



MATIA



IN DEATH
VERITAS

and other stories

ZAHER ALAJLANI

Revised Edition

In Death Veritas and Other Stories

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Zaher Alajlani



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Dedication

For Marcus, Eugenia, Houda, Shams, and Haya

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Finally, I'd like to thank Ilinca Mare. Her great translation skills and professionalism have enabled Matia Press to connect authors across countries.

From the Author

In Death Veritas and Other Stories was my first attempt at writing short fiction in English. And although all writers have a love-hate relationship with their first literary endeavors, I'm still very happy that I wrote and published the book rather hastily ten years ago. Undoubtedly, the book would've benefited from more rigorous editing, especially to make it less verbose. However, when I wrote those stories, I was in the throes of unimaginable mental and physical agony, and I do believe without any doubt that writing saved my life. After ten years of writing and having my stories featured in many literary journals, I decided to republish *In Death Veritas* with major revisions. Very little of the original book remained, but I made sure to use the same concepts that underlay the plots of the original stories.

I wholeheartedly advise the reader discretion and caution them that "Necrosis," the third story, contains depictions of psychosis, abuse, and violence. The purpose is definitely not to glorify violence or abuse whatsoever. But ever since I became familiar as an undergraduate student with the writings of Christopher Marlowe, Edgar Allen Poe, and other great authors who were interested in the abnormal states of mind, I myself

developed a fascination with madness as a literary device to explore the dark corners of the human psyche, mainly man's capacity and sadly willingness to do evil. So, this story should be treated as such.

Finally, two of the stories are set in nineteenth-century Romania. Therefore, to construct a fictional world that resembles this beautiful Eastern European country two hundred years ago, I use the Hungarian names of Transylvanian cities and a couple of expressions that some people may find jarring nowadays. These are merely literary devices to portray the past—no less, no more.

Zaher Alajlani
Cluj-Napoca, Romania
August 1, 2023

Prefață de Laura T. Ilea

***In Death Veritas* de Zaher Alajlani Nebunie, demoni și lumi apuse**

O căutare neobișnuită, un sincretism provocator, o explorare a limitelor psihicului uman, acolo unde el se apropie de moarte, de rău, de demonism și de tentația distrugerii. Astfel aș putea caracteriza volumul lui Zaher Alajlani, *In Death Veritas*. Desigur, făcând trimitere la *in vino veritas*, la puterea unei băuturi intoxicante de a ne transmuta percepția în domeniul invizibilului, cartea anunță de la bun început că scrierea ei i-a salvat literalmente autorului viața.

Nu e de mirare așadar că în ea apar referințe la exorcism, la posesie, la schizofrenie, la halucinație și chiar la tentația (dusă în text până la capăt) a uciderii. Nu e de mirare întrucât autorul ei a scris o teză de doctorat despre reprezentările savantului nebun în saga civilizației occidentale, în prometeismul cunoașterii. Este oare vorba despre același prometeism, despre același *hybris* al transmutării sumbre a vieții în moarte? Plasate în contextul transilvan al unui oraș numit Kolozsvár sau într-o Atenă decăzută din grațiile ei civilizaționale, explorarea acestui volum – primul volum de povestiri, cum afirmă autorul, revizuit acum într-o nouă

ediție – abundă de urmele demonilor dintr-o enciclopedie siriană și a altora de sorginte mediteraneană. Demoni care aduc personajul într-o stare limbică, destinat a-și petrece viața în invizibilitate și incapabil să moară, împins la a nu mai resimți nicio emoție umană sau pradă unei imaginații distrugătoare. ”Terrible things happen in the world,” afirmă el, citându-l pe Stephen King.

Probabil că lucrul cel mai terifiant descris în aceste povestiri este uciderea compulsiv-obsesională a iubitei, Roxana. Tulburător moment de pierdere a rațiunii, de întunecare morbidă, un moment psihopat, dacă e să îl încadrăm într-o tipologie a crimei. Dar și mai tulburătoare poate este meditația care urmează actului. Și anume că uciderea, fapta umană cea mai reprehensibilă dintre toate, este extinsă la scara celor care măcelăresc în numele virtuții patriotice, se întorc acasă ca eroi blazați de o condiție post-traumatică și devin personaje ambulante, dependente de droguri. Ca un autor dezlănțuit care nu își poate proteja creația de propria imprecizie blasfematorie, Zaher Alajlani explorează cu un patos întunecat lumi de graniță între dereglarea psihică și nevoia de abluțiune, lumi care l-ar putea face să găsească în sfârșit o ieșire. Volumul *In Death Veritas* pare a aparține unui autor care nu își poate pentru moment găsi liniștea în cuvânt și care explorează în

continuare tentația nebuniei, în speranța că lumea creată de el se va coagula în cele din urmă printr-un act redemptiv.

Foreword by Laura T. Ilea

In Death Veritas by Zaher Alajlani Madness, demons and bygone worlds

An unusual quest, a provocative syncretism, an exploration of the limits of human psyche, to the point where it approaches death, evil, demonism and the temptation of destruction. This is how I can describe Zaher Alajlani's book, *In Death Veritas*. Referring to *in vino veritas*, of course, to the power of an intoxicating beverage to transmute our perception in the domain of the invisible, the book announces from the start that its writing has literally saved the life of its author.

No wonder that it includes references to exorcism, possession, schizophrenia, hallucinations and even the temptation of murder (fulfilled in text). No wonder since its author wrote a doctoral thesis on the representations of the mad scientist in the saga of the western civilization, in the prometheanism of knowledge. Is it perhaps about the same prometheanism, the same hybris of the grim transmutation of life into death? Placed in a Transylvanian city called Kolozsvár, or in an Athens fallen from its civilizational graces, the exploration of this volume – his first short stories volume, according to the author, revised now in a new

edition – is filled with the traces of demons from a Syrian encyclopedia, or other of Mediterranean roots. Demons which bring the character in a limbo state, destined to live his life in invisibility and incapable to die, impelled to not feeling any human emotion or prisoner to a destructive imagination. ‘Terrible things happen in the world’, he affirms, citing Stephen King.

Probably the most terrifying act depicted in these stories is the compulsive-obsessive murder of the girlfriend, Roxana. An unsettling moment of loss of reason, of morbid darkness, a psychopathic moment, if we were to frame it in a killer typology. Perhaps even more disturbing is meditation that succeeds the act – that the killing, the most reprehensible human act of them all, is extended to the scale of the ones that are butchering in the name of patriotic virtue and return home as heroes blasé by a post-traumatic condition and become ambulant characters, with a drug addiction.

Like an unleashed creator that cannot protect his creation from his own blasphemous imprecation, Zaher Alajlani explores, with a dark pathos, worlds that exist at the border of psychic derangement and the need of ablution, worlds that could lead him to finally find an exit. The volume *In Death Veritas* seems to belong to an author who, for the time being, cannot find his peace in words

and who keeps exploring the temptation of madness, hoping that the world he creates will eventually coagulate through a redemptive act.

Translated by Ilinca Mare



Rama Badawi

In Death Veritas

I now stand at the forest's edge and stare at that accursed Transylvanian town I once called home. The sound of the nearby river conjures up the image of blood gushing out of a cut artery—the whole scene reeks of desperation, like the face of a man being led to the gallows.

I feel no solace when the night is clear and the moon becomes a lantern, for I can almost see the forest sneer under the silver light. The rustle of leaves tiptoes to my ears and whispers, “I—”

I might tell you later.

I despise this forest. It's a purgatory, an open prison. But there was a time when I adored it. Walking through it at night used to be as exhilarating as experiencing fear for the first time. I'd heard many old wives' tales about the evil inhabiting the forest, especially from the two women who raised me after consumption left me parentless.

“A demon has been living in the woods for centuries. They say her beauty is unparalleled. If you approach her, she will steal your soul, and you'll be forever trapped in the forest. So don't ever

set foot there at night, my little boy,” Grandmother would say, shaking her fat finger.

“The souls of witches executed long ago still roam the forest today. Why do you think the trees are crooked? They’re haunted. If you communicate with such unclean spirits, they’ll take you away, and you’ll never, ever return,” my aunt used to say.

“The devil is real, boys and girls. He lives in the forest,” even my emaciated, hook-nosed teacher loved to repeat.

At first, I’d tremble and gasp with the other children. *What if the devil comes after me? God help my soul*, I often thought, but I got older and fancied myself above such common superstitions.

Grandmother died, then Aunt. After that, things changed, but the forest’s trees remained the same: crooked.

After finishing school, I used some of my inheritance money to go to Nagybánya, a close-by city. After four lonely years of studying law and not relating to any of my pretentious colleagues, I returned to my hometown and found a job as a town hall clerk. By then, I had reached my mid-twenties and was aloof, handsome, and eligible.

Young women flirted with me when they’d come to stamp papers or obtain official documents. I lusted after some of them,

dated many, and eventually lost interest in all. Days came in and out, passing fast like shadows, until I found myself middle-aged and alone.

Despite the balding crown and wrinkled forehead, I still didn't look bad at all in my dark double-breasted suits. But young women saw me differently now. They flirted no more. They'd call me "Sir" or "Meister." And since the townsfolk knew each other, many called me "Uncle." *It seems like yesterday when your mothers came to me like moths to a flame.*

A sizeable fortune was not the only thing I'd amassed as a state employee. There was also resentment. My position enabled me to know the private affairs of the townsfolk. In short, they were hypocrites. Those who preached against sin on Sundays were often arrested in neighboring towns for public intoxication or soliciting. Respectable local women, who had a saintly air about them in the morning, were involved in sordid nightly activities, like orgies and spell casting.

The hypocrisy of the town suffocated me. Nothing seemed real to me anymore but my nascent desire to escape the mundane, breakthrough, and—like a demigod—dissolve myself into a

glorious end in which selfishness and heroism would meet. There was no better place than the forest to hound after such fantasies.

