Free Spirit: A Historical Novel on the Life of Nikos Kazantzakis

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University of Surrey
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
School of English and Languages

Supervisors:
Dr. Paul Vlitos
Dr. Dimitris Asimakoulas

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Chapter One

Cosmas Eleftherakis opened his eyes. A shaft of sunlight had seeped through the curtains and was now falling on the wardrobe opposite his bed. A shiver of joy rippled down his spine. It was the same joy that had graced all his mornings since his epiphany one bright day on Mount Athos. He’d discovered that life was in and of itself a miracle, the most glorious ever performed. Some people squander their entire lives waiting for some particular blessing—riches, success, popularity—while the most supreme miracle, the one that encompasses all the others, unfolds in front of their eyes unnoticed.

He slowly hauled himself upright against the bedhead and let out a small yawn. As he wakened fully, his face brightened with the prospect of another day blessed with the bliss of writing. The dream that had faded away while he was waking up now returned again, though only fragments of it remained. In the dream he was taking to task the director of his publishing house for failing to arrange translations for his books. The strange thing was that in his dream he was dead but had come back to earth as a wraith to prevent his work from being neglected. To his astonishment, Ambelakis had also appeared in his dream to taunt him that no-one would promote his books once he was gone. It was odd to see Ambelakis again after all those years. Ambelakis. Just as oddly, he looked exactly the way he was during their pilgrimage to Mount Athos forty-odd years ago—the same thick red-brown hair, the same square face, the same stocky body.

Ambelakis was a fellow writer, though the books he’d written were destined strictly for consumption on the domestic market. At one point during their trip Ambelakis had asked him whether he felt happy with the life he’d carved out for himself. The question was a broad hint at his childlessness. He had replied without the slightest hesitation that he felt hugely privileged to
be living the life of a writer. The measure of happiness in his life up to that point was the three books he had written. They were his brainchildren, the repositories of whatever wisdom he had accumulated in his brief terrestrial existence, and his undying legacy for the future generations. Now as he sat up in his bed in far-away Antibes reflecting on his rationale for continuing to answer this question in the affirmative, he would add two more factors: his travels around the world and his relationship with Sofia, his second wife.

Who was now lying next to him, still sound asleep. He eased himself out of bed as quietly as he could, not wishing to wake her. She’d gone to bed later than him last night, and she could use a bit of extra sleep. He picked up his slippers from the rug on the wooden floor. Held them forward in front of him as he padded past the living room into the kitchen. He closed the door behind him. Safely out of Sofia’s earshot, he put the slippers on, pulled the tea things out of the cupboard and put the kettle on. The clock on the wall showed seven-fifteen. He could count on five solid hours of intensive writing before lunchtime. He waited till the kettle started to hiss, then poured the water into the cup with the teabag. While the tea was infusing in the cup, he stood upright in the middle of the room and started to exercise. With his hands fully extended, he performed a series of stretches: forwards, backwards, and sideways. No matter which part of the world he woke up in, these stretching exercises were always a part of his morning routine. “Our bodies are on loan, a temporary vessel for the soul, and yet they are the greatest tools we’ll ever have access to,” he’d written in his philosophy book, *A Workout for the Spirit*, thirty-five years ago.

He opened the door and took the tea upstairs to his study room, treading on the steps as lightly as he could. He sat down at his desk and took a large gulp. He felt his lungs warming up at once; hot blood started to drum in his veins, and a jolt of energy surged through his body: he was ready to begin his writing day. He pulled his notepad from under the pile of books he’d left on the desk the night before and opened it to the last written page. He didn’t need to re-read the last sentence to remember where he’d stopped. It was still vivid in his mind: “as Jesus lay dying on the cross he was visited by a strange dream.”

He furrowed his brow. So much was riding on the next sentence. A few strokes of his pen could mean the difference between an uneasy peace and an ugly war. The slightest mistake could allow his detractors, who were watching eagle-eyed his every move, to pounce on him. His temples puckered with anticipation of the trying task ahead of him. This novel had taxed his
mental powers more than any other. It was early May, and he’d been lucubrating on it for the better part of six months—more than twice the time it normally took him to finish a draft these days. Ever since he took his first steps in the world of writing back in 1905, Cosmas had never suffered from writer’s block—he simply had no time for it; he just got up in the morning and sweated his guts onto the page day in, day out—but this time he agonized over every sentence, pondered each new turn in the narrative to the point of indecision.

He got up from his desk and crossed to the bookcase on the opposite wall. The top shelf was jammed solid with first editions of his own books. A tear trickled out of his one good eye as an image of his younger self as a budding writer freshly arrived in Paris flashed across his brain. He was twenty-four years old then. He’d come to Paris to study philosophy after a five year stint as a student in Athens—from a small and shabby city that had long been reduced to a shadow of its ancient glory to the very hub of the literary world. The prospect filled him with excitement mixed with guilt—he knew so many promising young minds who didn’t have the means to study in Paris. He remembered fondly how productive he’d been that first year in Paris. By the end of the year, he’d not only put the finishing touches to his first novel begun in Crete four years earlier but had also dashed off a second one, all the while immersing himself day and night in the works of William James, Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson.

He found his first two novels on the shelf, sitting back to back. He pulled out the first one, *The Snake Charmer*, and peered at the cover. It had a picture of his younger self in a suit and tie against a matte pink orange background. An image of Irene Faye appeared in front of his eyes: red-haired and fair-skinned with sensual lips and curves to die for. The snake that threatens the young poet in the novel. Irene Faye: the lass from Ireland, who was his teacher of English and his first lover. She had tempted him to sin, then plunged him into shame. Their relationship had inspired the novel—more of a poetic monologue really, as the critics had noted, bodying forth in words the agony of his soul in the face of the transience of life and the corrosion of the spirit by the flesh. He tucked the book back in and took out the second one, *Broken Spirit*. He examined its cover: a featureless man slumped over a chair in a state of despair against a grey background. His tribute to Nietzsche, he thought. His characters in the novel were meant as examples to avoid. Lacking the grit and resilience of Nietzsche’s superman, they can’t help but break down in the face of the challenges they face.
He replaced the book on the shelf and ran his eye over the others. He’d come a long way since his first days in Paris, as the range of books lining the shelf demonstrated: tracts of philosophy, travelogues, novels, plays, translations and an epic poem. Each one of them was a part of him, a distinct stage in his development as a writer, in turn a function of his personal development. And yet, despite all this prolific output, it was only with *A Night with the Santouri*, the book with the beige cover and the elongated figure of a man along the right side he was now plucking out of the middle of the self, that he’d made his mark on the international scene. It was his one and only global best-seller, published in 1953, that had won him critical acclaim and made him a household name outside Greece, though on that note few people outside the literary circles he moved in and out of could actually get their tongue around his surname even today.

He put the book back on the shelf. Thinking to get some fresh air, he marched with short spry steps to the French windows. As soon as he pulled them open, a blast of chill wind blew into his face. Defying it, he stepped out onto the balcony. He stared out across the sea that stretched vast and inscrutable in all directions. It was a hazy day with gleams of sunshine tinting the edges of the clouds. The sea was rough, its surface seething with whitecaps. The seawater in Antibes, as indeed in the entire French Riviera, was a duller shade of blue and a lot dirtier than what he was used to in Crete. But if he narrowed his one remaining sighted eye, it would seem to him almost identical to the color of the stately Cretan sea he was wont to gaze at from the port of Heraclion or of Chania when he was still residing in Crete.

He and Sofia had come to Antibes in the summer of 1948 while on holiday in the French Riviera. At the time they were staying in campus digs in Cambridge, England, as guests of the British Council. The initial plan was to stop in Antibes for a couple of days and then continue their trip along the coast. But fate had decreed otherwise. While they were promenading along the sea front, a sudden sense of joy had come over him. The air agreed with him here. When he reached the famous seawall, the most celebrated landmark of Antibes, he experienced a sharp sense of déjà vu. The massive stone structure reminded him of the seawall in his native Heraclion in Crete. He left Antibes with such favorable impressions that scarcely a month later he and Sofia came back and bought this house by the sea. Other people needed time to think things through before taking a momentous decision. He didn’t. He’d always been ruthlessly efficient at practical matters. Once he’d set his heart on buying, fixing, or furnishing a property,
he’d have it done in a matter of days, focusing single-mindedly on the task at hand until the work was done.

The cold air started to sting his face. He knew he shouldn’t be lingering on the balcony any longer lest he catch a cold again, so he scurried back into his study room and secured the window behind him. He returned to his desk and looked at the manuscript. He had embarked on this novel in the same exploratory vein as all the previous ones. It had started out as the mere germ of an idea, but as he kept plugging away at it, it had sprouted branches and offshoots, and by now it was almost fully-fledged. He had even given it a title, *The God inside the Man*, which he normally did once he’d finished writing the entire novel. *The God inside the Man* was a much more ambitious, and far riskier, undertaking than his previous novels, though. How could it be otherwise? Its main character, the figure he’d been striving all those months to inhabit with his whole being so that he could convert him to a compelling character in his novel, was none other than Jesus Christ. In his journey through life, Jesus had been his foremost source of inspiration. He embodied the qualities he most admired: far-sightedness, strength of character, capacity for forgiveness, and above all the spirit of self-sacrifice that was the most potent weapon in the war against the twin enemies of humanity: fear and vanity.

He picked up his pen to write the next sentence, but put it down again as he heard a familiar sound: Sofia’s feathery tread on the steps as she padded up the stairs towards him. He sprang up, strode over to the door and opened it. Sofia stood there clutching a glass of orange juice. She was shod in flats and had a plain white frock on. She often squeezed fresh oranges for him and brought them to his study first thing in the morning. It was a beneficial arrangement for both of them: it gave him the energy boost he needed to kick-start his writing day while it gave her the chance to check in on him before he became totally engrossed in his writing. She greeted him with a small smile, her trademark smile all those years they’d spent together, a distillation of her innate kindness and noble spirit.

He and Sofia had been together for thirty-five years. She’d been a fellow-traveler in his endless peregrinations of the last decade or so—spiritual or literary pilgrimages disguised as pleasure trips—but also his steadfast companion during the years of isolation in Aegina, a small island near Athens where he’d spent the trying years of the German occupation of Greece during World War II. They’d met on a hiking trip to Mount Parnassus outside Athens. Hit it off right away. It had always been that way with the women in his life: either they’d click from the first
moment or it was no good. Sofia understood him intuitively. She tolerated his little quirks and foibles, but more importantly she knew his needs as a writer, and accommodated them without a fuss.

He smiled back at her and kissed her cheek.

“You woke up early again,” she said with a note of concern in her voice.

Cosmas plucked the glass of juice from her hand, took a small sip. “I just couldn’t help it. I didn’t sleep very well last night. I suppose I wanted to get an early start.”

“Come on, my love, don’t ruin your sleep worrying about writing. We both know you don’t really need to start so early.” She had been by his side all those years when his books came easily to him, and she knew full well he could get a lot of writing done any time of the day.

“You’re probably right. For some odd reason I don’t feel like doing much writing today.” Sofia seized her chance. “Hmm, why don’t you join me on my trip to the market then?” Cosmas mulled it over for a second. “Not a bad idea,” he said. “I need to step out and stretch my legs.” He left the juice on the sideboard. “I’ll go downstairs to get ready.”

“Drink up your juice first.”

Cosmas put warm clothes on, including a woolen pullover underneath his overcoat, and tucked a pair of black sheepskin gloves into his overcoat pocket. Though the weather wasn’t particularly cold, he couldn’t take any chances with the flu. Not after what he’d been through in the Holy Land, where he spent half the trip in bed with a fever. He marched to the door where Sofia was waiting for him and seized his cane that hung on the coat hanger. They stepped out into a chilly day. The sky had clouded over. Fastening their overcoats a little tighter, with quick movements that were almost perfectly synchronized from years of living together, they started their leisurely climb uphill.

The market was only a twenty minute walk from their house. Sofia went there three or four times a week to take the air and buy fresh food. Cosmas rarely stepped out in the morning when he was in Antibes. Writing took precedence over all other activities, and he made a point of starting his writing day very early while his brain was at its sharpest. He was fond of walking, though, and just like the famous peripatetic philosophers of ancient Athens, he had conceived some of the best ideas for his books while promenading along the sea front. The best time for his
daily constitutional was early evening, roughly around dusk time, when he and Sofia could enjoy the changing colors and shapes as day gave way to night.

As they strolled uphill through the cobbled lanes of Antibes, the air perfumed with flower scents, the conversation turned to François’ visit. François, Cosmas’ agent, whom they’d invited to dinner that evening, would bring with him complimentary copies of Cosmas’ newly translated novels, *Freedom to Die* and *A Night with the Santouri*. Sofia knew how keen Cosmas was to read these books. In his early days he had been a translator himself and held high expectations for the translations of his work. And how could it be otherwise? It was through translations, alas, that the reading public outside Greece had come to know him and would continue to do so in the years to come. His habits of thought and patterns of style could only be reflected in the translated works as accurately as the differences between the target language and the source language made possible.

They were now so close to the market they could hear the hubbub of the conversations between shoppers and sellers. “What should we have for dinner?” Sofia asked, cutting short their own conversation about translation.

“Let’s wait and see what kinds of fish they’ve got in today,” Cosmas suggested non-committally. “If we can’t find any fish we like, we can buy some meat from the butcher on the corner of our street.”

They’d reached the first stalls. It was still early, but the marketplace was already teeming with housewives and elderly people, keen to get their shopping done early so they could go home and prepare lunch. Stalls on both sides were loaded with fruits of all varieties: apples, oranges, tangerines, plums, pears, figs, bananas, passion fruit, avocado, as well as barely pronounceable fruit coming from Tunisia and Morocco. “This is a feast for the eyes,” Sofia remarked. “You can say that again,” Cosmas answered, thinking the Mediterranean was blessed with the tastiest produce and the most enchanting landscape in Europe, if not in the entire world. His travels had taken him around the globe, and he knew from personal experience that every inch of land on the planet was sacred ground, but still the Mediterranean was several notches above any other place he’d visited in terms of natural beauty and the bounty of its products.

They now stopped at one of the stalls and started looking through the fruit. Sofia filled a paper bag with green apples while Cosmas handed the seller a bunch of ripe bananas and a few pieces of grapefruit to weigh them on his scales. He enjoyed mixing fruit with contrasting taste:
sweet, bitter, sour and tart flavors balanced each other out in his palate. He paid the seller for the fruit, hefted all the bags in his hands, and prodded Sofia to move on towards the centre of the market. They soon reached the fish section.

Well, we now need to decide,” Sofia said coming to a halt a few yards before a fish stall. “Will it be meat or fish, dear?”

“It’s really up to you. I’m not fussed either way.”

“Let’s go for fish then. It’s better for your health.”

“The question is not what’s good for me, but what François would like best.”

“I don’t see why there has to be a conflict of interest in every choice we make. Let’s get something that both of you like.”

“He’s from Nice, so he’s bound to like oysters. Let’s get some oysters.”

“Sorry but I don’t see the connection.”

“Nice is oyster country.”

They pressed on through the crush of people till they found a shellfish stall with an assortment of oysters, scallops, clams, mussels and periwinkles, all enticingly laid out against a background of light blue paper. They looked through it and finally picked three and a half pounds of oysters of different colors and shapes. Sofia was thrifty by nature and rarely bought more than they were likely to consume. Cosmas paid again. Then they wandered around the market some more, picking up small quantities of lemons, olives, lettuce, artichokes, and a few other basic foods. When they reached the northern end of the market, which ended in a small square with a dolphin fountain standing in its centre, they’d been walking for nearly an hour.

“Do you want to sit down and have some coffee?” Cosmas said, pointing to a sleek-looking coffee shop straight across.

“Sure, why not?” Sofia said with a quick smile. “It’ll take the weight off our feet.” It was nice to have coffee with Cosmas in the light of day for a change. They usually went out to coffee shops and bars when it was already dark on the streets.

The café had a few tables outside, most of them empty, but there was no question of their braving the elements, what with Cosmas running the risk of catching a cold and Sofia not really fancying sitting out in the chilly air. Cosmas pushed the door open and stepped in. Sofia trailed right behind him while he kept the door open. The café was half empty at this time of the day, but it still had a snug cozy feel. A waiter in a waistcoat rushed over to take their coats. It was so
warm inside they instantly thawed out. By mutual consent they sat down at a corner table by the window.

“What will you have dear?” Cosmas asked, dropping the shopping bags on the floor.
“I think I’ll go for a cup of nice warm tea. How about you?”
“Uh, coffee as usual.”
“Do you want some croissants with your coffee?”
“Nah, they’re more harm than good.”
“Come on honey, the last thing you need to worry about in your age is counting the calories in your diet. And you don’t need me to tell you that you’re very slim for a man of your age.”

It was true. His body had always been lean and lithe. It stood to reason. He’d taken great pains to cultivate an ascetic sensibility, resisting temptations of the flesh at times so staunchly that some people regarded him as a stick-in-the-mud. He was partial to honey, of course, the thick delicious Cretan honey his mother would feed him when he was a little boy in the land of gallants and swashbucklers, the hero-producing Crete, but that was his only indulgence. He’d lived through several wars, including the German occupation of Greece during World War II, and in the process he had become frugal enough to live off a hunk of bread and a fistful of olives. The comfortable life of the last decade or so hadn’t changed him one iota: neither he nor Sofia ever ate immoderately no matter what the occasion.

“OK dear, let’s spoil ourselves for a change. Garçon, on est prêt de commander s’il vous plait.”

Their beverages arrived shortly, accompanied by a plateful of crispy croissants. Sofia and Cosmas each had one in between sips of their drinks. They both sat a little further back in their chairs now. Sofia reached out and squeezed his hand. “Please tell me now, honey,” she said as the corners of her mouth curled into a small smile. “How is your novel going to end?”

Cosmas returned the smile, but no words passed his lips.
“Come on dear,” Sofia urged. “You know you can talk to me about it.”

Cosmas drew a deep breath, smacked his lips, and finally said: “I’m thinking of creating a long final scene where Jesus has a strange vision, a vision that is not mentioned in the Bible.”

She was struck dumb for a second. She’d read portions of the manuscript, so she knew Jesus was a cross-maker in his novel, but she too had always assumed he’d stay faithful to the
story of the crucifixion. “What kind of vision?” She asked drily, hoping he wouldn’t perceive the small tremble in her voice.

“I was thinking of making Jesus drift into a reverie while dying on the cross.”

“What kind of reverie? I don’t quite understand.”

“A kind of lifelike daydream, where he’s toying with the idea of abandoning God’s plan for him and living a normal human life.”

“A normal human life?” she exclaimed, still puzzled. “What do you mean? How could Jesus have a normal human life? That doesn’t make sense to me.”

“That’s because you’ve never considered any alternative outcomes to Jesus’ story. Very few people have. I mean the life of a family man.”

“A family man? Do I understand you well? Do you mean you want to show Jesus settling down and starting a family?”

“That’s exactly right. He will be given the option of escaping from the cross, marrying Mary Magdalene and having children with her.”

Sofia’s mouth was now slightly open. “You’re joking,” she murmured, incredulously. “Tell me you’re joking.”

“You know I don’t joke about my work. You asked me what I had in mind for the rest of the novel, and I told you. And now that I started to confide in you, I may as well go all the way. There’s one more thing.”

She twisted her face into a slight grimace. “What’s that?”

“In this vision he sees, Christ has relationships with other women too.”

“What kind of relationships? You mean as in helping them get through life crises?”

“You know very well what I mean. Intimate relationships. Like all normal couples.”

“Cosmas, are you sure you know what you’re talking about? You can’t possibly show Christ having intimate relationships with women. Jesus was supposed to have been untainted by carnal desires. The priests will be on your case the moment the book reaches their hands.”

“Yes, I know. But I have to tell people the truth.”

“What is the truth?” Her voice was steadier now.

He took a sip of his coffee. “What I’ve told you so many times before. The flesh is doing eternal battle with the soul. Jesus was a man, and as a man he experienced the same guilt and the same fear as the rest of us. If not, then his dual substance goes out the window.”
“Maybe so, but you know full well that’s not the way the story is told in the Bible.”

He knew it, of course. He’d studied the Bible in depth when he was a teen and could almost quote chapter and verse for most of its contents. He’d even spent six months on Mount Athos in his mid-twenties discussing it with enlightened monks. But he’d never accepted its pronouncements as the one and only truth. The Gospels were written by common mortals, and divinely inspired though the apostles were thought to be, they were prone to error, or subjective understanding of the events they described. Christianity was just one religion among plenty of others. They all proclaimed faith in their own god or gods, but there was only one God, ruling the whole universe. He’d ended up getting into trouble on Mount Athos too, openly disagreeing with some of the monks on matters of doctrine. He had come away with his original convictions further reinforced. His relationship with God was personal, and so was his understanding of the figure of Jesus. It couldn’t have been otherwise: no man, or woman, is free from the shackles of subjectivity.

“But the views of Jesus Christ’s identity advanced by the church are totally misleading,” he said finally, after casting a glance around the room to make sure no-one was listening to them. He knew of course it was a superfluous precaution: even if someone had been doing so, he or she couldn’t have understood them as they spoke Greek, and Greek tourists in Antibes were rare.

“Can’t you see what happens?” he now continued. “If Jesus was not a man, but one hundred percent pure divine essence, then he can’t have experienced any pain or suffering during his life on earth. He can’t have been tormented by an inner struggle to overcome his fear of death and the temptation to raise a family. As pure divine essence, he wouldn’t have had to fight against one part of his own nature. That being the case, there wouldn’t have been any battle, and by extension any victory either. All Jesus would have had to do is lay down the law as handed down to Him by His Father, and all of us would have had no choice but to follow this law without second thoughts or brave eternal damnation.”

“Sorry love, but I don’t see where the problem is,” Sofia argued sensibly. “Jesus was the son of God, we all know that, but He came down to earth as a man.”

“There’s the rub, honey. You can’t figure Jesus as a man and as a God at the same time. It’s an irreconcilable ontological paradox.”

“I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it. But that’s certainly not the way the whole thing is laid out in the Bible, Cosmas.”
“The Bible, my dear, is a book like any other book. It was written by men, and it’s read by other men and by women, who by the way had no hand in its composition. It might be one of the greatest books of all times, or even the greatest so far, but that doesn’t exempt it from being a narrative like any other narrative.”

“And what does that mean, Cosmas? I hope it’s not beneath you to explain it to someone who hasn’t had the benefit of a university education like you.”

“It means that it’s made up of words, and words are symbols. Like all other symbols, they’re subject to the process of signification.”

“All right, so what’s the bottom line?”

“The bottom line is that the Bible is a work of fiction.”

“A work of fiction? Are you off your head, love? I’m afraid this time you’ve gone much too far. The Bible isn’t a work of fiction. It’s the word of God.”

Cosmas gave a wry smile. “Yes and no. It’s an inspired work, and it’s the best of its kind. If studied in the proper spirit, it can lead to spiritual enlightenment. But it’s not the only one. The Koran, for example, makes the same claims to be a holy book as the Bible. So does the Talmud and scores of other books regarded as sacred by adherents of other faiths. But all of these books, the Bible included, are texts that represent people’s attempts to understand the work of God at a particular point in time. But as I told you before, there’s only one God for the whole creation, not a whole bunch of them, a separate one for each religion. Can you imagine the sight of sixty or seventy Gods slugging it out for supremacy up there in heavens?”

“Don’t be facetious, honey. You know that doesn’t make sense.”

“That’s exactly my point. You do understand the implications of the fact there’s only one God, don’t you?”

“I’m afraid I do not. Can you help me here?”

“It obviously means that the word of God is not the preserve of a particular individual such as Jesus or Buddha or of an elite group of theologians, though the priests would have us think so.”

“Where is the word of God then?”

“It’s within each one of us. To find it we need to look deep inside our soul, not someplace else in the outside world, though of course it is everywhere around us as well.”

“If that is so, then how come most people take no heed of it?”
“Because they don’t open up their hearts. That’s the greatness of Jesus. He set a shining example for all of humanity. He opened up his heart to God and found the God he had inside him. Then he showed his Godliness to the outside world through his ultimate sacrifice: giving up a safe and happy life, prized by most people as the noblest good. And if one human being can do this, then all of us can do it.”

“I like the way you put it, but I’m afraid others won’t see it that way. Few people are free thinkers like you. Most people rely on others to tell them what to do. Once your book comes out, they’ll take their cue from the priests and they’ll call you a blasphemer and a heretic. You know that, don’t you?”

He gazed into her face for a while. “I do,” he finally said, “and I’m ready for that.”

Sofia gave a deep sigh of frustration. “I don’t understand why you have to get yourself into trouble all the time. You’re about to release the Aeolian winds with this novel of yours. The furor you caused with your santouri novel has barely died down, and now you’re about to take on the entire Greek Orthodox church, not to mention all the other Christian churches around the world.” She paused for a moment. Every muscle in her body was now twitching with pent-up tension. Suddenly something inside her snapped. “Why are you doing that?” she said loudly. “We’re blessed to have a beautiful house, the means to travel, and peace of mind. You know how hard we had to struggle to achieve all that. Why do you want to risk our peace and happiness now that you have finally arrived after all those years of bitter fighting with the critics and the priests? Aren’t you happy for once in your life? Can’t you just rest content with the good name you’ve worked so hard to build? Can’t you just enjoy the rest of your life in peace and quiet?”

Now all the customers in the café were staring at them. Cosmas felt a constriction in his chest for a second. He cared deeply about Sofia and didn’t want to upset her. He waited patiently till her fury had spent itself and people had stopped looking in their direction. Then he took her hand again. “My dear,” he said gently, dropping his voice lower, “I’m doing all this because I have a mission to wake people up. The course I’m taking is dictated by a force higher than myself.”

“And what is that force?” she asked him very softly now, regretting her outburst a minute ago.

His face twisted into a tense, solemn expression. “It’s a deep inner voice,” he said quietly but emphatically. “The voice that talks to me when I wake up in the middle of the night. The
voice that tells me what to do next when I’m confused and need guidance. The voice that shows me a way out when I reach a dead end.”

She pondered his words for a moment, then creased her fine face into a benevolent smile. “No matter what happens, I’ll always be by your side,” she declared, bringing his hand tenderly to her lips. “But please don’t push yourself beyond your limits with this novel. Your health is still fragile.”

“All right dear. I’ll take care of myself. You have my word.”

**Chapter Two**

François arrived promptly at seven. Sofia opened the door and kissed him thrice on the cheeks, as was the custom in France. He was clutching a bulging carrier bag whose contents Sofia instantly guessed. She offered to take it off his hands, but he politely declined. She wasn’t from a privileged family background, and her upbringing hadn’t been particularly refined, but over the years spent as the consort of a respected and more recently fêted writer—though never in the country where he came from—she had developed an instinct for being a gracious hostess. She ushered François into the living room. Cosmas was there, lounging cross-legged on a beige-colored sofa. He rose agilely to his feet and shook hands with François.

“Here’s the booty, mon cher ami,” François said grandiosely, handing him the eagerly awaited bag. “I’m sure you can’t wait to dip your nose into it.”

He was right, but Cosmas held back the urge to pull open the bag and devour its contents. “Let’s have dinner first,” he replied coolly, patting his guest on the back. “We can talk about it later.”

Cosmas led François to the dining room while Sofia trotted off to the kitchen to fetch the starter. The dining room was a small and ordinary, with a wooden table in the middle and six plain chairs around it. The small size of the dining room was one of the reasons, but by no means the main one, why Cosmas and Sofia didn’t entertain very often, though these days they were regularly invited to other people’s houses. The table had already been attractively set with three place settings and wine glasses placed at a right angle from each set. A bottle of Beaujolais stood right in the middle. It was already open.
“So, have you recovered from the flu?” asked François, who was now facing Cosmas after sitting down at the table straight across from him.

“Not fully. But I’m feeling a lot better.”

“You should take better care of yourself. It’s time you cut down on long-distance traveling. It’s taking rather a heavy toll on you.”

“You know that isn’t going to happen. Traveling is my lifeblood.”

Sofia walked in holding a large bowl that she set in the middle of the table next to the wine. “We’ll start with a niçoise salad,” she announced as she took her place right next to Cosmas.

“Great choice for a starter,” remarked François.

“I’m glad you like it,” Sofia replied. “Help yourself then. By the way, we’ll have oysters for the main course. Do you eat oysters?”

“Oh, I absolutely adore them. Shellfish quite agrees with me.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” said Sofia with a quick sideways glance at Cosmas. “You see, we weren’t quite sure you’d like oysters.”

“Hmm, why was that?” asked François, spooning large chunks of the niçoise salad into his plate.

“You could be allergic to shellfish. Many people are.”

The truth was Sofia was a little worried about the absence of foie gras from their dinner table. It was a staple snack in just about every home, but she and Cosmas never got used to its taste and never offered it to their guests either. “Love,” Sofia said, turning to Cosmas again, “will you be kind enough to serve the wine please?”

Cosmas poured the Beaujolais into their glasses, and François toasted the success of the translated editions of Cosmas’ novels. They finished the salad quickly; Sofia rose and fetched the oysters from the kitchen. They were neatly arranged across a silver platter with succulent halved lemons on the side. Sofia also brought in a silver platter heaped with olives, carrots, and mashed potatoes, meant to be consumed as side dishes. They all piled their plates high with oysters, Cosmas using his hand, Sofia and François with practiced pincer-like movements of their spoon and fork. Sofia urged them to squeeze lemon onto their oysters, which is what she proceeded to do with hers. The oysters were of assorted colors and sizes and looked shiny against the white background of the plates. They dug into their meal while chatting about the vagaries of the
weather in the winter months in Antibes and the sights taken in during Cosmas’ and Sofia’s recent trip to the Holy Land.

They finished their meal. Sofia cleared away the table and disappeared into the kitchen while Cosmas and François carried on drinking Beaujolais, François twice as fast as Cosmas, who carefully timed his sips to avoid feeling dizzy. Loosened up by the wine, François steered the conversation round to the success of Cosmas’ last two books and suggested that this year he might be shortlisted for the Nobel Prize in Literature. If this actually happened, it would be the fourth time he had been nominated for the Nobel Prize.

“Believe it or not, François,” Cosmas responded, “I’m not so hung up on awards. Not any longer, that is. I’d much sooner be remembered as a humble worker for the cause of peace than as a literary celebrity. The satisfaction of saving people’s lives means more to me than the kudos of an award.”

“Point well taken, my dear Greek friend. I know how vital your contribution was to the repatriation of Greek people of Pontos and Caucasus. But the Nobel Prize is not to be spurned. I feel you have a sporting chance of making it to the shortlist once again, and if a few other Greek writers voice public support for your nomination, you can actually win it this year. And to be honest with you Cosmas, whereas I couldn’t agree more that international peace is a worthwhile cause, the greatest one, no doubt, in the times we live, there’s something to be said as well for making Greek people proud by being the first writer from your small country to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.”

Cosmas lifted his glass. “For one thing, I was never big on prizes, and I have no interest in becoming a literary celebrity,” he said after taking a long gulp. “For another thing, these prizes are decided by factors other than merit, so I see no reason to bother.”

“That may be so my friend, but I don’t think you realize what is at stake here. If you win the Nobel Prize, you’ll attract international attention not only to yourself, but to your country as well. It’s not every day that a writer from a small country that has just come out of a devastating civil war and who, mind you, doesn’t write in English, German, or French wins this great honour.”

Cosmas was swirling the wine in his now half empty glass while François was talking. He couldn’t deny the truth of his agent’s words.
“Think about it for a minute,” François went on. “If you become a Nobel Laureate, you’ll enter the pantheon of great writers in this century . . . Joyce, Proust, Mann, Kafka, Hemingway, and Eleftherakis. You’ll go down in history as a literary giant. Your work will live forever. In the future you will be mentioned in the same breath with the writers you now admire: Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and you too.”

Cosmas put his glass down. “I can’t say I’m not tempted,” he said, “but you know very well that this matter is beyond my control. There’s a lot of maneuvering involved. There are scores of great writers who didn’t win the Nobel Prize because there was nobody to pull strings for them.”

“That’s not exactly right,” disagreed François. “If you mobilize the support of your fans, the Swedish Academy will sit up and pay notice. And please don’t sell yourself short. Winning the prize won’t turn you into a literary celebrity in the demeaning way that you used the term. You bear no similarity to the shallow pseudo-intellectuals who join the ranks of the literati just so they can live a life of glitter and glamour. You’re a writer of substance. All your readers know that.”

Cosmas was staring at his glass, plunged into deep thought while François was making his case for the urgency of making a play for the Nobel Prize. Before he could formulate a reply, Sofia reappeared with a tray bearing coffees for him and François. She set the coffees in front of them, then resumed her seat next to Cosmas and took a sip of water.

She looked from one of the men to the other, and availing herself of the unexpected gap in the conversation, she asked the question that was uppermost in her mind: “So François, when were the translations of the novels officially released?” Cosmas breathed an inward sigh of relief as the words echoed across the room. François had touched a raw nerve with his comments about his legacy, and he would be hard pressed to make a well-reasoned reply.

“Oh, the translations?” murmured François after a long interval, as if he’d woken up from a long dream. “They … they came out last week. We threw a big book launching party in Paris. I would have asked Cosmas to attend, of course, but you two had hardly come back from your trip, so I didn’t bother to mention it.”

“The translations were rather long in the making, weren’t they?” Cosmas put in, grateful for the diversion from the Nobel Prize conversation.
“I’ll say,” answered François. “Six months is more than is usual even for books of that size. But that was to be expected, Cosmas. Your prose isn’t the easiest in the world to translate.”

“I shouldn’t think it would be too much of a problem for Michele Boudreaux,” said Cosmas. “He’s extremely experienced, and his command of Greek is flawless.”

“Boudreaux is indeed a brilliant translator, but he doesn’t know the Cretan dialect so well.”

“If I may say something,” Sofia chipped in. “I think you’re overstating the case for the use of dialect in these two novels. I’ve read them very carefully, and I give you my assurance there’s only a tiny smattering of Cretan dialect in them. Most of the language is fairly straightforward modern Greek.”

“You both know I can’t argue with you,” François exclaimed, spreading his palms outwards in a gesture of resignation. “I don’t speak any Greek, more’s the pity, much less Cretan Greek, so I’m afraid I go on what I hear others say about Cosmas’ prose. At any rate, it’s true it took Michele quite a while to finish these translations. I just hope the end result justifies the extra time.” He now fixed Cosmas with a deep questioning stare. “When are you planning to read them? I’d very much like to know what you think of the translation.”

“Right away! The moment you step out the door I’ll nip into my office and bury myself in them.”

“Please get in touch when you’re done reading them. I would really appreciate your feedback.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll call you the moment I’ve reached the last page. And I promise I won’t hold back. You know I don’t mince my words about those matters.”

“Drink the coffee, gentlemen,” Sofia scolded. “It’s getting cold.”

When François left, Cosmas repaired to his study. Unless he felt sleepy earlier than his usual bedtime, he could count on three to four hours of uninterrupted reading time. A tingle of anticipation swept through him as he fished the two books out of the bag. Each one of them enshrined the memories of a beloved person, properly fictionalized of course. *Free to Die* was the story of his father interwoven with the chronicle of the Cretan liberation from Ottoman occupation. *A Night with the Santouri* was the re-constructed story of his best friend, Minas Lexikakis, with whom he had once done business in Mani in the south of Greece. Both novels
were closely based on real-life events and experiences, but as was always the case in his books, he had filtered the facts through the faculty of creative imagination, a faculty he had sharpened and refined through decades of practice.

He picked up *Free to Die* first. He opened it to page one and started reading:

*Captain Manolis clenched his teeth, as was his wont when ire threatened to overpower him. His buck teeth poked out of his parted lips and gleamed menacingly underneath his dark moustache. The people of Heraclion, his hometown, had likened him to a wild boar. It was an apt simile. With his round red-hot eyes, short unbending neck, and heavy thick-boned frame, he looked like a wild boar indeed, a boar that caught sight of people in the distance and reared up ready to pounce.*

The words belonged to a foreign language, which widened the distance between form and content. And yet, they brought tears to his eyes, something that hadn’t happened to him in years. Salty, sweet, loving tears, no longer tinged with shame and self-reproach as was the case in his earlier years, tears that blurred his vision as his mind filled with images of his father in his middle age. His father, yes, his father Menelaos: a proud Cretan man, springing from the soil of his native land, a rugged man of few words but heroic actions, but of course at the same time the fountainhead of the feelings of guilt that had plagued him until middle age. He had contrived yet another resuscitation: his words had brought him back to life, more than a painting or a picture ever could. He put the book down as he lost himself in a nostalgic reverie.

His father’s steely gaze rose up before his blurred eyes. His father was perched on the edge of the hard sofa in the living room of their spacious house in Heraclion, looking out of the window towards the flower-filled courtyard. It was the consummate Cretan gaze, stern, defiant and unblinking. Cosmas held that gaze in his pupils as his father’s face sharpened into focus. It was a smooth and round face, toning in with the fertile soil of his native land and rendered unmistakably Cretan by the stiff-bristled handlebar moustache that poked above his full-lipped mouth. The sturdy wrestler’s neck holding the face in place dipped down into a broad back that stayed stiff and unbending whether in motion or in repose.

He’d chosen this image of his father, a proud man in dignified middle-age, to preserve him in his memory. For the shrieveled old man of his twilight years, shuffling around the house with a stooped back and drooping shoulders, wasn’t really his father. That pitiful old sod was time’s prey, a bag of crumbling bones and wizened flesh, wasting away day by day until his return to ashes and dust at the age of seventy-six.
He opened his eyes, lapsing out of his trance. He cast a glance at the cover of the second book, *A Night with the Santouri*. The elongated figure drawn there, a visual representation of Zervas Alexakis, had a lot in common, despite the exaggeration, with the real-life person, Minas Lexikakis, who was the inspiration for the novel: same wavy hair, same scraggy neck, same bony shoulders, same noble bearing. He reflected on the peculiarities of the process of turning them into heroes in his novels. The issue of naming, for example: while he had represented his father with his real name in *Free to Die*, he hadn’t done the same with Minas Lexikakis, whom he had transformed to Zervas Alexakis. He remembered an article that had appeared in the *Hearth*, Greece’s premier literary magazine, two years earlier. The reviewer had made a detailed comparison between the characters of Captain Manolis and Zervas Alexakis. He’d hailed both of them as larger-than-life characters and had gone on to extoll the descriptive oomph with which Cosmas had portrayed them in the pages of *Free to Die* and *A Night with the Santouri*.

The secret of this descriptive flair had been simple: the strong feelings he’d had for the *real-life* characters and his profound understanding of what made them tick. But despite the notable examples of his father and Alexakis, overall he had mixed feelings about basing his characters on real-life people. He may have turned Minas and his father into fictional characters with an easy conscience, but he’d been far more reluctant to do likewise with the women in his life, especially those who’d played the biggest role in it. He’d never even dream of using Sofia as a character in his fiction, though he wouldn’t stop short of asking her to do the reverse: forestall a host of other hopefuls by writing his biography immediately after his death. At the end of the day biography was also fiction, no matter how objective the biographer intended to be, but he would have preferred his wife’s fictional account of his life to that of all the others.

Another peculiarity of his process of turning reality into a novel was that he wouldn’t even dream of fictionalizing a person until he was dead and buried. It wasn’t until he’d entered old age himself that he had decided to create a story with his father as the main character. He couldn’t conceivably put him in a novel while he was still alive. He needed a certain distance to achieve perspective and find the courage to deal with him. His father had been a pivotal figure in his life. He was a farm trader, and he owned several hectares of vineyards outside Heraclion too. Working hard all his life, he had established a successful business, selling wine, oil, cheese, and vegetables in Heraclion and the surrounding area.
With the exception of the two years he’d spent on Naxos, they’d lived under the same roof until he turned eighteen. That was when he flew the coop once and for all, first going to Athens to study law, then making the much longer journey to Paris to study philosophy, and from then on gallivanting across most of Europe and Asia in search of artistic inspiration and spiritual enlightenment. It was his father who had financed, through parsimonious husbandry of his modest resources, his studies in Athens and Paris as well as the trips to Italy, Spain, Germany and Russia he’d undertaken in his twenties. In addition to funding Cosmas’ travels, his father also provided for the rest of the family—his wife and two daughters—until the very end of his life, and all of that without grudging a single penny. For all those reasons he felt he owed to him a large part of his free-spirited lifestyle and his subsequent success as a novelist, yet knew with undying regret that he was a disappointment to his father.

It was through his stabilizing presence, the security he offered to the whole household, that his own life as a teenager had been calm and quiet. Throughout his teens, he now mused, he had friends to socialize with and money to spend. And when school was out, he wasn’t averse to having a good time too. He remembered how on Sunday afternoons in the summer months he would meet his friends at the main square. They’d sit at a sidewalk table in one of the two sweet shops in town and lark about while waiting for the Scots (Crete had been carved up by the Great Powers, with the English and the Scots staying in Heraclion, while the French were quartered in Chania) to make their way to the main square from their quarters uphill. That was because they carried musical instruments with them, and they’d give an impromptu public performance once they got there.

The Scots would kick off the performance with the British anthem. Then they’d play a medley of Scottish songs. Meanwhile Cosmas would crack one joke after another and challenge the other kids to laughing contests, with the person laughing the loudest and the longest winning. Their loud laughter resounded across the square, interspersed with the notes from the band. His friends used to taunt him that his laughter sounded like the screech of a crow, but he wasn’t one to be offended, taking their light-hearted raillery in good part. Much to their delight, the main square would turn into an impromptu catwalk in the evening, like most other provincial towns in Greece. From their vantage point in the middle of the square, he and his friends would ogle at the young unmarried girls of Heraclion as whole troops of them sashayed by the sweet shops in their Sunday best, their clothes and appearance prompting a steady flow of wisecracks.
His thoughts returned to his father. He remembered with gratitude the educational benefits conferred by his father’s affluence. Thanks to him he’d got a head start in secondary school by attending a French school ran by Franciscan priests for two years. That was in 1897. He had been fourteen years old. Yet another uprising against the Turks had broken out all over Crete. His family fled to Naxos, a free island in the middle of the Aegean that enjoyed peace and prosperity. Despite his dislike of Catholics, his father had the foresight to register him at the French School of the Holy Cross. “If you can’t liberate Crete by the sword, you must liberate it by the pen,” he’d told him in a rare moment of approbation before handing him over to the Franciscans. The education offered by the school was positively stellar. He’d taken full advantage of it, acquiring a broad knowledge in a variety of subjects and sailing through his coursework with flying colors.

Once he’d started school as a boarder, his father returned to Crete to take part in the war against the Turks. It was during his stint at the French school that Cosmas had acquired a prodigious vocabulary in the language of Molière and Voltaire by translating an entire French dictionary into Greek. But his stay at the school was destined to take a nasty turn. A cardinal who’d come over from Rome for a visit singled him out as the most promising of all the pupils and took it in his mind to take him to the Vatican where he would train as a priest. A smooth talker, the cardinal coaxed Cosmas into granting his permission by painting a rosy picture of the life of a Catholic priest and promising him a quick rise to a high rank in the priesthood. The move was still barely legal. Secret arrangements were made for Cosmas to travel clandestinely to Rome by boat. His father, however, saved the day. He found out about the plan to smuggle him out of the country in a boat that would sail away under cover of the night. The night of his projected departure for Rome he arrived in Naxos in a boat bringing with him a small force of boatmen and fishermen. Holding torches aloft and carrying a can of gasoline, the team climbed the road to the castle. At his father’s word of command, they started banging on the door of the school and threatening to set it on fire. The principal stuck his head out of the window and saw the men below wielding crowbars and pickaxes as they hurled a torrent of abuse at him. Terrified, he gave instructions to wake Cosmas up, dress him at once, and lower him from the window in a basket. Five minutes later, Cosmas landed in his father’s eagerly awaiting hands. His father banged him on the ground three times as punishment for his apparent complicity in his foiled defection before gesturing to his men to make their way back to the boat and head home.
Beyond the shadow of a doubt, his father had been his benefactor. He had also been the bane of his life. He was such a dominating presence that he had undermined Cosmas’ confidence in certain key areas of ordinary life, while ironically nourishing his writing, which as is often the case had served him as a therapeutic tool in his first years as a writer. His father had conditioned him by antithesis. Resenting his father’s complete absorption in purely physical tasks—growing crops, selling his products, fighting the Turks—he himself became attracted to the life of the intellect, and devoted himself to this life with unswerving devotion, until it was too late to turn back when in his declining years the realization of what he had been irretrievably missing hit home with a mighty punch.

Cosmas now lifted his chin towards the ceiling and narrowed his eyes some more. As he settled farther back in his chair, his first memory of his father flashed back to him. The year was 1886. He was only three years old at the time. Unlike the rest of Greece, which was proclaimed a sovereign nation in 1832, the island of Crete was still under Turkish occupation, and daily life in Heraclion was tough. The gates of the inner city were locked every day at dusk. The Christians and Turks, who lived in different quarters and avoided close contact with each other, were compelled to remain inside the walls of the town till the next morning. This restriction as well as the very presence of an occupying force on their island, didn’t sit too well with the Cretans, who yearned to throw off the Turkish yoke. So far they had staged three rebellions to that effect, in 1854, 1866, and 1878. Knowing who they were dealing with, the Turks lived in constant fear of a fresh uprising.

One fine afternoon in early May a hot-tempered young Turk betook himself to a seaside taverna where he imbibed copious amounts of wine. Addled by booze and hatred of Greeks, he started riding through the streets of Heraclion on his trusty young steed and assaulting any Christian who came his way with his yataghan. His father had taken Cosmas with him to the shop that day. His father had just locked up the shop for the evening and was now on his way back home. Cosmas was toddling unsteadily by his father's side holding him by the hand. The burly Turk sharply turned the corner, his thick moustache bristling like the quills of a hedgehog, and loomed into sudden view. He spied them, and without a second thought, he charged towards his father with the yataghan raised, clearly intending to chop off his head. His father turned to him, his three-year-old son. He hoisted him off the ground and set him against the wall of a house a couple of yards back. Petrified, Cosmas watched the charging Turk draw nearer and
nearer on the back of his horse. Now the Turk was within striking distance. His dark eyes shining with fury, he lifted his yataghan and was poised to bring it down and slice off his father’s head. Luckily, he never did so. His father swerved deftly sideways and punched him hard in the belly. The Turk came flying off his horse and landed spread-eagle on the ground. Cosmas’ father bent over him. The Turk’s jaw was broken, and a pool of blood was oozing its way out of it. Without the slightest hesitation, his father wrested the yataghan from the Turk’s grasp and stepped away. He grabbed Cosmas by the hand again, and they strode on homewards without turning back even once.

When they got home, his mother was waiting for them. Her small round eyes nearly popped out of her head when they fell on the yataghan. Soaked in sweat, his father sat down in a kitchen chair and gave her an unvarnished version of what had happened. She heard out the story, not once making a comment. Conquering her incipient panic at what she’d heard, she rose and fetched him clean clothes to wear.

“The poor boy saw all that,” she finally piped up, beckoning towards him as his father was changing into a fresh shirt.

“And a good thing too,” his father replied pat. “He’ll learn to hate the Turks like his ancestors and never be afraid of them.”

“What are we going to do with the yataghan?”

“Keep it in a safe place till he goes to school. Then give it to him as a pencil sharpener.”

The memory of the incident cast a glow of pride across his cheeks. This spirit of defiance in the face of danger ran in the family. His grandfather, a doughty warrior who had devoted his whole life to the holy fight to chase the Turks off the island, had also displayed this defiance and under much more difficult circumstances. Family lore had it that when his grandmother asked him before a battle if he was afraid of death, he disdained even to answer the question. The idea of fearing death was inconceivable: fear was beneath him. This fearlessness was a cultural trait: true Cretans had always scorned death. Their contempt was best illustrated by a macabre Cretan custom, which he hadn’t seen anywhere else in the world. Before a Cretan funeral, the closest friends of the deceased dance over the dead body, clink glasses of wine and toast each other: “to our own death.”

His grandfather had never retired from the fight against the Turks, “the sworn enemies of Christendom,” as his father had called them. In between the last two uprisings of the second half
of the nineteenth century, during the interludes that lasted about a decade each, he would spend most of his time sitting in a straw chair on the porch of their house gazing silently at the blue-gray mountains of Crete in the distance while smoking his pipe. Finally, and although he’d dispatched his fair share of Turks in his youth and middle-age, he took up arms again in 1878, at the time of the last rebellion, when he was an old man and had almost gone blind. He fought like a wild jackal this time around too, nothing daunted by old age. His life had been finally snuffed out in a battle outside a monastery. His brothers-in-arms had kept his skull, disfigured as it was with sword blows, as a holy relic.

With such gutsy ancestors, he now reflected, a streak of bravery must have been passed down to him, though he himself had never fought in a war. It was this fearlessness of his grandfather—reported, for his grandfather died five years before he himself was born—and of his father—witnessed at first hand—that nourished the courage he had displayed in the face of prolonged uncertainty and merciless persecution during the last twelve years. For since the end of the German occupation of Greece, he had become persona non grata to the Greek government in Athens. They saw him as a nuisance and effectively compelled him to leave the country. He had, of course, seen that coming when the civil war broke out right after the end of World War Two. But he hadn’t flinched from publishing articles decrying the divisive policies that stoked the civil war. And the people on the other side of the fence—the communist guerilla fighters launching attacks against government troops from their hideouts in the mountains—didn’t like him either, as he didn’t advocate armed rebellion or support their agenda. He’d made his position clear in his novel *Brothers at War*, in which he advanced an unequivocal renunciation of both sides of the conflict, the only sane stance a responsible free-thinking humanist could take. For now that the Turks and the Germans had left Greece, it was incumbent on all Greeks to bury their differences and work together to build a peaceful and prosperous nation. Instead of that, they had waged a self-destructive war that had pitted brother against brother along specious ideological lines.

He had no option but to denounce such a war. It was a debt he owed to his father and grandfather, who had dedicated their lives to the dream of a free Greece. If they had been alive today, they would have felt mortified at the sight of one bunch of Greeks, sprung from native Greek soil and speaking the god-blessed time-honored Greek language, butchering their brothers, children of the same earth and speakers of the same tongue, the tongue of Homer, exquisite,
mellifluous, and splendidly well-aged, in the name of capitalism or communism (his friend Sikelianos was right, he ruefully reflected, to describe contemporary Greeks in one of his poems as caricatures of the ancient Greeks and the laughing stock of Europe). Wouldn’t his father and his father’s father and all the generations of freedom-loving Cretans down through the eons be utterly devastated if they were to rise from the grave to see all their sacrifices, their incessant fighting against an endless series of foreign invaders, their burning desire to tread the soil of a Greece belonging to Greeks, go to waste in such spectacular and insane fashion?

No, no, Cosmas whispered as he shook his head in despair, the least the two sides of the civil war could do was regret their actions and apologize for shedding the blood of their brothers. They owed it to their forefathers. For as he’d pointed out in *Exercises of the Spirit*, each new generation owes a debt to the previous one and all the ones before it, and by paying back that debt, a sense of continuum is established (who knows, he mused with a wry smile, perhaps a writer in the future will discharge the debt Greece owes to me), and at a collective level that is what gives life a sense of purpose and a greater value. Individuals die, but the race rarely does. That’s why he’d always regarded the village cemetery as a sacred place for the living. He’d made that point in *Brothers at War*. For the bones of one’s ancestors lay buried in the cemetery. As their final resting place, it is the repository of the village’s collective identity, the place that unites all the living and the dead, brings together the whole community, and reminds each one of the living of who they are, now and forever. If one senses that, then leaving behind the cemetery is a more poignant moment than leaving behind the house one grew up in.

He heard a dull thud, which jostled him out of his musings. His tired eyes snapped open. It was the manuscript. It had slipped out of his hands as he was apparently drifting off to sleep and fallen to the ground. He picked it up and placed it on the desk. Then he rose with a yawn and padded over to the window. He opened it just a crack to let some fresh air in and looked out over the dark silhouette of the mountaintops in the distance. Under cover of the night, he thought wistfully, they could easily be taken for the craggy mountains of Crete. He returned to the desk and lit his pipe. The fresh air restored his energy and he decided to read some more. He picked up the manuscript again and soon came to the blood-swapping scene, one of his favorite passages:

“*In the names of Mohammed and of Christ,*” Meri Bey said, and drew the dagger out of his belt. *Captain Manolis rolled up the sleeve of his jacket, revealing a brawny arm. It was a sunburned arm the texture*
of leather. Meri Bey bent forward. With a flick of his knife he opened a vein that stood out from the flesh. Dark, hot blood spurted out. Meri Bey pushed the empty cup underneath. He let a finger’s breadth flow into the cup. Then he removed his white head-band and tied it tight round the cut arm.

“Your turn, Captain Manolis,” he said.

“In the names of Christ and Mohammed,” said Captain Manolis, and drew out his knife. He slit Meri Bey’s stout white arm; its rich blood dripped into the cup. Then Captain Manolis took off his black head-band and tied it tight round Meri Bey’s arm. They placed the cup between them and began slowly mixing the blood with their knives, not a single word passing their lips.

The scene had been a figment of his imagination, though Meri Bey’s character was based on the real Bey, who had ruled Heraclion when he was a child, and whom he had often seen with his own eyes. He had conceived this love-hate relationship between Captain Manolis and Meri Bey as a device to imbue the novel with tension. Blood brothers were bound together by a sacred bond. Their union was a matter of choice, not chance, and hence it was even stronger than that of biological brothers. Yet the two blood brothers in question were on opposite sides, sworn enemies. As such, they were constantly torn between embracing each other in allegiance to blood and killing each other out of loyalty to race.

For, despite his abhorrence of the abject tyranny of Turkish rule and his boundless admiration for the accomplishments of the ancient Greeks, he didn’t believe in the inherent superiority of the Greek race over the other races. Quite to the contrary, ever since coming to Antibes he had championed a brotherhood of nations. No-one, he thought, was inherently better than anybody else. The color of our skin admittedly differed, but the color of the blood that flowed within our veins was the same. People all over the world were essentially the same regardless of their ethnic identity. There were kind people and cruel people, strong souls and weak souls, bright minds and dull minds, and a fair number of Greeks and Turks in both categories.

A smile spread over his cheeks. He hadn’t read the passage in quite some time, and now that he did so again, he was pleased with himself: he’d struck the right note: not too crude, not too soppy. But he wasn’t nearly so pleased with the translation. Not that Pierre was to blame. Far from it. He’d done his best to preserve the subtleties of his prose. But the music was lost. And some words describing people or places just couldn’t be translated: the shade of meaning of the
Greek word wouldn’t come out in the French one. Still, half a loaf was better than no bread: the message was there, though the French forms were less beguiling than their Greek equivalents.

He flipped over to the next page and continued to read. He quickly became engrossed in the pages of the manuscript. He was now the reader of the book rather than the writer. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice calling his name from a place so far away that the words sounded hollow and dull: “Cosmas, dear!”

It was Sofia calling from downstairs.

“What is it?” he shouted down through the floor boards.

“Nothing really! Just wanted to tell you I’m going to bed.”

“OK. I’m coming down in a while.”

“You don’t have to. I just wanted to say goodnight.”

“Goodnight then.”

“Goodnight, honey.”

He stifled another yawn. He’d have to go to go to bed soon. But first he had to read the scene over which he had labored so hard when writing the first draft of the novel: Captain Manolis’ encounter with Namib, Meri Bey’s wife. This, he thought, was the tour de force of the first part of the novel. Meri Bey invites Captain Manolis to his house to protest about the behavior of Captain Manolis’ brother. There Captain Manolis claps eyes on Namib for the first time. Aroused by Meri Bey’s descriptions of his valor, Namib flicks him a sultry look, and from that time on Meri Bey and Captain Manolis are vying for the attentions of the same woman. The most difficult part of the scene to write was Namib’s angel-like singing at the behest of Meri Bey. He’d now arrived at this scene in the manuscript and started reading it with bated breath.

_The notes of the bouzouki gained urgency; she swayed in the dimly-lit room like a wild beast, filling her lungs with air. And suddenly there shot from her jutting throat a fountain from the depths of the earth—the woman’s voice. The house shook and Captain Manolis’ temples were pierced. A war whoop rose up; battle was joined, and a spasm of ecstasy quivered through his fists, his throat, his loins! The mountains laughed, the plains turned scarlet with Turkish soldiers: over them stormed Captain Manolis on Meri’s steed, behind him thousands of Cretans in black head-bands, before him no one. The villages shouted, the minarets snapped like felled cypresses, the blood rose as high as his horse’s belly he looked around him; that wasn’t Crete; those weren’t the docks of Heraclion, its seas and houses; that wasn’t a mosque; he had stormed Aghia Sofia astride Meri’s steed! He dismounted, crossed himself, raised his head towards the sky-hung dome, and it seemed as if_
the tower bells had burst through their tombs, and from their tongues there dangled the old candle-lighter of Saint Minas, the gawky sod, but a giant gawky sod, and he sounding them and they resounded, and he roared and danced with them like a bell.

Captain Manolis clutched his temples. The Circassian’s throat fell silent. Suddenly the world stood firm again. Crete was again there, and Heraclion, and the Bey’s cognac. The Bey too gazed at Namib and sighed and drank…. The soul had forgotten its flight and had returned to its prison.

He looked up from the manuscript, drew a deep breath. The translation was up to scratch. He couldn’t fault it technically. But it was doomed from the start to do injustice to the cadences of his prose. The words were bereft of resonance, the passage had been stripped of its power and beauty. Tender Greek words didn’t caress when turned into their French equivalent. Harsh words didn’t castigate. And he felt the same way about concepts too. A gawky sod wasn’t the person he had fixed in his mind when he conceived of a “Μούρτζουφλος” sounding the bell. The language one uses, Cosmas knew all too well from being multilingual, is the same language one is used by too. Language is the tool that enables Greek speakers or French speakers or English speakers to construct their cognitive world. Using the Greek language, laced with the Cretan dialect, he had conjured up a passionate yet magical world in the original Greek version. The French translation rendered it more literary so that his prose sounded like an exercise in bellelettristic writing, and that wasn’t at all what he had in his mind as he was writing the novel. But in the final analysis translation was a necessary evil. He knew that very well. The world would know him through a filter.

He’d thought, of course, of writing the novel directly in French. After all, he’d already written two novels in French in the past, and his command of French was impeccable. But if he had done so, he would be robbing Peter to pay Paul. On the one hand, he would produce a much more natural-sounding and idiomatic text than the translation, but on the other hand, the French text would be a notch below what he was capable of. His mind was Greek. The language he had inherited from his ancestors was Greek, fashioned through Homer’s wordsmithery and perfected over millennia of nuanced use by his successors. No matter how articulately he spoke and wrote French, he didn’t experience the world in terms described by the French language, and hence, the French he wrote couldn’t convey the subtlety and musicality of the Greek tongue. But he had to hand it to Pierre. His translation was competent. From a technical perspective, he’d done a good job.
His eyelids suddenly went heavy. Sleep was coming. He rose from the desk to go down and join Sofia, hoping she wasn’t asleep yet. He put out the lights and crept down the stairs, leaving the rest of the manuscript for the next day.

Chapter Three

Sofia was sipping her coffee in the kitchen while glancing at the international news section of the morning paper when she heard a knock on the door. She gave a start, sending the cup rattling against the saucer. Morning visits were rare. She didn’t encourage her friends, even the idle ones with time to kill, to drop by so early, and most people were at work at this time anyway. Cosmas was upstairs cocooned in his writer’s den, but still she knew the slightest noise could distract him. She folded the newspaper on the page she was reading and left it on the table; then she scurried along the narrow hallway to answer the door.

The unexpected morning caller was a young boy in a plain blue uniform. He was from the telegraph office, which she and Cosmas visited very often to send telegrams to Greece. The boy handed her an envelope with a telegram for Cosmas. Sofia thanked him and gave him a small tip. Intrigued, she held the envelope in front of her eyes and looked at the name of the sender: Albert Camus. Her heart gave a sudden flutter. This was the telegram Cosmas had been waiting for. She had almost forgotten about it, for it had been quite some time ago when Cosmas sent her to the telegraph office with a message for Camus. Taking care not to crease the envelop, she hopped upstairs two steps at a time and knocked on the door of Cosmas’ study room. She’d heard him wake up at the crack of dawn as usual, and she knew he’d be hard at work at this hour.

A minute later Cosmas opened the door. He smiled thinly and motioned her in. He was, of course, in his pyjamas: coordinating an outfit was a distraction at the start of a writing day.

“Here’s the telegram you’ve been waiting for,” she said, handing him the envelope.

Cosmas’ big brown eyes lit up at once. “Is it from Camus?” he asked excitedly, and without waiting for a reply, he unsealed the envelope, taking care not to tear it off. He pulled the telegram paper out of the envelope and read its contents with complete absorption.

Sofia’s thin lips parted slightly. “What is he saying?” she asked, her oval face, still youthful and unwrinkled, agleam with hope.
Cosmas lifted his eyes back towards her. A seraphic smile had spread across his lined face. “He says it gave him great pleasure to read my play.”

“And …?” Sofia queried, her voice quivering with excitement, “… did he like it?”


Sofia took a step closer. “That’s great news, honey,” she gushed with joy, flinging her arms around him. “I’m so happy for you.” Cosmas jerked his head back and gave her a sideways look. “For us,” she corrected. She took a step back. “So, when are you going?”

Cosmas puckered his lips. “I don’t know,” he said tentatively. “When do you reckon it’s a good time for us to go?”

“Us?” Sofia exclaimed. “No honey, spare me the hassle, please.”

Cosmas’ eyes scrutinized her face as if to find a clue to her intentions.

“Let’s face it, honey,” she went on, “you don’t really need me on that trip. I’d be a burden to you.”

Cosmas twisted his face into a frown “A burden?” he exclaimed. He leaned forward and slid his hand across her cheek. “My dear Sophie,” he said in a tender voice, “you know me well enough to know you’re not a burden. Haven’t we always traveled together?”

“Nearly always,” corrected Sofia with a playfully reproving look. “Honey,” she went on, “you and Camus are men of letters. You need to be left alone so you can talk freely about your writing. Having women around you can be an inhibition.”

Cosmas wasn’t sure whether there was a hint of irony in Sofia’s words. “You know very well,” he replied, “that’s not entirely true, especially here in France where Simone de Beauvoir is a national heroine.”

Sofia laughed dryly. “I’m not Simone de Beauvoir, honey. As you know full well, I have no ambitions to leave my mark on the world of literature. I leave that dubious distinction to your ex-wife.”

This time Cosmas cottoned on. Letta, his ex-wife had lately taken to dashing off cliché-ridden sob stories bristling with communist propaganda that held some appeal for leftist pockets of the intelligentsia back home. Sofia didn’t like Letta at all, but not because of any misplaced sense of rivalry for a long-forgotten ghost from Cosmas’ distant past. No, Sofia had a good heart, thank God. Like him, she held no grudges against people who’d hurt her in the past. The cause of
her dislike of Letta was the smear campaign she mounted against Cosmas after he and Letta went their separate ways. Waxing increasingly bitter over the years that followed their divorce and his subsequent life with Sofia, she’d taken to traducing him in the Greek press with increasing regularity and ever more biting venom. The brunt of her criticism was that he was cut off from reality and had no sympathy for the downtrodden and underprivileged, whilst in his writing he still paid lip service to socialist ideas. Cosmas took this criticism in his stride: he’d never set out to please everybody, and no amount of opposition could make him shift his ground or waver from his convictions.

His mind snapped back to the present moment. He decided to play his last card. “Come on, dear,” he urged Sofia, “come along with me. It’s been a while since we last visited Paris. You don’t have to follow me around. You can always do some shopping or sightseeing while I talk to Camus in a café somewhere.”

Sofia leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you my love. But I really think you should go to Paris all by yourself. You and dear Albert have an awful lot to discuss. And I honestly don’t want to get in the way. I’ll be a distraction from your intellectual conversations. Besides I have better things to do here.”

He gave her a somewhat puzzled look.

“Why do you look surprised? Antigone is back in town. I promised to spend the day with her tomorrow.”

“Antigone?” Cosmas exclaimed, puckering his heavily lined brows. “I thought she was in Athens. When did she get back?”

“Two days ago. She phoned me yesterday afternoon, and we arranged to go down to the shops on Friday. I thought you’d be hard at work on your novel on Friday and wouldn’t mind my spending the day with her.”

“I see,” Cosmas replied with a somewhat arch smile. “To each his own, as they say. OK then, the timing is perfect. I’m going downstairs to get dressed.”

“What for?” Sofia asked, surprised in her turn.

“What do you mean what for, my dear? I need to reply to Camus’ telegram. I have to tell him I am coming over to meet him.”

“Quite right! Of course you do. So when will you go to Paris?”
“Well, since you’ll be seeing Antigone on Friday, I’d better set out on Friday morning. If I catch the morning train, I can be in Paris in the late afternoon.”

“Right! And where are you two going to meet?”

Cosmas shrugged his shoulders. “At a café, I suppose. That’s where writers usually meet in Paris.”

“Hmm,” Sofia exclaimed. “I know they spend lots of time in coffee shops, but I could never understand the exact reasons why. Doesn’t all this sitting around in coffee shops take time away from their writing?”

“That’s not how they see it, my dear. If you ask them, they’ll probably tell you they get inspiration for their stories in coffee shops, but if you ask me the main reason they go there is to find out what other writers are up to. Writers are just as vain and competitive as anyone else.”

“Ha!” Sofia exclaimed again. “Knowing you, honey, I don’t think you’d ever do that!”

