

Yorgos TRILLIDIS
Four short stories

Sunday

It's three o'clock in the morning and I have just left the club on Prince of Wales. I am crossing the street heading to the nearest kebab house. I am not drunk though I have drunk. I enter. Three sweaty, dark-skinned men are watching closely a sizeable piece of lamb rolling on a steel plate. I place my order, pay in advance and head out for a quick cigarette. I take a stand just outside.

I stare at the people who have just exited the nightclubs. Its closing time yet the street seems less busy than usual. Maybe because it's August and the students have gone back to their homes; maybe because most of the locals are getting a tan somewhere in the Mediterranean. I take long drags and can't wait to replace the butt with some meat. Then I see them on the other side of the road ready to cross the street.

It's a group of five. They wear stretched t-shirts, baggy jeans and white sneakers. They look particularly drunk – but again, who doesn't? They are coming towards me. It's a popular fast-food I say to myself, no need to worry. They are talking loudly and they spit out the vowels and the consonants in a somewhat violent manner.

I look the other way. What I see is the future coming swiftly towards me, aiming at me. The future enters through my nostrils, rides the appropriate neurons and gets carried all the way to my brain.

They are going to come near me. One of them will ask me something I will not be in a position to grasp. I will shake my head. Another one will feel obliged to rephrase it. Although I will understand, more or less, what they want from me I will refuse politely. Then the one who was the first to talk will start cursing. I will repeat as clearly as possible that it's my last one. Then a third one will try to get it out of my fingers. I will let him. They will start laughing and cursing me with words I will not fully comprehend. After that I will say something stupid, something like 'you must think is a quite brave thing to do, five picking up against one', or something equally stupid – the precise phrasing has not yet been formulated.

It is then that they will assault me. They will not stop kicking and punching even after I hit the ground. At some point one of the two guys that'd remained silent will pull out a knife. None of the bystanders will interfere, though I will hear someone calling for the police.

In the ambulance I will see a blue light and a void will suck me in. The doctor at the hospital will simply announce the time. The following day the coroner will perform the autopsy. Among other things he will discover some lumps in my lungs. Although he is sure of what he has found he will give a sample for biopsy. The results will be ready in three days.

Meanwhile a police officer will make an international call. It will be rather short because he hadn't taken into consideration the fact that my mother does not speak English. Later on that day, a member both of the thriving Hellenic community and of the Norfolk Police Force will redial the same telephone number.

When the results are out the doctor will not see his jaw dropping. It was an aggressive form of cancer that would have had me dead in six to nine months. He will then debate whether he should inform my family about his findings. He will discuss the issue with some colleagues of his and with his wife. Words like ‘ethics’ and ‘purpose’ and ‘irrelevant’ will be heard in the several exchanges. After a sleepless night he will decide not to reveal anything although he will not be in a position to explain why exactly.

Back home my mother will spend the rest of her life on a rocking chair going back and forth all the time, a habit that will not be disrupted even when the phone will ring and a voice on the other end of the line will inform her, in broken Greek, that all five men have been identified and two of them have already confessed.

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Translation

He takes up the book she gave him ages ago. Of course it’s in English. Not just because the said language is the appointed go-between, trying to bring closer those who didn’t manage to jump on the bandwagon of multicultural topsy-turvy, with those who didn’t even bother to wait for it. Also because, when a pair of juicy Cypriot buttocks gets rubbed for four consecutive years against velvet seats in universities ‘in the heart of cosmopolitan Loughborough’ or ‘only six miles from the centre of vibrant Wolverhampton’, when they are carried back to the homeland, the owner sees, acknowledges and craves a *Kolokoti* but she declines to utter the specific word on grounds of provincialism.

He has the book on his lap now and he is focusing on the cover. ‘Sei Shonagon. The Pillow Book’. Three months since she left him. He begins to turn the pages as if it were their photo album. He skim-reads the introduction. He has learned it by heart. Sei Shonagon – Japanese poet of the 10th Century – kept a journal in which she listed emotions, reflections and aesthetic assessments – Sei Shonagon was a big influence on Anais Nin. The English translator has apparently never heard of Nikos Demou.

