtless drooling over some bimbo “from another planet” and cursing his luck that getting with someone like her would never be his lot. “Well, go on, take to the streets to look for her, hic Rhodus, hic salta<sup>22</sup>, you have my permission, because in the end, if there's someone who deserves something better, if there's someone who has the right to be angry at fate, it's me,” she spouted in his face and, not before giving him more than a piece of her mind, disappeared forever.

Aren't you going to put a footnote that you lifted it from *Difficult Loves* by Italo Calvino? Just so you don't end up being accused of plagiarism.

- It's as if you are implying that women dunces when it comes to astronomy.  
- Despite some women's inclination to astrology, you know how far from me is such a thinking.

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<sup>22</sup> Here is Rhodes, jump here, meaning that one has to prove what he can do, here and now. The phrase arises from an Aesop's fable.

## Chapter 15

Babis was many things but not a lotus eater. He did not ignore the difficulties the whole exercise presented. Had he ever said publicly he'd be a writer? No. He had not even wholly admitted as much to himself, he had barely muttered that he would simply start to **write**. Yet, he wouldn't tell a soul, not even that. As to the question of how Alexandra, whichever Alexandra, had stood in his way, stopping him from doing so up to now, he would most likely remain mute. Because neither Elstat<sup>23</sup> nor Eurostat maintained any statistics on all those who, though having the appetite and guts to write, never did so because of a female presence. After all, while the writers who wrote something worthwhile, partly by not being accountable to any woman, who would either make their life a living hell or heaven, were not rare, those who had their own as a faithful supporter, tireless reader, listener and **editor**, and to whom they sometimes owed, financially and psychologically, their very ability to write or those whose repulsion for **married** life, the hatred or envy towards their better half, her disgust with them, inspired them to write a masterpiece, were abundant.

Then again, maybe Alexandra permanently bugged him with an endless list of matters, most of which, truth be told, couldn't be postponed; if, for instance, – depending on why he had gone to the **toilet** – he had opened its window or left **its** seat up, if he had taken the rubbish out, why he had talked rubbish to Panos and had aired all their dirty laundry in front of Voula, if he had put it to the washing machine and took out the dishes from the **dishwasher**, etc, etc. Matters – trifles, on the other hand, in comparison to all that he **explicitly** raised which, in relation to all the **implicit** ones, were admittedly chicken feed; implicit ones which in turn paled in front of his silent, as it could not be verbalized, griping. Purely as an indication: it did not suit him to be with a woman whose name contained the word “andras” (Greek for *man*) and which etymologically meant she who repelled them. He broke out in hives because even though pumps didn't fit her she still insisted on wearing them. It drove him up the wall when she read the newspaper, in reality she just leafed through it, thank goodness she didn't lick her finger every time she'd turn a page. It drove him nuts when, no matter what the conversation was, she would pin his back against the wall with the argument that everything was “**relative**” in the end, except, of course, the statement that “everything was relative.” The phrase therefore “yes, but on the other hand” which was **permanently at the**

- Yes, but he doesn't seem to give a toss that Alexandra, and before that Lila, walked out on him.  
- Of course he does, but part 2's theme is writing, which partly constitutes an antidote to his pain too.

+ Tolstoy is a grand example of this.

A grand example of this, put here, is again Tolstoy, but much later on.

A bit too much.

Or rather “opened its window and put down the toilet seat or conversely lifted its cover.”

Dish washer!!! They might as well have been a married couple.

- Examples?  
- To stop accusing him that whenever he disagreed with her he was only doing so to annoy her, while, whenever he would complain to her about something, he was pretending to be the perpetual victim.

- Here?  
- I did already, again? See pg. 65.

+ something that qualified her as a dogmatic relativist.

<sup>23</sup> Hellenic statistical authority.

*tip of her tongue* made him see red. It wound him up that she never flossed her teeth or used mouth wash. It really got on his tits that her profile view was not as good as her *en face*. Where he really blew a fuse though was that her physical imperfections, those she was aware of at least, bothered her more than him, as though they were his - something that, by the way, with as many women as he had previously dated, now that he really thought about it, only characterized Grace. Grace, who would have been totally *graceful* too if, apart from her *en face* which inexplicably fell short of her profile, didn't, unlike Alexandra who didn't give a damn, have a major issue with, firstly his rolls, which refused to go away despite having cut down on all the extra bread, and then with his worn-out slippers that he'd once bought on offer at Lidl.

We would however be making the same mistake as the person who tries to explain the peal of thunder with the flash, purely because one follows the other chronologically, when actually both are due to *lightning*, if we were to conclude that his appetite to write was due to Alexandra leaving beforehand; which would mean that she had provoked it, as a reason or as a cause, a pair utterly simplistic in the tight corset we refuse to be entrapped by, long preferring the infinitely more enlightening notion of the catalyst, which does what exactly? It multiplies the speed of a chemical reaction to such a degree that, in its absence, only just about manages to – if it does at all – take place. The primary explanation is to be found elsewhere, and specifically in the fact that every terrorist act requires the radicalization of its up-until-now unsuspecting and beyond-suspicion perpetrator. So the same question that divides the ubiquitous islamologists – if, that is, we ought to be talking about a radicalisation of Islam or conversely about the Islamisation of the already pre-existing *radicality* which, in absence of a more suitable offer, finds in Islam a shoulder to lean on – is also posed, albeit slightly paraphrased, for the act of writing by a novice.

A *radicalisation* then, whose early stages, in Babis' case, in our opinion were: the realisation, on the one hand, that the energy and, therefore, the inner synergies, clarity and sobriety that were required to sit himself down to write were not absorbed by whichever, at the time, Alexandra, but his relationship with her and, to be more precise, the act of maintaining or, conversely, the temptation of ending it, and in the absence of any relationship whatsoever, its *lifting*; the recognition, on the other hand, of the fact that, any other stance than that of a bulimic, undisciplined and disordered reader, who starts reading a book only to abandon another half-way, picking it back up again whenever he feels like it, or dooms another to be forever left on the shelf because it's bulky, or will read one to fall asleep, a different one to pass the time, a third he knows it inside out from reading it over and over again, a fourth he will turn it

Idea: So much that she would find extenuating circumstances even for Hitler.

Wow, ingenious. If anyone takes the bait, I'll eat my hat.

- Are you sure?  
- That's what Wikipedia says, what can I say?

+ Reference to Wikipedia where you fished this out from.

+ of the writing or writerisation of his underlying radicality

+ (of its absence), because, I'm afraid, the reader will just give up.  
- The reader would do well to use his grey matter and not to expect everything served on a silver platter.

into something unrecognizable from reading it at the beach in the summer, while he'll rarely lose sleep over the fact that one of them ended, since there's so many of them out there waiting in [line](#), as much as he wished, he could not or wanted not to have towards the opposite sex; a stance, however, that unfortunately women, though they very well could, on no account desired or were willing to accept.

It was therefore pure folly to think he could change his ways from now on, so to settle down with a partner without tormenting himself would be a real feat. That's why seeing happy – seemingly at least – couples out on the streets, parks, or squares, especially when one of the two was tragically charmless, evoked the same kind of awe and envy as with the execution of a skilful passing shot in tennis, a diabolical dribble in football, a risky descent of a giant slalom in skiing, or an outrageous move on the balance beam: how the hell do they do it?

That's all fine and dandy, one would say, half listening to all of this, but when and why exactly did Babis knuckle down to writing, one would reasonably ask? Though a Siamese sibling of "how on earth did he get the idea to write?" that concerned the before-and-the-up-until, as much as the answers that corresponded to the two questions fed off the same placenta, it didn't identify with it 100%, as it had more to do with the here-and-now in addition to the next. Only one thing is certain, and make of it what you will: namely that the first word he typed for what was destined to be his debut work was – weird? weird; insane? insane – on the day when, throughout the entire duration of his flight from [Rhodes](#) to Athens, he never once turned around to say a word to the bombshell sitting next to him. When instead of hitting on her hard and come what may, he opted for reading a book. When, at the terminal, last but not least, right before boarding, she had gone past him, he didn't feel the irresistible tug to turn his head and [fixate](#) on her distancing [silhouette](#).

Add the book that, while in the beginning you don't like it, afterwards, once you get into it, you start enjoying it.

+ from where, acting on Alexandra's "hic Rhodus, hic salta," he was returning empty-handed.

- Does this seem to you as valid reason for someone to start writing?  
- There's nowt so queer as folk.

- Silhouette, it's not enough. Also write "and especially her bottom".  
- Don't insist because, on my life, we'll end up making an ass of ourselves.

## Chapter 16

Turning his back, however, to the energy-sapping task of mating in order to start writing was a *sine qua non*, given that simply shrugging off the nerve-racking worries of a couple would never be enough. Yet, to first start writing so that he would then really get into the writer's role was not a prerequisite. The two went hand in hand. Provided he had many and important things to say. *Urbi et orbi*. And, indeed, he did. Or rather he thought he did, and that's what mattered. And, by God, he would say it all, even if he had to, if necessary, pry it out of himself. Say it all - who? Babis, who when out with friends, if the group did not consist of less than two people, even one, not just any one of course, and ideally no one, would never speak up. The guy who, every time he'd attempt to tell a joke, would mess it up so badly that, by the end of it, it neither made sense nor was funny. Or was this, perhaps, the whole point? In writing, he would essentially be addressing each and every **future** reader privately. A reader, who, if nothing else, would not ignore him, would not interrupt him, would not out-argue him, would not berate him, would not psych him out, which would allow him to rephrase his statements because they had supposedly been misinterpreted, or throw the blame on the publishing demon, the translator, and, if need be, blame the reader himself or herself. As for the choice of subject, and its approach as well, that of course would be exclusively up to his own discretion.

His goal for the time being? The same as that of a pole-vaulter who only cares if by chance he doesn't make it over the bar, hence why he lowers it. Or, even more than the marathon runner who is disinterested in his personal record as long he makes it to the finish line, as the Jamaican bobsleigh<sup>24</sup> crew in the Winter Olympics, who won't even make it to that.

His wish? For the reader – whom he would certainly warn about the consequences if they happened not to – to read the book inside out, as well as each phrase **individually**. In fact, not just read it, but 1) thoroughly examine it, 2) overcome their inherent tendency to utter “what's this dude talking about?”, 3) explain it, having comprehended not only the phrase, but also the intention of **its author** behind it, 4) possibly conclude whether he or she agrees or disagrees with it and, why not, 5) to indulge him/herself in a “Look at that!”. Was that so much to ask?

His motto? *Dum, not spiro, but scribo spero*.

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<sup>24</sup> High-speed racing sport using sleds.

Prospective reader, rather.

Yeah, all right. As if.

You're expecting a bit much, don't you think?



His style? Albeit still in the making, already a rebel, since it paid him no mind and had its own secret agenda. But in any case, the very opposite of both socialist and capitalist **realism**.

Also known as, add there, "feel good literature".

His method? While, with most writers it loves to hide, his was an open book since he was circulating it stripped bare. Thus, any analysis of it is superfluous.

His topic? Human relations. Nothing more, nothing less. He would treat them like Marx did with **commodities**.

- Oh? As if human relations were a commodity?  
- You're too touchy, aren't you?  
I'm referring to the method of analysis, not the object in question itself.

His subject? Beyond even things unspoken, all things both unthinkable and unthought of.

Its manifesto? That fatally, like all manifestos, he would trample over it?

Every phrase an event, every paragraph a punch, every chapter a provocation, every book a scandal, but every word a tough guy.

Forever ostracised from his work: crimes committed against life, rape of any kind, any intercourse and not only those contrary to nature, cops and robbers either by nature or by position, detectives, secret agents, anti-terrorism hounds and terrorists, men of the underworld, citizens of the world, Ibsen's triangles, vicious cycles, cancers, benign or malignant, paralysing diseases, mental illnesses, suicide, self-abuse, vigilantism, court trials, road accidents, air tragedies, etc.

The proscription of every description.

The transcription of the indescribable and the narration of the innarrable.

Not only due to his unproductiveness in the particular domain but also out of choice, even though a novel without a plot was like a garlic dip without **garlic**, the disengagement from the nightmare of the plot. Except, that is, the one that hid in each of his phrases and words.

+ and an omelette without eggs

The demotion of any suspense, therefore, to a poor relation that would simply appear in homeopathic doses.

An overdose, on the other hand, of metaphors, similes and analogies. He had, in the process, developed, much like a bodybuilder does his biceps, the pertinent parts of his brain responsible for their mass production. As a result, once he happened to think of any, it would be impossible not to hitch them to the text. Some, however, were missing their better half. It was therefore urgent to do a little matchmaking; otherwise they'd be left on the shelf forever. It'd be a shame, wouldn't it? The Potemkin villages, the Swiss Army knife, the blind spot, the canary in the coal mine, the Rosetta stone, the **Luddites**, the **black** box with the recordings of the pilots' conversa-

Add the hibakushas too i.e. the survivors from Nagasaki and Hiroshima nuclear bombings.

Which strangely enough is orange.

tions, a no-show, the business class, the full economy, the economies of scale, the black holes, the Ozone hole, the reheated **mash**, the **backpedalling**, the sparring partner, a punching bag, the good and the bad cop, the bad bank, the Copernican Revolution, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Thermidor<sup>25</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire<sup>26</sup>; these were but some of them.

Contractual requirements (regardless of the fact that he might not uphold all of them – we were in Greece, after all – to the fullest extent)?

Not a word about the crisis, a superhumanly difficult and inhumanely disadvantageous thing to do, but deep down also a convenient one since whatever was to be said had been written, and whatever had been written had been read.

In contrast to novels in which you can predict from the very first line what's going to happen and what follows next, like for example in *The Trial*, or even from the title, like *Crime and Punishment*, in his novel there would be nothing predictable, except of course that it would not **be**.

Yet, it wouldn't lump itself with those which, after reading the synopsis on the back cover, you put back down.

To become readable, legible, a must-read and, therefore, **publishable**.

But also, underlineable. His books would be read with a pencil in hand and would consequently become pitch black from all the underlining.

Low carbon literature and, thus, with an inconsequential environmental footprint on the one hand, maybe as much as the paper and ink for printing his pages, where, because the plot demands it, others would fly to the other end of the world just to supposedly get acquainted with the place.

Low budget, on the other hand, maybe a cappuccino and two or three Text Messages.

Low profile and low-key.

Zero waste; everything would be recycled.

His tool? His notepad. What did he note down? Whatever came to mind. It accompanied him wherever he went. To work? To work.

<sup>25</sup> The events of 9th Thermidor (27 July 1794): a coop against Robespierre and the end of the period of Terrorism (according to the French Revolutionary calendar.)

<sup>26</sup> The Eighteenth Brumaire coop (9 November 1799) through which Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte abolishes the Republic and ascends to the rank of Emperor.

+ (which contrary to its reputation isn't so bad)

+ the trackstand

Both untrue and conceited.

That it wouldn't be what? Predictable. Say it.

That, as well as the next one, put them both in the goals.

To the toilet? To the [toilet](#). On the bus? On the bus. On a holiday? On a holiday. As his inspiration had proven itself directly relative to the distance that separated them, they had become permanently joined at the hip. Incidentally, he always carried it in his hip pocket. One note - like a restaurant where no one steps inside if there is just a man and a dog - led to another. After that, of course, it'd be a damn mess picking and choosing. Most of them were dropped off the radar. Some got busted by his vice squad. Others got stuck by the Kokkinia Blockade<sup>27</sup>. Whichever ones survived, he'd push them forward by force to his text, no matter how crowded it was, the same way passengers are stuffed into the wagons by the personnel on the Tokyo subway. Other notes, if he were to read them somewhere else, were "burned" then and there like a secret agent whose name was leaked to the papers. Then again, when leafing through [general interest](#) magazines, every time he would chance upon his own inventions, of which he had been proud as punch, he would, like Darwin upon learning that the theory of natural selection had concurrently been discovered by some Wallace, get the shock of his life. To prevent that from happening again, he avoided any unnecessary reading, just as a sexually hyperactive person would postpone an HIV test so as to enjoy peace of mind.

His material? Anything immaterial. He gathered – as movie studios do – anything that looked interesting. Just in case. The irony was that instead of the script defining which, out of all of that, would be used, it was actually they that determined the script in the end. And just like it had never crossed well-known Lucy's mind that, 3.2 million years after her death, her scattered bones would end up in the National Museum of Addis Ababa, how could anyone ever fathom that his or her scattered phrases, ideas, banter, observations, nonsense or absurdities would be transported in their entirety to the novels of some Babis guy? He would shrug off any accusations of plagiarism. On the contrary. If there was something to be expected of a writer, it was to show in his work what he had ultimately retained in an entire lifetime.