The macabre stories I'd heard often trailed across my mind, morphing into one single obsession: *What if there's something beyond what we see?*

This thought devoured me, and I eventually sought an answer. My search led me to the nearby city of Kolozsvár, particularly to a Russian bookstore owner who sold me various rare manuscripts about communicating with the dead, summoning demons, and accessing the unseen realm.

"These books may harm you," he warned in a thick Romanian accent typical of native Slavic speakers. He said something to himself in Russian, scratched his chin, puffed, and then continued in Romanian, "I can't deny you knowledge. But there are points of no return in life."

The man's looks were more dreadful than his words: the mutton chops, acne scars, and droopy eyelid.

I nodded at him. "I understand. Thank you." As I exited the store, the last I heard was some ominous muttering in Russian overlaid by the sound of the door chime.

I read the books with the enthusiasm of a madman, finally memorized various ways of communicating with the unseen. Then, I began camping in the forest to test them, singing blasphemous chants and repeating ancient incantations. The constant disappointment bred new questions: *Maybe I'm having a mental breakdown or losing my mind.*

Doubt ate me up, but one thing was clear: The forest's beauty was ravishing. So, I started to go to the forest at night, light small fires, and read by the glowing flames. I even took several trips to Kolozsvár to purchase more esoteric books.

The serenity of the forest gave me comfort and filled me with a sense of wonder. I became obsessed with recreating the latter, so I began studying those profane texts in the morning, too. My bureaucratic duties suffered. Those who needed my stamp or signature had to wait outside now for long hours until I decided to have a break.

The large arched window in my office overlooked the town square. When the sky was bright, my desk, situated across the window, would swim in the sunshine. One day, as I basked in the warmth of the midday sun, a woman in her early twenties came in without a knock.

I put down the book I'd been reading, *An Encyclopedia of Syrian and Other Mediterranean Demons*.

"I love the grey streaks in your hair, Meister," was the first thing she said.

"And I love your red hair," I answered. "But you must wait for a bit outside."

"But I can't wait. I'm really in a hurry."

"I see." I closed the book.

She introduced herself before asking me to stamp the deed to a house she'd just purchased. Her name, Laila, was unusual, giving me the initial impression that she was of Turkish or Arab origin, but I soon noticed her Romani dress.

She smiled when she caught me staring at her cleavage as she leaned over my desk. "See, my place is in the heart of the forest," she said when I handed her the document.

"Yes, the deed says so, but I never knew there was any residential facility there."

"What do you mean? I know where my house is."

"I'm not doubting your word, but the record-keeping in this place is," I paused, "subpar."

Soon Laila's presence became the talk of our sleepy town.

“She’s a damn gypsy, and all gypsies are sorcerers. They come first, then God’s punishment follows. Draughts. Plagues,” the men would say.

The women would bulge their eyes and foam, “Look at her hypnotic green eyes, pale skin, bony face, and slender body. She’s here to seduce our men into sin.”

They were right. The same men who cursed her in the morning visited her at night, paying her in gold and silver coins.

Even the priest, who crossed himself when she passed him in public, would wait for darkness to veil the sky and sneak out of the town like a coward deserting an army. I bet he used to sizzle in lust in her arms like a piece of pork fat on a hot skillet.

I watched all that and was disgusted but not surprised, for I knew that hypocrisy is one of humankind’s greatest assets. Without it, we can’t keep this facade of civilization. Our town was merely a microcosm of the vast world.

During the day, if I saw Laila by chance in the town square or the market, I’d nod at her. It was the kind of greeting you’d give a concierge or a coachman. Yet, people criticized this meager courtesy. “As a public clerk, I can’t alienate anyone,” I’d defend myself.

After a month or two, the novelty wore off, and Laila became one of those ‘evils of the world’ our town of plaster saints was accustomed to. Through it all, Laila never took offense.

Although I never partook in that natural sin, Laila and I developed a peculiar friendship. She started visiting me in the office. I enjoyed her company, and our conversations were always bizarre. She’d sit in the armchair opposite my desk, telling me about Mesopotamian legends and speaking of ancient demons.

“Demons, all demons, entered our world from a valley in what’s now called Syria. Lamashtu and Pazuzu are still among us. They all come from the womb of Lilith. All demons do. And she is the most beautiful of all,” she raved once before pulling a small thing from her pocket and putting it on my desk.

It was a yellowish parchment with a primitive drawing of a woman at whose feet men with rat-like faces knelt. “See, this is Lilith. The legend says she walked through the mountains and above the sea all the way from Mesopotamia to Romania.”

“And those weird creatures prostrating?”

“They’re her creation. They live underneath human settlements. They may be underneath this town. What do you think?” She grinned.

“I think nothing remarkable lives in this town, beneath it or above it. Absolutely nothing. Nothing lives in the forest, too. No one lives there but you.” If cynicism were a person, it would’ve had the same smile I flashed at Laila. I continued, “I’ve been reading a lot about the unseen and the supernatural. It’s a fascinating topic, but I don’t think there’s any truth to it. It’s a bunch of entertaining superstitions kept alive by religion and man’s incurable existential dread.”

She said as if she hadn’t heard me, “You know that if you mate with Lilith, you lose your soul.”

“What do you mean? I’d die?”

“Worse. You’d spend your life unseen and unable to die, like you’re a conscious, powerless, purposeless witness of it, one who sees the truth but can’t say it to anyone, one who can never give or receive love, hate, or any human emotion,” her voice was confident and unweaving, like a faithful preacher’s on a hot Sunday sermon.

“And why would she want my soul? What the soul of a public employee in a small town would do for her? Won’t she be better off having the soul of a king or a queen?”

Laila bobbed her head, and a glimpse of understanding surfaced in her eyes, “Okay. It’s all about willingness. She can’t take one’s soul unless he’s willing.”

“Okay. If what you’re saying is true, then I’m willing to give Lilith my soul if she can show me that there’s anything beyond this physical dimension. If there’s a Lilith, I’d love to see her tonight.”

“Tonight?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, tonight because if there’s a spiritual realm, I’d like to see it. Anything but the mundane, anything that gets me out of such existence.”

She got up. “You can’t just get a glimpse of it. You must go all in and never come back.”

“Sure,” I was affirmative.

“Get up, please.” Once I did, she went on, “Have you ever had a fever so high that you hallucinated?” She held my hand with one of hers and rubbed its back with her other hand.

“Yes.”

“Seeing the other realm resembles a hallucination. But it never ends.” She let go of my hand.

“I’m ready.” *If anything like that exists outside your feeble mind.* “But I won’t take any drugs, smoke any opium, or drink any herbs or alcohol to induce hallucination.”

“Sure.” She looked at me the same way a lioness would look at a gazelle, and I mistook that for lust. “Meet me tonight at the town square at six o’clock in the evening.”

She snatched the old painting off my desk, put it back in her pocket, and then, when she was about to exit my office, said, “Your skin looks nice, despite the wrinkles.”

I went to my house at two in the afternoon, soaked in a relaxing bath, and floated down a river of thoughts:

Laila is beautiful. She likes you. You enjoy talking to her, and maybe she just wanted to go out with you, and this talk about demons is just her bizarre way of getting closer to you. What would she tell you otherwise, “Hey, Sir, would you want to go on a date with a gypsy prostitute? You’re the only one who didn’t despise me publicly and lick the dirt off my soles at night. That’s the only criterion I look for in a man.” There was something undeniably ominous about her today, though, but that’s not enough to reject her. If I do, I’ll be as gullible as her. It’s true I sang those useless necromantic chants in the forest, but that was merely a psychotic

episode in my life. Everyone has them. Mine was just singular and a bit longer.

I got out of the tub to the calming smell of lavender bouncing off my skin and filling my nostrils. In front of the oval mirror, I patted myself dry under the pale light of the candelabras dangling from the ceiling. *I don't look that bad.*

As I dressed, my youth days were reanimated in my head—memories of having vitality and excitement. And those memories of my younger self were like a pack of wolves feeding on a carcass. There was no stopping them. *I shall have her tonight. I shall have Laila. She'll make me feel young again.*

When I was locking my house door, a meager voice suddenly echoed in my head like a gunshot, “Stop,” as it tried to prevent me from going ahead. Maybe that was the last shred of my will to live. But I did not listen. I thought that by sleeping with Laila, I'd attain a new liberty. Little did I know that nothing enslaves a man's spirit more than perverted liberty.

I arrived rather early in the town square, so I sat on a bench by the fountain, anticipating her face among the faces of the uncomprehending passersby. When she eventually arrived, she asked me to go to the Museum of Torture and Antiquities.

“I’ve never been there before. I hear it’s a silly display of badly made papier-mâché figures of people getting tortured in medieval-looking dungeons.”

She held my hand. Our fingers intertwined. “Let me lead the night. There’s a small exhibition of replicas of Mesopotamian statues I’d like you to see.”

“Sure,” I said. From then on, I could only acquiesce.

I looked at her face as we walked. I couldn’t recognize it anymore. It suddenly took on features that made her look a thousand years older. Like dying embers, her eyes now sunk so deep into her face, and she struck me as one of those ancient statues you’d see in a museum in Syria, Iraq, or Egypt.

I was unable to speak, however.

When we arrived at our destination, Laila’s features became normal again, as though she’d metamorphized into her old self. Then, as we reached the end of the main corridor, she took my hand and said in a lifeless voice, “Let’s go to the Mesopotamian exhibition.”

Seconds later, we stood before a grotesque stone sculpture of Echidna, a half-woman-half-snake monster. Evil! That entity appeared exceedingly evil. I couldn’t tell whether that monstrous

sculpture was smiling, frowning, crying, laughing, or high or in pain. All man's existential states appeared in its face, expressed in one hideous deformity.

Suddenly, the monster began projecting light onto Laila's face. Laila's face absorbed all this existential terror, and somehow, I lost track of the entire physical world around me. Disarray invaded all my senses, and everything became surreal. All shapes and faces ever known to man became alien to me. It was a mere state of utter confusion and supreme despair beyond the logic of language or the skills of drawing. That was the unseen that had so fascinated me.