But he goes on turning the pages and he reads again about:

Seven things that arouse a fond memory of the past

1. Dried hollyhock.
2. Last year’s paper fan.
3. A night with clear moon

About

Five things that give a clean feeling

1. An earthen cup.
2. A new metal bowl.
3. A rush mat.

And about

Ten things that should be short

1. A lamp stand
2. A piece of thread when someone wants to sew something in a hurry.
3. The speech of a young girl.

He really likes the last one. He even encounters this:

Thirteen Things that look commonplace but that become impressive when written in Chinese characters

1. Strawberries.
2. A walnut.
3. A prickly water lily.
4. A provisional senior steward in the office of the Empress's household.
5. Red myrtle.

There are more.

He decides to play along. He gets a pen and writes on a white page:

One thing I want to hear right now

1. Come back or I die.

He feels relieved. He feels like a burden is off his chest. That he's got it out of his system. That he's contributed to the book, even.

But this is the point where the all-seeing eye, the omniscient narrator (who, if you must know, is none other than Sophocles' Deus ex machina on a bad day) intervenes and under the title:

Three things that our protagonist ignores

clarifies that:

- 1) A Japanese woman would never use the imperative form of a verb when addressing a man
- 2) The disjunctive conjunction 'or' does not exist in Japanese. It can only be expressed with a circumlocution
- 3) Due to the notorious Japanese social convention, 'die' cannot be used neither in a literal nor a metaphorical way.

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Carnival

She is denying everything. Therefore I have to state my case. 'Masquerade means I laugh my arse off at the accomplished fact' I declare. I string out my best, my most concrete arguments. About the a la Rimbaud falsification of the Identity, about the sweet sedation of the Personality, about the narrow escape from the Self and the way we make Time cry out 'temporary interlock!' About everything. I even mention a mocking dance in front of Professor Death. She makes me go so far as to say that carnival forces us to be off Existence's payroll. That it is a mutiny against the oppressive regime of Destiny, which imposes on you only the fate of the person you have already become.

She denies everything. 'Listen, honey,' she says and I do. 'It is me. Me. Always has been me. All the time. Me and no one else. If it was up to me not only would I not hit <rewind> but I'd thumb < fast forward>. Yes. I like myself that much.'

'Is that so?' I say, and hit <rewind>. I find the button easily. It is situated right on her nerves.

I make her watch this with me.

So here it goes.

She, as Ariadne, when she was in puberty, giving the ball of thread to the other guy. It wasn't her fault if he didn't know how to find his way out of her labyrinth. Calypso, in her final year of high school, and she promises him immortalities and stuff (he is your *first*...that's why). He'd like to stay but he can't. Eve, when a freshman at the university, but most of the time without the fig leaf. An archetypical bimbo, who just can't say no to godknowswhat is been given. She will regret it later on. Cleopatra, when doing her Masters. Ah, a career-high. Not only because of her nose (you'd take care of it, a couple of years later) but because you ridiculed both a Julius and an Antony (whom everybody called "Tonay" because he was from Manchester). A certain Octavian to put you in your place was never found – this isn't the Roman Empire and the name is quite unusual nowadays. Eurydice, when a groupie in stone-rock band, she sent the vocalist/ lead guitarist to Hades and back. 'Don't look back,' she said to him but he had every right in the world not to trust her. He looked. Off he went (And the band eventually split). Desdemona, around the time when she bought the first Louis Vuitton. Some signs of maturity but still that uncanny conception of obedience present. Faithful, for the first time in her life, but he was an oddball. Kicks and fists and bruises. She was saved in the nick of time. Slight but open wounds. You've never recovered completely.

'Hit stop,' she says. She doesn't believe a word I just said because she is still convinced that she has always been herself, just she, she and no other. 'So from now on what?' she asks me, perhaps, from sheer curiosity.