His guideline? The opinions of critics, irrespective of the fact that, since not a single line of his had been printed, they had not as yet even been formulated. No problem. He could imagine them, guess them, practice them himself instead. As strictly and mercilessly as he [could](#).

His mentors? First of all, the journalists. What did he draw from their articles? Mostly habits. Which he would avoid. Like the pla-

- I don't know if it's in our best interest in the present circumstances to be paraphrasing Putin.  
- Putin said the shitter. And after all, if need be, I'll draw my inspiration from the devil himself.

Which he never leafed through – tell the truth – unless he were in a medical practice waiting room.

You wish.

<sup>27</sup> When in August 1944 the Germans rounded up the entire male population of this popular neighbourhood of Piraeus in the square in order to identify and then execute over 200 resistance militants.

gue. The viewpoint, for instance, that just as horse and carriage go together, in every situation there is most certainly a fitting expression, in every concept an argument, in every question an answer, for every noun an adjective, for every verb an adverb. Therefore, the sense of relief not only would be palpable but also accompanied by a sigh as the ends are by purposes, the end ignominious, the analysis final, the heads that prevailed cool, the victims - of their success, the optimistic cautiously, the point either tipping or that of inflection (unless it was of no return), the devil in details etc *etc.*

Avoiding contamination was, however, as humanly impossible as it is for the organic farmer to stop the propagation of pollutants through wind. The only remaining concern of both anymore was to keep them below the minimum lawfully accepted threshold.

And what about the writers? Yes, but as a matter of priority and as long as it was humanly possible, he would read those who both did not shoot him down and, in their own way certainly, encouraged him. And those who, unlike others, nurtured him by not having the bad habit of brushing their mistakes under the rug. These writers ranged from those with a charisma of a damp rug to the below average. Even ex Nobelists. They had been granted their award close to their old age. By the time they received it, they had given all there was to give. Subsequently, purely out of momentum, maybe out of pride as well, they continued, casually, in between the dessert and the cheese, banquets, interviews and ceremonies, to write. Inevitably, they gave themselves up to convenience, turning the auto-pilot on. Who would dare scold them? The publisher? Don't be silly.

Whichever ones, conversely, he didn't demolish, he consumed in moderation. He would never be in the same league as them, he would realise in anger whenever he read them, and consequently, for several days, would run out of inspiration.

Generally, he read (and listened to) whatever came his way: flyers, road maps, cookbooks, notices to mariners, storm notices, obituaries, comic books, the Prime minister's address to the nation, the Penal Code, bills of indictment. As for the scriptures, he gave them hell. Conversely, like a swimmer who in the lead up to an upcoming competition will avoid flippers, he steered well away from essays, especially if they had something to do with his book's subject. Resisting the temptation to copy their ideas was pure hardship. It would have been just as bad as reading Freud before starting psychoanalysis.

Yet, whomever and whatever he'd read, their influence, whichever that may be, either exercised through aping and parroting or through taking to its heels and sending it packing, would be prominently im-

And what about logical errors, say, when people write 'needless to say' and then they say it, 'not to name' and then name it, or 'if you will' but then say it anyway, even if I don't.

- Offensive.  
- One is offensive, the other's conceited, the third's crude, the fourth's borderline, the fifth's too much, what's left in the end? Go on, tell me.

printed in his work, which could then be divided into separate periods, long or short. We can then speculate that, for example, he had spent the summer of 20... in the company of *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* by Marquis de Sade, *Druuna: Morbus Gravis* by Serpier, *Click* by Milo Manara, *Ta Kamakia* (The serial daters) by Vassilis Vassilikos and *Notes of a Dirty Old Man, Volumes I and II* by Bukowski.

## Chapter 17

In the meantime, the characters kept piling up on his computer's hard drive. He had successfully reached 150,000. That alone he considered to be the first victory for a novel that was not swarming with **characters** (essentially everything revolved around only one person).

As a second victory, that by not giving up, despite the first few adversities, he was showing, if nothing else, a lot of character.

The third was when, re-reading his text, it seemed to be, to put it mildly, characterless, a 'dud'. Less of a dud than he claimed it was, first to himself and then to his few friends (to whom, in a moment of weakness, it had slipped out that he was writing, and who would one day inevitably ask for a writing sample), but even so a dud.

A fourth, therefore, was that, if there was something that he was proud of, it was that he was not proud of it at all.

Just as well, because if by chance it had seemed even slightly good to him then, like parents who permanently sing their offspring's praises, he would be oblivious to his text's evils and, taking the appropriate pedagogical measures, unable to deal with them promptly.

There was nevertheless not even a one in a million chance of him giving up, and it decreased further as things progressed and the characters grew, until they ended up constituting a critical mass, such that giving it up became, very simply, non-negotiable. That had less to do with the fact that he felt sorry for them, since, if along the way they proved to be completely useless, with a heavy heart, he would drop them like a bad habit, which was eventually to **happen**. Neither was it just the fact that in general he rarely gave up on anything. Or that he'd be embarrassed about not knowing what to tell friends who, every now and again, asked how it was going. It did, however, definitely have something to do with the following two reasons, two reasons which it didn't take him long to realise, the one with relief and the other with surprise. What were they? Firstly, because he had started from absolute zero, whether he wanted to or not he *would* improve, and the more he improved the less "improvement operations" the text demanded. Secondly, even if his writing was not yet as **imaginative** as he would have wanted, by and large, it got him **high** above his imagination. So much, in fact, that he would have a very difficult time finding a comparable replacement from then on. Now, what in the world he found in it exactly, when it increasingly seemed more like slavery, albeit voluntary, and less than a hobby, was a complete mystery even to him. The proof of that lay in the fact that even if cornered, the most anyone would get out of him was the confession that he was finally

That's it, you've contracted the wordplay bug which unfortunately is as curable as herpes zoster.

- You were saying something about "zero waste"?  
- Well, I take it back.

The writer is imaginative, not the writing.

Though make-or-break, I'm keeping it (this phrase) only because it's partly true.



doing something that, if we may allow him the expression, “did it” for him.

All right, I understand that you’re lounging at the beach but not to the point to blow everything off. Cheap inventions like “did it for him” won’t wash, mind you.

## Chapter 18

The first thing he did as soon as he turned on his laptop was correction, alias proofreading. Either way, he considered it far more feasible than writing, to such degree that, had it been up to him, he would extend it indefinitely. He didn't have the **guts** to get into a bout with the blank white screen that early in the morning. He was still in the phase where, like the ink that a pen contains had coagulated during the night, he needed a bit of a relevant jolt to get going. A task carried out with abundant diligence, to the point that at times it resulted in excessive zeal, by the correction itself.

It usually took place before dawn. Like the executions in correctional facilities. Those to be sentenced to death or banishment for the most part were: phrases, words, prepositions, pronouns, metaphors, analogies, similes, ideas, rubbish, wisecracks. As he kept hovering over them, they more or less had suspected it, but remained completely unaware, the ones of the exact time and date of their execution and, the others, their final destination. Consequently, the bush telegraph went crazy. None of them, apart from those, of course, who for some reason had secured the boss's favour and were therefore laid-back, kept a cool head. Besides, presumption of innocence, reversal of the burden of proof, fair trial, procedural safeguards, legal aid, *ne bis in idem*, *cui bono*, *in dubio pro reo*, *lex fori*, these were all concepts as entirely **unknown** to the prosecution as to the defence. The basic rule of the whole process relied on a single man's rule, in spite of the fact that he was being led by God knows what sort of imponderables. A man who, in order to bring it to an end had to, finding it in his heart - put yourself in his shoes - turn his heart to stone to be able to hack away at entire sections, blood of his blood, to write which he has shed **blood**. Indeed, there were no words to describe how much it **pained** him to remove their right to exist just on a whim. How could he not feel if not hangman's agony, at the very least, that of the coach of the national basketball team, who a week before the world cup announces to eight players of the starting twenty that they don't exactly fit his plans. That the other remaining twelve were far more up to snuff, whereas they were the fly in the ointment amongst them all, he would certainly never give it to them straight, but it was as plain as the nose on their face. Leaving his office with their heads lowered, in a downpour of camera flashes and questions from journalists, they break his heart. Then, all alone, plagued by guilt, he sinks deep in his own thoughts and doubts: has he thrown out the baby with the bath water? There may very well come a time when he would come to regret his decisions horribly, but it would be too late, his choice players would not prove him right, the reporters would literally

You've said guts elsewhere, put down balls.

- As well as the readers, unless they've finished Law school.  
- That's what Google is for.

A phrase suitable for creative writing seminars on how one should not write.

Stop making it a melodrama, for God's sake.

maul him, demanding his head on a silver platter, the fans would embellish him with swear words never heard of before.

More to the point, now, some phrases he retracted like a man in love the words he uttered, after realising how deeply they had hurt his girlfriend. Others, conversely, were, after a sham trial, sentenced to death, with the unprecedented excuse in the annals of the judiciary that he had simply grown tired of them and the time had now come to replace them, like his clothing collection, with new ones, because they were worn way too many times and became completely out of fashion. There would also be some that, no matter how much he liked them, would be **sacrificed** on the altar of the unable-to-take-a-joke politically correct. Then there would be a few that, maybe because they were an integral part of the bearing **structure**, or in joint tenancy to the adjacent ones, or because his achieving some kind of exchange with favourable conditions seemed unlikely, or because divorcing them was prohibitively expensive, he could not get rid of no matter how hard he tried even though he couldn't even stomach the sight of them anymore. In other words, they were, with a little dressing up, agreed, there to stay. The expression "no one is irreplaceable" did not apply to them, much like "there is nothing more permanent than the temporary" did not apply to the provisionally new ones. Their first two or three days were crucial. If they proved with no actions but words that they could be harmonically incorporated to the collective, well, then happy days. Otherwise, they might as well start packing up or writing their will, accordingly. If, on the other hand, they lay low and played dumb until the storm was over, they might've actually come out clean.

The end result of the editing process was that while his text, because of all the extra sauce in it, had become a bulky and slow-moving station wagon, along the way it shrank down into a nervous and flexible compact **SUV**<sup>28</sup>. The same went with each individual phrase. Whereas before they veered, solely in regards to their length, to be clear, towards Proust after the weight loss treatment, they sounded either like machine gun fire, or as military communiqués. No wonder the relationship and attitude of the writer towards his writing was to be analysed in military terms. A relationship and attitude, that is, of an insensitive general towards a platoon of new recruits, which deeming as acceptable losses, he throws into a tactical battle, with the ultimate goal for whomever survives – by definition the most combat-ready ones – to fight the upcoming mother of all battles. Now, from a different viewpoint, the political one – given that as Clausewitz said, war is nothing but politics by

Something that you refuse to do and which you'll end up paying dearly for.

+ As they say about banks, it was too big to fail or rather to go to jail.

A Midsummer Night's Dream.

<sup>28</sup> SUV: sport utility vehicle.

different means –, Babis was applying to his own self nothing but the same classic trick of every government which, before putting forward a controversial bill, assesses the public opinion's mood with leaked information and off-the-record statements in the press by public officials, as well as with commissioned polls.

What are we getting at? That before the slightest phrase established itself in his conscience, it first had to go through hell and high water and then traverse dire straits. No matter where it came from. But where did it really come from? Here's what, at times, especially on days of inspiration, rather intrigued Babis' mind. Not like the one of a child, over where babies or Santa Claus came from, but that of a **grownup** who, after waking from a strange dream, mutters to his own self: "**Damn!** Did I dream up all of that?"

+ or both wondering where do jokes come from.

"Look at that!" more like.

## Chapter 19

On that August morning and while the still, but also already, warm water of the beach shower doused him – still, because he was without a doubt the first to be having one, and already, despite the sun having risen only a short while earlier – if there was something that intrigued his mind straight after seeing her for the first time, it was whether she was actually heading towards him and if so, why?

Initially he wasn't even sure about that either given that the more or less one hundred metre distance that separated them made, according to Euclidean geometry, virtually imperceptible any declination from the straight line that connected them. From fifty metres onwards though, when he – and while the water had now cooled – finally confirmed it, asserting with any **algebraic** precision that there was no other reason for her to set up out of the blue (when until recently she had been lounging in the sun care-free) other than her burdensome need for a shower, even with the best will in the world and even if there weren't any other showers nearby, was impossible. And it was impossible for one and only reason: at this time of the day, with the exception of the two of them, there was not a living soul on the beach. Just like in the sea that spread out in front of them, which he certified by quickly scanning it. Two steps away from the surf, he could make out her towel lying there.

What else could be going on was something he wouldn't find out until the very last moment **or** even later, most probably, never, though.

He had already spotted her on his way down for his morning swim. A woman all alone on the beach, his eyes were programmed to detect like a hawk its prey or a metal detector precious metals. Whoever she may be. In fact, the farther away she was, though not to the point where he would be wondering what part of speech she even was, the more desirable and mysterious he imagined her to be. More so, this specific one, who was all alone in a double sense. Both unaccompanied and solitary on a deserted beach. Even so, it remained opened-ended if apart from being, albeit in a double sense, alone, she had also – given that the two things were completely different – consciously isolated. Because, she might have distanced herself enough to simply hint at it, but not enough as to make it completely obvious.

Definitely in Homo but most probably in all Primates, when a specimen A observes from afar a congener B approaching, A has, apart from the information gradually acquired in the process, some already - not only about B but also that possessed by B about him or her, plus that which B supposes that A does or doesn't possess

- The correct term is Mathematical.  
- Tomayto, tomahto.

+ in case that i.e. they got together and she confided it to him.

about him or her. What then did Babis, as well as this unknown woman, beyond everything they both ignored, know about each other but also what did the one know about the other that they were aware of?

Well, first of all, that they had noticed each other. In addition, that they both belonged to the *Homo sapiens* species. And that they were of the male and female gender respectively. That they were not carrying a weapon and that, at least at first glance, they did not have any hostile intentions. That they both were, at that moment at any rate but most likely for some time, all alone. That for them to go for a swim this early in the morning at a pebbled beach, however much it hurt their back and the soles of their feet, they must have sought out solitude and could not stand all the noise and **hubbub**. That, consequently, as much as they both would die for a sandy beach, the one close by, teeming with umbrellas, killed them. That, apparently, one was a local while the other obviously a foreigner. What was it that made him a local in her eyes? His familiarity for one thing, versus her, for the time being, familiarisation with the place and space around them. As well as his stare. That it was intrusive, let alone threatening to her physical integrity and safety as it might be in some other country, wouldn't be how she might describe it. Maybe borderline embarrassing and full of curiosity, not necessarily pathological. It was the standard look men had in this country. Even if she neither was nor pretended to be, not even close, a "goddess of beauty". But that it lifted her up was a fact. The plane had barely **landed** on the island and already she could feel it either trailing up from her buttocks to her breasts and from there to her face, or, on the odd occasion, following the opposite route instead. From that moment on, whether she was dressed up, in her swimming costume, topless or completely in the nude, it pursued her. She had gotten used to it. In her country it was almost non-existent. There, the men did not fixate on **passers-by**.

Where she was actually from, it occurred to Babis through proof by contradiction. What the heck, he could identify his female compatriots from miles away, thanks to the characteristic manner with which they carried themselves around the **beach**, a manner which, though a narrative in itself, he would have big trouble putting into words, however much he knew it by heart – much like they his own.

That she wasn't a typical western-European either though, he could somehow tell. At least – any simplistic generalisations being far from Babis to make – compared to those that had found nothing better (and yes, that spoke volumes about who they really were) than to choose the **busiest island** in Greece as their holiday destination, an island which the more sophisticated ones, having visited

- Hubbub at 630 in the morning even in a sandy beach? You must be kidding.  
- Not at all. Go see. At that time it's already full of retirees.

That phrase is grist to the mill to a prone to easily criticism critique which will of course accuse you of what? A proneness to easiness.

- Are you sure?  
- Trust me.

- This sounds as if you're saying it with a negative tinge.  
- Quit being more papal than the pope all the time! How d'you figure that?

- How is it then that there's absolutely no one at the beach?  
- Who goes to a pebble beach at the break of dawn?



at sixteen when it was still untouched, would never ever return to again, not even if you paid them to.

