

HARA GIANNAKOPOULOU

Bio...

Hara Giannakopoulou was born in Athens, in 1972. She has translated many books, but she has also written a few of her own. Those few are: *Λητώ* (Lito 1998), *Η Ιστορία μιας Ιστορίας* (The Story of a Story, 1999), *Το Νησί που Ταξιδεύει* (The Traveling Island, 2000), *Μπλιάχ!* (Yuck!, 2005) and *Η Τρίτη Ευχή* (The Third Wish, 2009) which are all novels for young adults, as well as *Παιχνίδι με το Πιάνο* (Piano Games, 2007) and *Η Απέναντι Μοναξιά* (The Field Between Us, 2002 – *Greek IBBY Award*) which are illustrated stories for younger children.

She likes music, cooking, insects, melancholy, books, coffee, traveling (she has a backpack called Odysseus), and she keeps saying that she wants to immigrate one more time.

THE THIRD WISH

Part One

Summary

Hermes and his family have moved to a model city called Third Wish. The invitation was a “gift” to his father from the government in recognition for his loyal contribution to his country as a civil servant. However, Hermes is still quite sad over having to leave behind his friends, his neighborhood, and all the things he liked to do. As soon as he arrives to his new city, he discovers that something is definitely not right. It’s not only that everything is always in perfect order and exceptionally clean, or that the prime minister himself lives right across the street from him, or even the eerie feeling that the city is always deafeningly silent and completely empty... There is also a series of strange and frightening encounters, a sudden sinus allergy that causes him to go in and out of mood swings, alternating between happiness and sadness, a school system that can only be described as fascistic, a series of bizarre classes that don’t bear any resemblance to a normal high school, strange electronic devices, and the unshakeable feeling that the city of Third Wish is from another world – perhaps somewhere in the future.

As he tries to adjust to his new surroundings, Hermes has to deal with classmates who are mostly hostile and act like zombies. They don’t display the slightest exuberance, imagination, critical thought, or desire to communicate. Worst of all, they seem to not remember or care about anything, and appear to be clueless about everyday facts of life and the world as he knew it just a little while before.

Hermes has tried to get into contact with friends of his whom he left behind, but even the Internet won’t work. He was on the verge of a breakdown, but at some point he managed to befriend Lady, the mysterious, completely unpopular, and perennially dejected daughter of the prime minister. Although he didn’t trust her at all at first, she managed to convince him that the two of them share a lot in common. With her help, Hermes

discovers that he is part of a strange plot involving his stepmother, and that he is essentially being held prisoner in this new city. He begins uncovering answers to the questions that are eating away at him, but these answers only serve to terrify him even further, and make matters even more confusing. Along the way, Hermes and Lady will discover even more hidden secrets about Third Wish, the way the city operates, its secret purpose, and its citizens. They will attempt to change the order of things, and in the process they will come into contact with the “outside world.” No one must find out that they have uncovered the plot, and that they are the ones responsible for some of the unrest taking place in the otherwise tranquil city of Third Wish. However, they have uncovered something very dangerous...

This is the first part in a series featuring Hermes, Lady, and their friends, and their face-to-face encounters with a bizarre reality filled with suspicious characters who will try to make their lives as difficult as possible...

This is a book that talks about the need to fight back against the manipulation of free will and thought. The story is filled with surprises, unexpected twists and turns, and adventure, and promises to captivate young readers with the energy, humor, and freshness of its writing.

SAMPLE

CHAPTER 1

The name of the city was Third Wish, and it was brand new. When we say brand new, we mean right out of the box, like a finger-licking chocolate cake that entices you with its aroma and makes your mouth water uncontrollably as soon as you untie the ribbon and rip open the box fresh from the pastry shop. The city was sunkissed, as if no winter ever set foot in that place, it was small, it was squeaky clean, tidy, green, well-groomed, clean-shaven, well-pressed, smiling, sparkling, colourful, peaceful ...in other words, it was UNNATURAL.