“Of course not! You know better than anyone else that I need peace and quiet to write. But I’m not French.”

“Or Algerian for that matter!”

“Or Algerian for that matter!” Cosmas echoed with a sardonic grin, taking the hint. “But Camus is different from the common run of writers.”

“Is he? In what way?”

“He’s more profound than any other French writer. His words come straight from the heart and have more depth than theirs.”

“Then I reckon you genuinely like him.”

“I have the greatest respect for him!” Cosmas said with a nod. “I think he’s one of the two or three best writers of our times.”

“That’s great then! I’m glad I won’t be coming. You two will have the space that you need to get to know each other.” She paused for a moment. “Are you going to tell him about your project, then?”

“I’m not so sure about it. You know I don’t like to talk to other writers about work in progress.”

“Even to a writer you admire so much?”
“Hmm, I may admire him, but I don’t know if I can trust him. And another thing is, I don’t want to be influenced by other writers’ views. You know well I don’t consult anyone else when I write a book, including you my dear.”

Sofia sighed wryly. This wasn’t entirely true. Cosmas did sound her out about his work from time to time, even if ever so subtly. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe you should make an exception in Camus’ case. From what you’re telling me, he’s not just any other writer. He may be able to tell you things about your novel that no one else can.”

“Allow me to doubt that.”

“Why? You yourself praised him to the skies earlier.”

Cosmas started to frame the familiar reply that writing was a solitary activity; that his books reflected his own unique worldview and aesthetic sensibility; that he was answerable to the public for their content. But some deeper instinct held him back. “I don’t know,” he said. “We’ll see.”

Sofia leaned forward again and gave him a parting kiss on the cheek. “All right honey,” she said as she turned her back on him, “You do as you wish. Now I’d better let you go.”

“Do you want me to pick up a newspaper on the way back?”

“No thanks. I picked up *Le Monde* earlier this morning. In fact I’m going to start reading it now.”

Cosmas boarded the second class carriage of the early morning train to Paris ten minutes before departure time. He didn’t want to cut it too fine, and generally he wasn’t one to leave things to chance, least of all his daily schedule. Like most other Greeks, ancient and modern, he valued freedom, and freedom required strict discipline. The train wasn’t even half full. He took his place by the window, which was propped open just a crack. There was only one more person in the carriage, an old man in an old-fashioned suit, and he was busy reading a paper when Cosmas stepped in. They swapped a perfunctory greeting, and the stranger buried himself back in his paper. Taking advantage of the ample leg space, Cosmas stretched his feet and readied himself for the pleasures of the trip.

The train jerked to a sputtering start exactly on time at 7:25 and slowly chugged its way out of the station. Ignoring the other passenger, Cosmas looked outside the window. Puffy white clouds edged with grey streaks scudded slowly past. A faded-yellow sunlight gleamed faintly
around the contours of the clouds. Half an hour later, Antibes and the rest of the Cote d'Azur was left far behind and the train was grinding its way through Provence. A patchwork of brown fields and yellow orchards stretched out across the horizon as far as the eye could see, with only a rustic farmhouse or a silo surrounded by stacks of straw to break the pattern. The infinite variety of the French landscape was one of the reasons why now in his old age he’d chosen France as his adopted home. The French landscape couldn’t by any stretch of the imagination rival the Greek one—the former was pleasantly beautiful, charming shapes, colours, and contours that please the eye, the latter spectacularly sublime, mountain-locked and sea-girt tableau that take your breath away—but it was by far the second best, at least on this side of the Atlantic.

Nine hours later, the train reached the outskirts of Paris. Cosmas had spent the whole morning reading Dante. As the afternoon had drawn on, he’d started to feel a trifle peckish and he’d had a lemon-drenched sole fillet with assorted vegetables in the dining car. He’d taken up reading again upon returning to his seat, but he’d started to feel drowsy, and the book had slipped from his fingers a couple of times as his eyes slid shut. He’d finally taken a snooze and left the book on the seat next to him. Now that the first houses of Paris swept by, his eyelids started to flicker, and as if on cue he snapped fully awake with a sudden jerk of his neck. Though he’d spent several years in Paris, he wasn’t going to miss the experience of seeing Paris from a train for the sake of a little extra sleep. There would be enough sleep after death, and now that he had turned seventy-four the grim reaper was lurking around every nook and cranny. As the houses grew denser and denser, he remembered his first trip to Paris forty-nine years earlier.

It was the middle of autumn in 1908. Morning had just broken. He’d boarded the night train to Paris, and the rosy light of dawn had roused him from a light sleep. He’d taken a seat by the carriage window, pretty much like today, and he’d pressed his face hard against the window pane, straining his eyes not to miss any of the view. The windows were completely closed. Outside it was spotting with rain. The air was hazy, and the rain streaked the window panes, further obscuring the view. He peered through the fine rain at the majestic scenery. First he saw the wide streets of the outskirts that were lined with leafless chestnut trees. As the outskirts gave way to the suburbs, the train puffed its way past a series of imposing bridges, and then as it approached the Gare de Lyon, well-maintained verdant parks, Gothic churches, and grandiose neo-classical buildings drifted slowly past. A few early risers were already bustling along the streets.
As he gazed at these entrancing tableaux, a jolt of nostalgia shot through his lean frame. He hadn’t had the slightest idea at the tender age of twenty-five what was in store for him. He couldn’t even tell what would happen in the next hour or so, let alone during the next couple of years, the stint he intended to spend in Paris to pursue graduate studies in philosophy and law. Before coming to Paris, he’d only been to Italy and Israel. And strewn with museums and ancient sites though Rome was, it couldn’t rival the artistic oomph and cultural élan of Paris. The city of light, by whose pomp and magnificence he was now awestruck, would be his first experience of a major metropolis. In a sense he was now just starting to discover civilization. His native Heraclion had been a small provincial city with only twenty thousand people. Worse still, Greece had been under Ottoman occupation for four hundred years and had as a result missed out on the rebirth of the ancient spirit that had swept the rest of Europe during the Renaissance. He thrilled at the prospect of the huge step forward he was about to take. What he didn’t know at the time was that it was also a major step backward in other areas of life such as emotional intelligence and environmental consciousness.

His ultimate goal in life was to save his soul. Jesus was his one and only shepherd on this journey. No chance of advancing that aim in Paris. For in this magnificent city it wasn’t religious piety he stood likely to discover but its exact opposite: the pleasures and torments of the flesh. It wasn’t for nothing that Paris was called the city of sin. And a good thing, too. As the train was entering the station, he remembered the injunction of Father Jonas, a priest he’d met on Mount Athos. “Indulge in carnal pleasure to your heart’s content,” Father Jonas had urged him. “It’s the only way to conquer the flesh.” His advice had seemed contradictory at the time. But now that he’d reached the twilight of his life, he knew that Father Jonas had a point: how could anyone transcend both the tyranny and the delight of the flesh if they’d never succumbed to its many-splendoured temptations?

The train coasted into Gare de Lyon and slowly jerked to a halt. His musings came to an end. With a sharp sense of imminent adventure—of a literary kind, of course—he heaved his light suitcase off the rack and followed the other passengers off the train. Gare de Lyon was throbbing with ever-thickening late afternoon crowds. The large period clock on the platform showed 4:15. He spryly threaded his way through the milling throng and stepped out into the busy street. Camus had suggested they meet at Les Deux Magots, a legendary café at the Place Saint Germain where he himself had popped in for a coffee a couple of times before during
previous trips to Paris. Cosmas had replied in the telegram that he’d be there at five and would wait for him at one of the tables facing the street. *Les Deux Magots* hadn’t been a random choice. Like Sartre, Prevert, Verlaine, Valery, and a whole lot of other famous writers, Camus derived inspiration from the atmosphere of the café and spent much of his working day there.

Cosmas had recently read an article in *Paris Review* about the lure for the intellectual elite held by this café and a handful of others in the same area and in the hilly districts of Monmartre and Montparnasse. He fully grasped the reasons for their appeal, but he himself eschewed cafés, most of all literary cafés. He remembered several Greek writers who frequented literary cafés in Athens when he was a student there. He’d gone to join them at one of them, *Phalion* Café in Kolonaki, a couple of times, but he found their endless talk about literature pretentious, draining and disorienting. Worst of all, he detested public displays of erudition: one’s books should speak for themselves, for if the writer feels the need to gloss over them, then the books aren’t complete in themselves. He himself was a recluse by temperament, and he needed absolute solitude to set the creative juices flowing. And he couldn’t complain: the patience and understanding shown by Sofia and the three houses he’d used over the course of the last forty years as his writing dens—the two beach houses in Greece, the one outside Heraklion, where he’d stayed before the war, and the one in Aegina, where he’d spent the war years, as well as the house in Antibes, which was only a short walking distance from the sea—had accorded him the peace and quiet he needed. He had managed to complete *The Journey*, the epic poem that was his tribute to Homer, and some of his early novels in the two beach houses in Greece, and his current house in Antibes afforded the same favorable conditions to continue his work. But he had never sat down in a café to write a book, and he wasn’t going to start doing so now.

He lifted his eyes from the bustling street and gazed up at the sky. It was leaden and overcast, exactly as it had been on his first visit thirty years earlier. A dim sunbeam struggled to squeeze through the masses of clouds. It was a cheerless sky, but it couldn’t spoil his mood. He thought with joy that he’d soon be shaking the hand of Albert Camus, the writer he most admired among his contemporaries and his rival for this year’s Nobel Prize. Saint Germain des Pres, their meeting place, was several miles southwest of the station. The two most obvious options to get there were either to ride the metro all the way to the tube station just beneath the square or to grab a taxi from the rank outside the station. He rejected both of these options and chose instead to get there on foot, defying the long distance.
Without a second thought, he crossed the street and struck out southwards, heading for the Pont d’Austerlitz. He didn’t know how many more chances he’d have to roam through Paris, and he wanted to take in as much of the scenery as the route to Saint Germain des Pres reasonably allowed. No matter how many times he strolled through the cobblestone streets of Paris, flanked by the finest eighteenth century neo-classical buildings in the world, the walk never failed to bring back the butterflies in the stomach. When he was a student at the university, he also preferred to make his way back home to his modest digs on foot rather than take a taxi or a bus. Forty-five years later, he wandered through the orderly quiet streets leading to the bridge once again, hefting a suitcase packed with slightly smarter clothes, but also propped on legs that were slightly less sturdy.

He crossed the bridge and drifted towards the southwest. The mental trip he was taking was just as exciting: he was sauntering through the very same streets that Moliere, Racine, and la Rochefoucauld had tramped in the seventeenth century on their way to their digs, the cafés they frequented back then, or the playhouses where their plays were staged. As he was doing so, he fell to contemplating the mysteries of time. Funny thing, time was. People lived for fifty, sixty, seventy, or at best eighty years if they were lucky or the creator had assigned them a special mission, as was the case with Michelangelo, but the lifespan of buildings and trees, several of which he was now seeing, could stretch across a dozen generations. The other side of the coin was that those lucky mortals endowed with artistic sensibilities could leave a legacy, a fecundating idea or an extraordinary pattern of verbal, visual, or aural symbols captured in a statue, a painting, a poem, or a symphony which could last for several millennia and outlive the sturdiest of buildings or the oldest of trees. Thus the epic poems of Homer, the patriarch of the Greek race, were still extant and alive, while the city of Troy lay in ruins. Shakespeare, whose streets he had also roamed fifteen years earlier on yet another of his literary pilgrimages, had captured exactly this sentiment in sonnet fifty-five, his tribute to the ability of poetic language to conquer time: “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme … When wasteful war shall statues overturn/And broils root out the work of masonry/Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn/The living record of your memory.”

An hour and a half later, Cosmas was standing opposite Les Deux Magots, waiting for a green light so he could cross the street. It was a trifle chilly, but the long walk had warmed him
up, and he looked forward to sitting down at an outdoors table to take the weight off his feet. As he started to walk across the street, he saw that despite the chill the café was quite crowded. To his good luck, though, a young couple who were sitting at a table near the street stood up and left just as he was stepping onto the curb. He quickly sat down in one of the green-slatted cane chairs that had just been vacated. There were two more chairs around the table. He draped his suit over one of them and stood his suitcase on its seat. Then he fished his well-thumbed, widely-traveled copy of the *Divine Comedy* out of his suitcase. Grateful to be resting his legs and stimulated from his invigorating walk, he pulled his pipe out of his jacket pocket and lit it. Smoking his pipe, he started to read Canto Seven. His attention was fixed once again by the lines at the end of the Canto: “And hence thou mayst by inference conclude our resurrection certain.” He’d just turned the page when an aproned young waiter materialized by his table to take his order. He didn’t feel like having anything in particular, but he asked for *une tasse de café noir*; black coffee was the least likely candidate to upset his stomach.

He’d almost finished his coffee when Camus finally arrived at the café. He’d read a few pages of the *Divine Comedy* and then put it back in his suitcase; then he’d taken to watching passers-by parade in front of the café when he saw a well-built man in a cream coat crossing the street. He recognized him at once. Even from a distance he couldn’t fail to discern the brooding expression that had become his trademark in the photos that regularly appeared in the press. As in most of the photographs, he had a cigarette wedged between his lips. Cosmas himself had his pipe between his lips and was puffing idly. He raised his hand and waved at the fellow writer. Camus recognized him at once and headed straight for his table. Cosmas rose to his feet as Camus approached with long graceful strides.

“Bonsoir mon ami,” said Camus with a broad smile as the two men joined their hands in a firm handshake.

“Delighted to make your acquaintance,” answered Cosmas.

“Have you been waiting long?” Camus asked, putting out his cigarette in an ashtray on the table.

“Enough to see what I’ve been missing all those years,” Cosmas quipped, gesturing towards the inside of the café.

Camus reached into his coat pocket and took out a packet of cigarettes. Cosmas was startled: he’d just seen him stub out the cigarette he was smoking on the way to the café, Camus
now eased himself out his coat and folded it neatly over the chair opposite that of Cosmas. He sat down, plucked a cigarette from the packet, and lit it with a silver lighter.

“You’re not missing anything,” he said as he took a puff. “I’m sure you have better things to do in Antibes.”

Shrill guffaws followed by loud voices coming from the direction of the corner table broke in on their conversation. Cosmas cast a glance towards the table. A dozen people were toasting one another, drinking champagne from flute glasses. “Well, it’s true that my work keeps me very busy,” he said, turning his eyes back to Camus.

“And judging by its quality, rightly so. Mr. Eleftherakis, I’m most impressed by your work. It stands out head and shoulders from the pack.”

“Thank you Mr. Camus. Same here. I’m captivated by your novels. I was amazed by the way you handled the myth of Sisyphus. And I’ve read The Stranger three times. I distinctly remember how mesmerized I was when I read it for the first time. I opened the book in the evening and didn’t stop reading it till early in the morning. I had to get through it in one sitting. This doesn’t usually happen with other novels.”

“Ha! Well, thank you Mr. Eleftherakis! This is most flattering coming from your lips. Let me say then that I, too, am a great fan of your novels. The characters you put in them are most memorable. Alexakis will live on long after other fictional characters that are now popular have been totally forgotten.”

Cosmas accepted the compliment with an ironic smile. He’d set out to make his mark as a poet, and it was Sofia, bless her heart, who had turned him to writing novels. He took another puff on his pipe; then he leaned across the table and patted Camus’ hand with unusual tenderness. “Thank you my friend. You’re a really special person. I believe someone like yourself who was born in Algeria can appreciate such a character as Alexakis more deeply.”

Encouraged by this display of tactile intimacy, Camus also reached across and put his hand on Cosmas’ shoulder. “Cosmas—please allow me to use your first name from now on—let me come straight to the point. Your play is brilliant. You set it in ancient Greece, but it could very well be happening anywhere in the world today. I’m sure there’s an audience that can appreciate it here in Paris. We just have to find the right playhouse for it.”

A flicker of hope quivered across Cosmas’ breast. “Do you have any particular theatre in mind?”
“In fact I do. I know a friend of mine who stages ancient tragedies in Paris. His name is Jean-Claude Moreau.”

“I’ve heard of him. I understand he’s an up-and-coming director here in Paris.”

“Indeed he is. I know him personally. He staged one of my plays, The State of Siege, two years ago, so I talked to him about you. He’d like to meet you. A smile flickered across Cosmas’ wizened face. “It would be my great pleasure.”

“He lives in flat five in 23 Rue de Rivoli in the Latin Quarter. He told me you can drop by any day of the week between nine and twelve in the morning.”

“Splendid. I’ll go straight to his flat first thing tomorrow morning.”

The aproned waiter now came over to their table. He asked Camus if he’d like to have something. Camus flicked his washed-out blue eyes across at Cosmas, ticking his empty cup of coffee. “I don’t know,” he said, more to Cosmas than to the waiter. “Would you like a beer?”

Cosmas quickly thought about it. A beer after coffee would unsettle his stomach. But he felt so much joy to find himself in his company he decided to make an exception. “Sure, two glasses of beer, please,” he now told the waiter.

“And some assorted nuts to go with it,” added Camus. He waited till the waiter was safely out of earshot. Then he asked Cosmas: “How do you like this place?”

“Les Deux Magots? It’s fine as far as meeting place go. It’s not my first time here, you know. I stopped by twice on previous visits.”

“I’m quite fond of this place myself. Unlike the others, I never changed it for some other café.”

“The others? Who do you mean?”

Camus lowered his voice a little. “Sartre and his cohorts. They used to hang out here for many years, but they moved to Café de Flores after the end of the war.”

“You mean the café on the next block?”

“The same.”

“Hmm. Why was that?”

“They had issues with the owner, so they took their custom elsewhere.”

“Why? What did he do to them?”

“Nothing really. What happened is this place attracted a lot of Nazis during the war. So they held a grudge against the owner for allowing them to sit on his premises.”
“Well,” Cosmas said with a shrug of his shoulders, “I suppose he didn’t really have a choice. We had the Nazis coming to our coffee shops and tavernas on Aegina as well. I suppose you don’t know Aegina, but it’s the island where I spent the war years. Well, we had absolutely no choice but to put up with their presence. Anyway, is this a good enough reason to change over to another haunt?”

“My thoughts too.”

Before Cosmas could frame a reply, Camus placed a restraining hand on his arm. Cosmas turned around just in time to see the aproned waiter coming over with a tray balanced on his left hand. They watched him in silence as he placed the beers and the nuts on the table and left with a little bow. Camus took a swig of his beer and then smacked his lips with pleasure. Cosmas tasted his beer too and looked up at the sky of Paris, which was now slowly turning violet-blue. Dusk was coming on, and he knew one of the most fascinating evenings of his life was only just starting.

Chapter Four

A little earlier on the same day, Palmas, Varnalis, Avgeris, Michalis, and Lefteris, the coterie of writers that formed the nucleus of the Greek Authors Society, were having coffee in café Philion, a posh coffee shop slap-bang in the heart of Athens, two thousand miles away from Paris. It was a strikingly different kind of coffee from the one Camus and Cosmas were having: a thick, creamy brew with a heady aroma loved by Arabs and the Ottoman Turks and known everywhere in the world as Turkish coffee, and yet referred to by virtually every Greek as Greek coffee. As usual, Palmas and his cohorts were sitting at a corner table so that they could be out of earshot of the other customers. Palmas was now flourishing the latest copy of a French literary magazine that he’d picked up from the kiosk next to the coffee shop. He bid his companions to be quiet and began to read out a short article about this year’s Nobel Prize. He didn’t bother to translate its contents as everyone round the table spoke passable French, though he himself did so with an atrocious Greek accent. According to the article, Eleftherakis and Camus were running neck and neck for the award.

“Not again,” Avgeris exclaimed. “We had a narrow escape six years ago when he was nominated for the Nobel Prize together with Sikelianos, and now he’s a candidate once more.”
“Don’t worry,” Varnalis said reassuringly. “He stands no chance this year. The article is pure nonsense. Camus will get it. It’s in the bag.”

“You can never be sure,” Lefteris chimed in. “We can’t leave these things to chance.”

“What do you have in mind?” Palmas queried.

“A letter to the press,” Lefteris replied without missing a beat. “We’ll write a strong denunciatory letter, citing all the reasons why the Prize shouldn’t be given to Eleftherakis. That ought to poison the well.”

“A denunciatory letter to the press!” Varnalis echoed, his eyebrows arching a little.

“That’s a good idea, Lefteris.”

“It’s a bad idea,” Michalis brusquely interjected. “If we do anything of the sort, it’s bound to backfire. We’ll turn Eleftherakis into a martyr.”

“Excuse me, but whose side are you on?” asked Lefteris, ready to pick a fight.

“Take it easy, Lefteris,” Varnalis admonished his fellow writer, laying a placating hand on his shoulder, “Michalis is trying to say something. We should listen to him.” He turned to Michalis. “Why do you think it will backfire?”

“Because it will make us look vindictive and self-serving in the eyes of the reading public,” Michalis said firmly. “A writer from our own country is running for the Nobel Prize and instead of backing him up, which is what most Greek people would expect us to do, we’re scheming behind his back to undermine him. If that’s not mean and small-minded, I don’t know what is.”

Varnalis furrowed his brow. He was unable to decide which man was wrong. He turned to Lefteris. “OK, dear fellow. Let’s say for the sake of the argument that we all sit together and start writing this letter. What exactly should we say in it?”

Lefteris looked hard from one of them to the other, as if testing their resolve. Then he leaned forward and said in a very solemn voice: “First of all, it should be sent to all the Greek newspapers on behalf of the Greek Writers Society, and to remove all doubt that this is indeed the case, it should bear the signature of all the members of its governing body. We should make it clear from the start that we are united and express the views of all the members of our Society. Then we should set out the reasons why we believe that the ideas expressed in his books are biased and out of touch with the values held by all the decent people of this country. We should explain in very clear terms that if the Swedish Academy awards him the prize, they will be
insulting our country and its people as well as sullying our great literary tradition, of which he is a shameless profaner.”

Palmas leaned across and patted Lefteris on the shoulder. “Yes,” he enthused, his small, beady eyes gleaming with malice, “that’s a splendid idea. And I have an even greater idea.”

“What’s that?” asked Lefteris.

“We will translate it into English and send a copy to the Reuters Press Agency. In this way it will be published in the international press too and the members of the Swedish Academy are bound to see it. If a letter written on behalf of all Greek writers doesn’t turn the committee against him, I don’t know what will.”

“Hmm, let’s assume that we go ahead and do all that,” said Michalis. “How do you think this letter will make us look in the eyes of the Academy? Don’t you think they’re bound to believe that we’re trying to tear him down out of envy and regret, given that none of us here has even come close to achieving the kind of international career he’s carved out for himself?”

“Michalis is right,” Varnalis now said. “After all, Eleftherakis is as Greek as the rest of us. We can’t reasonably argue that he’s an affront to Greek literary tradition without begging the question of what Greek literary tradition actually is.”

“Greek, my foot,” Lefteris exclaimed in a huff. “How can he lay claim to being a Greek when he left Greece at the time when it most needed him so that he could further his own career while all of us stayed behind to fight for what we believed?”

“You mean during the civil war?” Varnalis asked.

“Sure I mean during the civil war,” spat out Lefteris, his eyes flashing wildly now, while his cohorts were looking around, concerned lest they attract the stares of the people in the café. “When virtually the whole country had become a battlefield, he just upped and left instead of standing up and being counted, like all of us here did.

“That’s absolutely right,” seconded Palmas. “He opted to go to France to ‘carve out’ the ‘international’ career you talked about by preying on the naiveté of French readers who know sod all about this country. In my vocabulary, that’s called chickening out.”

“But what should he have done?” Michalis protested, his face twisting with puzzlement. “Who should he have sided with?”
“Why, whoever his conscience told him to,” Lefteris answered, shrugging his shoulders. “Could be the leftists, could be the royalists, that’s immaterial. What he shouldn’t have done was sit on the fence, which he so conveniently opted for.”

“That’s not at all immaterial,” Michalis riposted. “On the contrary, it’s the very nub of the issue. What if he didn’t support either party? Think about it. What if he saw them both as equally misguided?”

“That’s unacceptable,” Palmas said severely. “I’m sure you all remember what Aristotle said. Man is a social animal, and he must take a stand whenever a conflict arises in public life.”

“Not taking a stand is a stand too,” Michalis said.

“Nonsense,” countered Lefteris. “Are you on the side of those who see it as their business to distort common logic? Those who claim that black is white and white is black?”

“What I’m saying,” Michalis exclaimed, “is that history proved both sides of the conflict wrong.”

“Is that so?” Varnalis asked with a frown, his voice now decidedly acerbic. One or two people were now casting oblique glances in their direction. “Thousands of people lost their lives, my own sister was executed by the rebels, and we’re sitting here finding excuses for someone who cared only about his public image and his so-called international career. To hell with caution! Let’s call a meeting of the Authors Society and write that bloody letter.”

Meanwhile at Les Deux Magots, the conversation between Eleftherakis and Camus had heated up.

“I know I shouldn’t be getting so personal, but do you ever regret falling out with Sartre?” said Cosmas.

“I do sometimes. We used to be so close back in the day … Now he hates my guts.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Yes, he pretends he doesn’t see me when we attend the same events.”

“And all of that just because of your political differences? I mean, you both advocate tolerance of differences and respect for otherness, don’t you?”

Camus lit a cigarette. He puffed it twice and said: “I suppose I should tell you the truth. Our political views were only the trigger for our feud.”

“Uh huh. So what was the deeper cause?”
“Sexual rivalry.”

Cosmas’ brows arched ever so slightly. “You mean?”

“I mean he never forgave me for sleeping with his girlfriend.”

Cosmas’ mouth curved into a wry smile. “I didn’t know you were connected in that way.”

“Few people do,” Camus said with a faint grin as he blew several rings of smoke from his mouth. “But it wasn’t my fault, really. She was a young girl from Algeria many years younger than him. One of his groupies, you know.”

“I understand both of you have your fair share of them.”

“You can say so, I suppose,” admitted Camus with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Well, he introduced her to me in this very place, where we used to meet at the time. We’d been drinking wine, and at some point he got up to go to the bathroom, and as soon as he’d left she came on to me.”

Cosmas gave an arch smile. “And you succumbed to her charms.”

“I sometimes wish I hadn’t,” said Camus.

Cosmas gave a dry chuckle. He and his fellow writer couldn’t have been further apart in their attitude towards the opposite sex.

“From what she told me afterwards,” Camus went on, the roguish twinkle smile not leaving his face, “she wasn’t happy with Sartre, at least not in the bedroom department.”

Cosmas perceived an undertone of Schadenfreude: the implied comparison was flattering for Camus but degrading for his antagonist. “Whatever the reason behind it, it’s a pity that you’re no longer on speaking terms,” he remarked. “You and Sartre are the greatest minds of this country.”

“Funny you leave yourself out of this equation. You also live in this country. At any rate, our rift was inevitable. The fling with his girlfriend just hastened it. Gave it a personal spin. But you can’t stay friends with someone with whom you no longer agree on key issues, issues that define who you are, like the expediency of violence and the scope of freedom of expression. Not if you want to stay true to yourself.”

Camus had barely finished his sentence when a waiter carrying a cake with candles on the one hand and a stack of dessert plates on the other walked across the room towards the corner table.
“Someone has his birthday,” said Cosmas.

Camus nodded briefly and turned his head towards the corner table. A young man had bent his head low over the cake and was now lighting the candles. When all the candles were lit, a woman started singing “Joyeux Anniversaire” and everybody at the table joined in. A young girl stood up now and blew out the candles. The table burst into clapping and cheering.

“I suppose we should join them in wishing her a happy birthday” suggested Camus.

“If you think so.”

As soon as the cheering from the corner table subsided, Camus started clapping. Cosmas joined him, albeit a shade more hesitantly. The girl who had her birthday turned towards them with an expression of curiosity “What’s your name?” Camus called out to her.

“Me?” cried the young girl, pointing to herself. “Natalie.”

Camus raised his glass and toasted loudly. “Joyeux Anniversaire, Natalie.” “Joyeux Anniversaire,” echoed Cosmas. Natalie smiled affably. She and the rest of the table raised their glasses, toasting the two strangers. Then they turned their eyes back to their table again and one of them started to cut the cake. Camus turned to Cosmas again. “Now my friend, from what I’ve gathered from the rumors that are circulating, you’ve had your own troubles with Greek writers. Didn’t they try to ruin your candidacy for the Nobel Prize?”

“Not only mine. My friend’s, Sikelianos’, too. Do you know Sikelianos?”

“I’ve heard of him—he’s a poet, isn’t he?—but to be honest I haven’t read his work.”

“He’s a great poet. His verse is so moving it brings tears into your eyes. We were both candidates for the Nobel Prize back in 1946.”

“You mean each one of you was a candidate?”

“No, I mean we shared the candidacy. Had we won the prize, there would have been two winners that year.”

“I didn’t know that was possible.”

“It was my own idea. We would both represent Greek literature, me as a fiction writer, he as a poet.”

“And what happened? Obviously you didn’t win.”

“No, we didn’t. The Greek state pulled the rug from under our feet as usual, and we lost to Herman Hesse.”
“I see,” said Camus, thinking Hesse would have been a formidable opponent for him too had he not already been awarded the prize. Just then the waiter with the slicked-back hair came to their table and set down in front of each of them a thin slice of cake on a dessert plate. “These are from Natalie,” he explained, gesturing with his head towards the corner table. “She asked me to tell you it was very kind of you to wish her.”

Camus thanked the waiter and turned back to Cosmas. “You know, I can understand losing to Herman Hesse. *Steppenwolf* was a literary phenomenon, after all. But what I can’t understand is why your compatriots are constantly trying to poke each other’s eye.”

“Ha! Only a Greek can understand that. It goes all the way back to the wars between Athens and Sparta. Envy and spite run in our blood. They are responsible for the decline of our nation. I’m sure you’ve heard the proverb, ‘when Greek meets Greek there comes a tug of war.’ You see, every Greek wants to lead; no-one wants to follow. But in every area of life you can only have so many leaders. Those who can’t rise to the top in their field feel resentment towards those who’ve made it and do their utmost to bring them down.”

“Huh, I can sort of understand all this in principle. But why have they turned against you in particular? Let me get this straight: you didn’t do anything to provoke them, did you?”

“I certainly didn’t sleep with anyone’s girlfriend.”

Camus gave an amused laugh. “Touché,” he said.

“No, seriously now, other than pursue an international career I didn’t do anything to deserve such virulent hatred. They probably resent the fact my work is read all over the world whereas theirs is strictly for domestic consumption.”

“I see. What a pity they see it that way! They should be holding you up as a role model and try to emulate you so that they can improve themselves. That’s the only way for any one of them to get to where you are now one day.”

“That is a healthy attitude. But to feel this way towards other writers, you need to have a high sense of self-worth, which most of them lack. Anyway I don’t hold a grudge against them.”

“Come on now! How can you be so forgiving? You’ve got to harbour some measure of resentment deep down.”

Cosmas thought about Jesus. He didn’t feel any resentment towards his abusers, and He had suffered infinitely more than he, Cosmas, had. “Honestly I don’t. Keeping your heart pure is
a constant struggle. I try as hard as I can to protect myself from toxic feelings. Holding a grudge against them would coarsen my soul.”

Loud laughter was heard from the corner table. Cosmas turned his head in that direction, not so much out of curiosity as out of embarrassment. He didn’t often talk about himself, but Camus’ company had drawn him out of his shell. Camus seized the opportunity to observe his fellow writer’s half turned face more closely. A network of lines crisscrossed his wizened old face, his skin was flaccid around the eyes and mouth, and his cheeks sagged just a bit. It was the kind of face that once upon a time must have been bony and ascetic. And yet, despite the imprint left by time, a natural kindness and calmness shone from his eyes. Cosmas could well have been exaggerating his capacity for mercy, but his intuition told him he wasn’t. A sense of awe came over him. How could someone reach such depths of nobility? Maybe it comes with age, he thought. You can’t attain it in your youth when the blood in your veins is boiling and you feel each provocation merits a response. He looked at his glass. It was empty. He picked up the bottle of Chardonnay and poured it into his glass till it was almost full. He patted Cosmas on the back and asked him if he wanted some more. Cosmas shook his head.

“Going back to the question of the Nobel prize,” Camus said after taking a long swig of the wine, “do you feel you were worth it?”

“It’s difficult to tell,” said Cosmas, shrugging his shoulders. “There were so many writers worth the prize.”

“I know. It’s all so subjective. And the selection process is anyone’s guess. No one knows for sure what kind of criteria they use.”

“It’s also a question of politics. You can’t win it without proper political affiliations. They never gave it to Berthold Brecht because he was a communist.”

“Or to Ezra Pound because he was a fascist,” added Camus.

“Or to Ezra Pound either. So I see no point in second-guessing the decision of the committee. It’s not something a writer should take personally.”

Camus didn’t pursue this further. This was a delicate matter best avoided. He glanced at the tasty-looking pieces of cake lying untouched on the table. “Well,” he said, gesturing with his eyes towards them, “what are you waiting for? Let’s eat our cake.” Cosmas smiled, but didn’t budge. “You’re not off sweets, are you?” Camus teased, half hoping Cosmas would say yes so he would eat his piece too.
“No, I am not,” said Cosmas. His mind flashed back to the days of his youth when he would often fast for months on end. In those days he thought abstinence was the way to spiritual growth. But the crucible of experience and the stint with Alexakis had taken the edge off his asceticism, relaxing his discomfort for the pleasures of the flesh. He picked up the spoon and took a small bite of the cake. Taking his cue, Camus dug into the cake too, gobbling it up with unbridled gusto.

“I’ve been thinking about this quality in you,” said Camus after munching the last bite of the cake.

“Which quality?” asked Cosmas.

“The quality of mercy not strained,” said Camus, adapting Shakespeare to the point he was making. “Your professed alacrity to forgive those who injure you. For me that’s been a lifelong struggle. I can usually restrain myself from striking back at those who try to hurt me personally, but when I see all the injustice that is inflicted on the poor and the downtrodden, those who have no means of defending themselves, I cannot tolerate it. It makes me seethe with indignation.”

“I feel the same way about injustice. I’m deeply saddened by all the suffering all around me. But I believe the worst possible reaction to the existence of evil in the world is to grow indignant. You need to maintain crystal clear vision and a pure heart as you fight your battle for justice. If you lapse into anger, you lose on both grounds. You become the mirror image of all the misguided people who seek to hurt you.”

“Good point,” said Camus, wiping his mouth with a paper napkin. “But how can you hold back from condemning the enemies of justice?” For me, if you don’t denounce injustice in the strongest possible terms, you’re implicitly condoning it. It’s our duty to stand up for our beliefs, and that includes passing judgment on those who sow injustice. Take the collaborators, for example. Those who aided and abetted the Nazis during the occupation. Shouldn’t they stand trial for their crimes and be punished for them? Even today if one of them is rooted out, no matter how old he is or what his state of health is, he must face trial. A message must be sent to all those heroic resistance fighters who risked their lives for freedom. They must know they’ve won the war, that their sacrifice wasn’t in vain. Otherwise we’re just giving free rein to the forces of evil.”
Cosmas pondered Camus’ words for a moment. “All of this is undoubtedly correct, but there’s another way to look at the question of justice.”

“Huh, and what’s that?”

Cosmas drew a deep breath before continuing. Meanwhile three customers from a table at the back of the café got up, said goodbye to the waiter and made their way out. The only customers left in the café now were the two of them and the birthday party group at the corner.

“Let me tell you a story that will explain everything. As you know, Greece, just like France, was under Nazi occupation during the war, and the Nazis were very cruel to us, in fact much crueler than they were to French people.”

“It’s because you fought against them while we surrendered right away without a fight.”

“That’s right. Well, the Nazis perpetrated no small number of atrocities during the four years they occupied our country, but one of the very worst was the Distomo massacre.”

Camus shook his head. “I’m sorry, I haven’t heard of it.”

“It’s no wonder. The Nazis committed so many atrocities in so many countries it’s impossible to know all of them. Well, here’s what happened. In the summer of 1944 a band of Greek rebels attacked a Nazi convoy near Distomo, a small village a hundred miles outside Athens. In retaliation, SS forces went to Distomo and butchered nearly all the inhabitants of the village. That is more than two hundred men, women and children. They were so barbaric they stabbed to death babies and pregnant women and beheaded the village priest.”

“Quel horreur!” exclaimed Camus. “They did this to innocent civilians?”

“Yes, they did. They killed anyone they could get their hands on and then set the village on fire. And all of that without any provocation. The rebels who attacked their convoy were completely unrelated to local people. Well, soon afterwards the Nazis were defeated and the war came to an end. The remaining German troops had to march back to Germany over thousands of miles of hostile land. The SS unit leaving out of Distomo was surrounded by a party of rebels.”

“Hmm, a perfect chance for reprisals.”

“My thoughts also when I first heard the story. But things turned out otherwise. As soon as the end of the war was declared and as the Germans were getting ready to leave, the Red Cross office in Athens sent food supplies to the Greek people who lived in villages near Distomo and had been deprived of food during the occupation. When the Red Cross team arrived in the area, they were met by a local priest and the leader of the rebels. Here’s the interesting part. Not
only did the rebels decide not to retaliate against the Germans, but what’s even more striking the local priest asked the Red Cross people to give the food supplies that were meant for the Greek population to the Germans troops.”

Camus lifted his eyebrows. “Is that what he said?” he asked, half-doubting.

“That’s exactly right. He told the Red Cross team, ‘we have hardly any food to eat, but at least we’re still in our country. Those poor souls have a grueling trip ahead of them before they reach their land. They need the food more than we do. Give it to them.’ That’s what he said to them.”

Camus shook his head in disbelief. “How could he be so charitable to the killers of his own brothers?”

“For a true Christian love and compassion know no bounds.”

“That’s an amazing story. I really admire that priest. But such level of forgiveness is superhuman. It goes against our natural instincts.”

“I’d say exactly the opposite. That’s what it means to be human. The Nazis were villains. There’s no doubt about that. But the duty of a spiritually enlightened person is not to be dragged down to the level of the villain. That’s what the villains of this world want us to do. Misery loves company. Their souls are deeply wounded, and they lash out at others in a vain attempt to ease their inner pain. These people are unloved and hence incapable of loving others. Their aim is to deprive all the healthy, loving people of the capacity to love by making them hate their abusers, but we must not fall into this trap. We must retain our humanity. We must stand for light in the midst of darkness. We must embody the values of peace and universal brotherhood in the face of so much hatred and violence.”

Camus lit another cigarette. “The story you told me is deeply moving,” he said taking a sip of his wine. “Hats off to the Greek priest for his compassion and grandeur. But I still cannot identify with this point of view. Forgiving the villains is a noble concept in theory but doesn’t work in practice. When someone attacks us, we must protect ourselves. Resistance against aggressors is inevitable. If your priest had had the opportunity to kill the Nazis before they massacred the inhabitants of the village, wouldn’t he have done so?”

“I don’t know. But I get your point, and I partly agree. We have a duty to safeguard each other from physical harm. No question about that. But when it comes to safeguarding our hearts, we must let that priest be our guide. You see, there are two kinds of struggle: the outward, often
physical struggle, where you try to keep yourself and your loved ones safe from harm, and the
inward spiritual struggle where you strive to keep your heart pure from toxic feelings and your
soul clean from the dross of this life.”

“If you put it this way, I have no option but to agree with you. But I still prefer to keep
my mind focused on the outward struggle. In that way I can be more useful to my fellow human
beings. Take the Algerian War, for example. I find it unacceptable that both sides use torture and
kill innocent civilians, and I have publicly renounced their methods.”

“I know. I’ve read your articles in the Combat. I fully agree, of course. The brutality of
both armies is a disgrace. It’s the same thing in Cyprus, by the way. The methods the British use
to keep control of the island are utterly barbaric.”

“Aren’t they? They’re supposed to be a civilized country, but it’s all a façade. They’re
such hypocrites. As you probably know, I wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth appealing for mercy
for Michalis Karaolis shortly before he was hanged last year.”

“I’ve read it. It’s spot-on, especially the point about the supposed moral superiority of the
British that doesn’t prevent them from hanging resistance fighters. But of course it fell on deaf
ears.”

“Sometimes I wonder if our work as a whole doesn’t fall on deaf ears. I’m not so sure
anymore whether anyone listens to the message we try to get across.”

“Would you like anything else, gentlemen?” The voice of the slick-haired waiter, who
was now hovering above them, interrupted the conversation. Cosmas looked at Camus. Camus
shook his head. “No, thank you,” Cosmas said to the waiter. As the waiter went away, Cosmas
glanced surreptitiously at his watch. It was getting late. He’d normally be in bed by now. But if
there was one conversation he didn’t want to leave, it was this.

“I’m sure there are many enlightened souls out there who understand and care about our
work,” he said to Camus.

“You really think so?”

“I do.” A short silence ensued. While it lasted, Cosmas summoned the courage to venture
a personal question. “Speaking about our work, what have you been working on these days?” he
asked.

“I’m putting the finishing touches on an essay about capital punishment,” said Camus
eagerly.
“Sounds interesting. What’s it all about?”

“It’s an account of the reasons why the death penalty should be abolished. You see, the worst kind of murder, the one that sets the worst example to follow, is the one premeditated and perpetrated by the state.”

“I agree. I also oppose the death penalty. No country that still enforces it can call itself civilized.”

“My views too. But I do not put in a plea for clemency for the convicted. That wouldn’t wash with legislators. My basic premise is that capital punishment is an easy option for the government. Instead of executing them, the state ought to commit its resources toward reforming offenders and remedying the social conditions that lead them to crime.”

“What can I say? I wish you every success. Your argument is compelling. I hope for the good of humanity it’s heeded by those in power.”

“Thank you my friend. I appreciate your good wishes. What about you? Have you been working on anything lately? A sequel to A Night with the Santouri maybe?”

“Oh no, no, I would never attempt a sequel to it. I was very happy to have written A Night with the Santouri at the time, but I’ve moved beyond it now. I believe we should leave well enough alone. Well, truth is I have been working on something, but I don’t know if there’s any point in discussing it.”

“Do as you wish, my friend, but I’d be very interested to know.”

Cosmas turned around to face the bar and raised his hand until he caught the attention of the waiter. “Bring us another bottle of wine,” he called out to him.

Camus stared at him half-puzzled, half-intrigued. “Is it that radical?”

“I don’t know if you would call it radical. Probably not your definition of radical.”

“Now you’ve really stirred my curiosity. Please tell me what it is!”

“I’m writing a novel about Jesus’ life.”

“Jesus? Did you say Jesus?”

“Yes, I did. Jesus Christ.”

“Non, c’est pas possible! Tu te moques de moi? You’re not saying that seriously, are you?”

“Yes, I am. I am re-telling Jesus’ story but with several twists from the Biblical version.”
“But why Jesus? I mean why go back to religion when we’re supposed to have moved past it? Aren’t two millennia of religious tyranny long enough?”

“Jesus is not responsible for religious tyranny. On the contrary, he was a shining beacon of freedom and justice. His self-styled followers are to blame for the harm caused by religion. It was them who distorted his teachings to manipulate and control the populace.”

“I’ve heard that line before, but still, don’t you think Jesus is irrelevant today?”

“No, I don’t think so. Quite the contrary is true! Jesus’ altruism and spirit of sacrifice is exactly what’s missing in today’s world where people are driven by their egos.”

“But surely religion is responsible for so much suffering and violence. Do we still need its crutches after all the wars it’s spawned? Can’t we stand on our own two feet without its glib certainties, its false promises, its rigid dogmas?”

“No, we don’t need its crutches. Or the crutches of philosophical thought, for that matter. That’s why I’m writing the novel. To inspire people to free their spirits, just as Jesus did so that he could find the strength to make the ultimate sacrifice.”

“But surely faith and freedom are incompatible concepts.”

“You talk of faith as if it were a plague.”

“It is a plague. It’s a plague that blights people’s minds.”

“But lack of faith is also a plague, and maybe even more destructive. It’s a plague that blights people’s hearts. I believe that by driving Jesus away from our hearts, we’ve thrown away the baby with the bathwater. That’s why I’m writing this novel. To help people connect with Jesus again. You see, the problem with people today is they’ve long lost that connection.”

“And how do you propose to restore it?”

The conversation was interrupted by the approach of the waiter bringing the bottle of wine wrapped around his service napkin. “Oh, here’s our wine,” Cosmas said to Camus. The waiter opened the bottle with a corkscrew and set it down on the table. Cosmas thanked him. The waiter left, taking the empty bottle with him. He poured a glass for himself and a glass for Camus. Cosmas raised his glass and toasted: “To your success, mon ami.”

“To yours too,” replied Camus, regretting his sharpness a little while ago.

Cosmas took a couple of sips before he continued. “I propose to restore the connection by showing Jesus as an ordinary man rather than the son of God. An ordinary man who is weak and
flawed at the outset but once he realizes the grandeur of his mission, he rises to the circumstances.”

“Well, it takes guts to do that,” conceded Camus. “You’ll have the whole religious establishment getting on your case.”

“I have a duty to save the God within the man regardless of the cost. Any writer who wants to make a change must be willing and able to stir the waters.”

“The God within the man …! Great way of putting it. But that’s if you believe in God, of course. As for me, I don’t know if God exists or not, but I’ve made a conscious choice to live my life as if he didn’t.”

“It’s a rational choice. The church has killed God by depicting Him as a creature with unreasonable demands and vengeful desires. But God is not a creature.”

“What is he then?”

“He’s pure energy, pure power, and pure Love. He’s the energy of Life, the power of creation and transformation, and the Love of harmony and peace. He’s a divine intelligence, and He’s everywhere. He is in all of us although we can’t see Him because we can’t detach ourselves from the physical and temporal world we live in, its frailties and infamies. He’s here right now. It’s His divine providence that brought us together tonight.”

“Do you also believe in heaven and hell?”

“No, I don’t, at least not literally. I believe we come from an abyss and probably return to this abyss when we die. Our body ceases to exist, but maybe we’re transformed into a different kind of energy.”

“So you don’t believe in reincarnation?”

“I’m not sure. I have no answer for the mystery of what happens after death. For me too, as for Shakespeare, it’s ‘the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns.’ But I don’t allow my lack of prescience to prevent me from believing in a divine intelligence with a thousand faces.”

Camus’ lips twitched into a wry grin. He took a slow sip of his wine. “I’m afraid I don’t quite see it that way. Even of you define God as pure energy and love, which is an improvement on the anthropomorphic, sectarian God of the various religions, it’s still too vague and unhelpful a metaphor for me. For me the universe is chaotic and absurd. I can’t see a divine intelligence behind it.”
“We can agree to disagree on this issue.”

“Sure we can. I still think you’re very brave to tackle an issue I’d never dream of writing about. It’s noble of you to strive for a better world.”

“You did the same thing with the myth of Sisyphus. You opened people’s eyes about the human condition. We both try to better the world through our writing.”

A flicker of a smile danced in Camus’ eyes. “Is that why we write, Cosmas?” he asked with a note of doubt in his voice. “Seriously now … sometimes I wonder if we don’t do it out of sheer vanity. Because we want our works to last forever, ’gainst death and all-oblivious enmity, since we’re both on a Shakespeare run tonight, so that we’re not forgotten ourselves.”

“Vanity comes into it too,” conceded Cosmas. “We’re only human, so we’re vain by definition. We can’t go against our own nature.”

“But don’t you think we’re clutching at straws? Don’t you think the very idea that something can last for all time is absurd?”

“Huh, I thought you were against using the word *absurd* in casual conversation? At least that’s what I read somewhere.”

Camus smiled. “Huh, I put my foot in it again.”

“I don’t think trying to leave the world a little better than you found it and make good triumph over evil is absurd.” Cosmas patted Camus on the back. “The world needs us, Albert.”

“Maybe it does. At least it flatters us to think so.” Camus lowered his head towards the ground. “Even so,” he said, his voice dropping a pitch, “there are days when I struggle to get up out of bed.”

“Do you? Why?”

“Can’t explain it fully. It’s just … a feeling of sadness that seeps through every pore of my being and gets the best of me. At those moments I experience an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and futility that is so acute that I feel almost paralyzed.” Camus raised his head again and trained his eyes on Cosmas. “Haven’t you ever felt it?”

“You mean hopelessness and futility?”

“I mean …,” Camus’ voice had now dropped almost to a whisper, “… bouts of depression.”
“No, actually I haven’t felt it. But I see it all around me. It’s the malaise of our times. As time goes by more and more people will be suffering from it. That’s what comes of a way of life based on consumerism and materialism, indeed plagued by it.”

“And of more leisure time and nothing constructive or fun to do with it,” added Camus.

“You’re right again. But as for myself I am too busy to suffer from depression. I have work to do. I’m always thinking about the project at hand and when it’s done I turn my attention to the next. That’s my mission in life. I’m a fighter. I can question everything except my own status as a fighter. A fighter has no time for depression.”

Camus was about to ask Cosmas what he was fighting for when a commotion was heard from the corner table. They turned around to see the large group getting up to leave. The slick-haired waiter, who was standing near their table, made a bow as they started to file their way towards the door. One by one they walked past the table where Cosmas and Camus were sitting. The girl who had her birthday straggled behind the rest of the group. When she reached the table with the two writers, she stopped right in front of Camus.

“Are you Albert Camus?” she asked him.

“Yes, I am,” he said, looking up at her. She had a smooth round face with sandy hair, light blue eyes and a fine sensuous mouth.

“After you wished me happy birthday, I started thinking I know you from somewhere, and then a few minutes ago it dawned on me who you are. Well, nice to meet you,” she said, stretching out her hand.

“Likewise,” said Camus.

The girl who was walking in front of Natalie had now taken a step back and was gawking uneasily at her friend hovering above the two strange, and much older, men.

“I’m one of your greatest fans, you know,” said Natalie.

“Is that so?” said Camus. “I’m glad we met then. By the way, this is Cosmas Eleftherakis. He’s a writer too.”

Natalie looked at Cosmas without a sign of recognition. “Nice to meet you,” she said to him as she extended her hand. “What have you written?”

“Different things,” murmured Cosmas, shaking her hand limply.

“Why don’t you sit down?” offered Camus.

“Can I?” said Natalie. “I mean I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”
“No, no,” said Camus, “sit down.” Natalie turned to her friend. “Thanks for coming out tonight, Catherine. I will join the gentlemen for a minute or two. Say goodnight on my behalf to all the others.”

Natalie’s friend kept flicking her eyes from Natalie to Camus and Cosmas, looking somewhat discomfited. “As you wish,” she finally told her friend. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Ciao,” said Natalie as she grabbed the chair next to Camus and sat down. She took out a pack of cigarettes from her bag and left them on the table. “Do you have a light?” she asked Camus as she pulled a cigarette from the pack. Camus lit her cigarette with his lighter.

“How old are you Natalie?” Camus asked her.

“Twenty-seven.”

“And what do you do?”

“I’m an actress.”

“Are you? Well, maybe one day you could be in one of my plays.”

“That’s an enticing proposition.”

“Would you like some wine?” interrupted Cosmas. The bottle on their table was still half full.

“I’d love some. Thanks for offering,” said Natalie. Cosmas waved to the slick-haired waiter. “One more glass, please.”

The waiter brought a glass. Cosmas filled it up with wine and offered it to Natalie. Then he filled up Camus’ glass and finally his. They all clinked glasses; Cosmas and Camus wished Natalie Happy Birthday again. After complimenting the quality of the wine, Natalie told Camus she’d seen *Requiem for a Nun*, his latest play, at the Théâtre des Mathurins two months earlier. A conversation about the play got going. Cosmas lit his pipe and settled further back in his seat. Camus kept turning his eyes on Cosmas as if to encourage him to join the conversation, but the fellow writer seemed content to just listen, nodding his head every now and then as his two companions continued to talk. Natalie, on the other hand, was in full spate, holding forth about the actors, the dialogues and the scenery of *Requiem for a Nun*, all of which she showered with fulsome praise.

Camus now started to ask Natalie questions about her own work, which turned out to be minor roles in one or two rather obscure plays. Cosmas glanced at his watch. It was nearing one thirty. Suddenly a tide of fatigue surged through his entire body. It was all he could do to stifle a
rapidly rising yawn. A couple of minutes later he took advantage of a gap in the conversation to announce he was going. Camus urged him to stay a little longer, but Cosmas was adamant. It was way beyond his bedtime; he needed to return to his hotel. Camus offered an understanding smile. Cosmas raised his arm to wave at the waiter.

“What are you doing?” asked Camus, gently pulling Cosmas’ arm.
“I’m going to pick up the tab.”
“Please don’t, it’s on me. I’ll pay it later.”

After a short parley, Cosmas agreed to allow Camus to pay. Cosmas rose to leave. He said goodbye to Natalie first, then turned to Camus.

“When are you leaving town?” Camus asked him, giving the fellow writer’s arm a little squeeze.

“On Monday at around noon.”
“I suppose your train leaves from Gare de Lyon.”
“That’s right.”
“Can I come to the station to see you off?”
“Oh no, it’s very kind of you to offer, but you really don’t need to put yourself out on my behalf.”
“It’s no trouble for me, really. I’d love to see you for a while before you leave.”
“OK then. I’ll be at the Gare de Lyon at ten in the morning on Monday.”
“I’ll already be there. I’ll be in the coffee shop, waiting for you.”
“See you there, then,” Cosmas said to Camus. “Goodnight,” he said with a gesture that included both Camus and Natalie before he walked away from the table.

Chapter Five

Natalie and Camus carried on talking fast and easy, fueled by the wine. The conversation zipped around different topics, becoming more personal as the level of the wine went down in the bottle. Camus made sure not to mention Francine, his wife, even though the image of her lying alone in bed kept intruding on his mind’s eye with increasing frequency as time passed. She would be asleep by now, but she could wake up when he got home and start questioning him
about where he’d been, though of course he had a cast-iron alibi, having spent most of the night with Cosmas.

“I need to go,” said Camus when Natalie had drained the last drop of wine. “I have an early morning tomorrow.”

“What are you doing tomorrow night?” asked Natalie.

“Nothing special,” said Camus, shrugging his shoulders.

“Why don’t you come by my place? I’ll cook you dinner, and you can sign my copy of *The Stranger*. I live alone so no-one will disturb us.”

“I’ll see if I can,” said Camus hesitantly, uneasy about justifying a second night away from Francine.

Natalie took out a piece of paper from her bag. “Here’s my address,” she said, scribbling it on the paper. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Two days later, Cosmas was lying in bed in his hotel room, reading the *Divine Comedy*. He had reached Canto XIV, devoted to the *purgatorio* and the sin of envy. It was now 10:30, and he was beginning to feel drowsy. When he wasn’t writing, he usually read himself to sleep no matter where he spent the night. Two soft knocks came on the door. He shuffled to the door in his slippers. It was the bell-hop. “There’s a phone call for you sir,” he said.

Cosmas slipped on his leather shoes. He tied them quickly and hopped nimbly down four flights of stairs to the reception desk, agile like a mountain-goat despite his age.

The bald-headed receptionist handed Cosmas the receiver, pointing to a stool below the counter for him to sit.

Cosmas declined the offer, preferring to remain standing.

“Allo, qui est, s’il vous plaît?” he said, turning away from the receptionist.

“Hi dear,” came the familiar phone on the other end of the line. “I hope I haven’t woken you up.”

His heart soared joyfully. “No, my sunshine, not at all,” he exclaimed loudly in Greek. “But even if you had, it wouldn’t matter.” An elderly couple, probably Americans judging by the slacks worn by the woman and the Stetson hat worn by the man, stood nearby waiting for a taxi, but the chances of them or the receptionist speaking Greek were almost non-existent. Greek was only spoken by Greeks, and the extreme unlikelihood of coming across a Greek person in a hotel
in Paris meant he could carry out conversations with Sofia without worrying about being understood.

“Did you have a pleasant day today?” Sofia asked him.

Cosmas explained that he was seized by nostalgia and paid a quick visit to his alma mater, the College de France. He then told Sofia with a tone of enthusiasm in his voice she hadn’t heard in a long time how surprised he was to find his books on the bookshelves of the library. Sofia reacted to this news with excitement, which Cosmas proceeded to temper at once by saying how disappointed he was not to have done any writing since leaving home. Sofia wasn’t at all surprised. She knew Cosmas had fixed habits that had almost acquired the force and potency of rituals. Spending the night away from home threw him off kilter, upsetting his writing routine.

“Don’t worry,” she said reassuringly, “you’ll do plenty of it when you get home. Anyway, how did the meeting with that theater director, what was his name?”

“Jean-Claude Moreau.”

“… the meeting with Jean-Claude Moreau, go?”

“Pretty well, I think. I met him in his flat.”

“What was it like?”

“Just an ordinary apartment. What I saw of it at least.”

“Can’t you be a little bit more specific, dear?” Sofia asked eagerly. “You know I like details.”

“There’s nothing much to tell you really. Let’s see … his living room was filled with bookshelves from floor to ceiling.”

“Hmm, that’s hardly surprising. And how was it furnished?”

“Let me think. Er… there were two beat-up cream sofas and an armchair of the same colour sitting around a large square wooden table. He had old-fashioned furniture, like most people here in Paris. I had a feeling the living room suite might date back to the eighteenth century.”

“No point in asking you what you two talked about, I suppose,” she said jocularly. “I mean it’s obvious you talked about literature.”
“You’re right. We talked shop all the time. He said he’s fond of ancient tragedy and started to drop names. You should’ve heard him holding forth about Euripides. The world’s first modern playwright, he called him.”

“What about Melissa? Did he like it?”

“Well, he hadn’t read or heard of it before, but I gave him a brief synopsis of the plot, and he seemed to like the sound of it.”

“Great. So where will he take it from there?”

Cosmas looked around. No-one seemed to be paying attention to the phone conversation. The strange-sounding language he spoke had forestalled any aspirations to eavesdrop. “I left him a manuscript of the play,” he answered. “He promised to read it at once and get back to me the soonest possible.”

“Cut to the chase, dear. Will he find a playhouse for it?”

“Well, he promised to use his influence to have it staged in the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse.”

“What kind of theater is that?”

“It’s a playhouse with four hundred seats in the heart of Montparnasse. Apparently it draws quite a sophisticated crowd.”

“That’s great news,” Sofia enthused on the other end of the line. “I’m so excited. Well, did he give you a timeframe?”

“Not really. He just told me he’ll get back to me when he’s read the play.”

“So then, should I be buying a new dress for the premiere?”

“I certainly hope so. And you should be dusting off your guide book on Paris too. If and when the dates of the production are fixed, I promised to come back to Paris to help him direct the play. Needless to say, you should tag along too.”

“That’s excellent news. I’m so glad. We’ve got to celebrate it when you come back.”

“And one more thing. He offered to put us up in his flat for a few days.”

Sofia left a little pause. “Does he have enough room for both of us?” she asked at length, her voice a little hesitant.

“It seems so. He’s divorced so he lives all by himself. He said there’s plenty of space in his flat.”

“Hmm! I’m not so sure I like the idea of staying with a stranger.”
“Well, it’s not a decision we have to make right now. We’ll talk it over when I get back anyway.”

“How soon will that be? I missed you, you know.”

“Weren’t you supposed to be going out with Antigone while I was away?”

“Honey, I did go out with her a couple of times, but it’s just not the same thing. She doesn’t have a tenth of your brains or charm, and most importantly she’s not my husband.”

Cosmas gave a flattered little laugh, but said nothing. “So when are you coming?” asked Sofia.

“Tomorrow morning. I’m catching the early train.”

“Brilliant! I’ll cook stuffed tomatoes and peppers for dinner. You know, to give you something to look forward to on the train journey.”

“Look honey! This call is costing you the earth. We’ll talk tomorrow at home. I’d better go.”

Cosmas hung up and smiled politely to the tourist couple, who smiled back at him as they started on their way out after being notified by the receptionist that the taxi had been waiting for them outside.

“So you’re Greek too,” the man said to Cosmas in impeccable Greek with a broad grin on his face as he swung past him. “Me and my wife are Greek-Americans, and it’s always a pleasure to hear someone speaking Greek when we travel.”

Cosmas spotted Camus sitting at a corner table. He was writing in a notepad, a half-smoked cigarette wedged askew in his mouth. It was ten o’clock on Monday morning. Gare de Lyon was thronged with passers-through milling hither and thither. Camus looked up from his notebook in Cosmas’ direction. Cosmas threaded his way through the busy room to his newly found friend’s table, his face aglow with anticipation.

As they shook hands, Camus noticed that Cosmas was wearing the same suit as on the day they met three days earlier. “It’s a real pleasure to see you again my friend,” said Camus. “Sit down.”

Cosmas took the seat next to Camus. He glanced around. “This place is so packed.”

“No wonder,” said Camus. “Haven’t you heard the news?”

“The news? What news?” queried Cosmas as he took off his coat and folded it across his lap.
“Wait then,” said Camus, raising his hand to wave towards a passing waiter. The waiter came to their table. “A coffee to face the day?” Camus asked Cosmas.

“Oui, un petit noir.”

“The same for me,” Camus said to the waiter.

Camus took a last puff of his cigarette and stubbed it out on the ashtray. Then he took a new one out of the packet lying on the table and lit it up. He offered the packet to Cosmas, but his companion shook his head.

“Old habits die hard,” Cosmas said with a wry smile as he reached into his coat and fished out his trusted pipe. He lit his pipe, took a long puff and asked: “So what’s the news I haven’t heard?”

“Trains are on strike,” announced Camus.

“What?” exclaimed Cosmas, coughing out the smoke in two staccato bursts. “Is that …?”

“Yes, that’s why it’s so crowded today. Most journeys have been cancelled, and many people haven’t been able to leave yet.”

“Good grief! Do we know which ones have been cancelled?”

“No, but I talked to the waiter earlier, and he told me only one out of five journeys will go ahead.”

“How can I find out if my journey will be one of them?”

“Show me your ticket,” said Camus. Cosmas took the ticket out of his wallet and gave it to Camus.

“Wait here,” said Camus, standing up from the table. “I am going to find out for you.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Cosmas, standing up too.

“No,” said Camus, placing a restraining hand on his shoulder, “stay here to keep our seats for us.”

Cosmas gave him a thankful look and Camus walked away. Cosmas’ eyes followed the crowd of people by the door and those sitting in the interior of the café, noticing for the first time how worried they looked. He took a few sips of his coffee while he thought of Sofia. She’d also be very worried if he wasn’t home by tonight.

Camus came back a quarter of an hour later. He sat down and handed the ticket back to Cosmas. “I’m afraid I have bad news,” he told Cosmas sombrely. “Your journey is one of those cancelled.”
Cosmas gave a sigh, then said: “any idea how long the strike will last?”
“No one knows. I guess it’s indefinite.”
“What are they striking for?” asked Cosmas, half curious, half angry. It occurred to him that he had been too preoccupied with the inconvenience he was being put through to care about the reason for the strike.
“From what I’ve been able to gather, the usual thing: salaries and working conditions. Anyway, what are you going to do now? Can you stay in Paris for a few more days?”
“I’m afraid not. I need to find a way to go back home. My wife Sofia will be waiting for me. Maybe I’ll take the coach.”
“Not a good idea. Thousands of other passengers will have had the same thought as you. You either won’t find a seat or end up travelling the whole trip standing up.”
Cosmas took a heavy breath. “I really don’t know what to do,” he said dispiritedly.
“Why don’t you stay at my place for a few days?” suggested Camus. “We have an extra bed you can use.”
“No, my friend,” Cosmas said graciously, “it is very kind of you to offer, and I’d love to spend more time with you, but I’m afraid I can’t stay in Paris any longer.”
Camus fell silent for a while. His face tautened with concentration, as if he was trying to work out something. “Can I have your ticket?” he said suddenly.
“Again? What for?”
“I’ll tell you in a minute.”
“OK,” said Cosmas, taking the ticket out of his pocket again. “Here it is.”
“Stay here,” said Camus.
“Where are you going?” asked Cosmas.
“Just stay here.”
While Camus was away, Cosmas turned over in his mind alternative ways to get home. He could try to get on a flight to Nice and then take a bus to Antibes, but that was too expensive and the tickets hard to find; he could, in theory, rent a car, but then he’d need to find a chauffeur too as he didn’t drive; he could ask Camus to give him a lift to Auxerre and then catch a bus to Nice from there, but that would be too much of an imposition on his new-found friend. No, none of these options was feasible. Cosmas was about to reconcile himself with the idea of spending a few more days in Paris when he saw Camus making his way back through the crowd.
Camus was holding the ticket in his hand. “Everything has been taken care of,” he said, handing the ticket to Cosmas as he resumed his seat. “You’re leaving today.”

Cosmas’ heart leapt wildly. “What do you mean?”

“I managed to get you on the one and only train going to Antibes today.”

“How?”

“The Chief of Police is a good friend of mine. I went to the train master’s office and got him to give the Chief a call. I talked to the Chief, who talked to the train master, and before you could say Jean Pierre everything was fixed.”

Cosmas wrapped both of his hands around Camus’ right hand. “Thank you, Albert,” he said pressing Camus’ hand firmly. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I will always be obliged to you for that.”

“You don’t need to. It was no sweat. I just made a phone call, that’s all.”

“You did much more than that,” said Cosmas, giving Camus’ hand another squeeze. “You bent your principles on my behalf. I know you believe we shouldn’t give anybody an unfair advantage.”

“It’s not an unfair advantage. I know how important it is for you to get on that train. The only thing is you’ll have to wait here a little longer than you had planned. The train leaves at two o’clock.”