An island that, essentially, as long as it turned out to be value for money and recharged their batteries before returning home back to the salt mines, it didn't matter to them one-bit which island it was, if it was even an island, and which country it belonged to. And this particular one was offering itself up like a prostitute. The charter flights that connected it to the rest of Europe in the summer, the relatively cheap sunbeds and the drinks, even if, who knows why, they always gave you a massive headache the next day, its genuine five star hotels, the immense heated swimming pools practically two steps away from the sea, the endless sunshine, not a single raincloud in sight, the fact that it didn't seem to be a target for a terrorist attack thus far, and there were no kids begging for money, while theirs could look forward to a series of entertainment activities, all numbered among its various assets. On top of that, there was the unprecedented and inconceivable (in their countries - role models of democracy) freedom that ruled here, in its cradle. The freedom to, for instance, park or have a smoke wherever you fucking pleased. And which they enjoyed unscrupulously.

Yet what this mysterious woman lacked, by contrast, was coming out of their ears. But also the opposite.

So, on their part - the British phlegm, the Prussian-like military discipline and the precision of a [Swiss watch](#) with which, since for better or for worse they had (forking out for it) bothered to come down to the island anyway, they executed and would continue to execute day in and day out exactly the same schedule come hell or high water.

On her part - the gift of discovering and being transported by what they – almost considering it a hosting country's contractual obligation – expeditiously overlooked as insignificant and negligible. Chiefly, the blue of the sea, bluer than the blue those GNT0 posters all over her city had managed to capture; she couldn't stop looking at it. Now she knew why folks in her parts (which Babis, owing to the strikingly yet familiarly old-fashioned aura that both her appearance and her swimming costume exuded, geographically located, the closer he observed her, all the more east of the Stettin-Trieste line)<sup>29</sup> called the other one Black.

Her literally glowing out of joy was an irrefutable proof of the that. A joy all the more spontaneous that she knew it to be fragile, ephemeral. It was impossible, let's say, for it not to have occurred to her

I like how you've supposedly unleashed a merciless hunt against stereotypes.

You forgot the French blasé style.

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<sup>29</sup> Along its length, according to Churchill, stretched out the so-called Iron Curtain.

recently, even once, that, after all, she **owed** of that moment to a single vote. A couple of deaths, too. Or, rather, three.

Because, hadn't God enlightened Gromyko to cast his in support of Gorbachev sometime in '85, in that crucial meeting of the PB of the CC for the election of the SG of CPSU<sup>30</sup> – a meeting which, had Andropov first, then Chernenko and before those two **Brezhnev**, not kicked the bucket, would never have happened – Romanov, SG of Leningrad CPSU obkom<sup>31</sup>, a well-known party henchman, would have prevailed, in which case you could kiss it all goodbye. As a result, neither the Perestroika nor the Glasnost would have been effectuated, nor would of course the USSR have collapsed, nor would the borders have opened, nor would the meaning of the term **Soviet** tourist have stopped being a joke, and during her entire life she would have had to spend her leave, even though, truth be told, for free, at the notorious spa towns of the Black Sea.

And the country which more than any other, ever since her school days when they were learning about its history and its myths, she had such a yearning to sometime visit, only sparsely through the television, thanks to the popular show “**клуб кинопутешествий**”<sup>32</sup>, would she ever see it. Therefore, no matter how much she might have had it in for the man because of whom, regardless of any good intentions he may have had, such a system that ensured the people a job, a roof over their heads, education, healthcare, blew up in smithereens, with the result of millions of her fellow citizens becoming housemaids and call girls abroad, at least one time since she had arrived there she must surely have given a thought in gratitude. A similar thought instead that a British woman lounging on her beach bed would hardly ever spare for the pioneer of the victory against the Germans in World War II, Churchill.

Who, by the way, had, in the spur of the moment, stated something about the USSR that in the end suited the ex-**Soviet women** perfectly: “It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”

And how could they not be, since not only had they woken up one morning to find themselves citizens of a country different to the one they were in before they'd gone to bed the night before, but they had also been born and raised into regime A – which, by maintaining numerous elements of regime B it had violently overthrown, in reality was not A anymore but X, never mind that in theory it was

- Didn't we say that the idea about the vote and the ex-Soviet woman would go in your next novel?  
- Best to strike while the iron is hot. Who knows what tomorrow holds.

- Explain what the initials mean for all those who were never a part of KNE (Youth of young communists).  
- Every Tom, Dick, and Harry's been a part of KNE at one point or another.

+ (who, were it not for Khrushchev's reckless caper to his dacha in the Crimean in the summer of '65, would never have been able to “defenestrate” him with a coup and pinch his place, which the other would never seize if Stalin, who only succeeded Lenin because Fanny Kaplan planted two or three bullets in his body, thus accelerating his death, hadn't himself suddenly met his Maker.)

- The joke was about an Albanian tourist.  
- Potato, po-tha-to

- How the hell do you explain now how Tamara let you in on that one?

- Ex-Soviet women and topless doesn't add up, not one bit.  
- That's what you think. They evolved in the meantime.

<sup>30</sup> PB-political bureau, CC-central committee, SG-secretary general, CPSU-communist party of Soviet Union

<sup>31</sup> Party organization.

<sup>32</sup> “Travellers' Club”, (original form in Russian).

presented to them as Z – witnessing the impending collapse of which they deluded themselves that they would live in C, but eventually grew up in D, full of symbols from A, like its national, albeit in different words, anthem, the hammer and sickle on the aeroplanes of the national airline, or Lenin’s mausoleum in a square that has always been called **Red**.

Speaking of regimes – and what regimes they were!!! – namely the socialist one, in contrast to their grandmothers, they might not have experienced its harshest Stalinist version, where, if someone knocked on your door at five o’clock in the morning, you wouldn’t be wondering if it was the milkman<sup>33</sup>, because there was no milkman to be expected, but the soft one, as soft however as the sandpaper **toilet** paper that it frugally supplied its citizens, though clearly milder than the barbaric and predatory version of the capitalist one in the phase of capital accumulation. Hence having already demystified the second and idealised the first, they missed it all the more passionately the more apathetically they had watched its collapse and the less likely its restoration seemed. At the thought that they hadn’t even thrown the **bathwater** out with the baby but rather just the baby was enough to make them bang their heads against a brick wall.

In the meantime, she had drawn quite close, at any case close enough so that the years she had lived through in conditions of real socialism, as well as the centuries of a chequered history that her entire nation had traversed, were screaming out at him. The scars they had left on her body were indelible, there was no other explanation. Babis could but imagine her life, from what little he knew about the former USSR and betting on the fact that she must not have been that much different from Tamara, an ex, who had clued him in on all of it.

She must have joined the Young Pioneers from the age of five, Komsomol at fourteen with the prospect, if not overtaken by events, to be accepted in the Bolsheviks party as well. There is no way she did not attend the grandiose demonstrations and parades on the anniversary of the October Revolution and May Day from when she was still a baby, and the Subbotniks<sup>34</sup> from at least her teens. As for the struggle to make ends meet, which in any case as a term, was de facto and de jure absent from her vernacular, she can’t have thrown herself in before ‘91, but she had probably ascended all the grades of people’s education without fail, even though the little cross that

- Didn’t Lioudmila tell you that Krasnaya in ancient Slavic meant beautiful, not red?  
- Stop throwing a wrench into my works.

Do you really want Rizospastis, the newspaper of CPG, to have it in for you for sewer-level anticommunism?

The one with the baby without the bathwater, even though it’s of your own inspiration, take it out because it’ll definitely be of other’s as well.

<sup>33</sup> Hint at the definition of democracy by Churchill: Democracy means that if the doorbell rings in the early hours, it is likely to be the milkman.

<sup>34</sup> Voluntary yet unpaid work on some Saturdays of the year.

hung around her neck testified that the undertones of Marxist theory she had consumed throughout them must have gone to waste. As a pupil, she must have undoubtedly spent her summers with thousands of children from all the sister countries of the socialist camp, at the school campsites in the Crimea, something that made the notions of international friendship and proletarian internationalism seem like more than just empty words to her ears. As a **college student**, she must have, whether she wanted to or not, voluntarily participated, as part of the socialist emulation and aiming to exceed the five-year plan the Party had set out, in the vanguard working brigade for the construction of the mainline Baikal-Amur railway or harvesting the crops in the kolkhoz. At dusk, especially, when after work, exhausted but proud for their contribution in the construction of communism, they must have gathered, boys and girls alike, with guitars and accordions around the campfire, something that if she didn't reminisce over it all with tears in her eyes, she would have been completely **insensitive**. The same went – since there was no way she had not lived at a student hostel – with revelling in the endless parties and smoky drunkenness, with Pink Floyd and Deep Purple blaring, whose songs she would never listen to with the same intensity and emotion ever again, nor would she ever be kissed with the same delight under the sounds of Santana's guitar as back then, Babis thought that exact moment when they **looked** at each other.

- Either you're going to make her younger because it doesn't add up, or you're going to have play dumb, hoping that the eagle-eyed reader won't notice.  
- Poetic licence, ever heard of it?

- Putin's more or less said the same thing.  
- Well, if he says that Moscow is the capital of Russia should we not believe it because he says it?

- That's all fine and dandy, but the reader will wonder, what does that have to do with all the rest?  
- The reader needs to do us the favour not to rush ahead.

## Chapter 20

The foreigner had just turned the shower faucet off and the spigot in Babis's brain, from where ideas poured out one after the other, had opened up. And although interpreting his desires as reality had recently become his bread and butter, it cannot have **been** all in his mind. Now, as to whether they were also bright, he did not have the slightest idea. In any case, she had barely turned her back to him, and he wanted his notepad urgently by his side. With as many as he hadn't filled it up with up until now, he would literally blacken it with them in a matter of minutes. In its absence, as he was in his swimming shorts, he set out while still in her presence to memorize keywords, parroting them, just in case any of the ideas slipped out of his mind. Now, to what extent they would, if any, be organically included in the novel was a matter of chemistry and as such a different story, (that's why, despite the "eurekas", he avoided for the time being the "whoopees", the "bingos" and the "yesses") just like something much more burning, namely whether the ideas automatically meant or were the signal or the sign that after a **misfire** that seemed to have lasted a bit too long, his mind got started again. And that because, if all three were to apply objectively but not subjectively, it would never get started no matter how much he tried.

In any event, for days now, he'd been fooling around with writing like a sexless man does with the sexual object, who worries less about its lack than the lack **itself**.

To cause it (regardless of the fact that by causing it, he further dulled it) and through it his longing for writing and therefore – as the two went hand in hand – the inspiration of what about, he used the same means as the sexless man, without of course avoiding his mistakes. Thus, in order to awaken their sexual or writing instincts, they would purposely throw themselves into watching porn and *films d'auteur* respectively. Or where the former would fantasize, but in vain, scenes of wild sex with himself at the epicentre, the latter would imagine, but pointlessly, sceneries for his main protagonist. Or, where the one would try to chat up someone completely uninteresting simply as a **warm up**, in view of, amen to that, the interesting one, the other would jot down in his notepad ideas that had nothing to do with the novel, in hopes that one day those that did would spring to mind. Unavoidably, whatever he may have written down lately resembled a dish made out of different kinds of leftovers that would be a sin to throw away. A dish that on top of everything else, want to or not, you had to eat up till the end.

+ even though, according to one of them, there was a good chance it was.

The problem with wordplay is that if you do it in one phrase you have to do it in the next too, otherwise it'll just look like a poor relation.

- Lack of what, the reader will justifiably ask.  
- Well, if the reader is not concentrating, there's no way to get the fact that they were both worrying over the lack of the lack. Of the desire of sex the one, of writing, the other.

So that he didn't lose the hang of it, is probably better.

From a quantitative point of view now, this time last year, go figure, his coming to the village, the abundance of stimuli, the fresh air, the nature, the iodine of the sea, the swimming, the carefreeness of holidaymaking had all unexpectedly doped him up, so much that within a week he had written as much as it had taken him more than a month to do in the city. So, at night, he would forthwith go to bed with a text on his side that he never would have imagined when he had got up that very morning. This year, conversely, his departure from the city, the scarcity of inputs in the village, the swimming, the summer sluggishness, the comings and goings, the iodine of the sea that seemed to almost drug him, had unexpectedly slowed him down, so much that his entire harvest up until that morning did not exceed even one fourth of all that in the city he would churn out in the space of a quarter of an hour. Therefore, the following text – not even half a page long – would be on his bedside when he woke up in the morning and went to bed at night:

“In his upgrade, generally, from the status of a budding writer to that of a not-yet newly-appeared one, the understanding that writing, in the end, was a race with obstacles butting in where they didn’t belong, the writer not **having** the luxury of the runner who knows beforehand where to expect them and accordingly adjusts his pace, was undoubtedly a milestone. A threshold – the diagnosis that the desperation of not having anything to write about, which frequently got hold of him in front of a blank screen, was not that much different from the fear of a lover, before intercourse, of not getting a hard-on. A landmark – when he stopped taking it so seriously, like in a class where no one takes the bait anymore of the whining student before the test that, supposedly, doesn’t know shit, and is going, as a result, to hand in a blank page but then ends up writing something down and never fails the course.

The unquestionable turning point though was his certainty that he would write the novel, be it laughable or ridiculous, come hell or high water, a certainty that was anything but given since, before acquiring it, the sureness that there was no way it would ever happen never left him for a single moment. A breakthrough – when he stopped shaking, not because he didn’t care anymore, but because it was becoming all the less likely that maybe, **somewhere**, he would stumble across some of his more brilliant ideas which, considering them to be exclusively his, he would **stuff** into the novel.

A step forward, especially to the point where he was drifting in limbo, was again when he ascertained that if the making up of a first sentence which he would then craft like needlework until he completed the chapter and after that the novel, was everything - starting in its absence with a first word to which the rest would come to stick to like a fly to honey (they’d be of the clingy type)

+ but accepting the fact

+ the highest degree of risk being adverts and waiting rooms of every kind, especially of medical practises of all types of specialisation

Stuff, again? Are there no other verbs? Introduced, integrated, inserted, put, incorporated, channelled into?



was *half* of everything. A leap forward – the awareness of how pointless it was to lament over the fact that he had started writing a little too late to have enough time to mature as a writer since the conditions had not been ripe yet for him to have started earlier. Crossing the Rubicon – the thought that to think as obsessively about the novel as an insomniac about sleeping, in addition to not thinking about it at all was, to say the least, completely thoughtless, while to sit willy-nilly in front of the text from early morning, in the same way the other would be counting sheep, at night, the former because it was suggested by successful writers, the latter, because of conventional wisdom, was reckless. A point of reference, finally, – the conviction that it did not matter if his texts could not even hold a candle to those from others, distinguished or not, but rather that, if he wrote exactly like them, he would not enjoy it at all. And a point of no return – the faith that the relationship between his efficiency in writing and that of his stocks, his performance in sports, in love, in playing cards, his medical exam results, his whereabouts, his nutrition, his age, the weather report, was anything but *dialectic*.”

Just as well, you should say, because had he not been struck by the idea of having Apostolis, his main character – do you remember? – throw himself out of the blue into writing, he would not even have managed to write this much. By having worked his tail off to write it, however, more than for anything else of the same magnitude, there was not a single chance he would sacrifice it. In his obstinacy to stuff it all in somewhere in the novel, he had for now, due to overbooking, kept it on the waiting list. He would rather stick his neck out in the process than not find some place for it, even in business despite it being full economy. Provided of course that a *no-show* would occur at the last minute.

Indeed, when on the next morning, Babis popped up at the beach, as punctual as an English man in his appointments, the foreigner was nowhere to be seen. Neither was her towel. Throwing in the towel being neither in his nature nor his culture, he went, just in case, round the neighbouring village in the event that he might coincidentally bump into her. It was all for nought though. There’s always a silver lining to everything, he philosophised. After all, he had a whole novel to finish off. More than ever, it was not the right moment to skip the wedding and go holly picking. Yet, the realisation that he would never come across a catch like her again, not only during this year’s holiday but also till the end of days, plus the way she slipped through his fingers, drove him crazy. Because even if it was surely a fact that, after exchanging looks they had greeted each other, it was on no account an event since, if nothing else, in recognition of the unquestionable fact that they happened to be the only representatives of the species *Homo Sapiens* on that beach, it would

And you call that progress? Because in the end, in case I get bogged down, I’d rather get doped up, say, on Ginseng, so whether it works or not I get unstuck.