Hermes, his father (Alcibiades) and Lila (Hermes' stepmother, whom he would refer to as the Stringbean) drove into the city in their fully loaded new car, specially provided to them by the Ministry. They passed mountain after mountain, crossed bridges, drove through lush green pastures and endless highways. Hermes, was bored to death, had a puss on his face and was utterly depressed. He had left behind his friends and neighborhood, in a city that he just loved so much. Now, he had to endure hours of his stepmother's ceaseless blabbering, which together with the noise from the wind and the sound of the speeding car formed a terrible cacophony, with her as the conductor. With no intent on closing her mouth, she waved her hands in unison, as she mercilessly spewed out all sorts of enthusiastic nonsense. Her voice bounced off the windows, and echoed in his longsuffering ears all the louder. He was bored, tired, and hungry. He had to pee, he was sore from sitting down for so long, his mouth was dry, and he was mourning his lost childhood, which he left behind some three-hundred kilometers away. He wished the back seat of the car would split apart and swallow him whole. They would be arriving soon. They had already passed the first sign warning them not to miss the turn in the next

half-kilometer. They drove the next five hundred meters, made sure to make the turn for TW like the sign said, and entered a tunnel filled with strange turns. After a few longlasting half-dim turns, they reached the end of the tunnel and saw their new home for the first time. The sun gleamed down on the city as it stretched out before their feet like something out of a Hollywood film set. The city was small, squeaky clean, tidy, green, well-groomed, etc. The Stringbean started jumping around in her seat and clapping like a well trained seal willing to do just about anything for a sardine snack. Alcibiades smiled discreetly under his mustache. Hermes simply gagged. He would have very much liked to have done it on purpose, but if he did do it on purpose he would not have set foot into his new room for the first time with his shoe full of whatever was left in his stomach – yesterday’s tuna fish sandwich, to be precise. And so, he missed out on a bird’s eye view of the city, the snake-shaped river that dissected it, the neatly arranged colorful homes, the overbearing Administration Building which stood at the center of the impeccable central square, the park that was filled with tall and short trees, the safe roads that were straight as an arrow, the sidewalks and their storefronts, along with many other things that his folks did not even manage to see at that moment, since the Stringbean’s enthusiastic peeps turned into squeals of disgust and Alcibiades had to open all the windows and a door until they could make their way down the last two hundred meters until they reached their destination: the sky blue house on Banquet Street.

CHAPTER 14

They soon reached the large courtyard where children of all ages stood in a well organized line, nicely dressed, smelling fresh, neatly combed, extremely conservative, and in total silence. The picture bore no similarity whatsoever to Hermes’ old school, and every other school on the planet for that matter. There were no weird hairstyles, no pierced body parts, no clothes that could attest to their owners’ character or particular musical preference. *What the hell? Did I come to some sort of army base?* Hermes thought to himself, and imagined how odd he must have seemed to the other kids because of the piercing on his eyebrow and his somehow “alternative” clothing. Suddenly, he felt a hand tug at his arm to lead him to his place in line.

“This way, honey.” Hermes turned his head to see who this cartoon-like voice and fat frankfurter-like fingers with pink nail polish that had grabbed on to his shoulders could belong to. “Gulp!” He took a hard swallow once he caught a glimpse of the face that seemed to him like a rubber cream puff.

“This way, my boy,” squeaked the female brontosaurus with a voice that dripped out of her mouth like stale jelly.

“This way” meant a spot behind a white line joining him with some other kids, who were most likely his classmates. There were ten boys and ten girls, from the quick count he managed to do. Aphrodite was one of them. *No hope*, he thought to himself and looked down at his feet, trying to seem obedient and not step on the white line – the priceless boundary that would separate him from normality and imprison him behind a misery that was beginning to get all the more mysterious and unbearable with every second that went by. Things were so bad that even that loudmouth Aphrodite had clammed up all of a sudden.