“That’s not a big deal,” said Cosmas releasing Camus’ hand. “It sure beats waiting for the strike to end. By the way, what’s the situation inside the station?”

“It’s sheer bedlam, as you can imagine. People running around everywhere, shouting at station staff and hustling to get on the trains.”

“That’s not a very pleasant sight.”

“No, it’s not. But don’t worry. You won’t have trouble boarding the train.”

“I know. Thanks to you I have a ticket.” Cosmas snorted ironically. “Funny how priceless a commodity a mere train ticket is at times like that. Still, it’s a sad scene. As usual, nobody wins. People cannot travel, and the staff has to fight for their rights and face the passengers’ anger too.” The large clock on the opposite wall chimed the hour, side-tracking Cosmas’ train of thought. Cosmas looked up at it. It was eleven o’clock. “Do you need to get going?” he asked Camus, realizing for the first time how much time had passed. “I don’t want to keep you from your work.”
“No, I’ll stay a little longer,” said Camus. “You’re not keeping me from my magnum opus, don’t worry. If anything, you’re contributing to it.”

Cosmas gave a little chuckle. “It’s funny,” he said, his lips curling into a roguish smile.

“What?” asked Camus.

“Had another writer been a fly on the wall, we could end up characters in his novel.”

“Maybe we already are,” joked Camus.

“Touché,” said Cosmas, and they both burst into laughter.

The two writers settled back in their chairs, eager for more conversation. The morning warmed its way into early afternoon. Gleams of sunlight streamed through the windows of the café, dappling its interior. Splashed by sunshine, Cosmas and Camus opened up more and more to each other with each passing minute. Camus asked Cosmas about the outcome of the meeting with Moreau. Cosmas told him Moreau extolled his play and promised to stage it in the Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse, an old playhouse in the fourteenth arrondissement with four hundred seats. Camus nodded his head knowingly. He’d been there a couple of times. It was a fine theatre, entirely suitable for staging Cosmas’ play. The conversation veered round to their childhood years. Camus reminisced about playing in the fields with his mates with a football they’d stitched together from bits of rubber and staying so late that their mothers would come out looking for them. Cosmas wondered whether he should ask Camus what happened with Natalie, but he decided against it. No matter how curious he was to find out if he went to bed with her, he had no business to intrude on his private life.

The clock chimed the hour again, reminding Cosmas that time was running out. He took a long puff on his pipe and said: “It’s strange that our meeting should happen at this juncture.”

“Why are you saying that?” asked Camus.

“Because this year one of us will win the Nobel Prize.”

“I know,” Camus said with a nod. He patted Cosmas on the back. “I hope it goes to you. You deserve it.”

“So do you. The essay you’re writing about capital punishment will surely advance the cause of justice around the world. And I was always amazed that you wrote The Stranger and The Myth of Sisyphus at such a young age. Such precocious talent as yours must be recognized.”
“Thank you my friend, but I can say the same thing about your work. I was blown away by *A Night with the Santouri* and *Free to Die*. What lyricism! What depth of insight! And to think that you wrote them in your … what is it…in your sixties?

“That right,” said Cosmas, taking another puff of his pipe. “I wrote *A Night with the Santouri* when I was sixty two and *Free to Die* when I was sixty nine.”

“It’s really impressive that you flowered so late. Most writers lose their spark as they grow older. At the very least you deserve the Nobel for winning the battle against the ravages of time.”

“That’s most kind of you, Albert,” Cosmas said with a timid smile. “Well, if you think that I published my first novel when I was barely twenty-three, I’m rather an unusual species of late bloomer.”

“What is your secret really?”

“There’s no secret other than my outlook on life.”

“What’s your outlook on life?”

“I see life as an upward slope that I keep on climbing. Pretty much like your Sisyphus. And the route to the top is quite tortuous, mind you.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I started out as a writer, I wanted to be a poet, not a novelist.”

“That’s funny! And I wanted to be a football player, ha, ha!”

Cosmas gave a dry chuckle. “Do you really mean that?”

“I do. I used to be a goalkeeper for *Racing Universitaire d’Alger*, which was the best team in Algeria back then. I was very good. Before I quit, everybody thought I was going to become a football player.”

“Why did you quit then?”

“I contracted tuberculosis when I was seventeen, and I had to stay in bed for quite some time, so I stopped training.”

“A small loss to the football world but a huge gain for humanity, Albert.”

“Huh, I didn’t see it that way back then. You see, I was mad keen on football. I still am, mind you. Had I been able to pursue a career as a professional footballer, I don’t know if I would have turned my hand to writing fiction.”
“Come on,” Cosmas demurred. “I’m sure you would have, no matter what. You were always meant to be a writer. Everything that happens, happens for a reason.” He took one more puff of his pipe. “If we constantly tried to second guess what would have happened had things been different, we’d be going round in circles. Anyway, to be honest with you, I was never a football fan myself. Or a fan of any other sport for that matter unless, of course, you regard hiking as a sport.”

“I’m not surprised. Very few intellectuals are into sports. So have you always wanted to be a writer?”

“I’ve always wanted to be a thinker. Which, by the way, went contrary to my father’s wishes.”

“What did he want you to be?”

“He wanted me to become a soldier. Poor father! He was sorely disappointed in me.”

Camus gave a little giggle.

“Don’t laugh, it’s totally true. My father would have given anything in the world to see me fight against the Turks like my grandfather, who was a hero of the Cretan revolution.”

“Fathers want their children to be like them, I suppose. Look, for better or for worse, we’re both writers now, and in a few months from now one of us will probably be a Nobel laureate.”

“You’re right,” Cosmas chuckled dryly, “one of us will make literary history, as they say!”

Camus uttered a short snorting laugh. “Right, but no matter which one of us wins it, it doesn’t mean he’s the better writer. You know how these things are. The committee is anything but objective.”

“I don’t think they even intend to be. Politics get in the way.”

“Let’s make an agreement then,” Camus suggested, his face suddenly lit up with a strange delight.

“What kind of agreement?”

“Whoever wins it will pay homage to the also-ran in his acceptance speech.”

“I suppose that’s the least we can do for each other,” Cosmas agreed. He stretched out his hand to seal the deal. “And needless to say I fully agree. The also-ran gets an honorary mention.”
Camus lit another cigarette. He then turned his face towards the open door to watch the movement of people as they bustled in and out of the café. Cosmas scanned Camus’ eyes as he turned his gaze away from him and towards the passing crowd. He thought he detected a note of sadness there but said nothing. Camus glanced at his watch. Cosmas took the hint. He raised his hand and asked a passing waiter for the bill. The waiter brought them the bill. It was Cosmas’ turn to pay, and Camus didn’t demur. Camus took one last sip of his coffee and rose to leave. The two men shook hands and promised to stay in touch before Camus moved off towards the door.

Neither of them knew it, but that was their final farewell: they were never going to see each other again.

Sofia had arranged to meet Antigone on Saturday noon at Place Nationale, a large square near the walls of the old town, a stone’s throw from where she and Cosmas lived. She put on a no-frills fuchsia-colored dress and set off through the quaint narrow streets of the old town towards their meeting place. It was a cloudy day, but the temperature was still high enough for the local set to go out for a spot of strolling and shopping, the two most common Saturday afternoons pastimes in this as well as many other corners of the world. Sofia arrived at the square five minutes before the appointed time. The crowd of people passing through was beginning to thicken, this being the time most local residents set out for their Saturday outing. She glanced round the square to make sure her friend wasn’t there—she didn’t expect her to come earlier than her anyway—and having satisfied herself that Antigone wasn’t in sight yet, she sat down on an empty bench near the children’s playground and waited. She could have invited Antigone to come by her place for dinner, but she preferred to get out of the house—something she didn’t do as often as she would like these days—and mingle with the Saturday shoppers and strollers in her adopted town.

A quarter of an hour later, Antigone emerged from the southeastern end of the square and sauntered across the open space towards the playground. She was wearing a blue and white polka dot dress that lent her a chic and elegant style and made her look several years younger than her actual age—forty eight, four years younger than Sofia. The two women from Athens had been friends for almost a year now. Their friendship was based on three things they had in common. They had similar origins, as both of them came from well-to-do families in Athens; they lived in
the same city, being two of the very few Greek women who called Antibes their home at the
time; and they had older husbands, neither of whom had given them any children. Antigone had
met Jacques Du Bois, a wealthy French lawyer who was twenty years her senior, on a trip to
Paris ten years earlier. They got married soon afterwards, and she moved to Paris to live with
him. They’d been living there in a lavish apartment until two years ago, the time of her
husband’s retirement. Now that business didn’t require her husband’s presence in Paris, they’d
moved to the south to enjoy the balmy air and the mild weather, and they had taken up residence
in a newly bought mansion on the southeastern edge of town. Antigone and Jacques had just
come back from a month-long holiday in Greece, an indulgence afforded them by her husband’s
still considerable income.

Sofia stood up and waved to her fellow countrywoman. Antigone saw her and strutted out
towards her with a huge smile on her face. Sofia smiled back and strode off to meet her halfway.

“I’m so happy to see you darling,” Antigone called out as Sofia came up to her. Sofia
hugged her gently, and the two Greek women kissed primly on the cheeks.

“Same here, my dear,” Sofia replied cordially, adding at once, “I hope Jacques won’t
mind my taking you away from him.”

“On the contrary,” trilled Antigone. “He quite welcomed the opportunity to do a spot of
gardening. He’s so obsessed with his vegetable garden, you know, though to tell you the truth, I
don’t know what he sees in it.”

“Ha, ha! Men have their little obsessions, don’t they?” Sofia said, giving her friend’s
hand an affectionate squeeze. “Well, how was Greece, my dear?” she asked buoyantly, brimming
with bonhomie in expectation of a pleasant afternoon in the company of her dearest friend.

“Lovely as ever!” Antigone chirped back, her tanned face also flushed with good cheer.
“The people were nice as usual, especially in Nafplio where we spent mos-
t of our time, and the
weather was absolutely fabulous.”

“It’s always like that when you visit Greece as a tourist,” Sofia said. “Well, I’m glad you
had a good time. You look so much younger and fresher! So what do you want to do first? Do
you want to have coffee at one of the cafés in the square?”

“Can I take a rain check for a bit later? I’d much rather we went for a walk first. I spent
the whole morning at home, and I’m sick and tired of sitting in a chair listening to Jacques
gushing about his garden.”
“Restless as ever,” Sofia exclaimed, curling her hand under her friend’s arm, “that’s what you are. Oh, I’m so glad to see you again Antigone.”

“Same here, darling. Well, why don’t we go round the shops for a while? I’m really eager to see the windows after a whole month away from haute couture.”

“Well, I guess I have no choice but to indulge your whims, my dear.”

Antigone smiled jauntily, showing two rows of well-formed teeth, and the two women set off towards Place de Gaulle, Antibes’ main square. They took their time, dawdling arm in arm past the shopfronts. They stopped by the clothes boutiques first, gazing at smart dresses and hats while discussing their merits and demerits at some length. Antigone compared the various styles, while Sofia laid more stress on value for money. Then they came onto the jewellery stores, two blocks away from Place de Gaulle. This was Antigone’s domain. She chattered a mile a dozen about the items on display in the swanky shop windows. Sofia, on the other hand, who’d shown quite a bit of interest in clothes, couldn’t care less about jewellery.

“Isn’t this necklace a thing of beauty, darling?” enthused Antigone, pointing to a pearly necklace with an exorbitant price tag, as they stood in front of a well-known upmarket jewelry shop.

“It’s not bad at all,” Sofia assented.

“Not bad?” snorted Antigone. “You call this exquisite piece of craftsmanship not bad? Well, I’m rather disappointed. I thought you’d pick a stronger adjective.”

“You know I’m not so keen on jewellery,” Sofia said weakly.

“Most high society ladies in Kolonaki would sell their souls to the devil to get their hands on it,” quipped Antigone.

“I think that’s a very high price to pay for something that’s not legal tender in the next world,” retorted Sofia.

“Well,” Antigone fired back, “I should think that now that Cosmas has risen in the world, you would be more inclined to indulge yourself a bit more in this world. I mean these things are now well within your reach.”

“Indeed they are, but it doesn’t work that way. Old habits die hard. I still don’t care for luxury, though you’re quite right that I can easily afford to buy fine things these days.”

“What do you care for then?”
Sofia didn’t have to think too hard. “I guess making long journeys. Traveling around the world. That’s what lingers in your memory when everything else has faded away. The places you’ve visited, the people you’ve met. To me, that’s much more precious than jewels.”

“The good thing, then,” Antigone conceded, thinking this an incontrovertible argument, “is you’ve done plenty of travelling with Cosmas, haven’t you?”

“Right. That’s one of the many reasons why he means so much to me,” Sofia said, giving her friend a gentle poke in the ribs to signal they should move on. “But one never wearies of traveling, my dear,” she added with a sigh. “There’s always the next trip to plan and dream about.”

“Talking of that, where are you and Cosmas going next?”

“I don’t know for sure. Maybe China.”

“China? Why so far away?”

“Well, I received a telegram this morning. The Chinese government has invited Cosmas to make an official visit.”

The two friends were now sauntering in the direction of the Place de Gaulle, which hove into view at the end of the next block. Antigone stopped for a moment as if she’s just thought of something. “But isn’t China a communist country? I mean from the little I know, human rights are not respected there. Surely Cosmas can’t accept such an invitation!”

Sofia stopped too, straightened her spine a little. “Cosmas knows their record more than anyone else, but I’m not so sure he can turn his back on such an honour.”

Antigone’s eyebrows twitched for a second, but the next moment a smile rose to her lips. “I guess the two of you know better.”

“I really don’t know what Cosmas will decide, my dear.”

“So you haven’t told him yet?”

“No, I’ll tell him about it when he comes back.”

“Anyway, if you end up going, make sure you bring something for me.”

“That goes without saying, my dear. Here we are! We’ve reached the square.”

“Indeed, and I didn’t even notice it with all the talking we did.”

“Le Café Jardin has quite a few empty tables on the pavement. Let’s sit down here and have coffee, my dear. You need to tell me all about your trip to Greece.”

“Sure I will! And I hope you’ll give me all the juicy details about Cosmas’ latest novel.”
Chapter Six

It was not until Cosmas took out his ticket to check his seat number while waiting for the train on the crowded platform that he realized he was going to be travelling first class. A glow of appreciation came to his face: Camus had done more than his duty to a fellow writer. The train coasted into the station. Passengers rushed towards the doors. A crush developed at the doors of all the cars except those of the first class carriage, which was at the front of the train. Cosmas clambered onto the first class wagon and looked for his seat. The carriage consisted of two rows of seats, one of which had single seats while the other had double seats. Cosmas had a window seat in the middle of the double-seater row. He laid his suitcase on his seat and fished out his copy of the Divine Comedy and the translated manuscripts. Then he stowed his suitcase on the luggage rack overhead and settled into his spacious leather seat, thinking how privileged he was to be traveling first class. He went on to untie his shoes so as to ease the pressure on his feet, but kept them on as a basic courtesy to the other passengers.

Seconds later a young man in a suit sat down on the seat next to him. They exchanged a greeting in English, and Cosmas noticed at once his fellow passenger’s cut-glass accent. Judging by the accent and the cut of his suit—stiff canvas, low gorge lines, hacking pocket, surgeon’s cuffs—Cosmas deduced that the young man was British. Seldom would he meet a stranger in a train or a boat in European territory whose language didn’t fall within the range of languages he spoke—English, Italian, French, Spanish, German, and Russian—and this young man was no exception.

He’d stayed in England during the first six months of the war and from what he’d seen he divided British men into two types: the public school gentleman and the lower class workhorse. The former, to which type this chap seemed to belong, were exceedingly discreet and observed etiquette to the letter. That was a good thing. He could do his reading without being disturbed. He picked up the Divine Comedy and opened it to Canto XV. A whistle was heard, and the train jerked forward. As the train was pulling out of the station, the roofs of the houses along the route poked into view. Cosmas lost himself in their contemplation. He was roused from his musings from the sound of a blow. The passenger had taken out a handkerchief and was blowing his nose. Cosmas’ eyes wheeled towards him. He was reading a book. Cosmas stole a glance at the cover.
It was an English edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche. The choice of book piqued his curiosity.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said to the stranger in the best English he could summon, “but I noticed you’re reading a book by Nietzsche.”

“I am indeed guilty of that offense,” jested the young man with the ghost of a smile, looking up from his book.

“How come? I’m asking because I love Nietzsche, and I’m curious to know why you’re reading him.”

“For a number of reasons, I suppose,” replied the passenger, speaking English with what sounded to Cosmas’ trained ear like a refined Oxford accent on account of its rounded vowels and cut-glass clarity of the consonants. “For starters, he’s relevant to my studies. You see, I’m a postgraduate student of Comparative Philosophy at the University of Lyon, and one of my areas of concentration is German Philosophy. But I also read him for his broad-mindedness. I mean I’m quite intrigued by his belief that no value-system is inherently better than any other.”

“Yes,” agreed Cosmas with a nod of his head, “it’s rare for a thinker to regard all value systems as equally legitimate.”

“You know what I like about this point of view, sir? It shows how misguided people are to believe that one specific culture or ideology is superior to all the others. And this belief is the cause of all wars since the beginning of time. When one day humanity accepts the validity of all value-systems, conflict will come to an end once and for all.”

Though he no longer believed in it, Cosmas still cherished a residual fondness for this brand of naive idealism. He thought very much like this young man when he was his age. But a lifetime of traveling and the experience of two world wars had changed him: now he knew better than to regard refusing to acknowledge the opposite point of view in a debate as a mere fallacy of thinking. “Point well taken,” he said wryly, “but no idea or value system can rise higher than the people who hold it. It’s people who can ennoble or debase an idea, not the other way round.”

Before the Englishman had the chance to frame a reply, the conductor had materialized and was now standing right next to their seats. “May I have your tickets please?” he said in scrupulously polite French.

He punched the tickets and turned to the opposite row to continue his inspection.
The Englishman started blowing into his handkerchief again. “I need to visit the gents,” he said when he was done.

He came back twenty minutes later. The conversation resumed but this time meandered along in a desultory and prosaic vein. It turned out he was about to embark on his thesis on the contrast between French rationalism and German idealism and he had a substantial amount of reading to get through.

The sky clouded over. A light rain started to fall. Cosmas watched the drops slowly sliding down the window panes in between snatches of conversation with the young passenger. Their conversation petered out, and they buried themselves in their respective books again.

“I’m getting off here,” the Englishman said several hours later as the train pulled into Lyon. “Nice to make your acquaintance, sir.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” Cosmas said, shaking his hand firmly and wishing he were young again.

Cosmas was in for a very comfortable ride for the remainder of the journey. The unexpected encounter with a Nietzsche scholar reminded him of his own first acquaintance with the work of the German philosopher. It was a fellow student at the College de France who’d put him on to him. Cosmas had just arrived from Athens to pursue a PhD in Philosophy. He was cooped up in the library, browsing through a stack of books he’d fetched from the shelves. A young female student he’d met in one of the classes he was taking came up to his table. She showed him a book of Nietzsche and asked him if he’d read any of his works before. Cosmas hadn’t even heard the name before let alone read a book by this writer. His classmate handed him the book, telling him it was a compelling read. Cosmas’ eye fell on the title: *The Birth of Tragedy*. When she left, Cosmas started to leaf through the book, aflame with curiosity.

At first he winced at it: from the very first pages it was clear that this writer whose name he still couldn’t pronounce was an opponent of Christianity, which he held sacred at the time. But he kept reading the book nonetheless, for the cases made by the writer were so rigorously argued that he couldn’t dismiss them out of hand. By digging beneath the surface, he soon began to discover similarities between Nietzsche’s and his own outlook on life. Like him, Nietzsche was a restless soul and a free spirit, and his fearless view of the world appealed to him. Like him, the German writer was multi-layered, bristling with subtleties and contradictions. The rejection of God, for one thing, was conveyed with almost religious fervor. Another interesting similarity
was that Nietzsche despised weakness because he himself was physically weak, plagued with ill health from the age of twenty-six onwards. Likewise, Cosmas had created larger-than-life characters with gargantuan zest for earthly pleasures such as Zervas Alexakis because he himself was bookish and restrained. He soon became infatuated with Nietzsche. It was an improbable love for someone whose background was so radically different from his own. Impelled to deepen his understanding of his multi-faceted work, he ended up writing his dissertation on Nietzsche— *Ideas and Policies: From Philosophy to Public Life*, a scholarly work dating back to 1909. It was the capstone project for his doctoral studies in law at the University of Paris where he was a student between 1907 and 1909. He’d managed to get it published only a few years ago. Its subject was hardly popular and ended up being read, not unpredictably, only by his more fanatical fan base.

But now the rumblings of his stomach roused Cosmas from his ruminations. Just as the patter of the rain against the windows of the train intensified, he got up and headed for the dining car to grab a bite. Sitting comfortably in the first class carriage, he had forgotten how crowded the train was. He was painfully reminded of it as he had to jostle and weave his way along the jam-packed corridors of the next three carriages to get to the dining car. He found a seat at a table for two opposite another lone passenger and ordered beef bourguignon with boiled potatoes. As he tucked into his meal, he thought with a bitter-sweet smile of all the years of deprivation when his only sustenance was a hunk of bread and a handful of olives. Now in his old age he had achieved a modest amount of commercial success and he could afford to buy a proper meal when he traveled. He finished his meal and hustled back along the aisle to his seat in the first class carriage. Three more hours stretched out before him until the train’s projected arrival in Antibes.

He picked up the manuscript of *Free to Die* and started to read it from where he’d left off last time. He presently came to the place where Captain Michales shuts up his shop and takes to the mountains determined to instigate a new uprising against the Turks. A top-level meeting with the island’s elders is scheduled. Before the meeting Captain Michales takes his wife and children to his father’s place, which was Cosmas’ grandfather’s house in real life. Concerned about their safety, he has thought it best to leave them in the care of the old man. Cosmas’ grandfather, a spry centenarian identified throughout the novel solely as *the grandfather*, invites the family to
the interior of the house to eat and drink to their heart’s content. And at this point Cosmas brought the manuscript closer to his eyes and read the passage out to himself:

“Dig in, my children and grandchildren!” his father said. “All you see in this house is yours to enjoy. You’re more than welcome to get through it all.”

“Father, I’ve come to hand over to you your daughter-in-law and grandchildren,” Captain Michales solemnly announced. “I’m going into the mountains.”

“So what’s new, Michales? You’ve been a wild thing since you were knee high to a grasshopper. After all those years, you still haven’t come to your senses.”

“I shall come to my senses only when Crete is liberated.”

“Then,” said his father in jest, “it better not be liberated ever. If you start to see sense, it’ll make no difference whether you’re alive or dead!”

Right on target, Cosmas thought with a wide smile. The dialogue expressed the indomitable spirit of his father and grandfather with elegance and precision. Their uniqueness shone through in the translation just as it did in the original. His only niggle was that “a wild thing” wasn’t quite the same thing as the untamed colt of the Greek text. While the translation was competent and effective, some local colour was lost. This was a restriction that he’d had to come to terms with: certain peculiar elements of Cretan culture and certain paradigms of metaphorical thought either couldn’t at all be conveyed in French, or any other language for that matter (there were translations of his work in most European languages as well as in Turkish, Arabic, and Chinese), or if they were faithfully translated, they would sound a jarring note, for close cultural equivalents of certain smells, tastes, clothes, and ways of interacting with nature couldn’t be found in other languages.

He read on till he came to the part where Captain Michales rises to address the assembly of elders at an important meeting up in the mountains.

Captain Michales stood up. His blood was pulsing in his veins. Leaning on his gun, he started to talk:

“Brothers, captains, you know very well I can’t spin speeches. So I’ll speak bluntly, drily and soberly: forgive me. Once again the stranglehold is tightening on our beloved and much-suffering Crete. Soldiers and dervishes have come to our shores by ship; the Turks are growing arrogant and are slaughtering our brothers in Megalokastro. We are no lambs. The blood of the killed is crying out. Arise, captains! We will either set the island free or die!”

Yes, that was the perfect note! The scene came alive before his eyes. His father came back from the dead to embody the greatness of his race. In real life of course he’d never heard
his father give such a speech. When his father joined the war against the Turks, as just another fighter and not as a leader, Cosmas was well out of harm’s way attending classes in a private school on Naxos, which his father had paid for with his hard-earned money. But that was exactly the kind of power Cosmas had: the ability to observe people closely and store away their most peculiar mannerisms and speech patterns. He could then shut himself up in his study and enact in his mind imaginary conversations the people he had observed could have engaged in if they had been in the fictional situations in which he’d cast them. In the case of his father, the person he’d known more intimately than anyone else in his life except maybe Alexakis, he constantly heard him give imaginary speeches in his head. In fact he’d had quite a few dreams in which his father delivered public speeches in front of excited crowds.

He put the manuscript down. All of a sudden he felt a shiver of mortification. The towering figures of his father and grandfather, which he had so artfully constructed in his fiction, now dwarfed him. His soul felt puny compared to his father’s and grandfather’s. How could a mere wordsmith, whose miserable lot in life was to spill harmless ink, stand up to two freedom fighters who spilled the blood of their country’s enemies? It was an uneven, indeed an impious comparison. But the next second his heated brain cooled off, and he changed his mind. The times had changed. Crete now enjoyed peace and prosperity. It didn’t cry out for sword and musket soldiers any more. And through this novel that would now go out into the world to touch other hearts he’d done his duty to the sacred soil of his land, the soil that would soon close over him like his father and grandfather. He’d paid homage to their fight to liberate it, and in doing so he’d preserved their legacy and the spirit of Crete for future generations. His fiction could now fertilize other minds, plant the germ of courage in other hearts, those of non-Cretans. Crete lived in its pages and worked its influence on other cultures. But for how long? A new enemy now threatened the human race: technology. Would future generations become so benumbed and stupefied by technology that they would become apathetic to the struggle of the human spirit for ennoblement?

The train stopped at Saint Tropez. One more hour or so and they would be in Antibes. Several passengers clambered aboard, but none on his carriage. He waited for a while, but no one came to claim the seat next to him. A pricey first class seat was hardly worth booking for the short trip till Antibes or Nice. He picked up the manuscript again and read on. He’d come to the
point where he provided a detailed description of the character of his grandfather. He now read it to himself with renewed attention.

*The grandfather took pride of place in the middle of the large bench. He was a vigorous centenarian with a flowing beard, which now covered his shaggy chest and hid the wound-scars from the great uprising. Thick, bristling eyebrows shaded his eyes—so that he had to stroke them back if he wanted to see. In spite of his advanced old age, his cheeks had remained fiery red, and when he grew angry one could see the blood throbbing in his temples. His arteries hadn’t clogged up yet; tirelessly they gave drink to the aged body, a body that was still thirsty and drank the juices of life, full of eagerness. He had not yet had enough of the world. He touched, heard, saw, tasted and smelled it with the same longing as a twenty-year-old lad. He saw men and women as tiny creatures lying at his feet. He felt sorry for them and laid his hands on their heads to instill courage into them. It was no pleasure to him that human blood should be shed. But, as soon as it came to a fight, his eyes grew troubled and he forgot that the Turks too were human beings—his hands never wearied of slaying them.*

Yes, that was his grandfather to a tee! He’d captured him nicely. That was biography thinly disguised as fiction. Or was it? Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t sure his grandfather’s eyebrows were as bushy and bristling as he’d made them out to be in the novel. And hard though he tried, he couldn’t remember the colour of his eyes either. He felt a jolt of unease. Was this description of a fictional version of his grandfather objectively rendered or had it been clouded by his own subjective impressions? He pondered the question for a moment. Then he decided it didn’t really matter. What the best writers of all times strove for was an ideal, not an actual world, a world they could be proud of, not the world they’d actually walked on. He had created figures larger than life, but then again his ancestors, the ancient Greek sculptors, had done the same thing. There were no ancient Greek statues or sculptures of fat old bodies and lazy bored people. All ancient Greek sculptors aimed to sculpt sinewy bodies full of grace. But fat and lazy people certainly existed back then too. They were deemed unworthy of being preserved as art objects.

Cosmas looked out of the window. Night had fallen, and as there were no lights outside, the darkness was almost impenetrable. He got up and stretched himself. He thought with regret that he’d done no writing today. The manuscript had brought back memories of Crete. He decided to pass the remainder of the trip jotting them down. They could be immensely useful as raw material for his autobiography or, if death came for him before he’d managed to complete it,
as material for a biography written by Sofia. He got up and took his notebook from his suitcase. Then he fished his pen out of the inside pocket of his jacket and started to write, stopping only to cast occasional glances at the scenery sliding past outside the window. Half an hour later, he’d finished his piece. He read it silently to himself. The heading he’d given it was “The Liberation of Crete.”

The day when Prince George of the Hellenes set foot on Cretan soil is still etched on my mind with preternatural clarity. People had lined the streets where he was supposed to march through with his cavalcade. With flowing tears that drenched their beards, Cretan captains tossed their kerchiefs in the air. Mothers raised their infants high so that they could see the blond giant, the fairy-tale prince who had heard Crete’s lamentations centuries earlier and, mounted on a white horse like Saint George, had set out to liberate the island. Cretan eyes were glassily blank after so many centuries’ watch over the sea. Lo! The whole of Crete quaked, its tombs opened, and a voice resounded from the summit of its tallest mountain: “He is coming! He has arrived! Behold him!” Aged captains with deep wounds and silver pistols tumbled out of the mountains; youths came with their black-handled daggers and tinkling rebeccs; bells tolled from quivering bell towers. The city had been adorned everywhere with palm leaves and myrtles—and the fair-haired Saint George stood on a pier strewn with laurel, the whole of the Cretan sea glittering behind his shoulders.

He put the notebook back into his suitcase and restored the pen to his jacket pocket. The floodgates of his memory had now burst open. He remembered his father taking him to his grandfather’s graveyard that very day in the early afternoon. He’d followed his father through the graveyard rather stumblingly, his heart fluttering wildly with fear of the dead. When they found the grave, a small mound of rounded earth with a wooden cross, the name had been effaced by time. His father took out his kerchief, fell face downward on the ground, and scraped away the soil with his nails, making a little hole into it. Into this he inserted his mouth as deeply as he could. Then he cried out three times, each time louder than the previous one: “Father, he came! Father, he came! Father, he came.” Then he removed a small bottle of wine from his pocket and poured it drop by drop into the hole, waiting each time for the liquid to seep down into the earth. Then he scrambled to his feet, crossed himself, and looked at Cosmas with flashing eyes.

“Did you hear?” he asked his son, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Did you hear?”

Cosmas remained silent. He’d heard nothing.

“Didn’t you hear?” said his father angrily. “His bones rattled.”
Chapter Seven

The train sputtered its way into Antibes station. Cosmas glanced at his watch: 11:33 P.M. He lifted down his suitcase from the overhead rack and shuffled somnolently towards the carriage door. During the last hour or so he’d been nodding in and out of sleep. A few passengers were already standing by the door, waiting to get off. He joined the end of the queue. All three platforms were dark and half-deserted at this hour. The train screeched to a halt. The passengers got off one by one. He was the last one to disembark. Holding on to the door handle with his right hand and clutching his suitcase with his left hand, he climbed down the two iron steps of the train.

And then it happened.

As his left foot was coming down, his attention was distracted by a stray dog crossing the tracks. He lost his coordination and stumbled a bit, banging his suitcase against his knee. “Damn it!” he exclaimed, as a jab of pain shot up his spine. He dropped his suitcase on the floor, crouched down and clasped his aching knee. “Bloody suitcase,” he cursed, his face twisting into a grimace. He looked around. Nobody seemed to have noticed the incident. The other passengers had already disappeared inside the station. So much the better, he thought and started to rub his knee to ease the pain.

After a minute, the pain subsided a little. He stood up to his full height again, determined to carry on. It wasn’t a big deal, just a dull pain now that would go away in a while. He picked up his suitcase again. Maybe he shouldn’t have packed so many clothes for such a short trip—whatever had happened to his lifelong habit of traveling light? He limped off across the tracks towards the exit, trying to keep at bay alarmist thoughts. But the pain wouldn’t go away, and now he felt drops of blood trickling out of his knee. He decided to stop by the public bathroom to check it out. As he shuffled his way there, he felt his trousers turning damp. He reached the bathroom and pushed its door open. No-one was inside the small building, which smelled of disinfectant. He walked stiffly up to the fly-blown mirror that lined the wall in front of him a few inches above a row of washbasins. He bent down and rolled his trouser leg all the way up to his knee. Blood came dribbling out of his knee and trickled down the side of his leg. He put his hand on the inside of his trouser leg. It was saturated with blood.
A wave of alarm ran down his spine. A minor cut wouldn’t warrant so deep a gash nor such copious bleeding. Easy bleeding was a symptom of leukemia. It might well be the case, he thought ruefully, that the leukemia he’d been able to hold in check for twenty-odd years had now well and truly returned. It was Sofia’s life-giving ministrations that had induced the illness to retreat, of that he had no doubt. He’d met her shortly after the onset of the disease, and soon afterwards it had gone into remission. It was all too tempting to think of their encounter as divine intervention: she was his guardian angel who’d come down to earth to protect him. Subsequent tests had failed to show signs of the disease. He’d finally forgotten about it and hoped he’d fended off the disease once and for all. But the prodigious amount of blood fueled his suspicions that it had now come back to claim its spoils. For he was too old to fight it off now.

He took off his left shoe. He lifted his left leg and propped it across the nearest washbasin. He then turned on the tap and let the water run while he washed the blood away and scrubbed the areas beneath the gash with a bar of soap. A man stepped into the bathroom. He saw the blood Cosmas was washing off his leg and gave a start. “Oh dear,” he said, “looks like you’ve been seriously hurt. Shall I call someone?”

“No thank you,” Cosmas replied, sizing up the man, who looked several years younger than him, “it’s nothing much really, just a cut.”

“How did you come by it?”

“I banged my suitcase against my knee stepping off the train. Its end must have been pretty sharp because it gashed my knee.”

“I have some sticking plasters with me. Do you need them?”

“I don’t know. I suppose they’re better than nothing at all.”

“Here you are,” the stranger said, holding out a wad of sticking plasters he’d fished out of the inner pocket of his jacket. “You can cover the wound with them.”

“That’s most kind of you,” Cosmas said as he stretched his hand to take hold of them.

The stranger looked on while Cosmas tore off the covers and put several sticking plasters across the wounded spot. He then took his leg down and plucked off a length of paper from the dispenser. He used some of it to wipe the bloodstained leg clean and bandaged the remaining paper tightly around his knee. Once he was done, he thanked the unknown man, who was still standing by.
“You should get your cuts seen to,” the stranger replied before turning his back on Cosmas and stepping into a toilet stall.

Cosmas rolled down his trouser leg. He washed his hands clean and splashed some water on his face. He then picked up his suitcase and limped out of the bathroom. He came out of the station and walked with faltering steps towards the first taxi in the taxi rank, bent on concealing the incident from Sofia.

When the taxi dropped Cosmas off at the northeastern corner of the Place du Safranier near the walls of the Old Town, it was already past midnight. Sofia had been sitting on the sofa in the living room, waiting for him. To while the time away, she’d been reading one of Camus’ books, *The Plague*—Cosmas’ meetings with Camus had aroused her interest in Camus’ work. She heard the familiar spry footsteps drawing near 8 Bas-Castelet Street and stood up from the settee. Cosmas opened the door with his keys. Sofia rushed to the entrance with a twinkle in her small clever brown eyes and gave him a hug. Cosmas still felt sharp jabs shooting into his knee but didn’t want to give himself away. He summoned all his resolve and steadied his step. Sofia told him she’d made fish soup for him and asked him to come to the kitchen. Cosmas said he needed to use the bathroom first: too much tea on the last stretch of the journey.

He scuttled off to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. He wrenched off his shoes and his trousers, wincing as he felt the coarse texture of dried blood on their inside lining. He tossed his trousers on the floor and yanked off the sticking plasters, stifling a cry as the sodden material peeled away. He then wrapped the sticking plasters in masses of toilet paper and chucked the whole thing in the dustbin, stuffing it with more toilet paper on top so it couldn’t be seen when Sofia cleared the bin. The wound had clotted. He dressed it with some new and larger bandage he found in the first aid kit. He tied the bandage as tightly as he could and then pulled on his trousers, making a note to drop them off at the dry cleaners the next day when Sofia popped out to do her shopping. He flushed the toilet and went straight to the kitchen.

Forcing a smile onto his face, he sat down at the table. While Sofia was busy serving the food she’d been scooping out of a pot sitting on the stove, he reflected on the dual pleasure of traveling. The excitement of departure on an outward journey beggared description: it was simply the quintessence of life. He always felt ineffable joy to leave his familiar surroundings behind him, as his mind raced ahead to the new experiences and exciting discoveries in store for
him. And it was always an immense relief to return home at the end of the trip, enriched with new knowledge, identifiably the same man, yet markedly changed too.

It was an intriguing paradox reaching back to the ancient Greek world: the dual influence of Persephone and Dionysus. Taken together, they formed the dialectic of life: life was a cycle, like Persephone’s circular movement as she went back and forth between the world of the living and the dead. But it was also a flux, a forward movement mediated by Dionysus, leading to growth and progress. It was a matter of attention, what you notice at each given moment. If you isolated and contrasted two discrete moments or states of your life, you saw your progress or maybe the lack of it. But if you turned your attention to the alternation of seasons and the rhythm of time that manifests itself as a constant present, you saw circularity. His life was this ambiguous journey, driven by change but ultimately cyclical, within calendar time and yet beyond it, like that of his fictional role model, Odysseus. Odysseus: a figure charged with a wealth of meaning for him. Odysseus was the heroic archetype that informed his work, the subject of The Journey, his epic poem of 33,333 verses, a poem narrating Odysseus’ final southward journey, an imaginary journey where he helps the underprivileged he comes across during his travels through Africa to take up arms against their oppressors, thirteen years in the making. But now his thoughts were diverted by the smell of fish soup, a smell synonymous in his sense perception with the pleasure of homecoming.

Sofia eased herself into the chair across from him with a plateful of steamy fish soup in front of her too.

“I thought you would have already eaten,” Cosmas remarked with a wry smile on his face.

“I was waiting for you dear, I wanted us to have dinner together.”

He reached out his hand and stroked her forehead. She smiled sweetly, then bent her head down and tasted the soup. Cosmas started to blow into his soup.

“By the way, what did you eat on the journey?” Sofia asked.

Cosmas thought for a moment, then said: “Comfort food, to be honest with you. Whatever was to hand to fill my belly.”

“That’s bad, sweetheart. You must try to restrain yourself more. Anyway, other than that, how was the trip dear?”
“I told you all about it on the telephone,” Cosmas said evenly, tasting the soup in his turn. He stayed silent for a moment, but he couldn’t shrug off her unwavering gaze. “OK, let me think … Well, it was a kind of reunion … I mean funny how time passes and people grow older, but places stay the same in a relative way… In a sense it felt as if I hadn’t left Paris for a single day, though none of the people I knew back then were there now. The library was exactly the same, but the students sitting there were forty years younger than me. Anyway, how are things with you? Did anything happen during my absence?”

Sofia hesitated for a second. “Not really, nothing much happened, except …”

“Except what?”

“There’s a telegram for you.”

“Another telegram!” he exclaimed puzzled, blowing into his soup again. “What’s this one about?”

A strange gleam came into Sofia’s eyes as she pondered her words. “Something totally unexpected,” she said at last. “And the timing is almost uncanny.”

“What is it, Sofia?” Cosmas queried quizzically. “Are you going to keep me guessing forever?”

“The Chinese government has invited you to make an official visit to their country.”

“What? You’re kidding me!”

“You know I wouldn’t. The President himself, Mao Zedong, would like to receive you in his office.”

“Hold on a minute. How did the Chinese government manage to get hold of my address? I quit my post in UNESCO three years ago.”

“They sent the telegram to the consulate in Nice, and the consulate forwarded it to you.”

An expression of wonder came into Cosmas’ face. “I’d never have thought writers could matter so much. Not to a government anyway. Do they mention you in the telegram?”

“They do. They said that I can escort you on the trip, and that once we arrive there all our expenses will be paid.”

“How odd! An official visit to China fully paid by the Chinese government?! I’m very surprised they even know who I am, let alone ask me to visit their country!”
Sofia reached across the table and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Your fame has spread everywhere. You’re known in every nook and cranny of this wide world.” A small smile played on Cosmas’ lips. “So what do you think?” Sofia asked. “Will you accept the invitation?”

Cosmas scrunched his eyebrows. “I don’t know,” he said. “The Chinese government doesn’t have a good name here in the West.”

“No, they don’t. The newspapers bristle with reports of human rights violations.”

“I’ve seen the reports, too. A lot of intellectuals have been persecuted recently. Quite obviously, Mao Zedong doesn’t tolerate freedom of thought.”

“Which means if we go there, we’ll be giving a perfect excuse to your enemies to pounce on you. I can almost see the look on their faces as they dip their pens in gall to denounce you as a henchman of Mao Zedong.”

Cosmas pursed his lips reflectively. “If I say no, on the other hand, we will lose a unique opportunity. You know as well as I do that we won’t get another chance to go to China.”

“Don’t say anything yet, honey. Take your time to think about it. And eat your soup. It’s growing cold now.”

Cosmas agreed with a nod and started to sip his soup. Silence fell over the table as Sofia started to eat too. While Cosmas was enjoying the soup, images of rivers shrouded in fog, rice fields shimmering with mirror-like water, and Buddhist temples fragrant with incense rose up in front of his eyes. “I don’t need any time,” he said, after swallowing the last bite. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“So is it a yes or a no?” asked Sofia lifting her head from her plate.

“It’s a yes.” Sofia looked at him silently, her eyes questioning his. “It’s an honour to be recognized by a government, even by a totalitarian one. And I hold China in high esteem. It’s the cradle of eastern civilization. The way I see things, it’s the country as whole that is doing me this honour, and I can’t spurn it because of the person who happens to be in power right now.”

“Even if he’s a dictator?”

“Even if he is a dictator. You can’t hold the whole population of China accountable for his abuses.”

“You do realize there will be a huge backlash, don’t you?”

“I do and I am prepared to deal with it.” Cosmas saw a cloud pass over Sofia’s face. “Don’t underestimate my readers, honey,” he went on reassuringly. “They know me very well.
They have no reason to doubt the depth of my commitment to the cause of freedom. They won’t take my acceptance of the award as acceptance of the regime.”

Sofia stirred her now empty plate with her spoon. “Don’t underestimate your enemies either. They’ll try to twist the facts. They will portray you as an opportunist and a carpetbagger.”

Cosmas puffed his cheeks. “We’ve talked about that many times before. You can’t please everybody. All my life I’ve been fighting battles on different fronts. This will be one more battle. If they try to slander me, so be it. Let my enemies reveal themselves, and let my friends give their support.”

“All right honey, I’m not going to argue on this ground any more. But I have another objection, and this one is more important.”

“Let me hear it, then.”

“It’s concerning the trip. It’s very long, honey. The flight alone will take twenty-eight hours.”

“I see you’ve done your research,” said Cosmas, impressed she had the flight time at her fingertips. Now that their finances had improved, browsing through travel brochures had become one of Sofia’s favorite pastimes, but he hadn’t realized before that she knew flight times to far-flung destinations by heart.

“I…” She lowered her head as her words trailed away. “I’m concerned about your health, honey. I’m not sure you can endure such a long trip.”

“Don’t worry about me dear.” He reached across and squeezed her hand. “God is keeping watch over me.”

“God helps those who help themselves,” Sofia said gnomically, retracting her hand. “But I don’t want to talk about this any more tonight, honey. Let’s sleep on it. We can discuss it again tomorrow morning after we’ve had some rest!”

After a restful sleep, Cosmas and Sofia woke up the next morning a little later than usual. They had breakfast in the kitchen before sitting down on the sofa in the living room. Cosmas’ knee was still aching, though less acutely than the night before, but he made sure not to reveal his discomfort to Sofia. As they sat down next to each other, Cosmas noticed the book Sofia had left on the coffee table: *The Plague*.

“I see you’ve been reading Camus,” he remarked, nodding towards the book.
“I want to learn more about him,” said Sofia, picking up the book from the table.
“You’ve chosen a great book as a starting point.”
“It’s indeed a brilliant book, though a bit depressive compared to your books.”
Cosmas flashed a small smile. “Thanks for the compliment, honey.”
“It’s not a compliment. Just an objective evaluation.”
“Listen honey,” Cosmas said, a coaxing tone creeping into his voice, “I have a suggestion about the trip to China that you may find a little odd, and I’d like to discuss it with you.”
“Are you sure you want to go on that trip, honey? Don’t forget it’s a twenty-eight hour flight to go over and just as long, maybe even longer, to get back.”
“Well dear, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I know you’ll think it’s a crazy idea, but to tell you the truth I was thinking of going by boat.”
“What?” Sofia exclaimed, the book slipping from her fingers onto the blanket. “Going by boat?” she turned her head slowly towards Cosmas. “You are pulling my leg, aren’t you?”
“I’m afraid I am not actually. If I go by boat, I’ll kill two birds with one stone. I’ve always wanted to go around the world by boat. You know, circumnavigate the globe like the great explorers of bygone times. See for myself what it feels like.”
“Yeah, but ‘the great explorers of bygone times’ as you call them made their trips hundreds of years ago! We live in 1957. You sometimes seem to forget that!”
“So much the better, then. Ships today are better and faster.”
“Are they?” Sofia said frowningly, narrowing her small eyes as the prospect of a long voyage across the seas sank in. “It’s a bizarre proposition,” she said finally. “Not the first one you’ve ever come up with, mind you. But in a strange kind of way I can see what appeals to you about it.”
“And there’s one more thing.”
“What?” Sofia exclaimed, bracing herself for the kicker.
Cosmas hesitated for a minute, searching for the right words. He had to tell Sofia enough of the truth to justify his strange scheme, but at the same time protect her from worrying about him too much. “I’m not getting any younger. This might be my last major trip. And it’s one of the things I want to do before I die. I can’t think of a more fulfilling experience before my days are ended.”
“Nonsense!” Sofia said indignantly, her face turning deadly pale. “You’re so young and vigorous. You look the picture of health. You have at least twenty years ahead of you.”

“Even so, I won’t have another chance to go to China.”

Sofia looked down at the blanket, then raised her eyes towards Cosmas again. “I hear what you say, but I don’t know that this trip is so important. And there’s also the Nobel Prize to consider. You need to be around when the decision is made. You don’t want to miss the ceremony.”

“That’s assuming I win the Nobel Prize, dear.”

“Your chances are as good as anybody else’s this year. They’re as good as Camus’s. And you don’t want to be in China when the ceremony takes place.”

“The ceremony is in December. I’ll be back by then.”

“How can you pull that off? It takes at least a month to get to China by boat, doesn’t it?”

Cosmas sat up in the bed and looked at her. “Indeed it does. But I only intend to make the outward trip by boat. No sense in returning to Europe the same way. Once I’ve made the voyage and fulfilled my desire, I can just as well catch a flight back.”

Sofia sat up too so that their heads were at the same level. “I see,” she said, curling her lips in a dry little smile. “That improves matters a little bit …” And then, as if remembering something, she added: “But what about the novel you’ve been working on? Aren’t you going to fall behind if you go on the trip?”

“Tout au contraire my dear,” Cosmas asserted, reaching out his hand to stroke her hair. “I’ll keep on working on the novel during the trip. In fact I’ll have plenty of time on my hands on board the ship. If you think about it, there’ll be nothing to do but eat, sleep, and write.”

“And watch the ocean, too,” Sofia added with a wistful smile, pulling back her head.

Cosmas nodded, bobbing his head sideways. “Well, that as well. I suppose I will be out on deck watching the ocean when I’m not writing.”

“Ha, there will be nothing else to watch anyway.”

“That’s right,” Cosmas conceded. “Except for the sky up above and maybe a few seagulls if they bother to follow the ship that far,” he added with a small laugh.

Sofia laughed too with a tiny snort and a wrinkle of her thin straight nose. A moment of silence followed. “So, is that what it is?” she asked, breaking the silence. “Have you made up your mind?”
“Yes, sooth to say my dear, I have.”
“I’m coming along then,” Sofia calmly announced.
“What?” Cosmas blurted out, his jaw dropping wide. “With all due respect, my precious,” he said crisply, bringing his face closer to his wife’s, “you have no idea of the rigors of life at sea. Spending a month on a ship is not an easy thing for a woman.”
“Is that so?” Sofia replied boldly. “I’m afraid I don’t see it that way. What’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If you can spend a month on the sea, I can do so too.”
“My little darling, that’s the heart talking. A long sea voyage is a great strain on the mind and body. And the thing is, if you change your mind, there’s no coming back to dry land. You’ll be stuck on board a floating mass of metal in the middle of the ocean.”
“I’m not a skittish little girl, Cosmas. You can’t frighten me into changing my mind. You’re wrong to think you’re gutsier than I am. I’ve never backed out of a single journey we’ve made so far, and I’m not going to start now.”
Cosmas just lay there speechless, staring at his wife’s face. “OK, remember what you just said. If you suffer a crisis of confidence in the middle of the trip, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”
“Come on honey,” Sofia said with a kindly smile as she ran her elegant long fingers through the thin bristly hair at the back of Cosmas’ head. “I’ve never suffered a crisis of confidence, have I? Now think of all the good things we can enjoy together on this trip. Think of all the luxury on board. We can walk hand in hand across the open deck and admire the vastness of the ocean. And I can take a rest from cooking and cleaning and allow the crew of the ship to pamper me for a change!”
“I didn’t know you needed a rest,” Cosmas replied, half-sardonically, half-sympathetically. “We can hire a cleaning lady to do the chores, you know.”
“Come on, Cosmas, don’t twist my words. I only meant for a short while. You know very well that I’m perfectly happy to be keeping house for us. Don’t confuse me with your first wife!”
A sudden pang of pain shot up Cosmas’ knee, reminding him he needed to rest his leg.
“OK dear,” he said pleadingly, “let’s get some sleep now. We’ll talk about China tomorrow.”
“All right, honey,” Sofia said soothingly, caressing his hair again. “I know you’re tired from the trip. I don’t want to keep you up any longer.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Good night. And don’t forget to call François tomorrow.”
“François?” Cosmas exclaimed. “You mean as in François my publisher?”
“Do you know of any other François, honey?”
“I suppose not. Why should I call him?”
“I don’t know why. He phoned while you were away and he said he wanted to talk to you. It sounded urgent.”

While Cosmas was mulling over the official visit to China, Christoforos, The Archbishop of Athens, was in Istanbul, paying an official visit to Athenagoras, the Archbishop of Constantinople and the head of the Ecumenical Patriarchate there. Christoforos was visiting the Patriarchate in his capacity as the head of the Church of Greece, ahead of Athenagoras’ recently announced visit to the Vatican to confer with Pope Paul VI. Among other things on his agenda, Christoforos had planned to sound out Athenagoras as to whether he’d sanction a move to excommunicate Eleftherakis, an outcome that would please many a member of the Holy Synod. The two archbishops officiated together during a high-profile ceremony earlier in the morning in the Church of St. George with hundreds of Orthodox Greeks in attendance. Then they had lunch together in the offices behind the church, and now they were taking a mid-afternoon walk around the grounds of the church.

It was a typical early-October Sunday afternoon in Istanbul. The sky above the two men was grey and overcast. The trees scattered around the grounds of the church had shed their leaves and now stood bare against the background of the sullen autumn sky, while the soil underfoot was thickly carpeted with crisp, russet foliage.

Christoforos bluntly asked Athenagoras what the agenda of his visit to the Vatican was. Athenagoras was aware of Christoforos’ opposition to his views, but he nevertheless told him the truth: he would discuss the prospect of bringing the Catholic and the Orthodox Church together and hence repair the Schism that had kept the two churches apart for almost a thousand years. Athenagoras could see Christoforos’ hackles rising as he was explaining his intentions.

Christoforos stopped walking, forcing Athenagoras to do likewise. “It was all purely their fault,” he told Athenagoras peremptorily, “that we went our separate ways a thousand years ago. Why should we seek reconciliation now after the tons of blood that has been spilled all those centuries?”
“That’s exactly the reason why, Christoforos. Our two Churches must be brought together again for the sake of all the people who’ve suffered from our split. Unity is crucial in the world we live in. We need to bury the past and join our forces in the face of all the important battles up ahead.”

The two men had been walking for quite some time and Christoforos was short of breath. “Shall we sit down over there?” he suggested, pointing to a wooden bench up ahead so as to take the weight off his feet. Athenagoras, led an ascetic lifestyle and was much fitter than his fellow clergyman, yet he wanted to accommodate his visitor, so he nodded his head, and the two men sat down on the bench right next to each other.

Now would be the right time to mention Eleftherakis. But first he needed to find out what Athenagoras intended to do in the Vatican. “To be honest with you Your All-Holiness,” Christoforos said in a soft but firm tone of voice, “all of us in Athens are worried about these developments.”

“Are you?” Athenagoras wondered out loud, as if caught by surprise. “And why is that?”

“Because this rapprochement that you’re trying to reach may weaken the authority of our church and anger our people. Italians are sneaky. What they really want is to undermine our church.”

“I don’t think there is such danger. Catholic people are inspired by love of God, just as we Orthodox people are. They want unity because they know division is the work of Satan.”

“That sounds noble and idealistic, Your All-Holiness,” Christoforos said, folding his hands across his lap. “It’s perfect on paper. But in real life it falls apart. Our people aren’t ready for a union with the Catholic Church. Don’t forget we fought against the Italians in the war. Our flock will see this move as a ruse they contrived to conquer us.”

Athenagoras stood up from the bench, strode over to an olive tree nearby, cut off a branch and returned to the bench. “Dearest Christoforos,” he said, holding the branch of olive, “our people might indeed be skeptical at first, but it’s up to us to make them see the necessity of a united church. We need to reach out to them with a message of love and unity. It is our duty to be a pillar of strength for them.”

“Your All-Holiness, I think you’re too high-minded. In reality people need to belong somewhere. These ideas won’t wash with our flock, especially in Athens. And don’t forget that not everybody is capable of receiving grace. Some souls, Your All-Holiness, are sinful.”
“Everyone is a sinner except our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Maybe so, but our flock has asked for His forgiveness whereas the Catholics are stubborn and haughty people.”

“You are too mistrustful, Christoforos. Your soul is ruled by fear. You need to open up your heart to God.”

“Your All-holiness,” Christoforos said, “I’m afraid we’re divided by more than just the Sea of Galata.” As he stood up from the bench he thought ruefully of the trouble that lay ahead for the Orthodox Church and realized that he couldn’t count on Athenagoras to get Eleftherakis excommunicated. He’d have to go it alone.

Chapter Eight

Cosmas stood at the door of the restaurant that François had named as their meeting place. A vest-and-bowtie-clad waiter opened the door for him. François had already been sitting in a table near the entrance, waiting for him. He’d rung a little after nine the previous evening to ask Cosmas if he could meet him the following day. He’d sounded urgent, so Cosmas had offered to go to Nice to see him. François had suggested he should come down to Antibes himself. They’d finally agreed to meet for lunch at an upscale restaurant in the marina down at the port—one of the best haute cuisine restaurants in Antibes and François’ absolute favorite. When he’d hung up, Cosmas told Sofia about his engagement for the next day. Sofia promptly arranged to meet her friend Antigone for coffee while Cosmas would be having lunch with François.

Cosmas took the only other seat at the table opposite François. His agent looked sharp in a pinstripe suit. He’d been drinking a dry Martini, and his glass was now halfway empty. François often indulged in an aperitif before his meal, a habit that Cosmas himself had never picked up despite living in France for, what, eleven years now. François saw him looking at his glass and asked: “Can I order an aperitif for you?”

Cosmas nodded his head. “I’ll have the same as you,” he declared, thinking he’d break his rule for once.

François caught the attention of a wandering waiter and pointed to his glass, indicating one of the same. “How did the trip to Paris go?” he asked curiously.
“It went very well,” Cosmas replied eagerly, crossing his legs as he sat back in his chair. “I had two interesting meetings.”

“Hmm,” François said, finishing off his drink. “Who did you meet?”

Cosmas took out his pipe and lit it. He pulled a puff and exhaled the scented smoke. “The first person I met was Albert Camus,” he said casually, tilting his head back a little.

“Oh did you?” exclaimed François excitedly. “That’s quite something! You met your rival for the Nobel Prize this year!”

“I don’t like to think of him that way,” Cosmas protested. He thought about the conversation he had with Albert about the Nobel Prize, but said nothing. “I prefer to think of him as a co-worker. We work in the same line of business and we have the same purpose: to show people the way to salvation.”

“That sounds very noble,” François offered, “but it won’t convince the Academy to give two first prizes, you know.”

Cosmas gave a dry little smile. Just then the young waiter who’d met him at the door came over bearing his Martini on a silver tray. Cosmas took a small sip, wincing slightly at the sour taste. He then regaled François, in between puffs of his pipe, with a shortened version of his meetings with Camus and Moreau. Before he’d finished his narrative, an older waiter marched over to their table to take their order. Cosmas picked up the menu from the table. He chose a prawn cocktail for a starter and a niçoise salad with tuna fillets for the main course. François waited to hear his companion’s order, and then opted for onion soup and a gilt-head bream. François suggested a bottle of wine to complement their meal. Cosmas consented, yet couldn’t decide whether his agent’s choice of food reflected a concession to Cosmas’ frugal diet or a newly-found concern for his own less-than-perfect health.

The food arrived promptly. They dug into it, making short work of their first course.

“While you were away in Paris, lots of people called the office to ask about you,” François said as the first course was being cleared away.

Cosmas looked up from his food. “Who exactly were those people?”

“All kinds really. Journalists, reviewers, academics, other publishers, even some members of your reading public.” He thought it better not to mention an anonymous man with a foreign accent, probably Greek, whose persistent inquiries about Cosmas’ new project bordered on rudeness.
“And what were they calling in for?” pursued Cosmas.

“They want to know what you’re working on. You see, your public knows that you publish regularly, so they sense a new novel is in the pipeline and want to know what it will be all about. Makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Hmm,” Cosmas said distractedly, watching a cat perched outside the half-open backdoor of the restaurant, which was staring hungrily at the approaching waiter balancing a tray with their main course. “Let’s say, I play along with you and declare against my better judgment that it does, which obviously it doesn’t but anyway—what do you tell them?”

“We tell them what you’ve told us,” François said earnestly, raising his glass to his lips. “Which is?” prompted Cosmas.

“Which is, that you’re working on a historical novel, and it’s about a terribly important person.”

“That’s how it should be,” replied Cosmas, thinking he should save some tuna for the cat.

“But this answer doesn’t deter all the people who call. If anything, it fires up their curiosity, and many of them insist on knowing who it is you’re writing about. But we obviously can’t help them there.”

“Keep them guessing … they’ll soon find out.”

François didn’t reply. The waiter set their dishes in front of them. Cosmas tucked his napkin round his neck. The waiter bent low over François’ fish and with deft practiced movements removed the backbone, leaving the white flesh sitting on the plate in two equal halves. François squeezed some lemon over his fish. Cosmas tucked into his salad. François looked on with a troubled expression on his face. Cosmas caught that look.

“What is it François?”

“Cosmas, isn’t it time we had a chat about the subject of your new book?”

“Françoise, with all the love that I have for you, I’m not inclined to discuss work in progress. Please respect my principles and my need for privacy at this stage of the project.”

“Listen my good friend,” François said solemnly, “You’ve always kept a low profile, and I never got on your case about it. I do understand your need for absolute privacy till you finish the manuscript, but things are totally different now. This is an exceptional situation.”

“Is it? Cosmas asked pointedly, munching on a mouthful of veggies from his salad. “Would you care to explain just how?”
“OK, I’ll try. You know that after the success of that film all eyes are turned on you. You’ve become a kind of literary celebrity. There are several people out there who want to know every detail about your work. And I’m not talking only about your reading public. Well-known people in the literary world are asking about you. The Nobel Prize is at stake too. The Swedish academy might use information about your future plans to make a decision. They want to award the prize to someone who has further potential.”

“Then Albert is their man,” Cosmas said decisively. “He’s much younger than me and has plenty more years of great writing ahead of him.”

“You know full well I wasn’t talking about age. That’s not so important in the literary world. It’s forward momentum that counts. And Camus has nothing on you in this regard at the moment. So if we discreetly leaked the name of the important figure you’re writing the novel about, the Academy may be impressed, and the scales may tip in your favor.”

Cosmas cast a quick glance at François; then stared blankly into space for a minute. “I’m sorry but I’m not convinced,” he finally said. “Listen, I need some time to think about it. Give me a week, and I’ll get back to you.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have the luxury of time.”

“We don’t?” Cosmas queried, furrowing his wrinkled brow. “Why’s that?”

“Christophe is asking for a summary of the plot of the new novel.”

“I thought we’d talked about that. I don’t do plot summaries.”

“I’m afraid he’s adamant about that. He wants it on his desk by the beginning of next week.”

Cosmas’ normally serene face clouded over with a troubled look. “It’s the first time he’s given me an ultimatum,” he said, coming forward in his chair.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t see it that way.”

“I can’t see it any other way. The timing is suspect. Makes it seem like he has a hidden agenda.”

“I don’t think so. He’s just trying to do his job. Like I said earlier, he’s under a lot of pressure.”

“I thought this was a friendly lunch. I was under the impression we’d meet to talk about the translations.”
“It is a friendly lunch,” François asserted plaintively. “Please Cosmas, try to understand. I’m only the messenger here. OK, listen. I’m going to Paris this weekend. I’ll meet with Christophe and try to talk him into waiting for a while. And don’t worry about the translations. Take as much time as you need to check them over. There’s no rush there. Now let’s finish our lunch. Make room for a dessert too. It’s all on me.”

Sofia and Cosmas had left the house within a few minutes of each other, Cosmas to meet François for lunch, Sofia to go out with Antigone for coffee. It was a sunny day with a slight chill in the air. After meeting in Place Nationale as usual, Sofia and Antigone went off on a stroll round the shops near the square. As Sofia had expected, they chatted about the latest fashions as they flitted from shop to shop, but Antigone manifested markedly less enthusiasm for the items on display than usual. When they reached Place de Gaul, Antigone hooked her arm into Sofia’s and ushered her into a café, not the sleek one in the corner where they’d had coffee the previous time they met, but a smaller and quieter one in a side street.

They ordered tea and cakes, and then Antigone asked how Cosmas was doing.

“He’s just fine,” Sofia answered. “Did you know he’s up for the Nobel Prize this year?”

“No, I didn’t,” said Antigone. A smile spread over her handsome face. “That’s great news. You’ll soon be the wife of a Nobel Prize winner.”

Sofia had no stomach for flattery. “How’s Jacques keeping?” she asked quickly to change the topic.

Antigone leant across and lowered her voice. “That’s what I asked you here for.”

“What is it?” Sofia stammered out, suddenly concerned about her friend’s husband. “Is he not feeling well or something?”

“Oh no, he’s fine.”

“Good! You gave me a scare for a second. What about him then?” Sofia asked curiously.

Just then the waiter brought their order and with a broad smile on his face slid the cups of tea and plates of cakes in front of the two ladies. Antigone waited for him to leave before speaking again. When she did so she spoke slowly and solemnly. “I’ve met another man,” she declared enigmatically, her black round eyes gleaming with mischief.

“What do you mean?” a startled Sofia exclaimed.

“It’s not so hard to figure out. I’m seeing another man.”
“Why?” Sofia asked in a perplexed voice. “I thought you were happy in your marriage. Did Jacques do anything bad to you?”

“On the contrary! He’s always been a real gentleman. He treats me with great respect. But to be honest with you darling, I’d gotten kind of bored. I needed some excitement.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Sofia said after a moment, knitting her eyebrows in confusion. “You’ve really taken me by surprise. Anyway, who’s this new man?”

“His name is Antoine,” Antigone answered with a joyous glow on her face. “And he’s twenty years younger than me.”

“Are you kidding me?” Sofia exclaimed, raising her voice a notch.

Antigone motioned her to drop her voice. “No I’m not,” she declared, after glancing around to make sure nobody was watching. “His mother is only a couple of years older than me.” Sofia could have sworn she detected a note of gloating in her voice.

“Is that so? And how come this Antoine isn’t seeing a woman of his own age?”

“I don’t know. And frankly, I don’t care. Why is that something I should worry about?” She paused for a moment to sip at her tea. Then she said flatly: “He says he’s in love with me”

“Huh!” chuckled Sofia. “Men tend to say that to every girl they meet, don’t they?”

“That’s what I thought too at first,” Antigone countered. “But Antoine doesn’t seem to be that kind of man. He brings me flowers and tells me that he loves me every time we meet.”

“So what? Most men do that anyway.”

“That’s not all. He also cooks for me and buys me expensive gifts, though he’s a man of modest means. If he’s acting, he’s the greatest actor I’ve ever met.”

Sofia thought for a moment. “All right,” she said pensively, “let’s say that this guy Antoine means what he says. Then what? What will happen if Jacques finds out? Have you thought about that?”

Antigone wrenched her eyes away from her friend’s eyes for a moment. “I don’t care,” she said defiantly. “For the time being I’m just enjoying myself. The future can go hang.”

Sofia didn’t have the chance to respond to this remark. The waiter who’d brought their order marched over to their table and asked very politely: “is everything all right, ladies?” Sofia noticed rather disinterestedly how young and attractive he was.

“Everything’s just fine, thank you,” beamed Antigone. “What’s your name?”

“Fabien,” replied the young waiter.
“Have you been working here long?” Antigone asked him.

