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IN BED WITH KIERKEGAARD

by

Theodora Valkanou, MA (distinction), MPhil, BA

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing**

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ABSTRACT

For the creative part of this thesis, I have submitted a novel in the genre of autofiction, titled *In Bed with Kierkegaard*. It is a fictionalised account of my initiation in a BDSM community in Athens, Greece, between the years 2007 – 2009, and an account of a long-distance relationship I developed with a dominant man, with the nickname Morpheus. The themes of the novel are: domination/submission and sadism/masochism in our modern digital age, the quest for a female identity defined by sexuality, and writing erotic memoirs. The novel is based on detailed notes kept during the narrated events and follows closely on the advice on seduction offered by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in the text, *The Seducer's Diary*.

The critical part of this thesis provides a background account of writing a novel of autofiction on sadomasochism and seeking its publication. It also provides a comparative analysis of two literary works on similar themes, Dominique Aury's *Story of O*, and Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness*, especially as they pertain to the way in which erotic fantasy encroaches on reality, as well as the quest for what Kierkegaard called a 'God-relationship': a love and devotion so deep it may offer one a sense of transcendence beyond the limitations of human existence as grounded on the quotidian.

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

Name: Theodora Valkanou

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I certify that the thesis presented here for examination for a DFA degree of the University of Glasgow is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it) and that the thesis has not been edited by a third party beyond what is permitted by the University's PGR Code of Practice. The copyright of this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it is permitted without full acknowledgement. I declare that the thesis does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for another degree [unless explicitly identified and as noted below]. I declare that this thesis has been produced in accordance with the University of Glasgow's Code of Good Practice in Research. I acknowledge that if any issues are raised regarding good research practice based on review of the thesis, the examination may be postponed pending the outcome of any investigation of the issues.

For Morpheus

PROLOGUE

*Life can only be understood backwards;
but it must be lived forwards.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

Sometimes I get a seat facing backwards. Up on the mountains, the framed views disappear one after another. The train crosses a series of bridges over a green valley way down below, then comes the long descent, in and out of the tunnels of Mount Kallidromon – or Bralos, as the locals call it. It always fascinates me, this madness of light and darkness, the dazed lizard of the sun lazing on the rocks, the near complete blackness of the next tunnel.

A few days ago, on the train from Thessaloniki to Athens, I finished Yalom's book on death. I read it all in one go, crying silently. Next to me sat one of those vapid, heavily made-up, young girls. Every now and then, she'd go for her cell phone and start yakking away. I tried to put her out of my mind, concentrating on Yalom instead, wiping away the tears with my last handkerchief.

It was a sunny afternoon in June. I found it a little hard to remember what year it was, but eventually I got it: 2009. I often find myself in this unfortunate predicament, at a complete loss as to where I am – and most importantly, *when* I am.

The train rumbled in and out of the tunnels, and I sat there facing backwards, balancing on the edge of an overwhelming feeling, almost floating in a sweet ecstasy. I knew that if I lost my equilibrium even for one second, I would be swept off the ground, like a leaf taken up into the air by the summer breeze. I steadied myself as best I could, and even if outwardly I was crying with Yalom's sentimentalities, I relished my inner bliss, certain that death, when it came for me, would be a minor incident in my extraordinary life.

Some people like to cry. I guess I am one of them. Crying reminds me that I am alive, not the empty shell of a woman. Some people enjoy making others cry. But that is another story. Or maybe, in a way, it is also this one. Maybe this is a story about what one sees through the looking glass, where everything is turned upside down, until we all find our proper place, until we stop travelling backwards or forwards, until we start travelling the only possible way, an inner journey, in a world where everything takes place at once, and nothing is ever lost or forgotten.

My quest was at last coming to an end. It had been the most ambitious, most difficult journey I had ever embarked on. And now the train was taking me over the mountains of central Greece, towards the spectacular culmination of all I had endured in the last two years.

V had decided that tonight would be the night. I kept crossing and uncrossing my legs, to the left, to the right, then back again, indulging for the last time in this unencumbered movement, moisture spreading between my legs, the texture of my underwear on the soft folds of flesh between my legs, already adorned with two discreet rings of surgical steel. The piercings had healed beautifully, and I no longer shivered at the memory of the needle. The rings were of minimal weight and had almost become one with my body, so much so that if the rigidity of the steel did not remind me of them, I would have forgotten their existence.

In just a few hours, I would be given my most precious item of jewellery. It was V's wish to seal the contract between us in this final way.

Your body belongs to me.

That was my final destination. How many times had I travelled on that same train! A journey with no return – *kein zurück*. Few realise that the body is always last to surrender. Most people begin with the body, but they achieve nothing this way. Tourists, amateurs, wasting their time on guided tours and travel packages, reluctant to pay more than a small fee for a quick visit to the land of the ultimate pleasure.

I wanted so much more... The question was, at what price? And if by any chance I changed my mind and wanted to go back?

Es geht kein Weg zurück. One should listen to songs carefully; there is a lot of distilled wisdom in them.

There is no way back.

PART ONE
OBSESSION

INFECTED

*Existence and non-existence
have only subjective significance.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

It all began with an ad.

*I am a submissive woman.
I seek intense experiences.
I aspire to become O.*

Story of O was a film that had been very popular during the years of my youth. It was based on a book by Dominique Aury, a French woman who had rendered immortal her love for a man, by writing the greatest pornographic book of all times. In the opening scene, René, O's lover, takes her to a remote castle in Roissy, to be trained to submissiveness by a group of men. When her training is completed, René gives O as a gift to Sir Stephen. In his hands, O will endure the most unimaginable ordeals: she will be branded by fire and have her genitals pierced. In the climax of the novel, she is offered to other initiates of the Englishman's circle for their sexual pleasure. O becomes almost a sacred figure, removed from the ordinary world, choosing a life of nearly constant, intense physical pleasure.

I don't know why, but O became my ultimate fantasy. Sometimes a story, a song, an image, engraves itself in us in such a way that it becomes part of our life story. I spent my teenage years daydreaming, roaming in castles and thinking of men who would whip me for the slightest transgression, forcing me to submit to their whims and desires. I never had another sexual fantasy. This, and variations on this, is the only fantasy I've ever had. Nothing else excites me. It's as if I am stuck in this dream, even now, travelling backwards on the train, on my way to meet V.

One afternoon, in a small flat in Hippodrome Square, right in the heart of Thessaloniki, I was in bed with my lover, a young army officer. I was about sixteen at the time. I had been sexually active from a very young age and had already slept with more men than any of my friends. Sometimes I felt guilty and wondered if I was a nymphomaniac, but I always pushed the thought out of my mind. I had no choice but to keep looking, as I remained sexually dissatisfied. The army officer had always been tender and considerate to me, and, though of a large physique, had never hurt me in any way. I secretly prayed that he would lose control, even for a bit, and take his pleasure properly with me. He never did.

That afternoon, as we were making love, I found the courage to ask for what I really wanted.

‘Hit me.’

The two little words were uttered simply, without any particular urgency, as if I were asking him to pass the salt.

He stopped making love to me, surprised, incredulous.

‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to hurt you.’ I could feel his erection still stirring in me, but I was afraid he would lose it.

‘Hit me,’ I pleaded again, stroking his arms with my fingers, making tiny circles on his skin, as if I were drawing little pleases on his body: *please, please, please...* He hesitated for a moment. Then, resuming his gentle lovemaking, he started giving me light, clumsy slaps.

It was the saddest thing I had ever seen. The affair was over soon after that. I do not know if the unveiling of my taste for violence was to blame, or more likely the unveiling of his gentleness. I only know that something had found its way into me. A disease, an infection. The source of my discontent.

I did not know what to call it. It had no name – yet.

Twenty-five years passed since that afternoon. I went on to live an ordinary life. Marriage, children, divorce. A boring job, too much drinking, wild camping, experimenting with drugs. A sense of futility. During the years, I forgot all about O and the erotic fantasies of my adolescence. One day, to my surprise, I opened my eyes to face the light of another ordinary day and there she was again, alluring and terrifying. A dream, a demon that demanded to be given substance – flesh and blood.

I did nothing at first. I waited for time to cure me of these fantasies. But the nights were sleepless, and the days a struggle to achieve a semblance of sanity. All in vain. The dream wanted to invade reality, to live my life. If I did not let it, I would die inside.

On the day I turned forty, I sat in front of my laptop, wrote the ad, and placed it on the internet, on a site that was home to a BDSM community. I was not entirely sure what BDSM meant, so I looked it up: *Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism*.

It was just a silly ad. What harm in that? Yet, unbeknownst to me, these few lines, naïve, even if slightly over-ambitious, would soon trigger a whole chain of events, leading me where I am today.

The alias I chose for myself was Dora Salonica, in imitation of a prostitute of the seventies, Xaviera Hollander, who had written a book called *The Happy Hooker*. I had

admired her for being so outspoken about her experiences and so at ease with her sexuality. If she was Xaviera from Holland, I was Dora from Salonica. Simple.

I signed as D. That is the initial of my name – and it also happens to be very close to an O. It is an O with corners, an O that twists and cuts like a diamond in its desire to become a perfect circle. Besides, I own a pendant that I love very much, a hollow crystal in the shape of the letter D, filled with sparkling stones. It was a gift from my last vanilla lover. This memento from the vanilla world is today the only thing that connects me to my past. That and my memories from a life not worth living.

An ordinary life, lived in and out of administration offices.

I went past Protocol, where Nikos stamped the documents that went in and out of the hospital. Right in the middle of the building, at the heart of administration, were the offices of the Manager, Mr K, and the Deputy Manager, the one we called the Beautiful. I went in carrying my folder. Fotini, the receptionist, winked at me. Another day at the hospital. The great bard came to mind: *Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day...* Was I the only one wanting to run far away from my life here?

I knocked on the door of the Beautiful, waited for precisely two seconds, and entered. She jumped up in her seat.

‘Oh... did I frighten you?’ I said. ‘I am sorry.’

Why was she acting so surprised? This was a public office after all. A visitor went in and out every minute.

‘You are to wait for my answer before you come in,’ she said curtly, going to great lengths to avoid eye contact with me. I guess I was too low on the food chain to warrant a look. As was her habit, the Beautiful started looking at her paperwork, pretending she was too busy to deal with me.

I followed her example and pretended to look out the window at the street below and the leafless trees lining the avenue. As a last resort, I turned to the map of Greece on the wall, behind her back.

‘I brought the balance sheet for the epilepsy programme,’ I said at last, realising the ordeal would never end unless I did something. ‘Could you please sign it? The Manager said you could sign in his place for all lesser matters.’

She took the document in her hands and looked at it for what seemed like an eternity.

‘What’s all this? I do not understand,’ she said.

‘Input and output for the last trimester. All you need to do is sign it and then I can send it off. Don’t worry, it is all correct. An Excel file rarely makes mistakes.’ Unlike people, I wanted to add, but didn’t.

‘What do you mean by input and output?’

GIGO, I wanted to say. Garbage in, garbage out – or the quality of output is determined by the quality of input. Like our lives.

I said nothing. What would be the point? The girl was dumb anyway. And, unfortunately, she knew it. What a destiny, to be one of the few exceptions to the Dunning-Kruger effect: fools do not know they are fools.

I would give her that: she was a creature of unimaginable beauty. Pity that beauty cannot guarantee depth, intelligence, kindness, sexual attraction. But I would gladly write an ode for her. A straight, delicate nose, with nostrils in the shape of two small perfect circles. How could she possibly breathe through those tiny holes? And what did her breath smell like, after it completed its journey through her lungs and made its way out into the air again, when she sighed in exasperation as she did now, through those perfectly white teeth? Did it smell of marshmallows? Bitter chocolate? Apricot jam? Her eyes were large, dark brown, revealing a secret innocence, a clumsiness even – or more likely the complete and utter lack of knowledge.

My direct superior. I could cry.

‘I do not understand this,’ she concluded. ‘I will not sign things I do not understand.’ She shook her hair backwards over her shoulders, then, using her index finger, wiped an imaginary smudge of red lipstick off the edge of her lips.

‘Give it to Mr K to sign.’

I took the document, and went out, closing the door behind me as softly as I could force myself to.

Olivia, the receptionist, was sitting behind her computer, in the anteroom. These offices were decorated in poor taste, civil servant taste, yellow colours and vertical blinds and shitty paintings on the walls – mostly landscapes.

‘She won’t sign it,’ I said. ‘Is he in?’

‘He is in alright. But he is in an atrocious mood,’ Olivia said.

‘I really need this signature today, or we will lose the funding. I will take the risk.’ I knocked, waited for precisely two seconds, and entered.

The Manager avoided looking at me. His small, piggish eyes kept darting from his chubby fingers to the document I had handed him. An expression of disgust was slowly spreading over his face, as if I had just placed a steaming pile of shit on his desk. I pretended

to be looking at the small bar in the corner, with the collection of expensive brandies and whiskies, for the entertainment of important guests. I could use a drink too, but fat chance.

The Manager finally spoke. 'The signature is done all wrong. The gap between my title and my name should be much larger. I do not like to squeeze my name in between. Don't they teach you how to type documents?'

I went on looking at him without saying a word. My office was a mile away and it was uphill, in the clinics building. Surely, he would not make me walk back all this way just to enlarge the gap before his name. Would you like a little drummer boy to play his drum as you are signing, old fool? Jesus!

'Bring it back typed properly,' he said. And with a wave of his hand, as if he were royalty, he sent me out.

A typical day. When it was over, I made my way to the bus stop. It took me a half hour to travel through the city centre on Bus 27. It was always full, so I had to stand for the duration of the ride. I held on to my handbag carefully. My wallet had been stolen once. I had not had much money in it, but it had taken forever to replace the papers. Sometimes I thought that if I died and went to hell, I would have to travel on Bus 27 day in and day out, for all eternity.

The traffic was terrible at that time of day, and it took for ever to cross the centre of the city. I looked out of the window at the busy streets and the shop windows, the cars and motorcycles waiting patiently for the red lights to change, the city people hurrying past on foot, and for a moment my mind began to travel. Wouldn't it be great if someone replied to my ad? What if there was someone out there who was looking precisely for me? Someone who was bored with his life as I was, someone who was very different from all those people who surrounded me, the Managers, the receptionists, the pickpockets on the bus. Someone who would treat me better than those fools who avoided my eyes. I went on dreaming of that man, trying to imagine what his face would look like. *Do you exist?* I whispered. An old man winked lewdly at me and I looked away.

I got off at the Kamara Fountain and from there I went on foot the rest of the way. Going past the kiosk, I bought a small chocolate with almonds. I still needed to cook something for the kids. Plenty of time, they would all be out still. Maybe I could just order pizza.

I reached my apartment building. The street was busy and noisy as usual, full of people and cars. But it was quiet inside the building and a little dark. If I could, I would bring a chair and sit there, behind the glass door. Just look at the passers-by.

It would be nice if he existed, I thought again. If I had a magic wand, I would bring him to life myself.

INITIATION

*The most common form of despair
is not being who you are.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

Alpha was the first one. He was a businessman from Athens. We exchanged a few emails and we soon spoke on the phone, too. He was polite and had a deep, masculine voice. He asked me if my fingernails were polished red and if my toenails were polished in the same colour. A surprising question, a little ridiculous I thought, but I reassured him that my nails were indeed fashionably polished, all in the same red colour. After I passed the nails test, Alpha asked me to go and meet him in Athens.

I was so unhappy with my life that I did not hesitate to agree to his proposal. I found it unlikely that Alpha would be a madman, a rapist, or a murderer. Besides, I would take precautions. We could meet at a public place, have a drink together and chat, and nothing would happen afterwards. Was I being foolish? I was not blinded to the fact that for someone like me, this was an extraordinary thing to do.

I made arrangements to take the train to Athens the following weekend. At the office, an invitation to a convention on mental health had come up just at the right time. I volunteered to go. The Beautiful was happy to send me. I suspected she would have had to go herself if it had not been for me. She was not one to do any favours.

Another perk of the trip was that I would get a little extra money for participating in the convention. Those days, apart from working at the hospital, I taught English in the evenings, at a foreign-language school. With my two jobs I just about managed to make ends meet. I had to support myself and the kids, as well as my good-for-nothing lover, who was happily living the life of a gigolo. He hadn't worked in years. In fact, he went to great lengths to avoid finding a job. He would lie down on the comfortable IKEA couch in the living-room, open the local newspaper and proceed to circle employment ads. That was all he did. He never went for an interview.

After two years together, it was obvious – to me, at least – that our relationship had reached an impasse. I had felt flattered at the beginning, that a handsome young man, eight years younger than me, would want to sleep with me, live with me even. But I had become disillusioned over time. Worst of all, he had gradually turned into something of a sex fiend. He demanded sex constantly.

In the mornings, I woke up early. The hospital was at the other end of the city, and I had to walk all the way to the bus stop. I did my best to sneak out of the bedroom, but he

always heard me and grabbed me for a ‘quickie’ – his quickies lasted at least thirty minutes.

‘Come here you. Where do you think you are going?’

‘Darling, I will be late for work again. Can’t we leave it for later?’

‘We will do it later too. This is the morning one. Come on, just a quickie. You don’t have to do anything. Just lie there and open your legs.’

What else could I do? Whenever I said no, he went sour on me. I would not mind so much if the sex were any good. But it was terrible. Sex with him was so boring that I had to write supermarket lists in my head. He panted away, pushing in and out of my unresponsive body, always in the same, identical movement – a piston that had found a convenient hole in which to spend its mindless existence. *Potatoes, onions, courgettes, aubergines*. I faked moaning, to help him finish faster. *Milk, juice, wine – definitely wine*. Ah, ah, ah... Thank God, it’s over.

That was the extent of my sexual life. Who could blame me for dreaming of something more? It was despair that was driving me, and lack of pleasure.

I was an ordinary woman about to do extraordinary things.

On a cold, bright day in January, three weeks after my fortieth birthday, I arrived in Athens. A room had been reserved for me at Titania Hotel, where the convention was taking place. The place was crawling with civil servants, complacent bureaucrats, rude and unhelpful, the plague of humanity. I was one of them, though I did my best not to resemble them. Instead of going to the convention, I prepared myself to go and meet the dream.

I wondered if I was pretty enough for what I was about to do. Luckily, because I was rather petite, I looked much younger than my age. I wore my blond hair in a layered bob, a little shorter at the back, revealing a tattoo on the back of my neck, a Chinese ideogram that meant *Under His Hand* – or *Slave*, in its westernised version. I had acquired it recently, taking the first timid steps in the passage from the realm of the imaginary to the realm of the real. My lips were thin, the mouth rather large. An involuntary – and unwanted – dimple, formed on my left cheek when I smiled. I liked to wear minimal make-up: black eyeliner, a little blusher, even less lipstick. I think the only striking thing about me was that I wore coloured contact lenses in a most peculiar shade, attempting in vain to capture the essence of my favourite poem by Constantine Cavafy:

*I hardly now recall the eyes; violet, I think, they were...
Ah violet, yes; the violet of sapphire.*

Unfortunately, I had not yet found anyone who might be moved by my violet eyes. No one except the gigolo, that is, who was waiting for me at home without a care in the world, lying on the couch and circling employment ads in the paper. The latest one he had considered suitable was: *Male model wanted*. I shuddered at the thought of having to sleep with him again. When I returned from Athens, he would want to catch up, no doubt.

I checked my attire in the mirror for one last time. For Alpha's seduction, I had chosen a black dress showcasing my bosom. I had been flat-chested for most of my life, but motherhood, and perhaps maturity, sometimes brings unexpected gifts. I wore black fishnet stockings, perfectly matched to a pair of retro-style peep-toes, with heels that were a little too high for what I was accustomed to. The pendant with the crystal D hung down to the beginning of my cleavage. A coat in golden thread, with a faux-fur collar and zircon buttons, perfected the image I aspired to create.

Alpha was waiting for me in one of those expensive hotels on Syngrou Avenue. I was about fifteen minutes late. In the vanilla world, women are always a little fashionably late. I thought it would be alright.

I walked slowly through the hotel lobby, taking small steps on my high heels and feeling a mixture of confidence and trepidation. This was the role of my life – the stuff fairytales are made of.

A man stood up upon seeing me. I had not known what to expect, since I had not asked him for a photo. For some reason, his appearance did not interest me much. He, however, had asked for a photo, and since I had sent him one, he recognised me right away.

'Are you Dora Salonica?' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

My skills of observation were ever present, and I used them to assess the man who had come to fulfil my dreams. He was dressed in a dark suit and tie. Tall, with slightly wavy hair, grown silver here and there; symmetrical features; large, white teeth. I liked the fact that he was rather large compared to me. The Big Bad Wolf and the Little Red Riding Hood!

Looking back now, I can't fail to see that I was a romantic fool, my head filled with films and stories and fantasies. The truth of the matter was that I disliked myself. I wanted to be someone that I admired; instead I was a nobody.

We sat at the hotel bar, in two comfortable armchairs facing each other. Although it was early in the afternoon, we both ordered red wine. The clientele seemed to consist mostly of businessmen and ladies in conservative attire. I was a little concerned that everyone would figure out why I was there. A couple of men gazed lustfully at me – I was dressed rather

provocatively, after all. The ladies eyed me with contempt, I think, perhaps with a little envy too. I took a deep breath and sipped at my wine, deciding to ignore them all. My attention was drawn once again to the man sitting opposite me.

Alpha was looking at me with curiosity – a little coldly I thought. I looked back at him, smiling with a touch of insolence, feeling suddenly very brave. He had beautiful long fingers, which he liked to bring together in front of him, the fingertips of one hand touching the fingertips of the other, in the classic steeple gesture sometimes used by university professors when talking of deep truths. The only flaw in his looks was a slight puffiness under his eyes, which reminded me of a bust of the Marquis de Sade. He had a funny way of talking. He would say what he wanted and then he would pause, waiting to see the impression his words made. During that pause, he pouted his lips, like a little boy who had just asked for an important favour. I found that cute and I relaxed a bit.

He spoke at length about his past, with calculated pauses and lip pouting and a good dosage of steepled fingers. He was a mathematician, he said, and owned a company selling something or other.

‘What brought you to BDSM?’ I asked.

‘I always had it in me, but I did not know it,’ he said. ‘I went to the States for a postgraduate degree, and I met a woman who became a sort of slave to me. She taught me everything I know about BDSM. She was great, the best. After my studies, I returned to Athens, without the slave.’

‘Why without the slave?’

‘She did not want to leave her home country.’

Some slave, I thought, but did not say anything.

‘I eventually got married. I have kids, a good family. But I cannot say I am happy.’ He pouted.

‘Why?’

‘I am trying to relive that first affair,’ he said. ‘I met a couple of girls from the site, but nothing clicked. It’s just not the same.’

That moved me. He was also looking for something he had lost, just as I was looking for O, the lost dream of my youth.

The conversation suddenly came to a halt. I looked at him, feeling the awkwardness of the moment. His face seemed to change. It was just a fleeting shadow that passed over his features, altering them for an instant, before he regained his composure.

‘Remove one of your shoes,’ he said.

The request threw me off a bit, but I did as he said. I pulled my right foot out of the shoe, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. We were in the middle of the bar after all, and a gentleman in an expensive suit was looking my way. Alpha examined the red toenails that peeped through the fishnet stockings and nodded his approval.

‘Will you come upstairs to my room for five minutes?’ he said.

I found it curious that he had already booked a room before even meeting me. Didn’t I have to pass a test of elegance and beauty first?

‘Come on. It will be alright,’ he insisted.

‘Better not,’ I said. I did not want to seem easy. I am extremely easy, but I did not want him to know it.

‘Just for five minutes. What are you afraid of?’

What indeed? Would he strangle me in the hotel room after everyone had seen us together? I didn’t think so. And had I forgotten the reason I was there? My ad... *Intense experiences. I aspire to become –*

If I had said no that day, everything would have been different. It was a single decision, taken within a few seconds. A small step over the abyss – and I took it. In that moment, I stopped being a mother, a teacher, a woman sitting and watching her empty life go by. *I am not a nobody*, I thought to myself. *I can do whatever I want.*

‘Alright. Just for five minutes,’ I said.

I followed Alpha to the reception, where he picked up the key to the room. I was a bit unsteady on my feet and the high heels were not helping either. We waited for the lift and when it came, he stepped aside so I could go in first. My heart was beating in my chest so loudly, I thought he would hear it and laugh at me.

Alpha pressed the button to the fifth floor and the lift started going up. I did not even have the time to panic. Alpha grabbed me by my hair and pulled my head backwards. I started trembling uncontrollably. It was a good thing he was holding me by the hair because my knees would have buckled.

‘You like having your hair pulled?’ he whispered in my ear. His breath was hot and unpleasant.

‘Yes,’ I said in a voice that was not mine.

‘Yes, Sir,’ he said.

‘Yes, Sir,’ I repeated.

We came out of the lift, his hand holding me firmly by the scruff of my neck. *Under His Hand*. My tattoo had just become literal. We made our way through the corridor. There

was no one else around and the carpet muffled our steps. Alpha stopped in front of a door and opened it, stepping aside again, the perfect gentleman. I walked into the room, as if I were going to the firing squad.

It was a large room with two beds, one double and one single. The curtains were wide open, and the sun was bathing the room in a dazzling light. Outside the window, the city of Athens with its grey buildings and the multitude of antennae on the roofs seemed unreal. *Unreal city*, I recited inwardly. Where are the poets when you need them? Opposite the window, on the other side of Syngrou Avenue, a huge billboard advertising a life insurance company was declaring in big, bright letters: *You are not alone*.

‘Take off your shoes,’ Alpha said. The coldness had now enveloped his face in its entirety.

‘Yes, Sir.’

I stood in front of him. Without my heels, I barely reached up to his chest. He was no longer pouting, the little boy had disappeared. I had the distinct feeling I had entered another dimension. This could not possibly be me.

‘Why were you late?’ he said. He pulled out his belt. Was he wearing a belt? I had not noticed.

‘I am sorry, Sir,’ I mumbled.

My fear began a steady ascent towards what I felt would be an abominable crescendo. I was paralysed, unable to react in any way. I was certain I was experiencing what a small animal feels, when held in the claws of a predator. I tried to cry, so he might take pity on me, but my eyes remained hot and dry. All I wanted to do was return to the hotel lobby and then get quickly out of there and go back to my quiet life, with my kids and the gigolo, and those convenient, empty days, to the end of my ordinary life.

But I could not return.

He made me kneel in front of him, the belt dangling from his hand. He lifted the belt and brought it down on my back. It reached down to my buttocks and curled itself round my kneeling body. A surprised moan, eyes down.

Then his voice.

‘You know what to do.’

Alas, I knew. I unbuttoned his trousers. He held my head firmly between his large hands, and I did what was expected of me. All I could think of was that I was unable to escape – not only from him, but also from myself. I was trapped in something large and powerful, I felt nothing but awe. What primal need in me responded to this violence? I did

not know.

He slapped me profusely during my efforts to give him pleasure. Though I did my best, his penis was too big for my mouth and the way he was thrusting it against the back of my throat did not make things any easier. When he grew tired of my inadequacy, he ordered me to get up. I scrambled to my feet and stood in front of him, with my eyes glued to the floor. He turned me round and threw me unceremoniously on all fours on the bed.

‘Don’t you dare move!’ he said.

I stayed still. I could feel the harsh light on me, coming in through the window. I was half naked, with my dress pulled up around my waist and my knickers pulled down round my ankles. The man’s eyes scrutinised every inch of my body and his large hands explored me with total disregard for any pain he might be causing me. All I could think of was the billboard across the street and its message: *You are not alone.*

I assumed from the heavy panting that he was playing with himself behind me. He quickly achieved his pleasure, much to my relief. His sperm landed on the carpet next to the bed. He buttoned up his trousers and put his belt back on. I stood up too, pulled up my knickers, put on my retro-style peep-toes and my golden coat with the faux-fur collar and the zircon buttons, and followed him out of the room.

We seemed like a perfectly respectable couple when we walked out of the lift and into the noisy lobby of a parallel universe that no longer had anything to do with me. Alpha did not say a single word. He smiled his cold smile, winked at me, as if we were fellow conspirators, and walked away, leaving me standing there like a pillar of salt.

Only then did I feel free from his grip. I collapsed in the first armchair I found in front of me. I looked at my watch. Barely twenty minutes had passed since we had gone to that room. How can the universe change shape within a matter of twenty minutes? I tried to light a cigarette, but my hands were shaking too much, and it took me a while. No one has ever treated me so wretchedly, I thought. But isn’t this what I wanted?

I ordered a glass of red wine. I had another cigarette, and then another. After a while my phone rang. Ah, he was not completely heartless after all.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked.

‘I am fine,’ I lied.

‘Was it what you expected?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘What did you think of me?’

‘You have potential,’ he said. ‘I like your smile. The dimple is marvellous.’

He hung up before I even had the chance to say goodbye. I sipped at my wine and

tried to compose my thoughts.

What was happening to me? Where was I? *Who* was I?

That was my first contact with the new life that I was so eager to embrace. D, that greedy and somewhat annoying girl, had started acquiring a voice within me. I was already overwhelmed by her, admiring her and fearing her at the same time.

From the very first time, I noticed that after a session I would fall into a deep trance for hours on end, sometimes even days. I found it hard to concentrate, and my reactions were mechanical, as if I were on automatic pilot. Even eating took a lot of effort. I soon became familiar with this experience, anticipating the moment after which I would be able to walk out of my ordinary self, peeling off the comfortable feel of everyday existence.

I was dying to share what I had experienced with others. But who would understand? I had a feeling that only the initiated would understand how I was feeling. If someone had tried to tell me the previous day about the effects of a BDSM session, I would not have believed them.

FIRST LIMIT

*He who does not know
how to poetize himself in a girl's feelings
so that it is from her that everything issues as he wishes it,
he is and remains a bungler.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

‘Hi, Tanya. This is Dora Salonica. I am in Athens. Would you like to meet?’

Tanya was a girl I had been chatting with on the Internet. She was in a relationship with Master P, who also wanted to get to know me. The fact that I had just come out of my first session did not daunt me. There was no time to lose. I needed to give life to my dreams. It was imperative, a matter of life and death.

Tanya agreed to come and meet me in about half an hour. A quick look at my watch confirmed two indisputable facts: a) it was already five o'clock in the afternoon and b) I had lost all sense of time. I had forgotten all about the convention, the gigolo back home – even my children. Nothing mattered. I patiently waited for Tanya, absent-mindedly gazing out of the large windows at the passers-by, who were going hastily about their business, oblivious to the woman who sat behind the glass, lost in a state of non-thought. I enjoyed being a stranger among strangers in Athens, a city I barely knew. Here I felt free to do whatever I wanted.

Tanya was a large girl, with a perfectly oval face and brown hair tied in a simple ponytail. She looked as if she had just stepped out of a Sunday service. It was very difficult to picture her in the nude writhing under the whip. We had a good, honest discussion, in which she tried to answer my queries. But I was far from being able to understand how domination and submission worked. I had gone through my first session as if I had been sleepwalking.

‘I know it is hard for you,’ she said. ‘I have been there, and I know how you feel. Perhaps my Master would be able to explain it all better to you. Would you like to meet him?’

I said yes. Oh, yes. Perhaps he was the One. I did not say that out loud, in case she felt threatened by me.

Tanya took me to her flat in Palaio Faliro. Nice furniture, a fireplace, an environment very much to my liking. She offered me some more red wine, which I gladly accepted. We were chatting amicably when the key at the door signalled the arrival of her Master. He came in and the first thing he did was to kiss the big girl. Then he turned to me and introduced himself.

‘I am P,’ he said. ‘And you must be Dora Salonica.’

Master P was in his forties; handsome, with curly dark hair and eyes that sparkled with intelligence and playful mischief. A likeable man. He sat by the fireplace and Tanya brought him a martini. During our chat, I found out he was a civil engineer and quite cultivated. The conversation soon turned to poetry.

‘Who is your favourite poet?’ he asked me.

‘Cavafy, of course,’ I said. ‘But I like English and American poetry, too. T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens...’

‘I also like Cavafy,’ he cut me off. He proceeded to recite ‘The God abandons Antony.’

*When suddenly, at midnight, you hear
an invisible procession going by
with exquisite music, voices,
don't mourn your luck that's failing now,
work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive – don't mourn them uselessly.
As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.*

‘Ah,’ I said, ‘but I have no intention of saying goodbye to Alexandria. I just got here.’

I felt cocky, aided as I was by the ongoing consumption of wine. Tanya had removed the Master’s shoes and socks and was rubbing his feet. This must have been a ritual between them, and it made an impression on me. I don’t think I had ever touched a man’s feet. The idea had never crossed my mind. Now it seemed right in a way. It was not just a symbol of submission. It was a gesture that changed the rules of the sex game: the entire human body could be worshipped.

‘So, you want to be a slave,’ Master P said. ‘And what can you do? Why would anyone choose you and not someone else?’

I did not know. He kept looking at me with his mischievous eyes. It was obvious to me that he was playing the cat and mouse game and I was the mouse.

‘Come,’ he said finally. ‘Let’s see what you’ve got.’

I followed him into the bedroom. Tanya was told to wait in the lounge, which I found a little cruel on her. I wondered if she was jealous. How little I knew then about this world...

‘Have you ever been tied up?’ Master P asked me. I shook my head.

He smiled and produced some rope out of a drawer. I could make out an assortment of things inside, whose use I could not even imagine.

‘On the bed, face down!’ he snapped.

What had happened to the little jokes? What had happened to Cavafy? Gone, all gone. I did as he asked of me, momentarily thinking that it might be dangerous to allow someone to tie me up the first time we met. Tanya's presence in the lounge was some comfort at least. Master P lifted my little black dress, pulled down my knickers, and proceeded to tie me to the bed, spread-eagled.

When his work was done and I was securely tied down, I heard a whooshing sound. I was so inexperienced that I did not know what it meant. The next second a stinging lash landed on my naked buttocks. I was being whipped! I squirmed to my heart's delight, but there was not much I could do, for the rope was digging into my flesh. Master P interspersed the lashes with gentle caresses on my buttocks, attempting to take away with one hand the pain he delivered with the other.

Soon, the strange passivity I had experienced with Alpha got hold of me again. I relaxed into my bondage and emptied my mind of all thought. And still, I could not allow myself to surrender completely to Master P. Perhaps what was required to fully access a sexuality of this kind was an inner itinerary which I had not been given the chance to follow. It was as if I had been thrust at the end of a process with the command, *express yourself*. I had absolutely nothing to express. I wanted to become O, but I did not know what an O was.

Once the whipping was over, he took me to the bathroom for the final act, which backfired horribly. When he asked me to kneel next to the toilet and undid his trousers, I started screaming and trying to kick him away.

'No, no, no! Let go of me!'

I could not even imagine that one day I would have to beg for the exact same thing I had just refused.

When I was taken back to the lounge, I suddenly felt ashamed of my inexperience, and I burst into tears.

'Oh, don't cry,' Tanya said and hugged me. 'You will learn, you will see.'

'Have another glass of wine and wipe your eyes,' Master P said. 'I will call a taxi for you. You will be fine, girl, don't worry. You have it.'

What did I have? I had nothing. I returned to my hotel feeling like a failure, a fraud. I slept fitfully through the night and my sleep was filled with nightmares from which I could not wake up.

SWEET ALICE

*When it comes to the labyrinth of her heart,
every young girl is an Ariadne;
she holds the thread by which one can find the way through
– but she possesses it in such a way
that she herself does not know how to use it.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

Those days I kept reading a passage, written out on a piece of paper I always carried with me in my wallet. I had found the passage in a book called *Kinflicks*. The main character, Ginny Babcock, a girl exploring her sexuality, exchanging one identity for another, had been reading a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard:

Modern philosophy has tried anything and everything in the effort to help the individual to transcend himself objectively, which is a wholly impossible feat; existence exercises its restraining influence, and if philosophers nowadays had not become mere scribblers in the service of a fantastic thinking and its preoccupation, they would long ago have perceived that suicide was the only tolerable practical interpretation of its striving. But the scribbling modern philosophy holds passion in contempt; and yet passion is the culmination of existence for an existing individual – and we are all of us existing individuals. In passion the existing subject is rendered infinite in the eternity of the imaginative representation, and yet he is at the same time most definitely himself.

Ginny Babcock became obsessed with that passage, and so did I. Ginny was the first character from a book I felt a close affinity to. That was what I also wanted: a passion so great that it would help me escape the quotidian, the mundane, with all those nice people waiting for the bus, walking hand in hand, kissing at street corners, taking their kids to school. I did not care one bit about all that. Nor did I care about small pleasures. I wanted to experience the greatest pleasure a human being could ever achieve. I called it *the ultimate pleasure*.

A few days after I had returned from my adventurous weekend in Athens, I was sitting in the office, thinking about everything that had happened. My colleagues kept going back and forth in the corridors, carrying files and wasting their lives in a meaningless world of bureaucracy. Why did they do this to themselves? Why didn't they react, why didn't they run out to the courtyard to sit in the sun, why didn't they talk to each other about things that really mattered?

My friend Alice was sitting at her desk, and every now and then she would lift her head to look at me. The other two girls had not noticed anything, busy as they were with their work, but she knew something was up.

Alice was a pretty girl, ten years younger than me. We hung out together. Our friendship was a balance of opposites. She wore tiny little dresses that paid tribute to her slender figure. Her legs were very long and thin and made her look a bit like a giraffe. A small head with a cute face balanced on top of that tall, thin body. She had long, dark hair, perfectly straight, with a short fringe across her forehead, in the style of Bettie Page. She always wore shoes with incredibly high heels, which I considered kitsch and utterly trashy. While I tried to achieve an image of graceful, mature femininity, Alice jumped fearlessly in the shallow waters of what we call *the modern*. Men found her irresistible, in the lightest of ways, a tasty snack. I, on the other hand, was a cause for indigestion, what with my ultimate pleasures and my dead philosophers.

We often went out drinking in Thessaloniki's countless pubs and clubs. I think that deep inside, Alice was also wishing for a relationship containing an element of domination, fed up as she was with the weak, ineffectual men she met in her everyday life.

I couldn't take it anymore. I had to tell her.

'Let's go outside for a little fresh air,' I said. We went to the courtyard and sat on a bench under a tree, to have a smoke. That is where I blurted it all out. Confessing my transgressions made them seem more real. The dream had been brought out in the ample light of the January sun, where we could examine it, try it out for size.

'I'm glad you told me,' Alice said in a muffled voice and there were tears in her eyes. 'I understand. I could never do what you did, but I understand.'

She put her arm around my shoulders to comfort me. Patients and staff were walking along the footpath, passing us by, as we embraced. This hug warmed me up a bit. Perhaps there were other women like me, who saw life as I saw it. Perhaps I was not alone.

When we returned to the office, I sat down and wrote an account of my first session with Alpha. It was that day, the day that Alice hugged me in the courtyard, that this book began. When I finished the story, I gave it to her to read. We sat down together and made small corrections, whispering so the other girls would not hear, laughing at all the spicy details as if we were teenage girls.

'Make sure you mention he had a big penis,' she said, and we laughed so hard the other two girls wanted to know what we were talking about. I made something up because I could not tell them what had really happened in Athens.

I immediately emailed the story to Alpha from the office. I wanted him to understand that I wanted so much more than one session. But he had disappeared after that day. It suddenly occurred to me that he should be told the entire truth if we were to engage in a

serious relationship. I sat down and wrote a second account, my session with Master P, and sent that to him too. If he chose to be jealous, so be it.

His reply came almost right away. He had read both texts, about the two sessions that had taken place on the same day, and said he was ‘unimaginably pissed off.’ Of course he was. But I was not about to give up that easily. I informed him that I would visit Athens again the following weekend and if he wished to meet me, he could always give me a call.

I then made my way to the office of the Beautiful, holding in my hands another invitation to a mental health convention. It did not take me long to talk her into sending me to Athens for a second time. She only asked me to keep notes and inform her about everything. I promised I would.

FIRST BLOOD

All eternal decisiveness is rooted in subjectivity.
(S. Kierkegaard)

Two weeks after my initial trip, I took the train to Athens again. My mother would keep an eye on the kids. They were now quite independent anyway. The gigolo did not suspect that anything was amiss, though he disliked being left alone with my children, with whom he did not get along.

