

# **A Time for Heroes**

**Pol Koutsakis**

A YA thriller

*She locked the door and pushed a chair behind it, just in case. This time nothing would stop her. Not her parents – absent as usual – nor her brother who didn't give a damn, nor her friends, if she could call them that, those girls she sometimes hanged out with at school. And certainly not Him, who never paid any attention to her. Who passed by her daily as if she were invisible, as if she didn't exist.*

*She walked out, to the balcony. A scorching sun, as if its purpose was to stop you from thinking. To allow you to let go. An ideal ally. And an ideal height. And she. An ideal suicide. A symphony of perfection.*

*Rea Andreou. 1997-2013. Daughter, sister, pupil, tennis player, hooked on her iPhone, ex-fan of Farmville, with 22 Facebook friends, teenager, lonesome, still a virgin – unfortunately. Saw the whole twenty-first century thus far and it didn't make an impression on her. Actually, it freaked her out completely. And she decided to stop hanging around with it. She was scared, of course. Her hands trembled. But she was sure of her decision. Rea Andreou. In a couple of minutes she would no longer be.*

*Third floor. Not too high to feel giddy, not too low, so as to survive and be a laughing stock for failing even to kill yourself.*

*She stepped toward the edge, took a deep breath, stretched out her hands and... she saw her. At the balcony right opposite, through the glass pane. Between them, just the narrow lane separating the two buildings.*

*A girl the same age as Rea, with hands up in the air, was struggling to protect herself from the stabs of a guy who was storming at her. A girl whom Rea knew all too well.*

*Rea opened her mouth to cry for help, but it was already too late. She had started. She had started to fall.*

# 1

Since the day my dad was fired, about a year ago, my parents' relationship has picked up for good. The constant nagging, the fights and their obvious efforts to avoid each other as much as possible are gone. All of a sudden they started talking in whispers, going out on nightly romantic strolls, holding hands in the car as they listened to songs of Julio Iglesias, who – I had to discover – is some Latin singer of the previous century. And hard as they try not to make noise at night, our rooms happen to be adjacent – can't they guess I can hear them? I'd never imagine that getting the axe could be so beneficial to adult relationships.

As for me, my dad's sacking wasn't exactly the best that could've happened. Yes, I'm glad my parents have made up again. But I lost the privilege of being all alone at home, for hours on end, every day. My mom works mornings and afternoons and my dad, who's an engineer, had worked for a construction company, one of those big ones which close down one after the other because of the crisis, and as he didn't have fixed working hours he'd be away everyday for as long as was needed. Now, he never leaves the house, he's like an extra pillow on the sofa, and mom rushes home after work so that they won't miss a moment of being together. Plus, their behavior towards me has rather changed for the worse. While once the one had tried to saddle me on the other ("Take him to his German class", "Who shall fetch George's report from school?", "You'll let him get back from the party alone in the dark? Chania isn't like old times, we've turned into a jungle like the rest of the country, anything can happen!") and whoever took up the duty did it to pass for a martyr, now they both try to get rid of me, so that they can... do whatever it is that they wish to do in any case – it's very difficult for me to imagine my parents together in bed, even when they were younger, let alone now, that they both won't see forty-seven again.

What's worst, of course, with my dad's dismissal, is our making ends meet. My mom works as a secretary at a lawyer's office, and she brings home a modest salary. So, this past year we slowly gnawed away the leftovers in the bank, from the dough dad had been earning during the good years. These days, all he brings home is some crumbs from the unemployment benefit, but rumour has it that the state may soon not be able to pay even such pittance. But my parents are so caught up in their romance, that they don't seem terribly concerned about our situation. My dad got rid of his mobile, cancelled our satellite subscription, gave up his drives with his jeep which takes up too much fuel and his outings for a drink with his mates, and has settled for a slower Internet connection. My mom visits her beauty parlour and hairdresser less frequently, has stopped buying from the best shops in town and only rarely goes to Zara, has started hanging our laundry outside the verandah instead of putting it in the tumble dryer and has informed my sister, who is studying at the National Technical University of Greece in Athens, to land some part-time job because she can't keep leeching off mom and dad. Well, mom didn't mention the "leeching off" part but she should have. I can understand that all these changes don't bother them much, especially when their mind is constantly on sex. But I can't forgive them for the humiliation they made me feel two months ago at the private German school, when my teacher took me aside at the end of the lesson and told me that they had called at home a number of times and my parents keep saying that they'll come to pay but they're already four months in arrears and if I could please just remind them. I got back home, slammed my backpack on the table, and told them I don't need no *Mittelstufenprüfung*, my German is fine, and I'm quitting. They listened to me with heads bent – I liked that, having so clearly the upper hand for once – and they told me they'd go pay the next day. I've no inkling of how they found the money, but they did. It will be interesting to see what they'll do next year, when I'll definitely need to prepare for the university entrance exams.