Hermes started to gaze at the large courtyard, trying to form a first impression of what it was that could be taking place around him. The kids in the six lines that probably made up the junior high and high school student body stood silently and motionlessly with their eyes facing down, as they did absolutely nothing; nothing at all. *Wait a sec, aren't they going to talk to each other? Aren't they going to pull any pranks? Aren't they going to show how they missed each other over the vacation? Aren't they going to whisper unflattering remarks about some teacher in each other's ear? Aren't they even going to at least smile?* Hermes asked himself these questions as he cautiously looked around, without barely even turning his head. The walls of the courtyard sparkled with cleanliness, the garbage cans were brand new, the lines on the field were freshly painted, the bleachers looked newly bought. There wasn't even a piece of gum to be seen on the ground, or some graffiti tagged up on the walls somewhere. At any rate, generally speaking, this school was just like the rest of the city: paranoid and totally unnatural. Alright, there was nothing wrong with a well kept and clean environment. Hermes didn't like seeing things dirty and broken down either (of course, a little constructive graffiti was a healthy thing), but come on, this place looked like it had never been used before. It was as if no form of life had ever lived there, and that was the most bizarre thing of all. Directly across him, a group of grown ups whom he guessed were the teachers had all gathered together and were looking down at the floor too, as if they were devotedly waiting for some sort of great god to appear above them, whose wrath they did not want to incur under any circumstances.

Hermes turned his head to the right, then to the left, but he soon began to form the impression that not only was he the only one who was moving some part of his body, but he was the only one who was breathing. Until...

"Achooooo!"

"Achooooo!"

"Achooooo!"

"Achooooo!" he heard sneezing from somewhere behind him, and he turned suddenly to see where it was coming from. It reminded him very much of his own situation, and the sneezes were accompanied by a very emphatic blowing of the nose. It was only then that he noticed the presence of someone who would haunt him for as long as he would stay in this place. At this point, I have to tell you that although things will become increasingly worse for Hermes (if they seemed bad to you already, wait until you see what is in store for him!), he is not going to stand by and endure this torture forever.

The girl was very pale, and very serious-looking, with very long blond hair and eyes that – had she gone to the trouble of opening them a little wider and not insisted on looking at her shoes – were surely huge and probably resembled some precious stone in color. She wore tight black pants and a short black dress over them, with puffy short sleeves and three buttons in the front. She also sported a pair of boots, exactly like his. She seemed so utterly unhappy, and so out of place. "Bless you," Hermes whispered to her, but she didn't even turn his way to acknowledge him. Her only reaction – although Hermes was not sure if he imagined it or if it really happened – was a small sigh and a mouthful of spit which she seemed to swallow with difficulty. She shut her eyelids tightly as she slightly cleared her throat.

Hermes felt a cold sweat coming on. Not only because his new congested classmate was absolutely beautiful, or because in a matter of just a few seconds he was

sure that he had fallen madly in love with her, but because he felt an uncontrollable need to scream, throw a fit and start hitting things. It was as if they had tied him to a giant refrigerator at a morgue that was holding a freezer full of corpses.

Despite the fact that the sun was at its highest point and the temperature had started to rise, Hermes was feeling colder by the minute, as if some invisible vacuum cleaner had sucked away all the laughter and happiness from everybody who was standing inside that courtyard. Look, for Hermes school was a tragedy in itself, but this here was a scene out of some sort of waking nightmare.

Right at the moment that he thought he was going to snap, all the children broke out into loud, albeit somewhat reserved applause. He raised his head and saw a familiar, loathsome face. He wore a dark suit, pink tie, gray shirt, freshly shined shoes, and flashed a grin that reached from ear to ear.

What the hell is this jerk the prime minister doing here? Hermes wondered, but before he managed to formulate a thought, Anthony Trambalas had already climbed onto the stage and started sending out heartfelt hellos to teachers and students alike. Without losing a second, he raised his hand and motioned for the applause to stop. All the students obeyed instantly and stopped as if all their batteries had run out at the same time.

What is this, did they send me off to communist China or something? Hermes thought to himself, and gulped.