Laila became the monster, and the beast became Laila. That unholy union fumed of decay—that pungent, sulfuric smell of rotten fruits and feces. Primordial fear gripped my throat like the withered hand of the ghost of a drowned man. My guilt was the same as Adam's when God banished him from Eden. And I still couldn't move or escape. It was as though a nightmare directed by Lucifer himself had engulfed me.

Laila murmured something, then exhaled in my face, and we were suddenly in front of a place I had never seen before, a

detached baronial building sitting by the edge of the town, right across the forest.

She said, “Here we are; this is where utter madness unfolds.”

My tongue rebelled against me. I couldn’t speak.

At the entrance, a frightening man warmly welcomed Laila. The fellow was in his early fifties with a face full of acne scars partly covered by grey mutton chops. His right eye was suffering from what appeared to be a mild case of ptosis. *A familiar face*, I thought.

He spoke to me with a Russian accent, “Greetings, Sir. We have been waiting for you. You are a bit late, but we kept your place. Please follow me.”

On our way to the table, I noticed how peculiar the waiters looked. Their faces had no lineaments. They moved like marionettes, and each had a piece of paper taped over where his mouth was supposed to be. “Here to only serve,” it read.

Black and white, just like the restaurant’s walls and curtains, they wore identical white tuxedos with black shirts and white ties.

The floor was shaped like a chessboard. On each square, a circular table was fixed. Each chair had a triangle for a back. The tables were set elegantly, as though for a regal feast.

As we sat, I noticed how heavily padded the chairs were. I yawned, then looked around. Suddenly, the restaurant was full of diners eating in a very orderly, silent manner: collectively biting and chewing. Slaves! They were slaves to the food before them.

The frightening man addressed me, “So, Sir, what would you like to drink?” Again, I couldn’t move a lip. I was there, present yet nonexistent. After waiting a few seconds, he politely smiled at me and said, “I’ll start you with A Point of No Return, one of our special drinks.” He faded.

Laila’s smile was disturbing, as though saying, “This is a fine spectacle. How glorious it is to see a man on the verge of madness.”

I fell prey to an overwhelming sense of emptiness. When I turned my face and looked around, they’d all been gone: the waiters, the customers, and the grotesque man. My eyes faced Laila’s direction: She was no longer there, too.

I panicked, and an unshakable feeling of complete isolation wrapped me like a shroud. My chest got tighter, and I felt as though I had a thousand hearts in my ribcage, each fluttering and skipping beats. But all of a sudden, a song came on, giving me a different kind of agony.

The terror of that charnel melody echoed that of my present ordeal. The slow piano music accompanying the ominous lyrics seemed to be coming from within the walls of the restaurant:

This room is nothing more than a death chamber;

So don't...

This chair reminds me of nothing but electrocution;

So don't...

This table is so round: it makes me dizzy;

So don't...

This wine smells like bleach;

So don't...

The face that once gave me comfort is now nothing but a meaningless waste of flesh;

So don't...

*Don't contrive more colors on that putrid head of yours,
for I am on the verge of vomiting all the nightmares I had for
a last meal.*

Applause echoed when the song stopped. My eyes traced its source: a handsome, well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman. He wore a shiny black tuxedo with a silver tie. His face was completely shaven and topped with carefully coiffed, slicked-back hair.

He approached me and said, “Great song, huh? I always come here to enjoy the show.”

Fear saturated my words when I finally could stutter, “Who are you? Where did everyone go?”

“Aha, let me introduce myself: Abado, Denis Abado. I’m an agent. I manage talents. The very nice lady whose voice you enjoyed is one of my clients, Lilith! Dear Lilith! Come and say hello to the gentleman here.”

Out of nowhere, she appeared dressed in a long purple tube dress. The color looked great against her pale skin. Oh, how beautiful she was: the hime-cut hairdo, the dark brown hair, and those dreamy hazel eyes.

She put her hand on my shoulder, then whispered, “We don’t usually get handsome creatures like you in here.”

All the bizarre characters I saw in that place transmuted into one woman: Lilith. The air around me became thicker and her eyes wider and deeper. I felt the gates of hell open. She smiled, stared at me, and, before I knew it, she smashed me against the wall. When I got up, she was gone.

“It happened to me before. I got smashed against the wall the way you did.” His eyes protruded before crashing to the floor and vomiting blood.

I assumed he was dead. His bluish lips confirmed my assumption. Nothing but those fragments of my nightmare surrounded me now. I sat in the corner of the room, rested my head against the wall, and closed my eyes.

“Abado is here, Sir. Right at your service,” I heard the mumbling.

I opened my eyes: The sight of him standing before me wiping the blood off his mouth curdled that in my own veins.

“You thought I was dead. Maybe I was. Maybe I wasn’t. Life and death are not the same here. Here, everything is merely an illusion,” Abado told me before he started turning into ashes.

The whole scene began crumbling like a glass wall hit with a sledgehammer, and I found myself before Laila’s house. I had never seen it before but somehow still knew it was hers. It was a lifeless brick-built, colonial structure with tinted, mullioned windows. It looked damp and deserted, giving the impression that filth had long sought refuge within its crumbling walls. Mold nested in the small spaces between its bricks, and humidity had

damaged it to a great extent. However, despite obviously looking like a hostile territory, I opened the door and entered.

There in the house, Laila lay naked. She looked like a corpse: pale, miserable, and awaiting a proper burial. Her moans were full of agony. Her skin had come to be thick and full of blisters. Even the thought of being with her was like a vile act of necrophilia. But again, I couldn't run away. I was merely a spectator of my demise.

She crawled toward me. After struggling to stand, she placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed me to the ground. Her touch paralyzed me. I was under her now, feeling her genitals pressing against mine until she got me inside her and began to consummate our union.

The closer I got to the climax, the more meager my will became. I tried to resist. I had even wished to be able to turn back time and get out of there. But that destructive force within made me go on until the end. Everything around me was baying for closure. Finally, I broke down; I let go.

There on the ground, I had lost it all: my pulse, my breath, my soul, my time, and my place. Scythed! I was scythed. Yet, I knew that, just like Abado, somehow, I would rise again.

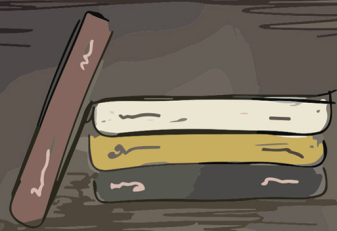
Now, I think I'm in purgatory. I walk down the town's streets, shouting at people, brandishing my fists in anger, hopelessly trying to make them notice me, but it is always pointless. No one sees me. I sometimes sit in the town square drenched in melancholy, watching people passing by. They look aimless as though nothing but death would give their lives meaning.

Every place in the town looks desolate. I can see emptiness proudly marching through our streets, parading the futility of being. Each occasional breeze is now an emissary of the menacing thoughts of the townsfolk, one that whispers terrifying things to me: "Someone is selling his soul to the devil tonight. Someone will abuse a helpless child. Someone will lie. Someone will rape. Someone will murder."

Though I exist, my face has now vanished. I can't see it in storefronts or mirrors. I escape to the forest and hear the trees murmur, "In death veritas; in death veritas; in death veritas." I long for death, but all I can do is lie in wait for it to come. When I see it, I will embrace it and never let go. I will hold on to it like one holds on to life. Only then shall I know the truth. I shall be free, for I will either fade into nothing or be forgiven and redeemed.



Rama Barlowi



Escape

I have a lot to tell you, but time can never suffice for me to divulge all the secrets about the darkness that holds me prisoner. Surely you can't trust me *yet*, for I sometimes don't trust what I say. But even if I'm lying to you, lying is but an art, and art can improve existence, offer an escape from its mundane traps, and even possess a soul. May the latter kind be forever cursed, just like the day when I first saw that ghoulish oil painting of a forest at night among whose trees a shadow figure lurked. In the upper-right corner, there was a moon with red lines running through it like veins, and in the lower-left corner, a Greek phrase was inscribed: *Καμία διέξοδος.*

The painting pulsed with life. I could almost hear the wind swish, smell the soil, and experience the isolation of the faceless man that abominable, nameless painter had drawn.

I looked at the Greek writing, then asked the old hawker, "What does that mean?"

"No Escape."

Something was unnerving about him. Maybe it was the thick, untrimmed white beard, the sun-beaten face that looked like

an unreal wax mask, or his towering stature casting a deformed shadow on the sidewalk where he had set up his stand.

“Are you going to give me a better price?” I asked.

He scratched his chin. “No.”

“Do I look rich to you?”

“No.”

“Listen, my friend,” I forced myself to smile, then continued, “I want the painting, but if I pay you the price you’re asking for, I have to go hungry for three or four days. So, please give me a better price.”

He eyeballed me like a lizard. “No. Not a *bani* (cent) less.”

“Alright. I see.” With the margins of my lips rolled in, I pulled out my wallet, counted the money, and handed it to him.

He licked his thumb and counted again. “Ten *lei*.”

He took the painting off the stand and gave it to me. “This is a great painting. It’s magical.” He coughed, took a cigarette out of the breast pocket of his soiled, tattered shirt, lodged it in the corner of his mouth, and lit it. “It’s a great painting, I tell you,” he spoke while holding the cigarette with his lips. The smoke billowed parallel to his face before dissipating, and the cherry bobbed up and down.

My one-bedroom house, with its crumbling white walls and thatched roof, was on the outskirts of Kolozsvár and had barely anything of value save for a collection of rare books and some antiques and statuettes. Trading such macabre objects was my only means of living. My existence was miserable, and I sustained myself with beans, bread, and beer.

There was one book that fascinated me the most, and I refused to sell it, no matter how attractive the offer: *The Encyclopedia of Syrian and Other Mediterranean Demons*. I'd purchased it some years ago from an old gypsy woman for the meager price of fifty *bani*.