That night, after I erupted, I started feeling bad for having spoken so roughly to them. It was then that I decided I too would do something to help with the money-problem at home, earning enough so that at least I wouldn't burden them with my personal expenses this year. Stamatis, the guy I sit next to at school, has an uncle Menios who's the owner of Ecstasy, the number one strip club in Chania, in an alley of the Maheradika\*, a neighbourhood near the harbour. The area has kept its name, though few shops still remain which make Cretan daggers. Ecstasy is the only shop in town that the crisis hasn't touched. It never saw its clientele drop, because it mostly depends on American soldiers from the Naval Base, but also on local moneybags. Stamatis had told me that every now and then he'd earn his dough by going to Ecstasy before daybreak, to sweep up the place and wash glasses and ashtrays. He owed me big time, since I had introduced him to Hara, his girlfriend who is admittedly just a bit all too gorgeous for him and Stamatis displays her all over the city always arm-in-arm and strutting about like a cock - so I asked him to put me in touch with his uncle. Menios took a liking to me, so I found myself thrice a week, behind my parents' back, earning my pocket-money at Ecstasy before getting to school – much better money and a more pleasant environment than that other option I had, to work as a souvlaki wrapper at a gyro shop called The Gyro Shop, in the Koumpes district. My parents think I'm off to early morning training with my school volleyball team, of which I'm the playmaker, and they admire me for my devotion to the sport I love. That I no longer ask them for money doesn't seem to raise any questions in their mind – it's just fine with them that they have more time for one another, in my absence.

What's good about my job at Ecstasy is that, money apart, I've also come to know the girls working at the club and some of them don't mind talking to me with the little English that they know – they're all from the Eastern block – about their personal story, all the

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\* The name "Maheradika" comes from the word "Maheri", which means knife in Greek.

while as I clean. They have a drink, smoke and speak to me. Often enough, I feel as if they aren't talking to me but to themselves, as if they're trying to remember and understand all that has happened to them. I very much like listening to their stories, however sad some of these are, because I feel that I truly *learn* from them, that they help me to better understand the world. If these girls came and talked to us once in a while at school, perhaps our six hours at the desk, day in-day out, would not be so unbearably boring. And much as they would run the risk of some horny teenager lunging at them on seeing such sex-bombs, whatever ensued would be much less hideous than the scenes with the disgusting old men who, ignoring the rules of the club, grab and lick the girls top to bottom while they lap dance for them. I think it's exactly such images that have helped me view Ecstasy differently than Stamatis, and refrain from doing anything more than chatting with the girls. For Stamatis, until he met Hara, Ecstasy was like a pastry shop where, invited inside, he could treat himself to whatever his heart desired. Me, as much as I enjoy the company of these girls, I like to know that the serving I taste belongs to me only.

One hitch with the job at Ecstasy is that the shop doesn't always close at the same time. Sometimes the last clients leave at five, other times at five-thirty and when some are in high spirits or have extra appetites and remain locked in the upper rooms with a girl, it could even close at six. This makes it difficult to get the place clean before eight o' clock, and I have been marked absent for the first hour at school quite a few times. I'd have a hell of a problem if my parents got wind of it, but a solution did crop up. One of the regulars at the club happens to be a doctor, head of a medical clinic at the hospital of Chania, and Menios asked him as a favour to excuse some of my absences. To avoid the trouble of having to give me medical notes every now and then, the good doc signed, some daybreak, twenty of them explaining how grave my condition is, with the dates left blank, and saved my butt.

Today is one of those mornings when, not only can I not be on time for the morning prayer and the usual larking around which precedes our first hour in class, but I also lose all sense of time as I chat with Aria, an eighteen year-old Ukranian brunette who made her debut tonight on stage and has a pair of legs which don't seem to end anywhere. Unless I do my best Usain Bolt impression I may miss the second class hour as well, so I start off with a quick step going up the Katolas, break into a sturdy sprint along Eleftheriou Venizélou, pass in front of the banks, the driving schools, the parking lot which has replaced the old "Regina" cinema, the once thriving gyro shop that brought down its shutters a few days ago, and at the corner of Korai and Eleftheriou Venizelou I'm confronted with a familiar scene. Perched on the one side of the road are three gypsy brats, eight to ten years old, waiting for the traffic light to go red so as to burst with their brushes and clean the windcreens of the passing cars, whether the drivers want them to or not. The logic behind this is that even if they initially refuse, they could soften on seeing the kids' endeavours, and fling them some penny.

I know the little rogues, and I'm glad to see them playing and cracking jokes while the light's still green. They have a better time here, in their freedom, than they would at the primary schools their parents went to enroll them and all hell broke loose by the parents' and guardians' associations which didn't want their kids to play with gypsies. When the same statement was made, recently, by certain German parents who didn't want their kids to be schoolmates with Greeks in Germany, all the hounds of hell were set loose against the German racists as soon as the news got to Greece.