So I go on.

Shortly she will be one/all of the following: Antigone (your brother has been behaving like a cunt lately and your dad always looked like a bit of a nutter) and Marianne Faithfull, and Marilyn Monroe and Helen of Troy and Patti Smith and Molly Bloom and Nico and Medea. 'Nicomedia!' she interrupts me. She is being childish. And Aspasia. And Carmen. And Magdalene, I rest my case.

'Enough', she says. She doesn't want to hear more.

I know what she's thinking. I would have liked to put her at ease but I can't. Yes she'll be all of them, all the above and even more. But there is one role she'll never play.

She'll never be Cassandra. Not only because in my vocabulary, 'bad news' means 'something that is about to be delivered'; but mainly because I know that even if she ever says anything that's not a lie, I am still going to buy it.

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Dinner

We are seven people around the table and it's one of those houses where, instead of a proper dessert, they bring out the cheeses. The kind of cheeses that smell like pointing towards the exit. Nevertheless we stay and the gourmets among us roll their tongues over their palates detecting aromas of cinnamon, wild strawberries, vanilla and damp elm. A young woman with a PhD on Marcel Proust from the University of Bordeaux, informs us that the aftertaste of a bluish one brings back to her mind a sweet memory. An evening in France, when after the screening of 'Amelie', she and a guy named Matthieu left the cinema

deeply moved and entered the closest bistro, where an explosive love was born over a table packed with 3.5 kilos of dairy products.

It is then and only then that he opens his mouth. 'Let me tell you what I think,' he says and he immediately freaks us out. 'The French have given us nothing but *Breathless* and *La Haine* in the past fifty years. Everything else is just *pauvre*. The Italian cinema has contributed *niente* to the way we comprehend this world, with the notable exception of *'8 1/2* and *Last Tango in Paris* to which I will soon return. I don't want to hear a word about Pasolini, or Moretti. Roberto Benigni I don't even count as an artist. Now, about *'8 1/2*, let me just repeat what an uncle of mine once told me. 'Son, if you can't understand why mademoiselle Mayia replied, ASA NISI MASA, when asked by Marcello Mastroianni to tell her collaborator what he is thinking at the moment; if you can't understand what Federico Fellini wants you, the viewer, to distil from that phrase, then you might as well not have watched the movie at all.' Wise man, my uncle. Wise man, and I don't care what that stockbroker said at his funeral. I would also like to point out that it is hardly surprising that Ingmar Bergman expressed his admiration for *American Beauty* and *Magnolia*. Moreover and since we've just broken bread together I feel obliged to inform the esteemed banqueters that the best movie ever to be filmed by a Greek is *Ulysses' Gaze* even if we count as Greeks both Elia Kazan and John Cassavetes. Furthermore, *Before Sunrise/Before Sunset* were inexcusably marketed as romantic comedies since they are actually a profound study on the art of flirting. *Before Sunrise* is an excellent treatise on the mechanisms of flirting and its side-effects; the sequel, an exposition of its after-affects. Other than that, I don't think there is a need to re-establish that *The Godfather Part II* is obviously a film about Fredo Corleone and not Michael. Whoever thinks otherwise is probably too young for chickenpox. One cannot stress enough that the 'new' American humour culminating in pictures like *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *Broken Flowers* pales in comparison to the deadpan humour of Aki Kaurismaki and Elia Suleiman. Finally, let me share my latest conviction with you all. Abbas Kiarostami is the best director on the planet right now and Wong Kar Wai is a bigger scam than a Korean air-conditioning unit. Ah, I almost forgot. I wish to put on the record my objection regarding Norman Mailer's famous essay on *Last Tango in Paris*. It is a pity that the greatest American mind of our time understood nothing about the film.'

He stops and then he gets up. 'Now if you'd excuse me,' he says and drops the white linen napkin on his plate. 'I'm off for a piss.'