She had been sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk when my eyes fell upon the bizarre leather-cover tome lying before her, along with handmade talismans and other strange items. She laughed when I gave her the coins, tucked them in her breast, and wobbled her head. The golden coins embellishing her red headscarf made a faint jingle.

There was no author or editor name on the book, and it was clearly the product of several hands, for it detailed and sketched a large number of malevolent entities that no single soul

could've investigated in one lifetime. However, of all the demons mentioned, there was one that struck me as most intriguing: Saraba.

The book said, "This amorphous, wicked female spirit can induce untamed imaginations in men. Once under her sway—" A giant ink blot was spilled over the rest of the paragraph.

Fascinating! What does she do to her victims? I'd often wonder.

The question is no longer a mystery to me.

After the drawing slept under my roof, I began having a recurring pleasant dream:

The moon cast its diamond light on the forest. The trees hugged one another, forming huge thickets. Serenity underlay everything I saw. The air was gentle and filled with the sort of happiness one feels at the onset his intoxication, when everything suddenly seems exciting and full of wonder. From the distant horizon—where the full moon slept in a clear, starry sky—the piano melody of Debussy's Clair de Lune softly came on. It was as sweet as the kiss of a shy, nubile lover. A young woman dressed in a long, white gown with a face full of bright light would then manifest before me, extending her hand. The sense of pure love that overcame me made it clear that she was a friend.

I'd always wake up at that point, wondering about the amazing thing that could've happened had I taken her hand.

Night after night, that vision visited me, and it never got any less beautiful or pleasing. I'd get up with a smile, not feeling the once-all-too-crippling soreness of sleeping on a worn-out mattress.

The bliss went on for weeks, but all good things must end. One night, I arouse from that blissful dream to see her standing by the side of my bed. I rubbed my eyes. She was still there. *I must still be dreaming.*

She extended her hand. I propped myself up by the elbow and gaped at her.

After she drew nearer, she said, "It's not a dream. Give me your hand. Don't be afraid."

It felt as though I had already heard her voice a thousand times. It was as familiar to me as crying is to a newborn.

I took her hand and stood up. We were now face to face, our hands locked in a loose grip. The awe and wonder I felt were like that of a man receiving communion for the first time.

She then released my hand and handed me a small bundle. “Take it with you, and I shall guide you,” she told me before turning into a pillar of light that vanished slowly.

I examined the bundle. It was white and pure as though formed from the same fabric of a summer cloud.

My house door cracked open. I stepped outside and found myself in the forest from my dream. But this time, a sense of impending doom had replaced the serenity I’d felt in my nocturnal visions. The air no longer carried the sweet melody of Clair de Lune. Instead, a ghastly symphony of hisses, howls, and chitter had supplanted it.

The moon looked pale and sick, and the stars were merely lacerations on the face of the sky. I could see the moon pulsing and trembling like a panicking heart. I began feeling light, too light, and although I could see myself, I felt shapeless, formless.

I wanted to escape that grim open prison. My heels sunk into the wet soil as I followed the beaten path until I came upon an anthill. The little insects crawled out of it and formed a straight line. They started marching together with the sense of purpose of an arrow about to hit its target. *Maybe they’ll lead me out*, I thought, then joined them.

We marched forward with the same beat, movement, and pace. They offered me a fleeting sense of belonging, and I eventually felt as fragile and insignificant as they were. I looked at the bundle: It looked smaller and lighter.

Have I done the right thing by joining them? Have I taken the form of a—

A loud noise, similar to glass breaking, interrupted my internal dialogue.

The ants began screaming and shaking in agony, falling one after the other, like naïve partisans caught in the sight of a heartless, professional sniper, and dissolving into black paint. I felt like vomiting at the sight of their oily corpses, but my heart wasn't touched by sorrow. I had no time to grieve over their purposeless existence, anyhow. All I wanted was to escape.

I followed the lead of my aimless, lonely steps before finally hearing squeaks and chittering. With the desperation of a drowning man whose lungs began flooding with water, I started tracing the source. I was horrified by what I saw: rats, giant disgusting rats with the tusks of wild boars. I decided to join them, however, hoping that they'd help me find an exit.

I stood among them, imitating every ungodly sound they uttered. A rotten apple then rolled toward us and stopped by me. A hairless rat wrapped in a hideous waste of skin gazed at me, salivating with hatred and aggression. He arched his back, but I attacked him first. We snowballed in a death match. As he slowed down to catch his breath, I took the opportunity. I clutched at him and closed my jaws on his throat, snatching the life out of him. His blood, now dripping all over my face, made me lust for more. Boiling with rage, I attacked the other rats. I bit their throats, bathed in their blood, and watched them slowly exhaling their last.

The whole forest was now reeking of death. My senses had the acuity of those of a psychopath, and with every step I took, I could hear some faint clinking within the bundle. I finally opened it. Something red was rolled into a ball inside. I undid it, hearing its jingling.

“So, you found my scarf?” the woman with a face of light from my dreams appeared before me. She snatched it from my hand, then shook it. “Remember the jingling?”

The light in her face started dimming, and within seconds, she aged years.

Fear rendered me speechless.

She was now the woman, that foul old woman, who'd sold me *The Encyclopedia of Syrian and Other Mediterranean Demons*.

"It can't be. This must be a nightmare," I finally cried. "Wake up. Wake up." I began slapping myself.

"It's not a nightmare nor a dream. It's an eternal vision, a painting with a beating heart," her voice was offensive and profane, like desecrating the grave of a saint.

She suddenly morphed into the hawker whose face looked like a wax mask. "I told you, this painting will change your life."

For reasons beyond me, there was no doubt in my mind that this was Saraba.

As I watched in utter terror, feeling cold sweat like a wet blanket on my back, she asked, "Do you know what the rest of that paragraph is?" Then, without waiting for a reply, she continued, "This amorphous, wicked female spirit can induce untamed imaginations in men. Once under her sway, they can no longer discern betwixt dream and reality, and she turns them into voiceless phantoms in surreal paintings that come alive briefly each year to recount their tales."

God! There is still much more to tell, but there is no time.
There never is. Didn't I tell you that in the beginning? Do you trust
me now?



No one
can hear

Rama Bobbi

Necrosis

Darkness. Utter darkness. As I lay in this eternal gloom, the memory of Roxana forces itself upon me like a sadistic offender. She loved that summer getaway by Lake Zalica, where the bungalows were far apart, offering a supreme sense of isolation. Every summer, we'd stay at the same one on the lakeshore's end.

During the day, we'd swim in the warm water and drink beer. The bikini-clad Roxana would lie supine on the sand beneath the blue sky, her body shining like an early morning sun and her black eyes oozing lust whenever she glanced at me over her shoulder. At night, we'd hear nothing but the chirping of crickets mixed with the murmuring of waves.

Roxana would open the curtains, then begin slowly undoing her nightgown, her fingers, with their manicured nails, moving nimbly from one button to another. The silk dress would fall off her shoulder and slide onto the floor, ending up around her white, flawless feet. The moon would cast its light on her firm breasts, making them appear to belong to an ivory statue.

"Let nature see us making love," she'd say while taking off her underwear.

We'd make love, all right, and I'd kiss her breasts, flat stomach, and hairless mons before my tongue would serpentine inside her. The salty taste lingered in my mouth, and I'd keep licking my lips to feel it anew as I'd lay beside her on the bed afterward.

Marlboro Lights. That was her brand. She'd light one, breathe in deeply, then exhale. The satisfied look on her face was befitting of a triumphant warlord who'd just pillaged a village, slaughtered its people, set it ablaze, and stood on its fringes to watch the unforgiving flames consume the remains.

Though by no means a war criminal, Roxana was still guilty. She'd made one mistake. Yes, one awful mistake that left an open wound in my heart. Her repeated apologies were merely the salt that made the exposed flesh itch and burn.

Two months ago, Roxana returned home crying. "I did something awful," she said. "Very awful!"

I closed the book I was reading and placed it on the sofa arm. It was Stephen King's *The Shining*. I still regret not finishing it and remember the last line I read: "*Terrible things happen in the world, and they're things no one can explain.*"

Oh, how I miss reading.

Roxana approached the sofa where I'd been sitting, threw herself at my feet, and then looked up. The mascara had now edged black trails on her face.

“Stop crying,” I said before trying to pull her to sit next to me. It was as useless as trying to move a tree stump. “What happened?”

“Take it. I don't deserve it.” She took off the engagement ring I'd given her. “You deserve better than me, better than—”

Her tears choked her.

“Come on, what happened?” I put the ring on the book, stood up, and got her to sit on the sofa after a brief struggle.

She still couldn't speak but was shivering like a wet dog left out in a winter storm.

“Wait a second.” I went to the kitchen, returning with a glass of water. I handed it to her and stood before her, gazing down.

She took a sip and finally collected herself. “I,” she paused, “I cheated on you.” She stared at my gaping mouth and said, “I didn't mean it. It just happened.”

“When?” My voice trembled.

“Please forgive me.” She tried to get up, but I pushed her to remain seated.

I felt like a police officer questioning a woman who murdered his fiancé. “I asked, ‘When?’” Warm tears started making their way down my face.

“One week ago.” She looked away. Her shame was palpable.

“How could you?” I wiped my tears. “How could you?”

There was an awkward pause, then she buried her face in her hands, speaking through them in a muffled voice, “Forgive me. Please forgive me, baby.”

“Who was it?”

She didn’t respond.

“Who was it? You whore, who fucking was it?”

She got up to hug me, but I held her by the wrists and shook her. “Tell me!”

“It’s Radu.”

“I’ve always sensed you were more than colleagues, but I—”

“I swear it was only once. One mistake. I wish I’d died before making it.”

I threw her on the sofa. “I’m not going to kill you or even hit you.” I took the ring and put it in my pocket. “I want you out of my apartment. Now!”

She kept apologizing and crying as she gathered her things. I wept, too. I sunk into the living room sofa, trying to digest that unreal tragedy. *We’re happy. I loved her. How could she? Why didn’t she just break up with me?* My thoughts whipped me.