Across the road, a forty-year old Romanian named Cosmin sits on the pavement wrapped in a tattered blanket. There is a cardboard stretched in front of his face, which reads:

I HAVE A 3-YEAR OLD LITTLE GIRL  
OUR HOUSE BURNT DOWN IN ROUMANIA

I HAVE A HEART PROBLEM  
AND CANNOT FIND A JOB

BE WELL

My night's pay at Ecstasy comes to twenty-four euros, four of which I always save for Cosmin. I have also written the text on his cardboard. Cosmin doesn't know Greek, and few could understand the broken English he had written on his old cardboard. Cosmin has taken me to his place, near the harbour, a single-storey tumbledown house with just one room and a bathroom with only a basin. He stays there with his wife and daughter, Bella, who is sweet enough to eat. Until you discover that she has the same murderous heart atrophy as has her dad and all you want to do is to burst into tears, and never stop crying.

I've asked Cosmin why he doesn't write about Bella on his cardboard, as the illness of a child can do more to touch people's heart.

"I don't write this because I want nothing to exist to remind me of it," he replied.

As soon as he sees me, Cosmin puts down his cardboard and beckons me to approach. He seems troubled.

"Morning, Cosmin. I'm in great hurry, I'm late," I tell him in English and show him the time.

"I must tell you!" he shouts, which is a bit odd for Cosmin.

"Pal, I'm late, really, can we speak when I'm out for break?"

"No! Now!" he tells me and takes me by the hand. "I've news for you from the future!"

Here we go again.

"I dreamt of you last night. And it was no good dream," he tells me.



Cosmin is a great guy, but he is a bit softheaded. He believes he can see the future in his sleep, but only for those he loves. From the moment he decided that I belong in that group, he has already twice told me about the future – his first oracle was that we’d win the cup for this year’s school volleyball competition, and the other that I’d very soon be an item with the girl of my dreams. Judging by the accuracy of his second prediction, I wouldn’t be too hopeful about our championship. Apart from his wife, no one else in his neighbourhood – which is chockablock with immigrants – actually believes in Cosmin’s gift, and he has no way to convince them of his abilities, since he doesn’t love any of them.

“It wasn’t a good dream? Which means?” I ask him.

“Can’t remember well, remember only that you in danger, very much danger, and you were trying to hold on something so you not fall.”

“Perhaps you had a bit too much to eat last night?” I ask him and pat him gently on the back. His disappointed look makes me feel terrible.

“I’m kidding! Thanks for the warning, I’ll be careful.”

“You can be very careful, but this is the future for you, it can’t change. Try not fall.”

“OK, see you in the afternoon, when the bell rings,” I tell him and am on my way.

I turn at Korai Street and cross the road until I bypass the primary schools so as to enter from the ancient central gateway of our lyceum. The time is ten to nine, just when we go inside after the first break. As I approach, however, I stop short – something seems not to be right. Instead of Nondas, the guy in charge of the canteen, standing outside the gate and puffing his usual cig, there are, just outside the gate, two parked ambulances. And the whole school is either around the quadrangle or on the pavement. Before I even get the chance to ask what this is all about, I see Mr. Zandas, our math teacher, coming out on the first stretcher. And Vardis Stephanides – the Beast, as everyone knows him at school – stretched unconscious on the second. Pupils hanging around in groups stop the chatter for a

while, so that they may all stare as the two exit from the central gateway and enter the ambulance, and then the chatter continues with renewed interest. Various rumours about what has happened are spreading like wildfire from one end of the school to the other.

I join the talk, to find out.

It is possible that the details of the story I hear may contain plenty of imagination and as much exaggeration, but everybody agrees on the basics of what happened. Class B4, to which the Beast belonged, had math for the first hour. Zandas announced the first trimester exam marks, and the Beast had been given a two. Two out of a hundred, since Zandas loves grading in percentages to remind everyone that he's studied in the US. For some reason, that two percent had annoyed the Beast. I say "for some reason" because the Beast's average grade in exams ranges from zero to five – out of twenty – and the five is given to him by the theology teacher, who happens to be his aunt. I mean to say that with that two percent, Zandas didn't much spoil the Beast's grade targets. It's the third year that the Beast is going through the second class of lyceum, and one would expect that at least out of experience, he'd do a little bit better, but no ways. The fourth year is coming with mathematical accuracy.