“Close to six months, I reckon.”

“Great. We’ll be coming more often to see you,” Antigone said boldly, as the waiter excused himself to attend to two customers beckoning to him from a table across the room.

“Isn’t he cute?” Antigone asked Sofia when the waiter was out of earshot.

“To be honest with you,” Sofia replied with a slight snort of disapproval, “younger men hold no appeal for me. They look like pretty little peacocks who try to impress you with their gaudy feathers and all, but they’re totally without character.”

“My dear, you take the high moral ground. It’s nice and well to dismiss young men as frivolous and empty, but you’re forgetting a very important thing.”

“Am I? And what is that, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Antigone fixed her friend with a mischievous gaze. “Their performance in the bedroom department,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Antoine is tireless. I mean he’s a real force of nature. We meet in his place, and we get it on two or three times at least. On one occasion we did it five times!” she said, spreading the five fingers of her left hand.

“Oh my!” Sofia exclaimed somewhat snidely. “I didn’t know you were so keen on it.”

“I didn’t know it either until it happened to me,” Antigone remarked.

“OK dear, I’m not here to pass moral judgments on you, and I don’t like being self-righteous. Listen, we don’t we finish our tea and go for a walk along the beach? It’s a lovely day for a walk.”

When Sofia returned home, she found Cosmas sitting on the sofa in the living room, listening to Brahms’ String Quartet No 2 with his head hanging back and his eyes closed. Cosmas opened his eyes slowly and flashed Sofia a warm smile. Smiling back, Sofia walked over to him with short, quick steps and kissed him on the cheeks.

“What have you been listening?”

“Something gentle and dreamy, to brighten my mood a little bit.”
“Can I bring you out of your reverie for a minute?” asked Sofia, wondering what went on between her husband and François to ruin his mood. “I brought this for you,” she said, taking a newspaper out of her bag as the airy strains of the stringed instruments rippled in the air.

“Is there anything about me?” asked Cosmas.

“No, but I read on the title page that they carry a letter by Camus, and I thought you’d like to read it.”

“A letter by Camus?” exclaimed Cosmas curiously. “What about?”

“Well, I sat on a bench before coming back and I read it. It’s about the railroad strike.”

“What does it say?”

“Why don’t you read it yourself while I make you a cup of tea?”

“All right, but can you first turn off the stereo, please?”

Sofia went to the corner of the room to do Cosmas’ bidding while Cosmas found Camus’ letter in the paper and started reading it.

With great dismay I have been witnessing the public reaction to the railroad strike that was proclaimed four days ago by the rail union. The newspapers and the radio have chosen to emphasize the inconvenience experienced by the general public as many journeys were canceled and passengers were left stranded at train stations. It is really unfortunate that passengers have suffered disruption to their travel plans, and we all understand that these people were planning on going somewhere. And yet, foregrounding the inconvenience caused by the strike, no matter how severe it is, takes away the focus from the strikers themselves and their just cause. The public must understand that railway employees are not striking because they are contrary and perverse, getting a kick out of plunging travellers into turmoil, as a significant portion of the press make them out to be.

In fact, railway workers have a very good reason to strike. Their demands are just and reasonable. Their pay is slightly below above the national average salary, which is not in the least commensurate with their contribution to our society if we bear in mind that most of them work day and night in difficult conditions to make sure we can all reach our destinations safely and punctually. What’s more, most of them have highly irregular working hours, toiling away at times when most of us are at home relaxing or asleep. Many of them lay their lives on the line to repair damaged rolling stock and make sure trains run as scheduled. Unfortunately, it is only at times like this when the whole country depends on them that people sense how vital the job they do is for us all. It stands to reason, then, that they should be paid accordingly and that their working hours should be reduced to offset the erratic nature of their schedule.
But the railway strike is not about money. It’s about respect. In a society like ours, which paradoxically holds in high regard only its least productive members—bureaucrats, politicians, investors; all those whose hands never get soiled; all those who have infinite amounts of leisure time on their hands—its most useful members are unfortunately given short shrift. It is only natural, then, that railroad workers feel unappreciated by the government and our society in general. By meeting their just demands—raising their salary by twenty percent and reducing their working hours by ten percent—the government will correct a grievous injustice and offer them a token of our gratitude for the invaluable service they offer to our society.

In this effort, railway workers must not be left alone. We must all be on their side. This has not been the case up until now. Several members of the general public have put the blame on the railroad staff for the strike. I was myself at a train station on the first day of the strike and witnessed at first hand this kind of behavior as a number of affected passengers complained most virulently about the cancellation of their journey, accusing the staff of lack of consideration for their needs. According to their way of thinking, the nuisance would have been avoided if railway employees had not gone on strike. This approach to the issue of the strike is perniciously selfish and threatens to have a knock-on effect on social life as a whole. Our society will degenerate into individualism and isolation with dire consequences for our way of life, if we wind up only caring about ourselves. We must all understand how intimately intertwined our lives are. The fate of one of us directly affects the fate of all the others. Thinking of other people as our brothers and sisters, not our enemies, is in our own best interests as it benefits society as a whole.

The danger of losing our sense of community is very real nowadays. We are becoming a society where everybody thinks of his own self-interest to the exclusion of the interests of all the others. We must resist this tendency with every fiber of our beings. It is imperative that at this juncture we all show our solidarity for the striking railroad personnel. We need to join our forces in a common fight for social justice and equality. Railway workers labour tirelessly in a calling that is absolutely essential for our society. Let us all show our support for them by applauding their just cause and cooperating with the strikers. United we stand, divided we fall.

Albert Camus

Cosmas lifted his head. He heard Sofia’s footsteps from the kitchen.

“Have you read it?” asked Sofia as she lowered the tea onto the coffee table.

Cosmas nodded his head, his face flushed with admiration.

“It’s very moving, isn’t it?”

“It is. The points he makes are right on target. But beyond that, it shows his greatness. He pulled strings to buy me a first-class ticket, going out of his way to accommodate me as if I
deserved special privileges, while he’d been thinking all the time about the plight of the railway workers. It’s now clear that he pushed his principles aside for my sake.”

“That shows how highly he regards you,” Sofia said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“I regard him highly too. And he’s dead right about selfishness. When I heard my train was not leaving I thought only about the trouble it would cause me.”

“That’s natural, my love,” Sofia said with a tender smile. “Don’t blame yourself. Anyone in your place would have done the same thing.”

“But I have a duty to my readers to promote altruistic behavior. I’m afraid I failed them in this case.”

“Nonsense! You didn’t fail anyone. No one knows about it anyway.”

“Except me and Camus.”

“Except you and Camus. Anyway, let me put the music back on. I’d like to listen to it too.”

Two days later, as twilight was falling, Cosmas stood on the balcony of his house and surveyed the view. His eye wandered out over the savage lion-headed waves surging towards the shore before he turned around to take in the indomitable eagle-shaped mountains peaking towards the sky. It was as if he was looking for the missing trail that would crisscross all the different paths of his life. Seconds earlier he’d left the manuscript of *A Night with the Santouri* on his desk with only two pages to go. He’d started reading it the evening after he’d had lunch with François and was now keen to finish it so he could turn his attention to the arrangements for the trip to China. As he lost himself in contemplation of the scenery, he conjured up the time when he stood out on the terrace of his seafront house in Heraclion at roughly the same hour as now and gazed out at the deep blue Aegean Sea, as if trying to read its inscrutable intentions. It was right after he’d learned the news of Alexakis’ death.

Alexakis’ figure appeared in front of his eyes. He was a remarkable man, not resembling anyone else he’d ever met before or after. He had a freshness of vision as if the world was newly created for him every morning; at the same time he gave the impression that life was constantly improving with each passing minute so that each day was more glorious than the previous one. He had a strong sturdy body, but his brawn and muscle were mere trifles compared to the strength of his soul, an indomitable soul that made him look ageless despite the ravages wrought
on his body by the passage of time. Yet, above all else, Cosmas now heard Alexakis’ laughter again, a gruff husky laughter that rang across the skies and startled the devil himself—an impregnable defense against all the uncertainties and insecurities the ego is afflicted with.

It was this laughter that plunged him into a memory of Alexakis’ superhuman dance. He always gave this blood-curdling laugh as a prelude to flouncing himself onto the thick sand on the water’s edge and starting to prance across it like a wild goat in heat. His small bird-like eyes shone like the eyes of a madman as he stamped his bare feet on the water with careless abandon, bespattering anyone near him with water and sand as he performed his savage trance-like dance. It was a swooning dance that transported him and anyone who witnessed it to another world, an ecstatic world of Dionysian delights beyond the reach of modern man, burdened as the latter was with petty worries.

In many ways, he reflected, A Night with the Santouri was a special novel, unlike any other he’d ever written, even Free to Die. In Free to Die he had idealized his father, pretty much like his ancestors, the ancient Greeks, had chiseled ordinary human form into idealized statues of transcendent beauty. In A Night with the Santouri he’d made use of the God-like qualities of a novelist, immortalizing his dead friend by turning him into a legend. Alexakis had made a greater impression on him than any other human being. He had shown him real life, the life of sensory rather than cerebral experience, and he had dispelled his fear of death. But he had come too late to his life, when he had already and irredeemably degenerated into a pen pusher, a man of words, for whom there was no turning back to a visceral engagement with life undiluted by reflection and language.

He wandered back to his desk and closed the windows. The time had come to plunge into the last two pages, the most emotionally intense section of the entire novel. He picked up the manuscript and read.

I set out to fill the pages with Alexakis’ extraordinary life. I wrote frenziedly, seeking to bring the past back to life, stretching every sinew to recall important details of his outward appearance and way of talking. I aspired to resuscitate him exactly as he was. I felt that if he disappeared from living memory, it would be entirely my fault, and I toiled relentlessly day and night to draw as full a picture as possible of my old friend.

The translation here was pitch-perfect. It was, of course, nearly impossible for the translator to go wrong in this particular novel as he’d steered clear of ornate turns of phrases,
using plain language instead, something he should have done in his other novels too. He didn’t want to erect a wall between his friend and the words that would revive him, so he chose the simplest possible words to describe him. And the good thing was that the translated manuscript reflected this approach to the full. The language, both the original Greek and the translated French, had retreated into the background, allowing real life itself to blaze across the pages.

Proud of himself and the translator, he skipped ahead to the next paragraph.

_In a few weeks my chronicle of Alexakis was complete. On the last day I was sitting on the terrace in the late afternoon, gazing at the sea. I was clutching the finished manuscript on my lap like a mother dandling her new-born baby. I was positively thrilled to have accomplished this mission, absolutely critical for my spiritual recovery. As I turned my eyes away from the sea to look down at the manuscript again, I felt ineffably relieved, as though a crippling burden had been lifted from me._

His mind went back to the actual letter he had received whilst residing in his house by the sea in Heraclion. He’d sensed the contents right away, but chose to leave it unopened on his desk. He went about his daily business, trying to ignore it. At dusk, though, when the sky assumed the colours of the twilight zone between day and night, he chided himself for not honouring his appointment with death. He opened the letter calmly and braced himself to read the news. It was the local schoolmaster who had been entrusted with the unenviable task, writing on behalf of the deceased’s wife, Lyuba. He put the letter down and took it all in. Alexakis didn’t exist any more. The laughter had been choked off, the song had been silenced, the santouri had been broken, the dance on the sand had been stilled. The mouth that had kissed so many breasts had now been filled with clay, the restless grasping hand would never again caress a woman’s private parts, touch warm bread, or feel the zing of cool winter water.

At first he had been overwhelmed with an overpowering sense of injustice. It was acceptable for so many other gutless, spineless creatures to die. In many cases it was just too, for they never appreciated the gift of life, never lived it to the full, and hence their extinction hadn’t been much of a loss to the universe. But Alexakis had received this gift gracefully, nurtured it with care, and raised it to a form of fine art. And now that he was dead, who knew how many years humanity would have to wait before someone like him was born again to ennoble its existence.

Absurd though it had seemed, he had never expected Alexakis to die. He’d hoped that the grim reaper would make an exception in his case. The old devil would find a laugh, or a dance,
or a manoeuvre to trip up the dark horseman and escape his cold clutches at the last moment. It was at that moment that Cosmas was visited by divine afflatus. Screw the grim reaper! His triumph was only temporary. For he himself, Cosmas Eleftherakis, would foil his intentions. He’d come to the rescue of his friend: making the most of his wordsmithery, he’d save him from being eradicated from the memory of future generations, the natural consequence of death for the vast majority of people.

He suddenly rose up from the sofa where he’d been sitting while thinking all that. Yes, he shouted, yes, he roared, yes, he growled from the bottom of his bowels: the dead can still dance. The art form he’d mastered, that of writing novels, could be turned to that use—making the dead dance—if its practitioners were so disposed. And that was the impulse that had seeded the idea for the novel that would eventually bring him international recognition. For early the next morning he woke up and put pen to paper. Swiftly and unstoppably he wrote, as if his hand had been guided by Alexakis himself, who wished himself thus resurrected.

And he’d chosen to write in the first person. He normally wrote in the third person to achieve some distance from the characters and gain more freedom to build them up as he liked. That had also been the case with Free To Die. In this novel, though, he set out to express his own personal feelings, not those of a fictional narrator at one remove from his true self, and he didn’t want anything to come in between his feelings and their form on paper. A Night with the Santouri had ended up being his most visceral novel, the one his readers identified with the most. And he had also eliminated the barrier of the language with his readers, who of course couldn’t read his novels in Greek. There were a few passages of lyrical overflow, mainly descriptions of the landscape and the weather, but the dialogues between Alexakis and the narrator—himself—as well as the description of the action was direct and unvarnished.

He picked up the manuscript again and read the last page—his fictionalization of Alexakis’ last wishes and his dying minutes as reported by the sender of the actual letter.

“Come here, schoolmaster,” he said. “I have a friend in Greece. When I am dead write to him and tell him that right until the very last minute I was in full possession of my senses and was thinking of him. And tell him that whatever I have done, I have no regrets. Tell him I hope he is well and that it’s about time he showed a bit of sense.
“Listen, just another minute. If some priest or other comes to take my confession and give me the sacrament, tell him to clear out, quick, and leave me his curse instead! I’ve done heaps and heaps of things in my life, but I still did not do enough. Men like me ought to live a thousand years. Good night!”

These were his last words. He then sat up in his bed, threw back the sheets and tried to get up. We ran to prevent him—Lyuba, his wife, and I, along with several sturdy neighbours. But he brushed us all roughly aside, jumped out of bed and went to the window. There, he gripped the frame, looked out far into the mountains, opened wide his eyes and began to laugh, then to whinny like a horse. It was thus, standing, with his nails dug into the window-frame, that death came to him.

His wife Lyuba asked me to write to you and send her respects. The deceased often talked about you, she says, and left instructions that a santouri of his should be given to you after his death to help you to remember him.

Cosmas thought of his own impending death as a line by Dylan Thomas sprang to mind. Would he rage against the dying of the light as his friend had or would he die peacefully? A frisson of resentment shot through his frame. He ought to have been given ten more years to live. He wanted to write three more novels, and he’d already worked out a rough outline of their plots in his mind. Three more brainchildren of his, three potential masterpieces, which would never be born. Once again he thought of the injustice of it all. People who had no contribution to make to anyone often lived a sheep-like existence till they were eighty or ninety years old. Others who had things to give made an early exit, their potential never fulfilled, their gift never reaching the hands of their intended beneficiaries. Death wasn’t only the great leveller of status but, most tragically of all, also of ability.

He’d spilled lots of ink on the concept and function of death in his philosophy book Spiritual Exercises. He’d made some witty remarks often quoted these days such as the one with which the book opened: “We come out of the abyss and we return to the abyss. The time in between we call life.” It had seemed so clever and witty back then when the prospect of death was theoretical. But now he was faced with the reality of his own death, the finality of his own death. The thought made him wince with horror.

But no, he thought now, recovering his composure: facing the final end with resentment and regret was no way to go. It wasn’t the Cretan way. Unlike his father and grandfather, he hadn’t fought in any wars, but now he had his chance to prove himself worthy of them by facing his own death bravely and calmly. After all, he’d lived the life he deserved, and even if he died
tomorrow morning, the legacy he’d leave—at least four great works of writing—couldn’t be sneezed at. But he still hadn’t shot his bolt: the novel he’d been working on and which was now nearing completion. It was his chance to change popular perception of Jesus Christ and revive His now dying message, pretty much the way he’d done with Alexakis. But this time the stakes were much higher. And he couldn’t let Him down.

Chapter Nine

Early the next morning Cosmas went to the post office and posted the annotated manuscripts of the translated novels to François. He then stopped by the travel agency and finalized the arrangements for the trip to China. The agency contacted the Hamburg-Amerika line steamship offices in Marseilles and procured the one-way trip tickets for Cosmas and Sofia. A week from today, he and Sofia would be boarding the MS Marco Polo from Marseilles. The ocean-going liner, whose voyage had already started in Hamburg, would call at the ports of Genoa, Port Said, Colombo, Straits, Manila, Hong Kong, before arriving in Shanghai five weeks after Cosmas and Sofia had come aboard.

After coming home and breaking the news to Sofia, Cosmas started to take care of some unfinished business. His foremost priority was to give Pierre, his publisher, a heads-up about the content of the novel. His forthcoming visit to China and especially the projected meeting with President Mao himself had spurred him to confront him and put an end to this cat-and-mouse game. If Pierre voiced any objections to his premise for the novel, he’d veto them outright: he’d never allow anyone to compromise his artistic integrity. He got on the phone to François and asked him to arrange a meeting with Pierre before the end of the week. François offered to do so at once. Half an hour later, he’d called him back and told him Pierre would be meeting him the next afternoon in their local office over in Nice. “Do you want me to come along too?” François asked before ending his call.

“There’s no need,” Cosmas said firmly. “I’ll sort everything out myself.”

“Can we meet for coffee afterwards at least? I’d like to see you before you leave for China.”

“Sure. Let’s meet at the Castel Beach Café as usual.”
“Four o’clock?”
“Sounds good. I should be done by then.”

The publisher’s local office was housed in an old building in the centre of Nice only a few blocks behind the waterfront. Cosmas walked in dressed in the black suit he invariably wore to his interviews. A young secretary in a pencil skirt and high heels got up from her desk in the lobby and greeted him. She led him up a rickety wooden staircase to the meeting room on the first floor, where Pierre, a short solid man in his late fifties wearing a navy blue suit, and another man, also besuited, were waiting for him. They were sitting on opposite ends of a leather sofa behind a glass-topped wooden coffee table. The unknown man looked much younger than Pierre. He was clutching a mug filled to the brim with steaming coffee, which he left on the table when Cosmas walked in. Though it was early afternoon, all the lights were on, as the squat building was dwarfed by much taller ones that surrounded it, and the two small windows didn’t let in the sunlight.

Pierre rose up and shook hands with Cosmas. “Awfully glad to see you again,” he gushed to Cosmas, taking him gently by the elbow and guiding him to where the younger man was sitting. “I don’t think you’ve met Daniel, have you?”

“No, I haven’t,” said Cosmas.

“I am the new Chief Editor for South France,” said Daniel eagerly, stretching out his hand as he stood up from the sofa.

“Can we offer you some coffee?” asked Pierre, his bald head shining under the bright ceiling light as he pointed to a sideboard by the wall. A coffeepot sitting on a silver tray was perched on it.

Cosmas politely declined. He’d already had his daily dose of caffeine in the train on the way over. Besides, he was eager to come to the point of the meeting and wanted the pleasantries out of the way as soon as possible. Pierre gestured Cosmas to an armchair before helping himself to some coffee from the sideboard and wandering back to his spot on the sofa.

Pierre spoke first after taking a couple of sips from his mug: “We’ll come to the point, Cosmas. None of us has time to waste. We’re all very pleased with your work to date. Your books have received very good reviews, and they’re also commercially successful. A Night with
the Santouri has just gone into a sixth edition, and Free to Die will soon go into a fifth edition. Needless to say, we’re proud to be your publishers.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” Cosmas said with an inward glow. He hesitated for a second, then added: “I hope my new book will live up to your expectations.”

“We should hope so too,” said Pierre with a broad smile. “In fact, we want to launch the advertising campaign for your new book well ahead of time. We’re now preparing our brochure for the next year, and we would like to include it in the list of upcoming books.”

“And there’s also the Nobel Prize to consider,” added Daniel enthusiastically. “If you win it this year, there will be a whole new level of global interest in your work.”

“Well, let the best man get it,” Cosmas said casually, thinking the topic was beginning to grow stale.

“That’s a really fine sentiment,” replied Pierre. “But the truth of the matter is some of our people in Paris are quite thick with senior members of the Swedish academy. A discreet word in the right ear might sway the academy in your favor.”

“That’s right,” Daniel chimed in. “We can put in a good word on your behalf.”

“I appreciate your good intentions,” Cosmas replied, trying to conceal his irritation, “but to be honest with you I came here on the understanding we would talk about my new novel.”

“That’s quite right,” said Pierre, fixing Cosmas with a curious stare. “If you don’t mind, we’d like to know a few things about it.”

“Well,” said Cosmas, “what would you like to know?”

“To begin with, can you tell us what the subject is?” Daniel said.

Cosmas drew a deep breath. “With pleasure,” he said decisively, glancing from one of them to the other. “It’s about the life of Jesus Christ,” he announced calmly to the two men, his hands resting squarely on the arms of the armchair.

“Jesus Christ?” Pierre exclaimed, after casting a quick glance at Daniel. “What do you mean? I thought you were writing a novel.”

“Is it a philosophy book?” Daniel chimed in, his voice calm and composed. “Something like Spiritual Exercises?”

“Oh no, not at all,” answered Cosmas. “It’s a historical novel.”

“A historical novel about Jesus Christ?” Pierre exclaimed, his thin pale mouth twisted into an expression of puzzlement.
“Pretty much like his book on Francis of Assisi is what he probably means,” explained Daniel, turning to face his colleague.

“Not really,” asserted Cosmas. “This book is quite different from the novel I wrote about Francis of Assisi.”

“Hmm! In what sense?” asked Daniel.

“Saint Francis of Assisi was just as much about me as it was about Saint Francis himself. It was based on one of my trips to Italy, and I was trying to convey the effect Saint Francis had on me while I was there. But this novel is nothing to do with my personal experience. It’s an objective, third-person account of the life of Jesus. I don’t figure as a character anywhere in the novel.”

A worried look had crept into Pierre’s face. “Cosmas,” he said in a somewhat faltering voice, “if you don’t mind my asking, what aspect of Jesus Christ is this … new novel of yours all about?”

“It’s mainly about his inner conflict and the suffering he went through during the last year of his life, but I also use backstory to portray his relationship with his mother and Mary Magdalene.”

“That sounds fairly interesting,” Daniel put in. “But there’s so much that has been written about Jesus Christ. Do we really need another book about him?”

Cosmas wavered for a second. Now was the time to fish or cut bait. “This isn’t just one more book about Jesus Christ,” he said decisively. “I don’t want to blow my own trumpet, but in my novel I take a radically different approach to the life of Jesus than the Bible.”

“What do you mean?” Pierre asked with a grimace of bemused worry. “How exactly is your approach different from all the others?”

“Well, it’s different because it emphasizes the human dimension of Jesus. You see, I show him as an ordinary man with flaws and weaknesses like those of any other human being. In fact, he’s no-one special until the moment he discovers he’s been chosen to redeem humanity.”

Pierre’s face had now taken on a positively ashen hue. “That’s bound to be perceived as blasphemy,” he blustered, doing a slow burn.

“No, I don’t think it is,” Daniel suddenly said, surprising his colleague. “The Bible explicitly states that Jesus had both a divine and a human nature and that he wrestled with real temptation just as much as we do.”
Pierre picked up his mug and tipped back a large mouthful of coffee.

“That’s quite right,” Cosmas said with relief, turning towards Daniel. “And in my version he’s not just tempted, he actually transgresses God’s law, for before he receives divine grace he’s as much of a sinner as any other human being.”

The two men exchanged another bewildered glance. “Did we hear you right?” Daniel exclaimed. “Did you say Jesus was a sinner? Cosmas, are you losing your senses or what? I hope you don’t really mean to show in your book what we just heard. Listen, if you portray Jesus as a sinner, as you claim you will, your book will provoke a storm of protest. Our offices will be flooded with complaints.”

“I’m afraid I don’t share your concerns. And I mean every single word I say. In my novel Jesus starts out as a sinner. But he repents and finally attains divine grace, and that’s largely because of his profession.” Cosmas paused for a second. Pierre and Daniel exchanged a puzzled glance. “You see,” he continued, “in my novel Jesus is not a fisherman.”

“And what is he?” asked Daniel. Pierre was watching eagerly.

“He’s a cross maker. He makes crosses for the Romans that they then use to crucify the Jews.”

Pierre’s hand suddenly jerked awkwardly, spilling coffee down his white shirt.

“I’ll call the secretary to clean it,” said Daniel, rising to his feet.

“No, I’m fine,” said Pierre, waving his colleague aside. “I’ll take care of this later,” he added, setting his mug on the table.

Daniel turned to Cosmas. “If he’s a cross maker building crosses for the Romans, then he’s an enemy of the Jews, which actually makes him a traitor,” he reasoned.

“Look, Cosmas,” said Pierre in a calmer but also colder voice, “I’m not a very religious man myself, but turning Jesus into a cross-maker and a traitor goes way too far.”

“I agree,” said Daniel. “The church will accuse you of blasphemy, and may I say, rightly so, and the scandal that will break out is going to play right into the hands of your detractors.”

It was Pierre who went on the attack now. “You know that ever since Free to Die came out, the Orthodox Church has had it in for you. If the kind of novel gets published, the Catholic Church will certainly turn against you too. You’ll become persona non grata for Christian fundamentalists and not only them. Are you sure …”
“Wait a minute Pierre,” Daniel cut him off. “Let’s hear him out. Cosmas, can you tell us what else happens in the book? Does it follow the story of the Bible all the way to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection?”

“Yes, it does, and more or less faithfully. But there’s an unexpected twist at the end.”

“What kind of twist?” asked Daniel.

“While Jesus is slowly dying on the cross, he has a vision, which is halfway between a dream and reality.”

“Can you describe this vision?” asked Daniel.

“Sure. The Devil appears to him disguised as his guardian angel and offers him a way to save himself.”

“What?” asked Pierre. “Cosmas, I’m afraid you lost me here.”

“It’s simple. The Devil appears in front of his eyes and offers him the option of a happy domestic life as the husband of Mary Magdalene. Jesus then sees as part of this vision a sequence of events leading all the way to his death as an ordinary human being in advanced old age. Mary Magdalene dies while expecting his baby. Then he marries another woman called Martha and fathers two children by her.”

Pierre’s jaw went slack. “Cosmas, have you taken leave of your senses? What is all this nonsense?”

“Enough is enough, Pierre” Cosmas cut him off. “I don’t care what you or the church thinks. I’m a free spirit, and I’m not accountable to any priests, Catholic or Orthodox, literary critics, agents or publishers. I am accountable only to the reading public. They, and only they, will judge the merit of my work. You asked me what the book is all about, and I told you. Now that you know, you can go ahead and prepare your brochure.”

Pierre and Daniel exchanged another knowing look. “No, I’m afraid that’s not where things stand at the moment in light of what you’ve just told us,” said Pierre.

“Pierre is right, Cosmas,” said Daniel. “Your book may appeal to a limited number of people who think like you, but the rest of the world will hate it. If the novel you’re describing to us comes out, you’ll face a huge backlash.”

“Daniel knows what he’s talking about, Cosmas,” Pierre put in. “He’s in tune with public opinion. That’s his job actually. You have a thing for sticking your neck out. It took you years to shake off the bad name you got when you were branded as a communist sympathizer and then
you were accused of siding with the fascists. But you won’t get away with this kind of stuff this time. They will demand your head on a platter.”

“You’re second-guessing the public,” said Cosmas, a tone of irritation creeping into his voice, “which I find patronizing.”

“Cosmas, please reconsider,” Pierre now pleaded in a more conciliatory tone. “Why don’t you write a novel about a person of our times? You’ve met so many extraordinary people in your life … you can certainly turn one of them into the main character in a novel.”

“Yeah,” seconded Daniel, “you can write a novel about another writer, like that Romanian fellow of yours … ah, I can’t remember his name right now …”

“Panait Istrati,” Pierre blurted out. “Yeah, why don’t you write a novel about him? He was quite an oddball. He’d make a great subject for a novel.”

Cosmas turned his sparkling eyes from one of them to the other. “I’ve never abandoned a project because a publisher objected to it,” he said defiantly. “There are many things I’m willing to consider, but compromising my artistic integrity isn’t one of them. And I’m just not interested in writing a novel about Panait Istrati or any one of my friends, no matter how much I love them. I got this out of my system with the novel I wrote about Alexakis.”

“Well,” announced Pierre with a sense of finality, “if you want us to publish this novel, you’ll have to make some major changes. We certainly can’t publish a novel with blasphemous content.”

“Then I’ll have to find another publisher,” Cosmas said boldly.

“You can’t do that,” said Daniel. “You’re bound to us by contract. In fact, we were reading your contract just before you came in. It states quite explicitly you’re under contractual obligation to publish your next two books with us.”

“I’m glad you’ve done your homework, gentleman. I’m very much aware of the terms of my contract. That’s why you have first refusal. When the novel’s finished, it will be yours to publish. But if you don’t want it, I’m not going to bother my head about it. I’ll simply go to the next person.”

“You can’t do that,” Pierre said angrily. “We’ll take you to court if you ignore the terms of your contract.”

“Yes I can do that, and it’s exactly what I intend to do. Gentlemen, I’m sorry to say that, but you’ve stolen my valuable time. You made me come here all the way from Antibes and you
sat me in this chair as if I was on trial. I said nothing at first, though I didn’t like your attitude from the very start, but now you’ve gone too far. I don’t owe you anything, but you owe me. My novels have enhanced the reputation of your company, and yet you have no faith in me.”

“Please Cosmas,” said Pierre, now trying to appease him, “do try to understand. This is a risky undertaking. We’re just trying to protect your interests.”

“No you aren’t,” said Cosmas. “You’re trying to protect your interests, which happen to be at odds with mine. I didn’t become a writer for the sake of publishers. I became a writer for the sake of the public.” Cosmas suddenly rose up. “I will publish this book even if I have to print it myself,” he said as he started towards the staircase.

“Cosmas,” Pierre cried out, “please come to your senses.”

“You’ve made me mad, gentlemen,” he shouted with a last look backwards. “This is the last you’ll see of me. Have a good afternoon.”

Five days later the phone rang in Palmas’ house at ten in the morning. The maid handed him the phone. Varnalis was on the line. Palmas was mildly surprised. He had expected to meet Varnalis later in the afternoon for their usual coffee klatch at Filion.

“Is everything all right, Costas?”

“I hope I didn’t wake you up, but I was just too excited to wait till the afternoon to tell you.”

“To tell me what?”

“I have great news. I just got a letter from our mutual friend in Paris.”

Palmas pricked up his ears. “Hmm. What does it say?”

“Let me read it to you: Dear Costas. The moment we’ve been waiting for has finally arrived. Our … Nobel Prize candidate has put his foot in it (now he will see the Nobel Prize only in pictures). When you find out what his latest novel is all about, as you inevitably will from the pages of the press any time now, you will most certainly agree with me. This novel is bound to be his undoing. When I come to Athens next week, I will come and see you to tell you all the juicy details… We now need to get our act together to maximize the impact of the outcry against his new novel at home and overseas.”

Varnalis’ reading of the letter had put roses in Palmas’ cheeks. He drew in a long breath of perfect happiness and said: “that’s fascinating news, Costas, but please don’t tell anyone yet.”
“Why? Is it a secret? Isn’t it mean of you to deprive your friends of the little joys of life?”

“Oh no my friend, I don’t want to deprive them of their joy. I want to bring them even greater happiness but only when the time is ripe. I see no point in getting anyone else involved at this stage. When we have more details, we can see how the others can contribute and draw up a plan of action.”

“All right, I won’t mention it to any of them yet.”

“Great! You’ve made my day. See you in Filio Café later on.”

Shortly after leaving the publisher’s office, Cosmas met François at Castel Beach Café. He gave him a run-down of his meeting with Pierre and Daniel (craftily glossing over the part about his contractual obligations) and asked him to find him another publisher. François was a bit unsettled at first, but he soon regained his composure. “I can see why they reacted the way they did,” François said. “The concept of your novel is indeed shocking. But as your agent, my job is to get your book published. Then let the chips fall where they may. I’ll try to land you another publisher while you’re away. It shouldn’t be that difficult. Publishing houses are clamouring to have a writer of your stature as their client.”

On the day of their departure for China, Cosmas and Sofia took the train to Marseilles, laden with luggage. They arrived there with a couple of hours to spare before embarkation. *SM Marco Polo* was a bulky tall white ship. While they were boarding, large chests of cargo were being loaded onto it. The dockside was chock-full of wares and merchandise destined for the various ports they’d stop at along the way. Their cabin was clean and functional. It had a small bathroom with a toilet and a shower, two twin beds, each one with a small nightstand next to it, and a mahogany desk with a leather chair over by the door. Cosmas took out his copy of Dante and a brand new notebook, both of which he’d kept handy in a small travel bag, and left them on his desk. This would be his working area for the next five weeks. He intended to have finished the novel by the time they arrived in Shanghai. At his age and with his experience, he no longer needed to do full drafts. He roughed out each chapter, wrote it up, revised it, and polished it before moving on to the next one, and he never went back to previous chapters.

As they sauntered through the inside decks shortly before dinner time, they realized how few passengers there were on board; even fewer of them were women. When they ran into one another, those few passengers swapped curious glances. They all wondered who else beside them
was odd enough to board a freighter boat to China. They found the dining room and sat down to a modest dinner—beef bourguignon for Sofia, fish soup and a salad with lettuce and carrots for Cosmas—which they both pronounced up to scratch. After dinner, they had a glass of wine in the bar, which was on the same floor. It had been a tiring day, but the wine helped them loosen up, and they shared ideas about activities onboard the boat. It would be a very leisurely month. They looked forward to spending long mornings promenading the deck, long afternoons sleeping in the cabin, and long evenings reading books and in Cosmas’ case writing his novel. They’d spend the time in between chitchatting to each other and to other passengers.

The ship gave three long blasts and jerked slightly forward. As if by tacit agreement, they both rose at once and headed for the outdoor deck. A handful of passengers, for the most part middle-age or elderly couples, were leaning out of the rails gazing at the slowly-retreating port. It was an image they needed to retain in their minds during the long days ahead surrounded by the vast deep-blue sea and the grey-blue sky. It had been a cloudy and rainy day, but now that its end was approaching, a blotchy yellow sun peeked through the clouds and splashed a palette of colors across the horizon. The boat edged out of the mouth of the harbor just as the sun dipped below the green-blue sea. Cosmas took Sofia in his arms, and they stood together watching the sunset as they talked about all the things they would do in China. They’d see the Great Wall and visit pagodas. They’d go to Buddhist temples and talk to the monks. They’d wander through the streets and observe the way of life of local people. They’d smell exotic spices and herbs and try both typical and recherché dishes. Sofia declared herself keen to taste the famous Beijing duck, which Cosmas had had twenty years earlier on his first visit to China, when he toured the country for a month, and now described it to her in mouth-watering detail.

As the ship left the harbor, it started to sail close to the coastline. Twilight now spread its silky veil across the rippling waters and the pensive sky. As Sofia and Cosmas lost themselves in contemplation of the violet-hued sky, they gradually ceased talking. Darkness closed in. The sharp outlines of the coastline melted away. The green and yellow fields in the distance got softer, then darker, and finally merged into an indigo blue horizon that enfolded everything. Stars studded the sky as the clouds dispersed. A cold breeze sprung up and started to chill them despite the layered clothing they had on. A flock of gulls flew overhead and started to squawk.

“Come on,” Sofia urged, prodding Cosmas gently in the ribs, “let’s nip back inside. You’ll catch your death if you stay out here longer.”
A lump came into Cosmas’ throat. Sofia meant the phrase metaphorically. She wouldn’t have used it had she known how near his death was. And she couldn’t see a tear rolling down his cheek, for his face was turned away from hers in the half darkness. “One more minute, sweetheart,” he pleaded, longing to take a last look at the scenery. The sight he beheld was heart-achingly beautiful. The vast canvas of the sky was awash with flaming pink, inky violet, and soft blue streaks no photographer could ever hope to catch or writer render in words, no matter how skilled they had become in their craft. Flocks of gulls flew gracefully overhead, from time to time spiraling down to look for prey. The deep blue sea rolled on imperturbable, singing its steady song of calm and tranquility. And it all had to go on without him. It would all vanish in the blink of an eye. For that’s how long his life felt to have lasted. It seemed like only yesterday that he’d taken the boat from Heraclion to Piraeus, embarking on his first boat trip—and this was going to be his last one.

“OK, let’s go,” he said, rising from the deck chair.

They walked along a long passageway towards their cabin. They didn’t meet anybody along the way. The ship carried very few passengers. They got into their cabin, and Cosmas took it in more closely now. It was long and narrow with two twin beds on both sides and little space between them. A walnut desk stood near the door, and a bathroom was right opposite. He opened the bathroom door. It had a toilet, a washbasin, and a shower, but it was so cramped that it was hard to move in without bumping your head or leg against some fixture. Cosmas took off his shoes and thrust them underneath the desk. Then he picked up his copy of Dante and padded to bed, while Sofia popped into the bathroom. He tucked himself into the crisp linen sheets and switched on the lamp on his bedside table. Intrigued by the imminence of his own death, he began to read the passage where Dante encounters Death in Acre.

In this fictional account, Dante slices Death in half and wields the scythe to negotiate the rest of the journey through hell back to his beloved Florence. But real life wasn’t literature. He’d tried his best and succeeded in dodging the Grim Reaper so far, but now the unconquerable foe couldn’t be thwarted any more. He closed his eyes and visualized the precise moment of his death. He wouldn’t panic or make a fuss about it like Alexakis. He would slip away so quietly that whoever happened to be standing by would hardly notice. His soul would float away towards eternity, and the part of him that wasn’t matter would serenely watch his body go limp and cold now that his soul was no longer housed there. He was born a Cretan, and he’d die like a
Cretan. He had no other option. His father and grandfather were eyeing him alertly from up above. And if not for anything else, he was grateful to his ancestors for passing on the Cretan genes that would enable him to face his death calmly and fearlessly.

But this attitude of acceptance was a game played by his mind. For his heart kept fluttering away like a skittish butterfly and didn’t want him to die. No, the nub of the problem wasn’t acceptance of death, for he had absolutely no fear of surrendering to the dark boatman. It was letting go of life that shattered his heart. He cherished life so much he wanted to live a thousand years. He wasn’t at all tired despite the pain and suffering and the indignities of old age. Sofia often told him that he had the body of a seventy-year-old man but the heart and soul of a little child. His sense of wonder at the magic of the world hadn’t been dimmed by old age. It took only a single sunset like the one he and Sofia had watched a little while ago, and all the pain went away, all the wounds were healed.

But even if he lived a thousand years, it now occurred to him, it still wouldn’t be enough. He’d never tire of life. What was a hundred years, a thousand years, or even a million years? The flap of a butterfly’s wings. An eye that opened and closed in a blink. For deep down time didn’t exist except as a concept that tyrannized humanity. How much time was a hundred years? How much time was a single moment? A hundred years was no more or no less than a series of passing moments. It would pass just as surely and irrevocably as a single moment would pass. No, time was an illusion, but life, life was a reality. Ever since the dawn of philosophy thinkers had questioned its existence, but all it took was a simple man like Alexakis to prove it once and for all. So what exactly was this thing called life? Now that he was about to lose it, he sensed fully what it was. Life was a wave of ecstasy with the intensity of a trillion orgasms, and who would want to shut off their senses and lose that sensation even if they were a thousand and one years old?

He heard the bathroom door swing open. Sofia emerged from the bathroom in her nightgown and soft slippers and padded over to her bed. “Do you have anything for me to read?” she asked him sweetly as she peeled back her blanket.

“Not unless you specify what you’re interested in.”

“Well, maybe a collection of poems. The sunset was very inspiring. Do you have any poems about nature?”
So after all the sunset had made an effect on her as well. Cosmas got up and went to the wardrobe. He browsed through his books. “I have an anthology of British Romantic poetry. You’re bound to find quite a few poems about nature.”

“Marvelous! That would do nicely.”

Cosmas came back and handed her the book. Sofia leafed through it and saw that Cosmas had earmarked several poems. She trusted his judgment, so she scanned their titles and settled on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge. Cosmas was very drowsy. He leaned across the nightstand, kissed Sofia on the cheek, and said goodnight. He switched off his lamp and closed his eyes.

Sofia watched him fall asleep while she was reading lines from the poem—and what a poem it was! She was mesmerized by the quick succession of startling images of a ship drifting off course as south winds drive it towards the Antarctic. Most of the action revolved around an enigmatic albatross, which was obviously a symbol for something else. She made a mental note to ask Cosmas what the albatross stood for and what the underlying meaning of the poem was. Cosmas started to snore lightly. She’d have to wait until the following morning before she could talk to him about the poem. She suddenly felt the bounce of the sea under her bed, and for the first time since they’d boarded the ship she became aware that the wooden beams in the cabin were rattling. She sat up in her bed in a cold sweat and was suddenly beset with doubts. This was going to be a very long trip. Had she done the right thing? Could it be the case that Cosmas was right? Would the rigors of an ocean journey eventually take a toll on her health? But no, she couldn’t allow herself to panic—that wasn’t even an option. She couldn’t have left Cosmas alone. And with Cosmas by her side, time would fly, and before she’d realized it they’d be in Shanghai. The fatigue of the journey now weighed on her eyelids. Her eyes drooped shut, and she drifted to a heavy sleep with the lamp light on.

**Chapter Ten**

When Bengt Hjelmqvist walked into the cottage-style café at the front of the Askfatshamnen Marina in Dalarö in the south of Stockholm, Hjalmar Gullberg was halfway through a glass of white wine. A paperback with a picture of a human palm on its cover was
sitting on the table next to the glass of wine. Hjalmar stood up and greeted his friend, a chunky bewhiskered man of around fifty, with a warm embrace.

“Will you drink a glass of wine with me?” asked Hjalmar, a tall and lanky man with dark deep-set eyes, gesturing towards the chair next to him.

“I’d rather not,” answered his friend, eyeing the wine with envious eyes, but not wishing to sit down in the café. “I’m raring to head out onto the sea.”

The two long-time friends had plans to go to Sandhamn, a resort island in the outer Stockholm archipelago, “OK, let’s go then,” Hjalmar exclaimed, before draining his glass and standing up to leave. He dropped two krona coins on the table.

“What were you reading?” asked Bengt.

“Oh this?” answered Hjalmar. “It’s Justine, a new novel by a British writer called Lawrence Durrell.”

“I know Durrell,” Bengt said with a smile. “Is it any good?”

“I just started it. I’ll tell you on Sunday at the club.”

The two friends walked to the edge of the wooden pier where a small white canoe was moored sideways-on tied to a wooden post. They hopped into the canoe and sat down facing each other. Hjalmar reached underneath his feet where the paddles were. He handed Bengt a paddle and kept the other one for himself.

Bengt lifted his paddle. Before he started to row away, Hjalmar gestured for him to wait. “Let me show you something,” he told him with a sly smile. He slid a plastic box out from underneath his bench seat, opened it, and took out a bottle of wine. “That’s for later on,” he announced, showing the bottle to his fellow-rower. Bengt beamed with pleasure. The two men started to row, their strokes almost in perfect sync. As they drew away from the pier, a scattering of people could be seen cycling or jogging on the towpaths along the banks of the canal. Mossy elm trees, the tips of their branches still laden with dew, hung over the canal. The feeble rays of a yolky sun filtered through the trees onto the water, dappling its surface with bronze and green glints. A number of boats were moored on either side of the canal, and the waters around them were speckled with green leaves. As the canoe edged out into the open sea, Hjalmar gave a sudden shiver. The forecast was for three degrees, but it felt much colder. The two men were wearing thin anoraks as if they didn’t mind the cold. Though the waters of the canal broadened out into the outer Archipelago, they remained perfectly placid. A newcomer might even be
tempted to take a dip, unaware of how cold the water was. But Hjalmar and Bengt were far from naïve: like most Swedes, they kept a supply of life vests on the boat for use in the unlikely event of the canoe turning turtle.

Hjalmar opened the wine while Bengt kept rowing. He took out two plastic cups from the box and poured the wine into the first cup with a steady hand. He handed the cup to Bengt and poured another one for himself. “Skål,” he toasted his fellow-rower before taking a sip. Loosened up by the wine and the gentle bob of the sea, the two academics started to talk volubly. They first swapped confidences about their family. Their children were growing up, and soon they’d be attending university. Bengt said his son was considering going to the US for college. Hjalmar arched his eyebrows in disapproval. He said he was worried that domestic universities were being undercut by growing competition from American universities. It was an insidious form of brain drain that threatened the standard of intellectual life in Sweden as well as the prestige of Swedish higher education and the vigor of the Swedish language.

Bengt didn’t like the direction the conversation was taking so he changed the topic. “The time is coming up for this year’s award,” he said, rowing with the one hand as he took a slug of his wine with the other. “We’ll be voting in a month.”

“We have a difficult choice this year,” remarked Hjalmar. “So many talented writers to choose from.”

“Quite right,” said Bengt, admiring the scenery. “There are many good writers on the longlist.” He turned his eyes back towards Hjalmar. “But most of them lack that extra something it takes to win the Nobel Prize. If you ask me, in the end it’ll be a toss-up between Camus and Eleftherakis.”

Hjalmar didn’t answer for a while. Seeing that their cups were almost empty, he picked up the wine from the box and topped them up. “Who do you think is going to get it?” he asked after taking a long swig from his cup.

“I don’t know. Both of them are outstanding writers.”

“And they both pulled themselves up against great odds.”

“Absolutely!” said Bengt, as the southernmost tip of Sandhamn poked into view up ahead. “They both fought hard against the mainstream. They’re both worth the prize, no doubt, but I think Camus has the edge this year.”
“Do you really think so?” exclaimed Hjalmar. “I don’t quite agree. Camus is a deeply philosophical writer, but so is Eleftherakis, and Eleftherakis’ questioning of authority is even more radical than Camus.’ Besides, Eleftherakis has been nominated several times. And if he doesn’t win this time, it might be too late for him.”

“He’s certainly not getting any younger,” said Bengt, as the red wooden hut on the edge of the quay came into view. “But don’t forget that his own people are against it.”

“I never understood why, to be honest with you.”

“They think he’s maligning them. Giving them a bad name. Remember the letter the Greek Writers’ Guild wrote us three years ago? They said Cretan people don’t stone innocent women as he shows them doing in his novel.”

“Yes, I remember. We’re treading a fine line here. Our mission is not to please the Greek Writers’ Guild, but to reward great literature. We can’t fall short of it. History will judge us.”

“I see your point. But don’t forget that Camus also faced opposition. Don’t you remember what Sartre called him in *Les Temps Modernes* when he learned of his nomination?”

Hjalmar nodded with a snort. “I do remember,” he said. “He called him ‘the street urchin from Algiers,’ ha!”

“Yes, and he stabbed him in the back, labeling him ‘a crypto-bourgeois individualist afraid to take sides on political issues.’”

Hjalmar gave a dry chuckle.

“Why do you think this is funny?” asked Bengt.

“Because that’s the very same accusation the Greek Writers’ Guild leveled against Eleftherakis. Don’t you remember what they said in the letter? They blamed him for fleeing the country when the civil war between the communists and the royalists broke out instead of choosing sides and staying there to fight like the rest of them.”

“Look there!” Bengt cried out, pointing towards the fast-approaching shores of Sandhamn where a flock of white swans had nested. He was growing weary of talking about writers and the Nobel Prize, and he hoped they’d steer clear of these two topics during their stroll through Strindberg garden.

“They look so blissful!” said Hjalmar wistfully, as the canoe glided past them.

“They don’t have to worry about judgments and competitions like we people do!” Bengt suggested. Hjalmar made a wry face. “Look,” Bengt said, “we still have a whole month to make
up our minds. Besides, we need to hear what the other members think too. Now why don’t we grab a bite to eat when we finish our walk through the gardens? You paid last Saturday, so this time it’ll be on me.”

“Sounds like a good idea. All this rowing has made me hungry.”

The month on SM Marco Polo passed quickly. Most of the time the ship was on open sea, and there was nothing to see save deep blue waters and cloudy skies. Everyone on board fell into sync with the rhythms of life at sea. Life slowed down to a placid and gentle pace. Every three or four days the ship stopped at a major port—Barcelona, Genoa, Port Said, Jeddah, Colombo, and Ho Chi Minh City—for a few hours to unload and be refilled with cargo. Sofia and Cosmas would go to the top deck and watch the activity around the port. Both of them availed themselves fully of the huge blocks of time they had at their disposal. Cosmas plugged away at his writing and completed the manuscript of the novel a couple of days before they arrived in Shanghai. He tucked it at the bottom of his suitcase and spent the two remaining days walking around, observing and absorbing the different areas of the ship and the other passengers as well as gazing at the sea and sky with intense awareness as if he’d never see them again. Sofia cleared a backlog of books she’d intended to read for ages and composed long letters to friends and relatives in Greece.

On arrival at the port of Shanghai a little after sundown, they were met by two officials of the Chinese government. They welcomed them politely, offering them two beautifully decorated Chinese hand fans and an assortment of rice crackers packaged in plastic wrappers. To Cosmas’ relief, their English was passable, though their pronunciation was so off at times that Cosmas had to struggle to suppress a laugh. They offered them green tea, but Cosmas and Sofia gracefully declined, pleading fatigue from the trip and the need to rest, which wasn’t entirely a lie. The officials, two slim men in their thirties clad in gray Tang suits, didn’t insist, preferring, as they naturally did, restrained guests to fussy ones. They escorted them to a clunky but comfortable Chinese car and rode them to a plush hotel near the port that would serve as the basis for their trips and visits.

Before going to bed Cosmas cast his eye over the list of places to visit the officials had handed him before they left. The first sites on the itinerary would be China’s famous waterways.
The next morning Sofia and Cosmas woke up feeling refreshed and ready for exploration. Cosmas consulted the list again before he and Sofia went down to breakfast: they’d start the day with a visit to the Shanghai museum and in the afternoon they’d go on a steamboat excursion along the Yangtze River. The two officials joined them in the lobby right after breakfast. Cosmas and Sofia had practiced their names—Wang and Zhao—the night before, but they still couldn’t get their tongues around them. Their hosts drove them to the Shanghai museum on People’s Avenue. It was a big museum mostly devoted to coins and parchments, and Cosmas secretly wished they hadn’t had to dawdle around each exhibit in every corner of the museum, though he quite liked the collection of traditional costumes on the second floor, whose splash of color provided a welcome contrast to the yellow hues of the coins and parchments.

Wang and Zhao drove them down to the tourist section of the port in mid-afternoon. The city had been cloaked in a thick gray haze when they’d come out of the hotel, but now an anemic-looking platinum sun had just appeared in the sky. Wang and Zhao parked inside the port and walked their two Western guests down a long jetty to a bulky steamboat moored near the end. Several tourists were already on board, most of them lounging in the covered area inside. Sofia and Cosmas sat on deck chairs on the sun deck, while the two officials stood up leaning against the railings.

The steamboat sailed away with the sun still high in the sky. The air was still chilly, and the timid sunrays barely warmed the skin of the few passengers on the sun deck. Cosmas and Sofia would rise from their seats from time to time to offer them to their guests, “to take the weight off their feet” as they told them, but Wang and Zhao adamantly refused. “What do you think of all this fuss they make over us?” Sofia asked her husband at one point, while Wang popped off to the canteen to fetch them a pot of green tea. Cosmas broke into a wry smile. “I think it’s over the top,” he told her, safe in the knowledge that Wang and Zhao wouldn’t understand any Greek. “I sort of like it, to tell you the truth,” Sofia said, judging by Cosmas’ smile that he secretly enjoyed it too, though he’d never admit it.

The steamboat chugged its way through the turbid river. Cosmas and Sofia sat back on their chairs and gazed out at the amazing sights. Despite its opaque gray surface, the river was teeming with marine life. At some point they saw an alligator raise its scaly head out of the water. Further down the river, they saw a giant porpoise following the boat. Where the river narrowed, they saw neat rice fields and farmers clad in plaid shirts working together in rows.
Zhao, whose English was better than his colleague’s, provided a running commentary. He explained to them that waterways such as the Yangtze River allowed trade with the huge inland of this vast country to be conducted more efficiently.

Cosmas was plunged into thought. So many people spread across this vast country, so many mouths to be fed. He wondered how China would evolve in the wake of increased contact with the Western world. For the time being President Mao didn’t allow such contact, and China was largely cut off from Western societies, but sooner or later his reign would come to an end, as all dynasties do. Change couldn’t be thwarted. Capitalism would spread to the East too, and China would fall victim to the same ills as the West: consumerism, competition, fear, and anxiety and the cynicism and bitterness attendant upon them.

“Would you like to see the life of a Chinese farmer from close up?”

Cosmas turned slowly towards Zhao. He’d been so deep in thought that he hadn’t noticed Zhao’s squatting down to address him. He cast a quick look at Sofia. Without waiting for her reply he said yes, if that was possible. It could be arranged, Zhao explained to the two guests from Greece before turning to Wang to tell him something in Chinese. Wang ran away at once, and he came back five minutes later. Yes, he said in English, the captain had agreed to stop at a rice field for a quarter of an hour. So the steamboat sailed closer and closer to the coastline, and five minutes later it anchored off by the side of a rice field terrace swarming with farmers.

Sofia, Cosmas, Zhao and Wang stepped out of the boat. They trudged along a grassy path to the first of the fields at the foot of a hill. The rice fields sloped gently up the hill all the way to its sinuous crest. They were the size of football fields, some brown and muddy, others green and lush. Rows of farmers were bent over them with straw baskets tied to their backs, planting new rice. An old thin man wearing a scarf around his neck was supervising the proceedings. Zhao and Wang traipsed straight up to the foreman, while Cosmas and Sofia tagged sprightly along. Zhao started to talk to the foreman. When Cosmas and Sofia had caught up, Zhao turned towards them.

“He says the hill is divided into layers of green rice shoot in the summer and layers of rice in the fall,” said Zhao.

“What about in the winter?” asked Cosmas, after bowing to the foreman by way of a belated greeting. Sofia did likewise, thinking that Zhao and Wang hadn’t bothered to introduce them to the foreman.
“In the winter it’s covered with layers of frost.” Zhao answered quickly, an affable smile spreading over his thin lips.

“Does he know when these terraces were built?” asked Cosmas with a quick nod towards the foreman to acknowledge his gratitude for the natural history lesson.

Zhao turned to the foreman again and asked him this question in Chinese. “He says some five-hundred and fifty years ago,” he said, translating the answer.

Sofia touched Cosmas’ elbow. “Don’t you think we should talk to some of the farmers?” she whispered gently.

“Absolutely,” agreed Cosmas. He turned to Zhao and bowed. “Thank you so much for obliging our curiosity. Now if you don’t mind we’d also appreciate the opportunity to talk to some of the farmers.”

Zhao scrunched his thin eyebrows for a minute. “Of course,” he said with a quick glance at Wang.

Wang took a step forward striking out across the fields towards a group of farmers who were taking a rest, sitting down on the ground. The other three followed close behind. As they made their way towards the resting farmers, Cosmas thought that the rice terraces resembled a dragon’s scales, while the crest of the hill looked to him like the backbone of the dragon. Maybe it was his writer’s imagination that turned it into this image. He didn’t bother to test it on Sofia. He had an idea, and rough material, for another novel: a historical novel on a Westerner coming to China to trade with local merchants and in the process becoming increasingly affected by Chinese culture until he’s finally converted to their way of life. But it was a novel that—barring an unexpected but very welcome reprieve by His Maker—would never get written.

The four visitors came closer to the clutch of farmers sprawling out on the ground. One by one the farmers stood up and bowed deferentially. Cosmas started to interview them through the good offices of the ever smiling Zhao, who was eager to interpret every word they said. Cosmas mostly wanted to know if they were happy with their life in the fields. A cascade of toppling prattle flowed out of their mouths. By and large they were, he was told by Zhao; it was the only life they knew. As the four visitors wandered from one of them to the other, the farmers invariably expressed gratitude to the land for its copious yield; a couple of them said they felt at one with it, and no amount of riches could make them go away to another part of the world.
Another farmer planting seeds nearby saw the commotion and sauntered over to the visitors. As Cosmas and Sofia swung towards him, he greeted them in English. Cosmas was thrown off. He didn’t expect to bump into an English-speaking Chinese farmer in a humble rice paddy in the back of beyond. He and Sofia shook hands with the newcomer and tactfully took him aside so that their conversation couldn’t reach the ears of the others. As Jiang, as the newcomer introduced himself, began to converse with them in fluent English, Cosmas was impressed by his polished and refined manners.

“You’re not really a farmer are you?” asked Cosmas after a while.
Jiang pouted his lips. “Well, I am, actually” he said, “after a fashion.”
“Which means you aren’t,” insisted Cosmas with a sly smile.
Jiang smiled archly and came clean. He wasn’t really a farmer. He was a student of English literature from Shanghai.

“How did you end up here then?” asked a bewildered Sofia.

The government had sent him to the rice fields as part of a training scheme whose purpose was to instill humility in university graduates.

“How long will you have to stay here?” asked Sofia.

He was in his second year. One more year, he said, and he would be returning to Shanghai. Then he would work as a teacher in a state school. And how did he feel having to work as a humble farmer amongst uneducated, illiterate peasants, Cosmas wanted to know. The humble life of a farmer was the greatest bliss that could ever be attained, Jiang told him. Though it wasn’t his destiny, and at the end of his stint he would devote himself to the instruction of his students, which was his true calling. He claimed he’d learned a lot of things from living the life of a farmer, but Cosmas was highly doubtful whether Jiang wouldn’t start to put on airs or think himself better than his fellow human beings once he’d become a school teacher. You can conduct as many social experiments you want, he thought, but you cannot change human nature.

Cosmas cast a glance over his shoulders. Wang’s leg was shaking impatiently. It was their cue to end their interview. He and Sofia bowed humbly to Jiang and wished him good luck. Grateful for the lessons they’d learned, they joined Zhao and Wang, and they all trotted back down the hill towards the boat. The rest of the cruise offered much more than just standard tourist fodder. Cosmas and Sofia leaned against the railings and linked their hands together. As they watched the descending sun turn liquid against a sky suffused with tropical colors, they had
the impression that the sun had set for the first time in the history of the world. As the steamboat drifted leisurely back towards the port of Shanghai, they sat down in their deck chairs and let their heartbeat slow down till it kept pace with the leisurely onward movement of the ship. Zhao suggested they all go inside to avoid catching a cold, which is what he and Wang eventually did, but the two Greeks preferred to stay outdoors to watch the sky fill up with stars. The evening was rounded off with complimentary dinner at a seaside restaurant on the harbourfront of Shanghai, where Sofia and Cosmas tasted the famous local trout, which Cosmas had hyped up so much that their tastebuds had already been tingling before they swallowed the first morsel. When Sofia switched off the lights in their hotel room, Cosmas fell asleep at once, having lived one of the most enjoyable days of his life.

Chapter Eleven

The highlight of the second week of Sofia’s and Cosmas’ trip to China was a visit to a state secondary school. Zhao and Wang collected the two Greeks from the hotel right after breakfast and drove them through leafy suburbs to a large concrete building in the southwest of Shanghai. As they pulled into the school yard, Cosmas’ eyes noted the unprepossessing gray façade of the building. But despite its unassuming exterior, the school, he’d been told by his hosts during the ride, was widely regarded as one of the best in Shanghai. Cosmas and Sofia received a warm welcome from the principal, who bowed deeply and shook their hand with a large smile on his face. Cosmas and Sofia followed Zhao, Wang, and the principal to a classroom on the second floor. The principal opened the door and ushered in his distinguished guest. The schoolchildren stood up at once and took a respectful bow. Their middle-aged teacher, who’d been waiting behind the door, also bowed to the two visitors, then smiled to them reverentially.

The principal introduced the two guests to the classroom. Then the teacher beckoned to Cosmas and Sofia to come to the middle and stand in front of his desk. Zhao and Wang stayed to the right close to the two guests, while the teacher and the principal took up positions to the left of the speakers, away from the door. “As you know, I come from Greece,” Cosmas told the students in English as he took the floor. “So, what do you know about Greece?” The students had meanwhile sat down at their desks. Zhao translated the question, spontaneously assuming the role of interpreter from then on. To Cosmas’ disappointment, the students, mid-teen boys and
girls in formal uniforms, knew little else beyond its position on the map and the name of its capital city. “Do you know who Homer was?” Cosmas asked now. The answer was negative once again, but this time he wasn’t disheartened. After telling them briefly about Homer, he gave them an overview of the history of ancient Greece, accentuating the role of Athens as the birthplace of philosophy and theatre, and he rounded off his talk with a description of Greece’s natural beauty. At the end of each sentence he’d pause and wait for Zhao to interpret. The length of Zhao’s statements as he rendered his English utterances into Chinese was a bit disconcerting, as they were sometimes shorter than his own sentences and sometimes longer, and he couldn’t help wondering whether Zhao was translating in good faith.

Cosmas’ speech lasted roughly twenty minutes. He improvised most of it, making impromptu adjustments as he went along to keep his audience interested. Talking to a group of adolescents was a new experience for him. Despite his solid background as a public speaker, he’d never spoken to schoolchildren before, and he had doubts about the success of this event. For unlike a number of fellow writers, who had to teach college or, more is the pity, grade school to support themselves before royalties enabled them to quit their day time job, he himself had never worked as a teacher. Also he’d never lived in the same house with children during his adult life, so he had no idea what to expect or what the whole thing would feel like. It turned out it was definitely worth his while. To his pleasant surprise, he found it refreshing to talk to people whose minds were still malleable and whose future hadn’t been written for them yet.

At the end of Cosmas’ talk, the floor was turned to the students, a few of whom—all of them males—started to ask him questions about Greece. Cosmas did his best to satisfy their curiosity. Then another male student somewhat sheepishly asked him a question about café life in Paris, which produced half giggles from his classmates. Not wanting to sound stuffy, Cosmas praised Parisian cafés as chic places where people let their hair down and enjoyed themselves, and instantly a flurry of questions about Paris ensued. Though he knew the pitfalls of misplaced idealism, Cosmas sympathized with these young people’s thirst for the bright lights of a big western city. He remembered how keen he was at their age to travel the world and suck the marrow of life. Weighing his words carefully, he told his young audience that Paris was a great city with glamorous life and vibrant entertainment, but for all its glitter and shimmer, it lacked the balanced outlook on life and the accumulated wisdom of the East. He saw Zhao and Wang break into contented smiles, but his caveat cut little ice with his student audience if their blank
look was anything to go by. Given the chance, he suspected, they’d move to a European mega-city such as Paris, London, or Berlin like a shot.

Cosmas sensed an impasse, but Wang offered a way out. He took Sofia by the arm and brought her forward closer to the students. With a gracious smile he asked them if they wanted to pose questions to her too. A woman’s viewpoint might be different from that of a man, he said. Seizing the opportunity, the girls in the class fired a barrage of questions—not unexpectedly, of a totally different kind from those posed by the boys. Assuming—mistakenly—she knew France well, they wanted to know the best shops for clothes and perfumes as well as the trendiest fashions. Sofia told them what little she knew—small boutiques were the best places to shop for clothes in France and buying a magazine such as Vogue or Cosmopolitan was the best way to stay informed about fashion—but immediately added that fashion accessories didn’t make women happier. At best they helped them make a favorable impression on other people, but this kind of impression was usually short-lived. Only the depth of your feelings and the purity of your soul made a lasting impression, she said to them. A male student shot up his hand and asked her amid giggles what she had been wearing to impress Cosmas. Sofia laughed off the question. She was dressed casually, she said, and she didn’t think her outfit was the first thing Cosmas noticed about her. Cosmas said nothing, but a nostalgic smile played on his lips. He instantly remembered the blessed day thirty-five years earlier when the mountain-climbing club of which he was a member organized a hiking tour in Parnassus. As soon as he arrived at the meeting place, his eyes fell on a slim young girl in a plain white frock—that’s what she was wearing—and was instantly captivated by her sweetness and kindness.

And it was Sofia’s warmth and kindness now that inspired the girls in the class to keep on peppering her with questions. Little by little this delicate-boned Greek girl, who also fondly remembered the time she was these girls’ age, and who secretly longed for a daughter despite knowing that Cosmas’ peripatetic lifestyle and single-minded dedication to literature didn’t allow for children in his life, started to loosen up. She now walked down the rows of desks, smiling at the young girls and stroking the back of their heads. As she came past them, several girls touched her coat or handbag, staring at them wide-eyed as if they were precious stones. Sofia never expected these run-of-the-mill items to become objects of curiosity. Touched by the girls’ spontaneity, she put her hand on her heart and took a deep bow every time they touched something she was wearing.
Sofia finished her rounds and returned to the teacher’s desk. Zhao politely indicated to his two guests that time was up. The next class would soon start. But there was one more surprise in store for the two Greeks. Several students reached into their satchels and fished out an array of presents for them. One by one, they walked up to Cosmas and Sofia and handed them the gifts: hand fans, maps of China, silver spoons and forks, small bowls, and other bric-a-brac. All of the visitors except the classroom teacher filed out of the classroom while the students stood up again and waved them goodbye.