This time, I met with someone new, Master X. My ad seemed to be extremely successful. We met in Plaka, the tourist district near the rock of Acropolis. That was where the convention was taking place. I attended the first part, so I could sign in and appear to be present. This was becoming a pattern and I felt no guilt whatsoever. Looking around me at the somewhat dull faces of my colleagues, watching them pounce like vultures on the table with the coffee and biscuits, I could see how little I had in common with them. It seemed that having cut the cord that kept me attached to that reality, I was now floating in the realm of endless possibilities. After the first break, I sneaked out, leaving my colleagues in deep and important talks regarding mental health, while I, the finest specimen of mental health, went for beers with Master X.

I was sitting at a café in Plaka, enjoying a cold beer outside in the sun, when Master X arrived.

‘The girl from the site?’ he asked.

I nodded.

He smiled and took my hand in his. He was tall and somewhat heavy, the daddy type, caring and stern at the same time, and older than he had claimed. We chatted a bit about our kinks, while I tried to assess how I felt about him. I disliked him. Perhaps it had to do with the way he was bragging about being a wealthy man. I could not care less about his money and in fact his behaviour put me off. But I felt he could be trusted.

Silly girl, I said to myself. You have been born under a lucky star. Alpha and P and X – these men are not dangerous. But what if you come across someone different? What if your luck runs out and you end up dead in some filthy basement, naked and cut up in little pieces, with a stupid smile on your dead lips? This was the internal dialogue I was having with D – my own personal demon.

‘I would like to see you again,’ Master X said, as we parted. ‘I know you are leaving tomorrow, but since it is Saturday and you do not have to go back to work yet, I have a

proposition to make. Why don't you keep your hotel room for one more night, so we can meet tomorrow? I will pay for it, it goes without saying. And I will get you a new train ticket for Sunday.'

No one until then had paid for a hotel room for me. The prospect of a career as a call girl at the age of forty did not seem very promising. However, I gladly accepted his offer. On one hand I felt flattered, and on the other, I have always loved hotels. One more night alone with my thoughts, without the distraction of the kids and the gigolo, might help me figure out what the hell I was doing with my life.

The following day, Master X picked me up from the hotel in an enormous Range Rover and took me to a fancy restaurant in Kaisariani, a suburb of Athens. We enjoyed a lovely meal of fresh fish and prawns, accompanied with the finest ouzo on ice. As I was getting more and more inebriated, Master X talked to me about his life. He had been initiated in the lifestyle by one of his professors at the university. His professor's kink had been cuckolding – seeing his wife fucked by one of his students. Master X had been doing BDSM ever since.

'It is like a virus,' he said. 'Once you are exposed to it, if you are a natural, it will never leave you.'

I nodded in agreement.

'I like to spoil my girls,' he said, smiling knowingly. 'Women love spending a day at a spa with everything paid. Sometimes, I buy them a gigolo. They all love that.'

What was I to do with a gigolo? I already had one at home and no way to get rid of him. I said nothing.

After our meal, Master X took me to my hotel, and asked if he could come upstairs to my room. I said yes, secretly hoping that this mature gentleman would know the way to transform me to O. In the room, Master X sat in an armchair, unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a somewhat flabby chest covered with white hairs, and asked me to kiss his nipples. I did what he asked, but my reluctance must have been evident.

'Not like that,' he scolded me. 'You must kiss my nipples as if you were a hungry baby. You must worship every inch of your Master's body.'

Yes, I understood perfectly well. I wanted to be filled with that desire, that deep devouring love for a man. But how would the love become born in me? And which of all those men would be the One?

Master X placed me on the bed, on all fours – this was becoming a regular position for me – and proceeded to give me a sound beating with his belt. This time, I had noticed that

my partner had been wearing a belt. It is funny how the mind gets trained to see what is important.

When Master X decided I had had enough, he took his leave.

‘I want you to keep the belt,’ he said and offered it to me. ‘Ask your boyfriend to use it on you.’

It was a brown belt, made of very expensive leather, a gift which I gladly accepted.

The following morning, I stood in front of the mirror, admiring the black bruises left on my buttocks by the attentions of Master X. Just as I started to prepare for the return trip back home, who should call but Alpha. I had forgotten about him!

Alpha asked me to take a taxi and meet him at his office. I barely had enough time, I had a train to catch, after all. But D insisted that we go. What did it matter? We had already exceeded the small fee required for a quick visit to the land of the ultimate pleasure. And I had the feeling that we had only just begun.

The hotel concierge let me store my suitcase at the hotel. I would collect it later in the afternoon, before catching my train. I called for a taxi and went to meet Alpha.

Agioi Anargyroi is a less than glamorous suburb of Athens. Alpha was waiting for me at the entrance of a three-storey building, the premises of his somewhat obscure company. He was wearing his usual suit and tie and was as attractive as I remembered him, though this time he seemed less of a big bad wolf. Perhaps as I grew in experience, he got smaller.

He smiled coldly and without even making small talk he led me to a storage room. I had the distinct feeling he was treating me like a prostitute, showing me in through the back door. Well, I was already a call girl, so this was a promotion of sorts in my descent to hell. It was a windowless, filthy room with a cement floor. There was a broken chair in a corner and some cardboard boxes stacked one on top of the other. To my horror, I noticed a few dead worms here and there on the cement floor. Was this purgatory or had I already entered inferno?

Alpha made me face the wall and pulled down my knickers.

‘I hope you have come prepared,’ he said. ‘Have you had an enema?’

‘No, Sir, I have not.’ What an idea!

‘How do you expect me to use you then?’

No matter. He kept me standing against the wall and used his hands to explore the orifices of my body, front and back. Afterwards, he made me lick his fingers clean, though

they did not seem dirty. Maybe he thought I would be daunted, but I was not in the least. I licked his fingers one by one. They tasted like –

Peaches! They tasted of peaches! I had never realised until that moment that the human body can be so lovely, in and out. What a revelation!

Alpha never had sex with me. He placed me on all fours on the cement floor, next to the dead worms, and pleased himself while he played with me. He only used his hands and was even more rough than the first time. My stockings were ripped and my knees were bruised.

Later, in the toilet where I went to clean up, I realised there was blood on my underwear. His hands had been too large for me.

On my way home, as the train wriggled its way through the tunnels of Bralos, I tried to put my thoughts in order. This was all going faster than I had anticipated. What would happen to me? Would I turn into an object? Meat for use? Would I lose my humanity?

I did not feel I was becoming an object. On the contrary, my inner strength was increasing. I was more determined than ever to find the passion I was seeking – maybe even experience the ultimate pleasure. I would never go back, never. *Kein zurück*. As for Alpha or P or X, perhaps I would never become their O, but it was certain – to me at least – that one day I would become somebody's O.

'Lucky star, let us go you and I,' I prayed, as the night darkened my window.

And I went. I went.

RETURN TO THESSALONIKI

*What enjoyment can there be in love
if there is not the most absolute self-surrender?
(S. Kierkegaard)*

Staring through the train window at the desolate landscape with the winter fields and the villages with their crumbling houses, I was vaguely aware that my country had been struck with the worst financial crisis of recent times. Unfortunately, I could not bring myself to care enough. Other things were on my mind.

I was no longer proud of my bruises. The initial sense of accomplishment had given way to a growing anxiety. The gigolo was waiting for me at home, and I knew I had it coming. He was a jealous, possessive man who had never been able to hide his insecurity. He had often been violent with me. In fact, it was probably his propensity for violence that had made me oblivious to his many other faults. What was worse, I knew that within the first five minutes of my arrival he would request a welcome-home fuck, one of many that would follow in the same night. Such was my lot on this earth, and I was prepared to grit my teeth through the weeping boredom of those embraces.

As for the bruises, there was no way to conceal them, no matter how much foundation makeup I applied on my buttocks. In desperation, I decided to invent an encounter with a lesbian, which I thought might be easier to swallow. The six-hour train journey gave me ample time to rehearse the lies that would save me. I had supposedly been chatting with a woman for some time online, we met at a hotel and things got out of hand. So here I am darling, your cherished petal, black and blue and full of remorse. So sorry.

I sent him a text on his cell phone, giving him a first taste of the fairy tales that would follow. *En passant*, I mentioned the bruises. I received no reply. That meant trouble but there was nothing left to do. I leaned my head against the window and slept the rest of the way, aware of my aching, yet mysteriously satisfied, body.

The gigolo must have been camping behind the door, because as soon as I entered the apartment, he grabbed me. He snatched the suitcase out of my hand, took a good hold of my hair and dragged me to the bedroom. He was wheezing through clenched teeth, his face distorted with rage.

‘Show me the fucking bruises,’ he screamed at me, tiny droplets of spittle landing on my face.

I had already arranged for the kids to spend the night at my mother’s so they would not have to witness any scenes. I knew precisely what would happen. I pulled down my

trousers and showed him the bruises. He went crazy. He rummaged through my suitcase like a madman, looking for something, who knows what. Evidence of my sins? He did not know what he was looking for either.

And yet, he did find something! It was the leather belt that Master X had given me. That had completely slipped my mind. I thought quickly, too quickly perhaps, and said it was a gift from the lesbian girl, overlooking the fact that a man's belt was not a likely gift from one woman to another. In a sudden flash of insight, the truth was revealed to him. I had been unfaithful and had met another man (men to be precise, though I was not going to clarify that). He must have realised that neither he nor I could turn back time and what had been done could not be undone. It was over between us. We slept in separate rooms and the following day he packed up his things and left.

'Mum, we are having a party tonight. Just so you know,' my son informed me a few days later. I was sitting in my room feeling sorry for myself. I found it so difficult to talk to anybody, I had even taken the phone off the hook.

'Oh? And what are we celebrating?' I asked. I could not even force a smile.

'Freedom! What else?'

Alex was right, of course. I should have been dancing with joy over the end of this unhealthy relationship. That night there was music coming from the living room, and the loud voices and laughter continued until late. I did not intervene, though I could not sleep. The kids, exceedingly happy that the gigolo was gone, reclaimed the house for themselves. As for me, my sexual desire had hit rock bottom. I did not love myself anymore, nor did I deserve to be loved by anybody. What the hell had happened to me? My life had not been that bad. It was a balancing act that had worked for a long time. Why did I have to take a plunge into this dark, unknown thing? I had been careless and selfish, and I had found myself alone for the first time in years. I kept thinking of all the recent events and nothing seemed worth the total annihilation of my life.

Alpha called me a week later. I told him I did not wish to see him again. It was obvious that he would never be able to offer me anything other than a session every now and then and we had already done whatever could be done between us. He was a man who found pleasure in the superficial aspect of things and his imagination was rather limited. It was true that I had been shaken by the violence of the affair and by my own acceptance of that violence. But that was not what I was looking for. I was not ready to get rid of one lie just so I could sneak into the comfort of another.

Master X called me almost every day. He was discreet and patient, and even offered

to pay for my airfare so I could go to Athens for ‘a cup of coffee’. I could fly there in the morning and return the same night, after our session. I declined. I was thinking of the gigolo. He had visited my brother and had started to cry like a little boy. I was thinking of the life I had lost, and the feeling of devastation grew day by day. In retrospect, I now know that to change our life we must shut the door to the past and walk away without looking back. But who can do that without flinching?

I took a step back. I sent an email to Master X, saying I did not believe that our relationship had any prospects. He took it calmly. He was a man without much passion, and I suspect his sexual prowess was also non-existent. Totally unsuitable for me.

Poor Master P was handling it better than everyone else involved in this circus I had created. I had sent him all my writings on my recent experiences. I don’t know what had urged me to bare my soul in front of him.

He sent me the following email:

‘Thank you for the writing, it is marvellous. Alpha and X and even humble P are quite something. This is what Americans do with their storms too. They give them names like Emily, Rita, Katrina. And when the storms continue to come relentlessly and they run out of names, they go Greek, you know: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and so on. Keep going, girl. And when you reach the letter Z, if in all the daze of having reached your destination you happen to think of me, even if I am only an initial to you, remember this: there are no shortcuts to a place that is worth a damn. May your journey be long and joyful.’

It was obvious he did not think much of me. And why should he? I had taken a romantic idea, a philosopher’s musings on achieving transcendence through passion, through the perfect union between two people, and I had turned it into a cheap, carnal joyride.

What a fool I was! What a failure!

I returned to my daily chores and tried to forget.

‘This is chicken Milanese,’ I announced to the kids at lunchtime. ‘Grandma’s recipe.’

‘This is great, Mum!’ Mona exclaimed with her mouth stuffed.

‘Will we stop having pizza every day? I am kind of bored with it,’ Annie ventured. I kissed her on the head. Her hair was blond and soft. She remained my baby, although she was already fourteen.

‘No more pizza, guys. I promise.’

The kids were right. I had neglected them long enough. I had to return to life.

That day I started playing the piano again, feeling so many mixed things which I could not express in words. I had not played the piano in years. I felt ashamed for having neglected both the piano and the kids.

‘Hey, Mum,’ Alex said. ‘This sounds good. What is it?’ He played the guitar, and he was always interested in music.

‘It is Schubert’s Serenade. It is not a difficult piece to play but I cannot quite manage the feeling. *Dolce espressivo*, it says. With sweet expression. What is sweet expression? I don’t get it.’

‘Can’t help you there,’ he said. ‘I don’t know either.’

Wonderful. I was not much different from my adolescent son in maturity of emotion. But internal changes had already begun to happen. There was still hope.

I started spending more time with Alice. With the gigolo gone, I had lots of free time on my hands, having been spared four or five dismal fucks a day.

‘I am coming to see you tonight. Will you be in?’ A quick text to announce my visit was all it took.

‘Come on over! I’ve got the booze, you bring the munchies.’

Alice lived in a small apartment in the centre of Thessaloniki, within walking distance from my flat. I enjoyed living downtown. The streets were brightly lit and full of people, the shop windows sported elegant clothes and Italian shoes, and the corner cafés were always busy and smelled of cappuccino. For a period of economic recession, everything still looked glamorous. I walked down Tsimiski Street, then made a right turn on Hagia Sophia Street, past the palm trees that defiantly survived every cold winter, and I was there.

Alice opened the door and kissed me. She was like a breeze, grinning widely over nothing. She had decorated her place tastefully, with bright red curtains hanging at her balcony doors and large cushions on the floor for lounging around.

‘Do you like the Republic?’ she asked. That was her favourite radio station, playing ethnic music from Ethiopia and other African countries.

I sure did. I gave her the bags with the munchies, then sat on one of the cushions on the floor.

‘I have prepared rakomelo,’ she said. ‘Shall we start with that?’

I nodded eagerly. I loved warm raki with honey; it resembled gluhwein. With the drinks served and the crisps, popcorn, and cheese cubes in small bowls, we were both happy as princesses in their red-curtained palace.

‘So how is life now the bozo is gone?’ she said.

‘It is getting better. I can sleep at nights.’

‘And the loverboys in Athens? Any news from them?’ She laughed.

‘Well, it is all finished. They were unsuitable for the role, don’t you think? Not that I have given up, mind you. I do not need little moments of happiness. I need the big thing, the greatest imaginable... I don’t know what. You do understand, don’t you?’

‘Can’t say that I do. Not quite.’ She frowned, taking small sips of the hot rakomelo.

‘If you ask people what they want out of life, they will say they want to have *a good time*. This is a sad answer. Mediocrity is not a worthy goal. Do you want to have a mediocre life, Alice?’ I was livid, furious at humanity. Furious at Alice, too.

‘I think you will soon grow out of it,’ she said, trying to blow her fringe out of her eyes. ‘I just can’t believe that you would want to live like a slave. Do you really want to obey a man, sexually serve him, be his property? Ask for permission for the smallest thing, even to have your hair cut? This is despicable!’

‘Oh, forget it!’

She was not ready to understand, so I let it go. It did not matter one bit. I knew what I wanted and that was enough. We sat on the cushions on the floor, next to each other, and made plans for the summer. The future seemed glorious and bright. We wanted to make a grand journey, like Thelma and Louise. We would take my good old jeep, which was on its way to becoming a relic, open the map and choose a route through small, quirky towns in the Greek countryside.

‘But you must not drink too much,’ I said, ‘because you go crazy and leave me on my own, going away with the first idiot that seems fuckable.’

She laughed. Even the idea turned her on. After the fourth glass of rakomelo, we forgot everything, put on some lipstick and hit the road. Our favourite pubs were near the White Tower: Flu, De Facto, The Bar – and that dark, forbidden one that had no name, on Koromila Street. The same scene unfolded there as usual: she had too much to drink and being so pretty she did not have any trouble finding a guy who wanted to take her home. She left me alone, kissing me goodbye with a smacking sound next to my ear. Thanks a lot, sis.

I returned home drunk and alone and slept in my lonely bed with Junior, my cat. He was a large ginger cat, cuddly beyond belief. Junior moved into my bedroom the very first night of the gigolo’s departure. He always slept on my pillow now, with one of his front paws resting on my head, as if he were protecting me, warding off the years of loneliness that would ensue.

One evening, Alice and I were together again in her flat. We were already quite drunk, I think, because Alice was giggling uncontrollably. Mulatu Astatke, an Ethiopian musician, was playing on Radio Republic. A pleasant buzz was humming in my head. Suddenly, Alice stopped giggling and looked at me quizzically. I don't know what was going on in her mind, but she leaned closer and kissed me. It was a proper kiss on the mouth. I closed my eyes and felt her tongue warm and moist on my tongue. Outside, in the small balcony, the half-dead plants were being shaken by the Vardaris wind in the coldest winter we had seen in years, while we, filled with hot rakomelo, had opened a secret door we had not even known existed.

We felt awkward afterwards, tried to put it behind us. Nothing had happened, everything was just fine, business as usual. Soon enough, we put on some lipstick and hit the road in search of superficial pleasures, just to fill the emptiness of the night. And yet, something had truly happened between us. I could feel it, sense it. It was as if a totally unexpected chord reverberated in the cold streets of Thessaloniki with an almost unreal echo. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

Later, much later, I would hear the echo of that night again. But it was still too early for me to understand what it was. Our erotic life is like jazz. We must cultivate our sense of hearing, before developing the ability to enjoy good jazz. Likewise, we are not born ready to delve into the erotic. It takes patience and perseverance. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some training in the hands of those who know the craft.

In March, my family had my father's bones exhumed. Seven years had passed from Dad's death and the grave had to be emptied to receive a new occupant, as is the custom in Greece. My brother and my uncle undertook the difficult task. They collected the bones and the skull carefully, washed them and placed them in a small metal box. We set off one Sunday morning, a procession of three cars, for Dad's faraway village where he had grown up. The village cemetery awaits all the villagers who have gone away to seek a better fortune. Everyone will return home eventually in a small metal box. It was a very poor mountain village and few people still lived there. Just a few dilapidated houses built around the central square with the ancient sycamore tree. A coffee shop that opened a few hours every day. A small waterfall, a river, a bridge made of stone. The smell of sheep in the air, flowers, moist leaves. When the last villagers die, it will be a ghost village, with empty houses and a

cemetery full of bones.

On top of the hill, to the north, the *City of the Dead* overlooks the village. That is what is written on a rusty sign over the metal gate. Why the sign? Why the gate? Who wants to come in? And who will ever come out?

Some old men and women followed us. They had seen us come up the path to the cemetery. *Are you his daughter? You take after him. Are you the son? The wife? May you live long and remember him.* Things devoid of true substance and purpose. *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.*

The sun was barely warm. A cold breeze shook the branches of the olive tree standing above our family grave. The bones of my uncle and my aunt were there too. Some framed photos stood on the marble. We wandered clumsily among the dead, a bunch of people holding a metal box, turning this way and that around the grave, not knowing where to stand. An old priest came along, the skin on his face darkened from the wind and the sun. A modest ceremony took place. Someone drew aside the marble lid that covered the crypt. Someone placed the box with my father's bones next to the boxes containing his brother and his sister. The crypt was shut again. All finished. Silence. Mum and I were crying. The cicadas in the trees were singing their maddening song. We are alive, they sang. Life never dies, dies, dies. *Zzzzz...*

I buried the dead and returned to my life. It was so short, so ephemeral. I would have to live it as beautifully and as fully as was humanly possible. No one comes back from the dead, there are no second chances.

I had not lost all hope yet, but I knew I was not doing so well. If only someone could help me. *Do you exist? Are you out there?*

THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD

*It is at this point, so difficult dialectically,
that the way swings off
for everyone who knows what it means to think,
and to think existentially; which is something very different
from sitting at a desk and writing about what one has never done,
something very different from writing de omnibus dubitandum...
(S. Kierkegaard)*

Before long, D woke up again. The first three disasters had not been enough. She said she was unhappy and lonely and needed to find a Master. It was spring and the streets of Thessaloniki were filled with children and young people, laughter and song.

My ad kept bringing new prospects. The next candidate made the trip from Athens to Thessaloniki. They had started to seek me out. How flattering! We spoke for a while on the phone. He was an optician from Piraeus, the port city forming part of Athens. I consented to a meeting with him. What did I have to lose?

Our meeting takes place in front of the White Tower, Saturday evening at seven. I am wearing my violet contact lenses and a purple dress, and I have polished my nails in the same colour. The words of Elytis, the poet, come to mind:

*I walk in thorns in the dark
of what's to happen and what has
with my only weapon my only defence
my nails purple like cyclamens.*

He recognises me from the photos I have sent him. We greet each other. I am the sadist, are you the masochist? Nice to meet you. Likewise. The universe bends its little head towards us and looks on with curiosity.

I am quite disappointed with his physique. He is thin and short, a minuscule little man. He is wearing a beige corduroy jacket, a pink shirt, and glasses. His face is not half bad. We go to De Facto for a cup of coffee. On the way there, I realise that his clothes give off a musky, unpleasant smell. Perhaps he got sweaty during the flight. Or maybe he keeps the jacket in moth balls and has not had the chance to air it properly. Everything is possible in the land of the ultimate pleasure.

De Facto is a café during the day and a bar at night. It looks like a Viennese bistro, with a large bar to the left, on an elevated area accessed via two or three steps, and a few tables scattered here and there below. The walls are covered with posters about artistic

events. Everyone who is anyone in the city has been here at least once: musicians, poets, writers, lawyers, doctors, and journalists.

The little man and I sit near the bar. We chat, drink our coffee, then I order a glass of wine. I need this. Frustration is approaching again on swift legs. And yet, I do not stop in my tracks, not even for a second. D has invaded me. She is hungry, she wants to feed. I step aside, giving her the space that she needs. What is the worst thing that can happen? I might hurt a little. Or more than a little. I need to do this if I want to live. I want so much to live.

The waitress brings us a side dish for my wine: sliced cucumbers and carrots in vinegar.

‘I hate carrots,’ I say laughing.

He feeds them all to me, one by one.

‘Come on, one more,’ he says each time.

Just as we are getting ready to go, a sweet gypsy child selling packs of tissues approaches our table. I search in my purse for some loose change, but the little man pulls out a ten euro note! If only it were that easy to become a Master, I think to myself.

We get up to go. I am carrying my red beauty case that is filled with sex toys. I am much more experienced now and I have purchased the instruments required for the ultimate pleasure. We walk hand in hand towards Egnatia Hotel, leaving behind us at every step the intense odour of his clothes. It is still in the balance if it is sweat or moth balls. I pray silently that it is the latter.

He has booked a suite, thinking perhaps that this weekend must stay in our memory for ever. Neither he nor I know at this point that it is not forgetting that hurts, but remembering.

We take the elevator and reach the penthouse suite. The decoration is very much to my liking. Reproductions of paintings by Gauguin hang on the walls. Above the double bed there is the one with the two Tahitian girls carrying flowers and fruit. In the small lounge, above the sofa, hangs my favourite one: *The Spirit of the Dead Watching*. It depicts a girl lying face down, stark naked, her magnificent dark buttocks in the foreground. Her face is a mask of fear. A woman dressed in black is watching over her with her dead eyes. Maybe she is a symbol of the girl’s demons, the obsessions of her life. It is equally plausible that this is Gauguin’s young wife and she is afraid because the painter is approaching her. Gauguin was said to be violent with his women. I cannot possibly imagine a better painting for this hotel suite, where I am going to bring to the surface, even if for a little while, my own demons.

I look at the paintings, chat about this and that, and stall as much as I possibly can. I

have another glass of wine from the suite's available drinks. I need this, to strengthen my resolve. Poor D. This will not be easy.

The little man asks me to prepare the jacuzzi. We both get in the bathtub, and he asks me to bathe him. I bathe him as well as I can and shampoo his hair too. He may not be my type but at least the sweaty odour will be washed off. Unfortunately, the minute we exit the bathtub, his body begins to exude the same smell as before. Yet D insists that we stay. Oh, why does she not get up and go? The stronger she becomes, the more obstinate she is. She will not stop until she immerses me completely in the night of her desires.

Wrapped in the hotel's bathrobes, we sit on the sofa under *The Spirit of the Dead Watching*. The little man wants to have a look at the instruments of the ultimate pleasure. I bring them out of the beauty case and show them to him one by one. Butt plugs, a nasty studded leather strap with small tassels, handcuffs, ropes, a metal anal probe, small clamps purchased at the hardware store. He picks out only one thing. I swallow hard. His eyes are shiny now and I am a little scared. But what good will fear do?

Without any pretence at pointless preliminaries, he removes my bathrobe and places me naked on my knees on the armchair opposite the sofa. I take my position without much fuss and fix my gaze at the empty wall in front of me. Outside the window, the city noises are becoming increasingly distant. Egnatia Street is full of cars. A street vendor is selling something or other and is advertising his merchandise. The noises retreat as I descend towards the place of my destination. A single word echoes in the room: *count*. I am not even sure who has said the word. I do as the voice says.

The first stroke lands on my buttocks. *One!* The leather tassels are wrapped around my body and strike my belly. *Two!* I lose my poise, I'm on the verge of falling. *Three!* Even harder. I moan and writhe. *Four!* Before I have the chance to think that this is a man who hates women the next one lands on me. *Five!* My body is on fire. I dive headfirst into the cushions and dig my nails into the soft velvet. This armchair is my shelter. I try to disappear in it. Doesn't he see? No, he does not. He keeps going, relentlessly. I beg him to slow down, uttering a somewhat incomprehensible series of supplications. *Please Sir please it is too much Sir please I cannot Sir*. But he will not stop. And because D is obstinate and she will not get up and go, after a point, and for some strange reason, nothing matters anymore. I do not particularly care, having gone past the point of caring. It is as if I am not there. I even start to enjoy this state of affairs. It is so strange and unlikely, but the little man is dominating me. I am O and I am at Roissy and I am being punished. I count one by one the steps of my descent into darkness, while with my inner voice I recite like a mantra:

*My only weapon my only defence
my nails purple like cyclamens.*

Maybe poetry will save me. Maybe the words will be like the breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left behind so they would find their way back home. I must maintain some sort of connection to reality before I get utterly lost and can never return.

When the little man gets tired, he stops and helps me get up from the armchair. Instead of a consoling act, he asks me to lick the sweat off his brow. I do it without a second thought. This is so unreal that I am unable to protest. If I did, I would have to jump out the window. Anything else would be inadequate. Gauguin's Tahitian girls stare at me with contempt. Or is it pity?

The little man drags me to the bed and sodomises me. He is a good lover. He pushes himself into me and when he reaches the end, he pushes a little deeper. I am in a most peculiar mood, passive, almost happy, turning this way and that, eyes wide open, oblivious to my own torment.

After the act, he lights a cigarette and orders room service. We lie in bed naked next to each other. When our coffee arrives, he begins to play with the folds of my genitals. He is harsh, pulling at my flesh and hurting me in the process. Not on purpose, more like a little boy pulling at the wings of an insect, to see how it will react. When I try to close my legs he slaps me on the inside of my thighs, always at the same spot.

I bear it all with a nonchalance that amazes me. But it is not over yet. The little man drags me to the bathroom, makes me kneel in front of him in the bathtub and asks me to go beyond my limit. I look pleadingly into his eyes. I look at his eyes, then I look at his flaccid penis in front of my face. I am supposed to ask for it myself. There is no way I can do this. I cannot, I will not. How can I say the words? I do not have these words in me.

But sometimes the inevitable raises its formidable head and then we run out of choices. All my steps have led me with mathematical precision to this bathtub, on my knees, in front of this little man and his penis.

Then D takes over and says the words. She transcends the limit, we cross over together. I open my mouth and accept the little man's urine in me.

'Drink it all,' he says. 'Don't waste a single drop.'

Surprisingly, I am still myself and not someone else. How strange. I feel comfortable in my skin.

After a few days, and as our telephone conversations continued, I decided I did not wish to see the little man again. This was not the way to happiness, and I knew it. I had allowed this to happen, paying the price for an intense experience.

In an unexpected act of cruelty, instead of telling him how I felt, I sent him this written account of our weekend together. How terrible it must be to erect a mirror in front of someone and say: *this is you*.

At first, he disappeared, stopped all further contact. I destroyed him, I thought. But two days later, my phone rang, and the word *Sir* came up on the screen. He was gentle, spoke softly. He said the only thing that bothered him was the way I had chosen to end it. And if I ever needed anything, even if we were never to repeat what we had done, he would be there for me.

I will never know if he meant it because I never saw him again.

THOMAS

*Don't you know
that a midnight hour comes
when everyone has to take off his mask?*
(S. Kierkegaard)

In April I found the forum. After three months of wallowing in the mud of my somewhat murky desires, the time had come to study this BDSM business, to try and understand it better. If I were lucky, I might even find a Master that would be worth the time of day. The other site, where I had placed my ad a few months before, had proved useless. But at least it had brought me Thomas.

Thomas was a handsome, lonely man, who believed firmly that he was the least desirable person in the world. We met one afternoon at the gate of the church of Hagia Sophia. He was standing at the kerb, looking anxiously around, trying to pick me out of the crowd.

‘Thomas Polygon?’ I asked.

He jumped nervously.

‘Dora Salonica?’

We measured each other with suspicious eyes. He was around thirty, well dressed, well groomed. A fair complexion, as if he had been living for years chained up in a dungeon; green eyes, with specks of gold in the middle; blond eyebrows; shaved head (later he confided in me he shaved it because he could not stand the sight of his thinning hair).

I thought he looked fabulous. A softer version of Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*.

‘Shall we go to the Social Bar?’ I asked.

‘Anything you want, sweetheart,’ he said. I think in the last fifteen years I must have heard this same phrase from his lips a million times.

He presented himself to me as a dominant man. *If this man is dominant, I thought, I am Yuri Gagarin.*

We chatted for a couple of hours and got to know each other a little better. He had never had a normal relationship with a girl, he said. Too shy? Possibly. Low self-esteem? Definitely. Thomas was a first-class masochist who liked to visit a professional Dominatrix, a different one each time. He would pay to get whipped and crawl at their feet, begging them to stop. In this unlikely, eccentric man, I discovered a nobility of soul the like of which I had never encountered before in my entire life, and I probably never will again.

‘Would you like to come back to my place?’ I said at some point, to which he agreed.

The kids would not be home until much later and we would have the place to ourselves.

My apartment was a couple of blocks away. We sat in the living room, and I brought us a couple of drinks. We drank vodka with orange juice that day, my drink of choice.

‘This place has character,’ he said, whistling in admiration. He was impressed by the baroque decoration, the heavy carpets, the fireplace with the marble mantelpiece, my grandmother’s antique piano in the corner, a wall tapestry depicting Venice, the large crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The flat had been given to me by my parents after my divorce, to help me with raising my children as a single mother. I owned nothing else in the world, but at least I lived in a beautiful penthouse apartment in the centre of Thessaloniki.

‘Have you ever been with a dominant woman without having to pay?’ I asked.

‘No, never,’ he said. ‘I don’t think any woman would go with me for free. But I came close once with a dominant man.’

‘Are you bisexual?’ I asked, surprised because he had not mentioned it before in our conversation.

‘I am not sure,’ he said. ‘I think it does not matter much, so long as there is domination and submission. They say a slave has no gender. Nor does a Master. BDSM is not about sex anyway.’

‘What an interesting idea,’ I said. ‘Did you enjoy it with the dominant man?’

‘We had arranged to meet in the town of Grevena. It was a bit far, but he sounded so eager. I took the bus and went. A two-hour ride.’

‘What did he do to you?’

Thomas avoided my eyes.

‘He never showed up. There was no return bus at that time. I booked a room at a small roadside motel. It was cold up there on the mountain and I did not have any night clothes with me. I slept in my vest and boxer shorts and froze to death. I dislike sleeping with my socks on, so I had to warm my feet in my hands.’

He said all that almost without any feeling in his voice, as if he had resigned himself to an unavoidable misery. My heart went out to him. That is an image I will always carry with me, this gentle, lonely man with his frozen feet in his hands.

I made up my mind. Everyone deserves a little happiness.

‘Come here,’ I said. ‘Enough drinking and enough storytelling!’ I hooked my index finger in his mouth and dragged him to the bedroom by his bottom teeth. He followed obediently making funny noises.

‘Take all your clothes off and lie on your back,’ I said. ‘I will be on top. Don’t even

think about changing positions. And you will do your best to please me. Got it?’

‘Yes, Mistress.’

Everything went swimmingly. Thomas was good in bed and had a nice, big penis. There was no violence that day, but I think he enjoyed the staging of the act. I was a little surprised that I could function so well in a dominant role, but I was only giving Thomas what he wanted.

From that day onwards, although we never repeated that first session, Thomas and I became best of friends. I always told him everything, without any fear of being judged. I think he also found in me the unconditional acceptance that was missing from his life.

Thomas was the one who brought me to the forum, where the Greek BDSM community lived and breathed. Most community members lived in Athens, but there were quite a few from Thessaloniki too. The forum provided a safe place where they could network and discuss their kinks while enjoying the anonymity of the Internet. The bravest and most determined among them met once a month.

I loved the forum. The first thing I did was to post my adventures under Personal Experiences. My initiation with Alpha, the whipping by Master P, the sugar Daddy and his leather belt, the little man with the funny-smelling clothes and the sadistic streak. Here I am, those stories said. Can’t you see me? I am searching for myself and cannot find me. Help!

Or maybe the message said: Ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment only, here is the echo of a world I visited for a while, just like another tourist with a fancy camera, taking pictures of all the recommended sites and never venturing away from the beaten path.

Or maybe the message said: I am D. I follow my dreams to the end. Notice how stubborn and brave I am. Enter at own risk.

It might have been saying many more things. I was still too naïve, too romantic, to understand what the hell I was saying.

What I did not know was that someone was reading me. Someone was reading me very closely indeed.

PART TWO
SERENDIPITY

MORPHEUS

*It is the eternal law of love
that beings are born for one another
only at the first instant of love.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

From: Morpheus@zeromail.com
Sent: Thursday, 12 April, 2007, 19:04
To: dora_salonica@zeromail.com
Subject: Bravo!

> *Your stories are very clever!*
> *Bravo!*
> *Morpheus*

Morpheus was one of the founding members of the forum. I read some of the things he had written about BDSM, and I formed the impression he was experienced and knowledgeable, albeit a little cranky. He had posted some of his own experiences too, and the way he presented himself in them was very similar to the way I saw myself. His writings contained a good dose of cynicism, the ability to laugh at himself, a good analytical mind, as well as a pinch of wounded sensitivity. If I were a man, those were the stories I might have written and those were the things I might have done. And if Morpheus were a woman, perhaps he would have been D.

His email to me surprised me and flattered me. I replied right away, thanking him for his kind words. Then I asked him for a favour:

‘Would you mind taking a quick look at the rest of my writings, Sir? The title is, *D and the Quest for the Ultimate Pleasure.*’

This was just a pretext, of course. I was not really interested in ever publishing what I considered mere pornography, written solely to promote myself to my prospective Masters. I was not looking for a publisher but for a relationship with someone who might know more about BDSM than I did – someone ‘local’ to show me around, the cobbled alleyways and the underground joints forbidden to tourists, all those strange places I could never find by myself. I did not want the tour with the pink fluffy handcuffs. I wanted the real thing.

To my surprise, he agreed to read my stuff. That was the day this correspondence began with the most mysterious man I have ever come across, in the strange land where I had stumbled, almost inadvertently.

I sent the first draft to Morpheus that same day. His reply was somewhat baffling. He advised me to never attach Word files to my emails if I wanted to protect my anonymity.

Such was my lack of knowledge regarding online communication that I did not understand what he meant. And why did he think I should care if my identity was revealed? I was already willing to go and meet him in some dirty warehouse if he asked me to, kneel on the cement in front of him, take him in my mouth. Why should I be scared? I had already proven – mostly to myself – that I was afraid of nothing and nobody. I pointed this out to him with all the indignation I could muster.

‘The worst vice is giving advice, Sir. Just tell me why you think my stories are good and let me worry about protecting my anonymity.’

He replied within minutes. And we continued our communication in this unlikely manner, through emails.

>You cannot even begin to imagine my vices. If you did, you would run away faster than your router could carry you.

>I never said your stories were good. I merely said they were clever. Take what I give you and be thankful for it. I am not always that nice.

>I suspect you grew up like a little princess, with a daddy who always gave you what you asked for – not unlike the other princesses in here. Big mistake if you ask me. Spare the rod and – you know how it goes.

‘I resent the fact that men like you tend to treat women like me with deliberate indifference. Pretending you know it all.’

>Men like me? A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti. Hannibal Lecter, Silence of the Lambs. In my opinion, an excellent BDSM film. Don't you agree, my little Clarice?

‘I am not afraid of you. Boredom is the only thing I am truly afraid of.’

>Boredom is a privilege (and the curse) of the bourgeoisie. You strike me as the perfect little bourgeois fool.

‘Thank you for the advice on sending files, but Word is convenient. Besides, you never know, I may secretly wish to have my identity exposed.’

>Why? Are you a serial killer? In the best possible scenario, I would say you are a serial thrill-seeker, and in the worst, just a serial writer. Judging by the stories you published on the forum (I could have sworn a man had written them), I think you would love a public flagellation.

>But Alexander, Simona and Anna might be of a different opinion, now or in a few years, don't you think? Since they cannot be asked, you had better be careful. That is all I was trying to say.

>You see, sometimes kneeling is not enough. Have you ever crawled on your hands and knees like a true penitent?

No, no, no, no, no! My hands began to shake uncontrollably. He knew the names of my children. *He knew the names of my children!*

A terrible violation. My other life, the real one, had just been ripped wide open. That was something I had never felt before: sheer terror.

I tried to understand what had happened and looked more carefully at what I had sent him. I found it. It was not surprising that he knew who I was. My full name was written on the properties of the Word file I had sent him. He found all the rest by himself. It is amazing what one can find on the Internet.

I could not even begin to imagine what was awaiting me. One thing was certain: I was now travelling properly – not on the little train from Thessaloniki to Athens, in and out of the tunnels of Bralos, but on a mystery train with an unclear destination. There are some places few people will ever have the chance to explore. For who would want to find themselves in a nightmare, unable to wake up?

And how could I stop trembling with fear, when there was nothing and nobody who could save me from what I had wished for, more than anything in the world?

I resented the fact that he had such a low opinion of me. I was not the spoiled brat that he thought I was. It was true I had grown up in a well-to-do family and it was also true that my parents had never managed to teach me any discipline. But I had come to know a lot about hardship. After my divorce, I found myself with three children who were totally dependent on me. Their father had got married again and had another two children to take care of. My

family's money was all gone, because we had spent it all, not realising that the days of plenty would one day be over. I had lived through difficult times, but I had never given up. And I had stood by my children in ways no one would ever know – not even the children themselves.

I blurted all this out to Morpheus in my next email. And to prove to him that he was wrong, I told him about something that had happened some years before, when the money problems had begun. My son was still little, in primary school. One day he told me he was ashamed to go to school because there was a hole in one of his shoes. I could not even pay the electric bill that month, let alone buy new shoes for him. I asked my mother for a small loan, but she was also waiting for her pension at the end of the month. Dad had just passed away. I was divorced and we were all alone now.

I mustered up my courage and contacted an escort service advertising in the paper. I knew very well what an escort service was. If my son had not said he was ashamed to go to school, I would not have considered the possibility of doing that. But that was where I drew the line: my son should never have to be ashamed. I was going to swap his shame for mine.

I met the pimp at one of the cafés near the White Tower. He was tall with greasy, shoulder-length, blondish hair, and rode a large motorcycle. I negotiated with him my new part-time job as a prostitute with a calmness that astonished me, as if I were playing a role in one of Bunuel's films. We agreed upon my fees, this much for this, that much for that, and we discussed the procedure we would follow, with him as the mediator and me as the product. I asked for a little time to think about it and told him I would phone him when I made up my mind. In the end I decided not to go through with it. I couldn't.

'You see, Sir, not everyone is capable of everything after all.'

But I would never be able to explain how I felt when that man opened my mouth to check if my teeth were real.