As soon as the bell rang, Zandas entered the corridor on his way to the teachers' room, but hadn't had the chance to take a few steps when the Beast appeared before him. Now there, at that point, there are a number of versions as to what happened. Some say that they squabbled, in other words exchanged insults, since the Beast isn't the best of the school's orators. Some say that Zandas simply ignored him and tried to bypass the Beast sideways. Some others say that the Beast threatened Zandas but he refused to change the grade, yet others support that the Beast didn't beat about the bush with words and pounced immediately. The eyewitnesses may disagree on what was said, but all agree with what followed next: Zandas is not taller than one sixty five, hunchback and scarcely seventy

kilos, and the Beast is one ninety, with abnormally large shoulders, head of a wild swine, and had already gone beyond a hundred kilos before he'd learn to add, at age thirteen. The Beast raised Zandas up with one arm to bring him to equal altitude and then headed him, growling: "I'll waste you". Theoretically, such a declaration would have led bystanders to try to save Zandas, but the particular teacher isn't much liked at school, not even by his colleagues, and no one wished to challenge the Beast. So, everybody stood still and positioned themselves to watch the murder. With the Beast's second header, there was the sound of a crack issuing from the skull of Zandas, who lost consciousness, but it seemed that the Beast really meant his threat. He bent his head back ready for the final death blow. At that point, he felt a hand clutching his shoulder. The hand belonged to Nick Evans, my best friend.

From the moment that Nick appeared on the scene and thereafter, stories begin to enter the realm of myth, as everyone has their own say as to what exactly happened. I wasn't myself there unfortunately, and Nick is so talkative that he could easily star in the silent movies that my dad enjoys watching – I think they were shot more than a century ago give and take, so they should only be kept in museums, but they're still available on DVD for the old-timers. Now Nick is again at the back part of the school, on his beloved bench, and is busy reading one of the numerous literature books of his collection – I see him at the far end, stretched face down as usual, with his feet sticking out in the air. Behind him, the two little walls between the railing display anything from graffiti and anarchist slogans to drawings of hearts bearing promises of eternal love. I'm sure that if I go and ask him about the Beast, he'll say, "Nothing too exciting happened" – that's what he always says about things that happen to him – and he'll just go on reading. So, I decide to talk to Nick later and rely on a couple of girls who were eyewitnesses and whom I more or less trust. I say "more or less" because I don't know anyone of our age who doesn't even a weeny bit

overstate things so as to put some dramatic emphasis on what they say, but at least the girls seem to be a bit more down-to-earth, while we boys have a crazy need to project and self-affirm ourselves, bar Nick, who has no need for anything.

The girls tell me that Nick held the Beast from the shoulder and told him: “Vardis, that’s enough”. The Beast turned, saw him, and blurted out through his teeth something like, “Piss off, pinhead,” and was about to draw back. Nick squeezed his shoulder tighter, at one of those points that only Nick knows, and the Beast started bending. In his foaming frenzy, he decided to change the direction of his header and pounce on Nick instead of the fainted Zandas, who now resembled a doll as the Beast continued to hold him in his burly hands. Nick raised his hand at a level where the Beast’s head would connect with his stretched-out elbow. The Beast screamed in agony, but he hadn't won his nickname by chance. Even thus, wounded and bleeding, he made a final try. He drew his knife from his backpocket and, dizzy, flicked it in Nick’s direction, forcing my buddy to finish him off with a kick in the head.

It goes without saying that the girls relating the incident melt even as they just mention Nick’s name. They are not the only ones at school who feel this way.

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From the first moment Nick Evans stepped into our classroom, mid-year of 1<sup>st</sup> lyceum class, we all felt that a star had arrived. Not just because he looked so damn different – all-blond, with blue eyes and a few freckles on his face, he stuck out like a sore thumb from among us dark and brown-complexioned Cretans but also from the blondish Balkan immigrants, who are also dark-skinned. It was not so much the complexion which screamed out that Nick wasn’t like us, but especially that distant look of his, the one which only special people have, not like that snobby look of stuck-up bozos, but that which is

simply *different*, as if he's elsewhere, preoccupied with questions which escape us common mortals.

This aura of a star was not apparently noticed by our philology teacher, whom none would mention by her surname, we all called her The Hag. Or maybe she had noticed it, but had come to believe that it only sprung from his appearance.

The Hag – short, fat, with moles on her face, despises even the air she breathes – entered the classroom that day, saw the new pupil sitting at the last row of desks and assumed she had discovered yet another candidate victim of hers.

“Let's hear from... Let's hear from... Let mister Evans tell us,” she said with a smile stretched from one cheek to the other, after waving the pages of her notepad this way and that, for quite some time.

That sarcastic little smile, I'd like to know, do they teach them that at the university? “You shall become teachers, try to be as disgusting as possible?” Or do they acquire it along the way, like a virus with which they infect one another? Maybe the second is true, because we do have teachers who have escaped the virus, and who make us feel cool the moment they enter class.

“Good morning,” replied Nick, looking at her straight in the eyes.