- A bit too much English lingo going on.  
- Well, what do you want me to do? These are terms rightfully naturalised in Greek by now.

have been completely rude of them not to have done so. After all, a dry *hello* was all they had exchanged, as affably as required by the circumstances, that's true, since they had not exactly crossed paths in the Sahara Desert or planet Mars, a *hello* that she had first directed at him and therefore counted as **double**, so it was his turn now to take again the floor, otherwise there would probably descend (as it did) a graveyard silence. If he never did, the total blackout, a product of nervousness, a result of cowardice, a consequence of **pusillanimity**, which the unknown woman exacerbated by playing dumb, was merely the **reason**. Its cause – an equation with numerous unknowns and one constant – the writing, whose resolution needed an iron discipline.

Christening, nonetheless, *Deus ex machina* someone who in appearance was a “goddess” only inasmuch as the role demanded, and *event* a fact where apparently absolutely nothing had happened, was, on any occasion, only human.

- You mean to say that the men's hello only counts as one?  
- You must be a mind reader.

Stop burdening the novel with a bunch of trinkets as if it were a Christmas tree.

+ after-effect of faintheartedness

It's as if you're telling the reader to eat it all up just because it really happened to you.  
- Why, is it any better when the reader eats up whatever surreal crap others serve up and thanks them on top of it?

## Chapter 21

*Look at that*, first and foremost, would be, although still up for discussion, [its](#) title.

Simos Panourgias, secondly (even though he was still weighing his options), would be his pseudonym since yes, if it was meant to be published, he would publish it under a pseudonym, and there was no room for negotiation. Why under a pseudonym? For no other reason of course, and here we are dead positive, than to maintain his anonymity. And why was it so imperative to maintain it? Well, in order, we guess, to protect himself against the admittedly annoying tendency of the reader to interpret everything the writer narrates either as his experiences – regardless of what applies to him in reality – which is only okay to a degree, or as his viewpoint, which hardly makes any sense. Or, worse even, both - but never as his condemnation of them. Why though, or rather, to what effect Simos Panourgias? Perhaps for the purpose of sounding ever so slightly like a decoy, since nature had not endowed him, like some (not [naming](#) any names), with a catchy name? Unlikely, otherwise wouldn't he have gambled on something not so lacking in colour? What's left then? His anxiousness (we're speculating, [right?](#)) for it to not jump out at everyone that it was a pseudonym. Now, about whether there were some hidden allegories or symbols behind it, we have our reservations.

«CV: see personal profile, Ch. 6, page 20

Summary: see Introduction and Ch. 2

Central idea: last phrase of the epilogue

FAQ: see Ch. 22»

That's what, thirdly, the note which he would include with the manuscript in the envelope would say, because yes, he would send it as a printed copy and not as a pdf, even if it was never to be returned to him. What was the difference from a reading perspective? The same as watching a match from the stands and not from the TV.

To Google, Wikipedia, Microsoft, [slang.gr](#), [www.greek-language.gr](#), Babiniotis dictionary, Vostantzoglou anti-dictionary, the coffee shop at Exarcheia, the bookstore-café on Stadiou av., dating websites of every [kind](#), Lola, Lila, Lela, Lily (and all the rest), Matina and finally Mitsos, he would address, fourthly, his sincerest gratitude.

“Even though I bet you're not even going to bother to look at it, here's *Look at that!*”, would be, fifthly, his dedication to Mitsos.

What, he's finished it already?  
- Well, didn't encountering (or rather not meeting) the Russian supposedly make him get out of his rut?

And what if you named - regardless of their worth, right? just to prevent misunderstandings - Noam Chomsky, Francis Ford Coppola, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Aki Kaurismäki.

But since you pretend to be an omniscient, omnipresent and all-pervading viewer, how is it you don't know why he chose Panourgias?

You forgot Aegean airlines and Olympic airways to whom you owe the 23rd chapter.

“Even though I’d bet my life that you’ve already devoured it with your eyes, here’s *Look at that!*”, sixthly, to Matina.

As for the black list with every single one of the publishing houses which, deeming his book as **inappropriate**, would never in a million years publish it, it had already, seventhly, been compiled.

Because, eighthly, the die had been cast. He would send it to all the rest and there was no discussing it, even though, in contrast to the above note which was hastily made up only moments earlier, it still hadn’t, despite being in the works for quite some time now, drawn to a close.

‘Drawn to a close’ and ‘novel’ were incompatible concepts for Babis however. For, theoretically, he could actually continue writing it indefinitely. Given, first of all, that it easily took three years to write it and just as many to correct it, during that time, **due to** the continuous apoptosis<sup>35</sup> of his cells and their replacement by new ones, plus the fact that he would lose about two hundred million neurons daily, he had become a completely different person. Fatally, whatever he previously deemed to be high art, he now **looked down on**. As a result, all of his phrases and ideas were permanently provisional, much more so that along the way, due to social changes on the one hand and the inevitable improvement of his writing skills on the other, his fresh ones would get stale; it was therefore imperative that, similarly to yogurts in the supermarket that have expired, they were withdrawn forthwith, the sometimes subversive ones were decapitated for getting gentrified, whereas the erstwhile decent and the up-until-recently politically correct ones that got out of line, were either permanently expelled for indecent exposure, or temporarily displaced to reformation camps with the intention of reintegrating them into the social **fabric**. And because the time would come sooner or later for their substitutes too, there was not, nor would ever be, a single one of them, on stable ground. Maybe that’s why, with the threat of a lifetime revocation permanently looming over their heads, they stood at the ready and behaved.

He would send it, even if he wasn’t in a position to assert not only whether he thought it decent enough, but also if he even **liked** it. And he was not in such a position, less by nature than by **position**. For (according to his theory, and yes, he had theorized the entire thing) it was a novel, flesh of his flesh, and not, I don’t know, the seafood pasta that he made with his hands – hence the “bless your hands” people say on such occasions – while tasting it, eyes and nose having a hand in it, under the palate. Therefore, neither with his own eyes did he manage to read it, nor could he measure him-

- Or rather improper?  
- Let’s then put: both inappropriate and improper.

+ if nothing else

+ and, strangely enough, never the opposite.

Idea: As the whole text it tended to, like the Chinese CP, bureaucratise, and as a result, to be, from time to time, in need, of a cultural revolution.

+ because as it is well known the two are completely different.

+ for instance, he liked it more while reading it than thinking about it - only the former allowed him to grasp it in its entirety whereas the latter - just his flaws.

<sup>35</sup> Apoptosis: a process of normal and controlled death of cells.

self by other's **yardsticks**, a difficulty well-known to all when before a social outing they look at themselves in the mirror.

He would send it, in spite of the fact that the **junction** between chapters from the middle onwards – which, by having worked them to the bone, and they having passed him through the ringer, he thought (mistakenly) that they were free of loose ends, odd jobs and IOUs, and the ones from the beginning to the middle, which by carrying them in excess (no matter what he did to them, even wonders) still had some screws loose – was continuously postponed.

He would send it even if there was no way he hadn't overvalued it, after all it was his offspring. Overvalue he also did, however the possibility of it being underestimated by those who first took it, guileless and unsuspecting, in their hands. For, while by having no surprises in store for himself, ambushing him was as impossible as a blitzkrieg<sup>36</sup> to the general who thought of it, or the joke to the teller. Those, with a little bit of dumb luck, he might take for a ride. Even if just once. After all, you only **tell** a joke once, too.

He would send it, even if he did not trust them at all to read him the way he wanted them to. Namely that, let's say, before skipping this phrase or that because it offered them some resistance, they would respect not the fact that it was pivotal, screw that, but that he had worked his ass off to **write** it. That in the likely occasion where the first page left them dispassionate, they would demonstrate some elementary patience just in case they came to feel more passionate afterward. That, even if they reached page 10 and still could not understand what he was driving at, they would show some understanding.

That they would not read it surfing the internet every now and again, or rather that they would not surf the internet, reading him **once in a blue moon**.

That he would not be their casual snack to pass the time.

That, unless they could not do otherwise, they wouldn't read him in order to **fall asleep** or after arguing with their wife, eating till they couldn't breathe anymore or reading Proust, when sitting comfortably on the toilet seat, or lounging on a beach bed.

And even if they did, say, that at least they did it, not selectively but everywhere, so as to even out.

Screw it, he would **send** it.

Find a way to make it sufficiently clear that you're writing it in reverse intentionally and not out of ignorance, otherwise it'll be corrected in proofreading.

Idea: with his lordship as a tunnelling machine

+ and you only do a blitzkrieg once.

Put it the other way around: not that he had worked his ass off to write it, screw that, but at least that it was pivotal.

You're asking for the moon now.

Yeah, rest assured...

You forgot the most important thing: Screw it, he would send it, even if he couldn't bear the thought, so joined at the hip they had become, of either parting with it, or knuckling down for a new novel.

<sup>36</sup> Blitzkrieg: lightning war (original form in German).

## Chapter 22

“So, in the end, Mr Panourgias, is what you are doing ‘literature’ (logotechnia)?”

“I’m afraid not. Because, I am neither uttering something, nor practising some form of art<sup>37</sup>. Now, if apart from writing, I am also “authoring”, it is as lost to me as it is to an actor (ethopoios) if, by acting, she is also creating ethos<sup>38</sup>. In the end, what in our language is considered to be a unique asset, to put, that is, two words together, see logos+texhne, – neither allowing for the other to breathe freely –, where the rest of them get away with a single one, see *literature*, sets us up for a fall. How? By having us professing to something that we never claimed in the first place.”

“Fine, let me put it differently, then. Might *Look at that* be a novel (mythistorima)?”

“Novel, here we go again. Enough, for pity’s sake. Myth and history side by side, that is a schizophrenic demand.”

“An anti-novel then?”

“Not even close, unless by that we mean that I wrote the anti-book of all I have discarded as a reader. A meta-novel though, definitely. The novel part, of course, is quote unquote.”

“A meta-novel? Meaning?”

“The word says it all. It is the novel of a novel.”

“Wow!”

“Wow or Oh shit, only time will tell.”

“But it is already telling. You were **published** right off the bat. Did it surprise you at all?”

“To be honest, I expected as much. I submitted an offer to the **publisher** which, quite simply, they did not have the luxury to refuse, since aside from the text it also included approximately twenty-five short **stories**, two or three novellas, a couple of **interviews**, a truck-load of aphorisms, and an infinite number of haikus all in one. I exercised, in short, such coldblooded blackmail, until, to paraphrase **Voltaire**, they bellowed: “I disagree with everything you write and how you write it, as well as the fact that you are writing it at all, however, I will defend with my life your right to be read.”

<sup>37</sup> Literary meaning of the word literature(λογοτεχνία) in Greek, that is the art(techne) of discourse(logos).

<sup>38</sup> Actor in Greek is ηθοποιός (ethopoios) meaning someone who makes ethos.

Rather: Not only..., but you brought the house down.

Given that your work was, not even with praise, given the thumbs down by about ten publishing houses, what if, for a more realistic effect, you had it - as the famous Amanda Hocking did - published as an eBook on the internet, unexpectedly becoming a hit, and then those same ones who had rejected you begging you on their knees to come back.

Why not add a title in every chapter? I.e. the 22nd will be ‘Interview No 1’.

And the 23rd ‘Interview No 2’.

Are you sure it was not Molière?



“I suspect more relentless chatting-up rather than cold-hearted extortion.”

“Chatting up of who? The publisher?”

“Chatting up erga [omnes](#)<sup>39</sup> I would say, rather. No one appears on the bestsellers list for a tenth continuous week by chance.”

“That’s a good point. I’ll reserve a seat from now for the coming reprint. With your permission of course.”

“[But of course](#), freely! Paraphrasing, myself this time, another writer, I would like to now ask you the following: In the end, Mr Panourgias, the Apostolis of the novel – is that you?”

“No more than Madame Bovary is [Flaubert](#).”

“Why is it then I’d bet my life that this is all autofiction?”

“Why not docufiction perhaps? Let’s get serious. There may be autobiographical elements in my book here and there, the only difference being that they could also belong to millions of my fellow-men. Whatever, on the other hand, alludes to me has been mercilessly expelled from Apostolis.”

“As long, of course, as he is middle-aged, with a bit of a bald patch and, albeit an athletic type, a bit of a beer belly, is an incurable ladies’ man even though he can never score a date not even in his dreams, and – I quote – he ‘decided on a whim, where his essays barely ever got a passing grade, to start writing all of a sudden.’ Who are you kidding?”

“You are sadly deluded if you think me as simplistic as Apostolis. And, in any case, in the last few years, [even the dogs in the streets](#) have started to write.”

“Why choose anonymity then?”

“I refer you, in order to cut to the chase, to page 94 of my book.”

“Pass. If not *roman à clef*<sup>40</sup> I will then assume, since it contains, as you say, approximately twenty-five short stories, that it is essentially a *roman à tiroirs*<sup>41</sup>, as the French would say?”

“Assume away, hence how it is read is *key*, as the Brits would say.”

Take it out, it’s not funny anymore. Even Koulis, the opposition leader said it the other day in Parliament.

Have her asking why he keeps choosing female names starting with L. And Babis explaining that the L reminds him of flirtatious breasts and sultry lips.

- Enough already with this whole Bovary and Flaubert thing; it’s turned into such a cliché as Proust’s madeleine.  
- I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but it’s the journalist asking, not I, Babis, I mean to say.

I sincerely wonder if and to what extent ‘the dogs in the streets’ still stands in 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Erga omnes is a [Latin](#) phrase meaning "towards all".

<sup>40</sup> A novel with intense autobiographical elements, where simply the naming convention is changed.

<sup>41</sup> A novel where some interjecting chapters having no immediate connection to the main plot.

“Lovely. How then should it be read? Or rather, how would *you* like to be read, Mr Panourgias?”

“Can we leave the Mr Panourgias aside for a bit? It’s starting to get on my nerves, you know, like when people offer their seat up for me on the bus. Because, I am neither a Mister, nor Panourgias. Now, in regards to how I want to be read. The only thing I ask is not to be skipped. Because in my work there is no such thing as lettuce-leaf phrases that only go on the plate for decoration and main-course phrases. They all bear the same weight. My text is isobaric, do you understand? And I would add, isotropic, isotopic and isomorphic.”

“Do you not skip when reading?”

“Certainly, but only weather-report phrases or the so-called fine print which even their own writer could not possibly be naïve enough to believe that they would be read.

“That’s sufficiently clear, let us move on. *Look at that* is its title. Could you please explain this a bit more?”

“There is a triple meaning to it. First off, it’s what it made me say it, but also an invitation for the reader to literally have a look at the novel, plus the hope that by doing so it will extract, metaphorically, from him a...”

“Look at that!”

“Not necessarily. That’s not the issue, is it? I’d be happy with a ‘Lookie here!’ even. Or a ‘*That’s it!*’ If it manages to steal away about ten of these, then it’s mission complete.”

“The book or the reader?”

“Both. As many as it takes to tango.”

“Yes, but how is that supposed to happen when for all intents and purposes there is nothing new you *convey* in the art of literature?”

“But that’s exactly the point. If I were to do so, the reader would glance at this new thing and never look at it again. It would be like museum exhibits whose worth is exhausted by *their* innovation.”

“Wherein is your originality, despite all of that?”

“If it is somewhere, it is in the avoidance of anything which, in other books, had always caused me to break out in hives.”

“Like?”

“All that would make you think ‘Come on now, this doesn’t even *happen* in the movies.’”

“What else?”

+ “even though, if you ask me, Take it would be a better choice.”

Also add there, “preach, brother, preach!”

How do you not convey anything? The achievement alone of not writing about the crisis, and simultaneously, doing away with, at least a dozen people – what about that?

If you have any dignity whatsoever, be honest about who it is you stole the idea from.

Give an example from the latest book you’ve read. The one by that Nobelist.

“Let’s say, the fact that most writers first devise the plot and then they’ll start coming and going to all the places it stipulates, for reconnaissance. Say the book is talking about, I don’t know, a public house? They’ll go to a public house. About a house of joy? They’ll go to a house of joy. The White House? They’ll go to the White House. About a nursing home? They’ll go to a nursing home. Something that both leaves a substantial ecological footprint on the environment and the sensation of, due to the regurgitation of familiar clichés, *déjà-lu* and therefore of *déjà-écrit*.”