CHAPTER 33

“Hi, it’s me Hermes,” he said boldly, even though only he knew what he was going through until he finally managed to dial the number. “Hi,” Lady said after a brief pause.

“I missed you after class,” Hermes said, “and I asked Marina for your number.”

“Do you want to meet up?”

“I have the house to myself, no one is home. So...”

“I’ll be there in five.”

Phew, that was easier than he had imagined. After such a disgusting day, Hermes had set two goals: to sort this matter out with Lady and learn as much as he could – he would be asking the questions and avoid sulking and things of the sort, like “poor me, what am I doing here” – and second, he would look for a way out of swimming practice. Certainly, he would recycle some excuse that resembled the “dislocated shoulder” bit he used on his supervisor, Mr. Garpouzas. He was never a swimmer, and he was not going to become one. Not to mention that the chlorine in the pool was really aggravating his sinus allergies.

He ran down the stairs and opened the outside door. Lady had not shown up yet, but he would wait for her. *Okay, let’s go over everything briefly: the room is relatively clean, my hair is fine. My armpits OK, my breath... How long did Lady say? Five minutes?* He closed the door again and went up to the bathroom. Mastic-flavored toothpaste. *Oh yeah, black shirt with the white herringbone on. Yeah, I definitely look better in that. Man! Slippers? Seriously? What am I thinking?* With one kick, he hid them under the bed. *Red socks? No way. But then again, who wears boots inside the house? No.* He opened the drawer, sifted through his clothes, and found a pair of forest green socks. Vanilla-scented fabric softener (*way to go Lila!*). He took one last look around the room. *OK, ready!*

Lady was standing outside when he opened the door again.

“Come in.”

“Are you alone? When will your parents come back?”

“Don’t know. But it’s no big deal. Why? You don’t want them to see you here?”
What did she care? Would it ruin her image if they saw her with him? *Hermes, this is no time for nonsense. Get to the point.*

“No, it’s no problem, okay. Sorry.”

“Let’s go upstairs. Do you want some tea, water, a refreshment... something?”
Hermes asked.

“No.”

They went upstairs and headed to Hermes’ room. Lady carefully studied the area around her and could not stop smiling.

“There you go smiling again. Well, I just don’t understand you,” Hermes started to say. “One moment you won’t speak to me at all, the next you give me this whole story about your relationship with your father, then you start talking nonsense and you never explain anything to me.” They sat down on his bed, Hermes had straddled a pillow and leaned back on the top of the bed. Lady sat at the bed’s edge. “You can take off your shoes and get more comfortable, if you want,” he suggested.

Lady did what he said. Nice, things were more relaxed now. She put her legs on the bed and sat down with her legs crossed. “There is so much...” she started to say.

“Let me ask the questions this time around. Because whenever you start off with these mysterious introductions I get lost.” Hermes’ mind was completely made up. Why did he go over this in his mind so many times? He knew exactly what he wanted to ask and this time he was not going to miss his chance.

“What do you know about me?”

“Everything.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Swimming, wrestling, chess? Does this mean anything to you?”

“Not a thing. But ‘Autumn,’ the ‘Last Days,’ and ‘Fourteen,’ ring a bell.” She had just named him three of his most important performances in films and theater productions. “You are...” my favorite actor, she was about to say, but Hermes cut her off.

“Correct, an actor. You know me, but no one else here seem to.”

“Not exactly no one.”

“Not even Marina, who is...how can I say this...more normal than the rest of them.”

“Her either.”

“Here we go again with the secrecy. Can you finally start telling me something specific?” *Calm down Hermes. If you lose it again, you aren’t going to learn a thing.*

Lady sighed. “Look. It’s not as simple as you think...”

“If I thought it was simple, I would have figured it out for myself.”

“Yeah, sorry, that didn’t come out the right way. It’s just that, in order for me to explain to you, there is an entire story that I have to tell you.”

“And how do I know that I can trust you? You are...”