He had sat at the last desk because it was the only one that wasn't occupied – the girls who usually sit there were playing truant, yet once more. Nick's look was absolutely calm, he seemed not to be afraid of The Hag, and that made me anxious – The Hag lived so that she may terrorize us, how would she react in the face of someone who was bold enough not to blanch when she questioned him?

“You've been transferred here, right?” she asked.

“Yes, just today.”

“From which school?”

“From the Lyceum of Paleochora.”

The Hag’s eyes sparkled – the new victim was not just a foreigner, he was also a peasant-boy. It would be all too easy for her to take his scalp. Silence prevailed over the class, as always during The Hag’s lesson, but this was an electrified silence – we felt as if we were in a Roman arena, watching the lion pounce on the Christian.

“Paleochora... Right. I hope you like our school and that you shall be able to cope. Does the name ‘Seferis’ tell you anything? Have you been taught him?”

“Yes.”

“What does that ‘yes’ refer to? Does it tell you anything or have you been taught him?”

“It tells me something.”

“Aha, it tells you something. You know, ‘it tells me something’ does not suffice here. I don’t know if it is enough for the Lyceum of Paleochora, but here it is definitely not sufficient. What is demanded here is in-depth knowledge.”

Nick looked at her without any apparent sign of concern on his face. I was starting to think that he simply didn’t care, he’d just get his round zero for this test and wouldn’t give a damn, like so many of my fellow-pupils.

“Apart from the opprobrium pertaining to the Lyceum of Paleochora, have you any question to pose me on Seferis?” he told her, without at all raising the tone of his voice. Even those few half-asleep pupils opened their eyes wide apart and stuck them on Nick. The girls, already super-impressed by his appearance, seemed to be holding their breath. Some boys nudged those sitting next to them, asking what that “opprobrium pertaining to” could mean.

“There was no element of opprobrium in my words, and be careful what you say if you want us to get on well. I do not tolerate that kind of behaviour in my class. Do we understand one another?”

Nick did not respond.

“*Do we understand one another, mister Evans?*” she asked him again.

“Certainly. I await your question on Seferis.”

“You are waiting for the question, then. Fine. Seferis has written a famous poem, allegorical, against the dictatorship.”

She was asking him on something we’d learn next year in literature! I knew it from friends, older ones, who had been hassled by that poem in the second class of lyceum. I was about to open my mouth to protest politely, but Nick spoke before me.

“The ‘Over Aspalathus Bushes’...” he told her.

“Ye-es,” replied The Hag, the surprise unmistakable in her voice.

“It was published in *The Tribune*, three days after the death of Seferis, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September in 1971.”

The Hag was starting to turn pale, but insisted.

“I never asked for historical data, it’s literature we’re doing here. Do you perhaps happen to know any line from the poem?”

*“Sounio looked beautiful  
that day of the Annunciation  
in spring once again.  
Scanty green leaves  
around the rusted stones  
the red earth and aspalathus bushes  
ready, showing their long needles*

*and yellow flowers.*

*Far off the ancient columns,*

*strings of a harp*

*echoing still...*

*Tranquility.*

*– What may have reminded me of that Ardieus?*

*A word from Plato I suppose, lost in the furrows*

*of the mind;*

*the name of the yellow bush*

*has not changed since then.*

*At night I found the passage:*

*‘They tied him hand and foot,’ it says*

*‘threw him down and skinned him*

*dragged him aside and slashed him*

*on the thorns of the aspalathus*

*and went and threw him down Tartarus, a rag.’*

*Thus in the nether world he paid for his sins*

*Ardieus of Pamfylia, the wretched Tyrant.”*

It wasn't just that this guy recited all of it. It was also how he said it. Right through to the word "Tranquillity" he had been able to convey just that with his voice, and from that point on he changed his tone completely, as if bitten by an African bee, gradually gathering such anger as if he could see the dictators before him, as if he was spitting in their face



with the final line. I glanced to my right and saw Anna, one of the chilliest and snootiest chicks of the class, looking like she was ready to jump on him and rape him. The Hag made one or two of her attempts again, asking him about Seferis' creative capabilities and the poetic technique he used, but it was obvious that she too knew she'd get the answers. The *perfect* answers. And when she did actually get them, she played her last card, just in case she'd save the hand.

“I see you know the ‘Over Aspalathus Bushes’ well, mister Evans. Obviously it so happened that you’ve read it, and in any case it’s all too famous. But Greece has many great poets, not just Seferis. Could you refer to some other poem against tyranny, written by a significant Greek poet?”

“One of my favourite is Kalvos' ode, ‘To Hagarenes’. That’s if we speak of tyranny in literal terms. But if we speak metaphorically, then Cavafy, let’s say, wrote: ‘*Perhaps the light will prove another tyranny. Who knows what new things it will expose?*’.”