As they were heading for the car, a lone tear came into Cosmas’ eye. Now he was “old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird,” but he too used to be a teenage boy with “pretty plumage once,” he thought poignantly to himself as he remembered the lines of Yeats’ poem inspired by a visit to a classroom in Ireland at the beginning of the century. He wished he could go back to being fourteen years old. If he could turn back time, he’d change everything. Instead of sweating his guts out on compiling a damn French Greek dictionary, which is what he did for a whole year in middle school, he’d spend half the day playing naughty games with girls and the other half gamboling in the fields with his school mates. The rough and tumble of childhood life only comes once, and for him the moment had passed on the day when his reclusive temperament had impelled him to undertake the “harmless drudgery” of amateur lexicography back on Naxos in 1897.

But as the car pulled away from the school, these thoughts receded too, and the prospect of his upcoming book filled him with contentment. A normal childhood life was for ordinary people, as most people turned out to be on the evidence of lack of achievement when their lives came to an end, but he had been assigned a different mission in this world: to join the battle of the defenders of the human soul against the dark forces that sought to coarsen and corrupt it. And the fight wasn’t over yet. There was one last combat to be fought. And it was taking place inside his mind, which was the real locus of all battles one way or the other. It was the battle that lay at the heart of the novel he was writing, seething chaotically in his brain before it was distilled into words that poured onto the page to give it shape and structure. He would allow his hero to grow to his full stature and then he would win the battle for him by finding a sympathetic publisher that would steer the novel towards its deserving readership.
A few days after Cosmas and Sofia left for China, François received a phone call from René Julliard, an old acquaintance and the editor of the Paris-based magazine *Les Temps Modernes*. René asked to see him to talk about Cosmas’ latest work. François was slightly surprised, but readily agreed. *Les Temps Modernes*, which had been founded right after the war, was Jean Paul Sartre’s brainchild, and René was Sartre’s long-time friend and collaborator. François suspected the meeting with René had something to do with the contest between Cosmas and Camus for this year’s Nobel Prize. Sartre and Camus had once been thick as thieves. But ever since the two of them fell out, Sartre had developed an intense antipathy for Camus. François understood human nature well enough to know that Sartre would have a fit if Camus won the Nobel Prize despite Sartre’s repeated assertions that the Prize meant nothing about the recipient’s real literary worth and that he himself would refuse it if it were given to him.

François met René in a café in Nice. René cut to the chase. Through one of his own people—a spy was the right word, François thought to himself—he’d heard that Cosmas had clashed with his publisher. He was naturally intrigued. He wanted to know what Cosmas was working on and why it had caused such a stir before it was even published. François hesitated for a minute but decided to come clean—he had nothing to lose anyway. He let on that Cosmas was working on a historical novel and the fuss was about its contentious subject-matter. René’s eyebrows arched with interest. “I’d be eternally in your debt if you could tell me what the novel is all about,” he said avidly. François glanced at the surrounding tables. After satisfying himself nobody was paying attention to them and making René promise his revelations would go no further, François told René what he knew. René showed no surprise to hear that the novel was about Jesus but bristled when François proceeded to describe how Pierre and Daniel had reacted upon hearing Cosmas reveal the contents of his novel to them. “These petit bourgeois scared little buggers,” blustered an outraged René. “I know what they are about! They have a secret agenda to sanitize art and censor free speech.”

“Watch your language,” François cautioned him, glancing nervously at two middle-aged men from a nearby table who were looking askance at them.

“Who cares about them?” said René, cutting a withering sideways glance at the two men, who looked away at once.

“You obviously don’t,” François said judiciously, “but the stark truth is that these people you despise call the shots in this country. And that’s why the publishing house is so reluctant to
bring out the book. They don’t want to be held responsible for offending the readers’ religious sensibilities.”

“To hell with religious sensibilities,” René thundered. “We want truth, not religious fanaticism.”

“René, will you please quieten down,” François implored. Several reproving eyes around the room were now studying them. “I of course agree with you, but don’t forget this is a nation of Catholics, and a Jesus with a sex life will infuriate them.”

“No,” René countered, but in a calmer tone of voice now, “I don’t think so my friend. This is a secular society, and anyone who doesn’t tolerate other people’s views greatly harms Catholicism. Mark my words, religion will lose further ground in the wake of this misguided crusade against progressive thinking. No sensible person will ever take religion seriously if it goes down the path of censoring free thinkers like Cosmas. But anyway, we’re here to talk about Cosmas, not religion.”

François’ eyes narrowed in wonder. “I’m listening,” he said curiously. “What do you want to tell me about Cosmas?”

“We want to publish a segment of the book before its official release.”

“Do you?” François exclaimed, intrigued by the idea.

“Absolutely. I came here to negotiate the rights with you.”

“So you did!” François said, his pale face lighting up with excitement. “Huh, I … don’t know. That sounds like a very interesting prospect, but I need to discuss it with Cosmas first.”

“I can’t imagine why he’d have any objection. He’ll get handsomely paid and get free publicity into the bargain. I’m sure you know as well as I do that having a chapter or two from the novel in our magazine will definitely boost the book when it comes out.”

“That may well be true, but I still need his permission.”

“He’s in China right now, isn’t he?”

“That’s right.”

“When will he back?”

“I think in about a month.”

René curled his lips. “That’s too late, I’m afraid. Timing is very important in this case. We have to strike now while the iron is hot. Listen, can I take a sneak peek at the novel?”
“I don’t have it, René. Only Cosmas has the manuscript. He never shows me work in progress. I only get to see the manuscript when he’s finished the final draft.”

“Wire him, then, and ask him to send you a sample chapter in the post.”

François pondered René’s suggestion for a moment. “OK, I’ll do so first thing tomorrow morning. But I can’t promise anything. Cosmas is very unpredictable.”

“Maybe so,” said René with a smile, “but he’s smart enough to know where his interests lie. Let me get the bill.”

Cosmas’ and Sofia’s round of visits continued throughout the next two weeks. Always escorted by Zhao and Wang, they were given guided tours of universities, museums, and public buildings. They met government officials as well as ordinary people, all of whom were eager to indulge their two guests’ curiosity about various aspects of life in China. Wherever they went they were pampered and fêted. Cosmas got a taste of what it felt like to be a celebrity, an experience for which, he discovered to his mild surprise, he didn’t harbour unmitigated distaste. Only two days were left before the start of their journey back home. Tomorrow Cosmas would meet President Mao and receive the State Peace Prize from his own hands. Then on Tuesday he and Sofia would catch a flight back to Nice via Singapore and Paris.

On the morning of the award ceremony Cosmas asked his wife if she wanted to join him on a visit to a Buddhist temple. Sofia agreed with alacrity. Given her husband’s affection for Buddhism, she was a little surprised Cosmas hadn’t already been to a local temple. For a moment, she thought he’d forgotten it in the hurly-burly of all their other obligations. But how could he? Spiritual Exercises, his spiritual manifesto so to speak, was an amalgam of socialist, Christian, and Buddhist principles. No, Cosmas’ visit to China wouldn’t have been complete without stopping at a Buddhist temple.

“Which one will we go to?” asked Sofia.

“The Jing’an Temple in Sheshan Hill. The guide says it’s the most peaceful and quiet Buddhist temple in Shanghai.”

“OK, I’ll ring downstairs to get us a taxi.”

Half an hour later, the taxi driver dropped them off at the foot of Sheshan Hill where a long flight of stairs led up to the temple. Sofia stood staring at the steep flight of stairs with misgiving. Negotiating these stairs would be quite a strain even for people with half their years.
“Isn’t climbing those stairs too much for you?” Sofia asked Cosmas as he was about to go up the first step.

“My little darling, I’m not made of sugar. What about you? Can you make it all the way up to the top?”

“Have I ever let you down all those years we’ve been traveling together? If you’re up to it, so am I,” she asserted tactfully, restraining herself from reminding him she was younger than him.

Sofia led the way, scrambling up the narrow steps with the grace and agility of a doe. I shouldn’t have questioned her physical fitness, Cosmas chided himself. When Sofia felt chipper, she would bound up the stairs of their house in Antibes two at a time. He kept up with her for the first hundred steps or so, but then started to run out of breath. They were now halfway through the ascent. The crest of the hill had come into full view. All of a sudden Cosmas lost his balance and banged his knee against a stone step. Sofia let out a small cry before she reached down and helped him back to his feet.

“Are you OK?” she asked anxiously.

“I’ll be fine,” Cosmas gasped out, his breathing somewhat ragged.

“Where did you hurt yourself?”

“Ah, on my knee I think.”

“Let me take a look at it,” Sofia said tenderly.

“It’s nothing, honey,” Cosmas said reassuringly despite feeling the bump on his knee swelling painfully.

“Let’s go back,” urged Sofia. “It needs to be seen by a doctor.”

“Oh no, no, let’s get on with our climb. We’re almost there.”

“You must be joking. Who cares about the temple? We need to look after your health.”

“Sofia, honey,” Cosmas pleaded with conviction in his voice, “we’re almost arrived. There’s no point in going back now. We’ll go to see a doctor when we get back to the hotel. I promise you.”

Sofia sighed, then shook her head admitting defeat. She couldn’t subdue Cosmas’ stubbornness. “Let me at least hold your arm the rest of the way,” she said, wrapping her arm around his.
Hanging on to Sofia for the remainder of the climb, Cosmas reached the main entrance to the temple. He withdrew his arm with a small smile of gratitude and took a step inside. Sofia tagged along behind him. They walked past a number of statues, heading for the main shrine. Outside the entrance a group of monks were huddled together, babbling about something in thick and fast Chinese. Cosmas bounced up to them, rehearsing the few Chinese phrases he’d memorized to help him get by on occasions like this one.

“Nǐ hǎo ma?” said Cosmas to an elderly shaven-headed monk whom he guessed to be in charge.

“Hěn gāoxìng jiàn dào nǐ!” replied the monk with a deep bow, repeating the greeting and the gesture to Sofia.

“Hěn gāoxìng jiàn dào nǐ,” Cosmas echoed, while both he and Sofia took a double bow, first towards Cosmas’ interlocutor, then towards all the other monks.

Cosmas had just about exhausted his stock of Chinese greetings. “Venerable brother,” he said to the elderly monk, switching to English, “Would it be possible for us to see the grounds of the temple?” The elderly monk stared blankly at him, saying nothing.

One of the other monks stepped out of the huddle and said something to the elderly monk in Chinese. He was young and slim and looked very alert. The elderly monk blurted out a reply. The young monk turned to Cosmas and Sofia. “Of course,” he said in fluent English, “you’re more than welcome to see the temple.”

“Thank you,” Cosmas and Sofia said at the same time.

As they strolled round the temple admiring its simple and restrained elegance, Cosmas and Sofia passed by several other monks. All of them looked well-mannered, making eye contact discreetly and unobtrusively. Cosmas would smile broadly at them, rattling off the greetings he’d learned by heart, and the monks would smile back serenely.

“These monks are such simple people,” Sofia remarked sotto voce at some point.

“Not like some of the priests we know,” Cosmas joked good-naturedly.

“Right”, agreed Sofia, “especially Catholic priests.”

“Orthodox priests aren’t any better.”

Sofia saw a bench and gestured towards it. “Let’s sit down to take the weight off our feet.”
Cosmas rested for a few seconds. Then Sofia took his hand in hers and entwined their fingers. The sense of calmness and nobility that pervaded the temple had seeped into her skin, flooding her with affection for her lifetime companion.

“I admire these monks for facing life with perfect equanimity,” Cosmas said softly.

“Theyir life is so simple,” she agreed, looking him tenderly in the eyes. “They don’t fritter it away in useless pursuits.”

“Quite the opposite! They’ve distilled the essence of life into three simple tasks. They tend the gardens, cook their food, and say their prayers.”

“And from what you’ve told me some of them compose poetry, too.”

Cosmas considered this comment for a minute. “They do,” he said, “but I wonder if rendering homage to God and nature qualifies as poetry.”

“Why not?”

“Because great poetry, and all forms of great writing for that matter, thrives on conflict, and that’s the one thing that’s totally lacking in this place.”

Once their feet felt light again, Sofia and Cosmas got up and made their way to the Grand Hall, touted in the tourist guide as the centerpiece of the temple. It was a spacious high-ceilinged room adorned with statues. Cosmas stood in front of three golden statues, each one depicting a different incarnation of Buddha. His mind was swarmed with thoughts of reincarnation. Bodies are made of mud, he’d written in Spiritual Exercises. Their fate is to rot. But according to the Buddhist faith, souls do not die: they enter other bodies, generating an endless cycle of death and rebirth. Certain thinkers among his distant ancestors, the ancient Greeks, thought so too. And now that the time was coming for his body to melt away he wondered whether his consciousness would be extinguished, returning to its starting point—the dark abyss that was death—or migrate to another body.

“It’s time to go,” Sofia reminded him. “We have to get ready for the ceremony.”

“Just one second,” he said. He took one last look at the central statue, the one of Gautama Buddha. He looked so calm and sure of himself, spurning the sound and the fury of the outside world. How different this Buddha is from the Jesus I bring to life in my novel, he wondered. For the character of Jesus was a troubled soul, just like himself. His life was fraught with ceaseless conflict, both external and internal, like the lives of most Western people. And therein lay his greatness. In the case of Buddha there was no struggle, for there was no temptation either; he had
attained the peace of death while he was still alive because he was temperamentally disposed towards it anyway. But the Jesus in his novel would have to conquer temptation as a means of saving himself and by extension all other humans. The Jesus he had created was a man who, both symbolically and metaphorically, became a God figure by finding his Godly attributes within himself. And if one man could do that, then all men and women could follow suit.

“What do you think I should wear to the ceremony?” he asked his wife as they turned their back on the statues and started to make their way towards the exit.

It was late in the evening. Most lights had gone out in the quiet street in Kifissia, a leafy suburb peopled with state-sanctioned writers, corrupt politicians, and old-money aristocrats from Greece and overseas, where Palmas lived. But the lights in his study room were still full on. The shaggy-haired author was slouched over his desk in the study room, putting the finishing touches to the speech he was scheduled to deliver at the annual meeting of the Greek Authors Society. His speech would explain the ominous threat posed to Greek literature by the widespread use of the demotic language. He was quibbling over a couple of abstruse words he intended to use, trying to decide whether they’d come across as overpedantic, when the phone rang in the living room. Palmas marked his place in the script with a fountain pen and went through to fetch it. It was the Archbishop of Athens.

“It’s been a while, your Holiness,” said Palmas.

“We’ve had a busy couple of months.”

“I know. I read about your visit to Constantinople. Well, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’ve heard you’ll deliver the keynote address at the meeting of your fellow writers.”

“That’s right, your Holiness. The lot has fallen to me this year.”

“In this case, the Holy Synod would appreciate it if you could insert a few remarks about the efforts from certain quarters to denigrate pure Greek. The Holy Synod feels in its entirety that the advocacy of demotic Greek will have pernicious effects on our language and culture. If future generations stop learning pure Greek, soon enough the Holy Bible will be little else than a load of gibberish for them, and by the way the same thing can be said about your books and the books of your fellow writers.”

“I fully share this view and so does everyone else at the Society, your Holiness. Rest assured that I will drive that point home most powerfully in my speech.”
“I’m glad to hear that. You see dear Palmas, if this advance of demotic Greek goes on unchecked, religious tracts and literary texts, including your own, mind you, that have stood as the beacons of culture and learning in our country for centuries will lose their prestige. I can’t stress strongly enough how imperative it is for all of us to join our forces to prevent this from happening.”

“On this point too, I see eye to eye with you, your Holiness. I was planning to cover these points anyway. But now that we’ve talked I’ll throw in a special reference to the support of the church for our initiative to restore the prestige of pure Greek.”

“I’m very happy, Mr. Palmas. I was sure I could count on you. Now, there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that, your Holiness?”

“It’s about Eleftherakis again. As of late, the Synod has been discussing the prospect of excommunicating him. I’m sure you realize that such a move is bound to be opposed by certain quarters of our society. That’s why we need to show a united front before we go ahead and issue the decision. To come to my point, we want the Greek Authors Society to lay the groundwork by writing a letter that denounces him.”

The receiver almost dropped out of Palmas’ hand. “By all means, your Holiness,” he exclaimed exultantly, his face all aglow with excitement. “We were planning to write such a letter anyway. We’d send it to all the newspapers, starting with The Podium.”

“I applaud your intentions, Mr. Palmas, but The Podium is not the right recipient.”

“Why, your Holiness?”

“I’m not sure you’ve read the newspapers lately, Mr. Palmas, have you? Eleftherakis is due to receive the State Peace Prize in China this Sunday.”

“Yes I know, your Holiness. I’ve been following reports of his visit in the press.”

“In that case you will certainly agree that his acceptance of this prize is a grievous blow to our nation and especially our Holy Church. Everyone knows that the Chinese are communists and atheists. Receiving a prize from the hands of Mao Zedong is tantamount to high treason.”

“My feelings too, your Holiness. That’s a disgrace for our nation. Mao Zedong is reviled worldwide as a ruthless dictator who suppresses freedom of expression. It’s the ultimate irony for Eleftherakis to be given an award by his government. He’s shot himself in the foot this time. He’s always accused us of restricting his freedom of expression, and now he himself is rubbing
shoulders with the very people he professes to despise. But I still don’t see why we shouldn’t send the letter to *The Podium* first. Its editorial board has always been entirely sympathetic to our views.”

“Of course they have. But we don’t want you to write a letter to the Greek press in the first place, that’s why.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t get your point, your Holiness. If you don’t want us to write a letter to the Greek press, who should we write it then?”

“My dear Palmas, can’t you see the obvious? Directly to the Swedish Academy, of course.”

Palmas went silent on the other end of the line.

“Write the letter in English,” the Archbishop went on. “Lefteris or Avgeris are up to the task, I’m sure about that. Tell them to denounce Eleftherakis as a narcissist and a hypocrite in the strongest possible terms. Give the first draft to a good translator and pay him handsomely to polish it up, then post the revised version to the headquarters of the Academy in Stockholm. Just make sure it bears the signatures of all the members of the Authors Society before you send it on. Palmas, are you still there?”

“I am, your Holiness. I’m just trying to absorb the implications of your proposal. Your idea is brilliant, of that there is no doubt. But don’t you think we should first send a letter to the Greek press anyway?”

“No, don’t bother with it at all. A letter addressed directly to the Academy will be a hundred times more effective.”

“As you wish, your Holiness. I will get to work contacting the members of the Society first thing in the morning. I’ll start with Lefteris and Avgeris, and see how soon they can write the letter.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Mr. Palmas. Please let me know when the final draft is ready. I’d like to read it myself and see if I can propose any amendments before you post it to the Swedish Academy.”

“I will, your Holiness. Thank you for calling. I was very glad to hear from you.”

**Chapter Twelve**
The day when Cosmas would receive the Peace Prize finally arrived. The ceremony took place in the main building of the Beijing Municipal Government. Cosmas and Sofia had flown to Beijing the previous evening and had checked into a smart hotel within walking distance of the venue. Sporting the best clothes they owned—he his crisp grey suit, she her elegant beige dress—which they’d dragged around eight thousand miles for this special occasion, they made their way to the Municipal building on foot. Although the ceremony wouldn’t officially start until an hour later, the large hall was already packed with top-ranking dignitaries and members of the Chinese intelligentsia, eager to engage him and Sofia in conversation. Most of them spoke some English, and to Cosmas’ pleasant surprise a few of them spoke French too. Cosmas found it refreshing not to need Zhao or Wang to converse with other Chinese people. As he kept mingling with all those unknown bigwigs and occasionally tossing back the odd glass of champagne carried on a tray by a passing waiter, he needed to pinch himself to make sure the whole event was indeed organized in his honor. With a bittersweet smile—he had been so certain the top accolade of his career was going to be the Nobel Prize in Sweden that he’d regularly rehearsed different versions of his acceptance speech in his mind—he realized he was living out the most important event of his life.

As these thoughts were whirling through his mind, a lanky middle-aged man came up to him and introduced himself in smooth-sounding English. It was Li Tian, his Chinese translator. They shook hands warmly and started to converse about Cosmas’ novels. Li Tian gushed about how well received they were among well-educated readers in the big cities. Li Tian had started to tell Cosmas how *A Night with the Santouri* had changed his own life too when a shorter man with a creased face and a receding hairline walked up to them to join the conversation. It was Hao Ran, one of the most famous Chinese writers of his time. Cosmas hadn’t read any of his work but was well aware of his fame. Hao Ran wrote novels about the life of farmers, pretty much like the ones he’d met in the rice field. Li Tian wandered off to leave them alone, but not before inviting Cosmas to his house for dinner the next day. Cosmas thanked him for the invitation but explained that he couldn’t come as he and Sofia were due to fly back home tomorrow evening. Declaring himself an admirer of his work and especially of the character of Alexakis, Hao Ran told Cosmas it was he who would introduce him to the audience and award him the prize.
Hao Ran was explaining to Cosmas how Alexakis was comparable to one of his own characters in a short story he was writing when a loud gong was sounded. The crowd moved close to the front. Escorted by Hao Ran, Cosmas mounted a raised podium and stood in its center. Li Tian joined them seconds later. Hao Ran picked up the microphone and gave him an impressive build-up, portraying him as a sublime poet and novelist and a tireless worker for world peace. Li Tian provided instant translation in English. Cosmas only allowed a modest smile to spread across his lips, but his heart was beating fast. This was the moment he’d spent a lifetime imagining: the moment of perfect alignment with his destiny. Here and now dream and reality had finally melded. He had overcome his humble origins—the son of a merchant in a small provincial town in Greece—and he’d turned to an internationally acclaimed writer whose work had reached the four corners of the world, including far-away China, a country out of bounds for most Western writers. What did it matter if he had to sweat and suffer for fifty-odd years to get to where he was now? The sense of fulfillment he was feeling had compensated for all that heartache and anguish in one fell swoop.

Two young women in chic yellow dresses walked up to the stage holding a small box. The big moment had come. Hao Ran scooped up the much-coveted medal from the box and held it up in front of Cosmas’ now sparkling eyes as he officially proclaimed him the recipient of the award. Cosmas gazed at it for a second: a square grey buckle framing an olive laurel against a blue background, with a round gold medal at its bottom featuring President Mao’s head. As flashbulbs started to pop, Cosmas took it in his hand, and with a courteous little bow to the audience he pressed it to his heart. Hao Ran handed him the microphone. Everyone lapsed into silence. Cosmas gave a brief speech in English. He thanked the government for the award and promised to continue to promote universal peace and understanding to the best of his ability. Peace, he said, was not a safe harbour but a tidal wave that should race across the oceans and engulf the entire world. He thought it only fitting to wrap up his speech with a tribute. None of his achievements, be they literary or humanitarian, would have been made possible without his wife’s Sofia’s unflagging support and encouragement.

He thanked the crowd and stepped down. Sofia walked up to him and kissed him on the cheeks. Cosmas picked up two glasses of champagne from a tray, handed one to Sofia, and raised his glass: “Here’s to our return trip,” he proposed. “To our return trip,” toasted Sofia. Suddenly a deadly hush fell in the room. Everyone turned towards the entrance. Cosmas and
Sofia fixed their gaze in that direction too. There he was: A round-faced man in a buttoned-up dark grey shirt, escorted by a party of suit-wearing bodyguards. Cosmas admired from afar his poise and self-assurance. Hao Ran hurried to the microphone and made an excited announcement in Chinese, which had to be: “We welcome our President, Mao Zedong!” Everyone in the room, including the two Greeks, burst into applause. A fusillade of flashbulbs went off for the second time.

The President was mobbed by his people, all of whom were trying to squeeze through the crowd that had clustered around him to shake his hand. With a delicious thrill tingling down his spine, Cosmas saw this living legend bearing down towards him and Sofia. Within seconds Mao stood right before him, a big smile across his smooth square face, waving for the crowds to part before he stretched out his meaty hand towards a momentarily awed Cosmas. “It’s an honor Mr. President,” Cosmas said eagerly as he shook Mao’s hand twice. Flashbulbs exploded in his face as the flurry of pictures that would soon be published in newspapers and magazines around the world were being snapped by the phalanx of photographers that surrounded the two men.

The reception after the ceremony lasted for a couple more hours, and when Cosmas and Sofia returned to their hotel room they fell asleep at once. Cosmas gave a press conference in the lobby of the hotel the next morning, during which he reiterated his gratitude to the Chinese government for offering him the prize and eulogized the President himself. Then he and Sofia got a taxi to the airport, where they boarded an Air France plane to Paris via Singapore and Istanbul. On the plane Cosmas mused with delight on the experience of getting the prize and meeting the President. He knew it was a semi-narcissistic feeling, but he couldn’t help feeling proud of himself and worthy of his ancestors. He’d never imagined when he was a little boy in Crete that one day he’d receive such an important award and shake the hand of the President of a mighty nation numbering hundreds of millions of people.

Two days later, and after a final train trip from Paris to Antibes that stretched their already thinly-worn endurance to its limits, Cosmas and Sofia crossed the threshold of their house and made straight for the two armchairs in the living-room. They flopped down on them like sacks of flour, feeling deeply fulfilled, albeit weighted down with accumulated fatigue. Cosmas didn’t feel much better the next day, but he attributed his lingering sense of exhaustion to the endless round of visits in China. He sat down at his desk at around ten o’clock—three
hours later than his usual time—but he had no inspiration or inclination to do any writing. He gave up and shuffled back down to the living room to exchange memories of the trip with Sofia, who had been pottering around the living room yawning all morning but had more colour in her cheeks than him. At noon François rang him. He filled him in on René’s interest in his latest book and asked him if he would grant his permission to have the final section of his novel published in Les Temps Modernes. Cosmas consented at once. Now that the manuscript was complete, it made no sense to withhold the novel from the public. His confidence bolstered by the accolades he’d received in China, he was readier than ever to face both the well-wishers and the detractors.

François came by a little before noon the next day to collect the last section of the manuscript. Cosmas handed over to him a sheaf of pages—approximately 7000 words—containing the last two chapters of the novel. In those pages, he explained to his agent, he gives a boldly imaginative non-biblical twist to the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. François put the sheaf in his briefcase, repeating to him that René was aware of the content and didn’t have any qualms about publishing the last two chapters. Before he left, François remarked how tired Cosmas looked. Cosmas nodded nonchalantly. “It’s the jet lag,” he said reassuringly. “I’ll be fine in a couple of days.”

But the fatigue wouldn’t go away, and on top of that Cosmas started to have dizzy spells that made it difficult for him to write even a short paragraph. Sofia became alarmed and asked him to go to Paris to see Jacques Benet, Cosmas’ regular doctor for the last ten years—a man who was the same age as her husband. Cosmas resisted her appeals for a week, insisting the symptoms would go away. But towards the end of the week, the dizzy spells became more intense, and Cosmas found himself unable to read even a single page from a book. Sofia ramped up the pressure until Cosmas finally gave in and allowed her to schedule an appointment with his doctor. So they took the train to Paris again and went to see Doctor Benet in his practice at the feet of Montparnasse hill. The old man examined Cosmas thoroughly. He confirmed that Cosmas’ symptoms were a cause for concern but declared himself unable to give an accurate diagnosis and referred Cosmas to a nearby clinic for a general check-up. Thus Cosmas checked into Clinique Arago, where he underwent a preliminary examination, and the doctors immediately decided to keep him for a few days. Sofia booked a room in a modest hotel near the
clinic but spent the next few days by Cosmas’ side and only went to her hotel for a few hours of rest after Cosmas himself fell into a deep sleep. The doctors performed a battery of tests, which failed to provide conclusive evidence of a particular condition. One of the doctors from the team that examined Cosmas ventured the opinion that Cosmas’ leukemia had relapsed, while another doctor said he’d come down with a severe bout of Asiatic flu.

One afternoon while Cosmas was undergoing yet another round of tests Sofia nipped out of the clinic for a while to call Antigone from a phone booth. She’d kept in regular touch with her friend while she was staying in Paris—they discussed Cosmas’ health and Antigone’s fast-developing affair with the younger man—and now she felt a sudden urge to talk to her.

Antigone picked up the receiver at once. She greeted her friend and asked her how Cosmas was getting on. As they started making small talk, Sofia thought she detected a slight tremor in her voice.

“You sound anxious, my dear” said Sofia. “Is there anything the matter?”

“Oh no, not really…Well, there’s something actually.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me love, did you read the new edition of *Les Temps Modernes*?”

Without knowing why, Sofia gave a sudden start. “No I didn’t, why?”

“They’ve published an extract from Cosmas’ new novel, that’s why.”

“I know. He’d told me about it, but we were so preoccupied with his health that we didn’t bother to check out when the magazine would appear.”

“Well, Jacques found out about it. He brought the magazine home.”

“Great!” Sofia exclaimed after a second. “That’s a spot of good news. Cosmas will be excited when he hears that the magazine is finally out.”

“Jacques isn’t so excited,” Antigone said, her voice sounding more solemn than usual. “His parish priest told him about Cosmas’ story.”

“His parish priest?” Sofia exclaimed.

“That’s right. He told him he couldn’t believe the magazine had published such rot. He said the text is full of disgusting descriptions of all sorts of filth committed by Jesus. I mean real filth like making love to two women in the same house and other nasty things. The priest was in
a state of shock. And apparently he’s not the only one. Jacques told me the story has caused quite a stir.”

For a moment there was no reply from the other end of the line.

Suddenly Sofia’s voice was heard again: “Listen, I need to get hold of the magazine at once. I’ll talk to you later.” she said and hung up without waiting for a response.

She hurried to the nearest kiosk and bought a copy of the magazine. Clutching it tightly in her palm, she rushed to the hotel, her face flushed with worry. She sat at the small dressing table in front of the mirror. Glancing at the table of contents, she noted the pages where her husband’s story was printed and flipped anxiously through the magazine till she found the beginning of the entry. She put on her glasses and started to read.

**The Vision on the Cross**

Morning had just broken. The birds in the trees on the hill had started their cheerful song. Jesus half-opened his eyes, hanging on the cross. As he was starting to remember who he was and what he was doing on the cross, a current of air swept in and suddenly an angel stood before him. He’d seen several angels in his life, but this one looked different from all the others. He had a firm and lithe body and sported soft curly fluff on his cheeks and upper lip. His eyes sparkled with cunning.

"Who are you?" Jesus asked him, his heart fluttering wildly with wonder.

"I’m your guardian angel," he answered tenderly. "God sent me to relieve you of your suffering. Men have mistreated you, and so have the heavens. You have suffered too much without deserving it. God sent me to save you. He doesn’t want you to be crucified except in a dream. So it was only in a dream that you tasted the fear and pain of crucifixion."

"Was the cross a dream?" Jesus wondered. "The nails, the pain, the darkened sun, were all of them a dream?"

"Yes, all of this was no more than a dream. Let us go now. Great joys await you. God gave me the power to allow you to taste all the pleasures you secretly ever longed for. You can now taste the intoxication of wine, the relaxation of laughter, the sweetness of a woman’s lips, the delight of your first son frolicking on your knees. Oh Jesus, you’re so lucky to be given this privilege. We angels look at the earth and sigh."

Jesus looked up. The fortress-gates of Jericho swung open and a procession of men and women riding white horses came tumbling out. "Who are all those people up there?" he asked the angel. "Where are they going?"

"They’re coming to your wedding."
Jesus turned to him bewildered. “My wedding? What do you mean?”

“This is the first earthly joy God has destined you to savour.”

Jesus’ face lit up with unexpected joy. He knew perfectly well who the bride would be. But a second later his face turned ashen again. “Wait a minute, this can’t be the kingdom of heaven that I announced to men.”

“No, of course not. This is the kingdom of the earth. You had once set your mind against the joys of the flesh. But the real kingdom of heaven can only be attained through perfect harmony between the earth and the heart.”

The angel helped Jesus down from the cross. Then he pointed to two white horses. They mounted the horses and set out to meet the royal cavalcade.

They came to a meadow and dismounted. Jesus heard an all too familiar tinkling of bracelets and necklaces. He looked towards the source of the sound and saw Mary Magdalene. She was crowned with lemon blossoms, and he could see her quivering with anticipation of their impending reunion.

He rushed forward and took her in his arms.

“Magdalene, my dearest Magdalene,” he cried, “oh how many years I’ve yearned for this moment! But why are you crying?”

“Out of sheer joy, beloved. The longing of my heart has finally been fulfilled. Come with me.”

“Lead the way.”

Jesus turned to say goodbye to the angel, but he’d already disappeared. The cavalcade was also gone.

“Who are you trying to find?” Magdalene chided. “Why do you keep looking behind you? Don’t you understand? Only we two are here. Jesus, I kiss the wounds on your feet, on your hands, on your heart. What supreme joy this is, what a sublime Passover. The whole world has been resurrected. Come! Give me your hand. Follow the woman. She knows the way.”

Overpowered by desire, Jesus took hold of her, tilted back her head, and kissed her fervently on the mouth.

The colour drained from their faces. Their knees turned to water. They lay down under a flowering lemon-tree and began to roll on the ground. She hugged him tightly, kept his body glued to hers.

“Beloved wife,” he said when his passion was spent. “I never knew the world was so beautiful or the flesh so holy. It too is a daughter of God, a sister of the soul. I now know that the pleasures of the flesh are not sinful.”

“You set out to conquer heaven and find the water of eternal life. I am that water. You have crouched down, drunk, and found peace. But why are you sighing?”
“My heart is a withered rose that revives and opens up again when placed in water. Woman is a fountain of immortal water. Now I understand. This is the road.”

“What road, dearest Jesus?”

“The road by which the mortal becomes immortal, the road by which god descends to earth in human shape. I went astray because I sought a route outside of the flesh. Woman, precious fellow-worker of God, forgive me for wronging you so. I bow and worship you, Mother of God … what shall we name the son we are going to have?”

“Hush! I hear footsteps coming near. It must be my servant.”

The young boy who was Magdalene’s servant showed up before her. His small sly eyes glinted cunningly. Magdalene jumped up and put her hand over his mouth.

“Shh! Don’t say anything!”

She turned to Jesus. “My dear husband,” she told him, “you’re tired. Get some sleep.” Tears were trickling down her face. “I have a meeting that I can’t miss. I’ll be back very soon.”

But Jesus had already closed his eyes. A sweet sleep had swept over his eyelids and temples, and he didn’t see Magdalene walk away under the lemon trees and disappear down the deserted road.

Suddenly he was jolted awake by some mysterious force. Where was she going? Why had she started to cry?

Magdalene followed her servant to another meadow a little way off. She stood in the middle of a clearing while a tumult of voices came from a ravine. She strained her ears and heard dogs barking and men climbing a cliff that led to the clearing. A vicious dog suddenly appeared in front of her, his flaming red tongue lolling out.

Suddenly God spoke through the clouds. “Prepare yourself for death, Magdalene, so that you may become immortal.”

“I don’t want to die now,” replied Magdalene, trembling. “I don’t want to become immortal. Let me continue to live this great joy I’ve tasted, and when my days on the earth are over, turn me into ashes.”

“Don’t be afraid Magdalene, and don’t resist my will.”

“Lord, I’m not afraid of death, but I have a complaint to make. Just now, for the first time, my flesh and soul are kissed by the same mouth, and must I die at this moment when at long last I’ve found the harmony and happiness that had eluded me all my life?”

“This is the perfect moment for you to die, Magdalene. Resisting is pointless. You must reconcile yourself with the idea.”
Hardly had God finished his sentence than a mob suddenly emerged from a bend in the ravine. They were wielding knives and hatchets. Their leader gave the word of command, and they all pounced on her.

“Whore,” they screamed irate. “You’ve dishonoured our race!”

A black cloud covered the sun, and the earth grew dark.

A monstrous-looking person suddenly emerged. He was a hunchback with a bald head, a huge paunch, and crooked legs.

“Who are you?” asked Magdalene.

“I’ve come to kill your lover,” he hissed. “Where are you hiding him?”

“Listen to me,” Magdalene said loudly, her heart pounding fast. “The man you’re hunting is the son of God. He was sent to earth to conquer the world with love.”

“With love?” exclaimed the hunchback. “I too want to conquer the world, but with my sword.”

“If you were to meet my master, the two of you together would truly conquer the world. He is all sweetness, and you are all fire. That’s the perfect combination. But I don’t trust you.”

She had hardly finished her reply when a large stone whistled through the air and struck her jaw.

“Brothers,” shouted the leader of the mob. “In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, strike!”

One after the other the men hurled their stones against the hapless woman, who slumped down on the ground and met her fate.

Light footsteps echoed across the meadow where Jesus lay down. He lifted his eyes and saw the angel hovering over him.

“Hello again! Your face is glowing. You must be a bearer of glad tidings.”

The angel gave a broad smile and squatted next to him. He crumpled a lemon-flower and smelt it. A soft breeze rose from the earth, and the leaves of the lemon tree rustled and danced.

“How happy you human beings must be,” he said. “You’re made of soil and water like everything else on earth. You match with all the other creatures of creation. You, and the animals, and all the plants, you all come one.”

“What’s your news, angel?”

“As I was coming to find you, I heard a woman calling your name.”

“Why was she calling me? What does she want?”

The angel smiled. “She sits at her loom, weaving and singing a love song for you. Her song pierces the mountains. There it comes, can you hear her?”
“Yes, I can. Loud and clear! But it’s a dirge. What is she lamenting?”

“You. She thinks you are dead, and she’s weeping. Come on! Let’s go and console her.”

“And Magdalene?”

“Magdalene. Oh yes, I meant to tell you, but I forgot. She’s dead.”

“Dead?”

God killed her. He threw an arrow and it pierced her heart at the peak of her happiness.”

“Why did God do that?”

“Don’t get angry. She has now become immortal. Can there be a greater joy for a woman? She won’t see her love fade, her heart lose its keenness, her flesh grow wrinkled and wizened.”

Jesus became furious. “Only dogs have such a longing for submission—dogs and angels like you! I’m not a dog, and I’m not an angel! I’m a man, and I shout with indignation: Unjust! Unjust! Almighty it was unjust of you to kill her. Even the most boorish of wood-choppers trembles to cut down a tree in bloom, and Magdalene had blossomed from her roots right up to her topmost branches!”

The angel spoke kindly to him. “Don’t despair. Only one woman exists in the world, one woman with countless different faces. The moment one woman falls struck down by death, another one rises to take her place. Mary Magdalene ascended to heaven, but Mary sister of Lazarus is still alive here on earth and is eagerly waiting for you. She is Magdalene herself, but with another face, just as comely and serene. Let us go to her. And one more thing: within her womb she holds the greatest gift God has in store for you: your own son.”

Little by little Jesus’ heart softened. The night was cold, but the angel wrapped him in his wings and warmed him.

“Come with me,” urged the angel, his breath smelling of nutmeg and damp soil.

As they glided through the air, the moon drifted behind the mountains, and the rosy-fingered morn crept softly across the ridges. Sweeping past clumps of olive trees and fig trees and vineyards, the angel and Jesus came before a house with a large loom and a lighted fire.

“Here we are,” said the angel. “Jesus, the two sisters lit a fire and milked the cows, and are now making milk for you. This is real paradise. It’s the little things that give the greatest pleasure. To knock at a door and have a woman open it for you, to warm yourself by the fireplace and watch her set the table for you, to feel her take you in her arms when night falls, these small pleasures are the essence of paradise.”

“I understand,” said Jesus. He grasped the knocker.
“Wait,” urged the angel. “You need some gifts for the two sisters.” He flicked his hand upwards. As if by magic a cornucopia of presents suddenly appeared: silk clothing, ear-rings, bracelets, fans made of precious feathers—the full paraphernalia of a woman’s treasure.

Jesus knocked on the door and Mary opened it. A dog wagged its tail happily in the yard.

“Jesus!” she exclaimed exultantly, her eyes dancing with delight. “So you’ve been resurrected, it’s not just a rumor. Welcome to our humble abode, it’s a great honor for us to have you here.”

Martha came running to the door to see who it was. Upon seeing Jesus she let out a sigh of wonder.

“Master, can I touch your breast to see if you really exist?”

“He does exist Martha,” Mary chided. “He’s flesh, just like us.”

Jesus walked in and glanced around the house.

“What a beautiful sight!” he exclaimed. So many fine things: fireplace and loom, table, pitcher, and lamp. Faithful servants of woman, I bow and worship your grace. Only before I met this angel the seven heavens weren’t big enough for me, and now, now what miracle is this? A tiny house, a morsel of bread, and the soft voice of a woman are all I need to be happy.”

Jesus paced around the house as if he had already become its master. He came out of the house again, drew water from the well and assuaged his thirst. Then he fetched some logs from the yard, brought them to the fireplace and fed the fire.

“Dear sisters,” he said solemnly as he was warming himself by the fireplace, “I proclaim war against poverty and fasting. My soul is a greedy animal and craves nourishment. I declare war against chastity. An infant is inside the womb of every woman. He who doesn’t sire, murders.”

Tears came down Martha’s face. “We welcome you to our lives. You are now the master of the house.”

Jesus’ eyes twinkled with infinite joy. “My struggle against God is now well and truly over. We have become reconciled. I will no longer make crosses. I’ll have someone fetch my tools from Nazareth, and from now on I’ll be practicing my trade building troughs, cradles, and bedsteads.” He thought for a moment, then continued. “I’ll reconcile myself with my mother too. I gave her to drink from the cup of sorrow. She’ll come and live with us to take care of her grandchildren and spend the rest of her days in happiness and sweetness.”

The angel heard him, and a crafty smile spread across his face. With a sad expression on her face, Martha walked out the door, leaving Jesus alone with Mary.

They climbed to the attic, hid from God under a blanket, and began to caress each other. While they were enjoying the fruits of their love, the cover slipped off for a second, and Jesus saw the angel standing at the top of the stairs, smiling contentedly.
Time passed swiftly. Trees bore fruit. Winter came on. Their son issued from Mary’s womb. Jesus toiled in the fields during the day, but at night as he lay together with Mary, hearing his son’s cries and laughter in the adjoining room, he forgot the day’s labour.

One night at bed-time while Mary was in the adjoining room with her and Jesus’ son, the angel came to see Jesus again. “Jesus, are you awake?” he asked him while his eyes were closed.

“Yes, I am,” Jesus said without opening his eyes. “And I am very happy.”

“Are you satisfied with me?”

“Yes, completely,” said Jesus. “Before you appeared I’d taken the wrong road to find God.”

“That’s right,” concurred the angel. “You cannot find God all by yourself. You need a woman—I taught you that. You found God when you mated with Mary. Now you’re a happy father.”

“That is the meaning of God,” remarked Jesus. “That is the meaning of man, that is the way.”

His former life flashed through his tranquil mind, and he sighed. Extending his arm, he found the angel’s hand. “How long will this happiness last?” he asked.

“As long as you and I stay together.”

“Forever?”

The angel laughed. “How do you mean forever? After all that and you still have those big ideas? Even your son hasn’t cured you of your megalomania yet? Now is forever: each passing moment is eternity. If moments aren’t enough for you, eternity won’t be enough either.”

Light footsteps suddenly approached.

“Who’s that?” asked Jesus, suddenly alert.

“A woman,” answered the angel and unlocked the door.

“Which one?”

“I told you before. Haven’t you learned your lesson? There’s only one woman with countless different faces.”

The door was pushed open, and a woman stepped inside. Holding her breath she crept forward towards Jesus’ bed. She slipped in next to him.

Jesus felt a flush of warmth rise from the soles of his feet all the way to his temples. He stretched out his hand and felt the woman’s face in the dark. She yielded to his caresses without speaking. Her body was already sweaty.

“Who is it?” whispered Jesus.

The next second he had regretted asking this question. The angel had explained to him that the identity of the woman didn’t matter. The face, name, background, even the looks of the woman next to him were
entirely immaterial. She was mother earth. Her womb was longing to extrude all the sons and daughters it contained. She had come to Jesus so that he might impregnate her. Only then would her destiny be fulfilled.

“I’m Martha,” the woman said with a shaky voice.

Days went by, then months, then years. Jesus’ sons and daughters multiplied, and Martha and Mary competed to see who would give birth to the most. Jesus would toil in the fields all day. In the evening he would return home tired from his physical labour, and the two women would wash his feet, light a fire, set the table for him, and receive them to their beds. What happiness this is, thought Jesus, while Martha and Mary held out their hands and touched him to see if he was real, for all this joy and sweetness seemed much too much for them, and they trembled lest they lose it.

But all this was destined to change. One night Mary had a horrible dream. She woke up from the dream with a scream. She went into the yard and saw Jesus and sat down at his side. “The whole night the moon was so bright I could not sleep. But at dawn I must have fallen asleep because I saw a bird that looked like a seraphim. He came fluttered silently around me and suddenly rushed down and wrapped his wings around my head.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that all this is a dream,” she said, bursting into tears.

Jesus shuddered. “A dream?”

“Yes, a dream. You, me, Martha, our embraces at night, the children…all of these are lies. They were created by the tempter to deceive us. And one more thing.”

Jesus gave her a probing look.

“Bend down,” Martha asked him. “She wants to say something to you.”

Mary summoned all her strength and blurted out: “You were crucified.” No sooner had she uttered those words than she fell to the ground in a swoon.

Jesus and Martha picked her up and tucked her into her bed. Jesus went off to the fields to contemplate the meaning of the dream. He climbed up onto a green hill. The earth smelt of thyme. He saw his house in the distance and watched smoke rise from the roof. With a sigh of relief, he decided to go back.

Several years passed. The mob of children now overflowed into the yard, where they played endlessly all day and half the night.

Jesus called his two wives. “Mary, Martha, we have too many children. The yard is full. We’ve got to enlarge the house or you have to stop giving birth.”
"We'll enlarge the house," the two women chorused.
"They're almost ready to climb the walls and trees of the yard like mice and squirrels. We've declared war on death, Mary. Blessed be the womb of the woman."
"Indeed," Mary replied, "we won't be conquered by death. Just take good care of yourself and do your best to stay healthy."
"Mary, don't you ever worry about what happens after death?"
Mary shook her head and guffawed. "Those are men's concerns. I don't seek God's mercy. I'm a woman, and I seek mercy from my husband. And I don't knock at God's door either, asking like a beggar for the eternal joys of paradise. I hug the man I love and have no desire for any other paradise. Let's leave the eternal joys to the man," she said with a note of irony in her voice.
"But the earth is so small. How can you be cooped up within its narrow confines and not want to burst out of them?"
"A woman is happy only inside boundaries. A woman is a reservoir, not a spring."
Martha suddenly ran inside the house, panting. "Someone's out there looking for you."
"Who is he?"
"I don't know. He's a fat bald-headed hunchback."
"OK, Bring him in."
The man with the familiar features came in. "Rejoice and exult brothers," he said, "for I bring you glad tidings."
"Is that you, Saul?" asked Jesus.
"I used to be. Now I'm Paul. I have a different mission now."
"What is your mission?"
"God has designated me to help save the world."
"And what's the good news you have?"
"Jesus of Nazareth was not the son of Joseph and Mary; he was the son of God. He came down to earth and took on human form in order to save humanity. The wicked priests and the Pharisees captured him, brought him to Pilate and crucified him. But on the third day he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven. Death was conquered, sins were forgiven, the Gates of heaven opened up."
"Did you see this resurrected Jesus of Nazareth?" Jesus asked.
"I did with my own eyes."
"What was he like?"
"His form was a flash of lightning, and his voice was a thunder."
“You’re a shameless liar,” said Jesus with an accusatory finger.

“No, I’m not. His disciples saw him. They were together in an attic, and the door was shut. Suddenly he appeared and stood in their midst. Thomas wasn’t convinced and placed his finger in his wounds.”

“Liar,” he shouted, full of righteous indignation. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, and I was never crucified, and of course I was never resurrected. I am the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter. I am not the son of God, I am the son of man, like everyone else. These are blasphemies. Is it with such lies that you intend to save the world?”

Paul was bemused. He suddenly noticed blue marks like nail-wounds on Jesus’ hands and feet. “What are these then?”

“These marks were stamped by God or the devil on me during my sleep. I dreamt I was on the cross, and I was dying a slow and excruciatingly painful death. I cried out, woke up, and my pain just disappeared. I suffered in my sleep, but when I woke up I was a normal being again. Here I live an ordinary life. I eat, drink, work, love women and beget children. The fire burning within me in my youth has now died out. Now I warm my bones by the fireplace and my wife cooks me the best-tasting meals. I set out to conquer the world when I was young, but now I’m back to living a normal life like everyone else. I have no complaints. I am not the son of God. Don’t go around spreading lies because if you continue to do so, I’ll reveal the truth.”

Paul lost his temper. “Shut up, you traitor,” he said rushing at him. “Can you tell me what truth is and what a lie is? Whatever gives wings to man, whatever produces great works and great souls and lifts us above the earth—that is true. On the other hand, whatever clips off man’s wings—that is false. Amidst all the rottenness, injustice, and poverty of the world, the crucified and resurrected Jesus has been the one precious consolation for the honest man and the wronged man. True or false, what do I care? It’s enough if the world is saved.”

“You won’t keep quiet, will you, son of Satan?”

“No, I won’t keep quiet. I don’t give a damn about what’s true and what’s false or whether I saw him or didn’t see him, whether he was crucified or wasn’t crucified…I fashion the truth out of longing and faith. I build it taller than man, and thus I make man grow. It is absolutely imperative that you be crucified, and I shall crucify you, like it or not. It is imperative that you be resurrected, and I shall resurrect you, like it or not. In every corner of the world, myriads of eyes will look up and see you crucified. They will weep, and the tears will cleanse their souls of all their sins. But on the third day I shall raise you from the dead because there is no salvation without a resurrection. The final, the most horrible enemy is death. I shall abolish death.”

“But this isn’t true. I’ll tell everybody I wasn’t crucified and didn’t rise from the dead and that I am not God.”
“You can say what you like. I’m not in the least afraid of you, and in fact I don’t even need you any more. The wheel you set in motion has gathered momentum, and you can’t control it now. If you say you are no Messiah, the faithful will seize you and burn you as a blasphemer.”

“I said one word only: love. That was my one and only message.”

“By uttering this word love you let loose all the angels and the demons that were asleep within the bowels of mankind. Love is not as you think a simple tranquil word. Within it lie armies being massacred, burning cities, and much blood. Rivers of blood, rivers of tears: the face of the earth has changed. You can cry now as much as you like; you can make yourself hoarse yelling: ‘I didn’t want to say that—that is not love. Do not kill each other. We’re all brothers. Stop.’ But how can they stop? What’s done cannot be undone.”

“You laugh like a devil.”

“No, like an apostle. I shall become your apostle whether you like it or not. I shall construct you and your life and your teachings and your crucifixion and resurrection just as I wish. Joseph the carpenter of Nazareth didn’t give birth to you. I willed you into existence. I, Paul the scribe from Tarsus in Cilicia. If you contradict me, I will deny you’re Jesus. I’ll tell everybody that if they follow you, they will live and die as sheep live and die, leaving behind wool, bleats, and dung. But if they come with me, we’ll conquer the world through love, struggle, and war.”

Jesus burst into sobs.

“Why are you crying?” Paul asked him.

“How can anyone see the way the world can be saved and not weep?”

“Well, I’ve had enough of you. I’m glad I came by though because I set myself free. Now I am my own master. I will now let you enjoy the life you’ve chosen for yourself. You can indulge in food, wine, and women’s embraces as much as you like. I will return to Jerusalem.”

Paul opened the door and ran off.

Jesus dashed out and saw him run down the street and felt great anguish and longing. Terrible memories and yearnings that had been long forgotten were now being awoken inside him.

Suddenly Martha came back from some chores. “Jesus,” she cried, “come back inside. What are you staring at?”

“Leave me alone,” Jesus said, his eyes glued on Paul who was now rounding the corner.

“Do you want to go with him?”

“I don’t know what I want to do.”

“Mary,” Martha called, and her sister came running toward her with the mob of children trailing behind her. They formed a circle around Jesus in the middle of the road. His face took on an ashen look.
Suddenly his eyelids drooped, and he allowed himself to be carried back to his bed. He smelt the rose scent Martha held before his nose. He opened his eyes, saw his two wives, and smiled.

“Take me in hand,” he told them, “and don’t let me run away. I’m just fine here where I am.”

Chapter Thirteen

The early morning rays had seeped into Cosmas’ room in the Clinique Arago through the wide open curtains of the square window opposite his bed. Cosmas woke up at his usual time—shortly before seven—after a fitful sleep. A man lay fast asleep on the bed opposite his. He remembered who it was: Pascal, a fifty-five year-old man with a stomach ulcer, with whom he was sharing the room. After munching slowly through a biscuit from a box that Sofia had left for him on his bedside table the night before, Cosmas sat up in his bed and for a moment he thought he was feeling a little better, but when he tried to get out of the bed to use the toilet it was only his sense of dignity that stopped him from asking a nurse to help him.

When he got back from the toilet, he started reflecting on his state of health. He’d probably dodge the grim reaper this time too. But the likely prospect of recovery was not sufficient cause for celebration: his body was still resilient enough to grant him more time to live, but it was merely delaying the inevitable. And the inevitable was no longer a distant prospect on a hazy horizon: it was drawing nearer and nearer with firm inexorable steps, and soon enough it would be on his doorstep. He now wondered where the ideal place to die would be: in a bleak hospital like this—the Clinique Arago in the center of Paris—in his own familiar bed in Antibes, or maybe somewhere in the heart of nature, in a green glen, a flower-spangled field, or a sandy beach where his last glimpse of the world would be an ever-lasting impression of its immarcessible glory?

He scrambled to his feet and tiptoed out of his room, trying not to wake up Pascal. He closed the door gently behind him and started to shuffle along the corridor. The nurse in charge of his ward walked out of another room along the corridor and ran straight into him. She asked him where he was going, and he told her he needed to stretch his legs after lying in bed for so long. She reluctantly nodded her head. He walked to the end of the corridor and stared out of an open window towards the back garden. It had rained the day before, and the grass was wet. Its musky odor wafted through the window, tantalizing his nostrils. These petrichor whiffs felt so
refreshing after the stale smell of his room. Nature was so much more vital than enclosed spaces, and yes death surrounded by nature was preferable to any other way of going.

He looked behind him. The nurse had left. He pulled out his pipe, filled it with tobacco and started to smoke. The sharp woody smell of tobacco perked him up a bit. He put his hand on his face and started feeling it. The old skin felt rough and crinkly. In a sense it didn’t feel his anymore. He remembered what he’d written about the relationship between mind and body in *Spiritual Exercises*: “Our body is our most cherished possession. We must care for it as scrupulously as a horse-breeder who daily grooms his horses to keep them in tip-top shape.” Though he’d written those lines thirty-five years earlier, they still rang so fresh and true in his ears. Like the ancient Greeks, he’d always understood the importance of maintaining a healthy body. And now he felt betrayed by it: he had become trapped by a body that no longer reflected the greatness of his soul and spirit. Cosmas’ brooding was interrupted by a beautiful snow-white dove that had landed on a branch of the large horse chestnut tree that dominated the garden. As he gazed at the bird, his mood was lightened. He drew a long puff on his pipe and smiled contentedly to himself. His body had been a temporary vessel, and it would now exit the scene, but his spirit was bound to exist for ever after, as was everybody else’s, of course. He would soon disperse into eternity and infinity. After this temporary and temporal separation from it, he would be forever reunited with the cosmic mass, which is where we all come from and where we all return. He had called it an abyss in *Spiritual Exercises*, but he now came to see it as the eternal light, a light that was not extinguished by death. And his own exit from the material world would leave behind a light that would shine on future generations for a long time to come.

He finished smoking and went back to his bed. Pascal was still asleep. It was only seven o’clock. He picked up his copy of Dante and carried on reading from where he’d left off, and soon his spirit was lifted by Dante’s rousing words.

Two hours later Pascal had woken up and was sitting up in his bed, chatting with Cosmas. Dr. Mouret stepped through the door, with two junior doctors in tow. He greeted the two patients courteously and walked over to the side of Cosmas’ bed.

He stood over him and said with a cheering voice: “I have good news, Monsieur Eleftherakis.” Cosmas’ pensive eyes smiled faintly as he glanced up at the doctor. “Given your medical background,” continued Dr. Mouret, “we were a little worried that leukemia might have returned, but the tests we’ve carried out haven’t revealed anything of the sort.”
“What do I have then, Dr. Mouret?” Cosmas inquired calmly.

“Nothing to worry about, from what I’ve seen so far. It’s just cumulative fatigue from your long trip to China. At your age such grueling trips can be rather exhausting. Quite simply, you need to rest, Monsieur Eleftherakis.”

Cosmas nodded his head, vaguely agreeing. “When can I leave the hospital, doctor?”

“Quite soon,” the doctor said evasively. “But we need to perform a few more tests before we are a hundred percent sure you can go home.”

Dr. Mouret and his retinue made their way to Pascal’s bed. One of the junior doctors started to examine Pascal. A brief consultation with Dr. Mouret ensued, and Pascal was also given a favorable prognosis. The doctors left the room. Pascal pulled the blankets aside and sat up on the side of his bed, facing Cosmas.

“Isn’t that great, mon ami?” he said eagerly. “Before either of us knows it, you’ll be out of here.”

“And before anybody knows it, I’ll be six feet under,” said Cosmas ironically. “All I’ve managed to do, my friend, is buy a little more time.”

Pascal shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t see it that way. You see, none of us knows when our time will come.”

“Yours is a long time off,” replied Cosmas, turning his head slowly away from Pascal’s direction with a small inward smile. Despite caviling to Pascal, the truth was that the doctor’s words had raised his spirits. He picked up Dante again and started to read, relishing the familiar sentences even more than before. But he couldn’t concentrate on the text for more than a few seconds and finally lapsed back into his existential ruminations. If he viewed things objectively, he had to count himself lucky. What with his long bout of leukemia and the additional toll on his health of worrying about his novels, constant traveling, and frequent relocation, he could have died a long time ago. If it hadn’t been for Sofia’s restorative influence, he wouldn’t have lasted that long. The question was how much longer he now had to live. He knew he couldn’t negotiate such things with his karma, but he still hoped to be given ten more years, ten good, healthy, profitable years. Time was relative, of course. So many people were already dead by the time they’d turned eighteen, though they were buried at eighty-five. Couldn’t he leech off some of their time? He of course knew he couldn’t: nature was relentlessly egalitarian in this regard. It
was all down to genes and habits rather than the depth of one’s desire to stick around for the whole time one’s creative vitality continues to flow.

His thoughts drifted towards Sofia. She would pop in to see him in an hour or so. But he shouldn’t share these grim thoughts with her. She would be devastated when he was dead and gone, but there was no point in making her suffer in advance. Yes, she would be devastated. In the first few months after he was gone, she might even see his departure as a kind of betrayal, that was common among loving couples, but he trusted her to rise above that thought with the passage of time. What would she do when he was gone? For a while perhaps she’d stay alone, mourning in silence. But human beings are inherently adaptive and resilient. Sooner or later she’d come to terms with her new situation and start doing the social scene again. She’d probably fall in love afresh, maybe with a younger man this time. Her new lover would be bursting with youth and vitality. He would offer her all sorts of new pleasures and sensations she hadn’t been able to enjoy during all those years with him … Now that he thought of it, she’d been deprived of so much living with him… She’d get used to the presence of a younger man by her side and immerse herself in everyday life next to him with new-found zest. For a brief second he felt a twinge of resentment at this prospect, but the next moment he realized how mean and ungrateful it would be to nurture such a feeling for the person who had stood by him all his life and had filled his days with happiness and joy.

He glanced at his watch: already eleven o’clock. In half an hour she would be there by his side. He scrambled to his feet and shuffled to the bathroom to freshen up, relieved he didn’t feel like needing a nurse to hold his arm. He was still straightening the new pyjamas he’d just put on when the door swung open and Sofia stepped in.

She greeted Pascal politely, who lifted his head from a magazine he was reading. Cosmas stood up by the side of his bed. She walked up to him and kissed him on the cheek. They sat down on the bed side by side. Cosmas wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “Dr. Mouret came by this morning,” he told her. “He had good news.”

“I’ve heard it already,” she said with a big smile, forestalling his report of the details. He should have guessed she would have found out first.

“He says I should be out of here in a couple of days.”

“He didn’t say a couple of days to me.”

“I can’t stay here any longer, honey. I need to get back to writing.”
“You’re not ready to go home yet. You need to stay here for a few more days until you recover fully.”

“I can convalesce at home too.” He squeezed her shoulder a little harder. “I promise I won’t do anything strenuous.”

“No, I won’t hear of it,” Sofia said sternly. “You’ll stay here to rest and get all your tests done. Then we’ll go home together.”

“OK,” he sighed, unsnaking his arm from her shoulder, “I’ll do what you say. Now, how about the extract from my novel? Did you read any reviews?”

Sofia cast a quick glance at Pascal, who still pretended to be engrossed in the magazine. “Don’t you want to talk about it somewhere else?” she said, turning her eyes on Cosmas.

Cosmas’ face tightened. Despite her natural tendency for discreetness, Sofia would disclose the content of the reviews if they were laudatory. Without another word, they got off the bed. Cosmas picked up his coat from the coat hanger by the door, and they walked out across the hallway to the back garden. The sun had hidden behind thick dark clouds that were scudding across the sky. They walked to a bench and sat down. The air had a bite to it, and Cosmas buttoned up his coat.

“Tell me now,” he said with a tone of urgency. “What did they write about the extract?”

Sofia had been rehearsing her answer all the way to the garden. She wouldn’t reveal the full extent of the furore that had erupted after the publication of his work in *Les Temps Modernes*. Not only could such a revelation sap his morale, it would also jeopardize his recovery. No matter how strong and resilient he was in other areas of life, Cosmas was highly susceptible to bad reviews, especially bad reviews from French critics. The novel could go hang for all she cared. It was the man she cared about. And she wanted him to be back on his feet and right by her side the soonest possible. No, she wouldn’t tell him the full truth. She steadied herself and said: “I’m afraid I was so tired and worried about you that I didn’t bother to read the reviews. But I talked to Antigone on the phone last night. She seems to have heard some people talk about your work.”

“Their comments must be pretty bad to make you avoid mentioning them in front of Pascal.”

“Well, they’re not flattering,” Sofia said after a second. “Apparently some of the critics haven’t taken very kindly to your treatment of Jesus.”
“What did they say?”
“I don’t know exactly, but they weren’t very happy that you showed Jesus experiencing desires of the flesh.”
“Prigs!” Cosmas exclaimed angrily, nearly jumping up from the bench. “Can’t they see that the only reason I’ve put these temptations in his way is to emphasize the greatness of his sacrifice?”
“Take it easy, my love. I’m sure when they read the whole book, they will see what your true intentions are. But please, let’s go back now. You’ll catch your death of a cold if we stay here longer.”
They walked back to Cosmas’ room, Sofia supporting her husband by the arm. Sofia obtained special permission from the head nurse to stay with Cosmas till late in the evening. He got back into the bed, and Sofia lay on the bed sitting up against the pillows with his hand in hers. They spent the evening remembering some of their best trips of the past, and by the time she left, his good spirits had been restored.

The next morning Sofia was going to see Antigone and Laurent, her lover. She had agreed to the meeting two days earlier when Antigone had called her at the hotel she was staying to tell her she’d be in Paris for a couple of days and if she could meet her and Laurent one of those days. Discreet as ever, Sofia hadn’t pumped Antigone for any details regarding the turn her relationship with Laurent had taken. Her first impulse was to decline the invitation on the grounds that she’d have to be with Cosmas at that time; but then her curiosity got the best of her, and so it was that right after a frugal breakfast at the hotel she caught the Metro Line Five to the Daumesnil station, ascended the escalator out of the station and sat down on the stone steps in front of the Fontaine aux Lyons in the Place Felix Eboue to wait for her two companions. It was sunny but cold. She tightened the woolen scarf around her neck, wondering how Cosmas would feel if he knew what she was doing right now. She had of course told him she’d meet Antigone, who happened to be in Paris at the same time as them, but she hadn’t told him the real reason why her friend was here and not in Antibes. Despite the fact that she kept no secrets from him, at this juncture Cosmas had much more important concerns weighing on him, and she didn’t want to burden him with other people’s concerns.
Sofia glanced at her watch. Antigone and her younger lover were already five minutes late. Sofia’s leg started shaking, a reflex movement that occurred when she felt impatient or uncomfortable. She was too preoccupied with Cosmas’ health problems and the backlash against his book to worry too much about Antigone, but she had no doubt in her mind that the new developments in her friend’s life were bound to disrupt their relationship. The balance that existed while Antigone was together with Jacques had been disturbed now. Her thoughts were interrupted when she saw them sauntering towards her hand in hand from the direction of the station. She put on a smile and looked towards the oncomers. Laurent was tall and beefy and was walking with a spring in his step. He had thick wavy hair framing a large face with eyes that shone. She guessed him to be around thirty-five. He looked the exact opposite of Jacques, who carried an air of world-weariness wherever he went but exuded an odour of refinement and sophistication this big strapping lad seemed to lack.

Antigone released her lover’s hand and strode up to her. She kissed her twice on the cheek with an effusiveness Sofia didn’t remember her showing before. She had changed incredibly in the couple of weeks since she left Jacques. Her whole being now positively glowed with youth and vitality. Antigone introduced her to Laurent, who kissed her hand gallantly. His face was bright and awake, and Sofia could see in an instant why Antigone had been so smitten with him. Laurent pointed to a coffee bar across the road. They made their way there, sat at a table and ordered coffee. They started chattering about the weather, which was said to get worse as the week went on. Then Laurent veered the conversation round to the latest shows in town. For someone who didn’t live in Paris, this man was very up to date. Antigone must have realized the conversation was getting too mundane for Sofia, for she now steered it to Cosmas’ state of health.