'As for *The Silence of the Lambs*, I am not Clarice, and I hope you are not Dr Lecter. Clarice was a person of principle. Me, well, now you know. I'm just a slut.'

I refrained from calling Morpheus a name, though I had one, right on the tip of my tongue.

Morpheus replied that same evening. I remained glued to my laptop, so that I could answer him almost immediately.

>Clarice was a woman who thought she knew. Lecter was a man who knew it is impossible to know and could live with the knowledge of his ignorance. I think we are very much like them.

‘I am similar to Clarice in only one way: I am a deeply unhappy person, like most people who lead lives of quiet desperation. But you probably know that better than I do.’

>Wow! She’s alive... almost kicking...

‘If you did not think my stories are good, you would not be here.’

>I suppose it has not crossed your mind that I might be here for you and not for your stories?

‘See how I reply to everything and in order? My thoughts are so well organised... But how does that help us when it comes to BDSM?’

>You will have something to deconstruct when the time comes. Some women tremble and drool and mumble words without meaning. It would be interesting to see what happens to you.

‘I am neither a serial thrill-seeker nor a serial writer. Why would you think that of me? You must be very disappointed with the women you’ve met in your life. And well done for finding the names of my children, but it will take much more than that to break me.’

>I did not try to break you. If there is ever a reason for me to break you, you will know it. I enjoy many kinks, but using the children is not one of them. If I really wanted to get under your skin, it would not be difficult at all. I have never heard such a silent scream as yours – not since Edvard Munch.

>That is what I meant by ‘clever’. Your stories were speaking to yourself, in the hope that someone might hear you. My stories are exactly the opposite: they are speaking to others in the hope I might hear me, at last.

Though I had read his stories – they were superb – I had no idea what he was trying to say. Could it be he had trouble accepting who he was, *what* he was?

>It seems communication is not one of your talents. I am willing to bet that most men send you pictures of their humongous dicks. I pointed out something which could have harmed you in the long run. And how did you react when a stranger showed he cared a little about you? With humility and gratitude? Of course not. Two aggressive emails, one after the other. Even a stray dog will not bite the hand that feeds it.

>Go on, try once more. This time with feeling.

‘Are you giving ME a lesson? You talk about feelings to me, a woman who follows her obsessions with such self-sacrifice?’

>I find obsessions tiresome. These days my only concern is people. Specific people.

And, as if dangling this bait in front of me were not enough, he finished me off, making love to me with words. No, not making love. Fucking me, hard.

>I am going abroad tomorrow on business. You can write to me, but I will not have a Greek keyboard at my disposal. I will respond when I return next week. Have you learned to write without expecting a quick reply? Or rather, to expect one, while knowing you will not receive it? You know, communication is not a clitoris – five or six good rubs with your fingers, the fantasy of a thumb up your ass, a couple of dirty words, a fingernail lightly scratching the hood, and bang – orgasm achieved. Has anyone taught you the value of patience? Let's see.

What a punch in the gut! Could he be the One?

Possible. Unlikely, but possible.

But was he right? I started to wonder. Did that silent scream have to do with something noble in me? My obsession had driven me out of my apathy. But where could I possibly find someone who would inspire passion in me? More importantly, was I capable of experiencing passion? I was a forty-year-old woman who drank too much and spent her days doing the kids' laundry while at nights dreamed of being tortured by a man without a face.

As my self-doubt grew, I realised that in his last email Morpheus had expressed the wish to see what his little Clarice looked like.

>Will I continue to read manifestations of your exhibitionism, or do I get to see some flesh?

Fine, I was game. Yet when I asked him for his photo, he laughed it off:

>Would you like me to show you my nipple so that we are even?

His nipple? Oh, Morpheus, give me a break! Still, I did as he asked, and sent him some photos, in the hope that he would reply once more before he went away.

The first photo depicted the epitome of maturity (i.e., my large breasts), the second one my Tahitian buttocks, and the third one my face. I knew perfectly well that I was not unattractive. Nor was I stupid, even if I did stupid things.

>I could not care less about your photos.

Then why the fuck did he ask for them? The man was driving me crazy!

>I am incapable of two-dimensional fantasies. I enjoy feeling a woman's skin under my fingers, touching her hair, holding her in my arms as she trembles and purrs after an

orgasm. Did you really think I would suddenly get the urge to fuck you just by looking at your photos? What kind of a man do you think I am?

He finished by rubbing in my face my recent transgressions.

>I once saw a fifty-six-year-old woman being urinated on in a bathtub. She could not get up afterwards. Not a pretty sight. I don't think old Frankie had that in mind when he sang, 'I did it my way'.

Bastard! I was ready to rip his throat apart with my teeth. And yet, despite my anger, I could not stop thinking about him. I kept writing endless emails to him, instead of doing my work at the office or taking care of my kids at home. He did not answer. He must have been away, just as he had said he would be.

What else could I do? I waited for his return, pretending I did not notice I was being taught the value of patience.

THE LAST VANILLA LOVER

*I must first know her
and her entire intellectual background
before beginning my assault.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

With Morpheus away, life had come to a standstill. Then something happened.

The gigolo called me. He said he wanted to meet me for one last time. I agreed. I felt slightly guilty for breaking up with him. We went to De Facto and had a good, long chat over a cup of coffee – which I paid for, of course.

‘I am sorry about everything,’ he said. ‘I want us to get back together. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.’

His hair had grown long, he now wore it in a ponytail. He looked impossibly handsome – and young. The eight-year difference between us was strikingly apparent.

‘I’ve got to be honest with you,’ I said, proud of my newly found maturity. ‘I cannot go back to a vanilla relationship. That’s not what I want.’

He went pale. He hated losing.

‘Why vanilla? It does not have to be vanilla. I can give you what you want. I will keep you on a leash like a dog. You will love it. You want to be branded? I will brand you.’

One of the waiters pretended to be cleaning a table near us so he could hear what we were saying. I glared at him and he went away.

‘Let’s go back to my place,’ he said. ‘I’m renting a small flat in Hagios Dimitrios. It’s nice.’

‘I cannot. Sorry.’

‘For old times’ sake.’

‘Sorry.’

He seemed genuinely sad. To make amends, I offered to drive him back to his place and he accepted.

During the ride he remained silent, brooding.

‘It’s here,’ he said at last. It was a tiny street with old, dilapidated apartment buildings. I stopped the car in the middle of the street; there was no traffic to speak of in that part of the city.

‘For the last time, will you come up with me?’

I shook my head.

I never saw it coming. He hit me once, then a second time, right on the face. I didn’t

even have the chance to raise my hands, to protect myself. Then he was out of the jeep.

‘You cunt!’ he screamed. ‘I hate you!’

He ran away like the coward that he was, disappearing into one of the buildings.

I was stunned. I had forgotten the violence of his character. I leaned over, pulled the passenger door shut, and drove away. I could already feel my left eye puffing up. Crying tears of rage and hitting the steering wheel with my fists, I went on driving until I reached the centre.

The first thing I did when I got back home was to write to Morpheus. I sat on the bed holding a bag of frozen peas to my swollen eye, and wrote down my new adventure, this time from the realm of non-consensual violence. This was a crossroads of sorts, a new chapter, the violence that had been imprinted on my face symbolic of a phase that had ended. I was at the threshold of a new life that was still vaguely shaped and somewhat daunting. But I was leaving the vanilla world in a spectacular manner. Beaten, abused.

Never again.

Thomas came to visit while I was convalescing. He brought me my favourite biscuits, from Cookie Man.

‘It’s not too bad,’ he said. ‘The swelling will go away in a couple of days. You should never be alone with that vicious man again. But forget about him. Tell me about the new Dom from the forum.’

I laughed and I cried, munching on a cinnamon biscuit. I enjoyed the company of Thomas, especially since I could discuss Morpheus with him as much as I wanted. Thomas read all the emails we had exchanged until then, which I had already incorporated in the book. He found them fascinating.

‘I think you might have found your Master, sweetheart,’ he said. That made me happy.

Alice visited the following day.

‘Oh, the fucking bastard!’ she cried out when she saw my face. She went to the fridge and brought out a dollop of butter which she proceeded to apply on the bruise. ‘This will soften the skin and help the swelling go down.’ I let her do what she wanted. I enjoyed her tenderness; besides, no one could really reason with Alice when she decided to do something.

I took a leave of absence from work for a week, so that I would not have to lie about my black eye. The kids, however, deserved to know the truth.

‘I should have known better,’ I said. ‘I should have never been alone with him in the car.’

‘Tell me where he lives!’ Alex shouted, forming a little fist with his right hand.

I managed to talk Alex out of it. Then I turned to the girls.

‘There has never been an abused woman in this family and there never will be,’ I said to the girls, trying to undo the damage done by my swollen face.

They nodded but looked dubious. I don’t think they held me in much esteem just then.

After taking care of all matters so bravely and beautifully, I engaged in a little internal dialogue. I had to abandon my obsessive ideas. D was still powerful and needy in me, and I had trouble keeping her at bay. But the time had come for some rebooting.

The first step was to acknowledge that I was not a woman who could possibly inspire passion in a man like Morpheus. I typed the last goodbye to him and sent it off.

‘And don’t you dare pity me,’ I said in the postscript, half blind and sobbing, feeling a most peculiar pain in my chest.

From: Morpheus@zeromail.com

Sent: Saturday, 21 April, 2007, 12:00

To: dora_salonica@zeromail.com

Subject: Serendipity

>*The only pity that ever crosses my mind when I think of you has to do with the possible ending of serendipity: a word that can describe your adventures.*

>*Morpheus*

Serendipity?

Wikipedia offered me the meaning of the word: *making happy discoveries by chance*. Apparently, there was an old Persian tale, ‘The Three Princes of Serendip’, in which the three princes were ‘always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things which they were not in quest of.’

I recognised the accuracy of the word. Hadn’t the same thing happened to me? And wasn’t Morpheus the most wonderful discovery that had come my way?

That email was sent to me in English. Morpheus must have still been abroad. He had taken the trouble to write to me, even from where he was, and that moved me. I replied immediately.

‘Our correspondence is so important to me, that I have stopped drinking. I do not need crutches anymore.’

How long would that last? I had no idea. But there was no reason any longer to try and escape from what I was experiencing. I wanted to remain sober and enjoy it.

‘Though I do not see any reason why we should ever meet.’

I said this mainly to get to him. I really wanted to meet him, but only if he wanted it too. On the other hand, I was afraid that meeting him might spoil everything. What more could we possibly do, he and I? Meet each other and play our respective roles? He had done well to ask only for humility and gratitude. I had nothing more to give.

>Whenever you mention the word crutches, I picture kicking them from under you, so you fall flat on your face.

The cynical, grumpy man was back! Oh joy!

>How fortuitous you have been given a black eye! At least you will now stay put for a while! You might even begin to grieve at last. So long as you know what you are grieving for.

Painful realisations were exploding inside my head. All the crystalized certainties inside me were collapsing, one by one. A shrink couldn't have done a better job.

That was the day the lessons began. Morpheus became my teacher, my mentor. My everything.

THE SACRED GAZE

*Don Quixote is the prototype
for a subjective madness,
in which the passion of inwardness
embraces a particular finite fixed idea.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

I received the next email from Morpheus while still nursing a black eye. This was the perfect remedy for taking my mind off my troubles.

He began with a brief introduction to communication according to Wittgenstein.

>Ludwig perceived soon enough the problem arising from human nature: we are imprisoned in a world of symbols. We call this prison, euphemistically, psyche. Ludwig found some comfort in the belief that if the symbols became clear and were paired correctly with their humble hosts (i.e. hosts of power / soldiers – hosts of potential / students), then the worlds that those symbols refer to would come closer to their symbols and the two separate entities might become one in the end. Today we know this is not true. This knowledge has brought us to the terrifying truth that true communication is simply impossible.

I must have been very stupid because I did not perceive any such terrifying truth at all. Evidently, he did. He was probably unable to communicate with common mortals, the main representative of whom, at that point, was me. I was still incapable of understanding that the unification of symbols with the things they represented would bring about the merging of fantasy and reality. In other words, I would really become D.

The lesson continued with Agamben's theory of the sacred. Morpheus said this might help me understand what was happening to me. Alas, I had never heard of Agamben.

>As the first communities gather around a fire, the human psyche seems to become preoccupied mainly with one thing: that which is sacred.

>But first, we need to talk about prohibitions. The creation of a community demands a big sacrifice: the prohibition of the ultimate pleasure – or jouissance, as is the proper term. Murder – the ultimate pleasure – must be prohibited if we want to co-exist with others. Why is murder the ultimate pleasure, you may ask. Simple. You bother me? I kill you. Am I bored? I kill you. Am I wondering whether I am alive or not? I kill you, just to see you die so that I will know the difference. When I am allowed to kill you, I have access to the ultimate pleasure. But without the prohibition of murder, there is no community; we are simply wolves.

If he wanted to kill people to achieve the ultimate pleasure, I was in real trouble. Maybe I was conversing with a serial killer, after all. Or maybe he was scaring me on purpose – so I might achieve *my* ultimate pleasure!

>People in the community begin to observe that there is now a surplus of pleasure. One can sit around all day long, practically doing nothing at all. And how do they solve this problem? Simple again: they increase the prohibitions. Civilisation begins to emerge. Civilisation is identical to survival: whoever is sitting around in a state of stupefaction will get eaten by lions in the blink of an eye.

>By the way – and I am sure the fact has not escaped you – biology does not allow a man to have more than one erection every twenty minutes. For women there are no biological limitations to pleasure. That is why it is easier for men to impose prohibitions. The twenty-minute interval in which pleasure is biologically impossible for men has led to the greater success of patriarchal communities. Matriarchal communities would have perished in the nearly permanent stupor of the women in charge.

Was it really twenty minutes for men? I looked it up. He was right. The waiting time between erections lasted an average of twenty minutes, with a few rare exceptions to the rule.

>The first prohibition has to do with incest: instead of a quick tumble in the hay with our own, now we must first communicate with others. The second prohibition has to do with the common use of women. This needs a more detailed analysis.

Ah yes! Now you are talking! I pricked up my ears...

>The symbolism behind marriage is that of a sacrifice. This is how a sacrifice works: the sacrificial animal is consecrated, which means that it no longer belongs to the community, but to God. Only after the ceremony, when the priest has desecrated the animal with his own hands, can the animal be enjoyed by the community: it can literally be eaten.

>In a similar way, the man who selects a woman removes her from the pleasure pool of the community. He renders her 'sacred'. In all civilisations, this demands a public ceremony. Now the husband is the only one who has the right to enjoy her: like a priest, he 'desecrates' her every night. And the woman finds great happiness in this metamorphosis, living her life under her husband's 'sacred gaze'. This is what sets her apart from all other women.

This was – in a simplified form for my benefit, he said – Agamben's theory of the sacred, which in its turn was a simplified version of the writings of Benjamin. Not surprisingly, I had never heard of Benjamin either.

I was minimally grateful for that complex theory. A little far-fetched, I thought. But if Morpheus liked to show off his intellect, before we could achieve my jouissance, so be it!

‘Why are you telling me all this? All I want is to experience what Kierkegaard calls transcendence through passion. How does this relate to me and my quest?’

Simple, he said. The gigolo wished me to be sacred. All the ‘dirty’ things we did together could never sully me in any way. They were ceremonies of worship, rituals of desecration. But with the *other* things I had gone and done in Athens, I had demonstrated I did not consider him capable of desecrating me properly.

>If I were you, I would not go back to him; he will dump you in a couple of months. The thing is, it is not imperative that we share our life with someone – we can be reasonably happy on our own. What we cannot live without is the sacred gaze. That is the proper book you should write one day, my dear D. Not your pornographic adventures.

>By the way, in case you were wondering, BDSM is just a simple disorder of our concept of the sacred. The word disorder here is not a medical term. It simply means a divergence from the statistically common view of what is sacred – a divergence which in many ways is a healthy reaction to the absurdities of our civilisation. I am sorry that your case is not as unique as you thought.

‘So, am I just a case study for you? What do you want from me, dammit?’

And then, for the first and only time, he allowed me a glimpse into his inner world. It had a chilling effect on me. I realised that I might have become the object of his affection, the target of a calculated passion, a plaything that gave him some sort of weird pleasure. This might explain the persistent, almost daily correspondence. Such carefully composed emails must have taken up a lot of his time.

Except this one was not carefully composed. It was an almost violent outburst of a feeling towards me, which until then had been under the most rigid control. Now I was scared for good.

>You still don't get it, do you? Should I explain why I approached you, why I said your writings were clever, why I read with such interest the scene in the storage room, where a stranger violates you and makes you bleed? Should I explain why I was intrigued by your longing for sacredness, by your willingness to surrender to painful rituals in the hands of the most ridiculous priests in the universe? If you had not written that scene, do you think I would have noticed you?

>And do I really need to explain why a radio that is tuned to receive AM transmissions cannot help but receive those transmissions? How hard is it to get it into your head that sometimes a man has no choice?

Sweet Jesus, hallelujah! I had my answer at last! I had stumbled upon a madman who could understand me better than I could understand myself, who could receive me loud and clear. We were two lunatics who had found each other among the millions of men and women who populate the Internet looking for their other half! What were the chances of that? In a world of the usual FM transmissions – of beauty, youth, status, compatibility (the most ludicrous thing of all) – I had found someone who could hear my call for help. Any vanilla man would have dismissed my so-called adventures as an expression of nymphomania and would have rejected me as a slut. Morpheus, on the other hand, had been attracted to me precisely because of those adventures, which, to his eyes, were a manifestation of my dire need for sacredness.

‘Okay. But where did I go wrong? What should I do to experience a decent BDSM relationship?’

I had to accept my desire, he said, instead of transposing it on to someone else, someone I called ‘the One’. My desire was mine and only mine; it belonged to me and my sacred genitalia. But there was a catch: I had to accept that my desire would remain unfulfilled.

>Your dream of being possessed by the Other is a quixotic fantasy. And don't think that your Kierkegaard did not know that. He abandoned his little Regine in the end, didn't he?

He did? I looked it up and it was true. Kierkegaard had met a young woman, Regine Olsen, with whom he had fallen in love. They had got engaged, but for some unclear reason he abandoned her the following year. Kierkegaard even wrote an essay about this affair gone sour, *The Seducer's Diary*, in which he took on the role of a scoundrel seducing a woman just for the heck of it – as a game, or to be precise, an art! The funny thing was that he kept a lengthy correspondence with Regine until the end of his life, despite breaking off their engagement. Figures... I would not be surprised if Morpheus, like Kierkegaard, abandoned me in the end.

The important thing now was to appear calm and composed to my children and my colleagues. What could I possibly say? That a stranger was obsessed with me to the point that he spent his days tormenting me at a distance? Even Thomas and Alice believed I was crazy

to waste my time with this affair that was leading nowhere. As if I could help it! If he had no choice, I had even less. I thought about him constantly, while having to pretend that everything was fine. I ordered junk food for the kids, unable to go shopping or cook for them, and piled their dirty clothes in the bathroom, trying not to look at the mountains of smelly socks and underwear.

It was even worse at the office. My work was very demanding. I had to check on the intricate finances of European programmes and make sure there were no mistakes. Instead of doing my work, I sat in front of the computer in such a way that no one could look at my screen, and I read again and again the emails Morpheus sent me.

My inner turmoil was increasing by the minute. In my anger then, I said to Morpheus something that would soon backfire horribly.

‘You are very much mistaken if you think that you have managed to hide your true self from me. I have read again and again what you have said, and I have learned it by heart. I have a clear picture of who you are: a man with a great mind and an atrocious personality. I would recognise you anywhere!’

I honestly believed that if he ever appeared in front of me in the flesh, I would recognise him at once. I imagined him coming near me and asking me something trivial, like directions to a place, to which I would reply by saying, ‘Oh come on! It is you! I knew you right away!’

I talk too much sometimes. Why did I have to say that? A phrase thrown carelessly at the man’s direction. An angry boast which I had no idea would come back to haunt me a few months later.

CARTOON

*In the type of madness
which manifests itself as an aberrant inwardness,
the tragic and the comic is that the something
which is of such infinite concern to the unfortunate individual
is a particular fixation which does not really concern anybody.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

Two days before attending my first meeting of the BDSM community, I disregarded Agamben's theories of desecration and followed my impulses, like the flotsam and jetsam that I truly am. I visited the gigolo, succumbing to his persistent phone calls and pleas for forgiveness. For some reason, I brought the beauty case with my sex toys. I wanted to rub it in his face: he had been a terrible lover, which had forced me to seek sexual knowledge elsewhere.

The gigolo had rented a small flat in a building that smelled of boiled cabbage. Though he was badly dressed and had lost weight, he was still a very handsome man; he looked like a Greek statue.

'I got a job, you know,' he said proudly.

'Well done,' I said. 'Modelling?'

'No. Assistant in a photo shop.'

It sounded good. Realistic.

'How about a drink?' he said. 'I got whisky.'

'Why not,' I said.

We sat side by side on an old torn sofa in the oblong lounge, looking at a blank wall. Between the two of us, we drank half the bottle. If Morpheus had been there, he would have said we were drinking not so much to relax, but to forget my transgressions. Anyway, he was not there, so I did what I had gone there to do: I went to bed with my ex.

The bedroom was worse than the lounge, but I said nothing. We kissed, took off each other's clothes, and we started making love like in the good old days: the mindless piston technique. Then something weird happened to me. From one minute to the next, without any warning, I turned into a maenad: one of those frenzied followers of Bacchus. Was it the whisky?

'Hold onto the headboard,' I said, 'and don't let go no matter what.'

It was an old brass bed, very handy. I took the small flogger out of the beauty case and sat astride the gigolo, holding him firmly between my legs. I rode him like a wild horse, hitting him again and again with my flogger, on his thighs mostly. He seemed to like it, and

he very quickly achieved his pleasure. I have no idea what possessed me to do that. Perhaps it was my need for erotic violence that dictated my behaviour. Since he had been reduced to the supplicant in the relationship, he could not offer me the violence I wanted, so I offered it to both of us. The roles had been reversed again, as had happened with Thomas.

Afterwards, I threw up in the small, dirty bathroom. The gigolo offered me a cup of black coffee and I accepted. Back in the lounge, he revealed his new plan to me. We would get married and live in my father's village, where we would run a hotel for ecotourism. We would have a vegetable garden and we could even have chickens. Our nights would be beautiful, a daring exploration of our sexuality (I assumed he wanted more of what I had just given him). This was how D's quest for the ultimate pleasure would end: in a small village up on the mountains, with chickens and a vegetable garden and a submissive gigolo!

I had managed to make a complete fool of myself again. I no longer needed a sadist to humiliate me. I could manage to do it all by myself just fine.

Morpheus was not amused at all. I could see at last why he was so disappointed with the women in his life: because they were like me.

‘So, what did you think of my latest adventure, Sir?’

> *Shrek 4.*

I died laughing. I was not completely oblivious to the fact that my search for an identity was unfolding into an incredibly comical tragedy – or worse, a truly tragic comedy.

> *You must know that Shrek is the post-modern narration par excellence. The beautiful princess wakes up, realising the prince has come. She combs her hair, donning her frock and making herself all pretty. But when she kisses the monster, instead of the monster becoming a prince, she becomes a monster. Does this remind you of anyone you know?*

It did. I was living in a zany universe where nothing was what it seemed, and the ultimate pleasure kept slipping through my unworthy hands. I had thought of myself as a female Don Quixote, but the romantic quest on which I had embarked had turned into a cartoon.

‘The worst thing is he turned nasty in the end, I thought he was going to hit me. And he kept my beauty case with the instruments of the ultimate pleasure. I need to go back and retrieve them.’

To which Morpheus did not reply.

Two days later, I went to my first BDSM meeting. I put on a mini skirt, a top in the same colour as my eyes (my contacts), with black lace on the back so the bra was visible, designer pantyhose with a nude bottom, and Italian high-heeled shoes (bought during the January sales).

On the way to the meeting, I stopped by Alice's place for a cup of coffee. The balcony plants were coming along marvellously, the red curtains were swaying in the breeze, and the radio was playing Ethiopian music.

'You're sure you don't want to come too?'

'I have no business with you perverts,' she said, and sent me off with a smacking kiss on the mouth.

The meeting was held at a dark, obscure bar in Ladadika, the old olive-oil market. It was attended by eleven people, disparate as hell from each other. My sweet Thomas; Elias and his sub, Silky, who had long, silky hair; a farmer from a small town in the north who liked to clean houses; a large, soft-spoken man who enjoyed being trampled on by women in high heels; a chubby slave girl with a beautiful face; a Master from Athens with his slave who was clearly bossing him around; another Master who looked like a ten-year-old boy; and me, of course, the monster-princess.

Grandpa was also there. He was an old forum member who was something of a BDSM guru, having trained many female slaves. He had unfortunately been confined to a wheelchair since a freak accident when he was a child. He opened the discussion with a question about the Stockholm syndrome: why do victims of kidnapping form an attachment to their kidnappers? Everybody expressed their opinion, except Thomas, who was too shy to say anything. In the end, we concluded that the attachment is formed when we allow someone to take care of our needs, just like a dog will become devoted to the person who feeds him. Masters, therefore, when they are successful as Masters, take care of their subs and their needs, rather than just use them for their own pleasure. They derive pleasure from the sub's unconditional surrender and devotion, which is a direct result of the Master's work on a sub.

What an interesting notion! It negated everything I had assumed in my naïve little mind about domination and submission.

The meeting was so successful that some of us decided to go to a pub called *Red Rose*, at the east end of the city. We ordered a bottle of whisky and coke, and after a few

drinks, reality reverted to a bearable state again. Luckily, the waiter brought some peanuts and a cold plate with meat and cheese, saving my life, since I had not eaten anything all day.

My sexy outfit seemed to enjoy a tremendous success. To my left the Master from Athens confessed to me that, a) he was a property owner with sufficient income so he did not have to work, and b) he loved my legs and the high heels I was wearing. I could not help but think how these two statements, that seemed to be *non sequiturs*, might have been connected in some mysterious way. To my right I had to deal with the advances of the ten-year-old Master.

I rejected both politely.

REPORT: SUNDAY, APRIL 29

9:30 I wake up with a hangover. I have a ham sandwich. That is all I can find in the fridge. I take some paracetamol.

11:00 I water the flowers. My bougainvillea out in the veranda has sprouted new branches with tender green leaves. I am almost happy.

12:00 After careful thought, I decide to write a better book. Enough of this pornographic pamphlet. My characters are ready, they are based on real people. All I need to do is decide how they are going to live their lives. If I ever finish it, I will dedicate it to Morpheus.

13:00 I cook a healthy lentil soup. Unfortunately, I forget all about it while reading for the hundredth time about the concept of desecration. Just as I begin to understand it, I smell something burning in the kitchen and run to the rescue of the lentils. I save half the soup, transfer it with a ladle to another pot, and place the burned pot in warm water so I can wash it later. I wonder if Agamben or Benjamin ever faced similar problems.

14:00 I am cooking meatballs and fries for my ungrateful kids, who refuse to eat the burned lentil soup. They remain oblivious to my drama, sitting all day long in their pigsties that are overflowing with clothes and rubbish. Annie polishes her fingernails a different colour every five minutes. Mona is jabbering on the phone for hours (since yesterday I think, with a small break just to get some sleep during the night). She keeps saying 'oh, I know!' (If she knows, then why are they talking for so long?) Alex has been playing the electric guitar at about 130

decibels, which is the maximum his amplifier can take before it blows up. No matter. My little darlings... Life will meet you soon enough. I wish I could protect you, but I can't.

18:00 A torrential rain is falling over the city. I have luckily parked close to the flat. I am off to the gigolo's place to return some clothes of his, in exchange for my beauty case with my toys. I have asked my son to come with me just in case the gigolo feels like becoming violent. I am learning!

18:30 The gigolo refuses to give the case to Alex. 'Tell your mother to come upstairs, and I'll give it to her.' I do as he asked, just to placate him, but keep Alex by my side. The gigolo now wants me to enter the flat by myself. I refuse. Alex and I leave the building (a small triumph of hard-earned wisdom). It is still raining heavily. I open my umbrella and walk next to my son, the weather matching our mood. Suddenly, the beauty case falls from the heavens above and the instruments of the ultimate pleasure scatter around our feet on the wet pavement. Whips, anal probes, dildos, leather straps... A young woman walking past looks on in astonishment. I have lost the capacity to be surprised by anything in my crazy life. I do not even feel embarrassed. I bend over to pick up the strange objects one by one out of the puddles. I throw them haphazardly into the beauty case and depart with all the dignity I can muster, leaving the past behind me for ever. 'Asshole,' I shout. But the balcony above is already empty.

That was the day I started sending reports about my life to Morpheus. Later I learned that most submissive girls do it. At least I was doing something right.

'And I will never allow a vanilla man to touch me again. I am no longer afraid of loneliness. I am free at last.'

I was quite proud of my decision, which seemed final to me. Morpheus did not seem as convinced as I was.

>Never say never again: another popular film.

>I found quite amusing the declaration 'free at last'. It reminded me of one of my exes. Just after we had broken up, I asked her how she felt: 'I feel free,' she said, 'but so fucking horny!'

>I found the Report entertaining and educational. I now know that in Thessaloniki, apart from raining cats and dogs, sometimes it rains anal plugs and dildos from the sky. I will therefore take all necessary precautions when I visit your city: I will not do hand stands naked in the rain, so I may retain the virginity of my ass, except, that is, for the urologist who – allegedly – examined my prostate without charging me for an ultrasound.

>Morpheus

>PS. Knowing that you will be spending the following days and nights all alone, I think I should warn you of the dangers involved.

Below that, there was a link to a YouTube video. I clicked on it, hoping it would be a romantic song, some encouragement for my days of loneliness. Instead, I watched an old, bearded man in a turban exposing fervently one by one the hazards of female masturbation according to Islamic teaching. He delivered his speech with a solemn face, consulting a thick book in front of him.

‘Sometimes women insert fingers and objects that may be risky, especially since the hymen is very sensitive and any playing with it may tear it. This might expose the woman to accusations of fornication. Her relatives might kill her, driven by jealousy and rage.’

The sweet old man seemed horrified at this and hastened to add:

‘Obviously killing her is forbidden and is a grave sin. Even if she did fornicate, she does not deserve to be killed. At the most, she should be flogged.’

Oh Morpheus! How long had it taken him to find this video clip? Priceless...

April is the cruellest month, the poet says. We had spent the entire April together, Morpheus and I. Little did I know that May would be worse.

A few days later, I decided to do something I ought to have done before, but with everything that was happening the thought had not crossed my mind. I logged on to the forum and read everything that Morpheus had written on BDSM theory.

My research lasted three days. I discovered that my teacher had confessed publicly his favourite kink: he liked to remove all protective delusions from others – women in particular – strip them naked, so to speak, and help them see through the sentimentality in which they had wrapped themselves. That was the message he liked to impart: that in a harsh life filled with pain and death, there are no great loves, nor any wonderful people that meet like strangers in the night, whirled by the forces of serendipity.

That was his perversion: he liked to witness the rebirth of his romantic victims, to hear their first cry upon entering the real world – a true waste land devoid of any consolation.

You want to hear me cry? Well, here goes.

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com

Sent: Wednesday, 2 May, 2007, 16:00

To: Morpheus@zeromail.com

Subject: Goodbye

Dear Bastard,

Sorry to disappoint you but I'm still standing.

I have been dragging myself like a zombie from one room to another, from my home to the office, and out in the streets of this city that I once used to love. I live almost mechanically on automatic mode. I have fallen in love with an incredibly intelligent man, who tries to help me see the light.

I think we can finally end our correspondence. I am no longer desperate or lonely. You have not wasted your time with me. I owe you a lot, even if I want to kill you right now. You helped me understand a lot about myself. You said you wanted humility and gratitude from me? Now I can give them to you. I place them at your feet.

D.

He did not budge either. Oh, he would never let me go.

>Perhaps you are now beginning to see why I made this small intervention in your life. When I see a trauma, a serious life wound, as in your case, I try to cauterise it with a handful of salt. Your habit of covering things up and trying to forget about them is the sure way to end up with a serious infection. For better or for worse, I could not walk away without doing something about it. I bet you will find this romantic too, as you find everything else.

>If you had asked me, I would have told you: I do not take any pleasure in hearing a woman cry. It is the way she look at me, through tears of pain and gratitude, when she manages to stand up again. A very human look.

>Do not kid yourself. If I had not seen in your stories the trauma, I would have never wasted any time on you, not even for the fifteen minutes it would have taken to fuck you in the wound, as your priests did in their vain efforts to desecrate you.

>Not because of pity or disgust, but because now, in my forties, I do not have so many erections at my disposal. It would not be wise to waste them on women who fantasize man is an insect buzzing around the beehive with their honey – and then they wonder why all the men they meet are fucking drones.

>Morpheus

He had gone berserk. Good. At least, I was no longer bored. Perhaps he was not either. Two bourgeois idiots who had escaped their cursed ennui... Success! Hip, hip, hurray!

THE PSALM OF DAVID

*With every movement of mine,
she becomes stronger and stronger.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

The flow of ordinary life had become irrelevant to me in every sense. I read Kierkegaard like crazy, coming to understand him more and more. *The Seducer's Diary* reminded me a lot of Morpheus and his tactics, to the point that I wondered if he had read it too and he was following Kierkegaard's advice in every possible way. I also developed the habit of holding lengthy imaginary conversations with Morpheus, at the office, at the supermarket, even when I was driving. 'Ah, really? You think so? What about this? But no, of course I do not agree. Don't be silly.' And so on and so forth.

As time went by, I felt my certainties abandoning me, one by one. Almost everything I had believed in had proven to be a lie. My belief that I was special, my readiness to use my good looks to secure a partner, my choice of the gigolo just so I would feel younger and worthy of attention, my choice of fake Masters to desecrate my body... As a mother too, I was a disappointment. As a daughter, indifferent, selfish. There was nothing – I had nothing.

I remembered a movie I had seen a few years back, *Kill Bill*, in which the actress, Uma Thurman, was trying to learn the technique of the three-inch punch. This is the hardest punch ever imagined, aimed at something that is so close that you can use only the force of your extended fingers. This technique was taught to Uma by Pai Mei, her misogynist teacher; it was what allowed her to come out of her coffin when she was buried alive.

I also felt buried alive. But I was not at all certain that my teacher would be able to teach me the three-inch punch. Even if the lessons were successful and I broke free from everything that kept me imprisoned, what would happen to me? Would I be able to survive in the loneliness of my freedom?

Most importantly, where would Morpheus be then?

One evening with a full moon, I was walking home, tired and lost in thought after teaching a late lesson at the English language school. The cafés by the White Tower were filled with young people and couples in love. I could hear laughter and loud voices, and a popular love song was playing somewhere. The happiness did not touch me. I felt I had wasted the greatest part of my life, like a spoiled child who had been given a whole load of gifts but did not want

to play with any of them. An increasing sense of self-pity overwhelmed me. Why was it that the most important relationship I could form was with a stranger, whose name I did not know and whose face I had never seen? I had the horrible suspicion that he preferred platonic relationships, just because they were indestructible. Maybe he wanted to keep our relationship purely spiritual, a bit like Kierkegaard had done with Regine Olsen. My God, what if I never got to meet him?

What else did I really have in my life? Just Alice and Thomas. They loved me of course, but they could not understand me. The kids were some comfort and I adored them, but soon they would be gone, chasing their own dreams. As for my mother and my brother, they did not want to have much to do with me. I was the black sheep of the family.

That day I had chatted online with someone I knew and I had tried to explain to him how I felt, but he could not understand either. He believed that the intensity of a relationship had to do with how much weight we can hang from various parts of our anatomy. I said to him: 'If I knew where Morpheus lived, I would send him one of my fingers.' I knew of course that this was a dumb thought, reminiscent perhaps of one of Jane Campion's films. But I was dead serious. It would have meant a permanent deprivation of one of the few true pleasures that I still had in my life: playing the piano. A great sacrifice. I wanted to sacrifice myself for him.

I was walking past the large tree by Doré Park, when a woman in a long skirt, with her hair plaited on top of her head, one of those religious fanatics who go around offering leaflets of catechism, saw me walking with my head bent, oblivious to my surroundings. She must have realised how low my spirits were, because as she went past me, she offered me a prayer leaflet. I accepted it, almost mechanically. I read it later, at home, and I was astonished at this chance message from heaven. It seemed serendipity was still at work.

It had been many years since I had stopped believing in a benevolent god, but I wanted to share these words with Morpheus. I sat down and copied every word of that prayer and sent it to him, together with the ravings about my fingers.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me... Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow... Create in me a pure heart... and renew a steadfast spirit within me... Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me... Save me from bloodguilt... You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it...

All recent events weighed heavily on me and demanded a sort of catharsis. I wished Morpheus would help me wash away all the filth, plunge me into the pool of Siloam so I could come out purified.

I knew what I wanted to transcend – that shallow life I was living – and why Kierkegaard's text had spoken to me. *Passion is the culmination of existence for an existing individual...* I badly needed to feel like an existing individual, trapped as I was in a prison made of fake pleasure. I was dying for a little authenticity. But everything was fake – including me.

The truth was revealed to me one piece at a time, as if falling from heaven, like the instruments of the ultimate pleasure.

From: Morpheus@zeromail.com
 Date: Friday, 4 May, 2007, 19:30
 To: dora_salonica@zeromail.com
 Subject: Vicarious liability

>Googling the title of my email will help you understand why you chose to leave your fingerprints on my Inbox yesterday. There are many ways for someone to invent a relationship – undoubtedly you would have chosen the one that would stump me the most.

>In the spirit of yesterday's email then, if I can choose a finger, I suggest the middle one: photocopy it and send it to your foolish priests, the ones who instead of desecrating you became minor characters in your pornographic book.

>If you really want to go religious on me, you should study Psalm 23. That should be the mantra of every good submissive.

>Morpheus

The term 'vicarious liability' led me to this: it was the responsibility of the superior for the acts of their subordinate. But Morpheus was wrong! I did not wish to transfer responsibility for my actions to anyone else, least of all to him! Besides, my quest was legitimate and worth

the hardship. Kierkegaard had been explicit: *It is not the path which is the difficulty; rather, it is the difficulty which is the path.*

Psalm 23, or the Psalm of David, as it was called, was more comforting. I read it carefully, letting the words find their way into my heart.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...

It was already evident to me that the entire western civilisation had become the terrain of our affair. We were grappling with slippery concepts – tearing each other apart in the process – but we could also communicate on a higher level, using literature, films, songs, the Bible, philosophers, and poets.

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com

Sent: Saturday, 5 May, 2007, 10:00

To: Morpheus@zeromail.com

Subject: Goodbye

An invented relationship? If I invented it all, then why did you send me the Psalm? Is that why you read Agamben and Wittgenstein? So that you can do BDSM at a distance? And you think I am plagued by illusions, given over to sentimentality? When I gave birth to my son, he lodged himself between my thighs. I felt his head come out of my body. That is a feeling you will never have, a feeling you cannot even imagine! That is not sentimentality. A woman's entire existence is emotion. She is incapable of perceiving the world in any other way! Even if she is an opportunistic, shallow creature like me.

You saw me, you heard me. What did you think of me? Too vulnerable? Too stubborn? What a challenge! That demanded an intervention, indeed. You immersed me in a painful introspection, you took me apart, so that you could put me back together again? Did you enjoy yourself, Sir? And what's on the menu next? Will you get rid of me, throw me out in the streets? Will you even say goodbye?

Well, goodbye then!

D.

I was tearing my insides for him and he dared say I had invented everything? Did he intend to abandon me now, after all this? I would leave him first!

I turned off the fucking computer, loaded my camping tent on the jeep and sought shelter for three days in Tristinika, my favourite beach in Halkidiki, two hours away from the city. There I would be able to find some peace at last, away from my tormentor.

>If I ever wrote the book, Life: An Instruction Manual, it would contain only one sentence: Don't do anything I would not do if I were you. This still allows for infinite possibilities.

I found this email waiting for me when I returned. My anger had dissipated because I had thought about everything and realised it did not matter one bit what he did to me – even if he just wanted to toy with me and then leave me. Besides, I had missed him terribly. But when I sat down to write to him, I realised I had nothing to say. I had already internalised him. I carried him with me, like the voice of my conscience. I know now, after everything that has happened, that for a sub this clarity is one of the most beautiful parts of her relationship with a dominant. *Claritas*. Knowing how to live your life. Borrowing a set of rules – ethical, or, more likely, aesthetic – and following them almost without thinking. *He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness...*

In the evening I sat at the piano and played Schubert's Serenade. I knew how to play it now – where to play *dolce*, where to pause. I imagined Morpheus sitting somewhere near me, too. He was nodding approvingly with a face I knew was beautiful, even if I could not make out its characteristics. It was beautiful because it gazed at me.