“Whereas yourself? You won’t move an inch? You only concern yourself with your own household so to speak?”

“No, but wherever I go, in the near vicinity usually, I don’t do it intentionally. Once I go though, I pick and choose, even if something is seemingly worthless.”

“I see. Whatever makes you...”

“Exactly, without thinking about where I’ll put it beforehand though. I go, in other words, from real life to plot and not from plot to real life.

“Have you got any examples?”

“In football, for instance, when the centre-forward topples to the ground following a legal yet violent tackle from the opponent and is issued a yellow card for play-acting, or when you’re making a stuffed dish, but you’ve run out of peppers and tomatoes and you still have stuffing left over, or in couples, when one of the two asks his or her partner for a *break* to think things over, or what a conventional producer says about a biological one, *or...*”

“I think you’ve made yourself clear. Since you’re on the subject of plot though, yours is rudimentary, it can easily fit in half a haiku.”

“I’ll **grant** you that, if by plot you mean the occurrence of natural disasters earthquakes and floods. Something, that is, which as a reader never interested me, so why would it appeal to me as a writer? If a plot is the sequence of events, the real matter then is what exactly constitutes an event. For you, as a reporter, only that which is *breaking news* is worthy of the honorary title of ‘event’, while for me it’s whatever is *no news*.”

“So then, in the end, why should one write?”

“I can only talk for myself. Firstly, there’s no, in me, such thing as an unconquerable need to express myself in order not to burst, and other silliness like that. Therefore, I simply write because I enjoy it. I would give the same answer to why I play, I don’t know, beach tennis.”

Well, yours is *déjà-noté*.

+ the pistachio nuts that won’t open up and are left for last in the bag, plus the French guy who learns a foreign language, but lest of accentuating every word on the last syllable, he accentuates even those which take the accent there, in the antepenultimate one, the guy who is sceptical about global warming because it’s freezing.

- Oh, come on; don’t imitate that asshole journalist, Pretenteris I mean now.  
- Later on, I imitate Adonis, but it’s Pretenteris you have a problem with?

“Yes, but how do you know you’ll like something before you’ve even tried it?”

“That is true. Consequently, the real question is why start? A basic prerequisite before engaging in something new is first to be fed up with the old. There comes a time, let’s say, when someone who would never miss a Champions League match starts skipping them. From then on, anything is possible. A void is created, which **demands** to be filled immediately by something else, by and large, completely random. Which, in order to establish itself, however, a simple ‘we shall see’ will not suffice. There needs to be a ‘Well, look at that!’”

“And in your case, was the stimulus indeed Champions League? Did you end up, in your old age, wondering – like approximately 99.99% of **women** – what the point is in having twenty-two lads chase after a ball?”

“Partly, yes. But not just that. If I ended up wondering about something in my old age, it was whether there was any point permanently chasing, like the 99.99% of men, after a woman.”

“So, what does writing have to do with anything?”

“Rather than chasing after them, I started to write on behalf of all those, myself included, who spent an entire lifetime doing so.”

“Are there no other contributing reasons?”

“Well, for some years now, I’ve been finding myself wide awake from **early dawn**. Old age, you see. Therefore, I have time to spare. Loneliness, on the other hand, whether you want it to or not, has you **thinking** incessantly. Also, no one used to play with me on the playground when I was little, while as a teenager at parties I was one of those who, when others were dancing, sat on the sofa, examining them. As a result, I developed the observation skills – with a tendency for demolishing others – of a recluse. Never mind the fact that I had never been very glib. I only find valid arguments when it’s too late. Can you imagine if I were a defence lawyer? On the other hand, whenever I talk a lot, I end up regretting it completely. I think to myself: “What bullshit did you just blurt out again?” Whereas when I write, I think a lot more about what I’m going to say, because, as it is generally known, *scripta manent*. That being said, nothing about me ever suggested that I would one day **write**.”

“Recently, you have been under fire from all sides. From the critics first of all, who, in regards to your book, albeit a bestseller, have not said a single word. A proper slating in other words. Because – in contrast to film critics who will never leave a single film un-commented-on – there is no worse type of salting for a book than it being snubbed. Subsequently, from a well-known language purist

+ because, as it is known, nature abhors the vacuum

Have a look to see what Eurostat has to say about the matter.

There is a possibility that the opposite is true, i.e. that you wake up at cockcrow because you write.

- As though people that are coupled up don’t think.  
- Of course, they do, but mainly about matters of a practical texture.

Have her asking him if writing was a repressed desire. And Babis replying that even if it was how would he know since, if something is repressed, by definition it obscures itself in the subconscious.

who circulated an entire catalogue of your solecisms and ‘jewels’. A similar list, but with your supposed sexist innuendoes, has been leaked by a feminist organisation. What do you have to say about all of this?”

“Let’s deal with **one thing at a time**, shall we? First off, regarding the critique. I suspect that it feels uncomfortable with an interloper suddenly becoming a writer. They are afraid of falling for a book that the public has embraced, and that the intellectuals on the other hand read on the sly but are too embarrassed to admit it to anyone. As to the language, what can I say? I can feel the injustice of it all suffocating me. Like the driver whom a ball-busting pedestrian questions for illegal parking. Instead of beating the saddle, Mr Babiniotis<sup>42</sup>, because it is him of course that this is about, would do well to deal with the donkey directly.”

“Who is the donkey?”

“**Our** language, who do you think? Me?”

“What’s wrong with our language?”

“It’s extremely problematic. Where do I even start. With contract verbs it is an absolute pandemonium, with the deponent ones total chaos, with their augment complete mayhem, with the middle voice past progressive an **utter mess**, participles are conspicuous by their absence, *which* and *that* are ubiquitous, while the female gender terminating in -ις has become a matter of ‘belief’. No one seems to care a tuppence about it however, the end result being that whenever the demotic doesn’t suit us we turn to the katharevousa. And vice versa. We can never get **anywhere** that way though.”

“You’re on a roll, I see, I must have pulled on a sensitive cord. Are the feminists not right, at least? Is there not a misogynistic undertone in your work as well? Promptly though, I’m being notified by the studio that we need to go on a commercial break.”

“To begin with, I am a feminist myself, in the sense that I stand for complete equality between the two sexes. In everything. As well as, therefore, the right for one to be sarcastic about the other. After all, sarcasm is the salt of literature. From thereon, however, if in my book I rubbed salt in one of the two sexes’ wounds, deep down it isn’t the **weaker** one. And...”

“That’s all the time we have, Mr Panourgias, let’s put a semi-colon on that, hopefully we’ll talk again at another opportunity in the near future. Dear friends, we welcomed **today** the controversial author Simos Panourgias who, with his book *Look at that*, caused a frenzy.

- This sounds like Adonis G. that far right-wing MP.  
- So what?

Are you completely nuts? You’re having a go at our language? You dare forsake all the blood that’s been spilt for its sake?

A fucking mess, maybe?

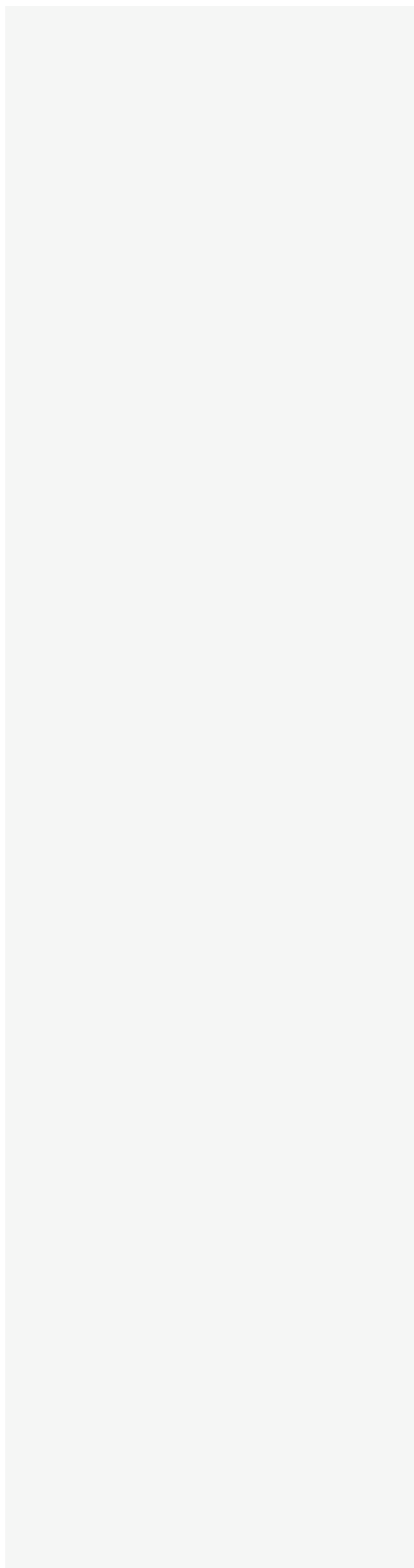
- What is it you want after all, a return to katharevousa?  
- I wish I knew what I wanted.

Hold on, you’re kind of ruining it now. Weaker? How d’you figure?

+ “under special conditions, it’s true, due to our interlocutor’s persistence with anonymity.”  
- It’s a radio, hellooo.

<sup>42</sup> Well-known controversial and conservative linguist.

We will be together again next week, same day and time, with yet again another exceptional guest who tells it like it is. Because that's our show's motto, don't forget. Until you hear from us again, so long."





## Chapter 23

“That’s as bad a translation as it can get, don’t you think?” he asked her, pointing to the label stuck on the back of the front seat with the caption ‘προσδεθείτε εφόσον κάθεστε’ and ‘fasten seat belt while seated’. He had scarcely completed his phrase when the beat of a familiar folk song sounded all of a sudden from within Lela’s bag – as he would soon find out her name was – who set out, after an initial hesitation, to rummage through it. However, the mobile phone – because what else could it be? – as though it were playing hide and seek, kept slipping through her fingertips which, fumbling in the dark with the contents of the bag, first fell on those items which, whenever she conversely needed, they found last. Because of that, she was running so amok, that only if she attributed deceit to each object individually and a conspiracy plot to all of them together, could it be rationally justified. It betrayed, if nothing else, a person who construed the slightest setback as yet another blow of relentless **fate**. The only thing that was certain in the whole upheaval was that his question had been recorded in his outbox. In her inbox, not necessarily. Let alone whether it had even been comprehended. Because, from her long legs – like those which in the ‘pink novels’ were classically described as endless or, more rarely, as statuesque – but mainly her plump **rump** where they **ended**, he never managed to **discern** where she was from, earlier on. Already, from the terminal waiting room, when he spotted her amongst the crowd of passengers queuing up in front of the gate, he had fixated on it. By inspecting its so endearing to the eyes symmetry, it was more of an aesthetic pleasure than a sexual one that he drew, a pleasure similar to that of a museum visitor observing a work of art, rather than that of a starving voyeur (after all, on no account had the specific part of the female anatomy ever been a part of his sexual **fantasies**.) Moreover, every time it disappeared from his field of vision, either because a passer-by hid it out of view or because he himself averted, for the sake of common decency, his eyes, he was pierced by a pain characteristic of withdrawal syndrome, so on the first available occasion he would restore them back onto it. He could not bear to do otherwise.

A few minutes earlier, it had occupied the middle seat next to him and accidentally sat on one of the two of his seat belt straps, something that Babis only realised when he unsuccessfully attempted to fasten his. It was the first thing he made sure he did every time he boarded a plane ever since the deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs lost his life in the infamous crash with the ministerial Falcon exactly because he had neglected to do so. The proof that the nerve endings of her glute muscles had recorded his imperceptible move-

+ a person, probably, who ended up considering Murphy’s law as indeed a law, only she was unable to explain it, and that really exasperated her.

- Enough already with the backsides.  
- Why, what’s wrong with backsides? Have they peed in someone’s cheerios? Never mind the fact that they have something to do with the plot.

Now, whether the rump ends in the legs or the legs in the rump is a matter on which science cannot offer any help.

- It’s as though you are implying that based on someone’s pelvis, you can also assert her descent.  
- If not on a country level, of a geographical basin, certainly.

+ let alone practices.

ments to extract the strap and (had) pertinently informed her brain's operational centre was that, lifting her right **butt-cheek**, she freed it **at once** (not before she turned apologetically to look at him). The, in the first instance taken, decision to start chatting her up became final when the thing he had secretly been wishing, almost praying for all this time, in other words for her face (which he had hitherto only managed to catch a quick glimpse of) to rise up to the full height of the expectations that the view of her behind had nourished, **turned into** reality. Seconds later, the first phrase that came to mind was leaving his lips. It took, according to the rules of the game, the form of a question that encourages, almost forces, its receiver to take a position as well as its sender to reply. Where, however, it trampled over them was that, unlike the archetypal example of a guy in a Clock Tower square asking a woman passing by for the time, his interest in her answer was actually genuine.

Even though one could have a lot to say about the 'προσδεθείτε (fasten)' and the 'εφόσον (while)', and even more about their forceful co-habitation on the one hand and with the elegant, clean-cut and flawless 'fasten seat belts while seated' on the other, it was the 'κάθεστε (you are seated)' of the label that had turned his stomach as soon as he had noticed it, sometime in the 80s, on an Olympic Airways aircraft. The problem consisted in the ambiguity of the verb itself which denoted at the same time both the momentary action when a person in an upright position, bending their lower limbs, lays his or her backside onto a seat and the more or less continuous and permanent action that cannot take place before the former happens, so that its two meanings were in constant feedback, the one being simultaneously a cause and **effect** of the other. An ambiguity which, in order to be lifted, a single participle might suffice, but both 'κάθισμένος (seated in demotic)' and 'καθήμενος (seated in katharevousa)' were blatantly unable to play this role, being outside the company's language policy. The solution, on the other hand, to omit 'προσδεθείτε' thus leaving 'fasten seat belts' stranded, which would then have no other hand left to hold but the **lighting** of the homonymous light signal, would open Pandora's Box. And it would because, if there was a lesson to be drawn from the tragic accident with the minister, it was the fact that passengers ought to remain fastened during the entire flight even when it was not indicated by the relevant lights.

"Enjoy your flight," the captain of the aircraft urged the passengers in the meantime, completing his usual briefing before take-off. Pointlessly, as far as Babis was concerned, given that for the next forty-five minutes of the flight (an hour if you counted the taxiing, take-off and landing, even more if he also added the time waiting for the luggage at the conveyor belt) he was doomed, – instead of, as originally planned, submerging himself in the book *Ta kamakia*

- Don't tell me the butt-cheek bothers you too?  
- I'm used to it.

Idea: "distinct evidence that she was one of those experienced passengers who, in order to fly by plane, didn't wait on the advent of low-cost companies."

Or rather he wished it never happened. Because, at this point he's got much more urgent things to do than hit on strangers, no matter how fine a dish they may be.

+ by the way, προσδεθείτε (fasten your self) also suffered, but to a lesser degree, from the same flaw.

+ under the condition of course that a suitable replacement would be found, yet both αφή (flaming) and ανάφλεξη (ignition) didn't cut the mustard and all we were left with anymore was the pompous ενεργοποίηση (activation).

by V. Vasilikos which he had placed in his backpack the night before – hitting on his unknown co-passenger. And indeed, did he have the luxury of any other choice since in his entire long-standing career as air traveller never before had such a scrumptious creature sat next to him? Usually he got nattering old ladies, cantankerous blondes, mothers with their whiny kids, passionate couples, indifferent housewives, hysterical **spinsters** who made him curse his luck and wonder with rage (just like Lela looking earlier for her mobile phone) although he was not in the habit of doing so, if there was some higher power after all that was seeking to piss him off. Why could that be? Maybe because, against all odds, he remained faithful to a now outdated and occasionally mutating to atheism **agnosticism**? Otherwise, according to the law of probability, such bad luck could not be explained in any other way.