Underneath the cracking, I could hear the noise of her packing in the bedroom. She got out and headed toward the door.

Who knew five years of love could fit into two suitcases in less than an hour.

She opened the door, then looked at me while her hand was still on the handle. I could feel her regret, and the tears in her eyes convinced me she was honest.

“I’ll go now. Please forgive me. I know th—”

“Get out and never return,” I said.

But she did return, and I accepted her apology because I loved her—I still do. I adored her and couldn’t tolerate the place without her smell, laughter, and voice.

She was acting very remorseful, frequently crying and apologizing all over again. And for several weeks, she was as

obedient as a neutered dog. She quit her job, then dedicated all her time to caring for me. Every meal was pageantry, and every time we slept together was like a scene from a filthy movie. She knelt before my desires and even asked me to be rough—to pull her hair, slap her, spit in her face, and call her obscene names.

“The least you could do to feel a bit better. You let her off the hook way too easy,” I’d hear a faint voice in my head.

Although I didn’t give the ring back to Roxana, I assured her I forgave her and largely believed what I said. But some visions tormented me. Whenever I went for my daily run or was in the gym, I imagined her fucking Radu, that dimwit with that annoying, cheerful personality and warm smile. I imagined him on top of her, closing his eyes in pleasure and flashing a toothy, confident smile to signal his imminent orgasm.

These visions burned my heart like a branding iron. *Radu is fat. He makes great money, but he’s fat. Fat men can’t fuck well. Men with unexpressed, bent-up spite, like me, are the best lovers.* Such a dialogue would spin in my head until I saw Roxana again and felt her regret. Whenever I slept with her afterward, I destroyed her. Her eyes rolling back and delicate fingers clutching the sheets with those long nails assured me she enjoyed the carnage. The

neighbors sometimes complained about her moans. “We’re sorry, but there are families in this building,” they’d say when I opened the door wearing nothing but a towel around my waist.

“Sure.” I’d shut it, return to Roxana, drop the towel, and throw myself on the bed beside her. “Let’s do it again. Try to be quieter this time. I love it when you’re loud, but the n—”

“I’d do anything to please you. I love you. I just want that terrible thing behind us.”

We finally went on our first trip to Lake Zalica after the cheating incident. Now that isolation, much like the sticky Transylvanian heat, had engulfed our bungalow, no one could hear her scream. She knew this very well and began joking about it, “No one can hear me shout here. I can moan like a cat in heat.”

“*No one can hear,*” that phrase became a demon that possessed me at night. Once darkness fell, it began repeatedly howling in my head. I’d hear it in Roxana’s voice, then in mine, then in Radu’s, then in some otherworldly voice. It was unnerving and throaty when the latter uttered it like a heathen chant.

At first, I ignored it, but it got stronger. I resorted to the sedatives my doctor prescribed for occasional insomnia. In two

weeks, the blister packs were empty. Then, there was only alcohol, which could partly drown out that voice.

“Are you okay?” Roxana would ask me as I sat alone in the kitchen. “What are you staring at? There’s nothing on the wall.”

“Yes, I know. There’s nothing on the wall and no one in my head,” I’d reply.

“You’re scaring me. Are you okay? Maybe you should drink less.”

“I’m fine,” I’d reply, grip her wrist, and drag her to the bedroom. “I wanna have you.” I’d sit on the edge of the bed and watch her undress before ravaging her to the sound of that awful phrase in my head: “*No one can hear.*” I’d ask her to scratch me, and I’d feel her nails digging into my back like the claws of a feral cat. The physical pain made the voice slightly less noticeable.

But the voice got bolder and louder and began bringing about a terrible urge to strangle Roxana. No alcohol could quiet it. Nothing! Sleeping with her became an even more obsessive habit, and she’d never refuse my advances out of guilt, I’m sure. She was often in pain. As I lay pretending to be asleep at night, I heard her going to the toilet. Groans of pain always preceded the splash of

her urine and the toilet flush. Still, nothing, absolutely nothing, could overwhelm that evil echo in my head, “*No one can hear.*”

“I want you,” I told her once when she sneaked into the bed like a thief after her bathroom trip.

“You’re awake?”

I turned toward her. “No, I’m talking in my sleep.”

She laughed.

“*No one can hear,*” that evil entity in my head said in Radu’s voice.

I ignored it. “I want you. Did you hear?”

She sighed, forcing a smile. “Sure. Me too.”

She undressed, and I got on top of her. She moaned. Was it of pleasure? Maybe. Of pain? Certainly.

I thrust.

“*No one can hear,*” that voice pretended to be Roxana.

I plunged myself deeper inside her.

“I like it. Harder,” said Roxana.

I obeyed.

“Choke me,” she begged me.

“*No one can hear,*” the voice came on now like a throaty chant.

I put my hands on her neck.

“Do it. Abuse me,” she begged.

“*No one can hear,*” the voice got throatier.

I pressed. Roxana smiled. I pressed some more. She bit her lower lip.

“*No one can hear.*”

I went harder, probably too hard. She placed her hands on my wrists, but I pressed more, feeling her windpipe against my palms. She began flailing beneath me like a fish out of the water. The throaty voice repeated the ominous words, and I choked her harder. She started scratching my forearms with her nails—those long, polished, sexy nails.

She has a long daily beauty regimen. No wonder her fingers are like those of a hand model. No wonder she's beautiful. All beautiful things must die. She is no exception, I thought as I saw her eyes bulge.

She went into a final fit of scratching, tried to remove my forearms, and flailed some more before the light in her now bloodshot eyes went out. The love of my life, who made one mistake, one giant mistake, was now a corpse beneath me.

Death is merciful because the dead don't see their postmortem bodily reflexes. Roxana defecated once I got off her. The pungent smell wasn't befitting of such a beautiful woman.

“Stick as much as you want to your beauty regimen, but your shit still smells like everyone else's,” I told the dead Roxana.

I paused and realized that the voice had vanished. I felt the same relief one feels when strong painkillers kick in during a terrible migraine.

“Maybe Radu liked you because he is *fat*. Maybe he even loved you. It doesn't matter. You're now getting buried with your stinky shit.” It was macabre to talk to her corpse, but after becoming a murderer, almost nothing strikes you as bizarre or wicked.

To take someone's life is the most reprehensible act ever. Luckily, not everyone knows what it is like to kill. Only a few do—those usually join the army, slaughter people abroad, then come back to their families with PTSDs and STDs. Society calls them ‘heroes.’ And as a reward, it allows them to become homeless drug addicts!

I left the room—now stinking of sweat, feces, and my fulfilled foul urge—and sat at the kitchen table. The image of Roxana breathing her last played in my head, followed by Radu's

pre-orgasmic face. The latter made me feel that I was no longer the villain.

The voice is gone, and I feel great about it. The woman I love—probably loved is the proper tense—is dead, and I don't feel bad at all. Oh, life. Life is nothing but a dog race toward the grave. My heart is useless to me now that some spider will soon build its cobweb on it.

“Murder is evil,” they tell you when you’re a child. “Thou shalt not kill,” you hear in church. This is one of the few things people don’t change their minds about when they grow up. But no one had told me that murder is intoxicating. It gives you a sense of invincibility that no substance, legal or otherwise, can. Hence, whenever I recalled her dead face, I felt like I was standing against her creator as his rival, demanding he’d declare his inability to protect his creation. His laws were so obsolete to me now. His presence was not desired.

The only law was my own will, which now dictated that I should put Roxana’s body in one of the suitcases, along with some big rocks, steal an old rowboat from the close-by docks, and drown Roxana’s body.

I went back to the bedroom with the tablecloth in my hand. “I’ll be back soon.” I threw it on Roxana’s face and went outside to find the easiest boat to untie. The walk to the docks was about five minutes. Once I arrived, I saw a white rowboat with ropes barely tied to the mooring. No one was around, and the starry sky provided enough light with its full moon.

The boat appeared as though it were waiting for me: in good shape and with two sturdy-looking oars. I walked around the docks to ensure no possible witnesses would see me. I was lucky.

Halfway to the bungalow, I saw a man wearing thick rectangle glasses and a double-breasted suit. At first glance, one could mistake him for a tax accountant or a bank clerk. Although his receding hairline made him look distinctively harmless, one could see indescribable evil in his eyes.

“Do you believe in the devil?” he asked.

“I d—”

“It doesn’t matter what your answer is.” He got closer to me. “Don’t you know that awful things happen at night when no one is seeing or hearing?”

His voice was ineffable. I can only describe it as a blend of all the horrific sounds, words, and stories man has heard. The

way he spoke was very familiar yet incredibly eerie, much like death.

I couldn't escape, for fear made breathing hard, let alone running.

"Are you mute?" he asked me with an evil grin.

"N-n-o." I used the tip of my sleeve to dry my sweaty forehead.

"So, tell me, don't you know that awful things happen at night when no one is seeing or hearing?"

"All I know is that I—"

"Have you ever met the devil?"

"I-I-I don't believe in the devil."

"Okay. Sometimes, the devil is," he paused, raised his eyebrows, then said, "very familiar." He took a step back. "Too familiar." He took another. "Sometimes you can see the devil in the mirror and not know it. Sometimes, it's better not to see at all." He walked away, disappearing in the distant darkness. Suddenly, I heard that accursed throaty voice again. "Good luck," it said.

The bungalow didn't smell that bad when I entered. When I went to the bedroom, I saw that the tablecloth had fallen off Roxana's face. Her eyes were protruding uselessly heavenward.

