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Partali: The story of a man who dressed as a woman

General

Partali is the name of a strange and enigmatic man who has been wearing women's clothes his whole life. When this story begins, Partali is already forty five years old and lives in Thessaloniki.

A group of students, two boys and one girl, get actively involved in the life of this eccentric man. While trying to understand and get the pieces of his story together, they literary fall into the trap he has laid. Follows a game of disguises, identifications, quest for identity, inversion of sexual roles.

The story takes place somewhere between the University and the port, at the marginal quarter of Vardaris. Through successive narrations, a historical scenery from the German occupation to the fall of the military dictatorship is created, while the author gives us a rough idea of what a "restless" post-dictatorship generation would bring about.

Sarcastic, tragicomic, daring even foul-mouthed, this novel adopts various narrative forms and is open to multiple interpretations.

Summary

Part One

"At the basement of the Faculty of Philosophy"

Thessaloniki, the biggest city in northern Greece. Port, castles, University. Twenty-year old Manuel meets by accident at the basement of the building he's living Aloe, a strange woman in her forties who's sharing a room with her widow friend, Despina. Aloe, once a professional dressmaker, asks Manuel to put on a dress she's making for her... brother! An unusual garment, neither for a man nor for a woman. A little while later she gives him the dress and sends him to find her brother at an underground tavern at Vardaris, an area around the port frequented by seamen and fringe people. Her brother's name: Partali.

Indeed Manuel goes to Vardaris, descends the stairs of a tavern called *Paradise*, and there he meets the so-called Partali. Partali, around forty-five, is a fascinating character, who's speaking in a nice and -somewhat- poetic way and attracts Manuel with his appearance and mysterious story.

Manuel manages to meet him again and gradually learns about this man's past as his story unfolds. As a child, Partali had been living in his village on the mountain Pangeo and during the Bulgarian occupation, his crazy mother used to dress him up as a girl, because she didn't want him to grow up and get killed at the war just like her father. So the little boy grew up dressed as a girl. When he was a teenager, his sister Aloe became a dressmaker and used to sew his dresses all by herself. Everyone though called him "Partali" (a rag). The little boy served as a messenger to the resistance, since he deceived Bulgarians with his girlish appearance.

Manuel returns to the University and to his studies. He meets Mike, an English literature student, who is moved by Partali's story because he finds out that a person far more eccentric than himself is living in the same city. Born in the countryside, Mike wears modern clothes, listens only to foreign music, and adores Pasolini... Mike likes Manuel a lot as he finds him quite "primitive", but he's worried about him as Manuel seems to be getting more and more involved with Partali and becomes estranged from his friends. Zoë who cares for Manuel is also surprised by his behavior.

Manuel finds out at last where Partali is living. His home is an old abandoned hotel, *The Port*, long forgotten between blocks of flats. Naturally, it's no longer used. Manuel installs himself there, trapped or enchanted by Partali's narrations. Besides his parents are too far away, immigrants in Germany.

Part Two "Hotel The Port"

Manuel is living at his new home, at the hotel, far away from everyone else. When he calls his mother at Berlin, he finds out that she has got problems with her husband and that she feels miserable there. Manuel gets to know piece by piece the rest of the story: how Aloe had an affair with the Bulgarian commander of the village. How he raped the young girl, and how everyone was talking about that. How he and his sister were forced to live the village and move to a neighboring coastal town, Kavala. And how later they moved again to Thessaloniki. There a widow, Stelina, who owned the hotel *The Port*, took them in and they started working for her.

In the meantime Manuel attempts to leave the hotel and get back to the University. He watches from afar an anti-American demonstration, but sees no one familiar. He returns to the hotel. At nights he goes out with Partali to various taverns. Their relationship is a mixture of admiration and dependence. Partali has always something to say. But some people talk about a cunning Partali who traps young people to his hotel with his sweet talk. Even Aloe warns Manuel not to trust so much her brother.

Manuel joins again his friends in order to see a show that Mike wrote and where Penny, a common friend, holds the main part. So relations between them are restored, while Zoë is still worried and tries to find out who is hiding behind Partali.

Part Three "The case of a teenager during the occupation"

Mike meets Partali and Manuel at a tavern, where after a fight between Partali and a soldier, regular client of the tavern, the rumor that at one time Partali "accommodated" various people at his hotel is confirmed.

Meanwhile Manuel finds out that his mother has left Berlin, has come back to Greece and is probably living with her sister's husband, Bandy-legged, in a small town.

But Zoë is the one that surprises him the most: Her poet mother discovers a book bearing the title *"Men Dressed up as Women"* and referring to various cases of men who were forced to dress up as women during wars and occupation in order to deceive the enemy and save themselves. The book includes the story *"The case of a teenager during the occupation"* which is identical to Partali's story. The author, Tzivelekidou, claims to be a folklorist. Mike and Manuel read the book over. Indeed it's the same story!

They run back to the hotel, but Partali has disappeared. He has just taken off to an unknown destination, leaving nothing but a note of farewell. The two friends try to find Aloe, but she's no longer at the basement... Manuel feels distressed.

Agis Tsingelas, teacher of literature and poet, gets involved in the case and promises that he would reveal the truth about Partali. Tsingelas considers him a suspicious and shady character.