“How’s Cosmas faring?” she asked in a concerned voice. “Will he stay long in the hospital?”

“Oh no, my dear, not at all. He’s getting better. He’ll be out next week.”

“I’m so glad to hear that. He must be pretty upset with the reviews.”

Sofia opened her mouth to tell her she hadn’t told Cosmas exactly what the reviews actually said, but then changed her mind. “Cosmas has never genuflected to the critics,” she said sternly, surprised to hear herself defend Cosmas. But then again, she thought, if she didn’t
defend her husband, who would do so? She had a sudden flash of insight that if he were to go, her life’s mission would be to defend and promote his work.

“Who cares about the critics?” Laurent said suddenly. “If the public buys the book, that’s all that matters.”

Antigone clasped his hand and held it tightly. “Laurent is right,” she agreed. “If the book sells well, the critics can go stuff themselves.”

Sofia flinched back a little at the sound of the words “stuff themselves.” She wasn’t accustomed to hearing her friend express herself in such crude language. As she saw Antigone and Laurent grinning contentedly with their hands locked together, an image of them tangled up on the bed, indulging in a passionate sexual embrace flashed through her mind.

They finished their coffee. At Antigone’s suggestion, they decided to go to the zoo, which was a short walk down Avenue Daumesnil. Sofia thought the idea of visiting the zoo a little strange coming from Antigone. It seemed her new relationship made available new forms of entertainment too. Shortly later, as they were strolling down avenue Daumesnil, Sofia told them she had last been to a zoo when she was a teenage girl in Athens. Laurent found it so funny he burst out laughing. His laughter was loud and harsh, and Sofia almost resented its coarseness. He wouldn’t score very highly on an intelligence test—that much was certain—but she supposed his sense of humor and happy-go-lucky spirit were some compensation.

It was getting on for midday when they reached the zoo. It being a weekday, the grounds weren’t crowded. Sofia overrode Laurent’s insistence and paid for her ticket. They walked past rows of animals inside large cages, stopping to admire the most exotic of them: pumas, baboons, jaguars, lions, and giraffes. But the ones that impressed Sofia the most were the monkeys. They let out screeching cries and were strikingly close to humans in movement and looks. Laurent and Antigone kept up a running conversation about the intriguing behavior of the animals they saw. Sofia reflected that people were much more intriguing than animals, but kept that thought to herself. The lions the lions and jaguars were raw and aggressive, but at least you knew what to expect, whereas people backstabbed you when you least expected it. Wasn’t that what they’d done to Cosmas time and time again?

They now walked past the panthers, who were staring at them with a fierce look in their emerald green eyes. They throbbed with primitive energy, and there was something decidedly unnatural about them being behind bars. They looked so out of tune with the place that a chill of
disquiet tingled along Sofia’s spine. Sofia had a sudden thought that disconcerted her. Laurent had the same energy the panthers had.

On the same morning Palmas and Varnalis were sitting across from each other at a sidewalk table at the café _Philion_ in Athens. It was a warm and sunny day, and the café was half full. Most of the other customers were senior citizens fingerin worry beads and squabbling over politics. Palmas and Varnalis had arrived a few minutes earlier, and now the waiter brought them their coffees and glasses of water. As they took their first sip, the two intellectuals embarked on a debate over whether their coffee ought to be called Greek or Turkish. Meanwhile clouds appeared on the horizon, and the sky turned grey.

“Listen, my good man,” Palmas said at length. “We’re not going to resolve in a few minutes a debate that has been going on for centuries. Let’s change the topic. By the way I think it’s going to rain. Let’s go inside.”

“You’re not afraid of a little water, are you?” said Varnalis.

“Alright! We’ll stay here till the first drop falls. Anyway, I’ve been meaning to ask you something since I saw you.”

“Sure thing! What do you want to know?”

“Have you read my new book?”

“Sure thing,” said Varnalis. “I’ve read it from cover to cover.”

“And what do you think of it?”

“It’s as good as anything else you’ve written. You must be proud of it. And from what I know, it’s got rave reviews in the press.”

“Not in all the newspapers, I’m afraid. Terzakis slated it in the Evening News.”

“Well, don’t mind Terzakis. We all know what a scumbag he is. What would you expect from somebody who’s openly endorsed Eleftherakis’ candidacy for the Nobel Prize?”

“You’re right, my dearest. Listen, I know you’re bringing out a collection of short stories next month.”

“That’s right, how do you know?”

“Your publisher told me. Anyway, as soon as it comes out send it to me to review it in the _Podium_. Just tell me what you want me to write first.”
“I’m much obliged to you, old chap. But I don’t need to tell you anything. I trust you to write good things about me.”


“I won’t, don’t worry. But you should trust Avgeris and Lefteris. They are on our side.”

“I know that, but you can’t be too careful with writers. The truth is we are a sneaky lot, my dearest.”

“What have you been saying about writers?” asked Avgeris as he approached them.

“Nothing you don’t know already,” said Palmas as he patted the chair next to him. “Sit down.”

Seconds later Lefteris had also reached them. He took a seat next to Varnalis. The two newcomers ordered coffee from a passing waiter.

“Did you hear the news about Eleftherakis?” asked Avgeris.

“No, we didn’t,” replied Palmas “What is it?”

“A chapter from his new book got published in Les Temps Modernes. You won’t believe the nerve of that man. He shows Jesus Christ being saved from the cross by Satan and becoming a stud who sires one child after another.”

“What?” exclaimed Varnalis. “Has he lost it completely? You don’t mean what you said, do you?”

“Every single word of it,” said Avgeris. “A huge outcry has been raised in France. The extract got slammed in the French press.”

“Of course it did,” said Lefteris. “You can’t portray Jesus Christ as a sinner in cahoots with the Devil and get away with it. I’m so glad this has happened. He’ll now find out the hard way what the French think about his blasphemy.”

“Now that public opinion is turning against him,” said Palmas, “we have to drive our own nail into his coffin.”

“What do you propose to do?” asked Avgeris.

Before Palmas could outline his proposal, a thunder was heard. Just as the sound of the thunder was dying away, loud footsteps resounded across the pavement. Varnalis raised his head and saw Michalis approaching their table. “Don’t worry, Michalis,” shouted Varnalis, thinking he saw a gloomy look on his chum’s face, “We’re going inside.” With the help of a waiter, the
four writers gathered up their glasses and cups and scurried through the doorway into the interior of the café.

Chapter Fourteen

Upon leaving the café Philion, the five friends arranged to hold their next meeting in Palmas’ house two days later. Palmas lived in a stone mansion in a leafy suburb of Athens, a perfect setting for sub rosa meetings. The guests started to arrive shortly after ten thirty in the morning. Each time the bell rang, the maid greeted the guest at the door, took his coat, and showed him into the living room where Palmas had been waiting. As each guest was seated around the large mahogany coffee table, she brought for him a piece of baklava, a crisp and moist syrupy dessert dripping with honey, and a glass of cold water. Five minutes later she also brought each of them a cup of Turkish coffee. Palmas glanced at the wooden clock on the wall. It was nearing eleven o’clock. Lefteris, Avgeris, and Varnalis were already there.

“Do you think we should start?” Palmas suggested, after his guests had taken a few sips of their coffee.

“Michalis isn’t here,” said Lefteris, licking a glob of syrup that had attached itself to his back teeth. He thought the baklava was just a touch too tarty for his liking, but didn’t want to share his disapproval.

“Let’s wait for him then,” said Avgeris. “We’re not in a hurry, are we?”

“If he’s not here by now, I doubt he’ll show up at all,” said Varnalis.

“Why are you saying that?” asked Avgeris.

“Michalis isn’t usually late,” replied Varnalis, wiping some spilled coffee off his hand with a paper napkin. “I bet he’s not comfortable with what we’re about to do.”

“Maybe he got home late last night and he’s still sleeping,” said Lefteris.

“I think he’s just afraid to stand up and be counted,” said Varnalis.

The clock on the wall chimed eleven. “Let’s go ahead and start the meeting,” urged Palmas. “If Michalis turns up later, we’ll fill him in.”

The maid walked in again and picked up the empty plates. Other than a small piece left uneaten on Lefteris’ plate, the guests had made short work of the baklava. As she left the room,
Palmas motioned to her to close the door behind her. “Well, you all know what we’re here for,” Palmas said to his guests.


“We’re all in agreement, Takis,” asserted Avgeris. “It’s payback time for the cocky old coot.”

“Yeah,” said Lefteris, “somebody has to send him the message that writing utter drivel about Jesus doesn’t make him a great writer.”

“No doubt he thinks he’s some kind of savior,” guffawed Varnalis.

“Well, our job is to make sure he doesn’t hoodwink the Swedish Academy into believing that he actually is,” said Palmas.

“Enough talking,” Varnalis declared. “We need to get down to business. Let’s all put our heads together and start writing the letter.”

No,” said Palmas, “I’m not a believer in writing by committee. It’s better to entrust this task to one of us.”

Varnalis, Lefteris, and Avgeris exchanged inquiring glances. “Who do you have in mind?” asked Varnalis.

“Lefteris, will you do it?” Palmas asked, looking at Lefteris. “Can you write the letter on behalf of all of us?”

“I’d love to,” said Lefteris with a small grin that exposed his yellowing teeth, “but what exactly should I write?”

“Ok,” said Avgeris, “let’s all brainstorm and give him some ideas.”

“Hold on a minute,” said Varnalis. “There’s a loose end that needs to be tied up before we start. The letter won’t be valid unless it bears the signatures of all of us.”

“Don’t worry about that, Kostas,” Palmas asserted. “No signature will be missing.”

“What about Michalis?” asked Varnalis. “He’s also a founding member of the Society.”

“This will be taken care of,” said Palmas, nodding his head with conviction.

Lefteris and Avgeris exchanged understanding glances. Varnalis saw the glint in their eyes, and his nervousness slowly dissipated.
The offices of *Les Temps Modernes* were on the Left Bank, several blocks away from the Place St Germain. Housing a printing press as well as the magazine headquarters, they took up nearly half a block in a street running parallel to the river, lined with office buildings. It was well past midnight. The night was starless, and the street was engulfed in deep darkness. The offices in the block had closed for the day several hours earlier, and all the employees had long left behind the grind of their daily work for the peace and quiet of their comfortable houses in the suburbs. There weren’t any residential buildings in the area, and any passers-by who were still out and about at that time had drifted towards the bars and brasseries of St Germain.

Someone suddenly appeared out of the shadows and bore down towards the entrance of the building housing the offices of *Les Temps Modernes*. It was a tall and beefy man hefting a bag over one shoulder. He strode past the entrance door and rounded the corner into a small side street. With heavy, hurried steps he made his way to the far corner of the building, came to a halt in front of the wall and reached into his bag. He took out a long and narrow tube and squatted down in front of the wall. After looking around to make sure no-one was watching, he shook the tube a couple of times and directed it towards the wall. With quick nimble strokes, he started to spray a message on the wall. He moved along the pavement on his haunches, forming one letter after the other with the can. When he was done, he took a couple of steps back and inspected his work. Then he reached into his bag again and pulled out something long and bulky—a pickaxe. He walked towards one of the windows, which stood at eye level. He lifted the axe above his head and slammed it against the pane.

A loud crash shattered the peace of the street, though there was still no evidence of anyone being close enough to hear it. Shards of glass flew everywhere, toppling down in a shower of splinters. A large jagged hole was now peeking through the window, while the pavement and the cobblestoned street beneath it were strewn with broken glass. The man thrust the pickaxe inside the bag and started to run away in the direction of the Pont Royal. When he reached the bridge, he slowed to a walk, crossed it to the other side and merged into the crowd of travellers milling around the Gare Saint Lazare.

It wasn’t until early the next morning that the act of vandalism was discovered. The elderly charlady, who always got in earlier than the rest of the staff, saw it first; a minute later she was on the phone to the police and the office manager. When the manager arrived on the scene, his suit disheveled and his hair unkempt, the charlady was sweeping clean the last
fragments of the glass. He paused across from the message scrawled on the wall and read out its squiggly letters, now clearly visible in the morning light: “No blasphemy goes unanswered.” He understood at once. They had been targeted for publishing Eleftherakis’ work.

His concern about the negative publicity they’d get in the press increasing by the moment, he ordered the charlady to wipe it away. But it was much more difficult than he thought: it took the whole agonizing day before the poor old thing, together with a crew of other cleaners enlisted for the purpose, could get it completely off the wall. Meanwhile the press had been tipped off—the manager assumed by the vandal himself—and a gaggle of reporters had appeared out of nowhere to capture the scene with their cameras. The papers were bound to make full mileage of the incident over the next few days, mused the manager as he watched the cameras rolling, knowing that the best he could do now was try to reduce the damage to their image that was bound to follow.

The next morning Sofia lay on top of the bedcovers in her hotel room leafing through the news pages of Le Figaro when her eye fell on a picture of Cosmas. She folded the paper and brought the page closer to her eyes. Her stomach fluttering with unease, she started to read the report beneath the picture. “A fiery backlash has erupted against the Greek writer Cosmas Eleftherakis in the wake of the publication of an extract of his latest novel in Les Temps Modernes. An unidentified protester smashed a window of the magazine offices in Paris and sprayed graffiti on the walls. The message the vandal scribbled on the walls read ‘no blasphemy goes unpunished,’ apparently in protest against the decision of the magazine to publish what officials of both the Orthodox and the Catholic church as well as many lay readers regard as a blasphemous portrayal of Jesus Christ. Up until the day of this incident, rumors had been afoot that Eleftherakis would be a serious contender for this year’s Nobel Prize. It is now thought that this public display of outrage has turned the tide against him, undermining his candidacy.”

Sofia dropped the newspaper and covered her eyes with her hands. This was certainly a paid job. But who could have put that man up to such a malicious act? She thought of a number of candidates—Greek writers envious of Cosmas’ international recognition, high-ranking church figures in Greece, Cosmas’ ex-wife—there was no shortage of people with grudges against Cosmas. Of course none of them was in Paris, at least as far as she knew, or had the guts to risk falling foul of the law. Whoever they were they were so-called respectable people, beyond
reproach, and certainly too cowardly to show themselves in their true colours. But she couldn’t afford to waste her energy trying to puzzle out the identity of the perpetrator. Cosmas’ wellbeing was a far more pressing priority. Resolving to conceal this latest incident from him, she got up and threw the newspaper into the waste paper basket under the dressing table.

Three days later Cosmas checked out of the clinic with a temporarily clean bill of health as the doctors checked him over once again and saw no apparent reason to keep him in any longer. Sofia came by shortly before noon to pick him up. Brimming with high spirits, he put on his casual clothes again, thanked the doctors and nurses, said goodbye to Pascal and stepped out of the door of the Clinique Arago. Sofia knew he’d want to go for a walk after a week-long confinement in the clinic, but urged him to go to the hotel first to leave his things. Cosmas wouldn’t hear of it. He was so thrilled to be up and about that he wanted to go straight to the Jardin des Tuileries.

“OK,” said Sofia, “but at least we should go there by taxi.”

“I’m not lame,” replied Cosmas. “Besides it’s only a few minutes away.”

Sofia shook her head resignedly, and they struck out towards the Jardin des Tuileries with Cosmas grudgingly allowing Sofia to carry his bag as a concession. The park turned out to be half an hour away—a short distance, under normal circumstances, for a seasoned hiker like Cosmas, who could spend hours walking around without feeling tired. They accessed it through its southern entrance and drifted towards the pond in the middle of the park. The sky was overcast, and a chill air cooled their faces. They reached the pond and sat down on an empty bench. For a while, as if by mutual agreement, they gazed at the pond in silence. A few ducks were swimming in its middle. A pigeon perched on a branch of a tree started to coo.

“Did you hear that pigeon?” asked Sofia.

Cosmas nodded his head.

“Its song is so happy,” said Sofia.

“It’s happy to be alive.”

“I don’t think pigeons have a concept of life and death.”

“Why are you saying that?”

“I don’t know. I just assume they don’t.” She thought for a few seconds. “To be honest with you, I’d never thought about it until now.”
“There’s so much we don’t know, yet we act as if we do.”

The pigeon flew off the tree and perched on the top of a statue.

Cosmas’ eyes followed its trajectory. Sofia meanwhile gazed deep into his eyes. She had to try very hard to keep back her tears. “My dear,” she said, “I’m so happy for you … for us. We have to make sure you never risk your health again. You must promise me any trips you undertake from now on will be gentle and leisurely. You can’t expose yourself to hardship anymore!”

Cosmas felt his heart fluttering. As much as he cherished Sofia, he didn’t want to make that particular promise. To give up traveling went against his nature. “I promise you this won’t happen again,” he finally said, not wanting to hurt her. “You know very well I don’t mean to exit this world any time soon.”

“Of course you won’t. You’re so lively. I’ve never seen anyone at your age filled with so much energy.”

Cosmas gave a wry smile. “That’s because you never met Alexakis.”

“You’ve said so many times before. I’m sure Alexakis was a deeply passionate man, but he obviously infected you with his vigor and vitality.”

Cosmas surveyed the tops of the buildings on the north side of the park. He loved those neoclassical buildings so much. They captured the spirit of Greece much more than the new nondescript concrete buildings that were sprouting up everywhere in his homeland.

“I feel so strong today,” he said. “I feel like I have ten more years ahead of me. Ten solid years.”

“Oh, you have more than just ten years.”

“We shouldn’t be greedy, honey. Ten years are enough.”

Sofia thought for a while. She didn’t want to contradict him. “Let’s say I go along with you. Let’s say I grant you that you have ten years left. How do you intend to spend them?”

“I will devote them to the writing of three great novels,” Cosmas said without hesitation. “Needless to say, we’ll do a fair bit of traveling too.” He remembered his promise and corrected himself: “I mean of the gentle and leisurely type.”

“I’m not so sure about the traveling part!” Sofia caviled.

“Boat trips are out of the question if that’s what you worry about. We’ll only be traveling by plane. And we’ll be taking it easy once we get to our destination.”
“All right,” Sofia said grudgingly. “If you absolutely promise to take it easy, I may consider going on the odd trip, provided your health is fully restored, of course. And what places do you have in mind?”

“We’ll go to America. That’s the place we haven’t visited yet.”

“Huh! That’s missing from our list, isn’t it? I must confess I’ve always been keen to go to America.” Sofia sighed nostalgically. “I was so frustrated when we canceled our trip in forty-six. But going back to your work, do you have any idea what kind of novels you want to write?”

“Yes, I do. I have a perfectly clear idea of what I want to do with each one of them. I worked out the plot and the main premise of each one of them while I was in the hospital.”

“Great! Why don’t you tell me then? I want to hear every single detail of your plans.”

“Not now. I’m not in the mood to talk shop now. When we get to the hotel perhaps.”

“As you wish,” Sofia conceded, shrugging her shoulders.

“Oh I’m so happy to be walking around again,” Cosmas said suddenly. Sofia smiled. Cosmas got up. “Come on, follow me,” he said to Sofia. They started to walk towards a grassy area interspersed with chestnut trees. Cosmas was hopping along. Sofia tagged along behind him, struggling to stay abreast. They reached the edge of the trees, and Cosmas started to gambol across the green expanse. Sofia ran behind him, wondering at his fitness level. Cosmas started to throw his arms up in the air and shout “whoop, whoop, whoop.” Sofia clapped her hands together, beaming happily and making encouraging noises. He was like a little child. Cosmas carried on like that for quite a few minutes. He finally came skipping along back to her. “It feels so great to be alive, my love,” he said to Sofia as he bent down and kissed her on the cheeks.

Cosmas and Sofia checked out of the hotel early in the morning and boarded the first train to Antibes. Nine hours later they were sitting side by side in the small love seat of their living room. They snuggled up against each other for quite some time, wallowing in each other’s warmth and relishing the comfort and safety of their home. Then Sofia rose to make tea, while Cosmas pondered once again the mystery of time—it was ten days earlier that they’d been reclining on the same sofa, but then why did it feel as if no time had passed?

Sofia’s return with a cup of tea interrupted him from his ruminations. “How does it feel to be back home?” she asked him as she served him the tea.
He took the cup from her hands and placed it on the coffee table. “It feels marvelous. I almost feel born again.” He took a couple of sips, relishing the double flavour—the sourness of the lemon mixed with the smoothness of earl grey. Sofia sat next to him again, and he took her hands in his. He drank some more while caressing her hands.

“You know,” he remarked, taking in the humble room with its plain furnishings, “much as I loved our house in Aegina, this place here is our real cocoon. We are impenetrable here.”

“I’m happy you feel that way. I was worried whether you’d miss Greece when we first got here. You’re a man of the world and you’ve spent your life trotting the globe, but I know Greece is your home.”

Cosmas gave a small grin. After twenty years by his side, Sofia knew him so well. He finished his tea and started to feel impatient. He hadn’t done any proper writing all those days at the hospital, and he now felt like an addict experiencing withdrawal symptoms. But first there was a loose end he needed to tie up. “Honey, have you checked our mail?” he suddenly asked her as if remembering something.

“No, I haven’t. I’ll go and fetch it now.”

Sofia slipped out to the letterbox and brought back a bunch of letters. “Let me see,” said Cosmas as he plucked them out of her hand. He sifted through them, checking the addresses. His eye fell on a letter from Jean Claude Moreau. His heart gave a sudden leap. That was the response he’d been waiting for concerning the performance of his play in Moreau’s theater in Paris. He tore open the envelope and started to read the note inside. Presently a dark cloud passed over his face.

“What does it say?” asked Sofia anxiously, concerned at the color of his face.

Cosmas hesitated for a moment. Then he read it out to her: “Dear Mr. Eleftherakis, I hope this letter finds you well. I’m afraid I have to be the bearer of bad news. I’m sorry to announce that in view of the recent controversy regarding your work we have decided not to stage your play in our theater. I hope you understand that we cannot risk a backlash against our theatre, especially in light of the acts of vandalism against the offices of Les Temps Modernes. Should any similar acts occur in our theater, the financial and the human cost will be too high to bear. It gives us great sadness that some segments of our society cannot tolerate the free expression of ideas and we wish you the best of luck with your play elsewhere.”

“That’s a disgrace,” Sofia exclaimed in an unusually loud voice.
Cosmas snorted derisively. “What do you expect when the so-called literati leave it down to the most conservative segment of the public to decide how to treat your work?”

“You’re right of course, but I beg you, please, please, don’t let this get you down, honey. We both know you have nothing to prove. This man is totally short-sighted. A year down the road he’ll be kicking himself when he realizes the chance he’s missed.”

“Don’t worry, my dear” Cosmas said after a short pause. “I promise you, I’m not going to let him spoil my mood.” He suddenly stood up and turned towards the interior staircase. “Now I’m going to go upstairs and start working.”

“But it’s only your first day back home.” Sofia said weakly. She knew she was protesting in vain, but she felt she had to say something anyway. “Get some rest today and start working tomorrow.”

“I’m afraid it’s not possible. I have work to do. I haven’t written a single word all these days. I have to get back to writing right away.” He could have told her much more. He could have told her that all those days in the hospital he had felt very acutely that something vital was missing from his life. He could have told her that lying in the hospital bed day after day unable to write, he had realized the obvious, namely that writing was the most important thing in his life. That it was his whole life. She was of course very important too, but he felt a little the way he’d made Jesus feel when confronted with his mother’s protests that he didn’t care about her pain at seeing him suffer. Jesus had ignored her protests, reasoning that his duty towards his mother was dwarfed by his duty towards the entire human race. He had had him treat his own mother cruelly so he could be kind to all the mothers in the world throughout all time. By the same token, he’d felt that Sofia was the most important person in his life, but he wouldn’t let his love for her prevent him from sharing with the world his vision of openness, courage, and magnanimity. But he didn’t want to hurt her, so he said nothing and just climbed upstairs to his study.

Sofia, who had half-understood all that intuitively, got up too and watched him climb the stairs in silence. A little before he reached the landing, she shouted across the room that she’d bring him some more tea after a while. Then she sat down again, and she felt flooded with bliss at being back home together with Cosmas. They were sitting alone in separate rooms, yet she could feel his presence in the house, and it was as if he was right by her side throughout the evening despite his being upstairs all the time.
Earlier the same day the literature committee of the Swedish Academy convened to vote for that year’s Nobel Prize in Literature. The meeting took place in a large room on the second floor of the large hall where the prize-giving ceremony would also be held, six weeks from that day. Bjork Angstrom, the head of the Academy, chaired the meeting. After waiting for the members to take their seats around the long conference table, he gave them a formal welcome and declared the meeting opened. A sense of expectation hung in the air of the high-ceilinged room.

“As you know,” Angstrom went on to say, “today we will decide this year’s prize winner. But before we take a vote, I’d like to let you know that two days ago we received a letter that may have an impact on today’s vote.”

“Who’s the letter from?” asked Hjalmar Gullberg, who was the second most senior and one of the most prominent members of the committee.

“It’s from Reverent Christoforos, the Archbishop of Greece,” said Angstrom.

The committee members threw puzzled looks at each other. “What does the Archbishop of Greece have to do with the Literature Prize?” asked Gullberg, voicing the query on everyone’s lips.

“It will become clear when I read the letter to you.”

Angstrom picked up the letter from the table and put on his reading glasses. Silence fell in the room. Angstrom started to read in a clear, loud voice:

_We have been informed that the Greek writer Cosmas Eleftherakis is one of the candidates for this year’s Nobel Prize in Literature. The committee has endorsed his nomination laboring under the misapprehension that Cosmas Eleftherakis represents the best that contemporary Greek literature has to offer. As one of the most prominent citizens of Greece, I can testify to the fact that this is far from being the case. In fact, and quite aside from the fact that his writing has no literary merit whatsoever, Cosmas Eleftherakis has brought shame and disgrace to our country. As his last three books make it abundantly clear, Mr. Eleftherakis evinces flagrant disregard for our cherished cultural heritage and our Christian way of life. But it is his latest work, a passage of which was recently published in the French literary magazine _Les Temps Modernes_, that has committed the most egregious act of sacrilege as it depicts Jesus Christ, the founder of our faith, as a coward who cringes before the cross and prefers an earthly life to the Kingdom of Heaven and as a fornicator, copulating with a number of whores when his life is saved by the Devil. In doing so, Mr. Eleftherakis commits blasphemy against the Bible and_
profanes the sacred figure of Jesus. Should you have any doubts as to that, please read the passages we have underlined below.

Here Angstrom paused, took off his glasses, and told the committee that a copy of what looked like a segment from Eleftherakis’ book was enclosed in the package they had received, and various passages had indeed been underlined in it. Then he put his glasses back on and continued to read:

>This man has no respect for anything sacred, and his works are an affront to religion and morality. His purpose can be no other but to exhort the readers of his book towards a debased form of life that is inferior even to that of animals. For all these reasons, the Church of Greece, on behalf of the overwhelming majority of Greek people, solemnly pleads with the committee not to award the Literature Prize to Mr. Eleftherakis. A decision to the contrary would constitute a grievous error that would compromise the integrity of the committee and would expose it in the eyes of posterity as an accomplice to Eleftherakis’ project of dismantling Christianity.

Sincerely,

Christoforos, Archbishop of Greece

As soon as Angstrom’s voice tailed off, the room broke out into a rowdy murmur. Shouts of disapproval rent the air, but it was difficult to tell if they were meant for Eleftherakis or for the Archbishop.

“Listen!” Gullberg—who’d made no bones in private meetings with other members of the committee that the prize should be given to Eleftherakis—shouted above the hullabaloo. “The Archbishop of Greece can say whatever he likes, but I don’t see the reason why we should lend an ear to his ramblings. We’ve been entrusted with the task of identifying and rewarding the best writers of our time. Our brief does not include pleasing the Archbishop of Greece. After all, he is not the arbiter of literary taste, is he?”

“No, he is not, Gullberg,” said Bengt Hjelmqvist firmly, “but the reputation of the award is at stake. We can’t afford to become embroiled in a controversy involving religious sensibilities. If we give the prize to Eleftherakis, it will be seen as taking a stand against the official position of the Orthodox Church. This might diminish the prestige of the award.”

“Our reputation is indeed at risk,” agreed another member. “Why don’t we spare ourselves the trouble and give the prize to Camus?”
“That’s right,” seconded another one. “No-one will accuse us of discrimination if the award goes to Camus. He’s the favorite to win it anyway.”

“Camus may be a sensible choice,” Gullberg inteijected, “but on the other hand, Eleftherakis has been nominated far too many times to pass him by this time too.”

“Eleven, if I’m not mistaken,” contributed one member.

“There you go,” said Gullberg. “Eleven times. I think he should win it this time. He’s older than Camus and has produced a larger volume of work, and as for literary merit, they’re really neck and neck, so we should give it to Eleftherakis.”

“Being nominated before is no legitimate reason why he should win it this time,” objected Bengt Hjelmqvist. “We award the prize on the basis of merit, not seniority or sympathy.”

“Quiet everybody,” Angstrom shouted, his peremptory tone restoring order in the room. “We’ve heard the arguments from both sides. There is no point in carrying on this debate anymore. Now we have to put it to the vote. You’re all familiar with the procedure so I don’t need to explain it again. Just write your choice on the piece of paper you have in front of you on the table and place it inside the box in the middle of the table. The vote is anonymous as always.”

Chapter Fifteen

Several days passed. Sofia had just finished her morning tea when the phone rang. It was Antigone. Sofia brightened up at the sound of her friend’s voice. Unlike her own, Antigone’s life had been heady with excitement lately. Whatever news she had to impart would be a much-needed diversion from brooding on Cosmas’ health at home all day.

Antigone was back in Antibes and asked Sofia if she’d like to meet with her at a café. Sofia agreed with alacrity. They arranged to meet in an hour at the quiet café in the Place de Gaul where they’d had coffee the previous time they got together. As soon as she hung up, Sofia started trying on her most fashionable clothes, finally deciding on a brown skirt and cream top. She scurried upstairs to tell Cosmas—who was at his desk writing in between puffs of his pipe—she’d meet Antigone for coffee, then rushed out into the chilly wind-swept morning. Buttoning up her coat against the biting wind, she hurried towards Place de Gaul, certain the meeting with
Antigone had to do with Jacques. She reasoned that the fling with Laurent had run its natural course and her friend had come back to her senses.

When Sofia stepped into the woody warmth of the café, Antigone was already sitting at the corner table near the door with a steaming cup of coffee on her table. Antigone stood up, and the two friends hugged and kissed each other. Sofia sat down across from Antigone with her back to the door.

“I’m glad to see you back,” Sofia said fondly.

“Glad to see you too, my dear. I missed you, you know. How’s Cosmas?”

“Getting better each day, thank you.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

Sofia couldn’t quite read the vague smile that was playing on Antigone’s lips. A waiter came by and Sofia ordered coffee too. A light rain had started to fall outside. The café didn’t have any music, and the patter of the rain on the panes could be heard inside.

“So did you miss Antibes?”

Antigone pursed her lips. “No, my dear,” she said, “not at all. “To be honest with you, I much prefer Paris. There’s no other city where you can go to a different show or dance club each day of the week. Here you fall into a routine. It kills your spirit, you know.”

Sofia hesitated for a second. “Didn’t you come back to be reunited with Jacques?” she asked her friend, somewhat bewildered by her reply.

Antigone gave a wry smile. “Far from it, my dear,” she said firmly. “In fact, I’ve come back to discuss the divorce with Jacques.”

“Divorce?” exclaimed Sofia surprised. “Do you actually mean that?”

Antigone nodded her head while Sofia was trying to grasp the implications of what she’d just heard. Meanwhile her coffee was served.

“Have you already told him?” she said taking a sip.

“I have.”

“How did he take it?”

“Not so well, as could be expected. But he’s trying to hide it.”

“Well, what are you going to do now?”

“I’ll stay here for a few days. I’ll ask my lawyer to instigate divorce proceedings. Then I’ll go back to Paris. I’m moving in with Laurent, you know.”
Sofia couldn’t contain herself any more. “You’re asking for trouble leaving a man who loves you for someone who’s so many years younger than you. It makes no sense.” The words had just toppled out of her mouth. No sooner had she uttered them than she wanted to bite her tongue.

The veins in Antigone’s temple started to twitch. Sofia’s criticism had touched a sensitive chord. “Of all the people in the world,” she said in a semi-quavering voice, “I never expected you to tell me that. I thought you were on my side.”

“I’m sorry,” muttered Sofia, her face tensing up suddenly. “My words were faster than my brain. I didn’t mean to judge you. You know I have your best interests at heart.”

But Sofia’s outburst had opened the floodgates of recrimination; Antigone was a raging torrent now. “You’re just saying that because you spent your whole life with somebody who is more than twenty years older than you. You resent my relationship with Laurent because he’s younger than me, and you’re just plain envious because you’ll never know what it would be like to be married to someone of your own age.”

Now it was Sofia’s turn to be upset. Her face tightened into a frown. Antigone saw the expression on her face and relented. “I understand you, though,” she said conciliatorily. “I was into older men as well. But I got over it a while ago. Meeting Laurent opened my eyes. I decided I’d been putting up with Jacques’ old age tantrums long enough. I couldn’t take it anymore. I know people will think my relationship with Laurent is bound to be short-lived, that he will soon get bored and dump me for someone younger than me. Those thoughts have crossed my mind too. But no matter what you or anyone else thinks, I’m determined to live out my dream for as long as it lasts.”

Sofia drew a breath and replied in a firm voice: “Of course it’s your own life, Antigone, and only you can decide what to do with it. It’s not for me to give you a lecture on what’s best for you.”

“You yourself have told me several times that life doesn’t last forever, so I see no reason why I shouldn’t live for the moment. I’ve found true happiness, and I don’t care how long it lasts. Now if you excuse me.” She motioned for the waiter to come over and took her purse out of her bag. “I need to get going,” she said coldly as she rose from the table.

Cosmas’ novel came out in Greece with the title «Το Όραμα του Εσταυρωμένου» (The Vision of the Man on the Cross) three weeks before it was published in France. With Cosmas’
consent, the French translation bore a slightly different title: *Visions sur la Croix* (Visions on the Cross) as this title was deemed more evocative than the literal translation of the Greek title, *Visions du Crucifix*. There was a subtle shift in emphasis between the two titles: the Greek one emphasized the impact of the vision on the person undergoing the experience while the French one placed a greater emphasis on the experience itself—the vision as such. A few days after its publication in France, a representative of the Greek publishing house wrote to Cosmas to inform him that «Το Όραμα του Εσταυρωμένου» had already exceeded its print run of five thousand copies and that they were now going into second print.

Cosmas was reasonably pleased at the news. The numbers were fairly high, given the short period of time the book had been in circulation, though nowhere near as high as those reached by his two best-selling books, *A Night with the Santouri* and *Live or Die*. He didn’t expect to make much of a profit from the sales of the book in Greece. After all, the Greek market was much smaller than the French (or the German or the British) ones. But he derived a keen sense of moral satisfaction from the success of his book in his homeland. It proved that a substantial segment of the reading public remained loyal to him, impervious to the smear tactics of his opponents.

Now it remained to be seen whether it would be equally popular in France. So far his books had sold well in this country, though none of them had topped *A Night with the Santouri*, published roughly a decade ago. And he’d done what he could to ensure both the critical acclaim and the commercial success of *Visions sur la Croix*. Not one to leave things in the hands of the translator, no matter how competent he was, he had closely collaborated with him during the translation of each chapter to make sure his prose was rendered in French elegantly and accurately. Two weeks before the official release of the book, he had re-checked the work of the translator, and had given the final go ahead. And there was also a German edition in the pipeline, which was progressing quite well: the German translator had been sending chapters regularly to Cosmas over the last few months and now his work was almost complete.

His reliance on good translations for his books—his worldwide reputation as well as his very livelihood depended on the quality of the translations—foregrounded the importance of his style, of which he was well aware. Fashioning the ideal style—a style that was uniquely his, yet translated well into other languages—was a juggling act. Cosmas tried to avoid excessively idiosyncratic prose that might hamper the work of the translator while at the same time sneaking
into the manuscript the odd flamboyant adjective or striking fresh metaphor that were as uniquely his as his fingerprints and would mark him out from his fellow writers.

Overall, and despite the furor sparked by the vandalism incident, Cosmas had plenty of reasons besides the easy translatability of his style to be contented with his latest book. There was one thing that galled him, though. For his last three novels, the publishing house had planned a book signing event to celebrate their launch. No such event had been scheduled thus far, which meant the publishing house would probably pass this time around. Throughout the previous weeks Cosmas kept expecting the phone to ring or a letter to come through the mail informing him of the arrangement of a major event in a central bookstore in Paris. To his disappointment, no such information had been forthcoming. And he knew that if such an event had been in the works, he would have known it by now.

“The publisher hasn’t contacted me yet to organize a book signing event,” he told Sofia one morning.

“It doesn’t matter, honey,” said Sophie, with a hint of relief in her voice. Given his recent health problems, it was preferable to avoid any unnecessary risks—even a minor exertion such as appearing at a book event or reading from his book might cause him to relapse.

“It’s the first time they’re launching one of my books without a book signing.”

“They probably fear a backlash from the church. The French church can be just as reactionary as any other, I should think.”

“They’re a bunch of cowards, that’s what they are,” he exclaimed suddenly in a rare burst of indignation.

“Don’t get excited, darling. You don’t need a book to anyway. Your work speaks for itself. These events serve only as fodder for the press. You already have a solid reader base. It’s your loyal readers who’ll buy the book, and they’re not waiting for the marketing gimmicks of the publishing house.”

“You’re right again my dear,” conceded Cosmas with a nod. “It’s funny for me to say it, but if I had to choose between the approval of the public and the approval of the critics, I’d go for the public any day of the week.”

Meanwhile a couple of days after the book’s official release in France, Sofia went out for a walk around Antibes intending to check it out in the bookstores. Every time one of Cosmas’
books would come out she’d go to the central bookstore of the town and look for it in the window and on the shelves. The local bookstores always carried his books, albeit not out of any sense of localism as Cosmas lived virtually incognito in Antibes. She walked out to the bookstore wondering if she would see Cosmas’ book in the window. Could it be the case that they would tuck it away into a hard-to-reach corner of the bookstore because of its content? She hastened her steps towards the bookstore, ever more fearful that the book wouldn’t be in the window. She rounded a corner and came to the front of the bookstore. Yes! Yes! There it was, sitting in the bottom left hand corner of the glass-fronted window. She gazed at it intently. It was a medium-sized rather plump paperback. In the cover the figure of a somewhat fleshier-than-usual Jesus in a ruby-colored robe stood in the foreground, staring vacantly into space. Cosmas’ name was printed in sizeable letters at the top of the cover. The title of the novel figured right beneath his name in slightly larger type. She felt a sense of pride mingled with unease. The work was out. It was now up to the public and, alas, the critics to determine its fate.

She bent her steps homewards, her mind seething with thoughts. Cosmas was upstairs, as usual. A few days earlier he’d started working on a new novel, but he was loath to discuss its topic before it took a more concrete shape. He was bound to be fully absorbed in the writing of the first draft right now. She knew first drafts were messy and confusing affairs, and she tried to stay out of Cosmas’ way at least during the first stages of a new project. But the topic of the new novel wasn’t uppermost in her mind at present: Cosmas’ wellbeing overrode all other concerns. She didn’t mind Cosmas’ devotion to his writing. His lofty mission couldn’t be accomplished without his extraordinary, at times even monomaniacal, depth of commitment. But she’d like to find a way to mitigate the intensity of his emotional excitement until he had fully recovered.

She wasn’t very successful. Cosmas worked feverishly over the next few weeks. To tease out the major premise for his new novel, he wrote a number of scenes, most of them unconnected, fleshed out character descriptions and produced different plot outlines, all the while trying to integrate the disparate pieces of his raw material into a coherent and cohesive picture. He was familiar with this process. He’d used it in the past to delve into an amorphous new idea until it took concrete shape and its various aspects—the characters, the plot and subplots, the main theme—began to fall into place. But one part of his mind was still thinking about the book he’d just published. So over the next few days, he’d take upstairs the newspapers that Sophia would
bring in early in the morning and scan the culture and entertainment sections for reviews of his novel.

The reviews, of which there were quite a few, were a mixed bunch. Some of them were stunningly perceptive. The critics who wrote them seemed to have understood his intentions completely. He recognized some of the names: Paul Bénichou, Michel Riffaterre, Georges Lecomte. These critics, who moved in avant-garde circles, widely praised his novel for its boldness and extolled his treatment of Christ. They correctly identified his reasons for emphasizing the human dimension of Christ, which were to promote empathy with the figure of Jesus, induce readers to see aspects of themselves in his early life and inspire them to attain similar spiritual grandeur. Cosmas felt happy that his underlying message—which was that if a normal human being, as he’d made Jesus Christ out to be at the outset of the novel, could reach divine status, then ordinary people such as the readers themselves could also elevate themselves spiritually and should in fact aim to do so—was not lost on them.

To his dismay, though, the critics who praised the novel were far outnumbered by those who panned it. His many detractors cited different reasons for their disapproval of the novel. Some denounced his portrayal of Jesus as a fornicator, overlooking the fact that Jesus engaged in sexual intercourse only in a vision, as an affront to the religious sensibilities of Christian readers; others accused him of distorting the historical truth by making Jesus a cross maker and introducing a vision that is not mentioned in the Scriptures; still others attacked the novel on aesthetic and artistic grounds, criticizing the whole conception as self-contradictory and flawed. One particular review had etched itself on his mind: the reviewer had accused him of projecting onto Jesus the conflict between flesh and spirit that he (Cosmas) experienced himself. The reviewer had gone on to say that according to the Scriptures, the real Jesus never went through that same conflict and that the forty-day test he endured in the wilderness was a test of willpower, not of carnal temptation. Projecting the writer’s own struggle and spiritual dilemmas into the figure of Jesus, the reviewer had concluded, was the ultimate act of self-absorption, showing us how self-centered Eleftherakis had become.

Cosmas strove hard to take the bad reviews in his stride. He knew after all that any writer who dared to reveal the innermost depths of his soul through his work exposed himself to censure. The more deeply confessional and distinctly idiosyncratic the work, the greater the number of the people who took offense and the more copious the ammunition it delivered to their
hands. But he couldn’t help feeling downhearted at times. His previous novels had also received bad reviews, but nowhere near as many as this one. And whereas the negative criticism he had received in the past emanated from very specific quarters of the scholarly community—those that represented conservative and reactionary positions—his new book had well and truly divided critics. But even in the midst of reading the bad reviews, in between puffs of his old pipe as he slouched against his chair in his study, there was one particular thought that regularly consoled him: history would vindicate him. As history progressed, people’s minds were constantly being broadened, so it was mathematically certain that future generations would see the love of humanity that permeated his book, and they would come to understand and gradually embrace the message of self-sacrifice and spiritual nobility he’d sent out to the world.

On the day *The Vision of the Man on the Cross* came out in Greece, Archbishop Christoforos got a copy of the book and read it from cover to cover. When he finally put it down on the arm of his armchair at three o’clock in the morning, having finished the last sentence with yet another snort of rage, he was beside himself with indignation. The portrayal of Jesus as a fornicator was the most disgraceful attack on Christianity he’d ever read. Not even Muslims had ever dared to treat Jesus so irreverently. Screwing up his face into an expression of disgust, he grasped the book and hurled it into a corner of his sitting room. He stood up from his armchair and started pacing the room. That was the last straw, he thought angrily. The moral state of his flock and his own leadership of the church were at stake. Blaming himself for not doing enough to stop the publication of the book, he decided to put an end to this matter without further delay.

The very next morning he set up a committee consisting of four bishops loyal to him—Nektarios, Isidoros, Christodoulous and Athinagoras—and procured a few more copies of the book. Christoforos gave the bishops a brief description of the contents of the book, then asked them to take it home and read it thoroughly. Their task was to highlight all the blasphemous passages and identify the breach of dogma or heresy committed in each of them. The four bishops divided the labor, undertaking a portion of the novel each. After poring over their assigned segment of the book closeted at home over the next couple of days, they all met again in Christoforos’ office. They handed him back their copies, each with several highlighted excerpts and annotations scribbled on the margin, and proceeded to deliver themselves of their unanimous verdict: the book was the most blasphemous text ever published. Christoforos
thanked them for their labors and within hours he’d called an official meeting of the Holy Synod in the offices of the Archdiocese.

The meeting was called for Friday evening. Christoforos made sure that all twelve bishops who were permanent members of the Holy Synod were present.

“First of all I trust that all of you have read the novel. Is there anyone amongst you who still hasn’t?” asked Christoforos at the start of the meeting.

All twelve bishops shook their heads.

Christoforos spoke again: “Then we shall proceed with the business of the meeting. First of all, you will hear some extracts from the novel followed by critical remarks prepared by a committee that read and annotated the book. Then we will confer to determine the appropriate course of action.”

Everyone nodded, and an expectant silence fell around the room. For the next two hours the most offending extracts from the novel were read out loud by Nektarios and Athinagoras. Each extract was followed by a brief commentary that identified the relevant contravention of Christian doctrine while the listeners rolled their eyes and tutted their tongues.

“I’ve never come across anything more blasphemous in my whole life,” exclaimed Polikarpos when the reading came to an end.

“He’s the son of the anti-Christ,” Isidoros shouted in a fury. “The anti-Christ come down to earth.”

“We must ban the book at once,” suggested Polikarpos in response.

“It’s too late for that now,” asserted Christoforos, shaking his head regretfully. “It’s already on the shelves of all the bookstores in Greece. It can only be recalled by act of government, and the government is unfortunately unwilling to take any action as was made abundantly clear by the Prime Minister’s speech in parliament the other day when the Education and Religion Minister proposed a ban of Eleftherakis’ books.”

“That’s to be expected,” interjected Athinagoras. “Eleftherakis is on good terms with Queen Frederica.”

“If we can’t ban the book,” said Nektarios, “then we must do everything in our power to defend the church and discredit the writer.”

“Allleluia,” agreed Anaxagoras, “Eleftherakis must be crushed. I’m sorry to sound so harsh, but he’s forced our hand. We have no option but to defend our faith.”
“That’s right,” agreed Nektarios. “We have a sacred duty to our flock to discredit him. Our response must be swift and decisive. There’s no time to waste. Our credibility is at stake.”

“Yes,” echoed Polikarpos. “Our flock will accuse us of condoning sacrilege if we allow this to go unanswered.”

“Would you now care to recommend a course of action?” asked Christoforos, his eyes scanning the room.

“In light of the gravity of the offence, we have no choice but to excommunicate him,” said Polikarpos.

“I agree,” said Nektarios. “We should all vote to excommunicate him.”

“But we’ve never done this to anybody in all the years I’ve been a bishop,” demurred Athanasius, the bishop of Fokida.

“Indeed,” said Nektarios, “excommunication is a very rare measure. We should only resort to it in cases where someone has caused grievous harm to the church. But dearest Athanasius, I’m afraid Eleftherakis is indeed the kind of person who justifies this extreme measure. He revealed himself as a blasphemer against the church in his previous two books. But this one crowns them all. This one goes far beyond the pale. It is the work of the devil, and this man is the devil incarnate. It is our duty to defend the Christian faith against him.”

“Even if what you say is true,” replied Athanasius immediately, “which by the way I highly doubt, we should bear in mind that negative publicity is good for the person you seek to discredit. If we excommunicate him, we will turn him into a hero. In the eyes of many people, even members of our faith, he will become a martyr of the spirit.”

“I agree with Athanasius,” said Demetrius, the bishop of Karditsa. “We were all distressed to hear Jesus Christ being portrayed as a sinner, but we should exercise restraint. We who lead by example should refrain from being so overly judgmental. Instead of excommunicating him, we could issue a statement informing our flock about the blasphemy of the book. Then it will be up to them to decide whether to buy it or not. We shouldn’t deprive people of their freedom of choice. That’s not our mission.”

“I have an idea,” said Theofilos, the bishop of Arta. Everybody turned towards him. “Let’s issue a public statement asking Eleftherakis to repent publicly. If he does so, we will then show the magnanimity of the church, and we will forgive him for his sins.”
“This is totally utopian,” remarked Polikarpos. “Eleftherakis would never repent for his sins. In his eyes he hasn’t committed any sin, and we are the ones who are transgressing by seeking to stifle artistic expression.”

“I agree,” said Nektarios. “Eleftherakis would never repent. We should go ahead and excommunicate him. This will send a clear message to everybody out there that we unequivocally condemn his books and his ideas.”

“Thank you, brethren,” said Christoforos. “There is nothing more to discuss. The debate has come to an end. You’ve heard the arguments for and against. Now it’s time to vote.” He left a pause. Silence engulfed the room. “There’s a motion that Cosmas Eleftherakis be excommunicated by the church of Greece that all of us here represent. Who agrees with that motion?”

Ten people said “ay”.

“Is there anyone who dissents?” asked Christoforos.

“I choose to abstain,” said Athanasius.

“I will abstain too,” said Demetrius.

“All right,” declared Christoforos. “The Church of Greece has voted to excommunicate Cosmas Eleftherakis with ten votes in favor and two abstentions. The official business of the meeting is concluded.”

“So that’s it,” crowed Polikarpos. “That mean devil has been excommunicated!”

“Not yet,” said Christoforos. “According to protocol, we need the approval of Athenagoras before we proceed. All excommunication decisions must be ratified by the Patriarchate of Constantinople before they go ahead. We’ll send the papers to him right away. Meanwhile we will issue a press release condemning Cosmas Eleftherakis and The Vision of the Man on the Cross for its blasphemous content. We will declare that the writer has no place amongst Orthodox Christians and issue an appeal to all Christians the world over not to read the book. This will prepare the ground for the excommunication, which, I am certain, will follow shortly afterwards. Thank you for your attendance, brethren. The meeting is closed.”

Chapter Sixteen
One day at the beginning of October Cosmas and Sofia went for a walk along the seafront of Antibes. The weather was on the chilly side, but a brilliant sun had broken through the clouds and shone resplendently from an azure sky. “It’s a beautiful day, honey,” Sofia had gushed as she brought him tea in his office. Cosmas saw her face transfigured with an almost childish joy. Within seconds her infectious happiness had rubbed off on him. He decided to leave his writing aside for a couple of hours and take her for a walk by the sea.

They slung their coats over their shoulders and walked towards the old city walls over by the harbour, which were only a few blocks away from their house. Then, they strolled along the promenade, stopping from time to time to enjoy the scenery as it opened out all around them: the green-blue sea that sparkled merrily in the morning sun, the gentle hills behind the sea carpeted with dense trees, the grey-blue mountains looming regal in the distance, the blue sky up above framing this enchanting tableau. The joy of creation in all its glory. They were coming close to the edge of town when Cosmas stopped at a kiosk and bought a newspaper. They found a bench overlooking the sea and sat down on it to glance through the paper. Cosmas started to thumb through the front pages while Sofia gazed out at the still blue sea softly agleam in the morning sun. They kept on talking as Cosmas scanned the headlines without paying much attention to them. He suddenly stopped talking to Sofia and brought the newspaper closer to his eyes. Sofia looked up at him and saw the muscles on his face twitching as he focused hard on something the paper had printed.

“What’s the matter?” she asked slightly alarmed.

“There’s an article about me in the paper.”

“An article about you? What does it say?”

Cosmas took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and coughed several times into it. “It says that the Greek Orthodox Church has condemned me as a heretic and denounced my books.”

“What? No, that can’t be! Give it to me!”

Cosmas handed her the newspaper and pointed to the article. Sofia ran her eyes swiftly over the text. Her reading merely confirmed what Cosmas had just told her. The Greek Orthodox Church had issued a formal statement decrying Cosmas as a sworn enemy of Christianity and enjoining all true Christians against reading his books, which the Holy Synod had denounced as “downright blasphemous.”
“That’s an absolute disgrace!” exclaimed Sofia with a note of exasperation. “I can’t believe how someone can distort reality so brazenly! Especially those ‘Holy Fathers’ as they dare to call themselves …”

“And to think that this libelous text will now be published all around the world!” Cosmas echoed indignantly.

“Is that how your country, the country you love so dearly and you’ve served so well, repays your service to it? They ought to be ashamed of themselves. I just can’t understand why they’ve chosen you to vent their spleen on.”

Cosmas pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket again and started to cough convulsively into it. “You’ve surely heard the saying,” he rasped out hoarsely when he’d stopped coughing, “no-one’s a prophet in his own land. The only thing these ‘pillars of the church’ care about is how to maintain a complete monopoly on all religious matters. They hate me because they can’t tolerate independent thinking. They can’t accept someone else’s perspective on the concept of divinity.”

“That’s a bad cough you’ve got,” said Sofia, trying not to sound overly anxious. “Maybe we should go home.”

“Not yet,” protested Cosmas. “It’s so wonderful here. Let’s stay a little while longer.”

“OK,” agreed Sofia, clasping his hand, “but I’ll give you a warm compress when we get back.”

“Yes, why don’t you do that? A compress may help. Then, I’ll sit down to write a reply to that statement.”

“Why would you write a reply?”

“But, of course, to send it to the Holy Synod.”

“Are you sure that won’t be more trouble?”

“No, but I can’t let this go unanswered. They have sullied my name, and I have the right to respond.”

“By adding more fuel to the fire?”

“I’m not the one who started the whole thing, but I’m not afraid of them. If they want a confrontation, they’ll have it.”

“But you don’t have anything to gain from it.”
“I do. My self-respect. My duty to myself and all those who believe in the values I stand for. Listen, I can’t just stay silent. People will be expecting a response from me.”

Sofia gave a sigh. Dawdling some more wasn’t such a bad idea after all. “Let’s think about it when we get home, shall we?”

On the way back home, their thoughts were hounded by the contents of the article. “I don’t think the Holy Synod understands what they’ve done,” Sofia commented at one point. “I’m sure they’ll regret that statement. It’s only a matter of time before people turn against them.”

Cosmas chuckled bitterly. “Are you talking about Greek people? Oh, so very few of them can think for themselves … The vast majority are still manipulated by the Church. They’ll believe anything the church tells them without questioning it.”

“When they see the outpouring of support you’ll receive from outside Greece they’ll come to their senses and see the Holy Synod for the bunch of hypocrites that they are.”

They’d now reached the Old Town again. It was almost noon, and the streets were thronged with strollers. Cosmas took a good look at them. “I don’t know about the outpouring of support,” he said pessimistically. “French people are less submissive to their church than Greek people are to the Orthodox Church, but their religious tolerance has its limits too. They won’t be too quick to come to my defense. Anyway, I don’t need anyone’s support. I can stick up for myself.”

“I’m sure you can, honey,” she said tousling his hair. She’d changed her mind during the walk. Cosmas’ fearlessness had rubbed off on her. He was right, of course. The letter from the Holy Synod merited a response. Only a coward would back out of such a provocation, and Cosmas wasn’t one of them. She was now certain he’d write a response worthy of his standing in the literary world and of all the free spirits that he represented.

No sooner had Sofia opened the door of their flat than Cosmas rushed to the staircase and climbed the stairs to his study two at a time. He sat down at his desk and set about drafting a letter to the Holy Synod at once. Seething with indignation, he dashed off a letter that bristled with invective, the sharp aggressive strokes of his pen almost ripping a hole through the paper. He accused the Holy Synod of being a pack of Pharisees and a stigma to Christianity and asserted that his treatment of Jesus was much more consonant with the spirit of Christianity than their bigoted dogmas. He read the letter to himself, then shook his head regretfully. No, that
wouldn’t do. He’d channeled all his anger and frustration into these lines. But now that he’d got it out of his system, he understood that he couldn’t send them such a spiteful letter. It would make the wrong impression and make him look vindictive.

For the next two hours he wrote feverishly, producing version after version of the letter. Some of them were terse and choleric. Others were involved and self-exculpatory. But none of them struck the right note, and he ended up tearing them all up. In the end and after giving up on doing any of his own writing for the day, he composed what he thought of as a short, subtle, rhetorically sophisticated missive shot through with antithesis: “You gave me a curse, Holy fathers, I give you a blessing: may your conscience be as clear as mine and may you be as moral and religious as I.” He rushed down the stairs and showed the letter to Sophia, who was sitting on the couch reading the rest of the newspaper he’d bought earlier. She read it twice, then nodded her head.

“It’s subtle, but the message comes across,” she said with a wry smile. “In just two lines it exposes their self-righteousness and the injustice they’ve done to you.”

“Good! When you find the time can you type up two copies of it?”

“Two copies? Why two?”

“We’ll send one of them to the Head Offices of the Church of Greece in Athens and the other one to the Reuters news agency.”

It was late morning on yet another sunny day in Athens. Having conducted the morning service at the Cathedral, Christoforos was now sitting at his desk filling in some paperwork. The deacon who acted as his secretary walked in after knocking on the door three times and handed him a sealed envelope. “It’s from his Holiness, Patriarch Athenagoras, your Grace,” announced the deacon. Christoforos’ face lit up. This was the letter he’d been so avidly waiting for. It had arrived with a couple of days’ delay, but it didn’t matter. What was more important was that it was here after all. He held off opening the letter for a while. His eyes hazed over as he started to conjure up the sequence of events that would follow Athenagoras’ ratification of his proposal: the official document proclaiming Eleftherakis’ excommunication signed unanimously by the Holy Synod; the headlines in the papers; the jubilation among his flock; and most crucially, the face of the blasphemer when he read the punishment and realized with inexorable finality that
no-one, no matter what his layman credentials are, can turn against the church with impunity. With a euphoric smile on his face, he opened the letter, refocused his eyes and started reading:

The Patriarchate has read the recommendation of the Church of Greece that Cosmas Eleftherakis be condemned as a heretic and punished with excommunication very rigorously and bestowed on it the thoughtful attention it undoubtedly merits. After careful consideration, we have decided not to sanction this extreme measure for two chief reasons. First of all, excommunication constitutes an unconscionably severe punishment. The Catholic Church applies this measure frequently and for a variety of offenses, some of them not particularly grievous, but we have a sacred duty and a noble mission not to follow in their footsteps, regardless of the severity of the transgression. The Orthodox Church ought to embody a spirit of mercifulness, rather than vindictiveness. Only Our Lord has the power to make such judgments as your letter asks us to endorse.

Just as importantly, excommunication is hardly justifiable in this particular case. Eleftherakis’ novels, indeed all novels, are products of the human imagination. Works of fiction should not be confounded with religious tracts or treated as such. The line between literature and theology is perfectly clear to the Patriarchate and should be clear to the Church of Greece too. What is also abundantly clear to the Patriarchate is that in the novel that you denounce as blasphemous, The Vision on the Cross, which we have read carefully in the English translation, Our Saviour Jesus Christ serves as a source of inspiration for the readers, be they believers or non-believers. Indeed the readers are called upon to resist the temptation to live a life of material ease, as Jesus Christ does at the end of the novel, and endeavour instead to nurture their spiritual dimension, which is hardly a reproachable undertaking.

For the aforesaid reasons the Patriarchate does not approve of Eleftherakis’ excommunication and also recommends that that the Church of Greece tones down its opposition to his work. We firmly believe that it is not in the best interests of the church to be seen to oppose men of letters, especially men of Eleftherakis’ stature, whose fame goes beyond the borders of our country and who is currently the chief representative of our literature overseas. Such opposition harms the interests of the church by making it seem spiteful and vengeful in the eyes of its flock. In closing the Patriarchate considers it incumbent upon all of us to channel our energies towards promoting understanding and forgiveness and believes that we should all incarnate in our daily life a spirit of love and compassion for our fellow men and women no matter who they are and what they believe in.

On behalf of the Patriarchate
Athenagoras, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople

Christoforos lifted his eyes from the letter. During the act of reading it, the smile had drained from his face, which had now assumed a grim look. He thought about reading it a second time but instantly dismissed the prospect. He didn’t want to feel the same jabs in his heart yet again. He dropped the letter on his desk and put his hands on his face. He stayed like that for a while, nursing his mortification. It would take him a long time to get over the embarrassment and humiliation inflicted on him by Athenagoras, for he had no doubt in his mind that the letter was written exclusively by the Patriarch himself, who wielded absolute power over the council of the Patriarchate. His temples started to throb. It was easy enough for Athenagoras to take the moral high ground. Declaring himself the savior of the weak while in reality condoning the evil actions of unrepentant sinners would make him look virtuous in the eyes of the decadent bourgeoisie who made up the bulk of his supporters. In contrast, he himself, the only member of the clergy who had the courage to stand up and be counted without regard for the cost would come across as mean and vengeful in the wake of the Patriarch’s intervention.

Suddenly, as if a spell was lifted, he took his hands off his face and snorted with rage. An imprecation escaped his lips, a phrase he couldn’t be heard using in public, but to his relief, the door was closed. No, he couldn’t do anything to reverse this preposterous decision or offset the loss of prestige it would entail in the eyes of his flock and the Holy Synod, but he wouldn’t give up. Clenching his fist, he resolved to do anything in his power not to allow the blasphemer, for he would never share the misguided pseudo-idealism of his “all-forgiving” higher-up, to have the last word.

The voting at the Swedish Academy was over. The votes were counted, and Albert Camus was declared the winner. He had received one more vote than Eleftherakis, who came second. A sense of relief permeated the room after the announcement of the results. A potential controversy had been averted. Few people would object to the choice of Camus, and no-one could accuse the committee of wrongdoing Eleftherakis as the names of runners-up were not divulged. Gullberg accepted the outcome with a heavy heart. He’d tried hard till the end to sway the committee in Eleftherakis’ favor, but while the letter was being read out in the room he’d sensed he’d been fighting a losing battle. He could think of a couple of members of the committee who would have voted for Eleftherakis had it not been for the admonition by the Church of Greece to do
otherwise. The letter had planted the seeds of doubt in their hearts, and in an even battle they’d finally opted for the most secure choice, avoiding the trouble of more controversy and in-fighting. The meeting was declared closed. Gullberg would have to stay behind. Together with the chairman and two more members they’d have to draft the justification for the award.

The Prize Announcement was immediately sent to the press. The next morning the decision of the committee was reported by all the major newspapers around the world. *Le Monde* printed it on the front page: “Nobel Prize goes to Albert Camus.” Next to the headline was a photograph of the winner’s face, his forehead pursed in intense concentration, his eyes cast downwards. Under the picture the caption ran: “The new giant of French literature—the arch-rival of Jean Paul Sartre—was the favorite to win it.” *Le Monde* carried a lengthy feature on Camus in its front pages, which started with the announcement of the Swedish Academy—“The Nobel Prize in Literature 1957 was awarded to Albert Camus ‘for his important literary production, which with clear-sighted earnestness illuminates the problems of the human conscience in our times’”—before going on to detail Camus’ life and work.

Early the next morning Cosmas’ publisher called him to break the news. Cosmas heard him out with equanimity, then thanked him and without further comment put the phone down. He went to the sofa and sat down next to Sofia, who was savoring her first cup of tea. He told her the news, still calm.

“I hope you’re not too disappointed,” she said gently.

“Well, I half-expected it after all this uproar,” he said with a tone of resignation, not knowing how close he’d come to winning the prize that year.

Sofia tried to sound reassuring: “It’s not a big deal, darling. You’ll get it for sure next year.”

“If I’m still alive, that is.”

“Of course you’ll be alive,” exclaimed Sofia, trying to swallow a lump in her throat. The idea of Cosmas’ death was unthinkable.

That night Cosmas went to bed early, but he couldn’t doze off. With Sofia lying fast asleep next to him, he sat up in the darkness, his eyes half open, reminiscing about various incidents of his life, from his childhood in Crete all the way to old age. Jumbled memories sprang forward from the back of his mind, without any sequence or logic. Then he drifted into a series of reflections. His life had been an uphill battle, but now he’d reached the highest point, and from
here on out he couldn’t ascend any further. He had an overwhelming sense the Nobel Prize had eluded him forever. He’d had his chance, but Camus had, perhaps predictably, prevailed. Was he a better writer than Camus? The comparison was futile. Pitting writers against one another was at best a concession to subjectivity, at worst an indulgence in vanity. But his heart had fluttered wildly at the prospect of scooping up the Nobel Prize, and he would have died a happier man if he had won it. His thoughts turned to the future, his death and the time beyond it. Would the dissolution of his body be tantamount to the extinction of his consciousness? And if so, would it at all matter what his legacy would be if he was gone, returned to the abyss from which we all spring and to which we all return? It was in the early hours of the morning when, frazzled out from his endless ruminations, he finally drifted into a dark dreamless sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, a faint amber light had snuck into the room through the curtains. He opened his eyes slowly and tried to prop himself up against the headboard. With ever-mounting terror, he realized that he couldn’t move. Every cell and sinew of his body felt numb. As he came fully awake, he felt a convulsive need to cough, but a tight constriction in his throat choked back his coughs. He was still in agony and trying to understand what was happening to him when Sofia woke up some minutes later.

“Are you OK, honey?” she asked, seeing his flushed and fraught face.

“No,” Cosmas said weakly.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t stand,” Cosmas said in a muffled voice. “I can’t even cough.”

Sofia fought a rising tide of panic. “Shall I call a doctor?” she asked.

Cosmas thought for a second. “No, just … bring me … some tea.”

“All right, honey, but don’t try to talk. It will make things worse.”

