

Look at that

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Athens 2019

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A few words about the author: see Ch. 6, pg. 20

Summary: see preface and ch. 2

Main idea: see last phrase of the epilogue

FAQ: see Ch. 22





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 parapaxis¹, 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.

¹ 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 – Babis² 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.

² 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!

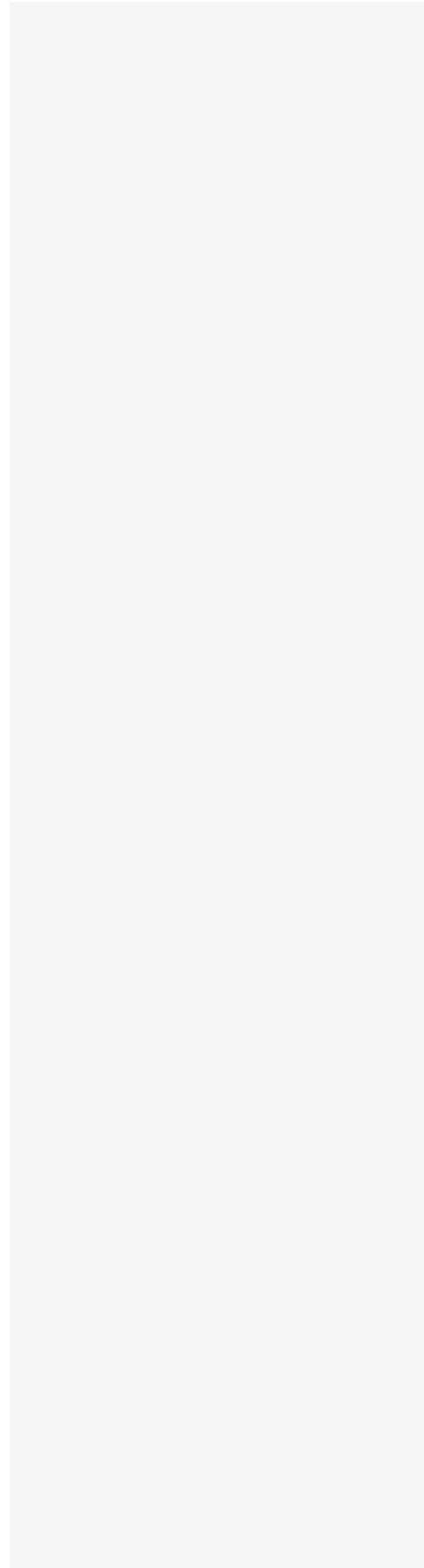
1) It's called a wheeled bag and 2) it can't be that a) she's pulling the bag down the stairs, and you can hear the click clack (?) of her heels, and b) whether she dumped him or not, why doesn't he carry it down for her?

- 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!”

Ipsa 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 neogracus.

- 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 empathy³ 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”

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

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