Meanwhile Mike gets down to writing a theatrical monologue about Partali, based on the book as well as on Manuel's narration. The play is staged at the café theatre "Banana" run by the homosexual Socrates.

Part Four

"The show begins"

Zoë is finally reconciled with Manuel and everything is back to normal. But Manuel receives a bag containing the clothes Partali was wearing. He brings the clothes to Mike, who is feverishly writing his play, and Mike keeps them in order to use them for the play. So Partali must be somewhere out there, watching them.

The play is staged and Manuel gives a breathtaking performance. It's as if he's the reincarnation of Partali. Zoë's mother, Mrs. Penelope, is going to write an enthusiastic review. However, Agis Tsingelas questions the authenticity of the book. He insists that the real author is Partali, as the data concerning its publication are controversial. Tsingelas is convinced that Partali was "selling" his story and that a lot of young people were caught in his trap.

Manuel is in bed with high fever. Zoë nurses him at her home. Meanwhile, Aloe is wandering alone at Ladadika where she gets raped and killed by a stranger. So the only witness to her brother's life and past is gone.

Agis Tsingelas invites the friends to a central bookstore where they start searching for evidence. Agis comes to the conclusion that the man they have met... was not the real Partali! Is this why Aloe got out of the way?

Part Five

"The Port Tower"

Another school year passes by, another hot summer comes along. Mike feels distressed. Manuel has disappeared once more without trace. Together with Zoë, they start desperately searching for him.

But Manuel is right next to them. Mike finds him locked in *The Port*. What happened? Partali asked to meet him for the last time and confessed that he was a fake. The real one had left for America many years ago. The "fake" heard the story from Aloe whom he met once by accident. At that time he decided to impersonate her real brother. He helped her financially. Nevertheless why did he dress up as another person? Is it just by eccentricity or is he still hiding something?

After their meeting, he proclaims Manuel his successor.

Mike desperate leaves the hotel. He meets Tsingelas who insists that Partali and Manuel have a sexual relationship. Mike, furious, starts to write a new play based on the new facts, unmasking Partali and exposing Manuel.

The play *The Lost Garment* is staged in a real theatre and makes a sensation thanks to its daring scenes.

[Flashback: 1963] The play *Iphigeneia in Aulis* is staged at Filipi. The young leading actress incarnating Iphigeneia gets sick, and a man (the messenger) suggests playing the role. In spite of the objections, he manages to play the part. Backstage, a dressmaker employed by the State Theatre dresses him up and takes care of him at the last moment.

Part Six

Miss Partales

Zoë and Mike feel lonely and disappointed because they have lost their friend who's still hiding at the hotel. Zoë meets Mike's neighbor, Riad, a Syrian student, and falls in love with him. Everything comes back to normal once again, then Zoë comes upon a new edition of the book "*Men Dressed up As Women*". The annex "*Three fake cases*" denounces Mike's play and includes one more case that predicts the fate of the next student...

This student is Mike, who is in panic! Partali is seeking revenge and is in fact determining their fate! Mike leaves a copy of the book at the hotel for Manuel to find it. Then he meets Manuel's mother and informs her on her child's life.

The beautiful and unfaithful mother appears on the scene. Together with Mike they go to *The Port*, but no sign of Manuel. They find him in his old apartment reading calmly. Mike is alarmed by his friend's alienation. Is he just pretending?

In Tzivelekidou's book, the "case" of an exiled man might give some explanation about why the actor from Thessaloniki impersonates Partali: something about an exiled father forced to make love with another prisoner, while wearing rags of female clothes.

At a car accident Zoë and Riad get seriously injured.

Mike, all alone, wanders around desperate during the night. He sees light at the hotel.

He goes inside. In front of a huge mirror a woman is fixing her make-up. A transvestite! The real Partali! Miss Partales!

The catharsis begins.

The real Partali had been living in America and got back because of his sister's death. He knew about the fake-actor-Partali. But he had accepted this situation since he knew he would be protecting the lonely Aloe.

Later Mike and Partali go to a tavern.

[Flashback: 1960]. At the hotel *The Port* is staying an American professor Eric. Eric likes very much the quaint Partali who's working at the hotel. Eric loves Greece, girls and Partali. Without realizing it, Eric forces Partali to become a girl, since this is the only way he could accept him and -maybe- take him along to America!

Miss Partales narrates the rest of the story. She explains what had happened with the Bulgarian commander, how the two children fled the village. How she ended up playing her old self at a show in New York!

Mike listens from a tape to a piece from the show. The next day they go to the village and light some candles at Aloe's grave. After so many years Miss Partales meets her old friends and they start crying out of joy.

Mike visits for the last time Manuel to inform him on Miss Partales. Manuel though has completely changed and wants to hear nothing about this any more. It's as if this story has never existed.

Part Seven

"The End of the City"

The finale is a crucial moment where past and present of both Partali and the city merge together. Miss Partales takes her clothes off and the roles are inverted: she dresses Mike with her own clothes and she becomes Eric. He tells Mike about his love for Eric and how he had forced Aloe to transform him from a ragged Partali into a beautiful young girl.

But the night of the devastating earthquake comes. Love and representation. The whole town is badly hit. The hotel collapses. Everything is buried underneath. So is Miss Partales.

Through the ruins appears a strange figure dressed in women's clothes. It's Mike in his new part, the new Miss Partales, who's walking in the night defying the panic and the ravages.