“Oh piss off. Don’t start again with that prime minister’s daughter crap, okay? If you think you have a quick temper, mine is ten times worse! I didn’t come here to argue with you.” Her eyeballs shrunk for a second. Oops, it looks like Hermes was starting to lose the upper hand that he wanted to maintain.

Hermes felt himself drawing back immediately. He frowned and tried to remember the next question that he had planned to ask. But Lady had beaten him to the punch once again.

“Look, you just have to trust me. Who else do you have who knows as much as you, who actually *remembers* where you came from, who finds what is happening strange? If we are going to do something about this, don’t shut yourself in your own little planet. Listen to me first, and then do whatever you want.”

“OK, there’s that word again ‘remember.’ Why, am I not supposed to *remember* where I came from? Why were you so surprised that I *remembered Wretched Pastrami*?”

“Haven’t you realized why nobody here knows who you are? Why no one knows about your film or recognizes your face? Why nobody talks about vacations and trips? Why no one ever leaves the city? And if, as you say, no one hangs out with me because I am the prime minister’s daughter, how do you explain the fact that everyone happens to worship the guy, and could by extent worship me too? It’s because they don’t see anything in me that reminds them of my father, or anything that they like and support in him. I’m different. I want other things. I don’t fit in.”

“Yeah, but can you tell me what that has to do with me? And by the way, of course I DON’T understand why all these things are happening. Do you understand what has happened to me? They uprooted me from my life, stuck me over here, and for some strange reason I haven’t let go of the past, while everybody else has. Everyone else leads a normal life, except for me. I am alone.”

“Open your eyes, man! Haven’t you figured out that I am in exactly the same position? I too have lost my friends and my old life. You’re not the only one. That’s why I’m telling you to trust me.”

True...if things are the way she says, then he had overlooked the fact that Lady was also in the exact same position. “Yeah, the truth is that I hadn’t thought about it like that. I don’t have the foggiest idea about who you are. Alright, I’m sorry. But you understand, right?”

“Better than you think. Just be a little patient.”

Hermes’ plan had gone completely awry. *He* was supposed to be asking the questions, and *she* was supposed to answer them. He tried to open his mouth, but once again Lady was a step ahead of him.

“That time at the station, I tried to get some information out of you. You said exactly the things that I wanted to hear, and I was so happy that...”

Hermes remembered the two times that Lady had gotten excited over something during their paranoid conversation. “Alright then, let’s start over. You were happy that I remembered that band, *Wretched Pastrami*. You were happy that I have a sinus allergy. Why? Where do all these loose ends meet?”

“They are not loose ends at all,” Lady said, and took out a crumpled handkerchief from her pocket.

Hermes looked at it strangely. What’s this? Is she going to give me an up close look of the symptoms of a runny nose now? However, Lady carefully opened up the handkerchief right in front of Hermes’ nearly disgusted but nevertheless curious face. There was a small clear bag inside. She opened it and emptied out the contents into her hand. In her palm was something that looked like a malnourished newborn ant. She brought it up close to him until he could see it with his bare eyes.

“What’s this now?” said Hermes staring at it.

“This is something that both of us share in common. The fact that we DON’T have it.”

Hermes looked up at the ceiling and breathed out a sigh of frustration.

“Alright, alright, I’ll be more specific...” Lady said after realizing once again that she was close to driving him crazy.

“The sent you to the Administration Building, right?”

“Yes. Well...I went by myself, but that’s irrelevant.”

“Good. At any rate, one way or another you would have ended up there. You felt lost afterwards, right?”

“Yes, a sense of bliss, a kind of amnesia, an indescribable happiness...and then...”

“Your sinus allergies started acting up again.”

“How do you know that? Were you counting how many snot rags I used from your window as well?”

Lady cracked up. “You dummy! Get over it! It’s just that the exact same thing happened to me! Well, just about the same thing. They didn’t take me to the Administration Building.”

Hermes was speechless. “In other words...that thing in your hand...”

“That’s right. They put it in your nose. But with all the blowing, it came out!”