I was deeply happy, at last. Even if it did not last for ever, at least I had the sacred gaze – for now.

Yet reality was still out there, lawless, chaotic, its workings inhuman. I braced myself and waited for what was to come.

PART THREE
PASSION

RAZZMATAZZ

*She must owe me nothing, for she must be free;
love exists only in freedom,
only in freedom is there enjoyment
and everlasting delight.*

(S. Kierkegaard)

Alice and I are in the forbidden bar with no name and are getting hammered. She is having tequila shots, chasing tequila with tequila, like the bright girl that she is. I am having my sixth gin with lemonade, holding an eternal cigarette between my fingers. I cannot quite focus my gaze, but I am almost certain that the barman is looking at me. I think he is gorgeous. But then again, I might just be plastered.

‘Hey, Alice,’ I slur into her ear, ‘is this guy looking at me or what?’

‘He is too young for you,’ she asserts.

I shake my head in doubt. This makes me very dizzy, so I stop it. His music selections are excellent, from Elvis Costello to Madness. *One step beyond*, the song encourages me. Why not? Why not indeed. Let me take one more staggering step into the darkness of my soul. Who is going to stop me? Who cares for me? Nobody, that’s who.

Alice is wearing a tiny black dress that reaches to the middle of her matchstick-legs. She is swaying languidly, doing her Mata Hari impersonation in front of a guy who looks like a down-and-out artist. Despite his boho appearance, he has bought us half of our drinks and just as many shots of a red, non-identifiable liquid substance, which has shattered our already compromised ability for sober thought.

We are chatting about this and that, in a light, uninterested fashion. Everyone is swaying in the semi-darkness, all strangers to one another, while the music fills the void with its sad notes. Not my idea of a good night, but what else can I do? Let’s see what else is going to happen. I don’t care much either way. If I cannot have Morpheus, why should I care about anything?

Alice soon leaves with the ‘artist’, just as I expected. I stay behind and watch everyone leave. The barman looks at me meaningfully.

‘Are you staying?’

‘Uh-huh,’ I nod. *One step beyond*.

He locks the door, draws the curtains, and throws me to the floor in front of the bar. He pushes my face down on the floor, lifts my skirt, rips my underwear. He suddenly penetrates me. My mouth touches the filthy floor, and I cannot lift my head, he is holding me

down. I cannot remember much of what happened after that. I blame the shots. When I am together with Alice, we cover each other's gaps of memory. Now I am alone, so a big chunk of the night is lost forever.

Women like me know very well it is not oblivion that hurts but remembering. I guess I am lucky in a way.

The following day I wrote to Morpheus and told him what had happened – more or less. It was clear to me now that I needed more time. I found it difficult to transform a chaotic life based on impulse to a life of determination. And it was still in the balance whether Morpheus would be able to help me. I asked him to be patient with me, to give me a little time. And then I asked him to teach me, if he could, one thing. For that, I borrowed the words of the poet:

*Teach us to care and not to care.
Teach us to sit still...*

So far, I knew how not to care. At least I was aware of my inadequacy.

>Time, like money and all other imaginary things, exists in abundance. Not in quantifiable units, but experientially. It is one of those things that shrink or expand, depending on the feelings of the person who is having the experience.

>In this sense, Louis is right to be singing: We've got all the time in the world... It is true for him, even now that he is gone. It is true even for you and me.

>Instead of giving you time, I will ask you for some. In the next 48 hours, I will make a last attempt to consolidate the small, inconsequential things that I have been telling you all along.

>I need the time to wash my hair – as our ancestors used to do on the eve of a battle.

>During those hours, please do not obfuscate matters with any more obscure information about your razzmatazz and the nights on the town.

>Morpheus

I turned to Google again, my saviour. ‘Razzmataz and the nights on the town’ turned out to be a song by a British band called Pulp. The lyrics seemed to have been written especially for me:

*Am I talking too fast or are you just playing dumb?
If you want I can write it down.
Well, I'm sorry but didn't you say
That things go better with a little bit of razzmatazz?
And your father wants to help you, doesn't he babe?*

I was devastated. I felt that my dead father was talking to me, telling me all those things that he had never told me. Or maybe he had told me, but I had not listened. I blamed myself for having taken my father for granted. We had never seen eye to eye, how could we? He was a reasonable man, and I was – what was I? A brat! Morpheus was right, I was nothing but a brat. I had been horrible to my father on many occasions. And now he was gone and I had lost my chance to tell him I loved him.

Razzmatazz was an important moment. It moved me – though I could not be sure if that had been Morpheus’s intention. I guess deep in my heart, I missed my father. I needed a father, or at least the idea of a father. I was driven by that need, and Morpheus treated me in a way that somehow fulfilled that need.

But why did he ask me for 48 hours? What was I going to do for two whole days without him? It was unbearable.

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com
Sent: Tuesday, 10 May, 2007, 19:00
To: Morpheus@zeromail.com
Subject: Lost

Before I give you the 48 hours you asked for, you need to know this: I am losing myself here. The roots of my hair have grown grey, my breath smells of cigarettes and yesterday’s booze, and my beautiful flat is filled with rubbish and dirty clothes. We eat junk every day. I do not know what to say to my kids.

It is simple. I have fallen in love with you. I know nothing will come of it. You have made it clear that you want nothing to do with me. What does it matter that I am falling apart? I do not care one bit. That is what I was looking for, what I wanted. Is it possible to love someone we have never seen, someone we have never touched? Yes, it is.

Please take pity on me and let me go. Now, before it is too late.

D.

Where did I find the courage to send him this email? I was hurting so badly and nothing was helping. I drank as much vodka as I could, but that made things worse. I smoked so many cigarettes that my fingers started to turn yellow. My children gave me pitying looks. My mother did not exist for me; I never visited her. If I did not have Thomas and Alice, I would have died of loneliness. And my job sucked and I was running out of money.

A few days before, Thomas and I had gone out for a drink. We were at the Fire Water, a place near my flat.

‘Don’t drink so much, sweetheart, you are going to get sick,’ Thomas said.

But I kept drinking, though it was early in the day. I couldn’t stop talking about Morpheus, how much I wanted to be with him, how much at a loss I was, not knowing what to do about it. When I could not take it anymore, I ran out of the pub. Thomas followed me. I sat down at the kerb like a beggar woman and started crying my heart out. *He does not want me, he does not want me*, I kept babbling on. Thomas tried to take me in his arms, to help me up.

‘Oh, leave me alone,’ I said. ‘What do you know about love? You always pay for it!’

I had never hurt Thomas before. If anything, I always tried to protect him. This time I wanted to hurt him, in a vain attempt to dilute my own pain. Just then, one of my students from the English class passed by. She was one of the best students, so clever and diligent.

‘What is wrong, Miss, why are you crying?’

I lost my mind then. ‘Why don’t you just fuck off and leave me alone?’

The poor girl was horrified. She walked away and never looked back. Thomas picked me up from the kerb and took me home, put me in my bed and stayed with me until I cried myself to sleep.

Was I having a nervous breakdown? Probably. I remembered then one of the first things Morpheus had said to me: *Sometimes kneeling is not enough. Have you ever crawled on your hands and knees like a true penitent?*

I poured myself another vodka, lit another cigarette. I could hear voices from the lounge; my kids had invited some friends over and they were having a good time. And me? What was I doing with my life?

Then it struck me.

I was becoming a slave! That's what I was doing! And in the process, I was losing my mind! I had gone looking for a sadist and I had found the best one. Why complain? The man was perfection itself.

When was the precise moment he realised I could become his O? I had no idea. It had happened so gradually I had not even noticed.

And now? What?

There was only one thing to do. I would make him proud of me. Make up for all the vacuous adventures and vulgar affairs over the years. He would see that I was worth something.

I had to put all that into words. Let him know I understood.

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com

Sent: Wednesday, 9 May, 2007, 14:00

To: Morpheus@zeromail.com

Subject: Self-criticism

I began to write this text as a response to the emptiness of my life. I wanted to overcome the mundane, give a small push to reality, help it move forward on its rails. My story is no more pornographic than our everyday life, and D is no more vulgar than the little deaths that occur from one day to the next. A text like this is an antidote to apathy and at the same time one of its symptoms.

The flow of events gives rise to the writing of another page, and then another, and another. And each page, each story, results in a new turn of events. The heroes are moved by invisible strings. Their actions are not the result of conscious choices, but the nocturnal emissions of wet dreams. Their search for an identity keeps slipping away from them and they remain wooden, trapped one step before transcendence.

D is a female Nero. She seeks the poetry and the magic of the authentic. She is brave but unworthy. Persistent but incompetent. To write her greatest poem, she burns her life.

Sitting in front of her laptop, she pounds frantically on the keyboard. She becomes obsessed with her wooden puppets. For a moment she feels alive, tastes intensity, lives on the edge.

But at night, when she returns home, she knows what other poets knew before her:

Life is elsewhere.

THE MATRIX DILEMMA

*I constantly retreat before her, and in this retreat,
I teach her through myself to know all the power of love,
its unquiet thoughts, its passion,
what longing is, and hope, and impatient expectation.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

The email I was expecting from Morpheus came when I was at work. Reading it was one of the most painful experiences of my life.

This is what he sent me.

>Dear D,

>As promised, I will begin by expressing my opinion on your stories, the cause of our initial correspondence.

>Their main flaw is that they are coming forth from the genitals – and are directed towards them too. I, and I believe every thinking person, would prefer texts that come from the gut. For example, texts that were written when someone was moaning in pain, not because the Anal Dominator penetrated him as he was held down by ropes, but because his vanity had been crushed by the realisation of his human (and divinely comic) fate.

>Having said that, I must admit that your text with the title ‘Self-Criticism’ seemed to come from the gut.

>I will now try to summarise what I have been trying to tell you all along. To see things as they truly are, we will have to go through The Matrix. I suppose that you know the film – you seem immersed in culture, especially when you can find a suitable role there for yourself!

>In The Matrix, the hero (Neo) is discovered by the secondary hero (Morpheus). Morpheus helps Neo to get out of his state of sleep so he can carry out his sacred duty, which is to defeat Evil. I hope you understand now who the One is: our sleeping hero – not Morpheus.

I looked around me in the office. I was miles away, living in my own dream world, while my colleagues chatted with each other and worked on their files. Alice looked up for a minute, but she did not realise that something was happening to me. It was funny in a way, how one can be transported to their own personal hell in full daylight among friends.

I returned to the email. I needed to understand.

>The sleeper resists – as you have been resisting (only you do it with more theatrics, having the annoyingly histrionic personality that you have). Morpheus apologises. He knows that by getting someone out of the Matrix, you do not lead them to the promised land, but to the inferno of knowledge. Paradise and eating from the tree of knowledge do not go together.

*>That is what happened to you too. And in your frantic efforts to enter Purgatory, you copy Dante Alighieri, when he says *trattando l' ombre come cosa salda* – you treat the shadows like a real, solid thing. You try to hold on to me, a digital presence, the mere shadow of a man, since you failed to hold onto those you came to know in the flesh.*

He insists on denying his presence in my life, denying me, my feelings for him. Is he hurting me on purpose? Is this proof of the relationship or am I slowly going crazy?

>The problem is you can only wake up those who are in REM sleep. That is the state in which we dream. This explains why I approached you – and not another Sleeping Beauty in the forum. And that is why I called your writings clever: they revealed you were ready to wake up.

>There is a scene in The Matrix for that too: Morpheus gives Neo the choice between two pills. The blue pill returns him to his blissful sleep, while the red pill will lead him to reality.

>The audience are chewing their fingernails. Will romanticism win? Will he choose to go back to sleep or to wake up? But the dilemma is false: It is not the answer that defines romanticism. It is the question itself!

>A romantic (someone who is voluntarily sleeping) is someone who believes that reality and fantasy are two separate worlds!

The other girls in the office were laughing now at a joke and Alice looked up and saw me. This time she realised that something terrible was happening and got up to come near me. I stopped her, shaking my head. Morpheus was about to abandon me and I needed to be alone for this. I was in hell and the devil was smiling at me, welcoming me among the damned.

>Adult life is certainly not an easy thing. But when someone can no longer sleep, the best thing to do is to wake up. The constant production of comforting dreams is not leading anywhere. Soon the dreams will turn to nightmares. You need to wake up now. Wake up, D!

>It has been a pleasure – though not jouissance.

>Morpheus

>P.S. In a world of 1s and 0s, are you a zero, or the One? (The Matrix)

I said nothing to Alice. I could not talk about it. I went home and ordered pizza for the poor kids. I could hear them in the kitchen whispering to each other, talking about me, about how concerned they were. 'Has she gone crazy?' I heard them say. There was no strength left in me. I could do nothing else but read the email again and again. My ego had been fatally wounded. It was the first time in my life I had opened myself so wholly to someone – and perhaps it would be the last. He had rejected me. He called me a dreamer, a romantic idiot, a fool. Someone unworthy of deep, passionate love.

What a strange feeling... My body had gone utterly limp. In my mind's eye I saw that man, the most unlikely erotic partner, standing in front of me, smiling like the bastard that he was. When my strength started to return, the feeling of utter loss changed into something else. It felt as if... he had just made love to me! As if the most possessive, the most dominant man I could have ever come across, had just fucked me, leaving me shattered.

And there it was. As I was trying to pick up my pieces and reconstitute myself, I realised the simplest thing in the world: I had already achieved what I wanted! My empty life was no longer empty! No one could possibly undo what had already happened.

The two worlds, fantasy and reality, fiction and life, had become identical. I was no longer a deeply unhappy woman in search of an elusive idea. I felt myself grow into something larger – a woman in love, a woman scorned, a woman who had been made to taste despair: a Regine Olsen.

Now I understood what that meant: *In passion the existing subject is rendered infinite in the eternity of the imaginative representation.* The passage by Kierkegaard I had been carrying in my purse for twenty years was no longer the forgotten whispers of a dead philosopher. It was a living thing, it breathed in me, it lived in my chest. It was filling me up like a river, a flood that threatened to drown me, a wave so big that I could not breathe.

I – just – could – not – take – it – anymore –

I gave one push and came out into the sweet blue air. Alive, reborn, and in love.

FATHER

*Without risk there is no faith.
Faith is precisely the contradiction
between the infinite passion
of the individual's inwardness
and the objective uncertainty.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

As I travel backwards on the train that is taking me to V and my future, I think back on my first experience with humiliation.

What had happened was not a scene at a fetish club, where an asymmetry between the partners is agreed upon. We were not merely playing Master and slave. The motto Safe, Sane and Consensual, the cornerstone of BDSM, was being stretched to its limits. Though I was a voluntary participant in what we were doing, I had the feeling this was neither safe nor sane.

I read the email again and again. When my tears dried and I went to wash my face, the mirror returned to me the image of a face that was glowing. The woman who had been typing insipid documents for years, the woman who had wallowed for so long in a pulp of boredom, that woman was finally emerging victorious.

That was the moment – I know it now – that I started playing the most intense game possible, a game that could never be surpassed by any carnal adventure, nor by any tender vanilla love: I played Russian roulette with my soul. I was willing to bet my entire existence that what I was experiencing was authentic and worthwhile – possibly eternal too.

I had been stripped naked by that strange man and I was not even sure how he had done it. Now I could continue my lewd dance in front of Morpheus, knowing full well that he would soon be bored with me, or I could embrace the future as his submissive – more accurately, his plaything. Was I a zero, or the One?

For a moment I hesitated. What was I to do?

What choice did I have, with D breathing down my neck? I sat down, swallowed my pride, and wrote to Morpheus again. I did not have much to say, but what I said was loud and clear.

‘I want more...’

Absolute silence ensued. Morpheus did not reply.

I waited patiently as the days went by. One night, I was looking at the wall, contemplating the many ways in which I had managed to screw up my life, when I suddenly

saw in a flash what Morpheus wanted from me. But of course! He wanted me to learn how to beg! The sweet man was giving me exactly what I had asked for. You want a BDSM relationship? You want to become O? Kneel and beg, you stupid girl!

There was nothing I wanted to do more. I begged – and I begged well. I begged beautifully. I begged as if my life depended on it. Then and only then did I cry with bitter tears. I lay down on my bed and cried as I had never cried before.

Ah, the joy, the happiness!

We had arrived happily in the middle of May, and I had been transported to a parallel universe. The world around me was crumbling and I could not bring myself to care about anything other than the digital voice of a man digging into my soul. Every five minutes I checked my email on the laptop. I would wake up in the middle of the night, turn on the computer, and check again. Still nothing.

Could he sense me waiting for him? Did he enjoy my growing need for him? I found this so physically stimulating that I was dripping sticky lust through my pores. I think I had reached a point where I was sexually aroused 24 hours a day. It was physically exhausting, but I was in ecstasy.

Then one evening I came home, turned on my computer, and found myself in his beloved hands once again. His email was even more forceful than before, with a directness that astonished me. As if nothing had happened, he started analysing some of my poems which I had sent him at the beginning of our correspondence. He said my poetry was lousy and went on to give me a lengthy lecture on the power of metaphor in poetic expression! And then he said what he had meant to say all along.

>I am only trying to show you my personal taste with this poetic intervention. And also to show you that I know what it means to be a father.

A father! Oh, my God... He had not abandoned me after all...

That romantic lunatic was the only certainty remaining in my life. If I told anyone what was happening to me, they would not believe it. They would laugh at my face, thinking me mad; for that certainty depended on something that no longer exists. Our modern life is

based on material, tangible things. Nothing ever takes place without material proof, especially when it comes to relationships. Yet here I was, on the greatest internal journey imaginable, the journey from zero to one. And my only guide was *faith*.

One of the poems I had sent to Morpheus was a poem I had written about my dead father.

*The village was white in the light.
A faint sound grew stronger
like an army of ants climbing over the hills.
It was the heated cicadas
rubbing their legs together
in the olive branches.
They buzzed over the graves
clawing their way up the tree
excited, in love.
'City of the Dead'
proclaimed the sign.
The innocent people
had tried to give a name
to that which has not.
There in the whiteness
we placed his white bones.
He was given back to the earth.
Returned.*

Morpheus did not like the poem. I could do better, he said. He urged me to dig deeper, discover bigger truths. I was to plunge into the desolation of loss and accept it, embrace the absent father, say goodbye for the last time. My God, how it hurt... But I did as he asked.

*Father is a bent figure
his head low
already dying
the veins in his eyes bleeding.
Father is that uneasy feeling.
After he died I could still hear
his slippers shuffling through the flat.
This is Father's favourite hat.
We danced to an old tango
my feet on his feet
we listened to the radio
picked up Deutsche Welle
at the time of the colonels.*

*Father is my heart that broke
 every cigarette I smoke.
 Father is every drink I drink
 every thought I think
 every man I kiss
 all my one-night stands.
 Father is my empty hands.*

Great journeys come at a price. I was growing, surprisingly, through pain. A pain bearing strange fruit: a sense of strength and wisdom, a sense of peace even, all of which had been bestowed upon me when I had least expected it.

That summer, there was going to be a party in Athens, at Vravra Beach, organised by some members of the BDSM community of Athens. I had been invited too. The stories I had posted on the forum were very popular and everyone was curious about me.

I told Morpheus I intended to go. He disapproved of my going but I insisted. I even gave him my phone number, in case he wanted to meet me.

‘I think you want me to admit that I would like you to fuck me, Sir, just so you could snub me. The truth is that I would very much like you to fuck me. But that is not enough for you, is it?’

He went nuts at that. It seemed I had a talent for enraging him.

> What you want is not for me to fuck you, but for me to WANT to fuck you! You can't possibly want anything else at this stage of our communication – or should I say your present mental state? My response to the edited version of your question is, no, it is not enough, of course not!

What would be enough for him, I wondered. Whatever it was he had in mind, I prayed that I would be strong enough to endure it. I was still so innocent that I could not even begin to imagine what he was planning for me. Looking back now, I can see how calculated his every move was, how cleverly he laid out the route of my journey, taking me subtly from one realisation to the next.

On the 1st of June, I took the train to Athens. The first night, I stayed at my hotel, reviewing the last few pages of my book. I always carried it with me, so I could edit and revise, but mostly so I could read the things Morpheus sent to me.

The next evening, I took a taxi to the hotel where the BDSM party was to take place. I was wearing a black corset which did not allow me to breathe properly. I had done up the laces so tightly that they marked the skin with a series of small, painful Xs. A black pencil skirt. Black thong. Silver sandals. Morpheus would have said I had managed to dress pornographically again. I knew what he wanted of me, but I still followed the stubbornness of my ego and my stupid choices.

Some of the forum members were already there, at the hotel's restaurant. Master Ferris was a sweet, older man. He was staring at me as if I were a fish that jumped out of its glass bowl. I couldn't understand why he was making so much fuss over me. His slave, a young woman in a leather collar, was slightly annoyed at him.

A tiny guy with a goatee was seated to my right. He looked like Fu Manchu. Another man, this one attractive, arrived and sat at our table. He was an engineer and was quite mysterious, just like his contributions to the forum. A tall, somewhat heavy lawyer who was into golden showers kept giving me the eye. We were all so mismatched that we attracted curious looks by the other customers. For some reason, I had the feeling that I was visiting the circus. Even worse, I was part of this circus.

The discussion flowed naturally, about BDSM seminars carried out all over the world, about a girl who would hang herself from the ceiling with hooks through her skin, about some male slaves who were voluntarily castrated in Russia – in other words, light, everyday topics of conversation. I was dying to discuss the power of metaphor in poetic expression, but with whom? Morpheus had not called me, nor was he going to.

After our dinner, Fu Manchu, Master Ferris with his slave, the golden lawyer, the engineer, and I all went outside to have one last drink by the hotel's pool. There was no one else around and we got a little naughty. Master Ferris asked me to remove my thong. I did it without much fuss. They all took turns to sniff it – except the young slave girl. I was not being particularly naughty. This was fun.

At midnight, the party came to an end. I picked up my knickers, stuffed them in my bag, and left – not before I lifted my skirt and showed my buttocks to Master Ferris.

The next day, Master Ferris and his slave came to my hotel and picked me up to take me to a new dungeon belonging to a Mistress. I could sense D's impatience; she was getting more and more difficult to control. Was that why Morpheus did not want me to come to Athens?

My first dungeon ever. I looked at everything in wonderment. Red walls, hidden lighting in the ceiling, a series of whips hanging at the wall. The Mistress picked a long

leather whip and tried it on my legs, showing me how it did not hurt if you did it properly (I thought the opposite should happen). In the far corner there was a vaulting horse; a slave was tied down on it and a tall, slender girl was whipping him. In the other corner there was a St Andrew's cross. I tried it for size. I loved it! I asked to be allowed into a small metal cage I spotted behind a red curtain. What a great feeling!

A naked middle-aged man in chains was crawling on the floor on all fours. Master Ferris was tormenting his sweet slave, giving her successive orgasms by pulling at her nipples. I wondered if the orgasms were real or fake. For me, an orgasm was a difficult, and very private, business. If she could manage it, though, who was I to judge?

A twenty-two-year-old girl who called herself Mistress Venus, was sitting right next to me. I assumed she was someone who charged for her services, one of those girls Thomas liked to go to. A tall man, around thirty years old, was sitting at the Mistress's desk. Maybe he was her boyfriend. I noticed he had rotten teeth (Marcel, from Buñuel's film *Belle de Jour*, immediately came to mind). When I asked him his status, he said he was a Master. 'You are a Master?' I asked, unable to suppress the surprise in my voice. He nodded affirmatively, a defiant expression on his face, as if my incredulity could possibly affect his status. I said nothing, but he looked too young to be someone in charge of a girl's life. What could he possibly know about a woman's complexities, her conflicting desires, the quirks of her sexuality?

He seemed to take an interest in me and asked me if I had any experience.

'I focus mainly on intellectual domination these days,' I replied solemnly.

Marcel smiled with his bad teeth and took me to the other room for what he called a small 'interview'. He sat in an armchair and placed me on my knees in front of him.

We were interrupted before the interview even began. The Mistress needed to leave urgently – a wealthy private client had called. The party was over. Marcel asked me for my phone number. I gave it to him and I got his in return. He asked me to call him the following day so that we could continue our 'interview'.

We left the dungeon and I followed Master Ferris, his slave and Venus to a tavern called Ouzou Melathron in the Psirri district. We ordered mysterious dishes called 'sodomy' and 'the eunuch's pleasure', as the tavern specialised in funny names. I was drinking 'tsipouro of the hedonist'.

'Are you chatting with Morpheus?' Ferris's slave asked me suddenly. She had overheard me say to Venus that my Master would always talk to me using the plural of

politeness. I thought that he did it to echo Sir Stephen's way of addressing O with the formal *vous*, because he knew I wanted to become O.

I didn't want to answer. I knew Morpheus did not want me to talk about him. Our relationship was a secretive thing, it almost belonged to the domain of the fantastic.

'He is the only one who uses the plural of respect,' she went on. 'He was chatting with a friend of mine for months. He even spoke to her on the phone.'

Everyone butted in, advising me to find a real Master. I was shaken. How much more real could my relationship with Morpheus become?

At midnight, Master Ferris and his slave bid us goodbye and left. Venus and I went bar hopping. Athens by night. Could it get better than that? We went to a bar nearby first, called White. It seemed a little quiet.

'Shall we go to the bar where JJ is working?' Venus said.

'Oh, yes, let's,' I replied. I had no idea who JJ was.

REPORT: MONDAY, JUNE 4

01:00 Venus and I are at a bar in the Peristeri district where JJ works. Two guys keep buying us shots. They are coming on to us and we start chatting. One of them is twenty-two, like Venus, the other twenty-seven. We leave the bar together to go to their place where they have a bottle of gin. On the way we stop to buy lemonade and condoms.

2:30 I am lying face down on the bed. The two men take turns with me, first one, then the other. The faces and the bodies keep alternating. I never know who is lying on top of me. Every time I turn my head to see who it is, I am surprised. I never manage to guess correctly. Venus comes too, every now and then, and burns me with her cigarette. I don't know why she does that, but I haven't got the strength to react. I seem to remember I embarked on a noble quest a hundred years ago, maybe more. It all seems so fuzzy now. What was it I was looking for? Passion? Transcendence? The taste of bitter defeat fills my mouth like bile. At some point, I can no longer bear the immensity of what I am doing, and I burst into tears. The two men and the girl hug me and console me. When I calm down, they all go back to doing what they were doing before. The younger man is particularly rough; the older one is somewhat more considerate. An hour later I leave alone, walking like a lost soul in the streets, until I am collected by a passing taxi.

I wake up with a terrible hangover. Though still drunk, I cannot fail to see that the dark side of D is surfacing in a majestic way. I immediately send a text to Marcel:

‘I will be free at 4. Is the interview still on?’

‘This text is not appropriate [sic] for a Master. Send me again to show me your submission and upbringing.’

I send a new text:

‘I am sorry, Sir. Something happened to me last night and I am not myself. Would you like to meet me for a while?’

He forgives me and we arrange an appointment at 16:00 at the dungeon. I have blisters on my buttocks from the cigarette burns. I take some paracetamol, but they go on stinging.

A little before I call for a taxi, my phone rings. I am taken by surprise. It is the fantastic invading the real, attempting to crush me. I don’t remember much from what the voice of Morpheus says to me. I retain only the following:

‘Am I speaking to D?’

‘Yes, I am D.’

This simple affirmation of my identity is important to me. Then, some fragmented phrases:

‘Calling you from abroad... don’t get any foolish ideas... that I left Athens so I would not meet you...’

I don’t remember anything else. Ah, yes. ‘Do you need me?’ I ask. Yes, yes, yes, I need you, I want you, without you I can’t... That is what I want to hear. His words though say something else:

‘I try to need nothing and nobody.’

Then why is he tormenting me?

‘Enjoy yourself in Athens. No need to call back at this number. It will not be working.’

When the trembling stops, I call for a taxi. I tell Yiannis, the taxi driver, that I am on my way to a dungeon. That amazes him. We start chatting and he tells me about his family, the health problems of his kid, his money problems. In the end, he gives me his phone number. He offers to be my own personal taxi when I am in Athens. I accept.

At the dungeon, Marcel and I are alone. He uses me for about an hour. He makes me ask for it.

‘Please use me, Sir.’

He places a collar around my neck, pulls me by the leash, and orders me to walk around the dungeon on all fours like a dog. I am at a loss for words. I don’t know what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what could possibly be achieved by this pretentious show.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asks. ‘Are you ready to submit?’

‘I feel ridiculous,’ I say. ‘I am certainly not ready to submit.’

‘Okay. Let’s go for one more walk.’

We keep walking, a Master and his dog. It seems like a type of neurotic behaviour, where we keep performing the same act, hoping for different results. At the same time, I experience an impressive passivity. Deep in my heart, a small idea is becoming to dawn on me: I am a truly submissive woman. This feels natural to me. I do it even though I am resisting it, and the more I do it, the more natural it seems to me. I think it is my old self who is resisting. D is happy walking around on all fours.

After the dog walk, it is the turn of the vaulting horse. Marcel has me stand in front of the horse, with my hands holding firmly onto the handles. He lifts my skirt and pulls my knickers down to my ankles. I am to bend over the horse and stick my buttocks out as much as I can. The whips are used properly this time. I must admit that he is good at what he is doing.

‘How do you feel now?’ Marcel asks.

I no longer feel so ridiculous. I feel that I am trying to hit rock bottom. I want to sink lower, to become one with the ground, a nobody, just a thing for use. During the whipping, I retain a monumental apathy. It is as if there is another person living in me, observing my passivity while I am getting whipped on my blistered buttocks.

‘Don’t you cry,’ Marcel says. ‘Don’t you dare cry.’

I do not cry.

Back at the hotel, I pick up the phone and try calling Morpheus. The phone is ringing but no one picks it up. I know he is there, breathing softly, listening to the phone ringing. A Master and his sub, trapped together in this strange thing they are creating.

I still cannot cry.

I returned to Thessaloniki feeling wretched. I sent the Report to Morpheus that same night and I included an account of my session with Marcel at the dungeon. The next day I sent Morpheus the texts I had meanwhile exchanged with Marcel. The poor man could not spell for his life. For some reason, this was the perfect metaphor for my crazy life.

‘Did you get the trein? Are you traveling wit your body or wit your mind?’

‘I am still travelling with my mind. I am in bed.’

‘Make a video masterbaiting and send it.’

‘Did the video arrive?’

‘It did. I like that you R obidient and eaga. I want you to do one more thing for me.’

‘What would you like?’

‘I want you to make a video, put 4 fingers in your mouth. I want to see you sufer.’

‘I cannot suffer anymore today. You will have to wait until I recover my strength.’

‘You will do it now. I know when your strength is finished.’

I turn off the phone and go to sleep. When I wake up in the morning to go to work, I find Marcel’s text on my phone:

‘You will do it because I say so. Dont you trust me?’

I waited for Morpheus to reply. What would he do now? How would he deal with my lack of self-discipline?

Though he was still abroad, he responded almost immediately, which was unlike him. The first thing he asked of me was to get Slavoj Žižek’s book, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. That would help me understand how masochism worked, he said. There was a discussion in the book about Haneke’s film, *The Piano Teacher*. In a nutshell, he said, the female masochist – yes, apparently there are female masochists living among us – reproduces her own anxiety in the person who is administering the pain. The masochist is the one in control, not the sadist.

What was he trying to say to me? That I was making him anxious? That I was driving him away with my masochism?

>I am too busy to deal with your new escapades. Some of us have to work hard for a living. Do you think you and I are playing hide-and-seek in some old strip joint?

And then he got angry with me. He had received a whole bunch of emails, he said, from female members of the forum, who always liked to engage in a bit of gossip, asking him

about that woman claiming to belong to him and at the same time enjoying cheap joy rides in Athens. And all the while defying the third commandment!

The third commandment? What bloody third commandment? What was he talking about?

Then I noticed the title of the email, which had escaped me: 'Using a name in vain.' *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!* He was referring to the ten commandments! Jesus! Or rather... Yahweh?

I defended myself.

'Do you want to see only my light without my darkness? And you are calling me a romantic! You said you like to strip women. But how can I strip naked if no one is looking at me?'

My masochism had reached its zenith. Moral masochism, the worst kind. I was perfectly capable of killing myself just so I could send him the video.

>I am beginning to think that I am wasting my time with an old, mangey horse that limps here and there, ridden by the worst possible riders.

I could not blame him. The light and the darkness that I had fed him word for word, blister for blister, was nothing more than a series of vulgar moments. He did not deserve that. And yet here he was, patient (even if fuming), claiming now for himself a role greater than that of a father.

An idea began to form in my mind. In his writings in the forum, Morpheus had always insisted that a Master should never fall in love with his slave. He said that Masters were like surgeons; they would never operate on people they love. If they did, their hands would be shaking too much. If Morpheus fell in love with me, he would have to let me go.

The hundreds of pages of our correspondence pointed to his increasing obsession with me. Could it be that –

In my despair then, I did something unimaginable: I begged him not to fall in love with me. It was tragic. What was even more tragic was that I did not have the power to prevent it! What if he were too attracted to that stubborn, passionate D, who had appeared out of nowhere and was now living in me?

I prayed he would not begin to love me. I prayed and prayed, hoping there was a God other than Morpheus.

While waiting for Morpheus to return from abroad, I kept busy. I started preparing for the future and whatever that might bring. I cleaned my house until it was immaculate. I cooked. I took the kids to the movies. I called my mum and promised to visit. I even tried to educate myself for Morpheus. I bought Žižek's book and I also found some of his articles on the Internet. There was one criticising the modern world and the way we like to remove the core essence of our commodities: we love coffee without caffeine, beef without fat, and skimmed milk.

I could see that Morpheus was trying to educate me, to make me a better person, perhaps gradually instil some self-control in me. I was willing to bet that he was leading a disciplined, extremely uneventful life. Perhaps there was a perfect role for me there: I could be his entertainer, his private dancer, his court jester. His Anaïs Nin, who would write stories to make him horny. His own personal Collette, who would write books for his amusement and would dedicate them to him. Finally, a worthy role!

I read Žižek's book in one evening. The man was right... Isn't it crazy to have coffee without caffeine? And yet, there we were, Morpheus and I, like true products of our time: having an intense personal relationship of a sexual and religious nature, without sex and without God!

If I ever finished my book, I should send it to Žižek. He would laugh his head off!

HELSINKI

*And now,
since the relationship
had possessed actuality only figuratively,
she had to battle continually the doubt
whether the whole affair was not one of imagination.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

That summer it was sweltering hot in Thessaloniki. The nights I went out with Alice, we drank gin and lemonade, and talked about Morpheus and his reluctance to appear in the flesh, but also about the inadequacy of the drone-like men we met. We invariably returned home alone afterwards. Just as it seemed that the situation was leading us to an impasse, several things happened at once.

The first one was that Grandpa started sending me emails and claiming me for himself. I informed Morpheus immediately and asked him what he would like me to do about it. Grandpa was the oldest member of the BDSM community in Greece and everyone held him in great esteem. I knew he and Morpheus had met the previous year and that despite their different approaches to BDSM they respected each other immensely.

At about the same time, someone in the forum revealed to me Morpheus's first name. He had my father's name, Alexander! That was also my son's name, as is the tradition in Greece. There was a cosmic plan after all.

And thirdly, in a few days I had to travel to Helsinki on an educational visit, as an interpreter for a team from the hospital. I told Morpheus all about it and promised I would continue to write to him during the week I would be away, though I would not have my laptop with me (smartphones had not yet become available to the public).

Just before I departed for my trip to Finland, I confessed to Morpheus that I was very scared of aeroplanes. He had said once that this is a common trait of women who find it difficult to surrender control. I was apparently one of them.

There was something else that caused me considerable concern. What we were doing was so strange that I had nothing to compare it to.

'Is this game we are playing like a game of chess? Am I a fellow player or a pawn? Are we doing this together? And most importantly, is this good or evil?'

Inevitably that poor man came to mind, Dr Faust, who sold his soul to the devil. Would I have to give up my immortal soul in exchange for the ultimate pleasure?

The thing is, in this story everything is upside down. And though I did not know it yet, I would have to consider that question once more before the end of the summer.

From the Internet access point in my hotel in Helsinki, I sent Morpheus the following email:

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com
Sent: Sunday, 17 June, 2007, 21:00
To: Morpheus@zeromail.com
Subject: I am sorry

Now I know why I did what I did in Athens. I am scared. I fear you and I fear this thing we are creating. I was hoping you would leave me.

Can't you see how weak I am, how self-destructive? You should have put an end to everything when I asked you to. I am not young enough, pretty enough, clever enough, humble enough. The list goes on and on and I despair. Do you really want me to see contempt in your eyes, when you know how I feel for you?

You don't get it, do you? I will never leave you. You will have to leave me first.

From Thessaloniki we flew to Vienna and from Vienna to Helsinki. I am no longer afraid of aeroplanes. Best flight of my life! We travelled through the clouds and I was smiling like a fool. I even clapped my hands at some point. The Austrian guy sitting next to me thought I was a lunatic. At midnight the sun rose high up in the sky and it was red and marvellous. Later on, drinking gin at four in the morning in my room, the sun was shining bright outside my window and I was talking to you, feeling a million things that have no name. I can see the Opera House from my window.

You make me so happy and so unhappy.

In the morning, our tour guide noticed the silver D, the pendant I always wear round my neck. 'Are you D?' he said. My heart skipped a beat. They know about me even here, I thought. But I recovered at once and answered the same way I had answered you on the phone: 'Yes, I am D.' People are so strange. They will do practically anything to construct an identity where there is none. And when they get the opportunity to gain a life and a self that is worth something, they turn their back and walk away in fear.

I know I behaved in a foolish and selfish way. Will you forgive me?

D.

That was the last thing I learned in my basic training with Morpheus: how to ask for forgiveness.

Morpheus replied promptly, the following morning.

>If I am not deceived by my memory, you are probably enjoying the comfort of Scandic Continental Hotel.

He did not say much else, but in his email he included a link to a song by a Finnish band called Mika. I printed the lyrics and to this day I carry them in my purse, next to my children's photos, and the passage by Kierkegaard.

*Took a ride to the end of the line
Where no one ever goes
Ended up on a broken train with nobody I know.
It's as if I'm scared.
It's as if I'm terrified
It's as if I'm playing with fire.
Relax, take it easy
It's clear we don't understand it, but the last thing on my mind
Is to leave you.*

I was in the hotel lobby, at the heart of Helsinki, a forty-year-old woman who had stopped being tired of her life. I must have been the happiest person in Helsinki that night.

I was no longer afraid he might leave me. Nor did I care if the devil took us and threw us into the fires of hell.

The village of Porvoo was a magical place: colourful timber houses with little gardens overflowing with flowers, surrounded by shallow streams and tiny bridges. I was secretly waiting for the witch from the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale to come out and drag me into her house. This time I was not dressed pornographically, knowing that Morpheus disapproved. Long pink skirt with a lacey hem, pink top, and a pink jacket with beaded roses. I fitted well into this enchanted environment. I did not fit, however, into the group; I found my colleagues boring. I preferred the company of my thoughts and Morpheus.

The entire trip was organised to the last second. We were given ten minutes to spend at the Church of the Rock, a Lutheran church excavated into solid rock. I could have stayed there for hours, distracting myself to oblivion while talking to Morpheus in my head. Then we were off to Sibelius Park for taking pictures. I managed to climb up and sit in the lap of

the statue of Sibelius, the great Finnish composer. I stroked his face, as one of my colleagues took a photo, which I intended to send to Morpheus. D in the arms of Sibelius.

When we returned to the hotel, the group departed for some serious shopping. There was nothing I needed other than the Internet access point. My hotel had turned out to be Scandic Marski and I needed to tell Morpheus how wrong we had both been. What I saw from my window was not the Opera House but the Teatern. Drinking myself to a stupor and not wearing my glasses, I was practically blind the first night and gave him the wrong data. Funny how we were floundering here and there, two blind people in cold countries of the north, in a mental embrace that was barely touching the real. Every now and then we kicked each other softly, just to make sure we were still alive and breathing.

In the morning, I was woken up by the phone. It was the team leader. Everyone was on the bus, waiting for me, the formal interpreter of the seminar. I had not heard the alarm! I had been drinking in my room until the wee hours of the morning, in the imaginary company of Morpheus.