She rose and made tea in the kitchen and brought it back to Cosmas with a glass of water, but that didn’t help matters. Cosmas could hardly lift his head to sip the tea or the water. “I’ll get a doctor,” said Sofia. Cosmas nodded his head. Sofia had to make several phone calls before she found a doctor who could come round at once. Two hours later the doctor knocked on their door up. He was a middle-aged man neither of them knew. He examined Cosmas at length in the bedroom, then closed the door behind him and took Sofia to the living room.

“He’s in a bad way,” he said in a low tone. “He should be taken to hospital immediately.”

“What is he suffering from, doctor?”
“I’m not sure. Perhaps some rare disease he may have contracted somewhere. But he needs to be admitted to a hospital where they can check him out. You can’t get an accurate diagnosis unless he undergoes some tests first.”

“Is he strong enough to endure a trip to Paris?”

“I think so. But you must take him there at once. It’s urgent.”

As soon as the doctor left, Sofia got a taxi to the train station and booked two tickets for Paris on the early morning train. She rushed back home and tried to nurse Cosmas back to somewhat better health. Late in the afternoon he was able to sit up, and she fed him a bowl of soup. Throughout the night Cosmas ran a high fever. Sofia stayed by his side, putting compresses on him, falling asleep every now and then and only to wake up a few minutes later.

Early in the morning, they got into a taxi and went to the train station. The trip to Paris was trying. Cosmas could hardly sit. They reached Paris in the afternoon, and they went straight to the Clinique Aragon by taxi. On his arrival at the clinic, Cosmas was examined by a doctor, then by several others.

It was in the afternoon the next day when the head doctor came by and took Sofia aside.

“Your husband is suffering from a rare strain of Asiatic flu.”

“The Asiatic flu? What is that?”

“It’s an outbreak of influenza coming from Asia. It started out in East Asia sometime in February, but it has since spread all over Europe and it’s also spreading in South and North America.”

“How serious is it?”

“It is quite serious. It has already been classified as a pandemic. I’m afraid it’s claimed the lives of quite a few people already.”

“But how could he have gotten it?”

“Has he recently come into contact with anyone who’d travelled to an Asian country?”

“Well, we were in China a month ago.”

“There you have it, then. He must have contracted it while you were there.”

“But he was all right when we got back home.” Sofia hesitated for a moment. “Well, in fact he was a little bit tired and that’s why we came to the clinic, but you examined him then, and you didn’t find anything.”
“I’m afraid these diseases can be very insidious. It’s not unusual for some strains of the flu to take a bit of time to incubate. He was already afflicted with it when you first came here, but it hadn’t yet developed into a full-blown flu.”

“Will he be able to fight back?”

“I don’t know. His immune system has been weakened. But we’ll do our best. We hope that his body will respond to the treatment.”

For the next two days Cosmas was subjected to a series of examinations. His high fever wouldn’t go down much, and he needed Sofia’s or the nurse’s help to get up and use the bathroom. Sofia was worried out of her mind but tried to keep a cool head. Cosmas needed her by his side and worrying would only make matters worse. Early in the morning of the third day, a team of doctors assembled by his bed and started conferring. Sofia, who’d been asked to get out, watched them anxiously through the small glass window in the upper part of the door, hoping they’d have good news. After a long consultation, the head doctor came out and took Sofia aside. He told her the Clinique Aragon didn’t specialize in flu-related cases. Though he personally had thought it better to keep him in the clinic, the majority deemed it advisable to transfer Cosmas to another hospital more specialized to deal with such cases. Sofia asked the doctor to recommend one, and he recommended the University Medical Center in Freiburg in southwestern Germany.

With the help of the doctor, Sofia made the necessary arrangements for Cosmas’ transfer there. The next morning Cosmas was transported to the train station in an ambulance, carried onto the train by the ambulance crew and placed lying down across the whole row of seats in a compartment. Sofia stuffed a pillow behind his head and sat down in the window seat on the opposite row. The journey lasted seven hours, seemingly an infinite time to Sofia, who had to tend to Cosmas’ every need, the worst of which was taking him to the toilet. Cosmas and Sofia arrived in Freiburg in late afternoon. Cosmas was again transported by ambulance to the University Medical Center in the western part of Freiburg where he was admitted to the intensive care unit.

Cosmas was placed in a room that he shared with another patient, and Doctor Karl Gebhardt, a tall bearded man in his late fifties, took charge of his case. Sofia checked into a modest hotel nearby. She then dropped by Dr. Gebhardt’s office and appealed to him to save her husband. The bearded doctor promised to do everything he could. He examined the patient himself and put him
on anti-viral medication. Despite the treatment, though, Cosmas’ condition kept getting worse over the next couple of days. The cough was reduced, but the fever wouldn’t resolve, and he was still extremely tired and wracked with muscle pain. He also sweated a lot as his fever went down temporarily, and Sofia had to change his underclothes two or three times a day.

On the morning of his fourth day in the hospital, Dr. Gebhardt came in and examined Cosmas, who was still hot and sweaty. He patted Sofia on the shoulder and took her to his office.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do,” he told her with the doors of his office closed. “You should prepare for the worst.”

Sofia refused to entertain the thought of Cosmas succumbing to the illness. She was rational enough to understand how critical his condition was, but she still hoped against hope that somehow he’d pull through. “But surely there must be something you can do,” she pleaded with Dr. Gebhardt.

“I’m afraid medicine can only do so much. This strain of the virus is lethal, and we haven’t been able to come up with a vaccine yet.”

A warm tear ran down Sofia’s cheek. “Please doctor, don’t give up on him.”

“We never will. We’ll give him the best treatment we can. But to be honest with you, nothing short of a miracle can save him now.”

Sofia went to the bathroom, locked the door and cried until her eyes were sore. From that moment on, she was constantly by her husband’s side. She spent the night on the chair next to his bed, dozing off intermittently. On the following morning, October 26, Sofia waited for Cosmas to wake up so she could ask him how he was feeling, but he wouldn’t open his eyes. After a while she fetched a nurse. The nurse held Cosmas’ hand and looked very apprehensive. She went out and fetched the doctor who was on duty.

“He’s alive but he’s in a coma-like state,” the doctor told Sofia after looking hard at his face and auscultating his heart.

“What do you mean a coma-like state?”

“He’s in a state between sleep and wakefulness.”

“Maybe you need to wake him up, then.”

“Not yet. If he hasn’t come around till evening, then we will.”

Sofia brought her chair closer. Every couple of minutes she’d look at Cosmas’ face, hoping to see him open his eyes. She’d often take his hand in hers and caress it with infinite tenderness.
But Cosmas wouldn’t respond. She left only a couple of times to use the bathroom and have a quick snack in the canteen.

In the evening, though, Cosmas’ face started to twitch slightly and after a while he half opened his eyes. Sofia perked up at once and grasped his hand tightly.

“How are you, honey?” she asked him, her voice shaking with worry.

“I’m leaving, Sofia.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, gripped by a wave of panic.

“I mean the time has come for me to say goodbye.”

“No, you won’t go away, Cosmas,” she said trying unsuccessfully to stifle the tears welling up in her face.

“I will. Everybody will. You have to accept this.”

“No, you won’t die, honey. You’re still so young,” Sofia said, her voice shaking from the sobs that racked her body now.

“I have two favors to ask you.”

“What are they?”

“The first one is to marry again. You’re very young, and I want you to enjoy the rest of your life.”

Sofia flinched slightly backward. “You know very well that I can’t promise you such a thing,” she said with a lump in her throat. “I can’t even think of it now. What’s the other favor?”

“To keep the vultures from pouncing on my dead body.”

“What do you mean?” Sofia asked puzzled. “I don’t get it.”

“When I die, the vultures will fall all over themselves to write my biography. If nobody stops them, they’ll tell all sorts of lies to smear my name.” He paused for a second. “I want you to forestall them.”

“But how can I do that, honey?”

Cosmas pressed her hand. “I want you to write my biography yourself.”

Sofia thought for a moment. Writing Cosmas’ biography was a formidable task. She had once entertained dreams of becoming a writer in her own right, but over the last thirty-odd years she’d dedicated all her energies to typing Cosmas’ work. Would she muster the elan needed to write such an important book? Could she say no to a dying man? But if she said yes, could she live with making a false promise?
“There’s nothing I’d like to do more, but I don’t think I can handle it.”

“Of course you can handle it. I trust you.”

“I’m nowhere near as good as you are with words.”

“Your words come from the heart,” he whispered. “You don’t have to use fancy words to tell the truth. Say it plain and straight.”

Sofia lowered her head downwards for a moment. She shut her eyes and focused her thoughts. Cosmas believed in her. He’d done so ever since the day they met thirty-three years ago, which she now remembered as if it was yesterday. His total trust in her strengthened her resolve. Doing his wish was her duty. She would have to stretch her limits to write the biography he deserved, but she had his blessing, and she would rise to it.

“I’ll write your biography. You have my word.”

“Thank you, my love. I can now die with a clear conscience.”

Sofia didn’t say anything for a while. She tore off a strip of toilet paper that was on Cosmas’ bedside and wiped her tears. “I want to ask you one last question,” she said after some time, her voice steadier now. “You’ve been searching for God all your life. Have you discovered him?”

“No, I haven’t,” Cosmas whispered to her in a weak, hollow voice. “But other people will.” Those were his last words. Soon afterwards, he closed his eyes and released his hold on Sofia’s hand. She peered into his face. It wore an expression of calm and serenity. He had sailed through stormy seas but had finally found the port. He had died a happy man. Sofia fetched the nurse, who in her turn called the doctor on duty, who came by and confirmed his death.

Sofia asked the doctor and the nurse to leave her alone with him for a while. She bent over him and held his hand, which was still warm, for a long time after he was officially pronounced dead. She could hardly believe that this vital man pulsating with life, the very embodiment of life, who sang the praises of life in every one of his books, now lay lifeless next to her. She couldn’t believe this flesh didn’t house a soul anymore. As she pondered the mystery of extinction, no longer an abstract idea but now concrete and palpable with Cosmas’ final and irrevocable end, she was gradually overcome by a deep overpowering sorrow. The sorrow penetrated every pore of her being, numbing her brain so much that she could hardly think any thoughts now.

She was still holding Cosmas’ hand when Dr. Gebhardt came by and gave her his condolences. He told her the body would have to be taken to the morgue. One part of her was
listening to him, while the other was still immersed in profound, almost paralyzing, grief. She wasn’t in the mood to argue with anyone. The doctors and nurses had work to do, and she didn’t want to be a hindrance. She took one last look at Cosmas. Then she left the nurses to take care of her dead husband and went out onto the garden. It was now dark and chilly. Nobody else was there. She sat down on a bench and cried uncontrollably, her body convulsed with grief. It was a fact, and now she had to come to terms with it. The man she had lived next to, the man she had cherished and admired for thirty-three years, the man who had brightened her life and made her a better person, was no longer by her side.

It was long after midnight when she went to the hotel. She climbed into her bed and tried to snatch some sleep, but her heart was so heavy that she drifted between sleep and wakefulness. She didn’t know what time it was when she got up the next morning to wash her face. She looked at her face in the mirror. It was sickly pale. Deep circles creased the folds beneath her eyes. She sat down in the room’s only chair and tried to assess the situation rationally. Cosmas was dead. His body would be lying cold and rigid in the morgue, his bed occupied by another patient. Suddenly, while she was thinking about all that, she was struck by the realization that as his wife, she was responsible for his funeral. This was shortly followed by the even more striking realization that his funeral was going to be a historic event, in view of which she had to make a number of consequential decisions. While Cosmas was alive those decisions were made jointly, but now she had to think for both of them and make the funeral arrangements he would have been proud of. The first of them was where the funeral should be held. Certainly not in Freiburg, that would be inconceivable. No, he’d have to be buried in Heraklion, his hometown, the place where he grew up and where his heart had always belonged.

Now that she had decided to have his body repatriated, she had to contact a number of people. First she called the Greek embassy in Bonn, and after talking to several employees, she arranged to have his body transferred to Greece in a car. Then she sent a telegram to Cosmas’ closest friend in Crete, Pantelis Prevelakis, asking him to arrange the funeral. Without waiting for an answer from Prevelakis, she hurried to the morgue of the hospital and had Cosmas’ body placed in a coffin. Several hours later, two men from the Greek embassy pulled up outside the hospital in a long black funeral car. They placed the coffin in the boot and asked Sofia to sit in the back seat. They set off at once, knowing they had a long trip ahead of them. Overnight they
crossed Switzerland and Austria, with the two men driving and sleeping alternately and Sofia trying to catch some sleep in the back seat. In the course of the next day, they passed through Slovenia and headed on down to Serbia. After spending the night at a motel outside Belgrade, they drove on to Skopje, and from there straight on to Athens after a second night when the two men took turns driving the car.

In the early morning of the day of the funeral the phone rang in Palmas’ house. Palmas picked it up on the second ring.

“Is that you, Michalis?” he exclaimed, hearing the familiar voice at the other end. “I thought you’d call.”

“I still can’t believe the news,” said Michalis, his voice wavering between sadness and regret.

“Well, he wasn’t exactly a young man,” said Palmas before conceding in the next breath: “but it was still unexpected.”

“His wife is bringing the body through Yugoslavia to be buried in Heraklion.”

“And from what the newspapers report, they expect quite a crowd at his funeral.”

“That stands to reason. Now that he’s dead, he’s become a national hero.”

Palmas thought he heard an undertone of awe. A tingle of disquiet crept up his spine.

“You mean he’s a national hero in Crete. I’m hardly surprised given their pride in their place. They’d be happy to bask in any fellow Cretan’s reflected glory, even if it’s a tainted glory.”

The line went silent for a moment. “That’s an interesting view,” Michalis finally said.

“Would you care to explain to me what’s tainted about Eleftherakis’ glory?”

Palmas hesitated for a moment. “It’s perfectly clear, I should think. I thought you’d read the papers. The Vatican has placed his last novel on the Index of Forbidden Books and the Greek Church doesn’t want to give him a proper burial. These are dubious distinctions, to say the least.”

“Takis, you disappoint me once again. Of all people, I didn’t expect you, a writer, to side with the official church opposing another writer. You still resent him, even now that he’s out of your way. Whatever happened to your sense of humanity?”
“Come on Michalis, what’s the matter with you? I am sorry that he died, that goes without saying, but I am not going to change my mind about his worth as a writer because a bunch of grandmothers and grandfathers want to go to his funeral.”

“I’m sorry to say that,” Michalis sighed sadly, “but you haven’t changed at all…the same old Takis. You’re not at all aware of what’s happened, are you?”

“Huh, so I’m not. Would you care to inform me, then?”

“The greatest Greek writer of all times has died.”

“Ha, ha, ha!” Palmas sneered. “The greatest Greek writer of all times? We’re surely not talking about the same person. If you’re thinking of Eleftherakis, let me disabuse you of your ignorance. He’s not the greatest Greek writer. He’s not even a good Greek writer.”

“Huh,” Michalis sneered back. “If he isn’t a great writer, who is? Yourself?”

“What’s the matter with you today? You have an attitude. I could hear it in the tone of your voice from the start.”

“Listen Takis, I feel guilty about my stance on this matter, and I have to get some things out of my system. I want you to know that what you did was incredibly mean.”

“What was mean?”

“You know very well what I mean. Sending the letter to the Swedish Academy.”

“That was a joint decision,” Palmas said confidently. “We all consented to write that letter.”

“No, it wasn’t a joint decision. I wasn’t there on that day. I’m sure you remember that. I never gave my consent. The letter you sent doesn’t bear my signature.”

Palmas flinched from telling Michalis the truth: the letter couldn’t be valid without the signature of all the founding members of the Greek Authors Society—it hadn’t been so difficult to forge his. “I’m afraid it’s too late for you to dissent now,” he said after a second. “Your silence was, implicitly, an expression of assent.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Michalis said firmly. “I never gave you my approval to write that letter. Listen, I’m not coming to the Filion Café tomorrow. Or ever again, for that matter.”

Palmas pouted his lips. “Whatever you wish, my dear. We’re all grown men. We’ll accept your decision.” Then he added: “Your loss will be greater than ours.”

“Mark my words, Takis. History will judge all of us. And it will judge us harshly.”

“Come on, Michalis. Don’t give me this horseshit, please.”
“We did what we did out of pure envy. Now that he’s dead, our actions and motives have become clear to me. None of us is worthy to untie his shoes.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Honestly, I think you’re losing it.”

“No, I’m not. But you have lost it. Your humanity I mean. And if you’ve lost that, it’s no use gaining anything else.”

“I don’t think we have anything else to talk about, my dear.”

“Neither do I. Until we meet again in hell.”

When the car with Cosmas’ body arrived at the Athens airport, it was met by the Greek Foreign Minister, who’d been waiting for it at the entrance. He gave his condolences to Sofia, and after informing her that the news of her husband’s death had plunged the whole country into mourning, he announced he would escort her to Heracleion. The coffin was placed in the hold of the plane, and at one o’clock local time Sofia with the two embassy employees and the Foreign Minister took off in Olympic Airways scheduled flight to Heracleion.

The plane touched down in Heracleion an hour and a half later. A large crowd of people had amassed outside the entrance to the airport building. On the left side of the entrance was arranged the town’s marching band, standing at attention. Sofia got off the plane and was heading towards the exit when she saw Prevelakis running up to her. With tears on his face, he hugged her tightly and kissed her on the cheeks. “We meet again under the most sorrowful of circumstances,” he told her solemnly. “Our island has lost its spiritual father.” It was now the turn of the mayor of Heracleion, who had been tagging behind Prevelakis, to take a step towards Sofia and offer her his condolences. As Sofia reached the exit, a phalanx of local dignitaries stepped forward one by one to shake her hand and express their sorrow for Cosmas’ death. The coffin had meanwhile been taken out of the hold of the plane, and four men in black suits and gloves had placed it on their shoulders. A group of priests in full regalia, who had been waiting for the arrival of the coffin with their incense burners in hand, instantly placed themselves to the left and right of the coffin.

At once a funeral procession got underway, marching its way through the streets of the city at a slow, majestic pace. The town band started to play funeral marches. Sofia and Prevelakis followed right behind the coffin-bearers and the incense-shaking priests. The word that the procession soon spread through the streets of the provincial city, and within minutes the crowd
that followed the procession had thickened. Most of the inhabitants of the town had come out of their houses and were now lining the streets the procession would pass through. As they saw the coffin pass by, they burst into applause. Loud cries were heard from all around: “Immortal, immortal.”

“Do you hear that?” Prevelakis whispered in Sofia’s ear, a cascade of tears, tears of sorrow and tears of pride, streaming down his cheeks. “Today we bury the greatest Cretan of all time.”

Sofia had to fight back her own tears not to disappoint Cosmas, who would have wanted her to retain her dignity as his long-time companion and now the custodian of his legacy. She was awed by the reaction of the crowd. Living away from Greece for so many years, she’d had no idea how dearly Cosmas was loved by common people, especially his fellow Cretans. After all, Sofia thought, there was justice in this world. Cosmas had been vilified so much by the Church, but had been vindicated by ordinary people, the people he had stood up for through his books, and had now assumed his rightful place in their hearts.

As the procession approached the Venetian Walls, which Prevelakis had told Sofia would be his final resting place, more and more people kept joining the crowd. Now the procession was numbering in the tens of thousands. As she turned her head right and left to catch sight of the people cheering them, Sofia wondered whether Cosmas was watching them from up above. If his soul is alive and is witnessing all that, she thought, he too will be feeling vindicated. The more she reflected on the possibility that Cosmas was somehow conscious of the funeral events, the more she felt certain that human existence doesn’t cease when the body melts away. The life of the spirit goes on forever, of that she was now certain. And Cosmas’ spirit had set off a chain reaction. In the future many other spirits would be touched and inspired by his example, and they would blaze the way forward for this nation and all of humanity.

The funeral procession finally reached the Venetian Walls and halted before an open grave. The priests escorting the coffin suddenly left, but there was another priest waiting above the open grave. This priest chanted the funeral rites, while the black-suited men lowered the coffin to the grave. A sign had been erected on the tombstone at the head of the grave. Upon it some words had been scrawled. Sofia read the words: “I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am a free spirit.”

After Cosmas’ funeral Sofia returned to Antibes. She boxed up all of Cosmas’ books and documents and gave his clothes to the local church. Then she placed an ad in the paper putting
the house for sale. A month later she returned to Heraclion for the memorial service. She found several bunches of flowers laid on the grave as well as messages of love and gratitude scribbled by complete strangers left on his gravestone. She only stayed in Greece for two days, but that was long enough for her to ascertain that with the news of Cosmas’ death, public opinion in Greece had swung overwhelmingly in his favor. She met his Greek publisher in Athens, who told her the sales of his books had tripled and that nearly all newspapers sang his praises now that he was dead. As if by magic his death seemed to have eliminated the opposition that had dogged him while he was alive.

A few days after she got back to Antibes, and while she was still trying to find a buyer for the house, a letter arrived in the mail. It was from Albert Camus. Sofia opened the letter with a beating heart. What could Camus possibly want to tell her? It wasn’t uncommon for writers to have an uneasy relationship with one another, but Camus had received that year’s Nobel Prize, and Cosmas was no longer a competitor. She read the letter, which was written in French, with avid curiosity:

“Dear Sofia. It was with great sadness that I was informed of your husband’s death. The world of letters has lost a literary giant. The void he left is difficult to fill. I feel truly blessed to have met your husband. I will never forget the precious moments we shared in Paris a few months ago. I want you to know that there is no doubt in my mind that your husband deserved the Nobel Prize a hundred times more than me. May he rest in peace and may time heal your wounds.”

Sofia left the letter on the table and burst out crying. Coming from a man of such stature, Camus’ words were another vindication of Cosmas’ greatness.

A few weeks later, Sofia sold the house to another writer, who paid in full the sum she was asking for. With the money from the sale of the house, she bought a big apartment in Athens near the city center. She moved there in late December, and soon afterwards she adopted a cat from the street to keep her company.

A couple of months after she had moved to Athens, Sofia received a letter from Antigone too. After commiserating her on Cosmas’ death and expressing her sadness that they’d lost contact since then, Antigone informed her she had now moved in with Laurent in Paris. They were planning to get married as soon as Jacques signed the divorce papers. She was now reading the last paragraph of the letter, which ran thus:
“I know you are in mourning, but time heals all wounds. I want you to know that I miss you a lot. I often think about the good times we had together in Antibes. I will miss the conversations we had during our coffees klatches. I will forever treasure these memories. But now both of us have started a new life whether by choice or by circumstances thrust upon us. In closing I want to apologize for being a little abrupt the last time we met. I hope you will forgive me and won’t bear me any ill will. Life is too short to spend it with bitterness and regret. I wish you all the best in your new life. Try to keep in touch.”

When she finished reading the letter, Sophia felt a lump in her throat. She hadn’t realized how precious her friendship with Antigone was until they had parted ways. A nostalgic tear ran down her cheek. She conjured up Antigone’s face sitting across from her in the coffee shop smiling and making small talk, and she nodded her head in agreement with her far-away friend about the futility of harbouring grudges and resentments when life is so short.

It was the letter from Antigone that brought her out of her mourning and spurred her to take the boat to Heraclion the next morning and visit Cosmas’ grave. She had brought him a bunch of lilies. On the tombstone she had placed a picture of Cosmas as a dignified, fiery-eyed middle-aged man with a moustache. She kneeled down in front of the grave and placed the flowers on the tombstone. She read the inscription once again: “I hope for nothing, I fear nothing, I am free.” These words were one of the most lasting legacies Cosmas had left. They would inspire countless people after him to live noble lives unfettered by petty worries and unafflicted by little infamies.

She smiled inwardly. Cosmas was no longer alive, but she had found a way to feel his presence by her side. She crossed her legs and took out a notebook from her bag. She turned towards Cosmas’ picture and said: “Honey, today I started writing your biography. I vowed to finish a chapter every two weeks and come here to read it out to you. Let me start…”

Epilogue

Sofia kept writing Cosmas biography over the next few years, but it didn’t come out until 1968, and even then only in a French, an English and a Japanese edition. A Greek edition didn’t appear until thirty years later. The biography received excellent reviews and found a wide readership. Sofia was praised for her clear style and the simplicity with which she brought to life
the unknown events of Cosmas’ life. Three years after Cosmas’ death, Sofia read in the papers that Albert Camus had died in a car accident. The news saddened her greatly. While destiny hadn’t favored Cosmas with regard to the Nobel Prize, it had also dealt Camus a double hand, offering him the Nobel Prize at a young age, but not allowing him to live long enough to enjoy the fruits of his success. With the passage of time Sofia’s financial status also underwent a major change. Over the next few years after Cosmas’ death she merely scraped a living from the sales of Cosmas’ books until in 1963 a British studio purchased the rights to *A Night with the Santouri* for a handsome sum. The film came out the following year and was a box-office hit. Its success pushed the sales of the novel, which made the best-seller list in several countries, and solved Sofia’s financial problems for good. She died at the age of 101 in a hospital in Athens, maintaining the tenderness and devotion with which she had loved Cosmas when he was still alive until her last breath.

**END**
CRITICAL COMPONENT

Chapter One: Reasons for Choosing Nikos Kazantzakis as the Subject of a Historical Novel in English

Brief introduction to Kazantzakis

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957) was one of the major literary figures of the twentieth century and most certainly ‘the novelist best known outside Greece’ (Encyclopedia Britannica, ‘Greece’ 6). He was also a controversial figure, numbering as many implacable enemies as he did fanatical supporters. His fame rests on a diverse range of achievements. His output was impressive: a large corpus comprising thirteen novels (three of which—Zorba the Greek, Christ Recrucified, and the Last Temptation of Christ—were adopted for the cinema in one French-speaking and two English-speaking productions), plays, epic poems, literary translations, and philosophy books. His verbal dexterity not only in his native language but also across languages also inspires awe and admiration. In the first place, he wrote in two languages: Greek (in which he wrote most of his work, including the highly successful novels of the forties and fifties) and French (two novels in the thirties). He is the only contemporary Greek writer of substance to have written novels in two languages, and in so doing he has joined a group of writers (Conrad, Nabokov, Beckett, and a few others) around the world with bilingual literary production. In his Greek-language novels he coined a plethora of neologisms, enriching the Greek language, and made extensive use of Cretan dialects, thereby fashioning a personal idiom that was entirely sui generis. Just as impressively, he compiled a French-Greek dictionary and translated into Greek masterpieces of world literature such as Faust by Goethe, The Prince by Machiavelli, and the Divine Comedy by Dante, translating works from four different languages—German, French, Italian, and English. Finally, he successfully waged a lifelong campaign to promote the demotic version of Greek over the purist version, which had dominated Greek letters and had driven a wedge between the language of ordinary people and that of a small elite.

His private life was a spiritual odyssey, stormy and uncompromising till its very end, rendering it the subject of much study, and with respect to some of its facets—especially his
erotic life—fueling widespread speculation, in Greece and elsewhere. He married twice, Galatea Alexiou and Eleni Samiou, and in both cases he spent a period of time co-habiting with his to-be-wives (one year with Galatea and a staggering twenty-one years with Eleni) before lawfully wedding them. All this happened at a time period when co-habitation out of wedlock was severely frowned upon by Greek society. He married Galatea in a clandestine wedding ceremony that took place at a cemetery church in Heraclion. The event is described by Galatea in her novel *Man and Superman* (1957): discarded flowers, open tombs, and ossuaries constituted the spooky setting of the wedding that was held in a cemetery to avoid detection by Kazantzakis’ father, who was implacably opposed to it. Kazantzakis and his second wife Eleni spent a total of thirty-two years together, but they never had any children. His sexual life has been a matter of conjecture: some scholars claim he had a normal sex life, citing his own testimony in *Report to Greco* and his various relationships with women other than his two wives. Others, including Elli Alexiou, his first wife’s sister, and Niki Zografia, neither of whom, however, was romantically involved with him, contend that he was impotent and therefore unable to have sex. Elli Alexiou asserts in regard of Kazantzakis’ sex life that ‘it is now known that despite the divine letters he sent her, he never consummated his relationship with Galatea’ (116).

Kazantzakis’s relationships with his father Michalis and his best friend Zorbas were also extraordinary, exerting such a profound impact on him that he turned both of them into larger-than-life characters in his novels *Freedom or Death* and *Zorba the Greek*, much to the delight of the reading public. He lived a frugal and sometimes reclusive life, often cloistering himself for months on end to complete a novel, and he set hardly any store by material comforts, of which he was deprived for most of his life. His friend and fellow-writer Istrati, who traveled with him to the Soviet Union and the Middle East, provides the following telling testimony: ‘he dines on a bowl of soup, half a kilo of apples or a smoked herring. His luggage: only ten kilos—to travel around the world! His house: only a bed. His wishes: a whole universe. His companion: a devouring happiness …’ (116). Almost constantly in transit, he lived in Greece and France, sojourned for long periods in Russia, Austria, Germany, and England, and traveled extensively in Cyprus, the Middle East, Spain, China, and Japan. His endless peregrinations seeded a series of travel books, all of them classics of travel literature largely due to a unique blend of description of places and poetic-philosophical commentary. His political and religious views were constantly shifting—he veered between nationalism, communism, and fascism, devout religiosity, nihilism,
and atheism—and inevitably landed him in trouble with the Greek church and state, which persecuted him for large periods of his life. The Greek state put him on trial on the 3rd of April 1928 for the views he put forward during a speech, which they regarded as pro-communist and anti-state. The Greek church tried to excommunicate him in 1955, but the archbishop of Constantinople, Athenagoras, vetoed his excommunication. Kimon Friar attributes the continuing ‘appeal’ of Kazantzakis’ personality to ‘his commitment to the “struggle,” his sense of mission, his dedication, his erudition, his insatiable curiosity and thirst for knowledge, his acceptance and rejection of all sorts of political and religious creeds, his numerous wanderings, his hermetic proclivities, his passion for the triumph of the Greek demotic language, and above all his industry without which there would be no Kazantzakis question today’ (2). With the term ‘Kazantzakis question’ Friar refers to Kazantzakis’ legacy, an important matter because if someone is to side with Kazantzakis on his various choices (to live abroad after 1946 to escape from persecution, to write novels where he presents alternative views of Christianity), they can hardly do so without condemning the Greek state and church of his time.

**Kazantzakis’ reputation & legacy**

Nikos Kazantzakis was the only twentieth century Greek writer of fiction (in the realm of poetry Greece has produced two poets who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Seferis and Elytis) to achieve true international stature. Colin Wilson argues that ‘Nikos Kazantzakis is a writer who can stand with the nineteenth century giants, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche’ (80). The National Book Centre of Greece has so far recorded 580 foreign editions of his work, which has been translated into no less than forty languages, a staggering number for a Greek writer in modern times. He was hailed as a giant of twentieth century literature by such prominent intellectuals as Albert Schweitzer, Albert Camus, and Thomas Mann (Colin Wilson 89). In Greece, however, critical reception was more mixed, especially in his lifetime, though the reading public was clamoring to get its hands on his work, which was largely unavailable in Greece till the mid-fifties, and held him in very high esteem. As Dimitris Tziovas notes, ‘Cavafy and Kazantzakis are the two Greek writers with the highest international presence and reputation. While Cavafy’s worldwide appeal has been studied and analyzed, Kazantzakis’ popularity has not received equal attention. His case is more complex. Though outside Greece his work
continues to be read and appreciated by ordinary readers, scholars, theologians and film directors alike, in Greece itself he has been treated in a somewhat inconsistent fashion’ (83).

Kazantzakis’ worldwide appeal stems from the universality of his themes and the vividness of his style (the flavor of which is inevitably lost in translation for non-Greek readers). The most salient of these themes are the struggle for freedom at both national and individual level, the essence of God, the nature of sin and virtue, the battle between body and soul, and the purpose of life (which for him was to devote your life to a single pursuit). Peter Bien, a prominent Kazantzakis scholar, predicts that Kazantzakis ‘will remain an important figure and continue to be read not only in the twenty-first but also in the twenty-second century’ (34). Now that passions have been cooled and time has restored proper perspective, Matthew Berke has summed up the true legacy left by Kazantzakis as the ‘strong emotions and heartfelt responses expressed through a great and unforgettable literary art, an inspiring affirmation of life despite tragedy and death, and an infectious love for God’s Creation, and for the vital energy He has implanted in the human spirit.’

Kazantzakis was at the heart of two major controversies in his lifetime. One of them was purely domestic. It concerned the so-called ‘language question’, in other words the choice between demotic Greek and purist Greek as the official and most prestigious language of use in Greece. Purist Greek is an archaic and formal variant of the Greek language that is pronounced like Modern Greek while adopting both lexical and morphological features of Ancient Greek. Demotic Greek is the vernacular, the spoken language used in daily interactions between ordinary people, which is often ‘associated with anti-national and anti-religious activity’ (Mackridge 263). A fervent proponent, and of course user, of demotic Greek, Kazantzakis played a vital role in enhancing its prestige and helping it become established as the official language of post-war Greece. According to the Encyclopedia of Modern Greek Literature, he ‘journeyed to remote locations to collect words and expressions that might be lost,’ … ‘removed accents from the text’ of his Odyssey … ‘and gathered notes for a dictionary of demotic Greek, which no publisher put on the market’ (466).

The second controversy was an international one. It concerned his treatment of Christianity in his novels Freedom or Death (English Edition 1954), The Greek Passion (English Edition 1954) and above all else in The Last Temptation (English Edition 1960). At the start of the last novel, Kazantzakis portrays Jesus Christ as an ordinary mortal, riddled with guilt and
He was ashamed, afraid. Curled up all alone in the yard of his house, he spun in his mind how one day he would wash away his shame, prove he was better than they were, surpass them all. And after so many years, the wound had never closed, had never ceased to run’ (12-13). As an ordinary mortal, Jesus is shown to have fallen prey to human weaknesses and base desires, including outright lust for Mary Magdalene. He finally overcomes the temptation to start a family and lead an ordinary human life, an option that appears to him in a vision sent by Satan, and prefers to save humanity by dying on the cross. Yet the restoration of order at the end of the novel didn’t prevent religious organizations from condemning both the book and the Martin Scorsese movie which, released thirty-one years after his death, was closely based on the book. As Peter Bien explains, this bold depiction of Jesus as a flawed human being engendered ‘a conflict between Kazantzakis and religious authorities (later reinforced by other conservative elements), which culminated in the attempts to excommunicate him and refuse him a Christian burial (both of them unsuccessful), to say nothing of the inclusion of the Last Temptation on the list of banned books of the Catholic Church’ (42). His conflict with the church, coupled with his refusal to support either side of the conflict in the Greek Civil War (1946-1950) rendered him persona non grata to the regime in Athens after 1946, forcing him to move to Antibes, where he lived the last eleven years of his life. It is even widely rumored that the Greek state played a part in his failure to win the Nobel Prize in Literature for which he was shortlisted three times (in 1957, the year of his death, he lost the Prize to Albert Camus by one vote). As is the case with many other writers too, though, he was posthumously vindicated in the conscience of Greek people, and he is now seen in his homeland, and especially in the island of Crete where he is revered as a spiritual hero, as an iconic figure in Greek literature, while at the same time it is widely felt that he was wronged by the church and the state that failed while he was alive to do justice to his greatness and reward him for the kudos he has brought to Greek letters. Morton Levitt lauds him as ‘the most important Greek writer of modern times and one of the major figures in what is perhaps the outstanding literary generation of all times’ (3), while Christos Evangeliou regards him as ‘an outstanding figure in contemporary literature and thought’, comparable in stature to James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Camus, Proust, Lawrence, and Faulkner (Rendezvous with the Sensuous 185). Over the last couple of years we have been witnessing a massive resurgence of interest in his work in Greece and Germany, whereas a Kazantzakis international conference took place in England a
year ago with Peter Bien as one of the speakers. *Ethnos*, a major Greek newspaper, has just finished offering his collected works in a new edition, and an international movie about his life entitled *Kazantzakis* (directed by Yannis Smaragdis) was released a few months ago, confirming his status as a household name in Greece and a recognizable figure in literary circles worldwide.

**Motivation for the novel: compatibility between Kazantzakis’ vision of life and mine**

The idea of writing a novel about Kazantzakis took hold of me while reading certain passages from his philosophy book *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises* (1927). In this book Kazantzakis advances the claim that each new generation owes a debt to all previous generations for their fights to secure a better life for members of the new generation and for the legacy that distinguished ancestors have left in the realm of the arts, culture, and civilization. Kazantzakis describes the way this cycle works as follows: ‘Your first duty, in the course of your allotted life as a member of your race, is to feel within you all your ancestors. The second one is to re-animate their urges and to build on their legacy. Your third duty is to bequeath to your son the injunction to surpass you’ (58, my translation). This duty to recognize and build on the legacy of one’s ancestors has to be fulfilled by enlightened members of the new generation. Kazantzakis himself states in another book, *Report to Greco*, which was written twenty-eight years later than *The Saviors of God*, that he owed a debt to El Greco for his luminous and dramatic vision of art and for immortalizing the Cretan view of life through his paintings. Then he acknowledges a second debt, this time to Homer, for forging the identity of the Greek race—the true members of which, for Kazantzakis, are lifelong explorers like Odysseus—and for creating its palette of verbal expression.

Once we accept the heightened responsibility that comes with being enlightened members of our culture (which is what Kazantzakis meant with the word ‘race’ in the days before political correctness), meaning a group with roughly the same language, history, and culture, we are then entrusted with the mission of helping this culture move forward but without severing its links with the past. In this light, Kazantzakis enjoins his readers to ‘shed light on the dark blood of your ancestors, shape their inarticulate cries into coherent speech, clarify their wishes, broaden their narrow sunless brow: this is your second duty’ (56, my translation). Kazantzakis’ words resonated with me at a deep personal level. His mission became my mission.
By writing a novel about his life and era, I hope to shed light on his struggle with the church and state as well as his process of development as a writer. I also hope to clarify important aspects of the history of modern Greece and especially the way it treats its most spiritually enlightened citizens. In so doing, I aim to fulfill my duty towards this colossal writer for making me realize we’re not isolated individuals, but rather interconnected parts of a larger whole that extends across time as well as space.

It has never been my intention to write yet another biography of Kazantzakis, though. There are four biographies of Kazantzakis already: that of Eleni Kazantzaki, his second wife, that of Elli Alexiou, his first wife’s sister, that of Pantelis Prevelakis, Kazantzakis’ close friend, and that of Peter Bien, the only one of the four who never met Kazantzakis in person. There is also a fictionalized biography, *Hold Fast the Mountain Pass: A Work of Historical Fiction about the Life and Work of Nikos Kazantzakis*, written by Theodora Vasils, which also adheres faithfully to the known facts. I see no need for one more biography, as the general facts of Kazantzakis’ life, with the exception of his sex life, are well known, cross-referenced, and fully documented. What is more, Kazantzakis himself wrote his own autobiography: *Report to Greco* (English Edition 1965).

In *Report to Greco* Kazantzakis narrates the major childhood, early and mid-adolescence events that influenced his intellectual development, but he curiously leaves out the last years of his life spent in Antibes. *Report to Greco* is a compelling read as far as it goes, but its mixture of fact and fiction coupled with its limited scope (it stops well before the beginning of World War Two) vitiates its usefulness as a biography. Peter Bien’s biography, *Kazantzakis: Politics of the Spirit*, is an insightful, if somewhat dry, account of Kazantzakis’ intellectual development, focusing on how his vision came about and how all the pieces of the puzzle of his complex personality fit together. Eleni Kazantzakis’ biography is based on her husband’s correspondence. She features six hundred of his letters to her and other people and provides occasional commentary every few letters. The content of the letters reveals important aspects of Kazantzakis’ thought regarding the major events of his time such as the Second World War, but Eleni’s commentary does not add, or detract, much.

Elli Alexiou’s biography is probably the most stimulating one. It is also in a sense the least reliable one unless we read between the lines and supply the missing premises behind her slander. For Elli Alexiou is not just unsympathetic towards Kazantzakis, she is positively
malicious. Having known Kazantzakis as a child, she gives a wealth of detail about his early years in Heracleion, Crete and describes quite vividly the living conditions there during Kazantzakis’ childhood years. Her thesis is that Kazantzakis made it to the top by using other people, especially women, and by ignoring any distractions that could have diverted his attention from writing such as sick loved ones staying in a hospital. Her focus is Marxist and feminist, but she seems particularly unkind to a woman, Eleni Kazantzaki, whom she disparages as being too meek and submissive. The problem with Elli Alexious’ biography is that half the truth is a lie too, and by focusing on how much Eleni Kazantzaki had to sacrifice in order to stand by her husband’s side, she tries to divert attention from what Eleni actually gained from being Nikos’ partner: three-odd decades next to an intellectual giant, endless trips around the world, fame, money (from 1965 onwards) and attention. Just as importantly she lived to be a hundred and one and remained healthy till her last days, all of which are notable achievements few human beings can claim.

In a sense, then, all these biographies complement one another, giving us a full range of approaches to this intriguing man’s life and work. Theodora Vasils’ book is a hybrid between a novel and a biography. Using Eleni Kazantzakis’ letters as the source material for her narrative, Vasils divides the book into sixty short chapters (four to five pages each) and narrates in strict chronological order Kazantzakis’ entire life from the day he was born to the day he died. Vasils adorns the events she narrates with imaginary details, as if she were a fly in the wall witnessing with her own eyes what was happening. An example of this approach is the description of Kazantzakis’ first wedding: ‘Three days later, on October 11, 1911, Galatea and Nikos stood before the priest at the cemetery chapel of Saint Constantine and exchanged marriage vows. For wedding rings, Galatea had facetiously entwined some twigs from a discarded funeral wreath lying on a nearby grave and slipped them on their fingers.’ (93) This approach slips between two stools, as it lacks both the strict discipline of a biographer’s art and the visceral excitement of a novel free from the constraints of historical fact.

What is missing from the market is a work that comes closer to the emotional truth, a work that can touch people’s hearts the way Kazantzakis did when he gave us Zorba, a work that can resurrect Kazantzakis himself the way Kazantzakis resurrected Zorba by weaving together the real and the ideal and in the process turning Zorba into a legend. My aims in opting to write a novel about Kazantzakis were thus threefold: a) to fictionalize scenes from Kazantzakis’ life, real
or imagined, with emotional honesty and dramatic intensity in a way that no biography has done
or can do as its aims are the exact opposite; b) to spark a renewed interest in Kazantzakis’ work
in the English-speaking world; I hope this novel will bring him back to life for contemporary
readers, including readers who half-know him or don’t know him at all, and for whom this novel
will serve as an introduction to his life and work; c) to dramatize a battle between expediency
and high principles, a battle for integrity and nobility, which takes place in many different forms
everywhere and at all times, and in so doing produce a novel of timeless appeal regardless of
whether potential readers care about Kazantzakis or not (in the second case they can enjoy
reading a book dealing with the life of a hopefully fascinating fictional writer and not worry
about the real-life figure).

This study discusses the challenges of writing a historical novel and examines the most
notable trends in historical fiction over the last two hundred years by way of providing the
backdrop against which Kazantzakis’ and my own approach to the historical novel are
elicited. My argument is that novelists needn’t be constrained by accounts of past events and
biographies of famous people and I cite examples of well-known novelists who have taken
liberties with the historical record. The novel, entitled Free Spirit, portrays Kazantzakis in the
last year of his life. The action in the present time starts off at the time period when he was
writing The Last Temptation. I describe events I made up, and I try to illuminate important
aspects of Kazantzakis’ character through his reaction to these events. Though entirely fictional,
my portrayal of Kazantzakis is based on an intuitive understanding of his personality achieved
also through study of his daily habits (minor details such as having tea, bread and olives for
breakfast, going out to buy newspapers and coming back with stories to tell his wife Helen). I
hope to tempt those who already know Kazantzakis into reading Free Spirit along with the
biographies to see how he is portrayed in a fictional work, and I hope to have produced a
dramatically compelling novel for those who do not know him, but would like to read a novel
about an uncompromising Greek writer living out his old age in France surrounded by
controversy and threatened by intrigue.

Chapter Two: The Historical Novel in Anglo-American Literature

Overview of the Historical Novel
While critics fully agree that the historical novel is a distinct genre, the ways they define this genre vary widely. First of all, they are divided on the question of how far in the past a novel has to be set to qualify as historical fiction (Davenport 300). They also dispute whether the writer needs not to have been born at the time of the events of the novel. Joyce Saricks, for example, requires that the historical novel be set ‘before the author’s lifetime or experience’ (291). One of the most recent definitions is Sarah Johnson’s, who defines historical novels as works ‘set before the middle of the last [20th] century […] in which the author is writing from research rather than personal experience’. Bran Nicol reduces the distance in the past to ‘a few decades at least before the time of writing’ (100). This timeframe is adopted by novelist Virginia Brodine, who claims to need a distance of ‘at least thirty years’ from the period she is writing about to feel comfortable (210). Lynda Adamson introduces a new dimension. While conceding that a ‘generally accepted definition’ for the historical novel is a novel ‘about a time period at least 25 years before it was written’, she also points out that some people read novels written in the past, like those of Jane Austen, as if they were historical novels regardless of whether they mention historical events per se (for the purposes of this study, though, the discussion of historical novels will be restricted to novels that make references to historical events). Perhaps the most authoritative definition is that of The Historical Novel Society, which stipulates that to be classified as such historical fiction must be ‘written at least fifty years after the events described’.

The fusion of historical and fictional elements in works of literature has a long tradition in most cultures. As a contemporary Western literary genre, however, the historical novel can be traced back to the early 19th century works of Sir Walter Scott and his contemporaries in other national literatures such as Frenchman Honoré de Balzac (Les Chouans 1829), American James Fenimore Cooper (The Spy: A Tale of Neutral Ground 1821), and Russian Leo Tolstoy. Scott’s Waverley (1814) is generally regarded as the first historical novel written in the English language (by no lesser authority than Georg Lukács among others). Of the historical novels written in other languages, one of the most widely acclaimed is Tolstoy's War and Peace (1869), set in the times of the Napoleonic Wars. Tolstoy carried out research into the Napoleonic Wars before writing the novel but ended up critiquing the historical approaches available at the time as well as extrapolating the lessons from Napoleon’s campaigns to contemporary history. At the start of
the novel’s third volume he describes his work as blurring the line between fiction and history, in order to get closer to the truth, which begs the question of the kind of truth he has in mind.

Since the early nineteenth century, thousands of historical novels have been written, as the popularity of the historical novel kept rising to ever new heights. According to Lynda Andamson, the Library of Congress catalog lists over 6,000 titles under the subject heading ‘Historical Fiction’ and omits many others listed as ‘War Stories’, ‘Detective and Mystery Novels’ and ‘Romantic Suspense Novels that could also be classified as historical novels (xi). One of the reasons for this ever-growing popularity was the lessons to be learned from the perusal of historical novels. In France, for example, enlightenment thinkers endeavored to drive home the unreasonableness of absolutist rule, its arbitrary and capricious nature. As Lukács, the prominent Marxist philosopher, points out, open-minded historical inquiry encouraged by works of historical fiction such as Voltaire’s *Henriade* (1723) became a weapon in this battle, as ‘the lessons of history provide the principles with whose help a “reasonable” society, a “reasonable” state may be created’ (20).

The popularity of historical novels briefly diminished after World War II, a development that many critics attribute to widespread disillusionment with history in the wake of the atrocities perpetrated in the long course of the war and their bleak message for humanity. As Southgate states, during that period historical fiction was not held in high regard in scholarly circles (6). Historical fiction, however, experienced a resurgence during the nineteen seventies with works such as John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), and since then, it ‘has never been so alive or fashionable’ (de Groot ‘Beyond’ 57). Historical novels made a striking comeback, so much so that several historical novels of the last decade or so [Pat Barker, *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991-1995), Valerie Martin *Property* (2003), Hilary Mantel *Wolf Hall* (2009), Andrew Miller *Pure* (2011), etc] have been shortlisted for (and some of them have won) prestigious literary prizes and/or made the best-selling list. In 2009, for example, all six novels shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize were set in the past with the winner Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* set as far back as in the 16th century.

The current popularity of historical novels extends to other countries around the world. As Perry Anderson observes, ‘if we were to make a roll-call of all those contemporary novelists who have in one respect or another contributed to the new explosion of invented pasts, the list
would stretch around the world, from North America to Europe to Russia to the Subcontinent to Japan to the Caribbean and Latin America’. The historical novel is, therefore, a boom area, having become ‘at the upper ranges of fiction, more widespread than it was even at the height of its classical period in the early 19th century’ (28).

Although historical novels are widely diverse in their scope, style, aims and approaches, they share certain characteristics. Martin Paul Eve sums up these characteristics as follows: ‘relative periodisation (the sixty-year rule); writing beyond experience (research); accuracy, heft and credibility (generic conventions); and a suspension of disbelief at enclosed epistemologies of the past (dissonance)’. Historical novels typically blend real and fictional events, real people—by which I mean people whose existence has been historically documented—and fictitious characters, though a caveat should be sounded that by its very nature the process of fictionalization transforms the real people into fictitious characters too. Lynda Adamson explains that ‘fiction evokes a particular time period by focusing on a well-known person or event on an ordinary person living in historical times’ (xi). In the interests of historical authenticity, the setting is a real place in a definite period of time in history, while the characters are usually ordinary real people, who did or could have lived in the historical setting, involved in a conflict typical of life during that time period. Historical novels are often rich in details in an attempt to recreate the historical period they describe, but those details are often made up. Using his or her imagination to complement information found in historical archives and sources, the writer of historical fiction may describe quite vividly the food consumed by historical characters as well as the clothes they wore and the routes they traveled despite the absence of records documenting those specific details of the characters’ lives.

There are various reasons why a novelist may choose to write a historical novel rather than a novel set in the present time. In an article about Walter Scott’s contribution to the genre, Allan Massie offers an insight into some of those reasons:

The writer may have become fascinated by some historical figure, as Mantel with Cromwell or Adam Foulds, whose *The Quickening Maze* was one of the six on the Man Booker shortlist, with the poet John Clare. Obsession with a particular period — the First World War, for instance — may suggest the theme for a novel. The author may wish to explore the past for its own sake, or to use it to point up the present. Harris's Cicero novels certainly offer a vivid picture of late Republican Rome, but Harris has worked as a
political journalist, and these books are also an examination of the nature and craft of 
politics, all the more effectively so for being divorced from immediate political concerns.
(Massie, ‘The Master of Historical Fiction’, accessed online)

Historical novels exert a strong appeal to writers. Its temporal and psychological distance from
the present time renders the past more amenable to critical reflection and easier to put into
perspective, while the present appears more elusive and unsettled. Historical novels can also
stimulate interest in the past and inspire the belief that we can obtain valuable knowledge about
it. Don Passos’ USA, for example, implies that ‘historical reality is knowable, coherent,
significant, and inherently moving’ (Barbara Foley 171).

Historical novels can have three different areas of primary focus: a particular historical
event, a whole era (or several eras in the case of sagas), or a particular historical figure. An
example of a historical novel that focuses on a single historic event is Franz Werfel’s Forty Days
of Musa Dagh (1934), which portrays the siege of an Armenian stronghold in 1915. A more
recent novel that deals with a single event is Beryl Bainbridge’s Every Man for Himself (1996),
which fictionalizes the sinking of the Titanic.

It is far more common for a novel, though, to ‘portray a broader view of a past society in
which great events are reflected by their impact on the private lives of fictional individuals’
(Encyclopedia Britannica). In some cases this portrayal spans several generations as is the case
with Alex Haley’s Roots (1976), which dramatises the life of an African slave and seven
generations of his descendants, and J G Farrell’s The Empire Trilogy (1970-1978), a sequence of
novels that chart the collapse of British colonial power in Ireland, India and Singapore. In many
cases historical events serve only as a backdrop against which private adventures unfold. This is
the case with Robert Louis Stevenson’s Kidnapped (1886), whose events take place amid the
Jacobite troubles in Scotland, Charles Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge (1841), set against the backdrop
of the Gordon Riots and A Tale of Two Cities (1859), where the action occurs during the French
Revolution.

Finally, a historical novel can also zero in on a particular historical figure himself or
herself as is the case with Robert Graves’ I, Claudius and Claudius the God, Ford Madox Ford’s
The Fifth Queen (a fictionalised account of the life of Catherine Howard) and Calvino’s Invisible
Cities (which fictionalises the life of Marco Polo). The origins of novels that made explicit
references to historical individuals’ private lives can be found in the late 19th and the early 20th-
century (Mullan). Often called fictional biographies or biographical novels, such novels narrate a fictional story that overlaps with biography in intriguing ways. As Mussara writes, ‘Calvino’s Marco Polo in Invisible Cities both is and is not the historical Marco Polo’ (Hutcheon 6). We can only know Marco Polo through texts including his own (Il Milione) which gave Calvino the story, the plot and the character (Mussara 141). More than advancing our knowledge of dates and events, fictional biographies induce critical reflection on the achievements, legacy and impact of the historical person they portray and remind us that he or she was a human being just as alive as we are now, who lived a life just as real as the one we live now, helping us narrow the perceptual gap with the past.

The writer I have chosen as the protagonist of my own historical novel Free Spirit, Nikos Kazantzakis, has written three historical novels focusing on particular well-known historical figures: The Last Temptation of Christ (English Edition 1960) on Jesus Christ, Saint Francis (English Edition 1962) on Saint Francis of Assisi, and Alexander the Great (English Edition 1982) on the life of the eponymous ancient Greek figure. In my own novel, Nikos Kazantzakis has been re-named as Cosmas Eleftherakis. There is ample precedent for this renaming, as in several biographical novels, the historical person portrayed appears under a different name. In George Meredith’s Diana of the Crossways (1885) the heroine Diana Warwick is modeled upon society beauty and author Caroline Norton, and in Somerset Maugham’s The Moon and Sixpence (1919) the narrator and main character Charles Strickland is in part based on Paul Gaugin.

Several subgenres of the historical novel have been identified. One of them is biographical fiction, which we have already discussed. Another subgenre, and a very popular one at that, of the historical novel is historical romance, two classic examples of which are Gone with the Wind (1936) by Margaret Mitchell and The Black Moth by Georgette Heyer (1921). Another subgenre is documentary fiction, a 20th-century variant of the historical novel. Documentary fiction incorporates ‘not only historical characters and events, but also reports of everyday events found in contemporary newspapers’ (Abrams 194). Examples of this variant form of the historical novel include U.S.A. by John Dos Passos (1938) and Ragtime (1975) by E.L. Doctorow.

Yet another subgenre is historical mystery (or ‘historical whodunits’), where the plot involves the solving of a mystery or crime occurring in the distant past. One of the first historical mysteries was Ellis Peters’s Cadfael Chronicles (1977–1994), set between 1137 and 1145 A.D.,
while more recent ones are Lindsey Davis’ novels about Marcus Didius Falco, twenty hard-boiled detective novels set in the Rome of Emperor Vespasian, which were written between 1989 and 2010. Historical mysteries are particularly noted for their wide variety of settings: ‘although medieval and renaissance Europe are the most common settings for historical mysteries, there are also series set in such diverse times and places as Japan under the Tokugawa Shogunate and Egypt during the reign of Tutankhamun’ (Magar).

Some other subgenres of historical fiction are nautical novels, notable examples of which are C.S. Forester’s Hornblower series (1937-1962), Patrick O’Brian’s Aubrey-Maturin series (1969-1999), Alexander Kent’s The Bolitho Novels (1975-2011), and Dudley Pope’s Lord Ramage series (1965-1989) and pirate novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island (1883), Emilio Salgari’s Sandokan (1895–1913), and Rafael Sabatini’s Captain Blood (1922), and more recently Tim Severin’s The Adventures of Hector Lynch (2009) and Mark Keating’s The Pirate Devlin series (2010). Finally the subgenres below can also be considered historical fiction: ‘alternate histories (e.g. Robert Harris’ Fatherland), pseudo-histories, that is works that deliberately distort or misrepresent the historical record (eg. Umberto Eco’s Island of the Day Before), time-slip novels (e.g. Barbara Erskine’s Lady of Hay), historical fantasies (eg. Bernard Cornwell’s King Arthur trilogy) and multiple-time novels (e.g. Michael Cunningham’s The Hours)’ (Lee).

Works of historical fiction have often aroused controversy for two main reasons: their outlook on history and their degree of (and attitude towards) authenticity. Their dual status as works of literature and commentary on past events has made them subject to dispute in historical and literary circles alike. As Ryle points out, historical fiction has been an area of contradiction and controversy within the fields of both literature and historiography (155). Indeed there seems to be a fundamental paradox at the heart of historical fiction, which is the aspiration of historical novels to authenticity while at the same time challenging by the very nature of their fictiveness readers’ certainties about the past (Jerome de Groot The Historical Novel 34). The norms of historical novels were also hotly disputed in the context of the culture wars of the 1980’s.

The most common bone of contention has been the degree of accuracy of works of historical fiction. Critics invested in the existence of a true version of past events are sticklers for accuracy, faithful adherence to the historical record, and so are like-minded readers. As Richard Carroll notes, ‘the overarching argument that has emerged is that authenticity is critical to the
traditional form of the historical novel where the accuracy of historical details is paramount if the author is to meet readers’ expectations of the genre and thereby respect the author/reader pact’ (229). Following this line of reasoning, if an author does not adhere to the unwritten author/reader pact, then readers that expect accuracy are bound to be disappointed. Joanne Brown makes a similar point: ‘However an author chooses to balance her material between history and fiction, accuracy remains a primary obligation of all historical fiction’. Many a historical novel has indeed been taken to task for lack of authenticity because of readerly or generic expectations for accurate period details.

To adherents of realistic fiction, the semblance of verisimilitude is also essential as is the need to weave historical events and fictional stories smoothly and in roughly equal measure. As Sarah Johnson explains, ‘the genre also has unofficial rules that authors are expected to follow. To persuade readers that the story could really have happened (and perhaps some of it did), authors should portray the time period as accurately as possible and avoid obvious anachronisms. The fiction and the history should be well balanced, with neither one overwhelming the other’. Of course accurate portrayal is not stipulated as the only criterion that must be met to fulfil readers’ expectations. As Donna Lee Brien says, ‘[r]eaders of even the most imaginative work will soon identify that work as flawed if the writing is unintentionally misspelt, illogical, anachronistic, or historically or factually incorrect’ (‘Creative’ 55).

Aware as they are of such expectations, most historical fiction writers read prolifically in their quest for authorial knowledge and accuracy. Their aim, if they wish to write realistic historical novels, is to understand as intimately as possible the culture they have undertaken to portray in their fictional works. If they fail to do so, their work will most probably suffer by the standards of those who expect realism. As Stone and Nyren explain, ‘outsiders to a culture often inadvertently create characters whose basic values and ideas reflect those of their own culture rather than the one at hand, thereby making the work unrealistic’ (16).

If the authors of historical fiction are expected to follow unofficial rules, then readers too must by implication meet certain demands. De Piérola asserts that the reader of a historical novel must have some form of ‘historical competence’, as reading is a hermeneutic act, depending ‘on the active participation of the reader’ (155). Readers, of course, build historical competence gradually. As James Thom points out, ‘[m]ost regular readers of historical fiction are reading to learn, and they gain historical knowledge from story to story’ (32). In this way the historical
novel becomes a highly effective means of raising awareness of the events of history and of the importance, but also the controversial nature, of historical inquiry.

Some critics such as Lukács expect historical novels to illuminate the past. By reading historical novels that faithfully portray the past, Lukács argues, the reader is able to gain valuable insights into ‘the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality’ (42). Following this line of reasoning, historical fiction faithful to the past enables readers to achieve a greater understanding of a specific period and of the reasons why people behaved the way they did. Maybe a novel, because of and not despite its fictiveness, can shed more light on the past than a book of history. Kent den Heyer and Alexandra Fidyk make exactly this point by suggesting that ‘historical fiction may offer a more plausible representation of the past than those sources typically accepted as more factual’ (144). The ultimate power of this representation of the past may not be so much a function of its plausibility, though, but of a more emotionally intense engagement of the work of historical fiction with what we assume we know or imagine about the past that forces the reader to care more about it and think harder about its connection with the present and lessons to be learned.

Helping readers engage with the past is an indisputable benefit. The question that arises, however, is whether the pursuit of accuracy and authenticity on the part of historical fiction writers is the only way for readers to derive this benefit. This is a question that concerns the ethics of poetic licence and invention within historical fiction. To answer this question we need to determine what is meant by authenticity so as to decide how much writers of historical novels can fictionalise without distorting the historical facts, as we know them through extant records, beyond recognition and what the value of the historical novel is with regards to portraying the past. Jerome de Groot offers the following observation regarding this point: ‘Historical fiction works by presenting something familiar but simultaneously distant from our lives. Its world must have heft and authenticity – it must feel right – but at the same time, the reader knows that the novel is a representation of something that is lost, that cannot be reconstructed but only guessed at’ (Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction). For de Groot this paradox ‘lies at the heart of historical fiction and makes it one of the most interesting genres around’ (Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction).

For many prominent thinkers such as Michel Foucault, though, the project of understanding the past is inherently problematic. Foucault questioned the feasibility of
reconstructing the conditions for the emergence of an *episteme* (an era defined by the thoughts that are possible within it) in a historical context. Simply put, thoughts that were possible in previous eras may no longer be possible in quite the same way in our own. Foucault mentions the example of today’s medical episteme, where the idea that female ‘hysteria’ exists or is caused by the wandering of the womb—which was a common belief at one time—is inconceivable (p. xvi). The inherent difficulty of accurately knowing and fully understanding history nevertheless does not entail giving up inquiry about the past or considering historical novels unable to illuminate it. As R. Slotkin reminds us, ‘The truth the novel seeks is poetic rather than historiographical: it sacrifices fidelity to non-essential facts in order to create in the reader a vivid sense of what it may have been like to live among such facts—and also a sense of what those facts mean in some larger sense—and to achieve that in a flash of recognition, rather than as the conclusion to a necessarily laborious argument’ (225-226). It is this widespread recognition of the elusive nature and yet necessity of engagement with the past that led to the development that will be discussed in the rest of the chapter.

**Postmodern Historical Novel and Historiographical Metafiction**

Over the last few decades a new postmodern approach to the historical novel has come about, which Keen has named ‘the historical turn’ in fiction (167)—though ‘new historical’ would be a more accurate term. ‘What is ‘new’ in the new historical novel is its treatment of history as a form of discourse’, (Mazurek 194). This treatment is predicated on the postmodern view of history as tainted with ideological and political biases, which coupled with increasing belief in the unreliability of human perception renders attempts to capture the past inherently elusive. This perspective has major consequences for historical inquiry. ‘In an effort to create a coherent historical account out of the accessible evidence, historians rely upon their imagination: their activity is thus endless, since the archive can always be reconfigured imaginatively’ (Holmes 68). As Simon Schama explains regarding the travails of historical inquiry, ‘historians are left forever chasing shadows, painfully aware of their inability ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness however thorough or revealing their documentation . . . We are doomed to be forever hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot’ (320).
The treatment of history as a form of discourse resulted in a new breed of postmodern historical novel broadly termed historiographic metafiction. Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as ‘fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically calls attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality’ \textit{(Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction 2)}. Of course self-reflexivity is hardly a recent development. Self-reflexive works of fiction can be traced at least as far back as Cervantes’ \textit{Don Quixote}, originally published in 1605, with its notorious episode where the eponymous hero visits a printing shop and observes the printing of a book about himself. Yet a more recent and more intriguing development is historical novels that contain elements of self-reflexivity. In \textit{A Poetics of Postmodernism} Linda Hutcheon refers to such novels as historiographic metafiction, which she defines as ‘those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages’ (5). Bruno Starrs describes historiographic metafiction as involving ‘the re-contextualisation of real life figures from the past, incorporating the lives of entirely (or, as in the case of Gregory’s Mary Boleyn, at least partly) fictitious characters into their generally accepted famous and factual activities, and/or the invention of scenarios that gel realistically but entertainingly within a landscape of well-known and well-documented events’. Works often described as examples of historiographic metafiction include John Fowles’ \textit{The French Lieutenant’s Woman} (1969), E. L. Doctorow’s \textit{Ragtime} (1975), William Kennedy’s \textit{Legs} (1975), Salman Rushdie’s \textit{Midnight’s Children} (1981), A. S. Byatt’s \textit{Possession} (1990), Michael Ondaatje’s \textit{The English Patient} (1992) and Thomas Pynchon’s \textit{Mason & Dixon} (1997).

Some characteristics of historiographic metafiction are that the protagonists are not ‘proper types’ of characters; that the historical record is contested, and the notion of truth versus lies is deconstructed; that historical data are mentioned but are rarely assimilated into the narrative so that their status as data is highlighted; and that dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions about the past are cast into doubt (‘Historiographic Metafiction: “The Pastime of Past time”’).

The open-ended, endlessly revisionist view of history advanced by historiographic metafiction has met with skepticism and opposition from various quarters. The Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, for example laments the development of ‘a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles’ (18). Other critics such as
Jennifer Blair have also expressed concern about what they see as an undue emphasis on history as a form of discourse, as textual practice:

Scholars may have become skillful at identifying the discursive processes of history, and may successfully argue that the contradictions within these processes signal resistances to dominant ideological paradigms, but these arguments have succeeded at the expense of a critical acknowledgement of the social experiences and effects of history, as well as a fuller appreciation of the dynamics of the active processes of time and memory. In other words, criticism has lost those aspects of ‘the past,’ of the passage of time, that are distinct from the textual.... Rather than exploring the complexity of that crucial difference between text and lived experience, critics seem to have become caught up in a somewhat limited approach that assesses the relations hip between ‘art’ and ‘reality’ only after reducing both to their discursive qualities and functions. (204)

In this context of critical opposition between advocates of historiographic metafiction and their various challengers, it is no wonder that many historical novels of the last forty years that break with standard versions of history by offering alternative histories or using the past as a setting for a fictional fantasy have been used as ammunition by both sides to advance their arguments.