The Hag bit herself so as not to smile, but her look was just too all-revealing. It showed that she was ready to shove Anna aside so that she'd be the first to jump on him. The Hag was in love, and she has remained so since then, also gradually changing her attitude towards the rest of us, a bit for the better.

The taming of the shrew.

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The third and fourth hours flow rather quietly. Talk about what happened naturally goes on, but it's now more subdued – school-life gradually returns to its boring routine. The third hour we have history, where the teacher enters the classroom, starts scribbling on the board his pre-prepared notes right through till his lesson is over, and then exits, and the next hour we have Natural Resources Management, where our teacher hands out an article for us to read and explains that she's going to examine us on that, in a week's time.

Luckily, I sit by the window and from the second floor I can gaze at the classes having physical education and admire the girls playing volley, while both we and our teachers continue pretending that we're having a lesson.

We've said very few things with Nick about what happened with the Beast. Making him talk is like squeezing blood out of a stone, as usual. "I did what I had to," he says and switches subject, asking me if I'd like to take a stroll to the sea after school. It's true that the weather's fantastic, it's the first time for as long as I can remember that it hasn't rained at all in February, and the temperature is stuck to over twenty five, but I don't fix anything with him, because I've so much on my plate – tomorrow there's an Ancient Greek test coming which, unlike him, I don't have at my finger-tips. Nick seems to be very much shut in himself today and I don't expect us to get together again till lunch, but by the fifth break I see him getting up from his bench and stride towards me. I'm at the volleyball court as usual during breaks, we regular team-members are practicing with the reserves. Play-offs for the school championship are approaching, and we still aren't ready for them, our automatisms don't work and I'm starting to worry. Nick signals to me that he wants to talk, I signal to him, "now?", he nods, so I hand over my position to the reserve setter and I find Nick by the tap, where he's waiting.

"I have news, and it's not good," he whispers, while I fill my cupped hands with water and splash it on my face to cool myself.

I look at him in silence. I know he means it, because Nick is not the type to crack jokes. In his list of merits humour found neither the means, nor the space, to nestle.

"Rea. She's made a suicide attempt," he says.

## 2.

Nick's black PIAGGIO BEVERLY 300 makes it well and easy on the uphill to the hospital. I get off and wish to dash towards the central entrance, but control myself. I wait for Nick to park and come with me. I control myself for two reasons. The first is that I'd expose myself if I went alone to her room, where her parents and the rest of her family will be, together with their friends and who knows who else, and who'd all be fixing their curious eyes on me. The second reason is that I know full well who it is that Rea would want to see right this moment. And that's Nick, not me.

Rea Andreou is, since the first class of highschool when I got to know her, the love of my life. And each year that goes by simply makes me want her even more, instead of helping me forget her. With each change in her appearance, from goth to emo, from emo to punk and from punk to trendy, from little studs on eyebrows, nose and mouth to her present look which is clear of all piercings, from a twelve-year old to a chick with curves who had an affair with one of the most pathetic turds who ever stepped onto our school – thank heavens she dumped him – I felt the void in my heart ever widening. Each one of my brief affairs with other girls made me feel how deeply I missed Rea. Is it possible to miss someone who was never yours? It is, as I've discovered.

Of course, she never pays any attention to me, in fact we have gradually moved from the “good morning” and the simple chats we had at highschool to not talking at all. A sure and logical cut, since Rea has no reason to talk to me and I have no breath to do so when I pass by her, because I feel that something shall explode inside me if I stand too near and feel those huge, sweet brown eyes looking at me. Recently, I have very often caught her stealing a glance in my direction, the exact same way as I've been doing the last four years – only I soon realized that she'd only look when I was with Nick, and not ever when I was alone. Mister Evans has yet again worked his miracle, he has cast a spell on another girlish

heart, and I can't smash his face, because he's not to blame for it. Nick doesn't give hopes to any of the schoolgirls, but they continue to want him like crazy, to leave love-letters on his desk, bras and panties in his bag, their phone-number on some book he reads. A chick from B3 found out which gym he frequents, waited till Nick hit the showers, burst into the locker room and wrapped the key to her place in his boxer shorts, with instructions on times and days when she'd be alone. On the other side of the scrap of paper with the instructions, she'd done a collage with pictures of Nick – some from last year, with long hair, and other current ones with hair cropped military-style – which were arranged so as to form the word "LOVE". Lucy, one of the most far-out of girls in our class, went one step further. One day, she waited for him to enter the toilet, followed him from behind, bolted the door and told him: "Tell me what you want to do to me". Nick replied "Basically I want to piss," and forced her out. When he related it to me, his mouth didn't wince a bit, while I was laughing my heart out. I don't think he understood why it seemed so funny to me.