I got ready in ten minutes and dashed madly out of the hotel. I had not had any coffee, my hair was tangled, I reeked of gin, and I was wearing yesterday's clothes. A dreamy silhouette of a woman in love, victim to my drinking and my obsession with a stranger.

At the psychiatric hospital, which was the first part of our visit, my ordeal reached a new peak: I had no idea what the hell I was translating. The Finnish doctors had a very strange accent and I could not focus enough to understand them, so I made up most of it on the spot. I tried to keep a straight face and pretend I knew what I was talking about. My colleagues were even keeping notes! I needed a cup of coffee badly, or I would surely die – without ever meeting Morpheus!

The next day we took the ferry boat to Tallinn.

Tallin was a medieval city that had come out of a book. I quickly managed to escape from the group. As I wandered around, I stumbled upon the Museum of Medieval Torture. I kept inventory and took photos for Morpheus. A metal vice for crushing the foot. Another vice for the head, so the juices would flow out slowly. The Throne, where the victim would be tied upside down. Judas Cradle, a sharp pyramid on a pole. I touched it secretly, caressing the edge on which so many women had died impaled. Chastity belts made of metal. Torture chairs with metal spikes. I touched those carefully because they were rusty. And the final treasure: the Iron Maiden, a cabinet with iron spikes on the interior, where the victim would be locked until death delivered her from the vanity of this world.

The last day of our trip, we visited a psychiatric facility in the outskirts of Helsinki. The Head of the hospital was a Russian doctor, a fervent supporter of electric shock treatments. We could not believe our ears. It had been twenty years since we had abolished electric shocks. Those people had probably never heard of psychotherapy. Their neurologist was also Russian, a young, attractive man. They were all tall and handsome, blond with blue eyes, friendly and cheerful, likeable, and slightly dead.

‘Here we are asked to build Volkswagens, not Rolls Royces,’ they said. ‘Minimum care at a minimum cost for the maximum number of patients.’

Exactly the opposite to what Morpheus was doing with me.

I translated the presentation sloppily. My mind was elsewhere. The time had come to resign. I had more important things to do with my life: explore BDSM and what Morpheus called my *sacred genitalia*. I would form mysterious, magical relationships at a distance. Give up my bad habits. Write the book. Travel the world. Go north. An endless list.

In the evening, I visited Kiasma, the Museum of Modern Art. The Finnish had a sort of innocence that I really admired (the more I lost my own innocence, the more I appreciated those who still had it). They enjoyed trees, straw, twigs, and turned it all into art. I particularly liked one room: there was a white bed in the middle, lace curtains hanging from the ceiling. On three large screens, naked women were engaging in all sorts of Shaman rituals, with skulls and such. I felt at home in that room.

The trip to Helsinki ended that night at Club Storyville. I rarely felt pity for others, but this time I could not help it. Everyone stood around quietly, watching a rock band perform. They were all dead and did not know it. I had a drink with my colleagues, we shook our head sadly, and departed, leaving the poor people alone to their own devices. We were flying back the following day, at last. I had missed my children, the crowded streets, the loud voices. Above all, I wanted to feel a little closer to Morpheus.

But distance was only an illusion. I carried him with me, everywhere.

THE PASSENGER

*All love is secretive, even faithless love,
when it has the proper aesthetic factor in it.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

I returned to Greece feeling calm and happy. We were at the height of the Greek summer. Morpheus was keeping quiet after three months of the most intense communication. Maybe he was waiting to see what I was going to do, with the new suitors that had appeared in my life. On one hand there was Grandpa, who had returned forcefully, sending me unsettling emails. He was knowledgeable, intelligent, but pushy, pressurising me to make a choice. On the other hand, there was Manos, a dominant man from Crete, who seemed extremely brutal and a worthy opponent to Morpheus. They both advised me to stop wasting my time and try to form a real relationship. But how could I abandon the very thing that made me feel alive?

Faced with all those dilemmas and uncertain what to do, I asked myself: what would D do?

Simple, D said. Let's throw a party!

I invited several members of the community, some of whom I knew personally and some whom I had never met. I asked Morpheus not to come. I explained to him that he had managed to make our relationship so unequal that I would certainly pass out if I suddenly saw him in front of me. Besides, I knew he would not show up even if I invited him.

Morpheus was not reacting in any way to the presence of the two prospective suitors who had appeared in my life. A nagging doubt began to worm itself in me: what if Morpheus were not such a suitable suitor, after all? He had told me he was not a *noble* person – holding nothing sacred, not even his mother – but I was afraid that he was. What if I repelled him with the intensity of my desires, like Haneke's piano teacher had repelled her lover in the film? The funniest idea in the world was tormenting me: I was worried that he was not perverted enough for my tastes!

One thing was clear: I loved him passionately, almost destructively. I wanted to devour him in his entirety, gorge on his flesh, until he disappeared in me and I in him. Then he would be mine, only mine, for ever and ever! I begged him to write to me, to say anything at all. But he would not budge. He remained silent, even though I was surrounded by wolves. I could already feel their hot breath on me. It smelled of blood and I liked it.

I sent Morpheus one final question before the party:

‘Why isn’t it good for a woman to become a slave?’

I had seen that idea expressed in one of his writings and it had baffled me.

He sent me his answer the night of the party, as I was drowning my sorrow in alcohol, in the company of Grandpa and the other esteemed members of our community. My veranda seemed enchanted that night. The flowers were all in bloom and the green thuja trees growing in large pots in the perimeter of the veranda protected my guests from the prying eyes of the neighbours. My new friends arrived from Athens, as well as from Thessaloniki.

Master Ferris was first to arrive.

‘Beautiful sub, it is wonderful to see you again! When will you become my slave?’

He took my right hand and brought it to his lips. This was very much in contrast with the emails he had been sending me, where he described a possible life for me, locked up naked in a dark dungeon and brought out only to provide him with sexual pleasure.

‘Never, Master Ferris,’ I said smiling.

He accepted this with a small inclination of his head. Feeling very much at ease, he sat on one of the rattan sun loungers in the veranda.

‘Do you have whisky?’ he asked.

Thomas, dressed in a canary-yellow shirt and a black suit vest, was acting as my butler (if necessary, he would have killed for the role). He immediately brought a whisky on the rocks, bending his head low in humble servility. I could tell he would have loved to be tortured by Master Ferris. The second guest to arrive was a handsome and very athletic ex-army man from Athens, with the alias Ivan. He was a man who liked to blow his own trumpet a bit. He was followed by Grandpa and the people I had met at my first BDSM meeting. They started to arrive one by one, and I was very happy to see them all, especially Elias and Silky, with whom I had developed a warm friendship. We had gone out together a few times and had held heated discussions about the range of BDSM behaviours, from the authentic to the inauthentic. I suspected I was becoming an expert at both.

‘Morpheus says hi,’ Elias said. He wrote to me today.’

‘What? What did he say? Is he coming?’ I couldn’t believe it.

‘You wish! He said he cannot make it. But he would like to dedicate a song to all at the party: “The Passenger”, Iggy Pop.’

I went to my laptop, found the song online and played it. The lyrics were again directed straight at me. Morpheus may not have been present, but he took good care to mark what was his.

*I am a passenger
 And I ride, and I ride
 We'll ride through the city tonight
 And everything was made for you and me
 'Cause it just belongs to you and me
 So let's take a ride and see what's mine*

I could have cried. It was as if he was offering me the entire universe like an oyster in my hand. Elias was looking at me with an amused twinkle in his eyes. Could he tell how I felt for the elusive Morpheus? What was obvious to me could not possibly be obvious to an outsider. As the real and the imaginary were increasingly becoming one for me, I could not invite anyone else to this world. It was a private, mystical sphere containing Morpheus and me, like a bubble that stood suspended a few centimetres above reality.

That night I met Mistress S, a beautiful young woman from Athens. Natural beauty still excited me, but I had to admit that beauty was not a usual preoccupation in the BDSM circles. In my quest for a Master, I had realised quite early that the usual criteria did not apply here.

Mistress S had already had some experiences with submissive men. Contrary to what was common practice, she had paid them for a session with her.

'Dear D,' she said, and it became a habit for her to address me so, and still does to this day, 'I am not incapable of remorse. Once, the session got very intense. Though the young man was accommodating, wishing to give me anything I wanted, I just had to give him a generous tip afterwards. He looked so wretched!' She laughed.

'What does S stand for?' I asked.

'Sadism,' she replied simply, as if she were giving me the recipe for rabbit.

She was wearing the most beautiful pair of designer sandals I had ever seen in my life. Her toes were a fetishist's dream come true. Thomas fell instantly in love with her and followed her around for the rest of the night like a lost puppy, trying not to neglect his duties as a butler. He did very well, and his reputation took a turn for the better that night.

Another woman who attended my party was a sub from Thessaloniki, called Belle de Jour, after the film. She was around my age and was also destined to become a lifelong friend, like S. She took me aside, at some point, to confess to me her secret kink: public humiliation.

‘Is it possible to have a little play tonight?’ she asked. ‘We can go inside the living room, draw the curtains...’

‘No one will stop you if you want to play,’ I said. ‘As long as it is safe, sane and consensual.’

And true enough, a little later, on my way to the kitchen to bring more ice, I saw Belle in the living room, on my green velvet couch, an antique from 19th century England. She was held face down by Master Ferris and Ivan, as the two men took turns to spank her bare bottom!

A young man, called Staccato, played the piano for us. Alice was there too. She was friendly to all the ‘perverts’, but she soon got drunk and left with a young engineer. The fact he was considerably shorter than her did not seem to discourage her in the least.

‘Oh, he’s just a snack,’ she whispered in my ear and giggled her way to the elevator.

The night went by swimmingly, with BDSM discussions until late. The question that was put under the microscope was if the lambs taken to slaughter really want to be killed.

‘It is in their nature,’ Elias insisted. ‘They are drawn irresistibly to their own death, there is no doubt about it.’

Everyone disagreed with that, especially the subs. Their voices intermingled, male and female alike. ‘No, they do not want to die.’ ‘They are led to their slaughter, willy-nilly.’ ‘Forced.’ ‘Helpless.’

I do not remember what else was said, because I drank too much. After midnight, I started drinking plain water, but I could not sober up. I do remember this though: at some point I accidentally interrupted Grandpa. In the heat of the discussion, I wanted to interject something which I thought was important.

‘Surely, you cannot possibly know how a lamb feels,’ I said. ‘You are only assuming – and as you always say, assuming is not allowed. Why don’t you ask the lamb for a change?’

Grandpa turned and glared at me. I flinched. I had not expected this. What did it matter if I interrupted him? Would the planet stop revolving on its axis? And anyway, everything was made for me and Morpheus. I was the passenger – this was MY planet. Most importantly: does God ever get angry?

Belle, who had meanwhile come out to the veranda again, flustered and glowing happily, intervened and saved the day:

‘They want what they don’t want,’ she said.

Everyone went quiet, pondering the depth of the statement.

The party went on until four in the morning. This is a usual thing in Greece; the nights are very hot in the summer and the neighbours quite tolerant. Grandpa was the last to leave, carrying with him my firm and perhaps slightly impolite rejection:

‘You are not suitable for me because you are not inhuman enough.’

I don’t know if he understood what I meant. His reaction when I interrupted him had reminded me of an old film, *The Man Who Would Be King*. The protagonist is thought to be a god and becomes the king of a wealthy tribe. He falls in love with a local girl, but during the wedding ceremony, when he tries to kiss her, she bites him and he bleeds. This reveals the truth, that he is only human after all. He ends up losing the throne – and his life. In a similar way, Grandpa had revealed to me that he was only too human.

I shut the door behind Grandpa and staggered to my laptop to see if I had any messages from the real God.

I did.

>Your non-sensical questions would have made you Ludwig’s pride and joy! There is nothing good or bad in a woman’s becoming a slave. To evaluate this state of existence, there would have to be a code of ethics about what is good or bad. Last time I looked, there wasn’t one.

What about Aristotle? Christianity? Love thy neighbour? My code of ethics was intact, dammit! Perhaps Morpheus was trying to live up to his initial assumption of the role of Dr Lecter. Well, the naïve, gentle Clarice, had news for him. My lambs were not silent! They were obstinate, unwilling!

>I would like you to consider for a moment the word ‘become’ and how that applies to your question. A woman may one day become conscious of the fact that she is indeed a slave. She does not wake up one morning with the conscious choice of becoming a slave and opening the relevant manual.

He was wrong. I was going to become a slave even if I had to burn down the entire universe, not just my life! More than that, I would become *his* slave, whether he wanted it or not. My insipid desires had been transformed into a raging torrent flowing towards one final destination: Morpheus. I was swimming desperately in the dark waters and my only worry was that I might drown before I reached him before I took him in my arms and pulled him under with me. I wanted us to die together, in a tight embrace, in a last moment of sweet happiness, in one spasm, with his last breath burning in my mouth.

He had driven me to madness. He had transformed me into a being obsessed with a single idea: him! That was what we were building together. A world completely cut off from

the rest of existence, something horrific, wondrous, vibrant, perverted, without physical contact, without anything tangible, without any connection to the ordinary, everyday reality.

It had taken him three months to transform me into that... *thing*. I had become a monster. I had stopped going out, saw practically no one other than Alice and Thomas, and spent my days and nights at home, with my cats and my books. My children did not pay much attention to me, they had their own life. I lived a half-life, I almost vegetated. I had no idea where Morpheus was taking me, but I could feel his control over me increasing day by day.

‘You are taking one finger at a time, aren’t you?’

The only thorn I could still perceive was my lack of humility, which I pointed out to him. I felt important, worthy, even if I had expressed some momentary self-doubt while in Helsinki. The Mika song had boosted my ego once more, as did ‘The Passenger’, dedicated to me in front of an entire congregation of BDSMers.

I knew enough about BDSM already to sense that if he wanted me as his slave, he had no other choice but to deal with the big idea I had about myself. I knew that moment could not be far away, and I was truly afraid of what it would do to me.

>This train compartment for smokers is despicable and the passengers are even worse. I took the decision to write to you – imagine how bored I must be!

A proper email, a long one, at last! Morpheus was still abroad, so this was in English.

>I thought of you about an hour ago, while I was using the urinals at a European airport. A young man was shaking his penis for much longer than it seemed necessary. He was standing in the middle urinal, looking all around him, worrying whether he would find someone to pay him for a blowjob. A middle-aged man to his left was taking his time urinating, waiting for all of us to leave so he could pounce on the opportunity. I shook my penis carefully and left without washing my hands.

>I thought of you then, not because I consider you a toilet slut (even if you are one). I met an amazing woman once, in Germany. She used to go to a Kino and wait behind a glory hole, just so she could give a blowjob to men who thought they were being blown by a man! In case you are wondering, no, I did not fuck her. I do not fuck every perverted woman I come across.

That was the first time he described to me scenes from his life. It was pure misery. The only ray of light in his train was his decision to write to me.

‘You are on the wrong train, Sir,’ I whispered to myself, wishing Morpheus could hear me. ‘Get out while there is still time.’

>I thought of you because I think you are ready to hear this: there is no one in the world that would acknowledge your uniqueness, accept your weaknesses, and instead of being repulsed by the peculiarities of your personality, pick you out of the pool of available women, to have and to hold and so on. There are only people like me who have forgiven themselves and therefore have forgiven all others too (though to forgive themselves, they first had to hate themselves deeply).

I could not understand it. Why would he hate himself? It didn’t make any sense.

>The catch is that those who can accept you, people like me, cannot make you feel unique. They are useless to you. Even worse – they are dangerous to your complacency, your narcissism. Against them you have only one weapon: to give them a name. That is why you were dying to find my name. Lacan is right to say, ‘the symbol is the murder of the thing’. Maybe he also liked the same poet I liked when I was young. The poet says somewhere: ‘by a name I know not how to tell thee who I am.’ But this phrase is unbearable, so people choose another phrase, a few lines above: ‘a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.’

Nothing was unbearable. Nothing except the fact that he kept throwing at me lines from ‘Romeo and Juliet’.

‘Just give me a whip, Sir, and I will explain to you how the whole thing works. A whip, a whip, my kingdom for a whip.’ I was talking to my laptop. Alas, Morpheus could not hear me. ‘And I do not need anyone to pick me out of the pool of available women. I already stand out in the goddamn pool of available women. If my personality is not complex and marvellous, then something is rotten in the kingdom of Denmark.’

I was upset but I kept reading, as if my life depended on it.

>When the Hebrews forbid the naming of Yahweh, and the Muslims forbid the making of images of God, when protestants denounce icons, erecting their churches in pointed spires towards heaven above, they know what they are doing. They are protecting their awe. But you prefer to revert comfortably to the Byzantine childishness of the restoration of the icons.

>The vapours of Bosphorus suffocate you. The desire of the impossible frightens you. Even the word ‘jouissance’ bothers you – the name destroys the awe of desire. You think you can possess both: jouissance in its entirety and your lover between your legs. You want to

have your cake and eat it. I am sorry, but you are chasing the impossible, like all romantics. Don't you think that Kierkegaard knew that?

What was he saying? That it was impossible to experience jouissance unless we kept it in the sphere of our imagination? That a proper, physical relationship negated passion? But that would mean that he would never –

I did not want to think about it. I needed him in my life. Without him I had nothing.

Then he cast the seed of the idea that would bring me to the next stage of our relationship. He said that deeply rooted in my way of thinking was the concept of fair exchange. From the first moment, I had tried to discover his motives, what he was getting out of our communication. I was seeking a sort of balance, even in the asymmetrical relationship I was attempting to establish with him.

>The idea of exchange in a relationship can be supported only by someone who is (supposedly) important. The important person has something to exchange, indeed. Whoever thinks oneself unimportant would never believe in the concept of exchange, because there would be nothing to give – and all to take!

Lovely. I got it. So why didn't he just leave me alone then?

>There was one more reason I intervened in your life – I am almost cursing the moment. An aesthetic reason. I studied your writings and I saw that you were the victim – and perpetrator – of an aesthetic mistake. It was a surreal complaint against the chasm opening in front of you, upon reaching middle age. The tools you had been honing during your entire life would soon go blunt. Tools you had always used, like the lust of others. If you lost that, what could you possibly exchange?

Did he really believe that? That I could not inspire desire in others? I was forty, not a hundred and forty!

>It was not imagination piercing reality that was your undoing. It was exactly the opposite. The real suddenly appeared at your door. You tried to deal with it in a clever way. That is exactly what I said to you. Clever, remember?

>I have nothing else to say to you. And I do not know if we will ever meet. I cannot imagine what the point would be. The only garden I am interested in now is this (and he attached a link to the 'Garden of Earthly Delights', a painting by Hieronymus Bosch).

'If you continue to talk to me about mindless fucks, I will throw up over the keyboard. A Master should teach by example. The only example I see is that of shallowness. Thanks, but no thanks.'

This was my reply to his email.

>And I do not know in which part of the triptych we could (if we could) live together.

‘Don’t be silly, my love. We are already living together.’

That was all. I got up then and started packing my suitcase. I would accept Alice’s invitation to a three-day gypsy ethnic festival in Vlasti, a village up on Mount Voion, two hours from Thessaloniki. I needed to calm down and think.

I informed Morpheus where I was going, and he sent me one last email:

>I hope what you seek will find you... perhaps at a gypsy ethnic festival... perhaps somewhere else. Who knows....

What did I seek, other than him in my life? Would he come and find me at an ethnic festival up on the mountains? Was this the moment I had been waiting for? I had the feeling this man was capable of anything. But whatever happened, my feelings would not change. I had retired into my own, private universe, where I lived with him, and I was happy there.

The next morning, Alice and I drove to Mount Voion. I took with me the folder with all my correspondence with Morpheus, which I printed at the office. I wanted to continue to read his emails every day and keep our inward conversation going. I knew I was slowly going insane, but that is how these things are.

Does anyone believe that Romeo and Juliet were not insane?

At the park of Prophet Elias, in the outskirts of the village of Vlasti, the soft hills were awash with colourful tents set up by city people. We had come here to celebrate Mother Earth and listen to ethnic jazz bands from the Balkans. Alice insisted that we set up our tent on a steep slope, and I gave in to her whims, as usual. That meant we would sleep on a slope downhill at a 45° angle. Her chosen spot was among the trees, without any sun, so we would get to feel the mountain cold to the bone. God, what a nutter!

Not that I was much better. I had brought with me my beach outfits and not a single sweater. I put on the warmest clothes I could find in my carry-all and I was still shivering. Alice took pity on me and gave me an orange woollen blanket that looked like a poncho. I wrapped myself in it, in gratitude. If Morpheus could see me now, he would turn around and run away. I bet I looked nothing like the elegant sorts he must have been used to.

In the evening, Alice and I went to find something to eat. Long tables had been set up beneath the trees. Village women served home-cooked food in paper plates and sold cheap, homemade wine by the litre. We had divine meatballs, kebabs and a creamy salad with

cheese and chilli peppers. Alice bought a plate of oven-baked beans. I had only one bean. If Morpheus chose to come after all and my belly was full of wind, it could be very embarrassing. Alice said he would not show up and he had sent me that last email only to torment me and spoil my weekend.

After our dinner, we lay down on the grass, in the forest clearing. I had already peed on my right boot and my knickers behind the trees. I could not find showers anywhere and the toilets were disgusting – though not as disgusting as the ones Morpheus had described to me.

‘I will never speak to you again,’ I said to Alice, ‘if you tell anyone that I brought with me a hair dryer and straightening tongs.’

I had brought much more, but I did not confess it even to her. Pumice stone for the soles of my feet and a Moschino body lotion. What was I thinking? By the time Morpheus arrived, if he did, I would be a filthy hag, with my hair hanging in oily strands, wearing socks that could walk by themselves.

At some point, a helicopter went past.

‘Ah, the VIPs are here,’ Alice said.

‘It is Morpheus,’ I said. ‘He has come for me.’

I imagined him riding in the helicopter, drinking his favourite Chateau Margaux wine, and listening to ‘The Passenger’, all the while trying to spot a silver D hanging from the neck of a half-mad ageing hippy in an orange poncho.

He could still surprise us all and arrive with the plebs by coach, wearing flowery shorts and flip flops. Anything was possible.

Next morning, I woke up from a non-sleep. All night long I shivered in the freezing cold. My pillow was a hard carry-all filled with hairdressing stuff and cosmetics. Every half hour I woke up to find I had slid downhill and was crushed against the bottom part of my tent. It seemed that would be the only crushing experience reserved for me this weekend. It saddened me somewhat. I wanted to be crushed. I was a lamb walking to the slaughter – but it seemed I was still boringly safe.

Most importantly, I needed an urgent pee. No, not yet. I refused to get out of the tent in the arctic cold.

I held it in as long as I could. At last, I emerged from my tent and ran to the toilets – a mile away. There I discovered the showers and took a frozen shower. I wanted to be clean, in case Morpheus came. The frozen shower was warmer than my first night in the tent. Just as I started to think I had acclimatised myself, my pocket mirror informed me of the cruel truth: I

was a wreck. The hardship – inner and outer – had taken its toll. I felt nothing but deep remorse over the last email I had sent him. He would think I was full of myself (which I was) and that I was dreaming midsummer night’s dreams (which I also was). I wanted to tell him I had read the Bard in his entirety, and that I could easily recite whole passages by heart (*Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, like me, an idiot full of sound and fury, like me, etc, etc*) without being unduly romantic. I also wanted to tell him that it was not worth living without dreaming. I wanted to re-enact all the love scenes, vanilla or not, in all the books in the world for him, with him. But where was he?

I spent my morning sitting on the grass in front of my tent, reading my newest acquisition, titled (fittingly) the *Hell Book*, by Carlo Frabetti. *The punishment of the sinner is the sin itself*. This was my punishment: I had shut myself in my own private hell. With a little help from Morpheus, who was apparently serving time for his own sin. Perhaps he hated himself for living in his shallow garden of earthly delights. I was not any better: I was living in the reflection of my life, *in the immense palace of my own words*. Trapped in my own book, a D with nowhere to go. A character in search of her lover.

I understood everything now, in a peculiar state of the utmost lucidity. Unfortunately, I became so lost in thought that I sat in the sun for hours and suffered a serious sunburn. My body turned to the body of a construction builder. Morpheus should see me now with my T-shirt imprinted on my skin. Why couldn’t I get control over even the simplest things in my life?

In the afternoon, a large procession of boys and girls appeared through the woods. They were chanting and playing tambourines, dancing under the trees like satyrs and nymphs, celebrating the fertility of Mother Earth. *The sacred genitalia*, I thought, and joined them in spirit. I did not have the strength to get up and dance.

Later in the evening, Alice and I went to the concert in the village. A sixteen-member band from the Balkans played all the songs from Kusturica’s movies. What an unforgettable experience! Afterwards, drunk out of our minds, we had a huge fight around the campfire. I was with Alice and Fotis, the artist, and the entire gang. We were arguing about the existence of a clear code of ethics. I said there was one but Alice said no. Fotis agreed with me. Alice got upset and pinched me hard on the arm, using her long nails. I threw my drink at her face. Our plan for a summer holiday together had just been scrapped.

The following morning, the gang and I somehow ended up in Namata, a mountain village twenty minutes away from Vlasti. Alice was still not talking to me. Fotis and his friends were playing rebetiko songs. We sat in the tavern at the village square and had the

best breakfast of our lives: freshly baked bread with butter and jam, manouri cheese, coffee – and as the time wore on and it was now lunch time, we simply continued to eat and drink: fried aubergines, tzatziki, lamb, Batzos cheese, tsipouro, homemade wine.

Later, a feast began in the tavern to honour a baby's baptism and we were invited to participate. A marvellous, unforgettable day.

I went on keeping notes on the last page of the *Hell Book*, so I could share it all with Morpheus when I got back. This was the song Fotis and the gang were playing:

*Her sweet words were lies – all lies
Her sweet kisses were fake – all fake*

If it were all a lie, I would leave him. I would go to Crete, to Manos, the wolf who smelled of blood. He wanted me, his persistent emails said so. And he was interested in the real me, not in a relationship at a distance. I had enough of Morpheus and his mindless fucks in the garden of earthly delights – lessons in shallowness. I would give lessons in passion, to whoever wanted to learn.

At the song 'Pagia' I got up and danced. I could bear it no longer, I would burst. It seemed I was the village hit, the feast exploded. For someone whose tools were about to go blunt, I was doing great. The bottles of tsipouro kept coming, bought by the celebrating villagers who were having the time of their life. If it went on like that, I would find myself betrothed here in the end. Perhaps to some landowner. Even better, a goat herder. Highly suitable for D.

Fotis dedicated the 'Princess' to me:

*I want this but I do that
One day I'll straighten up
Why try to change your ways
Why be right always
The wind blows out there
But in here princess
Your light is everywhere*

My right hand was shaking uncontrollably. No matter, it would pass. Last song.

*He's betting on a mangy horse – winning five hundred
I'm betting on an eagle's force – and losing five hundred.*

I could not stop laughing. Why explain anything to anyone? This was *my* life. I would burn it if I wanted to.

STRIPTEASE

I am watching the birth of love within her.
(S. Kierkegaard)

Back in the city, my messenger lit up with a hundred notifications. They were all from Manos, who had returned to the chase with more determination than before. He was intelligent, witty, confident, persistent. The reluctance of Morpheus to affirm his interest in me had become unbearable, and I was very tempted to give in to this passionate man. We started having lengthy chats every night and he would often ask me to turn on my camera so he could see me. I complied, though he never showed his face. It was becoming increasingly difficult to say no to him, though he was very different from Morpheus. Instead of castigating me for my wicked ways, Manos wanted me to feel good about myself.

‘Embrace your narcissism,’ he said. ‘It is what makes you unique.’

I was sure he had developed this ingenious method to steal other people’s slaves. He was already in a relationship with a submissive woman, but so what? I was in a relationship too, even if it was only in my mind.

I pleaded with Morpheus:

‘If there is something you need to tell me, Sir, now is the time.’

But he remained silent, as if he couldn’t care less if I had sex with another man. With my limited knowledge of BDSM relationships, I could not understand his lack of possessiveness. But it was there, as I would soon find out, and it was much fiercer than the possessiveness one encounters in vanilla affairs.

While Manos urged me to let my sexuality come to the surface, Morpheus waited patiently for the seed he had sown to sprout. I had already started to dwell on what he had said in his last email: I would never be able to have a proper relationship with him because I had nothing to offer in return. I found the idea mean and preposterous. Nevertheless, I thought about it.

What chance did I have? I fell into the next circle of hell, right where I belonged.

REPORT: TUESDAY, JULY 17

22:00 I am dancing in front of the camera for someone I cannot see. Manos enjoys the spectacle to the last minute until all my clothes have come off. ‘Marvellous,’ he says, ‘just marvellous.’

23:30 I am extremely horny, but Manos said every two hours, until ten in the morning. Twelve hours of this... thing, to which I consented. Now I must wait until midnight. The first one will be easy. I don't even need a fantasy. Just a touch, two or three light pinches, and I'm there. Pff... piece of cake.

I take some paracetamol for my headache. How much of a betrayal was the striptease? I don't see it as a betrayal and therefore it is not one. This is not a dirty thing. I honestly like Manos.

Twenty-five minutes left.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 18

12:10 This is not easy after all. I am thinking of Morpheus. This is his hardest lesson. It will either break me or make me walk away. He said he could see no point in ever meeting me. He wants to show me how insignificant I am. And to think, I believed he could not be cruel enough. What a fool I've been!

But this is not helping. Okay. Back to Manos. The striptease. 'Marvellous,' he said. Something is stirring now. Ah, I got it. I need a little fantasy to get going: what does he do to his girlfriend? He ties her up in chains, she cannot move. She has to endure this for ever and ever. Suddenly the fantasy changes: it is not his girlfriend, it is I who is tied up. I think of Manos standing next to my bed. He says I must always do what he wants. I hate being tied up and I tell him so. I do both voices, speak the words in the still of the night. 'That is why I chained you,' he says. 'Because you don't like it. One more hour.' 'Please,' I say, 'I have been here for so long.' He caresses me tenderly, running his fingers through my hair. 'Two more hours then,' he says. 'Two hours, two.'

The orgasm comes riding on a series of deep moans. I try to muffle them as best I can. The night is very quiet, and the kids are asleep.

1:55 I wake up before the alarm goes off. I had a nightmare, but I don't remember what it was. It is too hot in my room. I have a glass of water and turn on the air conditioning. I bring my hands between my legs and start playing with myself again. This is not working. I will go back to sleep. So tired.

But no! I get stubborn. I start rubbing my genitals as hard as I can. If they want me to hate myself, I will do it. I try to hate myself and I do it so sincerely and so diligently that I

almost manage it. I imagine I am with Morpheus, that he brings me to the edge and then stops, again and again. He is mocking me, playing dirty tricks on me. He says I must learn to come when *he* wants me to come.

I hate myself more and more for doing what I am doing right now. But I am doing it. This time the orgasm comes softly, with two or three pathetic whimpers. I come with pleasure but at the same time without pleasure. A very weird sensation: to be seething with self-hatred, while having an orgasm. I must tell Alice about it, see what she thinks.

2:30 I cannot go back to sleep. I tiptoe to the kitchen quietly so as not to wake up the kids and I eat their leftovers from dinner. Drink more water, then back to my room. I have spent three months in here. And what else do I have to do? Climax four more times? Or five? Manos told me to stop at 11:00. If I play with myself every two hours, then the last time will be at ten in the morning. This means there are only four orgasms left.

I get tangled up in stupid thoughts on purpose, so that I can avoid the truth. The truth is this: the man I worship as a God asked me to stop loving myself. I am less than what I think of me, he said. Unimportant, he said, with nothing to offer. How can I think of myself as less? How can I stop loving me?

I need to sleep if I want to make it to work in the morning. Alice will laugh at my face if I tell her what I have been doing all night.

4:00 This time the hatred comes easy, it's almost instantaneous. I feel it the moment I decide not to turn to the wall and go back to sleep. Manos is trying to tell me something with all this. Fine. I will do it. I will be his whore, dance for him the whole night long.

My body is not responding. I have to steal the orgasm. I no longer know who it is I am doing this for. One minute it is Manos, a man with dark hair I have seen once in a blurry picture. The next minute it is Morpheus, a man I know well but whom I have never seen. I will stick with the second one. He ties me with my legs stretched open. I try to close them, but to no avail. Now he summons his friend, the Peasant. He knows I am a snob, and I will hate that. The Peasant is a rude, crude man from the forum. He sticks a tiny needle in my genitals. He does it again and again, never tires of watching me squirm. How much longer?

He brings out a catheter.

'This must be done in front of an audience. A public humiliation will help you understand what it means to be an O. A nobody.'

I experience an intense, powerful orgasm, together with intense, private hatred. I am close to entering hell. My cat is staring at me with pity. I pet his head between the ears and try to go to sleep listening to his soft purring. At least someone loves me.

4:30 I cannot sleep. I have just realised the absurdity of my situation. I was looking for one Master and I have found two! One of them makes me dance lewdly for him and the other one is pushing me gently to intense self-hatred. And what do I do? I combine the two. Can it be done? Sure, sure it can be done. I despise myself while I dance in my bed, coming again and again, while dying inside. After a certain point it does not even hurt so much. God, help me. I am the angel who fell from heaven. I am Lucifer and I have lost everything.

I must get some sleep, or I will go crazy. I will never make it through the next one.

6:00 I will give up now. I cannot do this anymore. I am a wreck.

I struggle with myself for five minutes. Close my eyes, decide to give up. Go to sleep. You are done. You are a failure. Your sweet words were lies – all lies.

Then D takes over. I can feel her rising from my very bones. It is a mist, a moisture, the priestess of my sacred genitalia. I lift my head, grit my teeth. I look at my left hand. It is clenched into a tight fist. You will do this. One more step, descend to hell. Let's go again.

Private hatred, simmering. You are not who you thought you were. You are much less. Evidently. Everyone is.

Let's go. Focus on the hatred. I begin with Alpha – he was the first one after all. He makes me count the strokes, but I do it all wrong. After 2 comes 5 and after 5 comes 1. I can never get it right. Master P and his slave Tanya arrive next. They want to tie me to the bed. 'Three hours at least,' his slave says. 'Or even better, make it six! Six! Six!' She is shrieking now. I am at the mercy of all those people I met. They were supposed to help me live my dreams. Have I hurt them in any way? I don't know. Master X is next. He is beating me with the brown leather belt. But his hand is trembling too much, he is so old. Then comes the little man from the Gauguin suite. He offers me a glass of white wine. But it is not wine, it smells badly. I turn my head away in disgust. Grandpa is the last one to come. He spits on my face. No one else dares to come near me. Neither Manos nor Morpheus have the courage to show themselves. I am in hell, my mouth full of black insects.

'You are a big zero. You are such a big zero that nobody wants you. You are nothing. Nothing. Nothing.'

Nothing.

And that's it. I come. I come and I come and I come. Somewhere there, some strange place behind the pain, there is my pleasure too. It has fallen on its knees, a penitent whore. Is that thing really me? Who cares. I will sleep now. I am truly the best there is. Because I am the biggest nothing of them all.

I fall asleep on the wet, sweaty bedsheets. I don't care. I have won.

8:00 The kids have left for school. I am alone now. Back to my task.

But it's impossible. I can't do it. This confirms once more what a big zero I am. I am so vapid that I give up, thinking that if it were every three hours and not every two, I would have made it.

I will write the Report at work and send it to both of them. Let each one carry his own portion of the blame.

8:20 I am not surprised in the least. The whore takes a cold shower and returns to the wet bed.

Fantasies intermingling, chaotic, incoherent. At the core there is only one thing: *you will come when I want you to come*. I don't know who is saying that, but it is certainly not I. Surprisingly, the body obeys, responding willy-nilly to the order. I cry myself to the orgasm, with real tears, raging. What a wonderful life!

10:00 I made it to the office, late as usual. Alice is worried about me. I have black circles under my eyes and my hair is a mess.

'I'm okay, I didn't sleep much. I will tell you about it later.'

The Manager calls me and says he wants to see me. But it is time for another orgasm. I find some excuse and tell him I will be there in 10 minutes. He grumbles but what can he do?

I go to the toilet with a heavy heart. I pull down my trousers and my knickers, begin to touch myself reluctantly. I am an open wound.

But this is not entirely unpleasant! Surprise. I look in the mirror at the woman with the dimple on the left cheek. I am very curious about her. My God, she can really do this! The thought turns me on instantly.

I pull my trousers up, look away from the mirror. I will not do this one. This is my choice. I have earned this choice.

The seed Morpheus had planted in me has sprouted. Now I know how Morpheus came to hate himself. It is not difficult at all.

But what I cannot understand is how he managed to forgive himself.

The Manager looked at me inquisitively. I must have looked like a ghost. *My good man, you try and masturbate every two hours all night long and see how you feel afterwards.* I sweetly promised to work on the finances of the new programme. I had no intention of keeping my promise. I had more important things to do with my life. Let him wait. Let everyone wait.

Back in my office, under Alice's gaze, I finished writing the Report for Morpheus. I pressed 'send' and prayed to God he would not abandon me for taking orders from Manos. I ended the Report with the following words:

'I have nothing to give to anyone. I can only take whatever is given to me. That is what I have come to understand after last night. This does not make me unimportant. Perhaps, from a different angle, this makes me very important. Because if you have so much in surplus and you choose not to offer to someone like me, who has nothing, who is nothing, how important does that make you?'

I hid the finances of the programme in my drawer, said goodbye to Alice, and went to the personnel department to ask for a leave of absence effective immediately. I needed to recuperate. Despina, the Head of the department, seeing how haggard I looked, signed the form right away.

That same Friday, I took my trusted tent again and set off for my favourite beach in Halkidiki.

The drive from Thessaloniki to Tristinika takes about two and a half hours. I set up my tent on the beach, and after a lengthy swim, I sit in the sun the entire afternoon. I enjoy being alone among a large crowd of people. The sea is cool and crystal clear, so much so that I can see little fish swimming by my feet. I have a modest meal of bread and cheese under my umbrella and wash it down with gin and tonic.

As the sun begins to set, a cloud of mosquitos starts to fly around me. I spray myself from head to toe with insect repellent, thinking that if Morpheus could smell me now, he

would pick up his Chateau Margaux and walk away from me for ever. I have brought some candles with me so I can see just about enough to write to Morpheus. I will send him the email when I return to the city. I cannot bear to spend three days on my own and not share my experiences and thoughts with him.

I am wearing a short black skirt and a black top that belongs to my youngest daughter (we are all sharing our clothes and our shoes, isn't it sweet) but it has a small hole on the side. I can only imagine the mirth that my life and appearance bring to a bon viveur like you. I swam for hours and I now feel all sticky with the salt on my skin. I will stay salty for three days.

The moon is half full tonight and very bright. I have four small candles around me in a circle. I am trying to discern the constellations. I see them clearly, but I cannot name them (and therefore I do not kill them). Two fireflies are flitting near me (I allow them to live too). A multitude of shooting stars are falling out of the sky tonight. I haven't made any wishes. I don't know what to wish for. There is a bar up on the rock, called Ethnic. If cops decide to bust us for wild camping, we will be in trouble. But some of us on the beach have whistles and they will warn the others who do not.

I cried my little heart out earlier on, under the umbrella, while writing to Manos. I am not sure if what I am doing with him is right. I think I should stop it now. He was only trying to help because he thought I was unhappy. He was wrong. Besides, no one can help me now.

When I can no longer see to write in my notebook under the candlelight, I go to the bar on the rock. How wonderful it is that I do not need to hit on men anymore! For three whole days I am going to have the time of my life. Apart from the books I have brought with me, I have a notebook and two pens, a bottle of ouzo for lunch, a bottle of gin for the night and six packets of cigarettes. I will go on a diet once I return to the city. I am sure I will manage to control my bad habits.

The end of the first night finds me very sleepy and slightly inebriated. This time I do not have a bag full of hair dryers and straightening tongs with me, but I am wearing a fabulous satin black nightie. I see no reason why I cannot sleep in style just because I am sleeping alone.

In the morning the heat wakes me up. I take a very long swim in the cool water and spend the entire morning under my umbrella, reading the latest book by Irvin Yalom, *Momma and the Meaning of Life*. I talk with Morpheus for hours in my head and stay on the beach until it is dark.

I meet all my neighbours from the nearby tents. They come and introduce themselves to me. Such nice people. I have dinner at the nearby tavern, fried mussels and octopus, and I

drink a small bottle of ouzo. The night is divine. There is even a full moon, as if the universe were staging a play. Is this the final act in the love story I am living?