Proponents of historiographic metafiction commend the readiness of the authors of HM to delve into the past in unconventional ways. As mentioned before, historiographic metafiction novels often present alternative versions of historical events or examine the past from perspectives that were previously ignored or suppressed such as those of women, laborers, immigrants, slaves, low-life characters and the losers of war. For example, Philip Dick’s novel The Man in the High Castle (1962) provides an alternate history in which Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are the winners of World War II. Similarly, Kingsley Amis’ novel The Alteration (1976), which is set in the twentieth century, presents an alternate version of the Reformation where many events did not take place, the Republic of New England is the only Protestant country in the world, and Martin Luther is shown as reconciled to the Roman Catholic Church. Readers of such novels are left with the sense that these alternative versions and perspectives were also likely to have occurred and are encouraged to consider the implications of such likelihood. As Slotkin explains:

Precisely because the novel imaginatively recovers the indeterminacy of a past time, it is not bound simply to celebrate the mere outcome; but leaves the writer and reader free to
explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past. In so doing, the novelist may restore, as imaginable possibilities, the ideas, movements and values defeated or discarded in the struggles that produced the modern state—may produce a counter-myth, to play into and against the prevailing myths of the nation. (231)

Through imaginative reshaping of the past and the insertion of purely fictive events, readers of historiographic metafiction are also encouraged to see echoes of the past in the present as well as elements of the present in the past. Such is the case in Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, a novel that blends historical figures and fictional characters and shows them interacting in imaginative and often surprising ways and where ‘Walker’s meeting with Booker T. Washington, for instance, echoes the contemporary debate between integrationists and black separatists. Similarly, Henry Ford is described as the father of mass society and Evelyn Nesbit is depicted as the first goddess of mass culture’ (Levine 55). Fredric Jameson is, however, concerned about the consequences of linking the past and the present in this way: ‘This historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only “represent” our ideas and stereotypes about that past (which thereby at once becomes “pop history”)’ (24).

Stef Craps notes that critics of historiographic metafiction accuse it of distorting the past and in so doing relinquishing its moral duty to provide an accurate representation of historical events. Craps herself eloquently refutes this accusation: ‘the critical failure to find any kind of ethical relevance in historiographic metafiction can be accounted for by a continued adherence to a traditional notion of ethical criticism that cannot conceive of ethics outside of a stable mimetic project’ (433). If the historiographic metafiction novel destabilizes history, it does so in the interests of reaffirming our relatively democratic and open society where the grounds of (historical) truth are constantly shifting, its signified is always already deferred and displaced, and the grand metanarrative of accuracy and authenticity is deconstructed as a ceaseless negotiation of an infinite number of subject positions. As Linda Hutcheon explains, historiographic metafiction “plays upon the truth and lies of the historical record. Certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the possible mnemonic failures of recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 294).
One of the most characteristic examples of historiographic metafiction is Doctorow’s *Ragtime* where Doctorow adopts a boldly innovative approach to history. Though his novel brims with historical characters, it is far from a regurgitated fictionalised version of recorded history. As Anna Clark explains:

But Doctorow stamps out the usual markers of how we engage with the past: dates are nearly invisible, pushing readers out of the metronomic first-this, then-that chronology of history. The novel has no quotation marks, those little anchors for attributable facts. Instead, *Ragtime* is propelled by the connective tissue between the characters, and especially their selective memory. This is imagined history, not recorded history; a novel pivoting on our individual and collective mythologies. *Ragtime* thus highlights the reconstructive function of memory and celebrates the power of human imagination rather than attempting to construct a dubious historical metanarrative.

Novels that embrace the principles of historiographic metafiction such as *Ragtime* have wide-ranging implications for our understanding of history. First of all the metafictional strategies deployed in works of historiographic metafiction such as the insertion of speculative or ahistorical elements into the narrative highlight their status as artifacts (Béchir Chaabane 8). Readers are fully aware that the novel is a piece of fiction, not a historical account. This awareness of the novel as an artifact and not as an authentic and accurate reflection of the past means that historiographic metafiction ‘suggests not only that writing history is a fictional act, ranging events conceptually through language to form a world-model, but that history itself is invested, like fiction, with interrelating plots which appear to interact independent of human design’ (Patricia Waugh 48-49). If history is a series of competing narratives, then the most iconoclastic works of historiographic metafiction pose a challenge for the dominant ones. As Nunning points out, historiographic metafictional narratives ‘can be so entertaining and engaging that the overtly intertextual, explicitly inventive work of biographical HM can even change the “hegemonic discourse of history”’ (353). Indeed one of the greatest legacies of historiographic metafiction, Linda Hutcheon explains, is exposing history as another form of discourse and in so doing exploring the “ontological” issue of what exactly can be said to constitute fact and fiction—or life and art’ (*The Canadian Postmodern* 68).

An example of this new perception of history as a discourse is Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977), in which Richard Nixon figures very unflatteringly as a character and narrator.
According to Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso, the novel ‘incorporates some of the most representative features of the literature of the postmodern age: plurality of narrative levels, intertextual dissemination of voice, the laying bare (sometimes, the relentless questioning) of our notions of history and fiction’ (16). Mazurek explains that Coover aimed to challenge the empirical concepts of history and to conceive of history instead as a kind of discourse. As Mazurek points out, the years of Nixon’s presidency are used by Coover as a way of blurring the distinction between the empirical events of history and their representation in discourses such as novels and newspapers, thereby foregrounding certain problems of historical representation (28).

*Midnight’s Children* is another notable example of historiographic metafiction. One of the most prominent themes of the novel is history itself and the ways in which the unreliability of memory affects historical discourse. For Saleem, the protagonist, memory is an elusive guide to truth: ‘I told you [Padma] the truth ... Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies, also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.’ (*Midnight’s Children* 21). The novel accomplishes two things at once: ‘Rushdie absorbs the genre of historical novel and concurrently offers a critique of it, stressing the difficulty of reconstructing history, of distinguishing fact from fiction, and of developing a complete and exhaustive account of the past’ (Mandricardo 201).

Mark Currie mentions some other benefits of exposure to historiographic metafiction such as allowing readers a better understanding of the fundamental structures of narrative while providing an accurate model for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a series of constructed systems (7). He also rebuts the claim that historiographic metafiction degenerates into solipsism, asserting instead that it provides an ‘unlimited vitality: what was once thought introspective and self-referential is in fact outward looking’ (2). Instead of taking history for granted and accepting one version of it, writers of historiographic metafiction open it up for reconstruction, re-interpretation and renewed reflection. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, ‘postmodern fiction suggests that to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological’ (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 209).
Several critics have addressed the aim of historiographic metafiction novels to show the relevance of the past to the present. As Alice Mandricardo explains, such novels do not advocate a nostalgic return to the past, but rather a critical re-evaluation of the past to consider the multiple ways in which contemporary experience is affected by the past as well as how characters as diverse as Tom Crick in Swift’s *Waterland* (1983), Martha Cochrane in Barnes’s *England, England* (1998), Saleem Sinai in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980), Archie Jones in Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000), or Queenie Bligh in Levy’s *Small Island* (2004) ‘construct their understanding of their personal and national pasts’ (112). Steven Connor also notes this connection between past and present: ‘historical narrative such as it is evidenced in the novel of history in the postwar period is not a matter of representing the truth of history but of constructing the terms of a conversation or structure of address between the past and the present’ (164). The link between past and present is also discussed by de Piérola, who describes the postmodern historical novel as ‘a mode of writing that by creating and sustaining a constant tension between history and fiction, creates a potential truth. This in turn produces in the reader a historiographical consciousness, the awareness that the historical record is amendable, partial and ultimately written in the present’ (157).

The revisionist gestures resulting from filtering the past through the present are not seen favorably by critics such as Terry Eagleton, who counsels against overlooking the ‘pastness’ of the past, ‘the literal irretrievability and irredeemability of the past’ (‘History, Narrative, and Marxism’ 275). Eagleton warns of the consequences of a revisionist attitude to the past: ‘Any cultural or literary theory which represses this ultimate irredeemability [of history] by dissolving the stubborn reality of the past into discourse or metaphor, which hopes to redeem and resurrect by semiosis, also risks suppressing the tragedy of the past and so striking itself impotent in the present’ (275). Similarly, Katherine Jean Andrews questions the wisdom of ‘perceiving history as solely discursive and textual’ insofar as critics who do so ‘risk giving the impression that “history” can be resurrected in the present or, more importantly, changed: as though “the past” were a story to be rewritten at the author’s will and not an authentic experience of time, just as unchangeable as our present moment’ (8). Concurring with such views, Jennifer Blair calls for less emphasis on rhetorical analysis and greater attention to the ideological undercurrents of historical novels as a means of achieving ‘a critical acknowledgment of the social experiences
and effects of history, as well as a fuller appreciation of the dynamics of the active processes of time and memory’ (204).

Regardless of the position one holds on this debate, the emergence of a whole slew of historiographic metafiction novels that cease to view history as unified, coherent and knowable unquestionably has important consequences for our understanding of history. As Mustafa Kirca points out, ‘the postmodernist view of history argues against conventional history writing, which is claimed to be shaped ideologically by the dominant discourse, and against its claim to represent historical events truthfully and objectively’ (2). Inspired by this new highly contentious perception of historicity, the historiographic metafiction novel not only challenges the calls for authenticity and accuracy we examined earlier but also denounces those who make those calls as ideologically driven. As Aruna Srivastava argues, ‘historical events then have no immanent structure, but only one imposed by an ideologically conditioned historian. The act of creating histories, then, is an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems’ (66). As Greenblatt and Gallagher point out in *Practicing New Historicism*, history has become more literary and literature more historicized as a result of the postmodern condition. By inserting history into fiction to subvert historical ‘facts’ and rewrite them from a new perspective which is different from the accepted interpretation, postmodern historical novels challenge both the capacity of history to represent reality outside the text and the truth-value itself of historical knowledge. They also make it clear that any novel, historical or otherwise, is first and foremost a work of fiction, a product of the human imagination, not a different kind of history book. As Slotkin puts it, ‘if you prefer the realization of the story to the perfection of the argument—if you feel compelled to express your full understanding of events, despite gaps in your knowledge—then what you are writing is historical fiction, not ‘history’, and should be unambiguously identified as such’ (224).

**Conclusion**

The historical novel is here to stay whether in the form of novels which aim at accurate representations of the past or in the form of historiographic metafiction. As a result of having ‘reached a mature recognition of its existence as writing, which can only ensure its continued viability in and relevance to a contemporary world which is similarly beginning to gain awareness of precisely how its values and practices are constructed and legitimized’, the
popularity of the historical novel is likely to continue in the decades to come (Waugh 19). In the final analysis, the historical novel in any way, shape, or form reminds us of the fundamental truth that time is just a human concept after all and that all people, those who lived in the past as well as those who live in the present time, though far from identical, share many things in common. Capturing this aperçu, Allan Massie provides a fitting epilogue to this study:

Human nature does not change, though ideas and practices do. People are always subject to the same emotions: love, hate and fear. The Seven Deadly Sins offer the same temptations, and men are driven by ambition, idealism or the desire to exercise power, in any and every age. By turning to the past, free from the busy distractions of the present, the novelist gains the advantage of perspective. (Massie, ‘The Master of Historical Fiction’, accessed online)

It is this fundamental need for perspective on human life that is met by the historical novel, and the provision of perspective is the main reason why its continuing appeal is guaranteed.

**Chapter 3: The Historical Novels of Nikos Kazantzakis**

**Kazantzakis’ perspective on history**

Nikos Kazantzakis took a keen and abiding interest in history. In his seminal book of philosophy *The Saviours of God* (1927) as well as in several other works, a deep knowledge of history is presented as essential for spiritual growth. According to Kazantzakis, an understanding of history enables a particular culture (as we’ve seen, he uses the word ‘race’) to establish a sense of continuity. At this initial level the study of history is a duty and a debt we owe to our own culture. As their understanding of history advances, enlightened individuals come to appreciate the universality of human pursuits and the unity of the entire human race. Kazantzakis explains the connection we have with our ancestors as follows:

--You are not one … Myriad invisible hands hold your hands and direct them, When you rise in anger, a great-grandfather froths at your mouth; when you make love, an ancestral caveman growls with lust; when you sleep, tombs open in your memory till your skull brims with ghosts.
Your skull is a pit of blood round which the shades of the dead gather in myriad flocks to drink of you and be revived. (The Saviours of God 42)

Kazantzakis asks us to see our ancestors as part of us and in so doing to see ourselves as part of a collective whole. He then admonishes the reader to subsume his ancestors within him and continue their work:

-- ‘Do not die that we may not die’, the dead cry out within you. ‘We had no time to enjoy the women we desired; be in time, sleep with them! We had no time to turn our thoughts into deeds; turn them into deeds! We had no time to grasp and to crystallize the face of our hope; make it firm!’

-- ‘Finish our work! Finish our work! All day and all night we come and go through your body, and we cry out. No, we have not gone, we have not detached ourselves from you, we have not descended into the earth. Deep in your entrails we continue the struggle. Deliver us!’ (The Saviours of God 42)

Given his high regard for the past, then, it comes as little surprise that three of his best-known works of fiction—God’s Pauper (1962), The Last Temptation (1960), and Alexander the Great (1982), —are historical novels, while a fourth one, Zorba the Greek (1952), is also set in the past. This chapter, therefore, will be devoted to Kazantzakis’ approach to historical novels, especially in light of the controversies examined in the previous chapter.

Kazantzakis employs a largely liberal approach to historical facts in his works of fiction. He is concerned primarily with recreating the feel of historical events without necessarily adhering fully to the historical record. His ultimate purpose is not to uncover the historical truth, which is the work of historians, but to relate the events he is fictionalising to his own experience and understanding of the world, making them relevant to the present time, and in some cases, for example in Alexander the Great, turning them into legend. To create this legend, Kazantzakis fused fiction and reality, a process that is congruent with the contemporary concept of ‘legend.’ As J.A. Cuddon explains, the term ‘legend’ originally referred to stories revolving around the lives of saints, but then evolved to mean, among other things, ‘a story or narrative which lies somewhere between myth (q. v.) and historical fact and which, as a rule, is about a particular figure or person’ (408). Examples of figures turned into legends are Faust, the Flying Dutchman, the Wandering Jew, Hamlet, King Arthur, Robin Hood and Dighenis. Cuddon points out that
‘Any popular folk heroes (or heroines), revolutionaries, saints or warriors are likely to have legends develop around them; stories which often grow taller and longer with time’ (408).

My understanding of a legend is a set of larger-than-life depictions or exaggerated accounts of an event or a person that result in feelings of admiration, envy or fear for that event or person. For Kazantzakis legends are more powerful than (attempts at) objective representations of events as they also arouse our emotions rather than only appeal to our reason (Kazantzakis regards emotions as more important than reason), and hence creating a legend in one’s fiction stimulates a more fruitful engagement with history than the faithful account of historical events. To gain a more profound insight into Kazantzakis’ use of history in his novels, we should first examine his view of reality and human perception. For Kazantzakis our perception of the world is deeply flawed. As he argues:

a) the mind of man can perceive appearances only, and never the essence of things; (b) and not all appearances but only the appearances of matter; (c) and more narrowly still: not even these appearances of matter, but only relationships between them; (d) and these relationships are not real and independent of man, for even these are his creations; (e) and they are not the only ones humanly possible, but simply the most convenient for his practical and perceptive needs. (The Saviours of God 36)

For Kazantzakis those limitations meant that the mind was ‘the legal and absolute monarch’ as ‘no other power reigns within its kingdom’ (The Saviours of God).

One salient consequence of this belief system was that external reality, and by extension historical truth, were not known or knowable by the human mind, nor were they worth seeking as such, for we had to ‘recognize these limitations’ and ‘accept them with resignation, bravery, and love’ (The Saviours of God). By contrast, Kazantzakis, for whom Homer was a major influence, held that myth and legend were worth creating and this required a skillful blending of what was regarded as fact and what can more obviously be seen as fiction. Kazantzakis set about practicing this fruitful fusion of lived and imaginary experience from early on in his writing career. Before writing historical fiction, Kazantzakis had become known as a travel writer. Mounting a close reading of his travel pieces, Lena Arampatzidou points out that Kazantzakis blurred the boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional in his travel writings as well: ‘If the genetics of the travel genre presupposes certain structures, Kazantzakis comes in to deconstruct these structures and destabilize the genre by inserting structures of another genre, namely the
novel’ (182). He does so, for example, by inserting into his travel pieces dialogues with fictional people that according to Peter Bien ‘never took place in real life’ (Politics of the Spirit 20). His aim is to ‘evoke people and their surroundings’ (Politics of the Spirit 17).

This approach to travel writing evinces a disregard for purity of genre and an engagement with external reality that is intensely felt. For Kazantzakis what mattered most was writing literature that felt like real life by capturing its emotional energy and alternating rhythms rather than seeking to record facts faithfully, an enterprise of a different order more suitable for those entrusted by society to perform that task—reporters and historians. Judging by the results, his writing is so much the stronger for that. As Lewis Owens explains, ‘Kazantzakis was one of those rare breeds who felt the pulsating rhythm of life pumping through his veins and was able to transfer this rhythm into his works. He penetrated to the core of human passions, hopes and fears and managed to distil this into the very marrow of his characters.’ To achieve this effect, Kazantzakis drew on his relationships with real-life people such as his father Michalis (who gave rise to the character of Captain Michalis in Freedom and Death) and his friend Yorgos Zorba (who gave rise to the character of Alexis Zorba in Zorba the Greek); his understanding of the personality of historical characters such as Alexander the Great, St. Francis of Assisi and Jesus Christ through the texts he’d read about them; and his trips across Greece and Italy and all over the Holy Land, which gave him a personal feel for the character of the landscape that constituted the setting of his novels. We will now see how the seamless interplay of Kazantzakis’ empirical experience and extrapolative imagination is effected in Zorba the Greek and his historical novels.

Zorba the Greek

The character of Alexis Zorba, the hero of Zorba the Greek, was based on a real-life person, Yorgos Zorba (1869–1941), a miner from West Macedonia. Kazantzakis and Yorgos Zorba established a close friendship between 1916 and 1917 when Yorgos Zorba worked under Kazantzakis’ supervision as a miner in Kazantzakis’ failed lignite business in the Peloponnese. Yorgos Zorba exerted a profound influence on Kazantzakis. As Kazantzakis explains in his autobiographical work Report to Greco (English Edition 1965), ‘if it had been a question in my lifetime of choosing a spiritual guide, a guru as the Hindus say, a father as say the monks at Mount Athos, surely I would have chosen Zorba’ (445). Kazantzakis and Yorgos Zorba
separated in 1917 and kept in touch by correspondence ever after. Kazantzakis received the heart-wrenching news of Zorbas’ death one evening in 1941. The next morning he decided to ‘resurrect him’ by writing a novel about him (Report to Greco 458). He describes the moment when he sat at his desk to begin this task as follows: ‘you and I, my heart, let us give him our blood so that he may be brought back to life, let us do what we can to make this extraordinary eater, drinker, workhorse, woman-chaser and vagabond live a little while longer—this dancer and warrior, the broadest soul, surest body, freest cry I ever knew in my life’ (Report to Greco 459).

The novel took two years to complete. Melding memory and imagination, Kazantzakis gives an account of the time he spent with Yorgos Zorba twenty-five years earlier. Many of the details are changed. Yorgos Zorba is renamed Alexis Zorba, and the action is transferred from the Peloponnese to Crete, Kazantzakis’ homeland. The story is told by a nameless narrator (Alexis Zorba calls him ‘boss’), who is largely assumed by critics to be closely based on Kazantzakis himself. But we should not confuse the real people, Yorgos Zorba and Nikos Kazantzakis, with the characters in the novel. ‘The narrator, although constructed from shreds from Kazantzakis’ life, is not the novelist’ (Great World Writers 714). He is best thought of as a deliberately hyperbolic version of Kazantzakis himself with many of his foibles such as his skepticism, timidity, reclusiveness, and idealism pushed to the extreme to heighten the dramatic effect of the narrative and achieve a more effective contrast with Alexis Zorba’s character. Yorgos Zorba the real-life person is also not the same as Alexis Zorba the character.

Again Kazantzakis produces highly lyrical prose infused with exaggeration and idealization to fashion a character that transcends the mundane nature of lived experience to attain the sublime heights of a timeless legend. Here’s how the narrator perceives Zorba at work digging the mine:

He was completely absorbed in his task; he thought of nothing else; he was one with the earth, the pick and the coal. He and the hammer and nails were united in the struggle with the wood. He suffered with the bulging roof of the gallery. He sparred with the mountainside to obtain its coal by cunning and force. Zorba could feel matter with a sure and infallible instinct, and he struck his blows shrewdly where it was weakest and could be conquered. And, as he appeared then, covered and plastered with dirt, with only the whites of his eyes gleaming, he seemed to me to be camouflaged as coal, to have become
coal itself, in order to be able to approach his adversary unawares and penetrate its inner defences. (*Zorba the Greek* 119)

This lyrical approach to the subject matter of the book pervades Kazantzakis’ entire fictional corpus. ‘Throughout his novels Kazantzakis employs this technique of drawing upon his experience but transforming it through the writing process to something mythic, approaching legend’ (*Great World Writers* 714). Since myth is also central to Kazantzakis’ work, we need to clarify what it means and then see how Kazantzakis uses it. Mary Magoulick defines myths as ‘symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe)’. As Magoulick explains, myths ‘may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values’. As we see from this definition, myth is at an even further remove from the historical record than legend. We will now see how Kazantzakis deals with history, myth, and legend in the historical novels *Alexander the Great*, *God’s Pauper*, and *The Last Temptation*, each one of which is focused on the life of a single charismatic individual: Alexander the Great in the eponymous novel, Saint Francis of Assisi in *God’s Pauper*, and Jesus Christ in *The Last Temptation*.

**Alexander the Great**

*Alexander the Great* is a historical novel for children, though it can also be read by adults. It was originally published in Greece in serial form in 1940, and was republished in a complete volume in 1979. It recounts the story of Alexander the Great from his early adolescence till his death at the age of thirty-two. Although Kazantzakis uses a spare style, a somewhat heroic tone creeps in, particularly when writing dialogue, as befitting patterns of speech in Ancient Greece. Philip, the King of Macedon, for example, announces at a conference that the borders of Greece will ‘henceforth be expanded, reaching all the way to the sea on one side, and all the way to the tall snow-capped mounts of Macedonia on the other side’ (128). Ancient Greek culture is portrayed as noble, advanced and sophisticated, but the Greek city-states are described as strife-torn and in dire need of a hero to unite them and save them from terminal decline. Here’s a passage that exemplifies Kazantzakis’ depiction of Greek culture. Two ambassadors from Persia visit Philip, whereupon:
The heavy screen at the far end of the room stirred. The officer with the unsheathed sword appeared, followed by the two ambassadors. They prostrated themselves, as was their wont in Asia, before the King.

‘Stand up’, said Philip gently, ‘you’re in Greece, and it is not our custom to prostrate ourselves’.

The two ambassadors scrambled to their feet.

‘Welcome!’ said Philip courteously. ‘How is my beloved Great King’s health?’

‘He salutes your kingship’ replied Memnon, ‘and he sends us …’

‘There will be time aplenty to talk about all that without hurry,’ Philip said, interrupting the ambassador. ‘You must be tired from the long journey, I don’t want to add to your fatigue …’

‘With your permission, Your Highness’, Memnon insisted. ‘We need to …’

‘Hospitality’, Philip cut in, ‘hospitality has always been one of the most sacred laws of Greece; don’t ask me to contravene it. My beloved guests, your bath is ready and a lavish table has been spread for you, as per my orders. Bathe yourselves, dine, and rest. We have plenty of time …’. (my translation 51-52)

The scene is meant to exemplify the Greek ideals of equality, dignity, generosity and hospitality while at the same time juxtaposing them to the Persian propensity for submission to authority.

Earlier in the novel two Persian men had infiltrated the court of Philip, Alexander’s father, on false pretenses, and they were conspiring to harm their Greek hosts. Later on, Philip gives the following advice to young Stephen:

‘Then’, continued Philip, ‘I dispense this second piece of advice: never treat your subordinates cruelly and overbearingly, but be kind and considerate to them. Never flatter or abase yourself before your superiors, but be fearless and fair to them. Never forget, no matter who it is you’re dealing with, that you’re a free man’.

‘And a third piece of advice’, Stephen, continued Philip, ‘always tell the truth, and let the chips fall where they may! Never deign to tell lies. Whoever tells lies is a slave. A free person, Stephen, always tells the truth’. (79)
Kazantzakis’ undertaking is fairly clear: to present an ennobling picture of ancient Greek culture. The idealized model of Greek civilization Kazantzakis bodies forth in his novel is passed on to future generations of mostly young Greek readers, as a legacy from father to son.

Similarly, Alexander is also somewhat idealistically portrayed as a heroic visionary with a lofty mission: to spread the noblest ideals of Greek civilization across wide swathes of Asia and Africa. To his credit, though, Kazantzakis takes pains not to stereotype him. According to Bonanno, Kazantzakis’ portrayal of Alexander the Great is relatively balanced: ‘Alexander the Great is a flattering depiction of the hero from a Greek author with a sense of pride in Greek history. However, Kazantzakis does not entirely succumb to glorification of the hero, presenting his faults and human qualities as well. The modern reader can thus relate to an ancient heroic figure’ (‘Novels, Historical’).

As regards historical facts, the novel stays mostly faithful to them, actually narrating them in chronological order. Fanis Kakridis, however, notes one possible deviation from the historical record. It occurs when Dinocrates of Rhodes, a famous architect in Alexander’s court, tells Alexander that he would like ‘to have at his disposal the whole mount Athos to hew out a statue of his’ and Alexander shakes his hand and says: ‘you are a worthy companion. This will happen’, which according to Kakridis is historically inaccurate, as all the extant sources report that Alexander categorically rejected the proposal. Kakridis argues that Kazantzakis ‘does not betray the historical truth’ as a whole, as these deviations from the historical record are rare and they always serve a purpose, but he also observes that Kazantzakis’ perspective on history was affected by the time period in which he wrote the novel, a period during which the idea of the grandeur of a nation still resonated with most people. This point can be extended to nearly all historical novels, as they deal with the past from the standpoint of the present in which they are written. E. N. Souri also points out that Kazantzakis was keen to enter into ‘dialogue’ with ancient writers and sees Alexander the Great as a prime example of a ‘creative reading of the sources’ that deal with the history of the ancient world (3).

Yet the best explanation of Kazantzakis’ approach comes directly from the novel itself. While the historical facts, filtered as they are through Kazantzakis’ lens, constitute the main plot of the novel, Kazantzakis also invents a subplot and works it into the narrative. Through its very nature as fabrication, Kakridis suggests, the subplot confirms the words Kazantzakis ‘puts in the mouth of Callisthenes when the festivities that mark the start of the campaign are dedicated to
the Muses, and the philosopher says: “What does truth mean? To believe what you see. What does myth mean? To believe what you don’t see. What is history? The daughter of truth and myth” (132). In other words, Kazantzakis does not reject the reality-status of historical events or the existence of an external reality as a horizon of the human mind, but views historical reality as subject to individual interpretation and hence ineluctably imbricated in perspectivism.

Kazantzakis’ aspiration in the novel is to enhance the legend of Alexander the Great and use that legend to forge Greek national identity. Underlying this aspiration is an implicit belief in the power of writing. For Kazantzakis writing is a means—for both the writer and the heroes—of attaining immortality. After Alexander’s exploits keep piling up, Aristotle—Alexander’s tutor—prodigally praises Alexander in front of his students, asserting that he ‘lacks nothing’ (115). The following dialogue ensues: “Only one thing”, ventured a student to the right of the master, a dark-haired youth with fiery eyes. “One thing only!” “What?” asked Aristotle. “What does he lack?” “A great poet like Homer to sing his praises and never let him die” (115). It is, of course, Kazantzakis himself who has promptly assumed the role of the poet here and has sung the praises of Alexander, just as he did with Yorgos-cum-Alexis Zorba in Zorba the Greek, contributing in this way to the preservation of his legend for future generations.

**God’s Pauper**

Written in 1953, *God’s Pauper* is a historical novel that recounts the life of St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182 – 3 October 1226). Kazantzakis’ aim in writing the novel was to transform the story of St. Francis into a legend—that is, a highly suggestive narrative evoking powerful emotions—just as he’d done with Alexander in *Alexander the Great*. As he himself avers in the prologue to *God’s Pauper*, ‘If I have omitted many of Francis’s sayings and deeds and if I have altered others, and added still others which did not take place, I have done so not out of ignorance or impudence or irreverence, but from a need to match the Saint’s life with his myth, bringing that life as fully into accord with its essence as possible’ (7). Coming from a country steeped in mythology, Kazantzakis regards this congruity between historical record and myth-inspired fabrication as the ‘essence’ of the character of St. Francis in the novel and sees it as his duty to create that ‘essence’.
In the prologue to the novel, Kazantzakis provides the following insight into his writing process:

Art has this right, and not only the right but the duty to subject everything to the essence. It feeds upon the story, then assimilates it slowly, cunningly, and turns it into a legend. When writing this legend which is truer than truth itself, I was overwhelmed by love, reverence and admiration for Francis, the hero and great martyr. Often large tears smudged the manuscript; often a hand hovered before me in the air, a hand with an eternally-renewed wound: someone seemed to have driven a nail through it, seemed to be driving a nail through it for all eternity. (7)

What Kazantzakis is describing here is the power of writing to bridge the temporal gap in order to connect us—as much emotionally and spiritually as intellectually—to the past and the people who lived back then. For Kazantzakis, this connection with the past and its people is all the more poignant and powerful when it is negotiated through the medium of fiction rather than through a biography which merely records the facts without exploring the emotional landscape of the people involved and inviting the reader to identify with them.

In 1951, two years before the publication of *God’s Pauper*, Kazantzakis had translated Johannes Joergensen’s biography of the saint. Having undertaken for the purposes of translation a close reading of a biography so recently, it can only be assumed that he knew well enough the source material he drew on, but he was also keenly aware of the different approach required to write the kind of historical fiction he had in mind as opposed to writing a standard biography. Cappellaro explains that ‘Kazantzakis couldn’t anyway slavishly go down the path of the many biographies of the saint: as a free spirit he portrayed a saint who reflects the ideal he himself tried to follow/embody’ (186).

While the narrative revolves around the known events of St. Francis’ life, told as they are in first-person narration by Brother Leo, St. Francis’ own brother, Kazantzakis is not loath to put in St. Francis’ mouth words that were not recorded by any historian or found in St. Francis’ texts. Hence the character of St. Francis expresses certain views on religious matters during his conversations with other characters that we cannot with absolute certainty ascribe to St. Francis, the historical figure. From what we know about Kazantzakis from *Report to Greco, Salvatore Dei* and other works, however, the opinions put forward by the character of St. Francis echo very
closely Kazantzakis’ own views. One example of such views is the compassion St. Francis feels for Satan and his belief that God will forgive him. St. Francis addresses a group of nuns who have come to hear him preach as follows:

O God, a rebellious thought is mounting from my heart to my lips. …Now, at this moment—O God, forgive me!—I feel sorry even for Satan. …We must pray for Satan too, my sisters; we must pray that our gracious Lord will take pity on him, forgive him, permit him to return and take up his place among the archangels. …Satan is an ugly bloodthirsty beast, but if he is kissed on the mouth he becomes an archangel once more. That, my sisters, is Perfect Love. In the same way, let Perfect Love kiss Satan so that his original, radiant face may be restored to him. (257)

Later on in the story, St. Francis communicates similar sentiments when talking to Brother Leo:

‘If I were asked to paint God’s loving-kindness, I would depict Him with a sponge in His hand. …All sins will be erased, Brother Leo; all sinners will be saved—even Satan himself, Brother Leo; for hell is nothing more than the antechamber of heaven’ (338). Dimitris Tsinikopoulos asserts that these theories can only be ascribed to Kazantzakis himself, expressing as they do his psychic state and belief system, but they have been condemned as heretical by the church as they blatantly contradict the Scriptures, where a wrathful God seeks to destroy Satan, His arch-enemy (61). Lewis Owens also sees St. Francis as ‘a character who embodies Kazantzakis’s “Cretan glance,”’ that is, his heroic stance and defiance of death (Creative Destruction 94).

Though somewhat idiosyncratic, the portrayal of St. Francis in God’s Pauper doesn’t give a misleading impression of the historical figure. If anything, the novel does justice to St. Francis’ multi-faceted and intriguing personality, a personality that cannot be glibly pinned down with a few stock phrases. As Nick Trakakis puts it, ‘The truth is, though, that the truth about Francis, the truth that is Francis cannot be described and explained in a way that adequately captures his essence, that which makes him utterly unique.’ (5) Kazantzakis fictionalises that essence with extraordinary vigor. Reviewing the novel, Fiza Pathan contends that Kazantzakis ‘brings out the true side of Saint Francis of Assisi…..the struggling man to become one with his creator’. He also draws the other characters quite convincingly, making them come alive too. While acknowledging that the characters are fictional creations molded by the author, who has also ‘added many stories from his own imagination at times’, Pathan nevertheless asserts that
‘they all did exist, this is history, and this is fact. Not only was there the ever loyal but doubtful Brother Leo but there was also the loving Saint Clara who followed in St. Francis’ footsteps; not only was there a devoted Lady Pica the mother of St. Francis but also the crafty Brother Elias who twists the rule of St. Francis to his own liking and for his own self-glory’.

_God’s Pauper_ did not garner the widespread critical acclaim of _Zorba the Greek, The Last Temptation_, and _Freedom and Death_. One of the reasons for its lesser position in Kazantzakis’ oeuvre was its status as a historical novel centering on the life of a single individual. As Varvara Tsaka reports, ‘reviews of the work were far from unreserved, resting mainly on the fact that it was not an original composition, but rather a “fictionalized biography”’ (European Literary Characters). _God’s Pauper_, however, has several qualities to admire such as the amount of creativity involved in reworking the story of St. Francis so as to blend fact and speculation, the deep personal investment of Kazantzakis in the novel, its intense emotional energy and unflagging narrative verve and remains an engaging sample of Kazantzakis’ approach to historical novels.

**The Last Temptation of Christ**

Kazantzakis’ almost imperceptible tinkering with the historical record in _Alexander the Great_ and _God’s Pauper_ is nothing compared to the liberties he takes with _The Last Temptation_, a novel about the life of Jesus Christ that was completed in 1951 but was published in 1955. Featuring a savagely iconoclastic reconfiguration of a historical figure regarded as sacred by billions of people around the world, _The Last Temptation_ stirred widespread controversy, polarizing public opinion. As Lorna Derksen says, ‘If you are accustomed to Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels, Kazantzakis’ Jesus will be shocking.’

As he did in _God’s Pauper_, Kazantzakis seeks to personalize the mystery of divinity, to comprehend it in his own terms. Carol Iannone sees _The Last Temptation_ as ‘the effort of an ordinary man to understand Christ’s sacrifice from the inside and to experience it as his own’. This effort to understand Christ’s sacrifice is made from the point of view of a twentieth century man trying to come to grips with the historical context of Christ’s deification and relate it to contemporary experience by posing a modern-day dilemma. As Iannone explains, ‘in an age of
complacent materialism Christ must be tempted not only by extraordinary evil but by the possibility of a life of ordinary pleasure as well, not only by lavish indulgence but also by the life of middle-class satisfactions.’ So Kazantzakis fashions the character of Christ from a twentieth century perspective, and one might argue, with a twentieth century mindset. He does not seek to rescue the past so much as to make the past relevant to today’s world, and in so doing to spur his readers to reconsider the significance of Christ’s stunning transformation from an ordinary carpenter into the savior of humanity.

Kazantzakis’ Christ is a carpenter who makes crosses for the Romans, which they use to crucify the Jews. At the start of the novel he attracts Judas’ ire. Judas addresses him thus:

‘Aren’t you ashamed?’ he shouted. ‘All the carpenters in Nazareth, Cana and Capernaum refused to make a cross for the Zealot, and you … You’re not ashamed, not afraid?

Suppose the Messiah comes and finds you building his cross; suppose the Zealot, the one who’s being crucified today, is the Messiah… Why didn’t you have the courage like the others to answer the centurion: ‘I don’t build crosses for Israel’s heroes?’ (16)

This is a stunningly ironic reconfiguration of the historical record, which consists mainly of Paul’s epistles and the Gospels. None of these sources mentions Jesus as a maker of crosses for the Romans. Kazantzakis invented this odd occupation for Christ to fit his purpose of showing his complete transformation from a timid, submissive man to a heroic, self-abnegating divinity. With this novel it becomes perfectly clear that Kazantzakis is not interested in merely fictionalising biographical facts. As Derksen points out, ‘Kazantzakis never intended on writing a historical biography of Jesus. He wrote to describe the human struggle of existence and the hope which breaks through, as modeled by Christ.’

Christ’s occupation is not the only point of departure from historical sources. There are several places in the novel where Kazantzakis does not stay faithful to the Gospels. In one particular passage Jesus confronts Matthew regarding the content of the Gospel he is writing, denying ‘facts’ he reports about him:

Matthew got up and handed Jesus his writings. He was very happy. ‘Rabbi’, he said, ‘here I recount your life and works for men of the future…’

‘What is this?’ he screamed, ‘Lies! Lies! Lies! The Messiah doesn’t need miracles. He is the miracle – no other is necessary! I was born in Nazareth, not in Bethlehem; I’ve never even set foot in Bethlehem, and I don’t remember any Magi. I never in my life went to
Egypt; and what you write about the dove saying, “This is my beloved son” to me as I was baptised – who revealed that to you? I myself didn’t hear clearly. How did you find out, you, who weren’t even there?’ (391, 392)

This conversation is of course exclusively Kazantzakis’ fabrication as it has never been reported in any extant source. Its implications are quite subversive. Not only does it completely contradict Matthew’s Gospel but it also calls into question the status of the Gospels as the word of God, which for many Christians is a sacrosanct fact. Quoting this very passage, Dr Aw Swee Eng protests that ‘Kazantzakis is making the Bible stand on its head!’

Kazantzakis follows the same principles he employed in *Alexander the Great* and *God’s Pauper*, only this time the stakes are much higher. His intention is again to adapt the legend of Jesus to the needs of our time, and through this legend to bring Jesus closer to contemporary people. As Lisa DiCaprio says, ‘In *The Last Temptation*, the myth of Christ takes on a new and contemporary shape’ (109). Some of the details of Christ’s life are different in the novel but the ‘essence’ is a re-affirmation of Jesus as a divine figure through his character transformation and resistance to temptation, with the added bonus that his transformation and resistance are presented in such a vivid way that readers can identify with the process of mature reflection that brought about Jesus’ spiritual growth and consider pursuing the same ideals for themselves. Kazantzakis adapts the story of Jesus with the express purpose of inspiring readers to adopt Christian principles.

Several critics defend Kazantzakis’ approach. Lisa DiCaprio claims that ‘new historical evidence indicates that Kazantzakis’ rendition of a Christ who maintains an ascetic existence in order to fulfill his Christian mission (rather than out of any view that sexuality is sinful) may very well be close to historical reality’ (109). And as was the case with *Alexander the Great* and *God’s Pauper* too, Kazantzakis—according to Peter Bien—carried out exhaustive research before setting pen to paper. Peter Bien actually suggests that Kazantzakis may have derived the idea of *The Last Temptation* from a passage of Renan, which he copied into his notebook while doing research preparatory to writing the novel as ‘Renan’s speculations include the entire kernel of Kazantzakis’ novel’ (*Renan’s Vie de Jesus as a Primary Source for The Last Temptation* 4). Peter Bien also ascribes psychological depth to the novel, in accordance with the idea that every person, Jesus included, is evil by nature as well as good, violent and hateful as well as loving, which means that a mentally and psychologically sound individual should not ignore or bury the
evil within him, but channels it instead into the service of good (‘Tempted by Happiness: Kazantzakis’ Post-Christian Christ’ 12). Finally, Lewis Richards praises Kazantzakis for his efforts ‘to reclaim the values of early Christianity, such as love, brotherhood, humility, and self-renunciation’ (52).

Kazantzakis’ historical novels will continue to be dogged by controversy, especially The Last Temptation, but one thing is certain: Kazantzakis approaches the composition of historical biographical fiction creatively and idiosyncratically, and his historical novels reveal as much about himself as they do about the historical figures he portrays. I feel an affinity with his approach to writing historical novels, especially as regards his aspiration to render the past relevant to the present and to turn historical figures he admires into legends—figures larger than life, ennobled by a narrative that creatively re-works the historical record. In keeping with these principles, I have sought to turn Kazantzakis into a semi-legend in my novel as well as enable readers familiar with the current situation in Greece see parallels between his persecution by the church and state and the hostile treatment of independent thinkers by Greek society today.

Chapter 4: Challenges of the Project

Choosing the Title

The first challenge I faced in writing a historical-biographical novel about the last year in the life of Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis was the title. After careful thought, I chose the title Free Spirit. The term ‘free spirit’, which I obviously use (so does Elena Cappellaro) to describe Kazantzakis as a person, dates back to the Middle Ages, during which time it referred to various movements across Europe that opposed the rigidity and the oppression of the church. According to the most prominent chronicler of the movement, Raoul Vaneigem, ‘All the supporters of the movement of the Free Spirit insisted that life meant life immediately present’ (239). In accordance with their beliefs, adherents of the movement ‘abandoned the great external, productive subject, whose spirit signified servitude and tyranny, and made themselves earthly gods in the ceaseless flux of a universal attraction they called love’. (239) Vaneigem goes on to say that the Free Spirit ideology ‘is now resurfacing as the only alternative to the collapse of the
economic system’ (239). I describe Kazantzakis as a ‘free spirit’ because of his refusal to belong to any political or religious group, his opposition to all forms of servitude and tyranny, his alternate espousal and abandonment of various ideologies during his lifetime and his nomadic lifestyle.

In writing Free Spirit, I had a dual purpose: to craft a compelling story that would sustain the reader’s attention until the last sentence and to make my own contribution to Kazantzakis’ ever-growing legend. For Kazantzakis, much like Hemingway in the English-speaking world, has become a legendary figure in his native Greece, a figure that arouses admiration or envy, provokes wild speculation about details of his personal life and relationship with the church and inspires diverse creative endeavors. There are two reasons for Kazantzakis’ legendary status: his intriguing personal life and his conflict with the Church of Greece. Kazantzakis married twice (yet he fathered no children); traveled—following both terrestrial and maritime routes—to the four corners of the earth and resided for long spells in various countries; dallied with a concatenation of radical (and contrasting) ideologies such as nihilism, communism, and fascism; and published the highly controversial Last Temptation that led to his repudiation by the Church.

**My Own Attitude to Historical Truth**

As is the case with other writers with a turbulent life such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald, many stories circulate about Kazantzakis’ life, each one adding to but also modifying his legend. I, in my turn, also sought to enrich the legend of Kazantzakis, just as he himself contributed to the legend of Alexander the Great and St. Francis of Assisi. In doing so I aimed to expose, not resolve, the contradictions with which his life was riddled. As Andrea Molesini says, a historical character in a work of fiction is ‘complete, even though contradictory—memorable precisely because of their mass of desires, ambitions and weaknesses, of cruelty and tenderness. And this is why they can break away from the specific historical context within which their story is set to take their place on a sempiternal stage, where they remain specific but not just part of the past’ (Molesini, ‘Emotional Truths and Historical Lies in the Shadow of the Great War’, accessed online).
While writing the novel, I confronted two major challenges. The first one was to invent a sequence of dramatically compelling situations in the present time of the novel that would bring to life for the reader Kazantzakis’/Eleftherakis’ conflict with the Church and with rival writers. I needed to create the kinds of conflicts that would enable me to optimise what Dorrit Cohn terms the ‘mind-reading experience of third-person novels’ (23) by portraying Eleftherakis’ handling of those invented conflicts in a manner consonant with Kazantzakis’ personality and behavior.

The second major challenge was to delineate Eleftherakis’ character in such a way as to convey Kazantzakis’ significance as a writer and thinker while avoiding the kind of excess that would make him look over-inflated. To achieve this balance, I tried to expose Eleftherakis’ weaknesses as well as show his strengths and steer clear of a heroic and/or hyperbolic tone.

One of the most important decisions I faced while working on the novel was what approach to adopt towards the existing historical record. To make that decision I turned my attention to the nature of the historical-biographical novel and the purposes it serves. Almost from the start of the project, it became apparent to me that the writer of a historical-biographical novel is faced with a radically different task from that of a biographer, a task requiring not only a decidedly more flexible approach to the historical record than that adopted by a biographer but also inviting a deeper skepticism towards the notion of historical truth, to which a biographer, by the very nature of his or her profession, has to subscribe. This distinction between biography and historical-biographical fiction is analogous to the more overarching distinction between history and historical novel, on which Molesini has the following to say:

When writing a story set in a particular time and place, the narrator’s task is not to be true to the facts as recorded in extant source material. That is the job of the historian. What the novelist has to do involves continual ‘renegotiation’ of fidelity to historical objectivity, a process that concedes space to the exploration of emotion. For emotions are what the tale leaves the reader; it is only through emotions that the author can court the truth, even though he or she knows that truth to be unobtainable. By stirring emotions, a story can fascinate the reader, thus becoming a mirror image of truth. The writer may betray the truth, but by writing about it, by courting it in the articulation of emotions, he dresses before it, a mirror—the sort of looking-glass through which Alice has to pass. (Molesini, ‘Emotional Truths and Historical Lies in the Shadow of the Great War’, accessed online)
Embracing this view, I set out to court the emotional truth of Kazantzakis’/Eleftherakis’ (and of course the other characters’ too) inner experience, which is to say his innermost thoughts and most deeply-held feelings, fully aware I would only be creating my own subjective version of another person’s experience. This is not exclusively a contemporary practice. As Naomi Jacobs points out, ‘historical figures, dead and alive, appeared commonly in early English novels and were treated with full fictional freedom’ (xvii). At the same time I saw no reason to falsify the historical record as narrated by Kazantzakis himself in Report to Greco and also told in plenty of factual detail by his two biographers (Eleni Kazantzakis and Peter Bien). Any conscious changes to the historical record were made with a view to improving the story and making the characters more compelling, not in a wilful effort to distort known facts. For example, I made up Eleftherakis’ dispute with his French publisher over the publication of The Vision on the Cross to point out Kazantzakis’ faithfulness to his vision under trying circumstances, knowing that Kazantzakis generally had problems with publishers, though not necessarily with his French publisher and over that specific novel.

The relative weight of the events I included in my novel led me to draw the line between where to stay faithful to the record and where to fictionalise more liberally. I made a strenuous attempt to eschew factual errors when the events were critical for an insightful understanding of Kazantzakis’/Eleftherakis’ work and way of thinking. The two most prominent events in this regard were the decision he made to ‘resurrect’ Zorba upon hearing his death by writing Zorba the Greek (narrated in my novel through a flashback) and the equally material decision to turn Jesus into the subject of his novel The Last Temptation and make him contemplate a secular life replete with fornication in a vision he had on the cross. In both cases, I closely based the scenes I created in my novel on Kazantzakis’ own accounts in Report to Greco of how he came to make those decisions. But in other cases I happily resorted to artistic license. For example, Kazantzakis’ actual trip to China formed the basis for my purely imaginary description of Eleftherakis’ journey to the same country, while I also added other incidents that I completely made up such as the meeting with Albert Camus, for which there is no historical record, but could well have taken place had circumstances allowed for it, as there is reliable factual evidence for the two writers’ admiration for each other.

A similar approach was undertaken with regards to small details. Again I tried to honour the facts where such facts were available. For example, since Kazantzakis mentions in Report to
Greco that his favorite fruits are cherries and figs, I portrayed Eleftherakis as harbouring a penchant for figs and cherries too. But no information was forthcoming regarding his food preferences, so I took liberties and imagined what kinds of food would be most appealing to him—seafood, salads, and soups was my reasonable guess, as foods befitting a slim, fit, debonair and sophisticated individual like him. Overall, however, I tried not to overwhelm the reader with small details and instead keep the focus on the main action and the major dilemmas facing Kazantzakis/Eleftherakis. As Warren Adler, a seasoned writer of historical novels, points out in respect of historical fiction, ‘one of the most insidious risks you run is unconsciously allowing technical details to overtake the imaginary plot at the heart of your story.’ I used small details to flesh out the action and render scenes concrete and convincing but not to draw attention to the details as such. As Karen Dionne says, ‘Facts are fun, but if a detail doesn’t move the story forward by establishing the setting, advancing the plot or shedding light on the characters, it doesn’t belong’ (‘How to Use Facts in Your Fiction’, accessed online). The lesson here is that details that don’t serve a larger purpose in a scene should best be omitted. As Roland Barthes explains in ‘The Reality Effect’ many descriptive details have no function in the narrative of a historical novel and hence ‘correspond to a kind of narrative luxury, lavish to the point of offering many futile details’ (141).

**The Writer’s Own Era and Personal Agenda**

Evoking the spirit of the historical era during which the action of the novel unfolds is one of the key criteria adduced by critics and readers alike to judge its literary worth. Lukács, for example, looks down upon novels that do not create an ‘artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch’ (19). Yet conveying a sense of the time period in which the novel is set is a slippery undertaking. An osmosis of past and present takes place, as the bygone era is grafted to the era of the novelist’s own time since the novelist cannot escape his or her own consciousness. Though aspiring to capture the past, in essence a historical novel reflects current perspectives of past events. The past is examined in hindsight and tinged by the novelists’ own viewpoint and perceptual bias, which are largely determined by geography and temporality. As noted by Robertson Davies, ‘we all belong to our own time, and there is nothing whatever that we can do
to escape from it. Whatever we write will be contemporary, even if we attempt a novel set in a past age’ (358).

There are several ways in which writing about the past reveals the concerns of the novelist’s own era: the choice of events to be narrated, causal and relational associations forged between those events, the (inherently subjective and historically conditioned) rendition of the thoughts and feelings of the characters involved in those events, and his or her overall attitude towards these events. As Anne Scott Macleod explains, ‘Writers of history select, describe, and explain historical evidence—and thereby interpret’ historical events (26). In other words, when novelists set out to fictionalise historical events, they do so against a conceptual framework developed in the present time. Novelists’ mental make-up and habits of thinking were acquired in the present time, so all past events, and a fortiori, the attendant thoughts and feelings of dead historical figures, will be processed through their contemporary mindset and modes of perception. Although we cannot pinpoint the direction or the degree of change, it is reasonable to assume that cultural and individual mindsets as well as feelings undergo constant shift and transformation. As Shouse explains, feeling ‘is personal and biographical because every person has a distinct set of previous sensations from which to draw when interpreting and labelling their feelings’. And according to Shaviro, feeling not only ‘inherits from the past’, but also ‘projects towards the future’ (12). In so doing it conforms to past feelings while also enabling ‘deviation and novelty’ from them (15). By their very nature, then, shifts of feeling disable contemporary novelists from attuning precisely or identifying fully with the mental processes of people who lived in the past.

Oddly enough, the process can be reversed too. Herbert Butterfield offers the following explanation for novelists’ predilection for particular historical periods: ‘There is something in various ages of history, various phases of life and experience, various types of thinking, to which his mind naturally turns, and in which he finds his element. There is something in his own life which answers to its counterpart in history, and finds its own world there’ (110). Inspired by ‘facts,’ legends or rumors he or she finds appealing or intriguing, a novelist can find build cognitive bridges with the past, but only to link it (imperceptibly and indirectly) to, and even mingle it with, the present, not to retrieve it intact from the mists of time.

This symbiotic relationship between past and present applies to my novel too. The novel betrays my own preoccupations and perspectives in subtle ways. To begin with, I was infuriated
with the way Kazantzakis was treated by the church of Greece. I saw it not only as unjust but also as indicative of the contempt and envy shown by the authorities towards the intelligentsia in Greece. In keeping with my views, I portrayed the representatives of the Church as scheming, sinister and narrow-minded, as I had imagined them in my head. As Kathryn Lasky says, ‘no history, whether fictionalised in a novel or narrativised in a historical text, can be without bias’ (158). This is my own bias, and I accept it as such. I did, however, try to temper it by presenting the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Athenagoras I, as much more open-minded than the Archbishop of Athens and sympathetic towards Kazantzakis. Without staking out a claim to any kind of transcendental truth, I do base both portrayals on historical evidence, as Spyridon, the then Archbishop of Athens recommended that Kazantzakis be excommunicated, but Athenagoras intervened and saved him from such a fate.

The lesson I learned is that writers of historical fiction have obvious or hidden agendas, even when they are not aware of it. As Norma Clarke says, ‘Historical fiction almost always has an agenda of some kind – perhaps having an agenda is even intrinsic to the genre.’ Even when trying to be impartial, a historical novelist advocates or rejects a particular version of history, through all sorts of gestures outlined above—selection of events, emphasis on particular details, weight attached to each viewpoint, and the writer’s tone—and his views have consequences. My own agenda was to support the right of writers such as Kazantzakis (in real life) or Eleftherakis (in my novel) to question established norms and subvert religious and/or political authority while exposing the petty-mindedness of those who want to deprive them of that right.

**Places and Dates**

Perhaps the area in which I adhered most closely to the historical record was the settings of the novel, that is, the set of places where the story unfolds. In this regard I listed accurately the places where Kazantzakis lived in Greece and France and visited during his extensive travels. I gave Eleftherakis the same house where Kazantzakis spent the last years of his life in Antibes together with his wife Helen, I had him spend his childhood years in Heraclion, Crete and go on a trip to China right before he died, places Kazantzakis lived in and visited too. There was one notable exception. I made up the venue where he met Camus—*Les Deux Magots*—for the very simple reason that I fabricated the meeting with Camus. But I didn’t choose *Les Deux Magots*
randomly. It is a well-documented fact that Camus (just like Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir) was a regular customer at *Les Deux Magots*. There is no official record that Kazantzakis had ever been there, but knowing from research that the most famous writers of that time frequented that particular café, I used it as the setting for the imaginary scene with Camus, assuming it will resonate with readers familiar with the history of *Les Deux Magots*. It is important for the writer of historical novels to make intelligent guesses about places a historical figure might well have visited and things he might have done on the basis of what is known about that figure. This kind of extrapolation can help the novel come alive and contribute to the development of the character.

I tried to describe the various locations and interior places where the story unfolds as accurately as possible. Some of these descriptions were based on personal experience. I don’t believe that the novelist should always write from personal experience—next to impossible in the case of historical novels—but I do believe that personal experience helps. The settings for my novel encompassed sundry locations in Greece (described in flashbacks to Eleftherakis’ childhood), France, Germany (at the end of the novel) and China. I had already been to the places located in Greece. To acquire a sense of the place where he spent the last years of his life, including the year (1957) in which the novel is set, I visited the seaside town of Antibes in France and saw the outside of Kazantzakis’ house there, which gave me a feel for the mood in which Kazantzakis might have been while penning his masterpieces during the last ten years of his life. I have never been to China, however, so I had to conjure up the sundry locations, such as the Yangtze River, visited by Cosmas and Sofia based on travel writings, television documentaries and my own imagination.

As far as dates are concerned, however, I adopted a much more liberal approach. Just like Kazantzakis himself, who was a devotee of Henri Bergson’s theory of time, I believe that clock time is an illusion spawned by industrialism, resulting in unhealthy habits of thought. I fully identify with Bergson’s description of his own experience of time: ‘When I follow with my eyes on the dial of a clock the movement of the hands … I do not measure duration … Outside of me, in space, there is never more than a single position of the hand … Within myself a process of organization or interpretation of conscious states is going on, which constitutes true duration …’ (107-8).
Using clock time and providing accurate dates is the job of a historian. The job of a novelist is to illuminate the conscious states of the characters’ minds by showing how they experience time and the effect time exerts on their consciousness. In this light I reorganized the events in Kazantzakis’ life—for example I had Eleftherakis write *The Vision On The Cross* (which is my novel’s counterpart of Kazantzakis’ novel *The Last Temptation*) in the last year of his life while in fact Kazantzakis wrote it two years earlier—and altered certain dates to suit my plot. I made these changes to dates under the conviction that they do not materially affect a broader understanding of Kazantzakis’ life and work. If a reader is truly interested in the exact chronology of Kazantzakis’ life, they can check out specific timeline and publication history dates by consulting a biography, of which as mentioned before two are available, both accomplishing different objectives than my novel.

**Names and Characters’ (True) Identity**

Names are a major issue in historical novels: when historical characters appear under their own names, the author often feels an ethical and psychological need to be minutely faithful to historical fact. Legal constraints may also be imposed, and novelists can be sued for libel if certain details are felt by aggrieved relatives of the historical character to have been offensively falsified. Mark Fowler, a litigation attorney, quotes Rodney Smolla as saying:

> When an author wants to draw from a real person as the basis for a fictional character, there are two relatively ‘safe’ courses of action from a legal perspective: First, the author may make little or no attempt to disguise the character, but refrain from any defamatory and false embellishments on the character’s conduct or personality; second, the author may engage in creative embellishments that reflect negatively on the character’s reputation, but make substantial efforts to disguise the character . . . to avoid identification. When an author takes a middle ground, however, neither adhering perfectly to the person’s attributes and behavior nor engaging in elaborate disguise, there is a threat of defamation liability. (Fowler ‘Could I Be Liable for Libel in Fiction?’, accessed online)

It should be noted, though, that the spectre of a defamation lawsuit does not hang over novels featuring long-dead historical figures such as Kazantzakis (or Spyridon for that matter), but the moral imperative to respect the memory of the dead still obtains.
Perhaps the most radical gesture in my novel was renaming Nikos Kazantzakis to Cosmas Eleftherakis—a playful pun transposing his first name and surname, and in Greek alluding to a freedom-loving man of the world—and Eleni Kazantzaki to Sofia Eleftherakis (Sofia means wisdom in Greek). I decided to change Nikos Kazantzakis’ and Eleni Kazantzakis’ name for two main reasons. The first reason was to broaden the scope of the novel’s appeal so that readers who do not know or are not particularly interested in Nikos Kazantzakis can still be drawn to the archetypal figure of a freedom-loving artist plagued by age-old existential concerns and undergoing religious persecution for his beliefs, which are all the things Eleftherakis stands for. The second reason was to send a clear message to readers that as a piece of historical fiction my novel celebrates the art of imagination and does not in the least aspire to uncover any kind of historical truth, and hence if they are after factual accounts of Kazantzakis’ life, they should seek them in biographies, scholarly articles or other novels where Kazantzakis appears with his own name.

Out of respect for their memory and reputation, I used purely fictional names for the Greek writers who conspired to traduce Kazantzakis/Eleftherakis and even deprive him of the Nobel Prize although I had specific real-life writers in mind whose envy for Kazantzakis has been historically documented. Albert Camus, on the other hand, appears under his own name, which raises the question why I kept Camus’ real name while changing Kazantzakis’. Though his presence in the novel is certainly a pull for the readers, the character of Camus appears less often than the character of Kazantzakis/Eleftherakis. The novel does not make any controversial claims about him, nor is he the focus of emphasis. For all those reasons he is an important but nonetheless a supporting character, and in giving him his real name I followed the cherished tradition (a classic example of which is E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975) where J.P. Morgan, Harry Houdini, Henry Ford, Sigmund Freud and Emma Goldman make cameo appearances) of using prominent figures of the past in historical novels under their own names when they play a supporting role—an expedient practice enabling the novelist to attract readers’ attention through the presence of the famous historical figures as characters in the novels while at the same time assigning them a less important role in the story to minimize negative criticism regarding the accuracy of their portrayal.

Finally I also made up some characters such as François, Antigone, Jacques and Laurent from scratch. Using a mix of real people and imaginary characters is common practice in
historical fiction. In fact, in quite a few cases the made-up characters play a prominent role, as in the examples provided by Michael White below:

In Michael Dobbs’ series of novels featuring Winston Churchill, the story is written from the perspective of a fictional servant of the prime minister. Similarly, Robert Harris uses the device of narrating the plots of his Roman novels *Imperium* and *Lustrum* from the perspective of a household slave, Tiro, who works closely with the lead character, Cicero, the Senator. (White, ‘Mixing Real People and Imaginary Characters in Historical Novels’, accessed online)

The mix of real people and made-up characters in my own novel allowed me to close several gaps in the plot and made for a more compelling storyline—it is all grist to the mill of the literary storyteller. Antigone, for example, served as a foil for the character of Sophia, enabling me to point up the differences between Sofia’s value system and that of other women of the same age and with a similar background.

**The relationship between fact and fiction**

On a final note, this project also yielded valuable insights into the relationship between fact and fiction, insights that inform our quest for historical truth as much as they do our daily life. Dorrit Cohn argues that poststructuralist theorists took issue with the truth claims of historical narratives by exposing them as ideologically biased and making selective use of evidence as well as for using tactics from fiction such as point of view, internal focalization, time-scale compression, to name a few (8-9). Jill Paton Walsh contends that more than just careful research binds fact and fiction. She suggests that history is as *fict* (Latin for ‘something made’) as fact (‘something done’). She adds that while evidence of history exists, history is itself ‘a construct of the mind’ (22). And Stephanie Merritt also casts doubt on the essentialist notion of historical fact:

‘Historical fact’ is an ambiguous term. We can point to certain events taking place on certain dates – though the further back you go, the more even the dates are open to doubt – but we often don’t know what was said off the record, or how the principal players behaved when the chroniclers looked away. These undocumented areas often provide the most private, human moments, away from the public stage, and the blank spaces they
leave are irresistible to a novelist. Even ‘straight’ biographers and historians are not above a bit of imaginative colouring-in if it brings the story to life. (‘How true should historical fiction be?’ accessed online)

Historical fiction is, then, at least three removes away from the so-called historical truth or reality. To start with, reality is first filtered through the thoughts of the individuals who perceive it. It is subsequently turned into narrative, which means it is now filtered through the medium of language, which morphs it into discourse. As Paul de Man remarks apropos of the relationship between language and external reality in literary discourse, ‘it is therefore not a priori certain that literature is a reliable source of information about anything but its own language’ (11). Hillis Miller echoes the same sentiments, stating that ‘A literary work is not, as many people may assume, an imitation in words of some pre-existing reality but, on the contrary, it is the creation or discovery of a new, supplementary world, a metaworld, a hyper-reality’ (18). And finally the dominant discourse, the discourse that makes its way into printed books and reaches our bookshelves, more often than not reflects in the case of historical fiction the point of view of the winners, those who survived the crucible of military or class warfare or those who set the norms of literary taste—which I am not necessarily condemning as a bad thing.

If all of the above is an accurate description of the relationship between historical reality and historical fiction, it then follows that what we get in historical novels is not the historical truth, but a construct of certain minds at best trying to perceive the historical truth with whatever faulty or limited instruments—including the medium of language—they have at hand. As Paul Pardi points out, in the postmodern world, we (those who subscribe to the view of reality as subjective and of language as a filter of this subjective reality) find it impossible to ‘declare an “absolute truth” about much of anything since our view of the world is a product of our individual perspective’ (‘What Is Truth?’, accessed online). Pardi also highlights the common postmodern belief that ‘our worldview makes up a set of lenses or a veil through which we interpret everything and we can’t remove those lenses. Interpretation and perspective are key ideas in postmodern thought and are contrasted with “simple seeing” or a purely objective view of reality’ (‘What Is Truth?’, accessed online).

In my novel I tried to present as accurately as possible the point of view of the Church, the publishing house, and the Swedish Academy. Still, it is Eleftherakis who is the lead character, and it is his perspective that dominates. Aware of the subjectivity of my perspective, I
portrayed Eleftherakis as an open-minded writer who is unfairly persecuted by the Church and whose message is not heeded by conservative readers, and in the case of *The Vision on the Cross*, not even by the literary establishment. While also treating Camus sympathetically and showing him as a worthy contender, I present Eleftherakis as deserving of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 and denounce (in subtle ways, of course) the injustice perpetrated by the Swedish Academy by not giving it to him. For several of the readers who see Kazantzakis behind Eleftherakis—and I harbour absolutely no objection to readers doing so if they wish—these claims might seem contentious. I can only ask such readers to see this (sympathetic treatment of and identification with Eleftherakis) as a viewpoint like any other viewpoint, although I hope carefully qualified through the presentation of the other viewpoints. Each reader will be the judge for himself or herself. My novel is, above all, a work of fiction, and Eleftherakis is not Kazantzakis. I make no other claims than these, and I invoke Merritt’s observations about the necessity of disclaimers to my defense:

The words ‘based on’ and ‘author’s note’ are essential to the historical novelist’s toolkit. By making clear that you’re writing fiction, you claim the freedom to speculate, to stray beyond what is known, and so breathe new life into long-dead characters. Any attempt to recreate the past requires a leap of imagination. If a bit of poetic licence in historical fiction helps to keep people’s interest in the past alive, so much the better. (‘How true should historical fiction be?’ accessed online)

My foremost intention when I sat down to write *Free Spirit* was to produce a historical novel that would be dramatically compelling, emotionally engaging, and intellectually stimulating—as well as sparking an interest in Kazantzakis’ work and making its own contribution, however small, to the field of historical novels. If poetic licence has contributed to the achievement of these goals—the ultimate arbiter of which will be the reader—then it was worth resorting to.
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