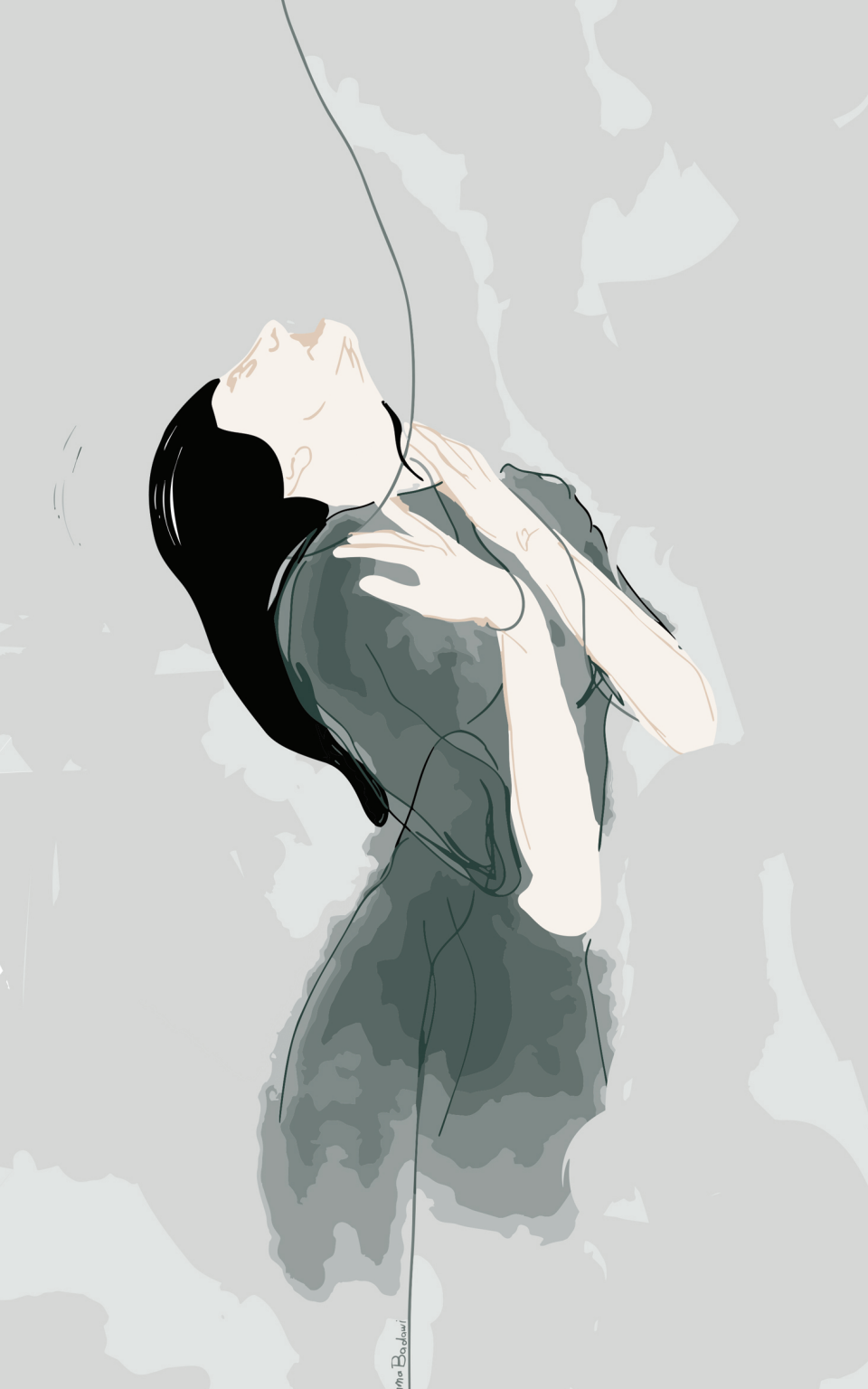
I felt something crawling under my skin when I sat beside her. “It’s nothing,” I assured myself. I felt it again, and Roxana’s body twitched this time when the sensation came over me. Then I felt a volcano erupting within. Demons came out of the pores of my body and began attacking me. I was like a sheep at the mercy of a pack of wolves. The demons, those awful, small black shadows, began biting my body. They were the size of rats and shared the same agility and furiousness as that hateful species. With each bite, I could see my flesh rotting. My physical existence became now merely the reflection of my soul, which I had stifled into necrosis.

Then Roxana came back to life. She seemed whole and untouched by my evil. She floated around the room like an angel. Amid it all, a burning question came to me, one that I heard uttered in a thousand different voices, “Who am I? Just who am I? Who in the name of heaven am I? Who in the name of hell am I?”

The demons came after my face. The last I saw was Roxana hovering above me. She had a halo. The demons began clawing my cheeks, then my eyes, then darkness. Utter darkness!

I think I’m dead now and in purgatory. But the voices that claim to be the doctors and nurses at a psychiatric ward tell me that

I killed my lover, then used her hand to claw my eyes blind. I don't believe them, for how can I trust anything in this utter darkness?



The Day Irimi Died: Belphegor in Athens

Foreword

“**W**henever darkness falls, Athens elevates herself above all creation and becomes a seductive warrior goddess. Only when you discard your five senses can you see how the familiar city becomes an uncharted territory, for within Athens lies another Athens, and beneath its modern guise lies a mystery that only through bereavement can one discern,” my uncle Father G. Paltoianis wrote.

He loved Athens, no doubt. But I sadly don't share his sentiment. To me, the city is a big mental asylum that reeks of uncollected garbage and urine. I see nothing magical about empty paper cups discarded on the sidewalks, poorly paved streets, motorbike noise, or angry drivers. But that's only me. I'm merely a philosophical materialist with no interest in anything beyond what I can see, hear, taste, and touch. I don't believe in gods, angels, demons, or ghosts—holy or otherwise.

Heaven and hell, to me, are here on earth. Wherever poverty, filth, tumult, disease, or violence exists, that is hell. Such hell is literal and real. And heaven is wherever utter peace prevails. If someone asks me, “Is it possible to feel utter peace?” I'd answer,

“Yes, certainly, but only when you’re fully oblivious—in other words, dead.”

My uncle, whose unaltered account you shall read soon, was different. He believed that man was a living soul in a temple of flesh. He believed in the sacred and profane, good and evil, the Mother of God and Lilith, and angels and demons. No surprise there. After all, he was a Greek Orthodox priest who spent the last thirty years of his life in an extremely isolated monastery on the island of Andros, where he died at the age of sixty-seven.

His fellow monks told me everyone admired him. “Father Paltoianis was a gentle soul who spent all his time in feverish prayer,” the abbot with a long black beard once told me. That was the consensus there, and I tend to believe it.

When Uncle died, the monastery sent after me, his only surviving relative, to attend the Divine Liturgy dedicated to him and partake in singing the prayers for the departed.

I drove from Athens to Rafina, then took a boat to Andros. Once there, I rented an old car and went through several villages until I reached a narrow mountain pass. Finally, I arrived at the monastery, a superb structure dating to the early Middle Ages, long before the Ottoman plague had come from Central Asia. Made of

light grey limestone and topped with reddish Byzantine roof tiles, the monastery's high walls appeared as though linking the arid earth to the blue sky. The majesty of the place filled me with awe. *Maybe there's a god, after all, who sees, hears, and knows all.* It is not unusual for the unbeliever to have a superstitious thought or two when dwelling in such secluded places.

After the liturgy and prayer, the monks buried my uncle in the monastery's cemetery, besides two local saints and various pious reverends. It had been more than twenty years since I last crossed myself. I gave up that habit when I graduated from high school, right about when I had my first schizophrenic episode. I had been in church attending the Divine Liturgy when a raspy, strained voice whispered blasphemous things to me for the first time. My initial response was to ignore it. Then, it started urging me to hurt myself, and the voice kept talking until I could no longer sleep. That was when my parents couldn't dismiss the symptoms as teenage moodiness and irritability coupled with the exhaustion of having just had my final high-school exams.

I am unlucky to be the first in my family to be diagnosed with such an awful disease. Even Uncle, the stoic man of faith, wept like a girl who'd lost her pet cat when he visited me in the

psychiatric ward. Nevertheless, I consider myself lucky, for with only one antipsychotic and one mood stabilizer, I've been living a normal life. Normal—despite occasional insomnia, indigestion, and dry mouth.

When you hear voices in your head, it is better and much safer to give up praying, taking communion, and all belief in the immaterial. Yet, when they started throwing dirt on Uncle's coffin, I couldn't help but do the sign of the cross while saying, “*Εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεύματος* (In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” It felt good but unreal, like a distant childhood memory.

I found the manuscript you are about to read among my uncle's belongings. The date and place of its writing are not mentioned—only the title, *A Brief Account of Why I Left Athens*. Although I printed the text in its original form, I changed the title to *The Day Irini Died: Belphegor in Athens*. I simply found it more befitting.

In any case, titles, like names, have a certain degree of randomness that neither reflects the work's depth nor captures its essence. After all, one of the best short stories ever (one in which

Anton Pavlovich Chekhov encapsulates life and all its dread) is titled “Gooseberries.” What an unimpressive title for a great story.

I. Paltoianis
Andrea Kalvou Street, Athens, Greece
February 20, 2014

* * *

(1)

*So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old,
called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world;
he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with
him. (Revelation 12:9)*

Anxiety devours me sometimes. I sense its thousand fangs piercing into my heart, while fear, with its wet claws, burrows through my stomach like a rat on cocaine. Desperation! Confusion! Loss! Since that horrible event took place in Athens, those feelings always have me within their reach like pursuit predators. Terrible things happen only on the most ordinary days, those when everything around seems calm, everyone lazy, and the larger world at peace. On such a day, Father Kriastakis—a pious, somewhat reserved man I knew from seminary—visited my church in Panormou and asked me to assist him with attending to the spiritual needs of a schizophrenic parish member of his.

“I don’t know how to say this,” he fretted as we sat in my basement office. “I’ve known this girl for twelve years since she was seven. She comes from an abusive family. Very abusive. Her mother was a pros—”

He held his tongue as though trying to find the right word, looked at the floor, then at me, and continued, “They say her mother sold sexual favors and had substance abuse issues. People talk a lot. Most of the time, they just gossip, but I know her mother abandoned her and left her with her grandmother. Grandma was faithful and kind and began bringing Irini with her to church. The first time I saw her she was barely seven years old. Ah, those green eyes. They contained all the innocence and wonder in the world. She gave me a hug, and I almost cried. It was like she’d finally found a long-lost parent.