At midnight I go to the bar on the rock. I sit by myself and go on chatting with Morpheus, doing nothing, just looking around without really seeing. A great big smile is growing inside me. I am already half insane and I know it, but there is nothing I can do about it.

Perhaps that inner smile has found its counterpart on my face, because the bar's maintenance man, a Russian immigrant, comes and sits next to me. I remember him from last year when I was a normal woman. He is about sixty years old, short and bandy-legged, with a couple of golden teeth in his mouth.

'Dorra,' he says, rolling his r's, 'you arre a verry attrractive woman.'

'Thank you,' I say, 'but I already belong to someone.'

He does not seem surprised by that. Do normal women say similar things? I cannot remember how it was to be normal. When it is time to go, I let the Russian kiss me on my cheek. Some people around us look on in astonishment. Am I behaving like Bruckner's Dora? In his book, *L' Amour du Prochain*, Dora offers her body to anyone who wants it, out of Christian charity. The thought amuses me. Another character from a book! When will they stop writing books about me? I make a mental note to add this to my writings to Morpheus in the morning. He will certainly laugh at that.

Though the distance from my tent to the bar is very small, a couple of minutes along a sandy road by the beach, I have taken the jeep. By the time I leave the bar I am quite drunk. What the hell, I should be fine for just one minute of driving. I arrive at my tent and reverse the jeep so that it will not be facing the sun in the morning. Just as I begin to reverse, I hear a crunching noise from the passenger's side. I have crashed into a van parked next to me.

A man stands up and approaches the van to examine the damage. It is the guy from the neighbouring tent. I get out of my jeep and walk unsteadily towards him. I have dented his door.

'I am so sorry. I just did not see it in the dark,' I mumble. It is not dark. The full moon is like a huge light bulb in the sky and the van is white.

But the man is smiling, he is not angry at all.

'The important thing is that you are all right. You do have insurance, don't you?' he says.

'Of course. I will report it on Monday when I return to the city.'

He is very kind to me, keeps asking me if I am hurt in any way. What am I to say? That I have been hurt again and again by someone I have never even met? I let it go. We exchange phone numbers and I go to sleep in my tent. I do not feel very guilty about the whole thing. It is just a door. Doors can be fixed.

‘They are here, guys, they are here!’ A shrill whistle wakes me up. It is a cop raid!

I take off my satin nightie and wearing just my knickers I run into the sea. The cops are walking on the beach looking at the tents, but everyone pretends to be sunbathing or swimming and no one is arrested for illegal wild camping.

When everything has returned to normal, I put on my bikini and sit under the umbrella to write to Morpheus.

I have been sitting under the umbrella, but I am seriously sunburned now. It is as if I were wearing a second red skin that hurts no matter where I touch it (that is how I am wearing you too).

This morning, two dolphins appeared in the sea, no more than a hundred metres from the beach. They were jumping in and out of the water, enjoying the hot summer day. I am certain they have come to look at unimportant D from afar. I greet them (and I stick my tongue out to you in all humility).

You must come to this beach one day. You will love it here.

I try to write a small poem for him too, but I find it impossible. I feel as if I am on drugs, in a daze. Something is happening to me.

When I get hungry, I set the notebook aside and go to the tavern. I enjoy a delicious moussaka dish and a small bottle of ouzo. I am reading Yalom again, isolating a few passages to send to Morpheus.

‘Is this seat taken?’

Lost as I have been in the book, I did not see the man with the van approach me.

‘Please sit down,’ I say.

‘I’ve been thinking. Maybe you would like to come over for a drink tonight. It is still a full moon. We can build a fire and have something to eat. What do you say?’

I realise he is flirting with me. How nice of him not to hold a grudge against me for trashing his van. I accept his invitation gladly, determined to have a drink with him and then

return to my tent to sleep alone. I am not about to go through unimaginable pain again. I would rather play with myself – though I have played with myself so much in recent days that the thought makes me break out in a cold sweat.

How long will I stay without sex this time? My inner clock has gone crazy. One moment feels like the whole of eternity. Fuck my jouissance!

The next morning, I am the first one on the beach to take a swim. The sea is all mine. I feel happier than I have felt in a very long time. Afterwards, I sit under the umbrella and write to Morpheus.

Everyone was still asleep when I woke up today. I swam naked, wearing my bathing suit on my arm. I waited all morning, but my dolphins did not return. Last night though, while I was drinking with the man with the van, I mentioned the story with the dolphins, and he told me to tell you that they had indeed come for me. A very romantic man.

He kissed me on the mouth when he accompanied me back to my tent. He was very tall with long white hair. His white beard scratched my face. I slept like a baby afterwards, alone (in your arms, to be precise).

I bet you a million dollars that you meant it when you said you have nothing else to say to me (nothing other than stories with filthy trains and toilet sluts).

The three days of my descent to unimportance have come to an end. The sun has begun to set in the west. I am so happy to be sharing this sunset with you. From the bar I can hear the echo of a song: *Love isn't always on time*. The sea is lapping at my feet and the moon has just come out. I feel so small, so akin to nothingness that I understand at last why the universe seems to have been created just for me. Even you – you have been created and exist just for me. I look around. The beach and the sea, bathed in this light, seem fragile, transient beyond belief. What a gentle world... If I don't kill myself tonight, I never will.

They can't hurt you now, can't hurt you now, can't hurt you now... My favourite song by Patti Smith. I listen to it all the way to the end, unable to cry.

*Come on now try and understand
The way I feel under your command*

I hope you will respect me in the morning, as much as I respect you. Even though I am utterly and hopelessly unimportant. I know I am not the centre of the universe, I always knew it. This does not mean that I don't want to be the centre of *your* universe.

And now I know what I want, at last. I want everything. I want you in your entirety. I want your soul. I do not want to be O. I want to be the Alpha and the Omega – for you. You must agree that this is a tremendous breakthrough for someone who has absolutely nothing to offer.

Thank you for everything you have given me. It was quite a lot, admittedly. But in all truth, I want more.

Yours,
D

PS. And now, I guess I will have to live with the knowledge that not everyone is capable of everything after all.

I returned to the city and sent to Morpheus everything I had written over these three days. Then I sat down and waited for him to tell me it was over. Which man – other than Dr Faust – would ever agree to give up his own soul? And without anything in exchange, since I had absolutely nothing to offer!

I waited for one day.

[PHYSIO]THERAPY

*To poetize oneself into a young girl is an art,
to poetize oneself out of her, is a masterpiece.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

I received what I was waiting for the following night, in my room. I heard the children whisper to one another, before they knocked on my door and asked me what there was for dinner.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, and locked the door again. There was very little connection left between the world outside and my crumbling world inside.

This was what he sent me.

>Dear D,

>I have just returned from abroad and found your very interesting emails. You will be very glad to know that you are right for once: it is indeed not worth living without dreaming.

>You recently came to understand how I came to hate myself: like you, I realised I could not live up to my aspirations. You are now wondering how I managed to forgive myself. I will gladly enlighten you.

*>I forgave myself when I realised the aspirations I could not fulfil were not really mine. They had found their way into me through a thousand different pathways, then burned the bridges behind them. The only aspiration that was truly mine was that of shallowness, as you very correctly observed. I could honour that shallowness beautifully during the sexual act. I could be **perfectly empty** during sex, for at least fifteen minutes, or even longer when I was younger. This is the only reason I still have sex these days: it is the only time I manage to stop thinking. Unlike most people, I do not fuck in order to be, but in order NOT to be. My life became complete when I emptied myself from all symbolism regarding sex. I no longer have any sexual fantasies. Most of the times I manage to masturbate – when I need to – without a single fantasy. I don’t even close my eyes when I come.*

What a sad, sad man. I pictured him masturbating in the dark, with his eyes wide open, thinking about nothing. What had happened in his life to drive him to this wretchedness?

>Let me say a few things now about these three months of your [physio]therapy. Physiotherapy is a careful simulation of movements which the body, due to some impediment, has difficulty performing. A gradual increase in the intensity of the movements will lead the patients to regain their abilities or to acquire new ones.

>In your case, one could talk of a dysfunction in forming genuine relationships. For three months, the simulated movements you performed (psychodynamically) were carried out on me. I offered you the required resistance, increasing it gradually, just as a physiotherapist would do when dealing with stiff knees after meniscus surgery. In other words, if my sexual partner had knee surgery, I would not demand of her to go on all fours. I would help her to bend her knees while lying on her back, until she could manage to lift her legs, place them round my waist, then place them on my shoulders, and so on and so forth.

Of course. It all made sense. My old self seemed highly undesirable even to me from this vantage point.

>Is your [physio]therapy over?

>[Physio]therapy is never over. However, the time comes when the real movements of life come to replace the work of the therapist. There is always the risk of injury. The most difficult thing about being a father is seeing your brat, for whom you deprived yourself of every comforting relapse into childishness, run away like a stupid dodo and fall flat on her face, just after you helped her with a million efforts and a myriad little tricks to somehow stand on her own two feet. But what can you do?

>You might say: it is not the [physio]therapist's business if I want to play with myself instead of forming genuine relationships. It is none of my business indeed! You can go on behaving like a child for ever and ever. But be prepared that you will only get to 'play' with other little 'children' who are like you. And they will treat you like shit, precisely because they are like you. I doubt, though, whether you can barricade yourself in that state of pretend innocence anymore. You cannot unthink your thoughts.

>That was probably what your friend, Manos, was trying to tell you with the touch-yourself marathon to which he subjected you. Perhaps he thought that if you are immersed into your narcissistic childishness, you might perceive its limitations and manage to resurface in reality – the only place where deficits of pleasure may be repaired, the only place where the gaping holes of unfulfilled desires in your psyche may mend.

>I, on the other hand, believe that your erotic life has been a balance of terror over the abyss. You kept going only by inventing little strategies of survival, like the 'adventures' you had in the BDSM world – not much different from the kiss by White Beard on the beach and your solitary return to your tent. An indication that you would always weasel your way out of confronting yourself was how you magically transformed this peculiar triangle with Manos and me into a Goldoni play: a sub with two Masters. And how miraculous – you ended up being the central character, again!

It was obvious to me he thought I was a fool. There was nothing I could ever do to win his affection. I felt myself drowning in the remains of my dissolving ego and it was only D's stubbornness that kept me afloat – though barely.

>So, is this how it all ends?

>In the adult world, yes, this is how it all ends, without anything really ending. You, being so erudite, must have read about Fort/da, the game that Freud described: a child keeps throwing a toy away to see it disappear until it re-appears when given back by a loving parent. For a child, a toy either exists or doesn't. Things are black or white. But we are adults – though you try very hard not to be one – and we live among shades of grey. In our world things come and go, and then start all over again. I am sorry that I cannot give you a lesson in finality too, but I am very unwilling to die.

>In this phase of your life, I felt you needed a bit of a father, one last opportunity to engage in dialogue with the absent beloved. That is what I offered you, no more, no less.

>These were my final observations before I put an end to this communication. I do not know if you also long for some distance, but I certainly need a break from the constant translation into baby talk required to have a discussion with you. Distance is a tremendously underrated value of adulthood. That is why our media culture despises it so much, asking us to immerse ourselves into our 'passion'. We are asked to live our lives as obsessive consumers of fulfilment (substitutes of fulfilment, to be precise). But the gaping holes of our dreams cannot be repaired so easily.

>I thank you for the time you devoted to our discussions. I wish you from the bottom of my heart a wonderful life.

>Yours,

>Morpheus

Perfect timing. I would not have lasted much longer. I know I'm good – but not that good.

Three months! Three months to demolish an entire ego, to take apart a personality, with all its complexities, its preconceptions and misconceptions. No wonder I felt I was going crazy. I was no longer the person I used to be. Everything had been put under the microscope: my convictions, my dreams, my desires, my impulsive actions, everything. His gaze upon me forced me to turn my own gaze inwards. I confronted myself – and faced the fact: my certainties had been an illusion.

He was right for one thing, though: I was standing on my own two feet at last. I was still very vulnerable of course. But if I had survived that, I could survive anything. Most importantly, I knew that I would never be able to live an ordinary life again. He had done this to me. I was angry, but at the same time grateful.

And now the time had finally come to say goodbye.

From: dora_salonica@zeromail.com
Sent: Saturday, 1 August, 2007, 10:00
To: Morpheus@zeromail.com
Subject: Goodbye

Dear Bastard,

Before I go, I need to tell you how sorry I am. It was not my intention, but I did something terrible to you. I allowed myself to become part of your life story. Please forgive me. I know that when in the future you meet various women, perhaps very beautiful women, more beautiful than me, perhaps younger and more desirable than me, but incapable of the passion that the very few are destined to experience, incapable of falling in love with a man for his mind and soul, women who will approach you for a million different reasons that will have nothing to do with the real you, you will not be able to help it: you will think of me. And you will make a comparison with these three months we had together. You took me into your life as much as I did, you have internalised me as much as I did you. We have become an 'us' – even if it is over.

May God remove from my path men I could fall in love with, and may he send an army of brainless bimbos along your way – into whatever bleak future you are going. I say this with a wide narcissistic smile on my lips (still incapable of embracing humility).

Yours always,

D

I wrote it and sent it. Then I took my three neglected children, whom I had missed dearly, and we went to spend our summer holidays at my mother's country house in Halkidiki. It was obvious to me that I was having a nervous breakdown.

My mother did not ask many questions. She took care of me. Every day she would prepare my favourite dishes, which I would relish, having returned for good to my childhood. I could not yet face adult life or take care of my own children in any way. I spent most of my time in my room. I never cried during the day, but during the night I would wake up and find my pillow soaking wet. It happened so often that I would just simply turn it over and go back to sleep.

I never left the house, and I did not accompany the children to the beach. One thought sustained me alone: that somewhere in this world there was Morpheus, alive and breathing, real as they come. And I was his, more than ever. He had re-invented me, had engraved himself in me in a way that could never be undone. I had stopped having inner conversations with him, I knew this phase was over. I simply waited for autumn to come. If he needed a rest, I had to respect that. He had said, however, that in the adult world nothing ever ends. That things come and go. What did he mean by that? Was he giving me a small hope so that I would not do anything foolish? Or did he mean it?

Even if this had been a sort of therapeutic intervention at a distance, I was grateful for what I was feeling. Few people get the chance to experience life with such intensity. I don't know why Morpheus had given me what I had asked of him. Perhaps he was bored with the shallowness of his life, his garden of earthly delights. Perhaps he liked my stories. Perhaps he liked to be a character in this book – even if he seemed like a cruel, unfeeling bastard. Who knows?

I stayed in my room in the country house, with my head resting on my damp pillow, waiting for the end of time – unaware of anything that Morpheus had decided for me and my future.

PART FOUR
DESECRATIONS

THE BAND WITH THE MASKS

I am everywhere invisibly present.
(S. Kierkegaard)

I returned to the city in September, with my unfortunate kids who had by now realised their mother was in bad shape. My older daughter, Mona, who had always been more needy than the other two, told me about a dream she'd had. It made my heart sink.

'A very bad dream, Mum. I was leaving the flat and I called the elevator to the eighth floor. Suddenly, on my way down the cable broke. I started to fall down the shaft. I was sure I was going to die. I called out to you: Mum, Mum! There was a red button and if you pressed it the elevator would stop. You were the only one who could save me. But you said: *I can't now, baby, I'm busy. Can't this wait?* I kept falling and falling and then I hit the ground and I died. You never came, Mum!'

'It's only a dream,' I said. 'You know I will always be there to catch you if you fall.' I meant it. But I wondered if she would ever forgive me. I had been a bad mother, a terrible mother. My love life had taken precedence. I was losing my children.

I cleaned our flat somewhat superficially, to get rid of the dust and the debris of the summer, and then I sat down and wrote to Morpheus. I was hoping that he was sufficiently rested now and ready for the second round.

In the *Hell Book* I had found this interesting allegory: once upon a time there was a princess who asked her suitors to confront a most terrible dragon. Only one of them managed to defeat the beast. When he appeared in front of the princess to claim his reward, she looked at him with contempt and said: 'I would never love someone who is so foolish as to confront a dragon just because of a woman's whim.'

The true test to which the perverse princess submitted her suitors was a meta-test: what proved them unsuitable was the fact that they accepted the challenge, regardless of the outcome.

I was the princess. The suitors were the ones who had attempted to offer me my dream, using their whips and their dicks. Morpheus was the only wise suitor, who had seen through the meta-test. He and I were trapped in a catch-22 situation which was all my doing. The princess was stupid.

I had a single sexual escapade in August with a man I met in a bar. I had to try, just once, to see if I could live like that again. The experience had left me completely cold and

untouched. I had spent the rest of that same night under the full moon on the beach, alone, crying for hours, grieving for everything I had done and everything I had lost. I had wasted half of my life, thrown it away in mindless pursuits. Except for the kids. The kids were my only redemption.

It was now obvious to me that I had undergone a series of interventions to my psyche without anaesthesia. But the triptych that Morpheus was so keen on, the ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’, held no interest for me. His sexual experiences in which he achieved complete emptiness, devoid of all human sentiment, brought only one word to mind: despair. His sins were his punishment, as much as my sins were my torment. He was trapped in a painting; *that* was his hell. There was nothing in what he had ever said to me that showed any sort of fulfilment. It was a life anchored to the present moment, the life of a wild animal, without any sense of continuity or purpose. Morpheus, the master of dreams, living a life without dreams!

I did not want to make love in order not to be. I wanted the psalm to give meaning to my life. I wanted to devote my entire self, my thoughts, my feelings, my life force, to one man.

As for Morpheus, the only possible antidote to his quiet life of desperation had to be... me – and possibly others like me. Like his counterpart, Dr Lecter, he had devoured me bit by bit, until there was nothing left. How delightful to remove a woman’s delusions – leaving her naked, shivering in a cold waste land. What a pleasure to adorn her hair with the flowers of paternal love, only to pluck them off afterwards. A father dressing his daughter in a flowery dress dipped in the poison of the Centaur Nessus. Such unimaginable joy in disrobing her again! He pulls at the dress, removes the small belt from the waist, her white slip, and together with the garments the flesh and the skin come off, her fairy tales, her romantic dreams. All that is left is the bones, white and shining, and in the centre something infinitely gentle, pulsating, trembling, barely alive. Hardly discernible, but finally his.

But there was still some fight left in me. And since he thought I was an arrogant fool, I would offer him a little more of my arrogance. It could not hurt now.

‘You should be thanking my lucky star that brought me to you. Otherwise, you would still be feeding, like the decomposing vampire that you are, on bats, rats, and other furry nocturnal animals, plentiful in the forum – your hunting ground. The only question now is not if you need me – we already established that you don’t – but if you want me. I will not resist any of your wishes. Even if you cast me aside, I will accept it. I can’t pretend I don’t want this to go on. But above all, I want to do what you want me to do.’

How did I come up with those things? Did I really want to do what the monster wanted?

Alas... That was precisely what I wanted. Looking back now, I feel a tremendous pity for that naïve woman offering her heart on a plate to a stranger. No, not just her heart. Everything. Her life. Take it, take me, do with me as you please. Ah, D... What have we done?

‘If there is nothing else you can do for me, it doesn’t matter. I will survive, just as you will. You can go on eating bats and rats – or even your own flesh. You feed on it so often, that it has become your staple diet. That is the reason you are never satisfied, the reason you despise the misery of your train, travelling through cold countries of the north. And that is why you hate the toilets where young men offer their dicks for money to middle-aged men – like you.’

I waited patiently for Morpheus to reply. I was glued to my screen, day and night, even at the office – especially at the office. I participated in discussions on the forum and bid my time. Nothing. He had disappeared.

And then, just as I was about to give up, an army of dominant men in disguise started to message me. They came out of nowhere and came at me from all directions. At first, I did not realise something was amiss. I spoke politely with everyone and replied to all chat messages, unaware that these people might be the Bastard.

I had been wandering like a ghost in the forum, starting discussions and posing questions secretly directed at Morpheus. The latest one was, ‘Why are you punishing me, Sir?’ A new forum member, called Eva, whom no one had ever seen, so no one could ascertain if she was a real person, had taken an interest in me. Her advice always seemed well informed and was tailored to my situation.

This was Eva’s answer to my question regarding punishment:

‘The punishment comes after the awareness that we have done something wrong. The submissive girl needs and desires the punishment, as it always results in catharsis. The feeling of guilt (the internal self-punishment) ceases to exist, since the external punishment has counterbalanced the mistake with pain. That is why pain becomes one of the best parts of the relationship as time goes on. It alleviates all feelings of guilt.’

I understood that only too well. Guilt had been my constant companion all my life. I felt guilty for being promiscuous, guilty for not telling my dad I loved him, guilty I never called my mom, guilty for neglecting my kids... But what had I done this time? I didn't have a clue.

Then the idea dawned on me: I had fooled around with Manos! I had dedicated the masturbation marathon to both men. That was it! Oh, I would never do it again...

But Eva was not through with me yet.

'The sub who has done something foolish is not a fool. She is someone who needs care and guidance (and punishment) so she may develop every aspect of her personality to bring out her best self. What should ideally come after the punishment is the sub's gratitude, expressed in her thanks.'

It was not enough that I was being punished! I had to say 'thank you' as well! They were teaching me how to be a slave! What could I do? I said 'thank you' in public, in all humility. I said it to Eva so that Morpheus would hear it. I was sure he was there, reading everything under the protection of the invisibility option. Luckily, most forum members were not aware of what was going on. Only Grandpa was on to us, I think. He had lost – I had rejected him again and again – but he had accepted it with dignity.

The new phase of this relationship had already started taking form. The adult reality with all the colours of the spectrum and the uncertainty of events would become my new world. Fort/da had to go out the window. Clear-cut statements of the type, 'I am your Master and you will be my slave and everyone will know it', was something despicable for Morpheus. Okay, Pops, I got it. But will the others get it too, or will they start mocking me for my imaginary friend? And how will I manage to live as the forum's clown?

Perhaps that was part of my development, so that I would feel like a true slave. It was cruel of him to isolate me in such a way, but my trust was growing more and more. Trust in him, but also trust in myself. It was as if he were saying to me, 'No one else is important. I am the only one who is. Have the courage of your faith.'

Ah, Kierkegaard would have been so proud of me, if he could have seen how I embraced faith in absolute uncertainty. I was still reading Kierkegaard obsessively, when I took a break from the forum:

Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I wish to preserve myself in faith I must constantly be intent upon holding fast the objective uncertainty, so as to remain out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water, still preserving my faith.

Apart from Eva, an array of new members appeared on the forum. Most of them could not spell to save their lives. They reminded me of Marcel, the Bunuelian character from Athens with whom I had had an interlude. Each one of them used an alias that rang a bell: ‘Psalm 23’, ‘Dr Lecter’, ‘Decomposing Vampire’, and so on. One of them said he was a Master looking for a Master. Another said he was a transvestite, called Mirella, who had supposedly fallen in love with me and kept sending me poetry. There were male subs who asked for my hand in marriage. There was even a ‘White Beard’!

I knew something was up. This could not all be a coincidence. I could accept one or two instances, but not so many. I knew it then and I know it now – even if I will never have any proof. Morpheus was playing sadistic little games, knowing how I felt about him. My confusion, my despair, my feeble attempts to hold on to my sanity, must have given him immense pleasure. Sometimes I picture him sitting in front of his computer, inventing another alias for himself, one that I would immediately connect to the things we had said to each other. I can imagine the smirk on his face. I can almost see the erection in his trousers, how he tries to re-arrange the bulging penis, as he presses on the keys of his computer. My vulnerability must have made him horny, just as he made me horny with his power over me. I was dripping wet, day and night. It was almost unbearable.

All those personas used capital letters when they first registered on the forum, which was against the rules. They would write one or two posts in capital letters and after a few warnings by the administrators they would start writing properly with small letters. It was the same pattern repeating itself with all of them. It was very strange. It was as if they were calling out to me. ‘Can you see me? I am here! No matter where you look, I am here, it’s me, it’s me...’

The first one that made me suspicious was someone called Dr Faust. He replied to my question ‘Why are you punishing me?’ by saying: ‘The sub must know why she is being punished. If she doesn’t, slap the hell out of the bitch.’ Just another fool, I said to myself. But within two days everything he said started to click.

‘Cold shoulder: this does not mean you are not interested in the sub. She must understand she has done something wrong. It is a mild form of punishment.’

Oh yeah? Why don’t you come to the beach at midnight to cry your eyes out under the August moon?

‘Control: the sub must be checked constantly. The Master must know where she is and if she is following his wishes.’

I guess that was why he was sending me the transvestites and the decomposing vampires who would constantly ask me where I was, what I was wearing, and what I was doing every minute of the day. Good thing I replied to all of them.

When Dr Faust mentioned his favourite fantasy, I became fairly certain of my suspicions:

‘My fantasy is to have the sub on her knees, begging me to allow her to submit. And I say to her, come back tomorrow. I need to take a rest. Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’

I wish I could be certain; I wish I had proof that this was Morpheus. But the rules of the game were cruel on purpose. I would never know for sure.

Then I remembered my foolishness: I had bragged to Morpheus I would recognise him anywhere!

The stupid princess and the wise suitor were trapped in their own game. And there was no way out.

There was another guy, who said he was a nineteen-year-old theology student. His alias was 666 (definitely the Bastard, who knew my preoccupation with good and evil). He dedicated a song to me, called ‘Prosthetics’. It was a song by a hard-rock band, Slipknot, of whom I had never heard. The video that went with the song demonstrated in the most spectacular way the new form of my relationship with Morpheus. The band members come on to the stage wearing hideous masks. Long noses, hair like snakes, ice-hockey masks. They scream and jump around the stage, looking like deranged serial killers. In the end they smash everything up, the guitars, the speakers, and all the props, in a psychotic rage.

I watched it all the way to the end, paralysed with fear. Is that how my knight in shining armour felt for me? Is that what a sadist experiences when contemplating the object of his desire? The motto displayed under the theology student’s avatar was perfectly clear: ‘I will tear you apart and I will fuck the holes I open in your body.’

These are the lyrics to the song. If any romantic soul ever decides to look for her prince in the BDSM world, this might help her make up her mind not to.

*Even if you run, I will find you
I decided I wanted you
Ah fucking you will be mine!
Better make yourself at home
You’re here to stay*

When I recovered from the shock, I played the video again and masturbated while watching the lunatics with the masks smash everything up. It took me only two minutes to come and my cries were as loud as the screams of the band.

The next morning, another persona I suspected of being Morpheus, contacted me on the forum. It was Mirella, the transvestite, who sent me this poem by Pablo Neruda:

*You are here. Oh, you do not run away.
You will answer me to the last cry.
Curl round me as though you were frightened.*

I tried to think logically. How likely was it that all these people were Morpheus? How much time was he devoting to this? You might be wrong, I said to myself. They could be anybody.

Then it was Dr Faust's turn. He wrote this on the forum:

MY SLAVE IS MINE AND ONLY MINE.
I WILL GIVE HER AWAY
ONLY IF SHE DOES NOT SATISFY ME.

Okay, okay, stop shouting. I got it! Jesus!

I would never fool around again with anyone else. I wanted to sleep on a dry pillow. I wished the 'mild' punishment of indifference would come to an end now. I mustered whatever courage I had and wrote to 'Dr Faust' – who I was sure was Morpheus.

'Are you fucking kidding me? What is all this nonsense? Dr Faust my arse! Did you think I would not recognise my own Master? I have a good mind to create a dozen fake profiles too, but then I would end up with a dozen Masters too, because I'm pretty and I'm brave enough to show my face in public.'

I immediately uploaded a photo of my face on the forum. I was not worried that I would be recognised by some student from my English classes because I hadn't gone back to teaching after the summer. I could not concentrate enough to teach. My relationship with Morpheus demanded an immense investment of personal energy, which I had stolen from my relationship with my kids and my friends and my job.

Dr Faust/Morpheus replied:

'I have no idea why you are getting upset. As for your photo, you are very pretty. Personally, I would not show my face on a site like this. Have a nice day.'

I had displeased him.

'Forgive me,' I said and took my photo down at once. Maybe my punishment would be over now.

His reaction was an invitation to talk with him privately:

‘Come to messenger right now and accept your punishment.’

I found only one of my contacts on messenger, Orestes. That was a man who had recently introduced himself to me as a male submissive. He had sent me a photo of his nipple too and I had scolded him for that: ‘Why are you showing me your nipple?’ Now I remembered what Morpheus had said when I had asked him for a photo. Oh my God... It was him! It must have been him!

‘Here?’ I asked timidly.

‘Here.’

‘I don’t know if I should call you *Sir*.’

‘Call me whatever you want. Would you like to see me on camera?’

‘Yes, please.’ I felt my heart stop.

On my screen appeared a man around my age with greying hair. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt and was looking at me calmly, without talking. He was neither thin nor fat, neither tall nor short, he was just average. To me, he was handsome beyond belief. It was Him.

He allowed me to take in his image for a whole minute. We said nothing to each other. That was a man I could fall in love with. A man I was already in love with. The memory of his face had always existed in me. He was my destiny. It was Him.

‘Is that enough?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I lied. It was not enough. It would never be enough.

‘I have to go now.’

He turned off his camera and left. That was all.

That was all? No, it couldn’t be. Then I noticed someone else who had just sent me a friendship request. I added him to my contacts and voilà, Dr Faust appeared. Sure, as if the other one was an angel of the Lord. The good doctor had his camera turned off – naturally.

‘Ready for your punishment?’

‘Yes, Sir,’ I said, losing for a moment my excellent contact with reality. I had been worn down by the absurd situation in which Morpheus had immersed me. I was no match for a sadist, that much was obvious. Surrounded by all those people with the funny names talking to me about things they shouldn’t have known, it was like reliving the video with Slipknot, the band with the masks. They were screaming and smashing everything to smithereens, and I was scared and alone and in love.

‘I will ask you now to do something that perhaps you have never done in your life. Do you have a candle? Good. Go and get it.’

I went and got a white candle from the kitchen cupboard.

‘Turn your camera on so I can see you. Remove all your clothes, kneel, and place two coins under your knees.’

I did what he asked. The pain on my knees was instantaneous.

‘Take the candle, light it, and hold it with your teeth. Let the wax drip over you. I want to see you in a praying position.’

The shame that I felt in this humiliating posture overshadowed the burning pain caused by the wax dripping on my breasts. I was aware that I was being watched and my facial expressions were scrutinised as much as my naked flesh, so I tried to remain as calm as I possibly could. When the flame started to approach my face dangerously, I informed my tormentor by typing it on my keyboard.

‘Okay, enough now.’

I blew out the candle. The flame was extinguished, like my entire life up until that moment.

‘Thank me.’

‘Thank you, Sir.’

‘How are you feeling?’

‘I hate you, Sir.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are doing vulgar things.’

‘You think I am vulgar?’

‘No. The things you are doing are vulgar. They do not suit your character.’

At that, he stopped our contact, and I was left all alone again, to contemplate what had happened. Was it Morpheus? Or just some forum guy who grabbed the opportunity to play a little game with me?

I could not be sure. Like Kierkegaard, I was *out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water.*

I remember what I had asked of him: *I want your soul.*

Be careful, D. Be careful what you wish for. If you want someone’s soul as your own, you will accept it in its entirety. You cannot pick the diamonds out of the mud, much as you like them. You think diamonds are a girl’s best friend? You’re a funny girl, D.

This is not the beautiful blue sea that I am accustomed to. It is a swamp. I am swimming with firm strokes through the murky water. I am a superb swimmer, have always been one. But the odour is unbearable. I gag, I think I'm going to throw up. My love rises from the swamp, all wet and slimy. He places the diamond necklace around my neck, the ring on my finger. I finally have what I wanted. The sweet stench of the nightmare has enveloped me. My love rubs his vulgarity on me. I feel it on my skin, like the wet fur of a mangy dog. Our souls embrace tenderly, two snails in the rain, turning and twisting, leaving a wet trail behind them. Nature has become monstrous around us. We are monstrous too, we have lost our humanity.

The god to whom I was praying on my knees is nowhere to be seen.

D AND THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS

*When one can so arrange it
that a girl's only desire is to give herself freely,
when she feels that her whole happiness depends on this,
when she almost begs to make this free submission,
then there is first true enjoyment.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

The next day, Thomas and I went to a BDSM meeting. This time, the appointed place was a café at a shopping mall, at the east end of the city. We took a cab there, which left us near the mall. As we crossed the street, I noticed a small chapel built in the wall. There were a few icons inside and some candles, lit by passers-by.

‘You do realise,’ I said to Thomas, ‘that I finally belong, don’t you?’

‘It’s all in your mind, sweetheart,’ he said.

‘No, it isn’t,’ I said. ‘Give me a minute.’

I walked up to the chapel, dropped a coin in the slot and lit a candle, which I placed among the other candles.

‘I thought you did not believe in God,’ Thomas said. Despite his innate shyness, he would often find the courage to speak his mind with me.

‘Oh Thomas... I just want to show my gratitude to the unknown being that moves the strings of our destiny. It is the least I can do. Can’t you see that what is happening to me is a miracle?’

He shook his head. He was unusually pensive during the meeting and kept staring at me when he thought I was not looking. Our friends, Elias and Silky, refrained from asking me anything about Morpheus and I did not volunteer any information about what was going on.

The following day, a new guy, the Seducer, made his first appearance on the forum. He wrote a couple of stupid, brutish things, right under my own posts, nudging me to answer, which I didn’t. Sensitised as I was to the incognito manifestations of the Bastard, I kept an eye on him, more so since his alias pointed to Kierkegaard’s text, *The Seducer’s Diary*. Eventually, he sent me a private chat message just as rude as his forum interventions. I rejected him rather brusquely, putting an end to any notions he might have been entertaining concerning a possible relationship with me.

But things were not that simple. I could not stop thinking about the double incident with Dr Faust and Orestes. What if he too... A growing suspicion sent me back to the Seducer's profile. His signature left me quite shaken: I am everywhere invisibly present. That was a line from *The Seducer's Diary*!

Back to the drawing board. I wrote to the Seducer once more, this time apologising for my previous behaviour.

'I should have recognised you right away,' I said. 'My mistake.'

He did not acknowledge the apology. He merely said the time had come for my training to begin. His name was Emmanuel – fittingly. In the Bible, this means 'the Lord is with us.' I thought of the references Morpheus had made to the Bible and to the Psalm of David. Having to pray while holding a burning candle between my teeth had strengthened the sense I had of the religious nature of our relationship.

The Seducer began by sending me a workout programme, which I would have to follow to regain my fitness. I gladly accepted; all those months of smoking and drinking while wallowing in self-pity had taken their toll. I summoned my courage and requested a photograph of his face. He sent me one immediately. This was not the beautiful face that I had seen on camera. It was a man of a very banal appearance, a protruding beer gut, hairy arms, and a receding hairline. I laughed, thinking Morpheus was mocking me once again. He had obviously gone and found the picture of a hideous man just to taunt me. I had said time and again that I could not care less about his looks. Now I was being punished for every little thing I had thought and said in my arrogance.

He asked me for some nude photos in return, which I sent to the usual email address, the one I had been using to communicate with Morpheus all this time. Then I thought he might want them at the new address under the alias of the Seducer, so I sent them there too.

'I sent the photos to the usual email too,' I said. 'I don't know if it was the right thing to do. Should I keep using the old one?'

He did not acknowledge this in any way. He said he liked my photos and he found me very sexy. I tried to explain to him how the punishment with the candle had made me feel, that it was vulgar and cheap. He did not acknowledge that either. Nor did he say anything at the mention of Dr Faust.

He asked me to send him one email every day, reporting all my thoughts and feelings. This was the first report I sent to him:

'I listened to the song, *Prosthetics*, and I came before it had finished. If this is how you feel about me, we are not going to make it. Neither you nor I are that strong. You can

And then we moved on to the next phase. Even today, as I am travelling backwards on the train over Bralos, on my way to meet with V for the final act, just thinking about it makes me sick to my stomach.

A few days after the wedding party, the Seducer asked me to contact him on messenger and turn on my camera. I did as he asked. He had his own camera on too, but he was taking care not to show himself. All I could see was the smoke from his cigarette and a cup of coffee he was drinking. *He smokes*, I thought. I relished gathering even the smallest pieces of information about him.

‘Do you know what I want from you?’

‘Not really,’ I said.

‘I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.’

That was so beautiful! I was speechless. When I looked it up later, I found it was from a poem by Pablo Neruda.

He disregarded my silence and asked me to take off my clothes and touch myself in front of the camera. He had already seen me naked, as Dr Faust, but this would be my first orgasm in front of him and I was very self-conscious.

I did my best, conforming to his wishes, and had already started the descent into pleasure, when he suddenly said:

‘Don’t you want to see me?’

‘It is not necessary,’ I said. ‘Your image is forever imprinted on my mind since you showed me your face on camera.’

He moved slightly then and I saw his arms, which were very hairy, then, fleetingly, his face. It was the hideous man from the photo I had considered too ugly to be real! The man with the receding hairline and the beer gut and the hairy arms! This was not Morpheus! That was the reason Orestes had shown me his face. That was the reason the Seducer waited for the right moment to show himself. They chose this cruel way to make me understand the simple thing they would subject me to, the simple thing I was still having trouble grasping. Oh, it was savage, despicable...

I turned off the camera, closed my legs, and went to the toilet, where I threw up. The Seducer called me at once, but I could not find the strength to pick it up. He sent me a text right away:

‘Why did you leave? Are you all right?’

I stumbled out to the kitchen and sat down on the floor. My legs could not hold me. Mona had luckily gone to her room.

I sat there for a while, staring into space. I did not want to come back to reality. The muddy water where my love had thrown me was deeper than seventy thousand fathoms. I had nearly drowned.

Then D stood up and took my hand in hers. I saw her typing this text with my fingers: ‘Fine, we will play it your way. It is not worth living without you.’

The Bastard had given me away.

My proper slave training began the next day. I was on messenger and I was surrounded by wolves again. Dr Faust and the Seducer were both talking to me at the same time. I did not know what to do. Dr Faust asked me to turn on the camera. The Seducer ordered me to go to the toilet and play with myself.

‘You will come while standing,’ the Seducer ordered me.

‘Now!’ Dr Faust said.

‘Do as I say!’ the Seducer barked.

They took turns shouting at me, first the one, then the other. I was about to lose control. I could not have two Masters, even though I had managed it once.

I made up my mind. I said goodbye to Dr Faust for ever. I turned off the laptop and with a heavy heart I went to the toilet.

This is the most difficult hour of my entire life. It seems impossible to have an orgasm while standing. I wish I could lie down, even if it is on the hard floor, but I am not allowed. I have a terrible migraine, my head is throbbing. I summon all my fantasies. My legs are shaking, my knees cannot hold me. I stop and look at myself in the mirror. There are small wrinkles around my eyes and my hair is a mess. How I want to cry... But my eyes remain dry. I punch the wall with my fists, bruising my knuckles. The texts keep coming to my phone.

‘You will stay there until you come!’

I glue my naked body to the cold tiles on the wall. I must show them what I am made of. I am real. I am D.

And I manage it! The orgasm comes, I feel it in my very depths. But my depths no longer belong to me, my body is not mine. I collapse to the floor, I crawl on all fours like an animal. My sweat drips down from my face, my breasts, my belly.

I want to do with you what spring does with the cherry trees.

It is not spring. It is autumn. The clear picture I had of myself is becoming dimmer. I do not even remember the woman I used to be. She's fading away.

At the end of September, I take the train to Athens again. The time has come to meet the Seducer.

He is badly dressed, unkempt, unshaved. He is driving a piece of junk. He looks like a dockworker coming back from his shift.

In the car he grabs my thighs. He lifts my dress and will not let me cover myself until we reach the hotel.

'You have good thighs,' he says. 'Strong.'

It is a cheap hotel, where you pay by the hour. He pays for the whole night. Once in the room, I ask for permission to take a shower, but he won't let me. He does not have one either. I find that annoying. Maybe spring with its cherry blossoms will not come unless we are dirty.

'Take your clothes off,' he says.

When I stand naked in front of him, he pushes me down on my knees. He becomes vulgar with me. Oh, he is so crude... The part of me akin to Blanche DuBois begins to fret.

The brute lies on his back in the bed and points to a place on his right, by his hips.

'That will be your position from now on. When I say, *position*, you will sit there.'

I am supposed to stay put as he is playing with me, touching me wherever he wants, as he wants. I am calm and obedient throughout the ordeal. But he invents new games, more vulgar. He sits on my face and orders me to come, while licking his anus. This is a wretched, final humiliation. I think of Morpheus and all the things he said to me. *Sometimes kneeling is not enough...* The girl that used to live in me is slowly disappearing. There is nothing I can do about it. So that is the price! Now I know... The irrevocable loss of innocence. I accept, I will pay it. I don the whore's clothes and dedicate my orgasm to the absent beloved, twisting

and writhing like a snake under this horrible man who is tormenting me. I achieve a desperate pleasure and – alas – looking for a sense of shame, I find none. Now I know the material I am made of. If I can do this, I can do anything.