Apart from being handsome, I think it's Nick's tendency to isolate himself and talk little which makes him so mysterious and charming in the eyes of the girls – the exact opposite to me, that is. I never quit talking when I'm around them, trying to impress them but rarely managing to. American flicks are to blame, they have built up the illusion that women want someone to enchant them with his brains, regardless of his looks. Women want someone good-looking and serious who doesn't talk to them, so that they may sit and fantasize about what he could be thinking of, that's what I know. Of course, girls at our school have no chance with Nick, but I can't tell them that, because only I know Nick's secret, and I don't intend to spill the beans.

We enter the hospital. The seat behind the window with the sign which says “Information” is vacant. Oh, how unusual. Luckily, Nick has found out that Rea is in the Orthopaedic Section, so we follow the signs. This section is on the third floor, and I have no time for the elevator. I take the stairs and start running up the staircase. Nick huffs and pants protesting about my choice, but follows. A moment later we face the secretariat of the Section, and by now it is me who huffs and puffs, from the exertion, while Nick stands beside me without a drop of sweat on his face.

The nurse at the secretariat shows us where A8, Rea’s room, is located. This morning I hadn’t seen her at school and was desperate to find out what had happened, if she had fallen ill, if she was playing truant, if she was with someone, if she was kissing him... How could I have possibly imagined? As we approach, I feel my stomach tighten and my head a bit fuzzy which always happens when I’m over-anxious – and it’s not a few things about which I’m constantly anxious: our money-problems, the volley team, getting on time to school from Ecstasy, not falling behind with my school-studies since I don’t get private tutoring for them like most of my classmates do... But all this really fizzles to nothing compared to my getting to see her. I look at Nick, who walks as usual with his chest stretched forward and his back a perfect line, hands and feet in absolute harmony, his arms relaxed, his chin exactly parallel to the ground. I ask myself yet once more if he isn’t perhaps a robot. I ask myself further if I shouldn’t be holding something in my hands, sweets or flowers, I think it’s flowers they hold when they go to hospitals, but if I showed up with flowers it could be seen as a romantic gesture and the last thing that Rea needs is a romantic gesture coming from someone she doesn’t see romantically.

Rea. A suicide attempt. I still can’t digest it. I’ve been thinking about it all the way here, my mind can’t fathom it and my heart *certainly* can’t, the idea that she could have managed it, that I wouldn’t see her ever again... Why? That’s what I wish to know, but

there's no way I'm asking her now, I only wish to see her, that's enough for me, that she knows I've come, that I'm right here for whatever she wants. And I hope now that she sees Nick she'll feel better. I'll drag him here everyday, if that's what she needs. Give her some false hopes, if she's to recover.

I'm about to knock on the door of A8, when it suddenly opens and out comes Rea's mom. I recognize her, because I've seen them both walking along the road, but I'd know her in any case, since they resemble one another so much. Blond hair, slim long hands and legs, and the same huge almond-shaped eyes, except that these are somewhat ill-matched in her mother's smaller face. Also, Rea's hair, before being recently restored to its natural blond colour, had gone through layers of dyeing which had included all the colours of the rainbow.

"Yes?" she tells us.

"Hi! I'm George Dante, we're Rea's schoolmates..."

She looks at me without saying anything. She's sure asking herself how we got to know about it so soon. And even more so, she's asking herself what exactly we know.

"And this is my friend Nick Evans here... And we came to find out, to see that is, if she's alright... Is she alright?"

Nick, beside me, remains silent, while I feel that I'm beginning to be more and more at a loss for words.

"Thanks for your concern. She'll get well. She's badly hurt from the accident, but everything will be fine."

*From the accident.* She says it and looks at us searchingly. If she expects to draw any conclusions from the expression on Nick's face, she'll be waiting for long. This time, I think I too manage equally well not to betray my thoughts.

If they wish to say it was an accident, I've no problem at all. On the contrary, I'd be the first to spread the word around. Maybe in the eyes of some of our nutty schoolmates the suicide attempt could be seen as something romantic, but for most Rea would be stigmatized if they hear of it. Some could quite easily not restrict themselves to talking behind her back, and make fun of her right in her face. Sensitivity at our school remains wanting.

Her mother has planted herself in front of the door like a guard and gives us the phoniest of smiles. She's not at all sure that all will be fine, the only thing she's real sure about is that she wants us to get lost. It seems quite impossible that she'll let us go in, but there's no way I won't request it.

"Could we see her for just a bit?"

"She's resting now, it's not the right moment. I'll tell her you came by."

"We can wait..."

"It's not the right moment, as I told you."

"...we don't have a time problem."

She looks at me without replying. The discussion is over, as far as she's concerned.

But not as far as I am.

"When could we see her, since we can't now?"