“She had no one but her grandmother and me, and I treated her like a daughter and saw her blossom into a young woman, one who’s beautiful, faithful, kind, and with a bright future. She was two days away from starting college when her grandmother died. That was a few months ago, and since then, Irini is,” he paused again, “psychotic, anorexic, and angry. We committed her to a psychiatric hospital, but there was no improvement, and they

eventually told us that it may be better to take her to a familiar place where she'd be under constant supervision by personal medical staff—”

“I'll help with covering the costs.”

“It's not about the money.” His eyes were fixed now on the cross hanging on the wall. I could see a speck of angry frustration in them. “It's not about the money, doctors, or medications. I got her the best room at a boarding-school dormitory and paid two good doctors to care for her. The problem is Irini's behavior. She claims to be possessed, and her current psychiatrist says nothing seems to be working for her so far. Antipsychotics, mood stabilizers, sedatives, you name it. Nothing. I think she's right. She may be possessed.” His eyes returned to me.

“I think this is a medical issue. We both know that demonic possession is a metaphor. We can't deny it because Christ spoke of it. But it's better to think of it as symbolizing how man's lower impulses can take control of him.”

“Father, I'm not asking you to do any exorcism. I just want you to come and see, to give me your insight. Nothing more. You may be right. I'm not committing myself to the reality of literal

demons or her claim of being possessed. I just want you as a neutral observer.” He bit his lower lip. “You know, Irini *is* my daughter.”

It became clear to me: What I mistook for frustration was just sheer desperation, fatherly desperation, one that disarmed me. “Sure,” I said.

After two days, he took me to a dorm room at a Christian boarding school. The facility was clean and organized, like a well-maintained prison. Icons and big wooden crosses flanked the sides of the long corridors with their spotless, white walls. We climbed several flights of stairs, the sound of our footsteps drowning in a sea of hubbub. Nuns and young female students greeted us with nods and smiles whenever we passed them. The place was busy and alive like a beehive.

The farther we walked, the lower the commotion got until it altogether ceased when we reached an isolated quarter on the fourth floor.

“Here, that’s where she is.” Father Kriastakis pointed at the large door and walked toward it. I followed him, now our footsteps echoing against the marble floor.

He knocked on the door, and we entered.

It was a cheerful room, spacious and well-furnished like a presidential suite. A king-size bed lay in its middle with a nightstand by its side carrying several blister packs of pills, a pitcher of water, and a half-empty glass. On the other side was an IV pole with an infusion pack. The clear liquid dropped into the drip chamber slowly and traveled into the arm of the emaciated girl lying still in the middle of the bed.

She was dressed in a green hospital gown and was thin, like a skeleton covered with yellowish skin. Her black hair was dry and brittle, like an old scarf discarded on the sidewalk and mangled into utter misery by the feet of the passersby. Her closed eyes looked like they'd never open. The sight broke my heart. It was as ominous as looking at a ticking time bomb.

The shock made me almost not notice the two gentlemen occupying two of the four small slipper chairs by the footboard. Father Kriastakis introduced me to them, and they stood up to greet me. The chubby, middle-aged man, whose handshake I could barely feel, was Dr. Michalakis, the critical care specialist. The younger man, with a thin, long face and cropped black hair, was Nikolas, Irini's psychiatrist.

Neither of the two men made a good first impression on me. Dr. Michalakis seemed detached and mechanical, almost like a medical apparatus himself. Nikolas struck me as arrogant. He was one of those overconfident people who thinly disguised their hubris with empty gestures, such as insisting that no one called him ‘doctor.’

We sat for a bit in silence. “Our Father, Who art in Heaven . . .” I repeated the Lord’s Prayer in my heart until Father Kriastakis got up, went to the desk in the corner, and came back with a small stack of papers. “Here, look at her grotesque drawings.” He handed them to me. “She had no painting skills before this.” He remained standing.

I began riffling through them. They were vivid depictions of a horned demonic being whose rattish face was as disgusting as his apish body with its curved back, hairless, wrinkled skin, and long snake-like tail.

Irini portrayed him doing various mundane things but with a face marred with despair, like that of a woman who’d just lost her only child and was assured that there was no afterlife. His nose was curled. His eyes were squinting in agony, mouth corners saggy, and

eyebrows raised as though saying, “This can’t be.” Irini wrote in the corner of each painting, “Belphegor dwells within.”

I could barely take my eyes off the last one: Belphegor was sitting on a chamber pot and crying, his hand resting on his knees with their palms facing the sky. The hopelessness! The anguish! It was as if his face were sketched by the very hand of existential dread.

I looked around me and saw that Father Kriastakis was now sitting in his chair next to me. Dr. Michalakis slept in his, and Nikolas was gazing like a hawk at me.

Irini was still asleep.

Nikolas cleared his throat. “So, Father,” he paused (to remember my name, most probably), “Paltoianis. What do you think the drawings symbolize?”

“It’s obvious: despair.”

“Totally agree.” He smiled.

I could hear my fellow priest muttering, “Exactly, exactly, correct.” It sounded like he was reciting a prayer he’d said a million times before and was now bored of.

I gave him a casual nod before addressing Nikolas. “Her choice of Belphegor confuses me because this is not a well-known

demon. She must have read a demonology book and the name just stuck with her. Also—”

“He represents the sins of sloth and sexual immorality,” Father Kriastakis interjected. “I told Nikolas and Dr. Michalakis this before.”

Nikolas ignored him, addressing me, “Are you familiar with Jungian archetypes?”

“Somewhat. All I know is that they’re primordial mental images innate to our subconscious psyche.”

Nikolas raised his eyebrows, bobbing his head in approval. “Well, that’s precisely it. People interact with these archetypes through fantasy, and their personalities may get affected accordingly. So, I believe Irini’s delusions are a form of overactive fantasy with a strong identification with subversive archetypes.”

“I thought she was diagnosed with schizophrenia.”

“That’s my diagnosis—the psychiatrist who had seen her before said so, too. Schizophrenia is a culturally influenced mental illness. The content of its delusions can be culture-specific, but the underlying mechanism is the same: fragmented archetypal images that are intrusive but meaningless.”

His argument was logical, and as someone who believed that the supernatural existed (but certainly, in ways more sophisticated than claims of demonic possession), I had no reason to disagree with him. Finally, Dr. Michalakis woke up, checked the girl's vital signs, and changed the infusion pack.

“Nice to meet you, Sir,” he said to me before leaving.

It's Father. I didn't correct him.

“Our Holy Father, Great Physician of our Souls and Bodies, You sent Your only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save us from sin and death and to heal every ailment . . .” I recited several healing prayers for the young girl, wished the three gentlemen a good night, and left the dormitory with Nikolas, leaving Irini in the hands of my good-hearted friend.

It was already night when we stepped out.

“Would you like me to give you a ride?” the young psychiatrist asked me.

“No, thank you. I'd like to walk. It's a beautiful night.”

I surely wasn't lying. The clear sky had a dark royal blue shade adorned with a hint of silver radiating from the full moon. The stars were sprinkled like glitter, and the pitted, patchy sidewalk

didn't look that bad under the yellow patches of light the streetlights were casting.

Despite a certain kind of misery, Athens was always beautiful to me. I was born here. I grew up here. And shall die here. Athens was not only my home but also my final destination. Yet, I was aware of the city's contradictions, but there was always something redeeming about Athens. The all-too-common sight of a drug addict with a needle stuck in his forearm was guaranteed to break your heart, but the genuine smile of a kind stranger or a street vendor was also enough to erase that painful memory.

Once at home, I grabbed a shower and lay in bed. "Our Father Who art in Heaven . . ." I recited the Lord's Prayer and sunk within, shutting out everything I witnessed that day.

* * *

(2)

If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" (1 Corinthians 15:32)

The weather was terrible when I woke up. The dull sky made the city look pale, somehow sickly. I made myself a cup of coffee and sat to drink it. The silence was beautiful but not meant to last.

Father Kriastakis's voice quivered over the phone, "She bit herself. I couldn't stop her. She scratched herself, too. It was like two people fighting inside the same body."

"I'm very sorry."

"Father, you can't imagine what I saw. Irini was twitching, rolling, and flailing like a sack of rats."

"Did you call the psychiatrist?"

He sniffed. "He's on his way, and Dr. Michalakis, too. Maybe you too can—"

"You don't even have to ask. I'll be on my way, too."

When Father Kriastakis opened the door, I could see Nikolas injecting Irini's infusion pack. *A sedative, no doubt.* I came in and stood by her bedside with Father Kriastakis. The white bandages on Irini's forearms made her look like a mummy, and I wondered if I'd ever see her awake or hear her voice.

After my fellow priest explained to me what had happened again, I didn't have to ponder. Irini finally spoke herself.

“Father,” she called Father Kriastakis, “He bit me. I tried to—”

Father Kriastakis held her hand, then put his other hand on her forehead before caressing her hair. “You’ll be all right, Irini. Your name means peace, and you shall find it.” He looked at me. “That’s a good friend of mine, a faithful man of God, Father Paltoianis. He’s here to help you.”

Irini’s chapped lips flashed a cynical smile, one befitting of a skeptic being told to pray away terminal illness. “Thank you,” her brittle voice was barely audible.

My friend stepped away, and I sat on the edge of the bed. I held Irini’s hand. “Our Father Who art in Heaven . . .” I prayed several times before looking at my company. It was the same scene from the day before. The three men sat in their chairs: Dr. Michalakis dozing off, Nikolas peering at me, and Father Kriastakis muttering.

“Irini, sweetheart, I know you’re suffering. My heart aches for you. I have a nephew your age. He’s recently been diagnosed with schizophrenia. I love him. I have no children of my own, but he’s the closest to one. So, I feel your struggle as if it were my own. You have two dedicated doctors here and Father

Kriastakis. It's always a dual approach to the disease: treatment and prayer. You must pray with a sincere heart and have patience, but you also must take your medications and follow the doctor's orders."