The ringing stopped at the exact time when she was flipping her bag onto the already unlocked tray, resulting in everything it contained falling into a heap on it. And it contained keys, a hair brush, make up, all the necessary, in any case, objects that a female bag is expected to **contain**, the mischievous mobile phone and his book which he immediately **recognized** from its cover. Upon seeing it, his member that up until then had remained neutral woke up like a rattlesnake after hibernation. It deemed completely arbitrarily, it seems, that this unexpected occurrence opened up new perspectives. Either way, it was the first time in his life that he met and travelled with a female reader (or a reader *tout court*) of his books. And what a reader! By this meaning not so much her looks as much as the manner by which she gobbled up his book. He did not need a bookmark to tell him that she was almost half-way through it, since the battered, already-read pages and the brand new uncreased ones formed two separate entities of which the former, greedily and aggressively, spread out with intentions of irredentism at the expense of the irresolute, defeatist and decreasing latter. It was **obvious** that every book she happened to read she carried everywhere in order, whenever she got the chance – while queuing at the bank? The bus? The metro station? At the dentist waiting room? The toilet? – to advance two or three pages further instead of wasting her time leafing through the same rubbish magazines over and over again. And the fact that, amongst the numerous books she undoubtedly possessed she had chosen *his* for such a peculiar occasion (due to the reading conditions and the lack of any alternatives) as a flight, must have meant something. What though? Was she afraid stepping in it with something high-brow, but way too mind-numbing and had therefore opted for something much lighter though mediocre, simply to pass the time? Or was she one of those uncompromising readers who do not bargain on the quality, even on the **plane**, and so had finally found in his novel something both worthwhile and more

Look urgently for an alternative word in the anti-dictionary of Greek language by Vostantzoglou.

Reverse it for it to be more convincing.

- Another cliché.  
- If you must know, there's no worse cliché in literature than the anti-cliché.

- You were saying something about coincidences that don't even happen in the movies.  
- I'm only doing it so that people stop bugging me in terms of plot.

+ and in that they were both alike.

+ or even the toilet

than suitably delightful to read on a flight? Oh, how he wished, practically prayed, for the second one!

After checking who was calling her all this time, Lela was in turn now calling back. “Hey, where are you?” were her first words. Despite appearances, they were quite meaningful in terms of content. For, besides the tone of her voice, the language of communication, the level of comprehension in it, the standardness of her accent and hence her possible ethnic descent, they were also telling of the existence of a person of unknown gender and other such personal information, whose geographical coordinates she **ferverly** desired to find out. It was the same for the person on the other end of the line, judging by **her** reply. It was completely honest, reflecting as closely as possible and with no embroideries the truth. Yes, she was already on the plane, unfortunately her arrival to Rhodes was expected to be slightly delayed due to the *no-show*, that’s how she put it, of a passenger, and a subsequent baggage check, which she left completely uncommented on; she took it, you see, for granted – and rightfully so – that any explanations were redundant in an age when anti-terrorist hysteria had reached unprecedented heights.

The final “me too” – final because the hostess had started her rounds to recall to order all the undisciplined passengers who had ignored her command to deactivate “now” each and every electronic device – even though it didn’t sound as **heartfelt**, troubled him. So, apart from the verb itself, she also shared with her fellow speaker the same object? The same object? He thought it over. Only if she were referring to something else, a third party, as it were. Nevertheless, calling her now of all times to declare a fascination for, say, stuffed eggplants, but also to gauge her own appetites, did not seem very likely. Therefore, his brain told him that the “me too” was the classic, almost reluctant **reply**, when the other half of the couple throws at you in the most unsuitable moment possible the “I love you”. He made a note of the entire scene in his little notepad so that he could make good use of it at the first opportunity.

Lela had, in the meantime, mechanically stowed her mobile phone in her bag, failing again to make sure she mentally recorded the exact location. Her reply, which he predicted would probably be dismissive and rejecting of **his** claims, he now expected at any given moment. Yet, nothing indicated that she was getting ready to give it to him. She opened, conversely, his book and started to read it. The fact that she could not care less about the demonstration of the safety measures as well as the candy offered by the airhostesses, her playful eyes, her flinching lips, its phrases that every now and again she underlined with a pencil, suggested, if nothing else, that she was enjoying it.

- Ferverly?? Come on now ...  
- Then, why is it the first thing she asks?

Idea: where ‘can you hear me?’ interjected all the time, owing to the fact that, as Lela was used to being interrupted and interrupting, when confronted with an interlocutor who was all ears and probably despised that ugly habit, she attributed his utter silence to a fault in the connection.

+ it was more akin to “good riddance”.

+ like in a household where the hostess (or host) asks the visitors whether they liked the dessert.

+ something of the style “Why, what’s wrong with ‘προσδεθείτε εφόσον κάθεστε’? It’s absolutely fine.”

“Is Panourgias any good?” Babis asked, with anxiety in his voice, which, nonetheless, only a suspicious ear could discern, otherwise it would interpret it as the common nervousness that accompanies such moves, especially when the first one had crashed into a wall of silence, deliberate or unintended.

Her reply was both torrential and swift, it was as if she were waiting for nothing else but an all ears co-passenger to whom she could express everything kept inside and pressing to spill out, the proof being that she did not seem to be taken aback in the least:

“That he is. Even if, in the beginning, he doesn’t exactly seem like much. Here we go again, just more of the same, you say to yourself. But then, each page is better than the one before. As if he’s literally learning while writing and writing while learning. It is a – ma – zing! I’ve literally **swallowed** him up,” she added, even though she couldn’t have been unaware of, unless she were from another planet, the sort of connotations the specific verb stirred up in a male, and not only, **mind**. “Really though, he’s unparalleled. He’s shattered every literary rule and dogma, that’s why I like him. It’s been a while since I’ve seen such freshness in literature and, believe me when I say, I’m an experienced reader. Without hesitation, I would easily characterise him as an enigmatic ULO.”

“ULO?”

“Unidentified literary object.”

“Maybe also unclassified and unclassifiable?”

“Unidentified, unclassified and unclassifiable, **all in one**. He barely knows which movement he belongs too himself probably and if such a movement has ever existed.”

“We forgot uncircumventable.”

“Uncircumventable? Definitely, it goes without saying. He’s a living example of how creatively one could write for someone who’s never stepped foot in a creative writing workshop or frequented any literary circles.”

“That’s right. Like a footballer who learned how to play in the sandlots and back alleys.”

“You’ve read him, I see.”

“Not once, not twice...”

“Well, then?”

“All right, he’s not exactly rubbish. However, I do have my reservations. He suffers from the familiar syndrome of the up-and-coming writer. He tries to say everything in the very first **book**, which, to some extent, becomes tiring. Just like his tendency to **strip**

- Who in the world says, “I’ve literally swallowed up this book”?  
- Let me google it, we’ll see.

- Here, you literally overstepped the mark.  
- Why, what’s wrong with the phrase?

Stop all this praising and heralding him as a genius. It’s starting to smack of North Korea.

Hackneyed and most of all unfair for Panourgias, who has more arrows in his quiver.

He’s contradicting himself since up until this point he always said he didn’t.



bare – he might as well be an actress in her debut – in front of the readers when they don't even ask for that, like the director would ask of the actress.”

“Then again, personally it reminds me of the local neighbourhood tavern owner whose portions are far too generous for their cost, so much so that there's always something left over in the plate and, lest it go to waste, I ask him to put it in a little take-away box. I compare his book to the dictionary I always dreamt of – mind you, I'm a translator. The dictionary with the unknown words you seek and almost never find, while all of the well-known ones, as well as the superfluous ones, are pruned out so that they don't take up space.”

“How does he manage to do that?”

“By presenting us with a report, a diary of all that he made a note of in his little notepad throughout his life, and I mean it. The tasty part is that whatever surprised him surprised me as well, the outcome being that I've blackened the entire book with my underlining. As to their average per page, he ranks, by far, first amongst all the writers I've ever read.”

“Is that all?”

“It's also how in every phenomenon he gets caught up not so much with the questions that would seem to many as central, but rather with the secondary ones. Which, in the end, prove to be even more central than the 'central' ones.”

“In the end though, did it interest you as far as content or as an achievement?”

“Mainly the first one, without meaning to disparage the second, all the more that, and credit to him, he doesn't reveal it as much, and that's exactly where he proves how cool he really is.”

“Does it flow?”

“Like a torrent. Even though not a single drop of blood is spilled and not a single leaf moves, it reads like a crime novel. The robbers are every kind of cliché, stereotype, consensus, misconception and delusion, while the investigator chasing them relentlessly is Panourgias. To the point where I'm under the illusion that his Word has a specific Find function for clichés.”

“Yes, but he suffers in terms of plot.”

“All the better. Because, a plot is a two-edged sword. Half the book is wasted on the writer clearing up the reader's questions regarding it. And the other half on hinting about what's coming next. Pure wastage, in other words, enough to spare. Whereas Panourgias is value for money.”

“and he reminds me of a chef who will make good use even out of the egg shells,” have him say.



“I wonder how the critics haven’t picked up on everything that you admire in Panourgias?”

“I wonder how you wonder. Because, the way in which we approach a piece of writing, how we handle it rather, which strategy we use in other words to read it, also depends on the where, the when, the after whom, the why, the given that, the **even though**. Panourgias had the misfortune or luck to be read and popularized through word of mouth before the critics were forced to do it, whereas if they had early reading rights, who knows? Maybe they would have seen him differently.”

“OK, but is what he does literature?”

“Honestly, I don’t give a shit. I know one thing for sure: that the closer the book got to the end the more an indescribable sadness came over me for not being able to prevent **it**. And that’s what matters for me the most. What need do I have for art, if it doesn’t talk to me, doesn’t touch me, looks down on me, **calls me names**? Panourgias, on the other hand, keeps me company, pampers me, spoils me. He is my best friend who whispers jokes in my ear during lessons. I understand his every word, his every phrase, how do I explain it? He must have, as a reader of garrulous and predictable books, lived through some traumatic experiences, from which he swore to spare his future readers. Here’s a writer I’d love to meet, by God! Sadly, though, he has stubbornly withdrawn himself from his fans in this excruciating hide-and-seek, and he doesn’t seem to want to come out from hiding despite the Marco Polo we yell to him. He doesn’t know what he’s missing. I’m definitely curious to see what he looks like, since there isn’t a single picture of him anywhere. Why is he so secretive? I don’t get it, what does he have to hide, who’s chasing him? He needs to finally assume the responsibility for his actions. Why doesn’t he?”

“Maybe he’s ashamed of his writing, afraid that it will expose him, revealing an image of him that that has nothing to do with the artificial one he tries to project outwardly?”

“If that’s the case, then too bad for him. Because if there’s an image of him that wouldn’t sit well with me, it’d be the artificial one, which logically I can imagine as the polar opposite of the fictional one.”

“Even if at that one a latent cynicism sneaks in and a sneaking misogynism is latent, even if the digs against the female sex are running wild? Even if his analyses exude the mustiness of a different era, when it was still referred to as the ‘weaker’ one? When talking about intercourse it was still usual to say “Aleka gave herself to Constantinos with all the might of her soul?” When no meant yes? The one of a Greece in the ‘70s, of the all-boys and all-girls se-

- You’re having her talk like Panourgias.  
- Well, by reading him, willy nilly, she ends up mimicking him as well.

And also for not been able any more to read it for the first time.

- The epitome of populism.  
- Well, ok, lately everything is dubbed as populism.

condary schools, of the porn cinemas in Acharnes avenue, the who-rehouses of Filis street where the youths poured in to lose their virginity, an era that he never manages to shake off, when the closest he ever got to a girl was looking at one through binoculars, from time to time at some party or at church? Even if his descriptions of men give you the chills? To the point that, want to or not, it makes you wonder, could Panourgias possibly be one of them? So shallow, so empty, so obsessive, so vain?”

“Even, even, even! Understand this, once and for all: describing a situation is one thing, adopting *it* is another, the writer is one thing and another his characters whom in crafting that way, means he surpasses them and sees them more with compassion, almost pity, than with admiration. Another aspect is also his incarnations which have *weaselled* their way into his books somewhere.”

“Then maybe, even worse, and personally I’m leaning toward this particular hypothesis: Is he refusing any publicity because he himself rates his works as below average?”

“And still publishes them? Why?”

“He must seek a second opinion, for better or for worse. Besides, he probably thought, you never know, someone might take the bait.”

“Gosh! We’ve not only taken the bait; we’ve fallen right into it face first.”

“Anyway, how do you imagine him to be?”

“It’s strange, but, with every writer, writing and appearance go together hand in hand. One affects, almost imposes on, the other.”

“It’s almost as though you’re telling me that you would identify him in the same way the victim identifies the perpetrator out of twenty or so ugly mugs at the police precinct, behind a glass screen.”

“Unquestionably.”

“Do you completely rule out the possibility that he might be, I don’t know, pot-bellied, bald, a hunchback, bow-legged, a cheapskate and an old crock?”

“But it ceases to matter. His work acts as the Pool of Siloam and purifies all of his defects, it rechristens them, it makes them cherishable.”

“Very nice. And now the crucial million-dollar question: If I were to tell you that Simos Panourgias is none other than myself, what would you say to that?”

“Well, do you know what I’ve thinking all this time that we’ve been talking? That your manner and build remind me of Apostolis, from *Look at that*. But, heavens, no, not Panourgias. Let’s not get crazy. I

In the logic of ‘keep talking, some of it will remain’, I will allow you to invoke the same line of defence as in the interview.

+ like Hitchcock in his films.

imagine him being completely different, how do I describe this to you? Much more imposing in any case and much surer of himself. Airier,” she added without defining it, accompanying her words with a yawn that she didn’t even bother to cover with her palm. Its *timing* alone made it more eloquent than any of her words, let alone the fact that within seconds she started reading again. Her goal, before they landed, was undoubtedly to “wrap up” the chapter. They didn’t exchange any other words. It was a common practice completely acceptable in a passenger aircraft cabin. The email which gave his publisher the permission to proceed – that’s how he put it – with the removal of *his* anonymity (that’s how he put it), Babis composed it during the remainder of the flight. He avoided exposing the reasons behind it. As soon as they landed, he sent it to him. Let him think whatever he wanted (he thought).

- There is a Greek word for timing.
- No, it’s too clunky.

- It’s not clear to everyone why he does it.
- Only if one is an extra-terrestrial.

## Chapter 24

*Carrots* in palaeontology are cylindrical samples of subsoil obtained by drilling, thanks to which conclusions can be deduced regarding the conditions of life that were prevalent during the x, y or z period of time on Earth. That's how, let's say, it was discovered that at no point in time in its entire history was the concentration of carbon dioxide higher than it is nowadays, or that the cause for the extinction of the dinosaurs towards the end of the Cretaceous period, sixty-five million years before, was the impact from a meteor striking its surface. One such **carrot** is what the student of the Faculty of Philosophy<sup>43</sup> in Athens University, Stergiou, dreamed of as well. It was not however the works and the days of our planet he had a burning desire to know, but those of a shooting star of the Greek letters, Babis Panopoulos, otherwise known as Simos Panourgias. What wouldn't he give to unravel the underlying reason why, while he had reached the pinnacle of his glory sometime in the beginning of the century, he unexpectedly dropped under the public's radar, assuming in the annals the not so enviable reputation of the most ephemeral famous **writer**. Did he, perhaps, like an aeroplane, crash with no survivors or did he – something that did not necessarily rule out the former – intentionally **deactivate** his transponder? As for the possibility of locating the black box with the internal monologue in the cockpit of his brain, there was none, since some time ago it must have ceased to transmit the characteristic signal. Furthermore, what sort of bee, Stergiou kept racking his brain wondering, had got in his bonnet so that in his fifties he would start, out of nowhere, writing relentlessly, the experiences through which he had accumulated all those words inside of him that, inexorably, at some point came to ask for a way out and found it in a work that, considering the amount of time it took to write it, could be best described as pharaonic? Whence did the specific content, style and ethos originate from? How, finally, why and for what did the initial Panopoulos become in the process **Panourgias** and Panourgias again and forevermore Panopoulos?

And yet, a few months back, Stergiou didn't know he even existed. And he would continue to do so costlessly and blissfully, had his professor, by the name Trigazis, not had the bright idea of assigning him a dissertation project on the exact subject of post **post-modernism** in Greek literature through the figure and work of Panopoulos. He accepted unflinchingly, foolishly thinking that he would knock it off in no time; summer, you see, was approaching and amongst

<sup>43</sup> In actual terms, funnily enough, more of Philology than of Philosophy, since it primarily produces Greek language teachers then philosophers.

Idea: because evidently the method of the whip did not have any effect on Panourgias.

So famous in fact that the SMS spellchecker on Android phones had included his name in the suggestion list.

It jumps out that you wrote it when Malaysia Airlines plane disappeared. And the above mentioned erga omnes when the Macedonian dispute was rekindled.

And Simos into Babis.