My parents, like all who know me and are irritated by my stubbornness, have the impression that it's easy for me to pester people. It's not, not at all. Each time I do it I feel my stomach turn, my gob go dry, my voice turn hoarse. But I've discovered that it's only with donkey-like dedication that one can get things done. When you come up against hurdles which you can't bypass, your only solution is to ram through till they fall.

The particular hurdle, Rea's mother, doesn't seem at all prepared to fall right now. Most probably she seems ready to send us to hell, when a familiar voice is heard behind us.

“Nick!”

We all turn towards the direction of the voice. It belongs to a lanky brunette with blue eyes, near fifty, wearing a doc’s overall. Her name’s Mary Drettaki, she’s the Consultant Surgeon of the Orthopaedic Section, and it’s from her we know what happened to Rea.

“Morning, *mother*,” says Nick.

With his ability of perfectly controlling his expressions, he makes the word “mother” sound monstrous. Because that’s how he feels about her.

“Morning, dear. That’s my son, I was telling you about,” she whispers to Rea’s mom.

Nick’s mother always talks in whispers, at least in front of Nick – I’ve never met her without my buddy being around. Maybe she talks like this because she’s scared of provoking his reaction. Nick detests his mother, despite the continual attempts she makes to get closer to him. Her decision to break medical confidentiality and call Nick to inform him about Rea and ask him if he knows her well, is just part of those attempts.

Nick’s stance towards his mom may seem cruel to me – I’ve seen him turn his back to her right in the middle of the street after a random meeting – but I do understand him. His parents met twenty years back on a trip Mary took to Canada, at the Niagara Falls. That’s where she met his dad, a blond Canadian, almost identical with Nick, but shorter – Nick’s one eighty-three, two centimeters shorter than me, and we’re both about one head taller than Frank. Frank – I’ve come to call him so since he insists I don’t call him Mister Evans – worked as a salesman for Hershey’s chocolate outlet, spent all his free time practicing kajukenbo, a tough martial art which is a combination of many others, and dreamt of sometime travelling around the Mediterranean. A few weeks later he’d realize his dream-trip, but not just that, for he never returned to Canada. He came to love both Mary’s family and her village of Paleochora, got baptized an Orthodox, married her, and set up a coffee shop/ouzo bar along the main road, The Prodigal. Quite soon The Prodigal became a joint



for locals throughout the year and for tourists in summer, not just because his coffee and appetizers were ridiculously good, but also because Frank had beaten the hell out of some pissed Englishmen who had tried to molest a waitress, and had come to create a sense of total security in his shop. Thus, Frank was able to finance Mary's specialization in large hospitals of London and Munich, and in the meantime to raise Nick all by himself. But Mary fell in love with some other Greek trainee doc in Munich, who returned with her at Chania and were both posted at the hospital, and she decided she no longer wanted to be with Frank. When she announced this to him, she proposed returning the money he had spent for her. Frank said no, explained he didn't plan to plant her boyfriend under the ground, and simply asked her to respect Nick's wish to stay with him. Mary didn't. She fought for the custody of Nick in the courts, and lost for good – even her own parents testified against her – and above all lost Nick himself, who never wants to clap eyes on her again, however many “apologies” she may offer him.

“*Your son?*” asks Rea's mother.

A total change in the tone of voice and attitude. We're no longer two troublesome little brats. We're VIP's. Nick, that is. He's the star, I just the prop. “Well, all the best, he's very cute,” she tells Mary. The joy on her face sends goose bumps down my spine, I preferred her to be the three-headed watchdog she previously was – what's the woman up to now, public relations? Her daughter is inside there, escaped as if by miracle, and she smiles?

“Yes, very cute,” Mary replies, looking at him in delight, as if for the first time. Or the last.

I cast a quick glance at Nick. When you're with someone everyday, for a whole year, you can communicate with him almost through the air you breathe. Now's our chance and he sure knows it.

“When could we see Rea?” he says.

“I’ll go see if she’s awoken. Otherwise, if you could just wait awhile...”

She smiles again to all of us, and shuts the door.

“Nick, can I have a word with you?” Mary asks him imploringly.

“About what?”

“It’s about us, the family.”

“When you say about *us*?”

“Nick, please, just two minutes.”

Nick bends his head and follows her to her office. I remain alone, in front of the door which opens a few seconds later. Rea’s mother sees me without Nick and Mary, and her face speaks volumes: it’s now turned into the very definition of disappointment. If she’s to show her better side, she wants to show it to the correct people. She doesn’t even try to hide that.

“Mrs. Dretakki and her son?”

“They’re coming.”

“Rea... is very tired. She’s just woken. If you wish, together with your friend, you may enter, but only for a while.”

“Fine, I’ll go call him.”

But I don’t need to do so. Nick has already come out of his mother’s office. He doesn’t look happy, but that’s not something new, Nick rarely seems happy, wherever he is. We enter, together.

*I’ll see her, now.*