We spend five hours in bed. He talks to me about this and that, inconsequential things. I have the feeling he is a sort of a hustler, a conman. Maybe a bouncer or something like that. He teaches me how to make a razor from the filter of a cigarette. He says that in jail the inmates know how to make paper knives. They are knives for one use, good for one murder only.

I don't care about any of this. I do not intend to go to jail or commit murder. I would rather talk about poetry or Wittgenstein, though I doubt whether this guy has had any formal schooling. I am tired and bored, but he will not let me sleep. He wants to break me. Just before I start to cry, I feel my strength returning. I am not alone. I am with Morpheus, walking along a dark country lane strewn with cherry blossoms. I know there could be no other way. He is desecrating me. He has delivered me like a sacrificial lamb to the hands of this man. I am his sacred offering, his only daughter, climbing onto the altar of my own volition. And still, I want to lie down and sleep. But he will not let me sleep.

'You are my bitch.'

'I am not.' I am not a bitch. I am D.

He places me face down on the bed. He presses my head down with his bare foot. Then he makes me beg. He tells me what to say, he writes the script for me.

'Please Sir.'

'What was that? I did not hear you. Louder.'

'PLEASE SIR.'

'Please Sir, fuck me.'

'Please Sir, fuck me.'

I remember very well what I had said to Morpheus back then, at the age of innocence. *Do I have to beg you for it?* Yes, I had to, I had to. There could be no other way. Thy will be done.

The brute does what I begged him to do. He begins to fuck me, hard and fast. He baptizes me in the flesh, he immerses me in depravity.

'Are you my bitch?'

'No.'

'Are you my bitch?'

'No.'

‘Are you my bitch?’

‘No. No. No.’

He abruptly pulls out of me, leaving me there, half broken. He lies down on his back, places his feet on me, and lights a cigarette. I start crying at last. He pays no attention. He keeps smoking, blowing rings towards the ceiling. It is obvious to me that I have run out of options. Why complain, silly girl? You are up on the altar, where you always wanted to be. You did everything to get here. Why lose heart now?

I wipe my tears on the bedsheet, take a deep breath and calm down. I go to my position and wait patiently for his cruel hand. When he asks me again, I give him the answer he has been looking for. Now I can do it. Now yes. It is over. Now, yes, it is over.

‘Are you my bitch?’

‘Yes.’

The path on which my lover is leading me is dark. There are no stars in the sky, the light of the moon is barely glowing. We walk together, he and I, hand in hand. I don’t know where he is taking me. I feel his hand on mine, firm, dry, warm. Even if I wanted to pull my hand away, I would not be able to. That is how tight his grip is. A cold wind is whirling the cherry blossoms all around us. I have never seen anything more beautiful. We stand together in the dark and we are alone. The whole world has disappeared. We stand alone, he and I, happy and in love, together, in the centre of the universe.

*And so she sleeps, my tender love, naked
among cherry blossoms,
a girl unwithering as an almond branch,
with her head leaning on the crook of her arm,
and her other hand
resting upon her golden coin,
upon its comforting warmth, while slowly and
quietly like a thief
from the window of spring, enters the Morning
Star that shall waken her!*

And so she sleeps, my tender love, naked.

This poem by Nikos Gatsos was sent to me the following day by – who else – Mirella, the transvestite.

I could not help falling in love with him. It was just impossible.

I wanted his name to be remembered forever, through the ages. I wanted him to be remembered even after our bones had crumbled to dust.

I no longer wanted to kill him so I could have him just for myself. I wanted to take him into history so that everyone could have him.

I realised then, with a gasp, for it was the first time it had happened to me: I had just made the passage from obsession to a passion so great that it had become eternal love. I was no longer a disillusioned, unhappy woman who had sacrificed her insignificant life, hoping to chance upon an extraordinary love affair. I had taken a leap of faith over the abyss, without knowing if there was anyone there to catch me as I fell to my demise – moral, and possibly physical too. I believed so deeply and with such fervour in the man who had become everything to me that my faith had become a living, breathing thing.

At last! I was in bed with Kierkegaard.

CHARENTON

*Inwardness in an existing subject
culminates in passion.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

By October, the Seducer had become my Master; he ordered, and I obeyed. After the first time we met, he did not ask me to go to Athens again, nor did he ask me to turn on my camera. We communicated with texts on the phone and that was that. I always kept my phone by my side. I had to ask for permission to go out with my friends, to have another drink, to meet with Alice or Thomas, or even to put on underwear, when I wore a dress or a skirt.

‘What are you wearing now?’ he would often ask me.

I always felt his gaze on me, as if there was a secret camera watching my every move, day and night. Was that the sacred gaze Morpheus had told me about? The result was an increased self-consciousness on my part, which kept me in a constant state of sexual arousal. I was being watched – and I loved it. I think this is one more thing that separates us from vanilla people: the ability to transform a distant controlling gaze into sexual arousal.

I knew that the Seducer and I were not meant to have a proper relationship. Our session in Athens had shown me his true face: he was a shallow man, a vulgar man, someone who had been sent by Morpheus to train me until I became capable of submission. That was all the Seducer did: he demanded – and he received – constant reports throughout the day – and sometimes at night too. Each command and each compliance immersed me more and more into a very pleasurable state of passivity. I went to the gym three times a week, followed the programme he had sent me and, while I watched my diet, I still drank too much. Luckily, I got permission to drink, almost at will. He had probably realised that I would not be able to comply with any commands for abstinence. On the contrary, I was more than capable of obeying his commands relating to my orgasms – whether it was ‘do it now’, or more often, when I asked for permission, ‘maybe tomorrow’.

It seemed strange to me that I could go on living without Morpheus in my life. That I did not fuck around anymore. That I put up with all the mocking comments by our forum friends about the disgusting brute who controlled my life. Nobody believed that the Seducer had been sent by Morpheus to train me. They thought I had made it all up, just so I could have an affair with a stranger.

But the last thing on my mind was to have an affair with this man, whom I utterly despised. I firmly believed that he had been entrusted with the difficult task of bending my will, preparing me for the relationship that would follow with Morpheus. Perhaps the reason

Morpheus had not appeared himself had to do with what he frequently said in his writings: *surgeons never operate on people they love*. Could it be that Morpheus had developed feelings for me?

I could not talk about my predicament with anyone. Thomas was preoccupied with his own miserable life, his lack of confidence when it came to women, his tendency to pay exorbitant amounts of money to stupid girls just to smell their sweaty feet and lick their toes. As for Alice, she laughed at me every time I mentioned the Seducer. But isn't that the destiny of all mystical experiences? They are reserved for the people caught up in them and cannot possibly be communicated to anyone else. *And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.*

Morpheus had opened the mystical gates of the universe and was leading me carefully through a peculiar amalgam of experiences the like of which most women would never get close to, not even in their wildest dreams. As I had seen with my own eyes, during the first encounters in my quest, most BDSM affairs were simulations of desecration. But this was no simulation.

*April is my favourite month.
A light breeze blows through my hair.
It is warm and smells of little birds.
Reminds me of his first words to me
loving whispers in my ear.
Months go by
the clocks ticking their own time
eternal, ours.
The world is whirling
in celebration
people talking, dancing, touching each other.
We live in a parallel universe.
I am holding on by a thin thread
to the lives of others.
If I pull a little, it will snap.
I look without seeing
answer without talking
nestling close to him
crooning words that have
no human meaning.
I know how sparrows feel in their nest.
For the first time in my life
I do not want to fly away.*

I wrote this poem for Morpheus and posted it on the forum. I knew he did not think much of my poetry, but so what? Right under the poem, a new member I did not know, who could not spell for his life and had the alias ‘Shadow of a Man’, wrote this:

*You're not much, goodness knowz
but you're so presious to Me
cute as can be, baby of Mine.*

The bastard wanted to see me melt. And melt I did, every day. And every day I reconstituted myself again, more stubborn than ever, determined to reach the end.

The next morning, as I walked out of my apartment building to go to work, I noticed a new graffiti on the wall across the street. *Little bird, have you heard? I love you more than my words have said.*

My heart skipped a beat. And though I knew this was some random graffiti, and not intended for me, the thought crossed my mind that this could have been written by Morpheus – or by someone Morpheus had got to write on his behalf.

I could not help it. Deeper and deeper I descended into madness, unable to get back to reality. I was in ecstasy most of the time – and sexually aroused, constantly, beyond belief. The entire universe was speaking to me, sending me secret messages. All the songs on the radio were for me, all the graffiti on the walls had been written for me. Oh, I knew it was not true... But I allowed myself to have these thoughts. In my mind's eye I saw a grey-haired man take the plane from Athens to Thessaloniki. At nights he would walk the streets, dressed in a loose pair of trousers that revealed the top of his boxer shorts. He wore a cap on his head – backwards, in true street fashion – and wrote with a spray can on all the walls I would encounter from my home to my office. Every morning I read his new messages, relishing in the throes of this unlikely love affair.

Morpheus knew I always listened to the same radio station at work, one that played songs dedicated by listeners to their loved ones. I suspected that some of those songs were for me. Was I mad to think so? And does it make any difference if they were not truly for me? Their effect on me was the same, no matter what the truth was.

One day, there was a contest on the radio.

‘This contest is for you,’ the presenter said. ‘Yes, you. You know who you are.’

Oh, my Lord. Yes, I hear you.

‘Just answer this question: where does the word *kimono* come from? You can win a single ticket to the theatre, to see *The Caveman*.’

I stepped out of the office and called the radio station. My call was accepted immediately.

‘What is your name?’ the presenter asked.

‘D,’ I said.

‘Would you like to go to the theatre?’

‘Yes, very much so.’

‘Good. Give us the answer then.’

I gave them the answer – a winter garment in Japanese, or something to that effect. But it was wrong! I got it wrong!

‘Not quite,’ the voice said. ‘It just means a single garment. However, stay on the line please and give your details so we can send you the ticket. Enjoy your night at the theatre, D!’

They did send me the ticket and I did go to the theatre – courtesy of Morpheus, or so I believed. I had a wonderful time watching the play, thinking the entire night of my own romantic caveman.

There was one song that played every single morning on the radio: ‘The Passenger’. Iggy Pop kept singing, ‘The world is made for you and me.’ Thoughts of my unimportance had dissipated. I had become the centre of the universe at last, the Alpha and the Omega. If these were lessons in shallowness, they were working in a very mysterious way, for the complexity and depth of my emotions were surprising even to me. Morpheus and I were strolling around in his favourite painting, the ‘Garden of Earthly Delights’, which was no longer insipid and vain, but a glorious celebration of life. We walked hand in hand, day after day, balancing on the tightrope of our own madness; two reckless acrobats, violating almost every single demand and expectation of western civilisation concerning romantic love. I had never met him – and yet I felt him closer than anyone in the world. He had never slept with me – and yet he possessed my body in every way, via his proxy, the horrible Seducer. They both did what they wanted with me, and yet I felt safe in this relationship, even as I floated over the abyss of uncertainty. Worse of all, I was alone in this absurd affair; no one could help me or understand what I was going through.

And still I had the courage of my faith.

If anyone found out what we were up to, they would incarcerate us in a Finnish psychiatric facility and give us electric shock treatments until we became Volkswagens – as those Russian doctors had been trying to do to their hapless patients. I often wondered if it were the rest of the world who were mad, people living their mundane little lives without ever realising how miserable and empty they were. Look at me, I wanted to shout to the world: I am in ecstasy 24 hours a day. If you touch me, I will come instantly. How do you live your life? What did you do today? You know what I did? I accounted for all my moves during the day, described what I was wearing, asked for permission to go to sleep and got it, asked for permission to play with myself and did not get it, and have been horny since the moment I woke up and through the night. My body and my mind are on edge constantly. What did you do?

I was no longer unhappy. In my mind, I had set up my own theatrical stage, just like that other lunatic, de Sade, when he was incarcerated in Charenton.

I strutted up there on the stage day and night, playing the greatest role of my life.

In Norwegian mythology, there was a wolf named Fenrir, who had been tied up by the gods with an invisible, very thin rope. The more Fenrir tried to escape, the deeper the rope cut into his flesh.

‘This is how I feel,’ I said to the Seducer one day. ‘Like Fenrir. Unable to escape from... all this.’

‘It is a good analogy,’ he said. He remained obtuse as hell.

I asked him then for a chastity belt. I was wearing a mental one, but I longed for a real one. I found a photo on the Internet and sent it to him: it was a metal chastity belt fashioned out of steel rings piercing the inner labia and a padlock attached to the rings, closing the opening of the vagina.

‘Few subs in Greece wear a padlock. I only know of one,’ he said.

I was not aware of it back then, but I was truly writing my life’s book. How many people can boast they did that?

In December, the Seducer asked me to start sending my reports to a new email address. His new username was Emmanuel Alexander. But Alexander was not his name! That was my father's name – and, also, as I had discovered a while back, the name of Morpheus! My hands started shaking uncontrollably, like the good old days. I finally had proof. My God, it was all true then!

The next step was to sign a contract of slavery, sent to me by the Seducer. I read it carefully, gave my consent, and still carry it around with me to this day, together with the passage by Kierkegaard, the lyrics to the song by Mika that Morpheus sent to me in Helsinki, and my children's photos.

Funny how a woman's whole life can fit in her purse.

THE CONTRACT

Rule one

I am His object. I breathe, sleep, and take care of myself because I belong to Him. I improve myself constantly because He does not deserve trash.

Rule two

I am His property. Whatever I experience, happens to His property and He must be informed of it as soon as possible. All decisions are His. If communication is impossible before a required action, I act in His greatest interest.

Rule three

I am His toy. I will not stimulate myself sexually and will not engage in any personal pleasure unless He permits it. He chooses how, where and with whom I will enjoy any type of pleasure.

Rule four

I am His slave. He can use me in any way, at any place and at any time He wishes and so can anyone else He permits.

Rule five

I feel what He wants me to feel. My feelings are the ones He wishes me to have. When He has not given me any instructions, only positive feelings for Him are allowed.

Rule six

If He allows me to take initiative, then I can do whatever I want but He maintains the right to exercise His dominance over me any time He wants.

Rule seven

I belong to Him for ever. He is and He will be my Master until the end of my life and possibly even after that.

In my heart, I knew that the real recipient of the signed contract was Morpheus. In a similar way, O had been trained by that young man, René, on behalf of Sir Stephen. I was living the life of O, following in her steps in every single detail. I was grateful to Morpheus for humouring me in this way, for allowing me to live the life I wanted to live.

But I had not understood yet how dominant men experience love. I would find out soon enough, in spring. The time when the cherry trees blossom.

Every time I mentioned Morpheus to the Seducer, he pretended to get angry.

‘I have nothing to do with him. When will you stop with the fairy tales?’

All the while, the name Alexander kept coming to my inbox with the Seducer’s emails. If he had not been sent by Morpheus, he was a crook taking advantage of my obsession. He was so slimy that I considered him capable of anything. On the other hand, why would he go to all this trouble with me? What was he getting out of it? He never even wanted to see me! This was an indication that he was merely training me for Morpheus. Unless he was a psychopath of some sort!

I could never be sure, one way or another. Perhaps this lack of certainty was a necessary ingredient of faith.

There is this poem by Yiannis Ritsos.

ESSENTIALLY FAITH

*And yet I am happy, - he said.
I will bring you a dress made of splendour,
two birds made of light
that will perch on your shoulders, their shadows
two boats from a children’s notebook
floating in the sunlight – blue. Two cicadas,
for earrings – I am happy, I tell you.
And for all this, I need nothing
nothing but your faith. All else
leave to me – the splendour, I mean,
the birds, the cicadas, and your happiness.*

*Ah, the colour of the sunset! – will you make it in time?
Stop crying now, a dress, I tell you,
made of the most luminous splendour. Don’t let me down.
If you don’t take it, I don’t have it.*

Three months into my training, the brute stopped communicating with me. I continued to ask for permission for everything, but he would reply with one word, yes or no. Naturally, I confronted him about this.

‘If you want my submission without even talking to me, it will never work, no matter how willing I am. It will remain a rehearsal for submission. If this is what you want, fine, just say so. I will give you your rehearsal and then I will go, so I can play the role I was born to play, in the real theatre of life.’

All in vain. The Seducer remained aloof. Perhaps he had carried out the task of bending my will and that was all. I do not think he could deepen the relationship anyway. The kind of BDSM relationship I sought demanded an intellectual complexity which the Seducer lacked.

He had, however, one last thing to offer. And he offered it on the 12th of April, the anniversary of my first contact with Morpheus.

A NIGHT AT THE THEATRE

*If one can bring her to a point
where a girl has but one task for her freedom,
to give herself, so that she feels her whole happiness in this,
so that she practically begs for this devotedness and yet is free –
only then is there enjoyment, but this always takes a discerning touch.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

In March, a new forum member started chatting with me. His alias was Mastershammer.

He came on to me in a way that reminded me a lot of Morpheus:

‘It is a pleasure to read you. Honestly.’

I was flattered, naturally, and we started to chat. I asked the Seducer for permission, but he did not even respond to me. He had stopped answering my texts, claiming he was very busy with his business. What the business was, I never found out.

The Hammer sent me his photo at once. He was about thirty years old and of gigantic proportions, with dark hair cropped short and brown eyes that seemed to be flickering with a good dose of sarcasm. He was a naval officer, had travelled all over the world and had lived in the States for a while. At some point, he ended up in New Orleans. As the twentieth century was coming to an end, the Hammer sat in his flat and watched some ‘weirdos’ enter a club at the end of the street. They were all dressed up in uniforms: cops, soldiers, firemen, and so on. Some of them wore leather collars. He tried to get into the club and was turned away. ‘You’re not dressed properly, buddy,’ he was told. He returned in his naval officer’s uniform and the gates to sadomasochism opened and swallowed him whole.

‘A slave girl working at the club taught me everything I know about BDSM. Do you know the most important thing she taught me? That first you conquer the mind and then the body.’

Really? Is that what they were doing with me? But I had been eager to offer my body to submission from day one! Then the Hammer said something that should have reminded me of the Seducer’s words to me. I only connected the two in retrospect. That slave girl, the Hammer said, was the only woman he had ever met whose genitals were pierced and locked with a padlock. I did not pay much attention to it. I considered the padlock story too far removed from my own life.

The Hammer and I exchanged emails almost daily. He sent me links to songs that talked about sodomy, sadism, broken bodies. Maybe he was trying to scare me off; but I was not scared. He also sent me songs that talked about an increased awareness, an alternative

reality, like when you take drugs and go on a psychedelic trip. I was very receptive to those songs, given the situation I was already in.

Soon, the Hammer started sending me texts on the phone. I had never heard his voice, but there I was, spending my nights with him. I would go to bed, fall asleep, wake up with the ping of a text, answer it, sleep for five minutes and wake up again when the next text arrived. Sometimes I would spend the entire night with him, until sunrise. In the morning, I went to work with dark circles under my eyes. It was truly a crazy thing. But I enjoyed his company; it made up a little for the Seducer's intolerable silence. Not that I cared about the Seducer anyway, except that he provided me with a sense of contact with Morpheus, which I needed.

'Those stories of yours on the forum? I read them all. Yours must be the most desperate quest for pleasure I have ever come across in my entire life.'

I accepted the Hammer's verdict. I did feel desperate, especially now that it seemed I was going to be abandoned. I kept going, though, mostly out of stubbornness.

'Your problem is that you are a masochist, seeking physical pain, but you cannot surrender control easily. You need special treatment to achieve submission, with a lot of detachment on the part of the Master.'

The Hammer was a very intelligent, knowledgeable man. I enjoyed our conversations immensely. He seemed to have come to terms with his own sadism, yet he sought at the same time a type of inner freedom. He had been impressed by Carl Jung's theories about the shadow hidden in our subconscious. The only way to be free, he said, was to confront the things we meticulously hide from ourselves.

'Men are forced quite early to engage in dialogue with their shadow: their secret desires and fears. Women rarely have the inclination or the opportunity to do it. Except in BDSM. There, women are sometimes made to do things they despise. They face their shadow – their subconscious and whatever lurks in there – and learn to carry the burden. That is why I admire you,' he said and my respect for him reached high heaven.

I had to agree with him again. The quest for the ultimate pleasure could only be one thing: the quest for freedom. Pleasure is a matter of choice, not fulfilment of needs. A masochist takes care of her needs and does not really experience pleasure. I knew that very well, having learned it the hard way. Knowing it, of course, would not prevent me from sending to Morpheus, if I could, a detailed list of all the tortures I was willing to be subjected to. Just like the piano teacher, in Haneke's movie. I was seriously trapped in my own masochism.

In April, the Seducer asked me to go and meet him, at last.

‘You are ready now. Come next Friday, on the 11th of April.’

I was overjoyed at the prospect of going to Athens again. The 12th of the month was the anniversary of my first contact with Morpheus. On the forum, the band with the masks – all the fake personae with the fake names, who were all Morpheus, as far as I was concerned – went crazy. They would upload love poems or posts with double meanings, or songs like, ‘Come on down, it’s time to meet your Master’. I could sense that the moment was nigh for something important, earth-shattering. Would Morpheus finally appear to me in the flesh?

The Seducer, on the other hand, kept reminding me to bring with me the beauty case with my sex toys: the instruments of the ultimate pleasure.

‘Which ones would you like me to bring?’ I asked.

‘Bring everything, D. Bring it all.’

I could not believe it! Maybe he had finally realised how dedicated I was to the cause. He might have decided to teach me everything I wanted to know about sadomasochism. The real thing, not the simulations.

On the 11th of April I took the train. I will always remember the reflection of my face on the window, superimposed over the gentle landscape racing past on the long way to Athens. I feel nothing but pity for the person I was that day. And yet there was something moving about this eager face in the window. I must admit that if I were Morpheus, I would also want to crumple up that innocence.

I arrived in Athens at noon. I had booked a room in a nice central hotel, with a spa bath, skylights above the bed, and a lovely little balcony, lost like a drop in the ocean among a multitude of glass buildings. I relaxed in the spa bath for about an hour, then put on my most beautiful lingerie and a satin dressing gown, and sat waiting patiently at the little balcony, with a bottle of red wine. I sent a million texts to the Seducer but received no reply. He was probably waiting for midnight, so he could arrive precisely for the anniversary. Perhaps he was trying to get the Oscar for romanticism.

When I got tired of waiting, I sent him one last text for goodnight and went to bed. At about 2:30 in the morning, a phone call woke me up. It was the receptionist, asking me if I was expecting food delivery. Of course not! A sandwich in the middle of the night? Suddenly it hit me. The Seducer! I told the receptionist it was a friend, who could come up for a quick visit. In a few minutes the Seducer was knocking at my door. He was wearing an old sweatsuit with baggy knees and was carrying a plastic bag with a couple of disgusting, greasy sandwiches. No wonder he had been mistaken for a delivery boy!

He sat at the balcony with me and ate both sandwiches, chatting all the while at his usual level of shallowness. My inner voice kept saying: *Where is Morpheus? When is he coming?* The Seducer then asked me to go inside and show him my toys. I emptied the case on the bed and exhibited them all one by one.

The Seducer left them all there without a second look and asked me to go and stand against the wall opposite the bed. I was to touch myself with my face turned towards the wall, as if I were a pupil being punished in class. He turned on the television, lay on the bed and started watching a boring programme, a political debate of some sort. I do not know what kind of pleasure he could have derived from my suffering, but no matter how much I tried, it was impossible for me to come. When I admitted defeat, he gave me permission to lie down on the floor next to the bed, while he kept his bare foot on my belly. I finally managed to squeeze a mediocre orgasm out of my unwilling body, upon which the Seducer got up, bid me goodnight, and left.

The Hammer stayed with me for the rest of the night, trying to make me feel better. I spent hours on that balcony, drinking wine and exchanging texts on the phone with him. He kept despair at bay.

I went to bed very late. The following day I had breakfast in my room and watched a sad programme on television about orphaned children. I cried bitter tears, for them and for me. I waited for the Seducer, hoping he might visit me, take me somewhere for dinner, or to a bar for drinks, show me a little bit of Athens... Nothing. I waited patiently until it was late in the evening. I texted him many times, but he did not respond. Eventually, when it was obvious that he was not going to show up at all, I asked him for permission to go out with the Doc, a medical fetishist who was a friend from the forum. There was no way I would stay in that room feeling sorry for myself.

He replied to that text. Yes, I had permission.

I called Yianni, my personal taxi driver, who arrived promptly and took me to Kolonaki to meet the Doc. It was the first time I was meeting the Doc face to face, though we had chatted many times on the forum. He was about ten years younger than me and quite handsome, with bright blue eyes. He wrote magnificent noir stories with a touch of BDSM. The Doc took me to a jazz club, where we had a couple of whiskies each and listened to Peggy Lee. *You give me fever...* When the club closed, he took me to his flat in Kypseli, a neighbourhood that is considered bohemian. I asked the Seducer for permission to have sex with the Doc and he gave it to me. It figures... He did not care in the least.

The permission went wasted in the end, for the Doc and I did not even have sex. We merely played doctor with his medical equipment. He took my blood pressure, and it was good, which was a small miracle. I could not even hear my heart beating any more. Life had drained out of me. I was no longer walking on the path with the cherry blossoms.

Even so, I slept the entire night peacefully in the Doc's arms. He had a very hairy torso, and his touch kept me warm. It was like sleeping with a teddy bear. In the morning, the light came in through the blinds and woke us up. I showed him my gratitude for his tenderness in the best way I knew how, and he had a powerful orgasm in my mouth.

On the train to Thessaloniki, I texted the Seducer that it was over. There was no point in going on. During the long train ride, I wrote a little story too, which I posted on the forum the next day for Morpheus to read. I wanted him to know exactly what he had done to me.

This is it.

THEATRE

One day before my birthday, Daddy came to my room. He kissed me on the forehead and said:

'Tomorrow, I will take you to the theatre. That will be your present.'

I was so happy that I could not sleep all night. The next day at school, the teacher sent me out of the classroom because I was daydreaming. And I had to write down one hundred times, 'I will pay attention in class and listen to my teacher.' I did not care one bit, because Daddy would take me to the theatre.

On the way home, I kept saying the word THEATRE inside of me. I rolled the 'r' in my mind, I roller skated on the word, THEATRRRRE, and I was so very happy.

At lunch I couldn't eat a bite. I gave my food secretly to Sammy, who ate it under the table and then followed me around with his long tongue hanging.

In the afternoon I put on clean underwear, white socks, my shiny black shoes, the red velvet dress, and the black cardigan with the flowers, and I sat waiting for Daddy.

He came home from the office at six.

'Ready darling?' he asked.

'Yes, Daddy, I am ready.'

He took me by the hand and put me in the car. Daddy is an excellent driver. He drove for a while through the city. I was calm - but inside of me I kept saying the word, over and over.

Daddy stopped the car in front of an apartment building. He opened the door for me, we entered the building and got in the lift.

'Is the theatre here, Daddy?'

'Sh... quiet now, it is here.'

On the fourth floor he unlocked a door, and we entered an empty apartment. There was no furniture at all, nor curtains at the windows. A naked light bulb was hanging from the ceiling. In the middle of the room there was a single chair.

Daddy had me sit on the chair. My legs were dangling. Then he left. I waited there who knows for how long. I kept looking at the walls and at my shoes and at the ceiling. Later, when the word had died inside of me, I heard the key at the door. It was Daddy.

At home I undressed and put on my pyjamas.

'Happy birthday, darling,' Daddy said and kissed me on the forehead.

It was a small death. A small murder, to be precise. A blow that came close to crushing me. I went on living like that for a few more days, without faith, without hope, breathing out of habit. My will to live had disappeared to such an extent that I was not even interested in killing myself. What would be the point?

That was the moment when Morpheus decided to return. He posted a text on the forum about the anxiety that some women experience when confronted with pleasure. Their anxiety is so deep, he said, that they would do anything to unload their burden onto someone else. Their most common survival strategy then becomes, 'do whatever you want with me'. Some women suffer so much from anxiety that they even bring sex toys to their sexual encounters! Imagine that!

He concluded with the lyrics to a popular song by Haris Alexiou.

*If your ground were more fertile
I'd build you an airstrip with style
With twelve runways, twelve panic bays
Electric outlets and portable tensions
Hijackers and childish contentions
If your body were an oasis
I'd bring you songs and sacred gazes*

If your body were an oasis... But it wasn't! He was right. Much as I was afraid, much as I was trying to postpone it, the time had come for the body to find its rightful place. *The body is always last to surrender.* I had already given Morpheus control over my thoughts, my feelings, my life. Now I would give him my body too. My body, which I had allowed to be abused for so long – because neglect is a form of abuse too – my body would become sacred at last.

I remembered one by one all the songs Morpheus had dedicated to me from the beginning of our relationship. From 'Razzmatazz', the first song he had ever sent me, to the Mika song which gave me hope in Helsinki, from Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger', to 'Prosthetics', the song of the band with the masks.

And now this.

Within a few days, the wound had healed. I stood up again, sensing an inner strength the likes of which I had never felt before. I had acted in a very childish way, waiting for pleasure to be handed to me on a platter. That was the reason for the little stroll through hell: a theatre where the protagonist lives and dies alone on the stage, without a script, without a director, without an audience. Without applause and without pleasure, alone in the vast emptiness of masochism.

I was no longer afraid. I had hurt so much that nothing could threaten me anymore. I had reached the edge of pain and I had survived. I was invincible.

These were not lessons in shallowness. They were lessons in resilience, self-confidence, perseverance. They were lessons in life. I was finally learning that pleasure is something to be fought for. And when it is earned, it is by the skin of our teeth. The ultimate pleasure could never be offered to me. Neither the shallow Seducer, nor the distant Hammer, not even my beloved Morpheus himself, could possibly ever give it to me.

D's pleasure was precisely that: it was D's. It stemmed from D, it was born in D, it would be claimed by D, and it would be earned by D. Her pleasure would be the pleasure fashioned by her heart and her sacred genitalia. That would be the ultimate pleasure.

That punch was even closer than the previous one. I was still fighting to get out of the coffin, when I felt my fingernails tearing my own flesh from inside, scratching the inner walls of my being. Maybe it was my heart that was fighting to escape my chest. Boom... boom... I did not know what to do. I will follow you, I said. Lead on. I believe in you. I trust you.

He did not even turn to look at me. Come here... go there... open your legs... now close them... go to sleep... think... don't think... feel... kneel... on all fours... stand up... come... come... give me your orgasm...

Enough!

The sound of breaking glass. Everything that had been protecting me, all my convictions, my crystallized beliefs, lay smashed around me. A pool of blood at my feet. I did not even try to pick up the pieces. I kicked the broken glass aside, stepped over it, and came out into the light.

In my mind's eye I saw Morpheus standing a few steps away, with a funny smile on his face. *Dear D...* He suddenly seemed smaller to me. You are a little pale, Sir, aren't you feeling well? Was he worried about me? Why? I wanted to take him in my arms and hold him tight and tell him, don't worry, Sir, everything will be alright. I knew I could now thank him and walk away if I wanted to. I knew I could lie down at the edge of the sea and look at the stars, I could dance all night in the dark, with my eyes shining, I could walk in the streets of Athens or Thessaloniki or any city in the world, any city I cared to choose for myself, I could reach out my hand to those around me, or not reach out if I did not feel like it. I could talk or remain quiet, stay put or whirl around, laughing, until I got dizzy and breathless.

That moment, for the first time, I realised what it means to want. Ah, yes... Isn't it better this way?

I want. I want you. And I want so much more.

I turned around and looked at Morpheus. He was still smiling, like a little boy. I smiled at him, too.

'What is it you want, D?'

'It will take us a lifetime for me to tell you. Shall we go?'

I took his face in my hands, looked into his eyes. We left together, our shadows lengthened behind us, he was walking as calm as ever, I think he was leaning on me a little bit, but maybe I am wrong, maybe he was trying to hold me back a bit, so that I would not walk so fast, because he likes our moments together, he wants them to last forever, but I am always walking so fast and I don't know who is leading whom, I think it is he who leads, but he makes it look as if it were me, because he knows I like that, and all the way I whispered secrets in his ear, secrets he knew already, but I kept telling him again and again because he likes to hear me tell my secrets, and he did not say anything, because what could he say? He only had one thing to say to me and he had already said it. I have not even started yet, little girl, that is what he said. And I said let's go now, I want to go now, but aren't you going to

beg me for it, he said, and I said ah, maybe in the next lesson, and he smiled again. It is not absolutely necessary, he said, and I wanted to kiss him for accepting that I will never be very humble, and I said again let's go now, there is so much to do, let's go and do it now, it is time.

Ah, and one more thing, you better watch out, because I have not even started either. Isn't it better this way?

PART FIVE
RETURN TO THE FLESH

MAGIC BUS

*It is not all finished between us;
we are still in the middle of the sentence;
it is only the sentence that is not finished.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

After the events in Athens, I realised that the Hammer was to be the Seducer's replacement. He was the one who would forge D's identity on the way to her final destination.

I did not bat an eyelid at the prospect of a new trainer. It was clear already, to me at least, that I was slave material. This time I prepared for a smoother transition to the hands of the new Master. But while inside me things progressed smoothly, I could not say the same for the world around me.

The whole affair had imbued my life to such an extent that I had become isolated. I had stopped talking about it with Alice and Thomas, unable to explain to them what was going on. Even as I was certain I was going somewhere where things would be completely different than before, I could not tell them where I was being taken. I believed, I trusted, and I followed. Alice and Thomas would never understand. The children had to be protected. And the forum members all thought I was crazy.

One thing was even more clear to me: Morpheus had no other choice but to give me to others for training. What I desired was to become property, not to love and be loved. I wanted to be owned, be used for sexual purposes, live a life devoted to the One. And it was *my* dreams that determined my destiny. If not my dreams, then his interpretation of my dreams.

Twice until then I had managed the three-inch punch, taught to Uma Thurman by Pai Mei – which in my case had been taught to me by Morpheus. I had managed to smash all that stood in my way. At the start of my journey, I had been a nobody, a big zero. I had escaped the Matrix of ordinary life and had seen fantasy and reality miraculously merge. I had discovered the depth of passion. And now here I was. I had made it. I was D, as surely as the sun rises every morning. I accepted that identity wholeheartedly, just as I embraced self-control. That much I had learned. *Teach us to sit still...*

And now? Where do we go from here? How do we explore D's dream world? How will self-control serve my own desire? How much closer does the next punch have to be?

And what will happen there? What is *the ultimate pleasure*?

The Hammer started sending me very peculiar emails. Their titles referred to things that only Morpheus and the Seducer could possibly know. The mysterious coincidences overwhelmed me once more.

One email was titled ‘Vicariously, I’, and it contained a link to ‘Vicarious’, a song by a band called Tool. I remembered the email Morpheus had sent me once, with the title ‘Vicarious Liability’. It was easy to understand what the Hammer meant: he would relate to me only on behalf of Morpheus. Or rather, Morpheus would now relate to me through the Hammer. This was certainly a vicarious affair the three of us were engaged in.

If this seemed far-fetched, his next email hit closer to home. The Hammer sent me the song of a heavy metal group from Helsinki, called Walhalla. The title of the email was ‘Fenriz’.

‘Let’s see. Will you get Fenriz?’

I did. It was the drummer’s name, and it was a version of Fenrir, the wolf who had been tied with invisible thread. I had trouble forcing myself to believe that Norwegian mythology was a common subject for a chat. Was the universe conspiring against me again?

‘Spot on about Fenrir.’

I was sure now he had been sent by Morpheus. Besides, he admitted it openly, in one of our chats.

‘You do realise we will never meet, right?’

‘Yes. But I want to know why.’

‘You don’t know why?’

‘Pops will not let you.’

‘Damn right.’

‘But he allowed the disgusting Seducer to touch me.’

‘Precisely. I am not disgusting, my dear.’

It made sense. The session with the Seducer was meant to desecrate me. But the Hammer was on a different mission. I could not imagine yet what Morpheus had in mind. All I knew was that he had given me to the Hammer. I could already feel the invisible thread tying me to him.

Then the time came for the formal transfer. I expected that there would be a gesture of obedience to the new Master and disobedience to the old one. That was precisely what happened. The Hammer asked me to send him my photos, just like the Seducer had done once. I refused. I said I needed permission for that.

‘If you don’t do it, I will punish you,’ he said.

‘Only my Master can punish me. You do not have the right to punish me.’

‘Watch me.’

He stopped all communication at once. It was as if I had been deprived of oxygen. I was already addicted to him, as if he were a drug. And in a sense, he was.

I asked the Seducer for permission to send my photos to the Hammer. He told me to forget about him. That same night, I sent the Hammer the photos he had asked for, and I said goodbye to the Seducer. He had nothing more to teach me. I never thought about him ever again, except when I was writing this story.

The transfer was complete. I had been given away again.

The Hammer called me at last and I heard his voice for the first time. It was a youthful voice, cultured, intimate. I tried to clarify things from the start.

‘I belong to Morpheus. I am his, now and forever. I want you to know this, before we begin.’

‘You are one of the most dedicated women I have ever met. Would you ever consent to be my slave?’

‘Yes. If I did not belong to him, I would.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are a man with clear, uncomplicated desires. Because you are decent. Because I trust you and I like you.’

‘Don’t let this go to your head, but I would give my right arm to have a slave like you.’

I did not reply to that. What could I possibly say? The man was very experienced, he knew precisely what to say to get to me. I wiped the tears from my eyes, grateful he could not see them, and embarked on the second phase of my training.

‘Illusions are the solace of ordinary people. The pleasure map is a map of our dreams, but the journey itself is a journey in the desert of the real.’

The Hammer was clearly referring to Žižek’s book, one of many in the Morpheus curriculum. Another indication they were all working in cahoots.

The aim of our relationship was then announced to me. If, in the first part of the journey, I had learned how to expand my heart and my mind, now I would learn how to expand my body.

‘The desert of the real is made up of flesh. That is where I am taking you. This is the final journey: a return to the flesh.’

I was not interested in any of this. I didn’t know how to do anything else any more other than follow.

‘Where would you like to go?’ he said. ‘Ask and it will be yours.’

‘I want to go where Morpheus wants me to go.’

‘Fine. We will go where your pleasure will make you tremble and mumble words without meaning. Then I will leave.’

That was one of the first things Morpheus had said to me. At least he was consistent in his demands.

My training began with a few simple exercises that would expand the orifice of my body that would be used mostly. The Hammer said that O had received similar training at Roissy. It all made sense now. I was truly living O’s life. My body was becoming compliant, always available for use, eager, willing, open. I learned to relax my sphincter muscle in response to the voice of the Hammer. It was not the easiest thing in the world, but I soon learned to master it by relaxing my facial muscles first. Then the shoulders, the stomach and so on. It was a bit like a crazy yoga, aiming at transforming my body into an instrument (and a receptacle) of pleasure.

The Hammer called me any time of the day or night. When he called, I dropped whatever I was doing and followed his instructions. If I was at the office, I excused myself and went to the toilet, where I masturbated, with or without an orgasm, depending on the command. Sometimes I was ordered to simply remove my knickers, stuff them in my pocket, and return to work. Other times I had to pinch my labia with a clothespin and keep it there under my clothes for an hour or so. Very often, I had to wear a large anal plug for many hours of the day. Just like O had been forced to expand her anus, they – Morpheus and the Hammer – were doing something similar with my body. I would go to work wearing it, or sleep with it lodged in my body. Once I was asked to go to church wearing it; I complied.

The permanent accompaniment to the exercises ordered by the Hammer was an empty bottle of my favourite white wine by Hatzimichalis. I had to learn to insert that into me, by kneeling over it, until I learned how to impale myself on the bottle. We did these exercises when I was alone at home, for my convenience.

I was in a constant state of arousal. Sometimes the ping of a text on my phone would wake me up at four in the morning. The Hammer said he was on a ship somewhere in the Aegean, working the night shift and overseeing maps and navigation. We would exchange texts for an hour or two, until he would finally allow me to go back to sleep. I did not get enough rest, had permanent dark circles under my eyes, but I was happier than ever.