"But why won't God just help me?" Tears began pooling in the corners of her eyes.

"If we could pray away sickness without seeking treatment, that would—"

"Would what, Father?" She pulled her hand away.

"That would be considered s—"

"Sloth, you piece of shit," Irini suddenly spoke in a gravelly voice, one that was as hideous as the sound of nails scraping a chalkboard.

The three men stood behind me. I had no doubt they were good-hearted, but they now seemed like vultures.

"Irini, sweetheart, why won't you—"

"Why won't I suck you off? You, a man of God, need to be sucked off, too. Do you know how many cocks I've sucked?"

I gaped at Nikolas, who blinked his eyes once while bobbing his head. "Please let her talk more. That could help my therapy," the look on his face said.

I shook my head in approval, then looked at Irini. “My daughter, why won’t you use your normal voice? It’s wonderful and kind.”

“Remind her of who she is,” Nikolas whispered in my ear.

Irini, with the agility of a fox, was now sitting in her bed, her back resting against the headboard. “What did you tell him, you faggot? That I’m crazy? that I’m no demon? that Belphegor is a metaphor? Metaphor, my ass. He is real. He is me.” She uncovered herself, assuming a butterfly sitting position and revealing her underwear. She moved the crotch to the side, exposing her private. She urinated, and a puddle formed between her thighs. The foul smell filled the room. “You like looking at my pussy, Father Paltoianis? Do you know how many men have seen it?”

I was staring—not out of lust, for sure. But that bizarre sight was like a bloody car crash. It unnerves you. You hate it. You know it will give you nightmares, yet you still look.

I collected myself and swallowed the insult. “Who am I talking to now? Belphegor or Irini?”

Irini rubbed her index and middle fingers against the urine puddle, then licked them. “Tastes good. Wanna try?”

“You didn’t answer me. Who are you?”

“Does it really matter?”

I took a deep breath and exhaled. “Yes, it definitely does. Are you Belphegor or Irini?”

“It doesn’t matter. There’s no difference because angels and demons are inside man’s brains. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, too. And since everything is in our brain, we’re all of them. And since our brains are part of nature, nature is all of them, too. See, there’s no difference between things. There’s no difference at all.” She licked the tip of her fingers again. “Are you sure you don’t want?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Why should I believe anything you say?”

“I can’t give you a reason. And that doesn’t matter, too. I’m simply here to collect Irini’s soul.”

“I don’t think you can.”

“Do you want to test me?”

“No.”

She laughed. “Why? Are you afraid?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid to test your god?”

I didn’t know what to say. In the seminary, we learned that all God’s children are exorcists, for they must pray to rid

themselves of the spirit of sin. Even in case of possession, there wasn't much I could do apart from reciting the prayers of Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom and leaving it all to God.

What if the prayers do nothing? What if they're merely words? What if my faith fails me? I surely can't live with that. My faith is the source of all meaning in my life. Without it, I can't find morality, condolence, and guidance. And now I'm testing it, and someone else's life is at stake. The Scripture says, "Do not test the Lord your God." I believe in God's Word, but I can't just do nothing now. I can just turn a blind eye to her suffering. I can't be indifferent to her pain and misery. But how would I feel if my prayers went unanswered? I could lose my religion. My livelihood as a priest doesn't really matter. I won't die of hunger after all, but what will surely kill me is meaninglessness. That awful feeling ruined my early youth when I was a militant skeptic. And the question I'm facing now is that of doubt. I know myself. Doubt is often obsessive, and obsessive doubt is the root of meaninglessness.

I said many other things to myself that I can't recall now. That flight of ideas must've lasted for half a minute. But the awful thing about talking to yourself is that it always feels like an eternity.

Finally, I began reciting the Holy Prayers to the giggling Irini. She kept licking her lip and pointing at her exposed womanhood.

When I finished, Father Kriastakis placed his hand on Irini's forehead, repeating, "In the name of Christ, leave her." Irini would laugh hysterically, make babbling noises, and do the whole thing again.

During all that, the bemused Nikolas stared at us while the overweight doctor maintained his detached presence.

Father Kriastakis sat back in his chair, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and blotted his sweaty forehead. The poor girl appeared calm before she growled at Dr. Michalakis, "Hey, fat fuck, whatever you put in the infusion pack is not working, much like your penis." She laughed, her snorting sounding like a pig oinking. "What did you give her, anyway?"

"I gave you some strong antibiotics and a tetanus shot," he replied.

"They're not working, like the mood stabilizers and antipsychotic the faggot prescribed."

Nikolas now looked at Irini with a conceited grin. “Sometimes, it takes a while for psychoactive drugs to work. Have some patience, Irini.”

“Nothing will work because this is the end. I’m here to claim her. She invited me to come into her life because she was lonely, and I kept her company. I never left her side. I always watched over her, even when she was in bed with her legs spread for some random stranger. Now, she should be with me, forever.”

I began feeling nauseous, like a man boarding a boat for the first time.

“Father Kriastakis,” Irini finally spoke in her normal voice. “Don’t leave my side. I need you. Help me, please.”

Irini’s smile was innocent and endearing, like that of a newborn smiling in his sleep. But the smile slowly turned into an evil grin. “Fuck you all,” Irini shouted in that grotesque voice, then began scratching her cheeks, her fingertips leaving trails of blood as they went down her neck and chest.

I gripped her wrists, but she shook herself free and grabbed my forearm. As the other men started trying to restrain her, she brought my forearm near her mouth, finally biting me like a rabid jackal. With her jaws still clasped, she jerked her head

sideways. There was foam on her mouth and on my forearm. Finally, the four of us could push her away. That's when she laughed, looked at each of us, heaved, and projectile vomited on us.

The bile hit me, and the last thing I saw before blacking out was that nauseating, greenish substance pouring out of that poor girl's mouth.

* * *

(3)

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

It was late in the afternoon when I came to. The view wasn't bad from my fifth-floor room at Evangelismos Hospital, neither was the treatment of the medical staff. The nurses checked on me and measured my vital signs several times before the doctor finally came in.

"How are you doing, Father?" he asked.

"I think I'm fine."

"What happened exactly? Is Irini fine?"

He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You've been unconscious for almost twenty-four hours, but there's no threat to your life. A human bite can be very dangerous if untreated, but you

shouldn't worry. We've cleaned your wound thoroughly and already started your antibiotics. But," he stopped briefly, then added, "there is a police officer outside who'd like to talk to you. Can you talk? If you're tired—"

"Why would he want to talk to me?"

"He has a few questions, I think."

"Sure, I can talk."

The doctor nodded, told the nurse to give me a glass of water, and went outside.

"Sorry to bother you, Father," said the police officer, pulled a chair and placed it by the side of my bed, and took a notebook and a pencil out of his pocket, and addressed me again, "You should know this is an official interrogation. Anything you tell me now may be used against you later."

He looked like one of those men who had nothing remarkable about them but their professional uniform: thinning black hair, small eyes, and chubby cheeks.

"Of course, I have nothing to hide," I told him.

"First, I'm sorry to inform you that Irini Elliou passed away. She died of sepsis caused by human bites."

He went on to explain to me that Irini's infection was antibiotic-resistant and that Dr. Michalakis's treatment was sufficient, but the patient didn't make it. He interrogated me then about my relationship with Father Kriastakis, to whom he referred as "George Kriastakis," his secular pre-ordination name.

"Father Paltoianis, the forensic experts suspect that the marks on Irini's forearms belong to Mr. Kriastakis. He is the prime suspect for now."

"But Irini bit me, too! I saw how she scratched herself like a frenzied polecat. She did that in front of all of us. Ask Nikolas and Dr. Michalakis."

"I assure you that we've conducted the necessary interviews with all the witnesses. Don't worry about that."

"Where is Father Kriastakis?"

"He is in police custody."

The police officer stood up. "Thank you, Father. I wish you a speedy recovery. We may ask you to come to the precinct later," his words were before he left me.

The murky waters of my subconscious bubbles, and fears, thoughts, and doubts emerged like swamp mosquitoes. They started

buzzing and biting me into unmitigated madness. I spent that night weeping, and the one after, and the one after.

The police summoned me and dragged me through another prolonged interrogation. It was the same officer, but this time, a typist also documented every word I said and asked me to sign my statement at the end. What I learned from the police shocked me. They were convinced Father Kriastakis, who was now in jail, was mentally unwell and responsible for Irini's death. He bit her, and the display of madness I'd witnessed was merely her nervous breakdown.

I thought a lot about the day Irini died. I tried to recall every detail, no matter how minute. And the story always came back to me the same, exactly how I write it here within. I decided not to visit Father Kriastakis, nor to see the two doctors.

I spent about a month in Athens trying to recover from the ordeal, but the city had become intolerable. I saw no beauty in it anymore, only the drug addicts, prostitutes, and unsightly buildings. I was now trapped in a bad marriage. I felt like a husband whose wife had deceived him into believing that they had a perfect life together, but then he discovered that she had slept with every man in the neighborhood. Thus, I took a leave from my religious

duties and sunk into isolation. I became a night owl, but even the night turned against me. In its quiet, I began hearing Belphegor's voice whispering. "I'm real. Irini is dead. Now you shall never find peace," his foul mouth would utter.

I eventually became convinced that I could never live in the city and had it on my heart to spend the rest of my life as a monk. Within days, I was on a ship heading to Andros. All way long, I recited the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, *but deliver us from evil.*" This last phrase I kept repeating. To this day, I often do so.



MATIA

IN DEATH VERITAS

“Like an unleashed creator that cannot protect his creation from his own blasphemous imprecation, Zaher Alajlani explores, with a dark pathos, worlds that exist at the border of psychic derangement and the need of ablution, worlds that could lead him to finally find an exit. The volume *In Death Veritas* seems to belong to an author who, for the time being, cannot find his peace in words and who keeps exploring the temptation of madness, hoping that the world he creates will eventually coagulate through a redemptive act.”

Laura T. Ilea