“In other words, that’s what caused my memory loss and ...the...” he couldn’t think of any other words to describe the interchanging feelings of happiness and sadness that had overcome him that night, along with the memory lapses.

“Yes. The first thing I noticed was the sad look on your face. As you’ve seen for yourself, everybody here is spaced out, either smiling and happy, or completely serious and expressionless. That wasn’t the case with you. You felt things, you missed things. You looked surprised at the technology, at the cafeteria food. You would ask clueless people all kinds of irrelevant questions, and when they would answer you, you looked as if you had fallen off a building. This would have never happened if you still had this thing inside of you,” she said and once again showed him the mysterious contraption in her hand.

“In other words, everyone else has it except for the two of us.”

“Exactly. Have you got a vague idea of what it does?”

“I guess. Does it cause amnesia? Does it leave you totally spaced out?”

“Just about. They put it in through your nose and it does something to your head. I’m not exactly sure what. Maybe it puts pressure on certain spots, nerves, something... I don’t know exactly how it is programmed and how it works, but the results are what you see around you at school. Introversion and...what did you call the other thing, bliss? And of course, no one remembers anything about what they did before they got here. And more importantly, no one cares.

“In other words, it kills every form of curiosity too.”

“Yup. I don’t know if that’s the scientific word for it, but that’s what I’ve figured out. Even I don’t know for sure. I’m just making educated guesses.”

“But since our noses are filled with...other stuff...that stupid thing couldn’t find its way to our heads, right?”

“You got it.”

“And how many people know that we don’t have it?”

“No one.”

“What? You’re saying that your father thinks that you have it?”

“It’s a different story with my father. Skip it.”

Hermes’ jaw dropped in amazement. Just about every question that he had asked himself from the moment he had set foot in that damned city, and everything that he had thought was just another scenario in his waking nightmare started to unfold before him piece by piece.

Lady told him that she had managed to find out various things due to her relation with the mastermind behind this intricate plot. Thanks to her skill in anything related to technology and computers, she had managed to uncover even more secrets. No details, but enough to understand what was going on and what she had to protect herself from. She learned how to play her role well enough so no one would catch on to her.

“Why can’t I find my friends? Why doesn’t the Internet work like it used to back home? Why are we four years ahead of everyone else? When did everybody come here? What do they want with me, and why is my bio on the website filled with so many ridiculous lies?”

Lady tried to give him the answers he was looking for one at a time, based on whatever she knew, or could figure out in any case.

“Don’t worry about being four years ahead. You haven’t gone into the future.”

“What then?”

“It’s still 2008 here too, but people don’t need to know that. There is a reason for them to think otherwise. The charade is accomplished thanks to a system governing all the electronic programs involved in the entire project. The goal is to cut off all contact with the outside world as it is today. At least that’s what I think.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“There are a lot of things that I don’t know for sure. Slowly but surely, though, I’m putting the story together. We’re not alone.”

Hermes was also worried about something else. Now that things began to loosen up a little between them, he figured that he could start opening up to her a bit more. Since he had decided to trust her, he had to treat her accordingly. Lady hid the chip back in the little bag, which she then placed in the crumpled up handkerchief, and returned to her pocket.

“How come nobody at school likes me?”

Lady smiled. “Because of me, of course. No, I’m just kidding. Well, not exactly. Since you hang out with me, it’s only natural that you seem weird to them. Everyone here is really insecure. It’s hard for them to accept anything that upsets the rhythm of the daily routine they’ve gotten used to. They’re afraid of it. As you can imagine, there’s a lot of competition. Our school is filled with plenty of egos. And don’t think that you’re the only target. It’s just that at this moment, you’re a target that’s *alone*. In time, you’ll come to see the different cliques at work here, and how one group hates the other. And now that you know, you can make your own decisions. You can choose to become popular once again, as I imagine that you were wherever you went, or you can be with me, and face all the consequences...” She lowered her head and looked at him through the corner of her eye, as if she was waiting for an answer.

I’m with you, Hermes thought, but he didn’t say it out loud.