- Now, post-modern, albeit post-, I don't know if you can call me that.  
- Good, how would you describe yourself? Naïve?  
- I don't think so. Vulgar structuralist rather.

his group of friends, the traditional conversations about the right choice of island to visit had already flared up. Little did he know though that, instead of the ship of the non-profit line<sup>44</sup>, he would be boarding on a profitable yet extensive search wherein criminal journalism and literary analysis would intermix charmingly. That, because of it, his holiday would go down the drain. That this way, he was guaranteed at least a couple of months of griping from his girlfriend. And, most importantly, that it would fundamentally change his life.

Stergiou's first task was to immerse himself into his collected works. And this is where the added value of his dissertation was, because, maybe even for the first time in the chronicles of criticism, he actually sat down to read him critically. Word for word, with a pencil in hand since, as he quickly realised, Panopoulos's every word, be it present or, funnily enough, even absent, counted. The present, because it was obligated by law to prove, displaying at any given moment the relevant badge, that it was not an interloper, that it was accredited, that in other words – as in a dish where the slightest seasoning is added only if it adds something to it – its presence served some particular purpose; and the absent, thanks to its justified absence from the text, sparing it from anything undesirable or inappropriate. Along the way, he would discover that the same by extension was true about the phrases, the paragraphs, the chapters, as well as his entire novels.

In the beginning, to be perfectly honest, Stergiou had a tough time. As it were, he belonged to a generation completely unaccustomed to reading recalcitrant texts, that's why he came very close to giving it all up and only the prospect of having to, in a rush, change his dissertation topic prevented him from doing so. From thereon it was only a matter of time before he warmed to it. And, yes, if there is something that grows old before you know it it's the written word, but Panopoulos's, despite the secludedness it went through to which even Kostalexi<sup>45</sup> paled in comparison, won him over with its immediacy and freshness. It was therefore by no means worthless. All right, its weaknesses were abundant and obvious, but it had the gift of turning these into an advantage. How? He asserted them, adding insult to injury where most tried to brush them up under the carpet. Either way, he must have realised that the more he concealed them

- You were saying something about the remorseless persecution of clichés. Is there a bigger cliché than the moaning woman and her grumbling?  
- I am not entirely sure it is a cliché. Women generally indulge in making remarks.

- Oh, really, he's written more?  
- He took a liking to it.

+ because of too much internet.

OK. We got the idea you don't want to give off the impression that you're full of yourself.

The ones he could infer that is, because the rest...

<sup>44</sup> Hint to the fact that the so-called barren (άγονης) line islands, where these ships operate under state subsidies, are the youngsters favourite holiday destination.

<sup>45</sup> In 1978, in Kostalexi village in Lamia municipality, the police found in the basement of a house a young woman held there by her family over the course of 29 years for having an affair with the local teacher.

the more they'd re-appear, while, the more he exposed them himself, the more they protected him like a bulletproof vest. So then, with the purchase of his books you **also** got as a bonus offer, apart from their recipe, his public self-criticism. Stergiou was in fact first to claim that, basically, for Panopoulos things like critique, recipe, instruction manual and opus coincided. Text, context, and *modus operandi* in other words lived side by side in a *sui generis modus vivendi*. Not having, unfortunately, any archives or correspondence to consult, publishers, journalists, relatives, friends, neighbours, spouses, girlfriends to interrogate, so as to trace Panopoulos from his life to his work, something that either way he considered to be a blow below the belt, he had no other recourse than to do it from work to life. A variation of reverse engineering<sup>46</sup>, that is. A variation, because the study of the object, in this case of the opus, aimed to define not its internal workings and structure, but rather (those) of its originator.

And that's exactly where things got sticky. The conviction by many (questionable maybe, yet not so questioned) that all Panopoulos did was write his own autobiography, instead of helping, confused him. Just like a goalkeeper, who, seconds before the referee's whistle and while the ball has been placed eleven metres away, is approached by a teammate who whispers in his ear about how his opponent (eyewitness of the scene, who is already pulling back for a running start) takes his penalty shots. Which side should he launch to, the goalkeeper wonders? The one that was pointed out to him, risking, if the shooter aimed for the opposite one, to be made an utter fool? Or the other way around though who's to say the shooter will be fool enough to aim there?

Therefore – unless he now stands dead centre in the **goal post**, banking on the possibility (especially if the specific player is not just anyone but *the* one) that the ball will be shot right there – what other choice is he left with? To dive at random and come what may. And indeed, no one will laugh if he comes up empty, no one will bite his **head** off if he allows the goal in, a luxury that Stergiou sadly did not have, therefore, the middle ground as the point of view from which he would analyse the life and times of Panopoulos was more imposed upon him than chosen consciously. Yet, there would come a time he would consider it imperative.

His compass and only support were, in the beginning, the following law which he instinctively discovered: that the more a writer rents his garments, purporting that his work hasn't the slightest relevance

+ in the logic of Churchill that  
"History will be kind to me for I  
intend to write it"

+ something he will never do since,  
even if he makes the save,  
everyone will say the penalty was  
sloppily hit and, if he doesn't, that  
he stood there frozen like a statue.

+ whereas everyone will have it in  
for the person taking the penalty if  
he misses it.

<sup>46</sup> Reverse engineering is the study of an object, aiming to define its internal functioning, structure and principally its method of construction. It is applied in cases where its creator did not give relevant information.



to his own life, the more ironclad that connection becomes. In Panopoulos' case, who on top of everything else had appeared as Panourgias for a time, the law fitted him like a glove. It seems, however, mind you, that he had got wind of that and, muddying the waters, unleashed his ink relentlessly, like a squid, something, though, it didn't take long for Stergiou to get wind of, who, albeit a Humanities student, had retained one thing from Science: that reality only rarely corresponded to what common sense suggested. In fact, sometimes reality was to be found in the very opposite of it, sometimes neither in one nor the other. The same went for Panourgias, whose words Stergiou did not take at face value. The truth then, the existence of which he nevertheless didn't doubt at all, would be sought, not mandatorily in initial intuition or systematically in the counterintuitive result of the torture to which he would submit it, but potentially in its denial and so on and so forth, until, through a prolonged retrogression, he would collide with irrefutable facts.

The thing was that with Panopoulos you could make neither head nor tail. All right, to hell with the fact that while he fancied Coca Cola, in his novels he would have Apostolis, who for some was his alter ego (whereas for others his alias), down one Pepsi after the other, ordering a souvlaki with a single pitta and no tzatziki and Pizza Margherita when it was a well-known secret that tzatziki was his bread and butter, and that he wanted his pitta bread double and his pizza Puttanesca. Or big deal, he had him listen to Theodorakis a lot more than Hatzidakis<sup>47</sup>, following a classical direction rather than a science one, smoking Karelia in his youth and not Santé<sup>48</sup>, having been a member of the KKE M-Λ(GCP Marxist-Leninist) and not of the M-Λ KKE(Marxist-Leninist GCP)<sup>49</sup>, living in Ano (upper) Patisia, not in Kato (lower), supporting AEK FC when essentially he was anti-Olympiacos etc. Or would the world implode because while it was Kiki he chatted up when she was weighing some vegetables in AB, he had him doing that with Popi in Sklavenitis<sup>50</sup>? No, it was definitely much more complicated than that. So, out of all the events that he narrated, some had never happened, but it was likely that one day they would; if he were i.e. to ask Nitsa on a date, he would get the mitten, that Keli would wed over the

+ see geocentric theory.

Others are not so sure about that.

- Shameless lies, since you've not drank Coca-Cola or Pepsi ever since you had a hamburger, in other words some centuries ago.  
- Need I constantly remind you that we are not talking about yours truly, but about Babis?

- Check if instead of pasta it is a pizza.  
- Whether it is or not, which it is, I'm putting it anyway.

<sup>47</sup> Well-known Greek composers with, according to some, complete opposite styles and opinions.

<sup>48</sup> Greek cigarettes marks

<sup>49</sup> Trotskyist and Maoist communist parties respectively, both opposed to pro-soviet GCP.

<sup>50</sup> Known supermarkets chains in Greece.

mixen than over the moor, that Sakis would be given the boot by Loukia, whereas other ones, like supposedly Kostis winning the favours of Nana, when it was of Nina, and Manthos - the lottery, would never happen, them happening was their wishful thinking. Even worse, the scene with Marina telling off Apostolis was inspired by a Turkish serial Panopoulos had watched on the [Mega](#) channel, while the line thanks to which he extracted the as-yet-unknown Nausicaa's mobile number in the metro station, he had copied from Friends, his phone call to Dimitra he had unintentionally overheard on the bus, the scene where, in his dream, he talks Ariadni into doing it in the shed, he had poached from *Lady Chat-terley's Lover*.

In other words what concrete evidence from Panopoulos' life had Stergiou to cite? Not that much, most of it scattered in disarray and with no sulphur and phosphorus. I.e. that, as a child, when he was not obsessively reading Μικρός ήρωας (Little Hero) he'd be maniacally kicking the football in his neighbourhood's vacant lots, that he never got on well with ancient Greek grammar or differential equations (whence the conclusion that as a student he was probably average, if not a dunce). That his language teacher had grown tired of repeating (but it was like talking to a brick wall) that there's no such thing as a composition with no introduction, main part and conclusion. That on the November 17th of '73 uprising at Athens Polytechnic<sup>51</sup>, he wasn't even outside. That, in contrast, at the '87 EuroBasket finals<sup>52</sup> he was inside. Indirectly, Stergiou concluded that he had gone to middle school somewhere in Patisia and that before he settled down in YPEXODE<sup>53</sup> at Mesogeion Av. he had, by the skin of his teeth, finished his Physics degree in Ioannina University. From Apostolis' indiscretions, he concluded that his moving from the sunless studio apartment in Acharnes to the two-bedroom in [Galatsi](#)<sup>54</sup> took place at the exact time when his books had really sat [comfortably](#) in the top ten bestsellers lists.

If nothing else, this evidence forever closed the mouths of all those who doubted the fact that he had indeed existed and had written all that had been written in his name and that of Panourgia's, but they were not by any stretch of the imagination enough to complete, as Stergiou dreamed of, the puzzle of his chequered, as he wanted

I suggest the following footnote about MEGA: memorable channel which in those days dominated the audio-visual landscape, shaping both the ethics and the aesthetics of the public.

- Are you trying to tell us that one can become rich by writing? What planet are you on?  
- We're talking about a damn two-bed in Galatsi, and that on a loan, not a maisonette in Ekali.

You've said sat comfortably (or will say) about the toilet too.

<sup>51</sup> The Athens Polytechnic uprising occurred in November 1973 as a massive demonstration of popular rejection of the [Greek military junta of 1967–1974](#).

<sup>52</sup> In the 1987 European Championship, Greece won its first European title by defeating USSR.

<sup>53</sup> Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works in the 80's.

<sup>54</sup> Patisia, Acharnes, Galatsi are working class neighbourhoods in Athens.

(wrongly) to believe, life. They barely allowed him to make up Panopoulos' identikit, identikit being the portrait of a wanted terrorist or criminal of whom the police, based on conflicting statements from passers-by, sketched out. A basically negative portrait in the sense that it shows how someone is through what he is not, what he has through what he does not have and what he does through what he does not do, and which betrayed, in Panopoulos' case, a person, strangely enough quite ordinary, someone whose entire life story could fit into a gravestone inscription, to such a degree that it made you wonder where he found the material to supply such a plethoric piece of work. A person, distant and unsociable, who tasted freedom, as oxymoronic as it sounds, more by withdrawing himself both into his own self and lair rather than in crowds, minglings, comings and goings which, especially as of late, he considered to be taking up precious time from the only activity that now generally offered him rare delights - writing. Who, him? Who, as a student, had never managed to hand in a decent essay with an introduction, main body and conclusion? Who only through threats or blackmail by his mother would sit down and write a letter, a shoddy one at that, to his grandma in the village? Who had never once submitted even the smallest sample of a short story for literary review? Who had never **taken** a single creative writing seminar?

His first steps in prose writing came late, at some point in his fifties, at an age, that is, when others reach the zenith of their maturity and creativity. Stergiou thought it as pointless to sit there and imagine what levels of **mastery** Panopoulos could have reached had he started sooner, as it was useful to figure out why he had started so late. The answer however, that that's when the time was ripe, that to have done so sooner had never crossed his mind, that he did not possess the maturity and creativity needed to root himself to the spot to write, or to put it differently, that whatever maturity and creativity he possessed at the time he channelled it into other activities, seemed to him to be tautological.

That being said, there was no doubt that his turning to writing coincided with one of the many crises that had befallen his country since 1830 and hitherto. Maybe him and his likes, civil servants, were having a hard time caught in its whirlpool, suffering both increases and cutbacks but also, justly or unjustly, public derision. From that point on though, the fact that Panopoulos, who was possibly feeling suffocated in the **stifling** environment of **YPEXODE** saw in literature the opportunity that his narcissistic character was searching for to escape the misery of the poor little pen pusher, to prove his worth to all of Greece, as well as supplementing his livelihood, was an attractive scenario. But one that a smart and clued-up student such as Stergiou stubbornly refused to follow as he did not consider either the crisis as the only key of reading into the hap-

All right, you've said it. Do you want to be given an award too?

Mastery? Change it to just plain level, it's enough already

- How do you know?  
- Well, it's a Ministry, what do you think it's like?

- It is not called YPEXODE anymore but Ministry of Energy, Environment and climatic changes  
- That's a pity. There's never been a more successful name for a ministry in all of history

penings of this land or the opposite, the latter, in other words, as the only key to reading the former. Yet, the assertion that while he had clammed up like an oyster in his anonymity for as long as he was unknown, and renounced it when he became known - only because it was beyond his powers to reject pressing requests for interviews, meetings with the public in established bookstores, invitations from political parties to represent them as a member of Parliament in an electable position, from TV channels to give his opinion on **just about** anything and therefore lose a unique opportunity to shine, his every word to finally be read devoutly, having the public in the palm of his hand, his face becoming recognizable and his own self finally unquestionably becoming a member of the intellectual nomenclature - was at the very least unfounded, never mind the fact that it left Stergiou exposed to the accusation that he is judging other people by his own yardstick.

Anonymity which Panopoulos had perhaps chosen solely for getting the status of protected **witness** against his own life, an assumption which Stergiou initially held onto in desperation? Utter bullshit.

Maybe the fact that Panopoulos, having an over-inflated sense of self-importance, assumed that he had so much to say, that if he didn't Greek Literature would be the first on the list that would miss out on it? Rubbish.

That with his work he would supposedly clearly reveal the pathologies and complexes of Greekness? Balderdash.

That this way he would counterbalance, so to speak, his social inertia for which (belonging with the comfortably complacent civil service workers) he felt guilty? Please, no more.

That he turned tail on tip toes when he realised that his target audience wasn't the one he always dreamt of, in other words the high-brow artsy kind? That when and if they deigned to read him, they did so for the pleasure that they would get by disparaging and slating him, as well as, if they were ever to start writing, having him as an example of what to **avoid**? Baloney.

What then? The rejection of some working hypotheses, no matter how valuable that might be, was not enough. Stergiou was fully aware that without the submission of new ones, more or less ground-breaking and heretical, he would never be in the clear. At the risk of falling flat on his face, of course. But, after all, had not the very man he was discussing done the same thing his entire life? That's exactly where Stergiou really got stuck though, where he realised, deep in character, what the anguish of the blank page means for a writer. Which is only aggravated by the constant reminders of the publisher about the text submission deadline.

- What about the female readers who would never leave him alone?  
- Don't be obscene. I'm fighting tooth and nail to maintain a certain level here.

- Some will link this with Novartis's case.  
- I don't give a shit.

Now is you who judges others by his own yardsticks.

That is why even decades later he would vividly remember the when (on a Saturday at twilight), the where (he was sat comfortably on the **toilet** seat), what he had on at that precise moment (his stripy red pyjamas), the fact that the radio was playing the song “not a peep, thank God for the **TV**” when the following extract from Panourgia’s book (he had not yet changed it to Panopoulos) opened his eyes:

- What is this obsession with the toilet!  
- Accept it. Literature and political correctness are incompatible concepts.

+ and on Sky TV that asshole of a journalist was chewing Tsipras out.

## Chapter 25

“Driven by the rule of thrift by Morgan (a variation of the principle of Occam's<sup>55</sup> razor in the field of Biology) according to which in order to interpret a certain behaviour, there need not be a reference to psychological structures of a higher order (such as will, intentionality or cognition) but to simpler, and therefore frugal ones, such as reflexes, Alexandratou supported the idea that Apostolis Kalambakas' preoccupation with writing was not a product of a vocation since childhood but by and large a random act which, because when he first attempted it, it only hadn't left him indifferent, but actually was agreeable to him, so he repeated it. Something, that it to say, that every infant does, either sucking on his thumb, or fumbling with his genitals and whatever else might come about, but more generally, playing. And indeed, did not Apostolis' entire life and times also indicate something to that effect? Was he not an eternal infant, who meant to continue playing around indefinitely? Playing around even with matters that are «εν ού παικτοίς<sup>56</sup>»? In that sense, his work was not an “imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself<sup>57</sup>”. It was the self-same action, if we were to accept that playing is an action in itself, and an extremely serious one at that, the most serious in any case out of the unimportant ones. Because writing for Apostolis was Lego, albeit the constructs he created were from words and phrases, it was Monopoly because it monopolized his thoughts, it was hide-and-seek because he enjoyed it, hidden away, being sought after and not found, it was, finally, a bicycle since when he wrote, it was like he squealed from excitement: “Mommy, mommy, look, I'm doing it with no hands.”

So it's like that, exclaimed a visibly moved Stergiou, recognizing, as though Alexandratou was simply the clairvoyant in a spiritual convention, Panopoulos' voice from the beyond.

With the exhilaration of a prospector who hand struck gold, he continued reading:

“Of course, Alexandratou did not have and could not have access to Kalambakas' phone bills which, sometime in his mid-forties, de-

<sup>55</sup> Scientific principle according to which, when two theories present equally precise predictions, we always select the simpler one.

<sup>56</sup> Παιζω εν ου παικτοίς (to play with matters not meant to be played with): phrase attributed to Jean Chrysostome, medieval theologian and one of the early church fathers.

<sup>57</sup> Definition of tragedy by Aristotle.

Hold on a minute because even I am confused, and I'm the one who wrote it. Babis is Panopoulos alias Panourgias whom Stergiou is researching while Alexandratou is researching Apostolis Kalambakas, the protagonist of Panopoulos' novel?

An asterisk here, definitely, to indicate that it was the great, the immense politician Evangelos Venizelos who took it out of obscurity, in Parliament.

And this one that it was said by Aristotle.

And this one by the coach of the national team of Slovakia, Jozef Vengloš, but about football.

Bite your tongue you jinx! You're going to end up killing the man!



monstrated a dramatic decrease in his calls to and from fixed lines, proof of that being the, even after a long absence, fixedly lit red light on his answering machine, as well as the discontinuation of his mobile phone subscription and his resorting to prepaid cards. Nor could she access his e-mail inbox though, where nine out of ten emails were by Kotsovolos, Germanos<sup>58</sup>, Aegean Airlines, plastic surgeons suggesting a penis enlargement and Russian women attaching photos of their vagina, nor to his medical file in order to understand why, as a consequence of progressive tendonitis, early rheumatoid arthritis and, on top of that a meniscus and cruciate ligaments rupture, he suddenly stopped doing his favourite sports, particularly football.

But let's say she did.

The information however that, after his breakup with Laura sometime in his fifties, his love life had once and for all hit rock bottom, since the hope that he would find the woman of his dreams was now virtually lost, since women had deserted his wet dreams, since any appetite to look for them on social media, ogle at them on mass media or chat them up on any means of transport had all but disappeared, since his curiosity to pause and inspect them when walking past him in the street had run out, since the fruitlessness and pointlessness of this pursuit he only now realised, since, since, since... which database, which Google would contain it, which NSA would intercept it, which Wikileaks and which Snowden would leak it?

But even if they did, why should Alexandratou associate what they contained, intercepted or leaked with what had only been recorded on the hard drive of his computer (which would be near impossible to get her hands on, but even if she did, only the anti-terrorism unit would unlock it, good luck then) regarding the day, the time, the minute, the second when on his yet blank screen appeared the first letter of his work? Or even if she did make this association, why would it be considered a cause-and-effect relation and not simply a before-and-after one?

He must have been sitting for over an hour on the toilet seat, his legs, surprise surprise, now numb from not moving, when he reached the last phrase:

However, Alexandratou was not as lucky as Galileo's biographer who, by unearthing the purchase invoices for concave mirrors from a Venetian glazier, proved that it was him that invented the first telescope in 1609. Because if she was, then she would have ascertained the haste with which, much later on, the double bed was

- This is without a shadow of a doubt going too far.  
- And yet, is "do you want to see my pussy?" not something that an Aliona from Vladivostok wrote to you this morning?

+ thus the insomniac looking at the clock indicating half four in the morning, accepts that it's hopeless to struggle to sleep anymore.

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<sup>58</sup> Kotsovolos, Germanos : leading electric and electronic retailers in Greece respectively.

ordered, or the youthfully coloured cotton sheets, the modern underwear were procured, how his entire wardrobe was generally revitalized, as well as the furnishing of his bachelor pad, all of this obviously with the help of an increasingly robust bank account. Predictable, since the publicity and the self-confidence that he had conquered and acquired respectively, possibly acted, if not as a powerful aphrodisiac, at least as an allure? Inevitable, because out of all of his female readers who, following his *coming out*, came to his Facebook profile, it was not hard to imagine that some would have infiltrated, not necessarily his *bed* but, in one manner or another, his life? Indispensable, because there must have been, *time and again, someone* with whom he shared, OK, perhaps not his nights but, at worst, some of his private moments? Unfair, if it was from where he drew his material for a collection of short stories – each one with a female name for a title –, a collection which was eventually published, causing an outcry? Fair, if by material we mean nothing more than a mood, an atmosphere, random conversations, occasional grimaces, the odd shivers perhaps, the sound of someone's laughter, a moan, a silence?

Alexandratou, and she was not the only one, assumed that in this collection of his, Kalambakas reached the Alexandria Eschate<sup>59</sup> of his writing talent. Not that from that point on he did not write – though, where would he find the time to do so when social media alone took up five hours in a row a day; when his gray matter was consumed on giving interviews ad nauseam, feuding in vivo on TV studios, reacting with pleas pro domo to malicious attacks ad hominem, a fortiori, and ad personam, ruminating in *petto* over the absence of critiques; when he was seen more and more in places which in the beginning he would frequent less and less, surrounded by people with whom he previously never socialized, answered questions he had never been asked with words he had never pronounced, and generally did things that he never used to do before, and all those that he used to do he could no longer do anymore, nor could he say all that he used to say and listen to all that he used to listen. Not that no matter what he wrote could not be published, and no matter what was published of his would not be read. On the contrary, he was both read and adored and for being adored, whatever he wrote anew was published and would continue to be published uncritically and for life thanks to the indolence and inertia so typical of the *readers*. Who, lest, god forbid, they break a sweat to penetrate the world of a writer unknown to them, were willing to fork out the twelve something euros for the sequel from the one fa-

- Are you, no more no less, claiming, in other words, that famous people attract women who would otherwise never so much as turn around to look at them if they were mere mortals?

Change it to, for a more realistic effect, "every once in a while".

Enough already. Who are you, that writer, Tatsopoulos, who boasted of having gone to bed with half of Athens' female population?

I'm worried that others might have come up with this whole Latin trick too so take it out.

+ and therefore, the publishing houses.

<sup>59</sup> Alexandria Eschate, literally "Alexandria the Furthest", was a city founded by Alexander the Great, at the south-western end of the Fergana Valley in August 329 BCE. It was the most northerly outpost of the Greek Empire in Central Asia.

miliar to them, whose previous ones had successfully passed the test of last year's vacation, had kept them company aboard the **ship** or at the beach, had stood by them at the hospital, had been their sleeping pill at night. Who cared if by doing that they were digging his grave as a writer, Alexandratou had the nerve to observe, herself never having missed a single premiere of a Woody Allen film, no matter how much the critics might have 'slated' it, just because erstwhile she had been left feeling in awe by *Manhattan*. That's about the time she places, with the accuracy of the method of radioactive isotope C-14, Kalambakas slipping into a type of writing that is seemingly identical to before, only now he does it on demand whereas before it was spontaneous.

Round about that time, she also dates his tendency towards **carelessness**. It is much more evident with restaurateurs. While, after the grand opening, they start with the best of intentions using fresh and pure ingredients in the food they serve the customer, cooking it slowly on a low fire, heating it on bain-marie, warning the customer that the sea bream is not fresh out the sea but rather straight off the hatchery, treating him to tsipouro<sup>60</sup> and halva<sup>61</sup>, well, it's only human nature after all, especially if the hype and brouhaha run wild, for them to eventually rest on their laurels, resorting more and more to frozen vegetables, Knorr stock cubes, canned dolma and micro-waving.

A tendency that even the various institutions, clubs, academies that award him, trendy bookstores that invite him and reporters who interview him maintain and fuel but couldn't care less. Nor would they, even if they had known how much they deprive him of his oxygen and his petrol of its octanes: of the uncertainty, the doubt, that is, of whether all that he writes is simply a load of rubbish and total nonsense. From the moment anything he writes is construed as intelligent or even brilliant, when the excited "oh my", the ecstatic "wow" far outweigh the reserved "look at that", it all goes to his head. What was once a forgivable habit – to sometimes act like a smart aleck, to infer the **general** from the specific, to deduce the specific out of the general, to decry social ills, to preach and **teach**, to get out of line and challenge public opinion – now turns into his annoying trademark. He exhibits an unforgivable negligence in the editing of his texts, disregarding the duds that are right under his nose. It is only to be expected since the rule is no longer the since, the because, the provided that or the on account of this, but the why not, the come now, the who cares, the see you later, the oh brother.

Oh, please, who reads on a ship anymore? They're all stuck to their smartphones.

It's you doing that, more like, because the finale is approaching.

Infer and deduce are already the general out of the specific and the specific out of the general.

I did all that without even realizing it?

<sup>60</sup> Pomace brandy.

<sup>61</sup> Popular flour-based sweet confection.

He does not weed out with an herbicide the eternal enemies of every writer, the this, the that, the which, the and, the said, the did, the put, the had, resulting in them spreading all over the place like noxious weeds. He underestimates his readers' intelligence by inexcusably laying out after a word all of its synonyms as well, or attaching in front of a noun a truckload of adjectives. He overestimates their patience, extending his sentences or smothering them in **metaphors**. In interviews of that period on YouTube, Alexandratou ascertains, he completely makes a mess of it all, vanity practically coming out of his ears. In vain, he struggles to discard it. It has now become second nature to him.

The last word of his last novel whose last paragraph, for history's sake, is:

"...it never crosses anyone's mind that the swim in the sea he goes for, the kiss he gives, the film at the cinema he watches, the goal he scores, the sunset he gazes out toward, the kokoretsi<sup>62</sup> he eats, might possibly be the last ones in his entire life. But Kalambakas, if there's anything he realises with cast-iron certainty, it's that he's writing the last word of the last phrase of his last novel. It's on the day when, out of the blue, he asks for a divorce from his style. Shouting, screaming, crying, a whole uproar ensues. They have become, he says, one of those couples that are at each other's throats but who won't get a divorce for the sake of the children. They first met on a blind date when he was attempting to write his first lines. That same night, they had a roll in the hay, something both **tacitly** described as a one-night **stand**. Which would end up in a forced, due to procreation, marriage. Nowadays he could not even stand to look at it. It was time for them to go their separate ways. Get it through your head, he says, when it asks him for explanations, that I am but a writer for one and only novel, a novel that has already been written, and that the rest were not and are not and will not be anything but variations of it. Which there is no point in writing since the question of how they come from my **innards** have already answered, and the certainty of not knowing beforehand which shape they will take afterward I have lost. Much like the joy of meeting up again with the text every morning, mixed with the curiosity of whether it will react to my hinting, the apprehension about whether the transplant, with myself as the donor, which I sewed into it the previous day was rejected as a foreign body, if the ideas I fed it, instead of being digested, caused a bellyache, the words I added, an anaphylactic shock. But also the horniness of a stallion that only

If you are referring to ex-nobelists you should speak it boldly.

+ and tactfully

- ?????  
- That's the way I see the meeting between the writer and his style.

Too heart-rending. It sounds too much like an ANTENNA TV serial. At least add "deep within me".

<sup>62</sup> Kokoretsi is a dish, consisting of lamb or goat intestines wrapped around seasoned offal, including sweetbreads, hearts, lungs, or kidneys, and typically grilled.

moments earlier ejaculates and still gets a **hard-on**, the longing of the seaman to open his sails for different lands, for other seas after his feet had barely touched land, of the footballer who just returned from the World Cup and cannot wait to throw himself into the Champions League and of the nerdy **student** who is tired of being on holiday and cannot wait to go back to school, Kalambakas writes those very days.”

Something doesn't smell right here, Stergiou exclaims, flushing the toilet. He means the last paragraph of the last novel by Panopoulos. It doesn't add up, dammit! He thinks him capable of everything, as long as he writes. Because, how in the hell is he going to be filling up his 'hollow' days from here on out? His waking up at the crack of dawn? His empty mind? His summer leaves? His pensioner days that are fast approaching? What, he's filling his little notepad up for nothing? All are questions regarding which Alexandratou plays possum, as if she's gifting them to the poor student who one day will take on the dissertation on Panopoulos. It will be, as we all know, Stergiou. Who strongly believes that it's easier, for instance, to leave the Eurozone and go back to the drachma than to leave writing if you've been infected by its bug. And what does the monster suggest? Nothing more and nothing less than the fact that with the infamous paragraph which is far from the final one of his life, crafty<sup>63</sup> Panopoulos succeeds in killing two birds with one stone: On the one hand, he moves in a hurry his own self out of the way, like a show does with its protagonist due to her pregnancy. And that because he has made a complete mess of it all. On the other hand, he continues to write. Incognito though. Only like that can he be himself. Only like that is he not forced into a continuous staging of a more socially acceptable facade. He is going to write many more novels. He disdains publishing them. It's the epitome of mastur-writing. They are lost forever, because, quite simply, they are imprinted on the hard drive of his computer which, when, God willing, the end comes, no one is able to open without a password.

It's a matter of whether it passes censorship.

Get it through your thick head, we're doing literature, not a display of similes.

Yes, but what exactly does mastur-writing mean? Writing with the intention of self-satisfaction or writing a whole load of bullshit, the reader will reasonably ask.

You have the green light. There are no answers on the internet on this.

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<sup>63</sup> Wordplay between crafty (πανούργος panourgos) and Panourgias.

## Epilogue

Much like any dissertation that does not content itself by simply muddling through things, regurgitating and at best confirming already acknowledged findings, but which instead aspires to reach the marrow, Stergiou's one passed through many stages before finally being presented in front of a board of professors of his university, stages which we presented above, as we consider how they present a certain epistemic interest. Its reception was at minimum lukewarm. Stergiou's obsessive emphasis on an obsolete and vulgar biographism, which did not even, as one would expect, rely on evidence drawn from Panopoulos' biography but on arbitrary interpretations of it through the form of Apostolis, provoked a highly negative impression. Distressing - his almost detective-like research of all the *dessous* on the how, the why, the where, the when and the whence of his work. Pathetic - his psychologizing and thoughtless radiographic focus on it. Considering it differently then, instead of a monography, a hagiography, there was no way, not even as a joke, he was told off. By researching him, he had identified with him so much, thus turning into his most passionate supporter, so he was admonished. It was obvious, he was reproached, that he had become a victim of a syndrome similar not so much to Stockholm, where the hostages end up developing an emotional attachment to their kidnapers, but more so of embedded reporters, whose news reports are scandalously friendly towards the entity that accredited them. What was expected from a dissertation of a School of Philosophy in name but of Philology in essence, – the purely literary analysis of a piece of work – had conversely, he was reprimanded, inexplicably been brushed aside, brutally underestimated. Not a single word about Panopoulos' literary influences. Complete silence about his contribution to Greek literature. Not a peep as to what his novelty was all about. He was barely given a pass. Not a mention about publishing a paper in an authoritative magazine. A pure wreck, he abandoned the premises in a hurry, crossed the campus surrendered to his thoughts and made his way towards Kaisariani<sup>64</sup>. That same night, he would be writing the first line in what was bound to become his first novel. His subject of choice – the life and work of someone there was nothing to indicate he would become a writer.

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<sup>64</sup> Suburb in Athens where the University campus is situated.