There were no limits. I did what he wanted. I did things that I do not dare mention, monstrous things, disgusting things, that would make an ordinary person gag. It did not matter. I was property. I followed and the body followed too. Within a month I had learned to sit on the bottle. If this seems incredible, a quick look through the available videos on the Internet will convince even the most incredulous that anything is possible with the human body. My body became so flexible that I could make the bottle almost disappear. Almost, because the Hammer insisted that I be careful. Lose the bottle and you'll end up in hospital, he said.

'You will have to explain to the doctors what happened. And you will be punished.'

I was careful. I did not lose the bottle.

Apart from these exercises, I had to continue to write for his entertainment. I could not understand why it was important to keep writing, but I did as I was told. It was as if my identity had been decided upon, ever since I had appeared in front of Morpheus. He had offered me his opinion of who I was on day one: *In the best possible scenario, you are a serial thrill-seeker and in the worst a serial writer.*

I gradually came to accept the destiny Morpheus had chosen for me. That is how I came to be who I am today.

The Hammer issued two orders, which I was to follow at all times. One: I would seek new erotic adventures, on the condition that they were intriguing and entertaining. And two: I would write about these adventures in my new, de-romanticized worldview, and add them to the book.

Which book? This book, of course. The book and I were growing together. I sent everything I wrote to the Hammer, just as I used to send everything to the Seducer, and before him to Morpheus. Everything I wrote was taken into consideration, determining my future, just as everything that happened to me went into the book. Morpheus and his Seducers pored over my adventures, the people I met, the places I visited, my fears and my dreams,

putting me under the microscope and making careful decisions about the future of their peculiar living toy.

It gave me great joy that my ability to conquer new destinations had finally been acknowledged. This new journey was a bit like the Magic Bus, the hippy bus of the seventies that used to take young people all the way to India and back. I was now riding on my very own Magic Bus, travelling through the land of the ultimate pleasure, with the Hammer sitting at the wheel, whistling heavy metal songs, and discussing Norwegian mythology.

All that was left to do now was find some company for the journey.

DESTINATION: SUPERMAN

*Her development was my handiwork.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

Thomas lived in a beautiful flat with a balcony overlooking the entire city of Thessaloniki and the Thermaikos Bay. The view was breathtaking. I often went to visit him, and I would stay over if I had too much to drink. Thomas always cooked for me, put up with my whims, and let me sleep in his bed, while he used the couch in the living room. After that first time, we had never had sex again. Sometimes we played together, and I was always the dominant with him. I considered him my sub – and to an extent, he still is my sub to this day.

One evening, Thomas invited me and some friends to his place. I arrived a little early so I could help him with the buffet, but I did nothing other than smoke in the balcony and sample the delicacies he had prepared. The more I immersed myself into a life of obedience and dependency, the more passive I became, to the point that I was incapable of taking part in mundane activities, such as making sandwiches. I simply rejected everything that was not sexual or significant or both.

‘You are a pleasure slave. You’d better get used to it,’ said the Hammer repeatedly, and I obeyed.

Our guests were a kinky photographer and his wife; my friend Alice, who often came to our gatherings, without ever participating in any form of play; Belle de Jour, who had attended the summer party at my place, and a guy she had brought along. Thomas and Belle were the only ones who were proper BDSMers. The others were all newbies.

Belle was intelligent and loving, the epitome of kindness. A brunette, tall and curvy, with very pale skin. She had a weird way of talking. Every now and then she would add this word to whatever she was saying and make it somehow fit the context: p-l-e-a-s-u-r-e she would say, annunciating slowly, as if she were playing with worry beads, picking them one by one and letting them drop one at a time with a soft clicking sound.

She and I could become the best of friends, I thought. She was also submissive and knew what the role demanded. We could probably travel together for a while. Though I did not know it then, that would soon come true in the most spectacular way. Since the innocent, winter kiss Alice had given me, with a sweet mouth smelling of rakomelo, I had come a long way. Large chunks of my innocence had been lost already, as well as my convenient life, my old habits, the simple things most ordinary women get to experience. Good riddance.

Belle’s friend, whose real name I cannot remember, was the spitting image of

Superman – Christopher Reeve, that is. Tall, muscular, with a handsome, symmetrical face. A hunk. Unfortunately, he was an absolute birdbrain. Superman must have been the equivalent to male fantasies involving dumb blondes. I was as shallow as Morpheus to desire this man, but what the hell – I would gladly take a stroll through the garden of earthly delights, after all those months of abstinence. I picked up my phone and sent a text to the Hammer, asking for permission to have sex with the hunk. I got the ermission at once, but there were conditions. The Hammer wanted to determine the menu of pain and pleasure for me.

Superman was flirting with me, that much I could tell. My frivolous chat about my training as a pleasure slave had aroused his curiosity. With the permission for sex in my pocket, I did not waste any time.

‘How would you like an introductory lesson in sadomasochism?’ I proposed.

I had never seen a man get up so quickly. We excused ourselves and went to the bedroom. Our friends giggled and made jokes, but what could they do? A woman who wants to have sex is a force of nature. I shut the door behind me, and we did precisely what the Hammer had ordered. I assured Superman he could do anything at all with me, and he did. He pulled my hair, spanked me, choked me with his penis until I gagged. It was not half bad, especially since it was done according to specifications, ordered by the Hammer, under the auspices of Morpheus. This was no joke. I was securely placed in a double frame of control, and I thrived in it.

Soon, Superman concluded the first part of the ordained physical activities. I was having a marvellous time and had forgotten that outside the door our friends were getting on with their night, pretending they could not hear what was going on in the bedroom. At some point Thomas knocked at the door.

‘Are you alright guys? Shall we save you some chocolate cake?’

‘Yes! We’ll be out in a minute!’ I said.

I snuggled next to Superman and thanked him for sharing his body and his time with me. That startled me more than it startled Superman. What had happened to that sad, confused creature, crawling on the hard floors of an obscure bar, getting roughed up by a clown? It seemed I had regained control of my body and my life. I was still promiscuous – my core essence had not changed. What had changed was –

Simple. I now liked myself. *I celebrate myself, and sing myself...* Good old Whitman had got it right.

For the second part of our activities, the Hammer had arranged for a small humiliation for me. He had allowed me to have sex with the hunk, but I would have to pay for it. Once

more, I had to ask for what I could not bring myself to ask once upon a time. I had no trouble asking for it now. I went down on my knees in front of Superman – the concept was magical in itself – we were travelling on the Magic Bus after all – and waited for his golden rain with my mouth wide open and my tongue hanging out. The image must have inspired Superman more than sadomasochism did, and soon he proved that he could live up to the name I had invented for him. By the time I realised what was going on, the hunk had disregarded the Hammer's strict menu and instead of humiliating me with his nectar, he dragged me onto the bed, where he proceeded to take his pleasure a second time with me. Oh, it was all my fault, I admit it. I should have stopped him. These random behaviours are commonplace in the vanilla world, but for me, loss of control was unacceptable.

The following day, I gave the Hammer a full account of what had happened.

'And this is what went down, Sir, instead of sticking to the menu, he wanted to start all over again. I did not think it was possible, only five minutes had passed since the first round. Perhaps someone should inform Agamben that not all men need twenty minutes between erections. And what if everyone was like Superman, what would happen to our beautiful, all-male civilisation? Who would build the bridges then? Surely not I.'

The minute you start questioning male privilege, they all go red in the face. The Hammer said I had to learn to ask for permission even if I just wanted to use the toilet, let alone this.

'But Sir, how was I to know that there are men capable of getting an erection so quickly? Doesn't it take about twenty minutes between erections? Such astonishing luck! I know I have been born under a lucky star, but this is beyond all expectations –'

The Hammer was trying hard not to laugh. I could hear him chuckle, but he kept up appearances. He announced the punishment I was to receive. I was to go and have my nipples pierced. He asked for my bank account and sent me the money for the piercings. I would wear silver rings, from which the letter N would hang. That was the initial of his true name – Nikos.

'This will teach you to ask for permission next time.'

I wondered how Morpheus would feel, knowing that I would carry another man's mark on me and not his own.

Then I realised that this was *his* problem. Why should I have to worry about it?

The day I went to get the piercings must have been the happiest of my life. There was not a single thing on my mind. The internal judge had disappeared. A new system of control had been installed in me, allowing me to make conscious choices, but without any guilt over

those choices. I was free at last from the tyranny of the self.

That was the first step toward the final form of my slavery. And since everything was upside down in the land of the ultimate pleasure, it was also a small step towards freedom.

The second destination was already looming ahead. When the Hammer saw that my humiliation in Superman's hands had backfired, he went and found a more compliant accomplice. The Magic Bus was following a map on which my illusions were a natural obstacle, a mountain range standing between me and my target.

Once, I had been taught the beauty of unimportance. Now things were much more complicated. I was a woman who had gone and had her nipples pierced following an order, a woman who had been punished for being thoughtless. I was turning into a real slave. Yet, at the back of my mind, I believed I was even more important than before. I had been selected and therefore I was valuable.

I was the One.

I think that my ego would have preferred to die than to lose its illusions. Had I been asked I would have chosen death.

As it so happened, nobody asked me.

DESTINATION: MOUNT EVEREST

To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily.

Not to dare is to lose oneself.

(S. Kierkegaard)

Patiently, for months, the Hammer became the absolute ruler of my life. It was strange, but I felt free to do as I pleased. I could disobey if I so wished it, and sometimes I did. When I disobeyed, I simply faced the consequences. The punishments he imposed on me were more humiliating than painful. Sometimes I was ordered to have sex with someone I was not attracted to – like a young man who called himself The Cat, and whose hygiene was rather dubious. That made me think twice before I made any derogatory remarks about those I met.

Another frequent punishment was the humiliation of drinking my own pee. I became crafty and when I knew a punishment was coming my way, I would secretly have a cappuccino beforehand to dilute my urine. I had to pee in a cup and then drink the stuff on camera, so the Hammer would be certain I complied. ‘Oh, it’s just like a cappuccino,’ I would exclaim. That drove him crazy, but what could he do?

It's time though to hop back on the Magic Bus. There's still a long way to go.

I can sense the thing that is growing inside of him for me. It is not love and it is better than an erection. I think I know what it is.

‘You keep going because I make it possible, Sir. I know very well what it is I am doing.’

‘We also know very well what we are doing, my dear.’

This is not a smile. This is the face of a beast.

‘Once upon a time, there was a girl who...’

‘You had better stop with the theatre now. You have to jump. You are not who you think you are.’

I am not jumping into the abyss. I would never jump by myself. I need a little push. Oh, it’s just a push, paid for by hundreds of nights of companionship. It is worth the while if we consider the p-l-e-a-s-u-r-e behind the face of the beast.

The Hammer knows about my relationship with Thomas. I give Thomas the sense of stability he needs in his life. He is a good sub to me, a companion mostly, though the roles are clear.

One night, I am with Thomas at his place. I am chatting with the Hammer and he suddenly gets it into his head that we can have a little play with Thomas. This bothers me. My relationship with this man is of a different nature. I have given it a certain form and I do not care if it is true or not.

The Hammer insists. He may be right, what does it matter if I come down from my pedestal? If Thomas is truly devoted to me, he must see me the way I truly am. I am not a role.

We become puppets for the Hammer, he guides our movements. Thomas, who is a better sub than me, is doing precisely what the Hammer is asking him to do, though he seems more agitated than I am. He begins to touch me and the touching brings forth an erection. The Hammer orders Thomas to fuck me and he complies. I find it disgusting. It is as if I am being fucked by my own son.

‘How does that make you feel?’ the Hammer asks.

‘I want to die, Sir.’

‘Good. Tell him to continue. And to fuck you harder.’

I feel wretched. How do I keep going? Why do I keep going?

It is not enough for him. Now he asks Thomas to turn me over and sodomise me. My sweet Thomas is trying to be gentle, but he is rather large and is hurting me. I have been ordered to keep perfectly still and quiet. *Not a peep from you.* I bury my face in the pillow and cry tears of rage. A slave girl soon develops an excellent relationship with her pillow.

Thomas is taking a long time to come. His world has suddenly been turned upside down, he is in shock.

‘Continue fucking her until you come. Don’t you dare stop before that.’

He hangs up. The Hammer is gone. Perhaps what we are doing is so inhuman that even gods need to avert their eyes.

‘My darling, please be quick,’ I beg.

He comes, still trying not to hurt me. I am amazed. I have never seen a man come so gently. He pulls out looking numb, confused.

‘Go get washed,’ I say, pointing to the bathroom. He is still in my care. What we have has not been broken.

I pick myself up and get dressed, without washing up. My hands are shaking too much, and I want to throw up. But I must be strong if I want to help Thomas.

‘What did you think?’

‘It was... weird,’ he says. ‘I am not sure what we are doing.’

‘We are doing BDSM. Isn’t that what you wanted? Make sure you keep notes.’

Our relationship has just become real. We have touched each other in ways most people never will. One day we might even forget.

Later the Hammer calls me. I am lying in my bed and am travelling far away.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Wanted. Loved. I have just conquered Mount Everest.’

He laughs.

‘And what else?’

‘I am the One.’ D to the bone, as always.

DESTINATION: THE AEGEAN

*Reflection is directed to the question
whether the individual is related to a something
in such a manner that his relationship is in truth a God-relationship.
(S. Kierkegaard)*

The old timer was a new member of the forum. He was what we call BDSM-curious. We chatted for a while before he invited me for a weekend to the island in the Aegean where he lived. All expenses covered by him, he said. Just as well, because I was penniless, as usual.

‘So, you like pain?’ he asked.

‘No, I am here looking for truffles.’

Oh, we were sure to have a blast. I was preparing a good dose of D for him.

I asked the Hammer for permission, and I got it. I had started to believe that he was having the time of his life, enjoying my adventures more than I did.

‘Any particular orders?’ I asked.

‘Just be yourself.’

Oh boy, oh boy!

At airport control, my nipple rings set off the alarm. A security girl came up to me and frisked me.

‘I have piercings,’ I whispered to her.

‘It is probably your high heels,’ she said. I took them off and passed.

The airplane was a bus with wings. The flying Magic Bus. I did not even know propeller planes were still in use.

‘This thing will take us over the Aegean?’ I asked the flight attendant. She nodded, with a melancholy smile.

To my surprise, as soon as we took off, all my anxiety disappeared. This slave training is marvellous when it comes to handling anxiety. During the flight I kept busy munching cream-flavoured pita bakes. During landing I masturbated by squeezing my inner thighs hard. I did not have an orgasm - I did not have permission anyway - but it was a pleasant flight.

At the island airport, I found the old timer waiting for me.

‘Welcome to Lesbos,’ he said and kissed my hand.

He was a short man, with a slightly hooked nose and white fluffy hair blowing like chicken feathers in the wind. He was wearing a youthful orange jacket with a hoodie. Nails well-groomed, kept a little longer than necessary, in the manner of bourgeois men after the

war - the second one, to be sure. By the end of the evening, I would know if I would take the whole package, or if I would just stick to a tour of the island.

The hotel he had booked for me was much to my liking. From the balcony I could see the entire harbour. No more storage rooms with dead worms on the floor. BDSM with a little luxury, and a balcony with a view of the Aegean.

We went out for a drink at first, to get to know each other better. He had half a pint of beer only. He confessed to me that after his stroke he had to be careful. Just great, I thought. Knowing my luck, he would end up dead on top of me.

After the introductory beers, he took me to a restaurant. Large, empty, without any music, the kind that attracts families. At some point even a priest walked in. I was pining for a picturesque tavern with a little bouzouki music, but what can you do? At least the dinner was good. I had dolmades, fava, and sheftalia. He had fillet steak and lettuce salad – hold the dill, he told the waiter. He was extremely snobbish to everyone and nagged about everything. In between the nagging, he told me the story of his life. Apparently, when he was a little boy, his mother had sent him to a boarding school, where the other boys had bullied him to death. He sounded very bitter about it.

‘She wanted to get rid of me, so she could live her own life,’ he said.

‘Some women are only interested in their own p-l-e-a-s-u-r-e,’ I said.

I ordered desert too, a delicious panna cotta. The old timer ordered halvah, but he nagged because the portion was too small. He nagged when the waiter took his time bringing the bill, nagged when he found a car slightly blocking us in, then he nearly hit the car parked on the other side. He was one of the worst drivers I had ever seen in my entire life.

We grabbed a bottle of wine and went to my hotel room. No turning back now. I showed him my instruments of pleasure, in my faithful beauty case, and he showed me his. He had bought two leather straps of dubious use, two aromatic candles, utterly inappropriate (everybody knows that only plain candles should be used for dripping wax on the body), medical gloves, a nylon string (good for hanging your clothes to dry), and two carving knives from IKEA.

I took my clothes off and lay face up on the bed. Luckily, I had brought my whip with me because I did not wish to be cut up in little pieces with a carving knife from IKEA. Within a few seconds, the noble gentleman had been transformed into what he really was: the reincarnation of Marquis de Sade, straight out of the eighteenth century. He even looked like him, with his hooked nose and his fluffy hair flying all over the place. I was surprised at his strength and stamina. He left afterwards, allowing me to sleep alone, which I had requested.

I finished the bottle of wine and slept like a baby. When I woke up in the morning, I discovered two things that made my day. The first was that my stomach was adorned with symmetrical black lines, caused by the whipping of the previous evening. The second thing was a tube of Fixodent in the bathroom. Denture adhesive, apparently.

I immediately texted the Hammer, informing him what was happening in the Aegean.

‘It is not to be laughed at. Fixodent is everybody’s future. Even yours, Sir.’

The Hammer must have been in stitches but would not let on.

‘Stop fooling around and make sure the poor man has a good time.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

By the time the old timer arrived at noon, I was as horny as a cat on a hot tin roof. I don’t know if it was the ambience of the hotel, the sun and the sea outside, the previous evening’s whipping, or perhaps the feeling that I was there for something important, though not completely knowable yet.

‘I am a little short of breath,’ the old timer said. ‘This humidity is killing me.’

He unbuttoned his shirt and went to the balcony to get some fresh air. Then he came back in, sat on the bed next to me and started to chain smoke. What a lunatic! Still, he was no crazier than me. I took off all my clothes, lay on my back and purred, but he didn’t get it. It is possible he did not have cats. Instead, he called a friend of his, called Andreas. He wanted to brag about me.

‘Hey, Andreas, that girl I told you about, she is here. You know, the one from the Internet. You cannot even begin to imagine. I did what I wanted with her. I beat her black and blue.’

It went on for a while. I spoke to Andreas too. He asked me if I ever go to Athens and maybe we could get together and so on. After he hung up, the old timer told me that Andreas was a little older than him, around sixty-eight, but more handsome. Unfortunately, one of his legs was shorter than the other one and he had to wear a shoe with a platform heel.

‘What can you do,’ I said. ‘One can’t have it all.’

When the old timer felt a little better, he took off his clothes, keeping his socks on, and started to whip my stomach. I immediately turned face down on the bed; as a slave I am obliged to always take care of myself. I had allowed it once, but I would not a second time – certainly not on the bruises.

‘I want to tie you up,’ he said.

‘Not a good idea,’ I said.

Without any warm-up, he started whipping my buttocks as hard as he could. I kept

squirming like a worm.

‘That is why you should be tied up,’ he said.

Yeah, sure. And if you begin to die, who will untie me, Pops? (I think that these moments of clarity are my redemption for all the foolishness of my life.)

He went on whipping me for a while. I felt nothing but disgust – for both of us. He did not dominate me in any way. I was mostly bored.

And then I got it. I may have taken my sweet time, but I got it in the end. To abandon my need for pain, once and for all, perhaps I had to experience what I already knew in my heart. My pleasure was a reflection of my Master’s pleasure and there was nothing I could do about it. No matter how many adventures I had, how many islands I travelled to, how many whips landed on my body, my pleasure, even if born in my sacred vagina, as Morpheus insisted from the start, did not exist without my Master’s pleasure. I was not a masochist after all. I was just a slave girl.

I took the whip out of the man’s hands.

‘Enough of that,’ I said. ‘You sit over there now and watch.’

How lucky that I had an empty wine bottle to work with! The old timer was dumbfounded at the trick with the bottle. Closing my eyes to focus better on the task, I cut off all contact with him and my surroundings. I was no longer the cheap slut he imagined that I was, but a woman with all her complexity, a woman whom someone, somewhere, loved in a most peculiar way, accepting her with all her madness, with all the dreams and fantasies that moved her, understanding her better than she understood herself, a very harsh man who had taken her away from her own complacent existence, placing her in an almost inhuman relational framework. That woman now surrendered herself to the throes of her orgasm, lifting her eyes only once, the moment of the first contraction of her tortured belly, to look at that stranger who had whipped her mercilessly, who had avenged on her body all the women of his life, and first and foremost his own mother.

He had never touched me, not for a moment. There was no respect in his violence. I was not a human being for him, but an object on which he could vent his anger, someone he had beaten black and blue, so he could brag about it to Andreas.

That was why I was there. I would never again succumb to the whims of my masochism. From now on it would be a mere peculiarity of character, perfectly within my control.

That night, he took me to a tavern for our dinner. I was tired but calm, observing every detail with great interest, keeping mental notes so I could write the story afterwards.

The old timer treated the waiter with contempt, asked for a lettuce salad without dill, nagged about the mustard they put on his steak, and when he asked them about it, they lied that it was just lemon. He had to wipe the mustard off with a napkin, because he suffered with increased uric acid, he said, among his other health problems. He was in the process of consuming huge quantities of his salad, when a piece of lettuce flew into his eye. He groaned like a wild boar; he was in great pain, tearful.

‘Quick, blow into my eye,’ he said frantically.

I blew into his eye as hard as I could, but to no avail.

‘It’s a piece of dill,’ he said. ‘It’s that waiter, he put the evil eye on me.’

I sent him to the toilet to wash his face with plenty of water. There was nothing else I could do. I then texted the Hammer to inform him about what was happening.

‘I don’t think there will be a session tonight, Sir. His eyes are watering, and he has a runny nose too. He is not well,’ I said.

‘What have you done to the poor old man? For shame.’

‘I am innocent, Sir. He plucked out his own eye.’ I tried to picture the Hammer’s face as he was reading the loony texts.

I slept alone the second night too. I woke up in a jolly good mood, despite the bruises. I could feel I had taken one more important step towards my final destination: I had escaped the loneliness of my masochism. I was no longer strutting alone on the stage of my life. The world had become a small theatre reserved for two spectators, Morpheus and me. I lived *under his hand*, just like the tattoo at the back of my neck proclaimed. I could sense his gaze on me: he observed the development of my thought, embraced my feelings, rejoiced at my growing strength. That is why I had to keep writing. He experienced my pleasure *vicariously*. It made perfect sense. I finally had a purpose in life.

DESTINATION: ALPHA

*Everything is a metaphor;
I myself am a myth about myself,
for is it not as a myth that I hasten to this tryst?*
(S. Kierkegaard)

With the Hammer's blessings, I joined a BDSM dating site, to do a little research into prospective partners. The Hammer felt I needed more adventure in my life, for my return to the flesh. I created a quick profile and waited. In a few hours, I had received a few hundred chat messages, competing in bad taste and lack of imagination. 'I want to whip you until you bleed.' 'Talk to me now, bitch!' I even received a proposal to join a commune in the United States where I would spend the entire day working manually on a farm.

Just as I prepared to delete my profile, I received a new chat request. It was a businessman from Athens, who would be in Thessaloniki the following Monday on business. And would I like to have dinner with him at Kapsis Hotel?

I would. Slaves need to eat too. I was finalising the details, when the guy embarked on a fantastic scenario, in which I would supposedly arrive at the hotel at 7:30 in the evening and there would be an envelope at the reception with a key to his room. Then I would take the lift, find his room, and join him for strawberries and champagne, as if I were Julia Roberts in that movie where she played the beautiful prostitute.

'Forgive me for interrupting your fantasy,' I said, 'but that is out of the question.'

'It is not a fantasy,' he said.

'Oh, yes, it is. I never go to a hotel room to meet a total stranger, found on a site for sadomasochists. I might accept a meeting at a public place, but only if my curiosity is piqued. You are not doing very well so far. To begin with, how about showing me your face?'

He did. The photos he showed me were of a man who looked a lot like Mr Big from *Sex and the City*.

'They are fake,' I concluded.

'Don't be an idiot,' said the gentleman who wanted to offer me a romantic evening with strawberries and champagne.

My finger lingered over the blocking function as if of its own accord. Then, surprisingly, the man wrote:

'My name is Alpha.'

Alpha! No way! He looked different in the photos.

‘Oh, my first session,’ I reminisced as I returned to the keyboard. ‘I am almost moved.’

‘Who the hell are you?’ he asked.

‘I am D.’

He did not understand. When I met him, I was not D yet. I was just a girl who was dreaming.

‘Dora Salonica,’ I explained. ‘The one with the nice smile. The dimple?’

He got it then. He gave me his new phone number and asked me to call him and let him know if I would have dinner with him.

I let him wallow in doubt until Monday noon. Then I called him and accepted his invitation. The Hammer had already given his permission for dinner with Alpha, and it would be up to me to have a session with him or not. He said he was curious to see how I would handle it.

I was ready to handle Medusa if it came to that.

‘Kapsis is unacceptable,’ I said to Alpha on the phone. ‘Terrible place, for grandfathers and priests. I only know one person who would like to have dinner there, but he lives on an island.’

I suggested going to a nice restaurant in the centre, near my apartment. He accepted my proposal, saying goodbye to the story with the strawberries.

We met that evening in front of the church of Hagia Sophia. I was wearing a black pencil skirt, beige high-heeled shoes, peep-toes so my polished toenails were visible, and a black top studded with zircon stones. My collar bones jutted out like wings.

‘Time has been very kind to you,’ he said. He took my hand in both his hands but did not kiss it.

Time had not been kind to him at all. Sometimes decay settles in quite fast, especially when someone is unhappy. He had lost much of his hair, there were bags under his eyes and a round beer belly protruded over his belt. He was wearing a white shirt with sweat stains on the armpits, for which he apologised, saying it was a very hot day and he had walked to the centre.

I took him to Kapela, my favourite restaurant. I ordered pork fillets with chestnut puree. Alpha had veal with noodles, and a salad with asparagus and avocado, to be shared with me. He ordered a beer, but I did not want to drink, so I had a Coke.

He did not eat much. He kept talking about himself: how clever, how knowledgeable, what a great Master he was – if only he would find the right girl.

Dear God, if I really wanted to dive into vanity, I would simply look in the mirror. (I smiled tenderly at the thought, recognising the voice of Morpheus still alive and well within me...)

He took good care of me, I can't complain. He kept piling salad onto my plate and pouring my Coke for me. Smoking in restaurants was still allowed in Greece back then, so we both had a cigarillo afterwards. He insisted on lighting mine for me.

I was listening to him absentmindedly, when I picked up the lighter to light the cigarillo which had gone out. Alpha grabbed the lighter out of my hands.

'If you touch that lighter again, I will break your arm,' he said.

I smiled with admirable self-control and let him offer me a light and play the 'gentleman' game. If I had been wearing a Groucho Marx mask, with a fake moustache, nose, and glasses, I would have laughed so hard that it would have all fallen to the floor, leaving me with my true face. My date was so warped that my metaphors were becoming more absurd by the minute.

Our discussion naturally moved to BDSM. He asked me which sadomasochistic practices I had engaged in for the past couple of years, and I told him. He listened attentively, without interrupting. He said then how strange that we should have come full circle like this, when we least expected it. He asked for the bill somewhat hastily, much to my chagrin, as I had noticed a panna cotta with wild fruit on the menu, which I wanted to sample.

Once in the street, he grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. We walked like this for a while towards my apartment building. There, at the entrance, I stopped him and asked him to remove his hand from my neck. It was perfectly clear to me that he and I could not possibly engage in any power exchange. He asked me to follow him to his hotel, but I refused politely.

'Why not?' he asked.

'Because I no longer do meaningless things,' I replied.

He persisted a little, but not for long, because he was truly intelligent and had already understood that I was a different person now.

Alpha took my hand again in his hands, kissing it this time, then walked away. He looked old, defeated. I knew I would never see him again.

I had a feeling the Hammer would be pleased.

LAST STOP: THE VITRUVIAN WOMAN

*Every erotic relationship should cease
as soon as one has had the ultimate enjoyment.*
(S. Kierkegaard)

Belle and I were chatting about this and that, while drinking coffee. When my cell phone rang, I placed it gently on the couch between us and turned on the hands-free.

‘Well, Sir,’ I said. ‘Pity you cannot be here in person. We would have shown you all the nice tricks we know.’

The Hammer laughed. I was so glad he could hear what a good time Belle and I were having, while he was all alone, committed to his promise to train me without ever touching me.

‘Can you hear me alright?’ he asked.

‘Try saying this: I love you, baby.’

Weird noises started coming from the speaker. It sounded like a cat coughing up hairballs. This is common among Doms: they’d rather die if confronted with something they are unable to admit.

‘I would love to get to know you, Sir,’ Belle said sweetly.

‘I, on the other hand, not at all,’ I said. I am a tough cookie when I want to be.

Belle and I had just taken a shower and we were wrapped up in white, fluffy bath-towels. We were two mature women, soft and fleshy, smiling, willing, horny. Poor Sir...

Belle followed the Hammer’s orders and placed me facing the wall, standing with my legs open and my arms stretched sideways above my head.

‘Ah, yes,’ she said, ‘just like the Vitruvian man by Da Vinci.’

‘More like the Vitruvian woman by the Hammer,’ I said.

Romantic nonsense. Things were very simple: I was D, in a flat belonging to my sub, Thomas, and I was about to be whipped by Belle de Jour, following the orders of someone I had never met, in a universe controlled by Morpheus. A perfectly normal, ordinary, love affair.

‘Make sure you do not hit her kidneys,’ the Hammer said.

‘See how much he loves me?’ I laughed. ‘He cannot say it, but he’s sure as hell showing it.’

Belle went on whipping me and I took it well. I had been in a state of arousal since that morning. I knew that today I would experience what I had been preparing for, all this time. The Hammer had announced it a few days before, on purpose. Anticipation is part of

the fun and games. And now the time had finally come.

‘Enough. You, to the bed, on all fours.’

I took my position, while Belle put on a medical glove on her right hand. Her movements were slow and deliberate; she looked very much like a nurse. In fact, what she would do to me was more of a medical act than a strictly erotic one. The Hammer’s commands kept coming like barks over the phone.

‘One finger, two fingers, three fingers... Leave the thumb for last.’

My body writhed and twisted around Belle’s fist, erecting its fortress of flesh against this unnatural invasion. There was a moment when the secret world of my body proved victorious, despite the persistent pressure it was under, and despite the exercises I had been carrying out all these months. The body has its limitations and it seemed we had reached the end of the line.

But the Hammer insisted; he now ordered me to touch myself. I obeyed, without overthinking it. We had done the exercise so many times together, that my body began its slow surrender. Belle was leaning onto my back, our sweat mingling. And the Hammer kept pushing, driving the Magic Bus deeper and deeper into my flesh. *Welcome to the desert of the real.*

I have no idea what happened then. I only know that my mind became a blank, all thought, all sense of self abandoning me.

‘Harder, keep pushing. Don’t feel sorry for her, she wants it. She is dying for it.’

The Hammer’s voice, deep, masculine, kept urging Belle. *More, deeper, keep going, she likes it, she loves it.* I lost myself in that voice. Who was he talking about? I was a female animal, not a *she*. I moaned and groaned and relaxed my sphincter muscle in a sweet surrender to Belle’s fist.

And there it was – when I least expected it: the gate to pleasure came wide open. My entire past disappeared. My childhood years, my relationship with my father, the tenderness of motherhood, my passion for Morpheus, the months of isolation in the hands of the terrible Seducer, the humiliations in the hands of the Hammer. All gone, all forgotten. I became body, only body. I pushed the door and I found myself at a place where I did not exist. And, oh miracle – the small, delicate fist belonging to Belle came in too. How could it be? Impossible!

The last remnants of the self were vanquished. The guilt, the fear of lust, the pitiful defences of the body, the armour with which I had been protecting myself all my life. All gone, nothing left. Morpheus was right. *I do not fuck in order to be, but in order NOT to be.*

And then it struck me. The journey from zero to one had been reversed. I had come back to zero!

Is that what it is to be an O? Is it a circle?

‘More, more,’ says this body that is talking through my mouth, this body that has suffered so much to get here. The time has come to see what is concealed in the small oasis of the flesh, in the desert of the real. Here is the thing I have been seeking, the thing for which I have sacrificed so much. Belle is glued to my back, she and I have become one, a strange, sweaty animal with two heads. I cannot move an inch, I am nailed onto this fist that does not really belong to Belle, but to Morpheus, my beloved Morpheus. He is the Master of my desire, the Master of my pleasure, the Master of my pain. That is the closest punch there is: the fist of the Other, inside me. I touch myself wildly, obsessively, my juices drip on the bed, my moans are muffled on the pillow. Suddenly my spine curves backwards, creaking in the final crescendo of an unearthly harmony. I surrender to the orgasm, kneeling in front of the universe, trembling and mumbling words without meaning.

In this unexpected way I completed my journey. There, at the zenith of jouissance, the ultimate pleasure, I saw what I had been carefully hiding from myself all those years. At the most extreme end of pleasure, there is no control. Complete surrender. It is a strange journey, from zero to one – and back again, from one to zero. Both are necessary. Without the self, you cannot find your way back to zero. You need to have something to lose – something to deconstruct, as Morpheus would say. And without the complete surrender of control, pleasure will always be incomplete. That is why I could not live life as an ordinary woman.

‘How can I thank you?’ I asked Belle.

‘Kiss me,’ she said. ‘There.’ And she showed me where, taking off her medical glove and touching the tender spot between her legs, where her clitoris was waiting for my mouth.

We completed our interlude with Belle’s soft moans enveloping our naked embrace, the pungent smell of female secretions hanging over us like a wet cloud.

Only then did the Hammer hang up. His job completed, he went back to his naval maps and his navigation duties. The Magic Bus had successfully reached its destination.

‘Will you be alright, D? Are you in pain at all?’ Belle asked as she was getting dressed.

I reassured my friend I was fine. I just needed to rest a bit.

Belle kissed me and left. I did not have the strength to get up and go home. I would stay and sleep there, until Thomas returned at night. I pulled the cool sheets over me, feeling my skin hot to the touch and my body satiated to the bone.

I am alive, alive, alive.

We did it, Pops. Who would have thought it possible?

I had taken my pleasure to the limit. I was there, at last.

FREEDOM

*The bond burst; longing, strong, daring, divine,
she flies like a bird
which now for the first time
gets the right to stretch its wings. Fly, bird, fly!*
(S. Kierkegaard)

This is how it all happened. The Hammer taught me how to live following a set of rules. To enjoy my own perversion without any feelings of guilt. To do away with all romantic notions and to accept bare reality – especially my own bare reality. I became a woman who knew what she wanted, who was ready to do what was necessary to get what she wanted. As I often remark, the Hammer taught me how to win – whereas V would teach me how to lose.

A few months later, as was expected, my ride on the Magic Bus came to an end. The Hammer was great at hammering away but was unable to take me in his arms. I would need a man of flesh and blood so I could move forward; a man in front of whom I could kneel, wrap my arms around him, feel his hand on my hair, his kiss on my lips. These are important things and no one should have to live without them – not for long, anyway.

In December, the Hammer informed me he was going away with the navy.

‘No problem, Sir,’ I said. ‘I will find someone else.’

He did not talk to me for two days. When I finally sent him a new text admitting I would miss him, he bid me farewell, and gave me a last gift: the password to his account on the forum. He said I could play a whole load of pranks. I played only one. I used his account to contact Morpheus. I asked him to release D, so she may continue with her life. Morpheus never replied. I still smile when I think of him reading my email: ‘Dear colleague...’

I gave it quite a bit of thought and soon figured out why he would not release me. This had to be my decision. It was something I was now perfectly capable of doing. Besides, I had not lost him. He had suffused my inner world to such an extent that he would always have an impact on the way I perceived the world.

Now I could bury the dead, reconcile myself with the loss of my father, accept life with its imperfections, embrace loneliness if I had to. I would find new mistakes to make, better mistakes. And some day, perhaps sooner than later, I would meet someone with whom I could form the relationship I dreamed of.

The lessons in shallowness had proven invaluable. I had come to understand that our shallow moments are not to be lamented, not when they alternate with meaningful ones. We

all live in an eternal fluctuation between zero and one, from emptiness to fulfilment, and our only compass is the quest for meaning. Morpheus was still afraid of those other moments, the deep ones, when love crawls on the pebbles of a lonely beach and asks you to sacrifice everything. Maybe one day he would stop being afraid and would sacrifice everything. Not for me, but for another D.

In January of 2009, after nearly two years since the beginning of this story, I said goodbye to Morpheus. I had nothing else to give him; he had taken everything. So, I gave him his freedom; freedom from the responsibility over me.

‘The most valuable thing in the world is freedom. I thank you for it, and I reciprocate.’ That was the last thing I said to him.

I did not have the right to ask for anything else. He could have come forward, we could have had an average love affair, even a good one, we could have had a good time for a while or for longer. He chose not to do that. Instead, he offered me the chance to live with hope, with faith, with love, with passion, with madness. I felt complete, at last. The immense void within would never be filled; but I had learned how to feed it. That is the most useful lesson a father can be expected to teach.

That same night I had a long talk with my children. I opened my heart to them, told them everything. At some point I felt the immensity of my confession and I started to cry. All three of them hugged me and told me they would always be by my side.

‘Don’t be sad, Mum,’ Mona said.

I was not sad. I was astonished. My children loved me, after all.

‘Mum,’ Annie said, ‘I did not know you were so cool. I thought you just cooked and washed clothes.’ That killed me and I started to laugh. My baby, I so want you to be happy in your life.

‘I knew it,’ Alexander said. ‘Ever since that bag fell on our head from the sky.’ My rock, my pride. I hope you retain the ability to laugh at everything.

I got my life back. Today, D continues to exist within me, impulsive and passionate as ever. She continues to chase after pleasure, but she does not throw her life away. I may have lost my innocence, but I have regained my courage. I found the lost girl of my youth. I found my children, whom I always hold in my arms, close to me. I feel more alive than ever before. I feel free. But always so horny, dammit.

And what did he get in return?

Nothing, one might say. Absolutely nothing.

I would not be too hasty to make such an observation. I feel him still looking at me, watching over my life, caring for me. I could never forget him, I could never erase him from within, even if I wanted to. Perhaps he became Sir Stephen for me. And perhaps I became his O, in a way.

I don't know if this was a love story. Perhaps this love was so great, so far removed from the concept of love as we know it, that it is not recognisable as love.

Or maybe I imagined it all. What difference does it make?

V showed up a couple of months later. In less than a year, I had become his slave. I stopped drinking, embraced a disciplined, almost ascetic, life, and found a calm happiness close to him. Having become incapable of ever falling in love again, I created a new religion, with V at its centre. I started to live under his hand, at his complete disposal. I worshipped him the way I know best. There are numerous ways in which to worship someone, and a lifetime will not suffice to fill ourselves with the Other. There is nothing else I would rather do with my life. That is all I do. I am and I live as a slave.

My freedom is mine. I have conquered it. I can therefore offer it to anyone I want.

But why did I give it to V?

I will not reveal that, not yet. My V deserves his own book. And one day, he shall have it.

EPILOGUE

*Flee where you will, I am still yours;
go to the farthest boundaries of the world,
I am still yours; love a hundred others, I am still yours;
yes, even in the hour of death I am yours.*
(Cordelia, 'The Seducer's Diary', S. Kierkegaard)

We sat outside, on the veranda. It was the middle of June, and the moon was travelling over Mount Lycabettus. I continued to be alone, a stranger among strangers, just as I had been at the start of my journey, an eternity ago. I felt it for only a moment, and then I shrugged it off.

V had the silver padlock in his hands. He rubbed it with a soft cloth, until it started to shine in the moonlight, then placed it on the table, making sure I saw it. I did not say anything. I went on sipping at my Perrier; he was drinking gin with lime juice. We were not less lonely than before. But we had entered a parallel universe, which, almost magically, was in harmony with that thing around us, the shapeless and harsh thing the rest of the people lived in. It was as if we had built, with what we knew, and with what we had chosen, a bubble that was reserved just for us, floating over the rooftops and the antennae and the terraces of Athens.

I was naked under my dress. He opened my knees, touched me softly, then asked me to step inside and take off all my clothes. He got up too, removed his top, but nothing else, keeping his jeans on; he was barefoot. He remains a handsome man, with an athletic body, with soft grey hairs on his chest, mixed with black ones. Would it be arrogant of me to say, *he pleases me*, when I am there for his pleasure? I think not. My pleasure, D's pleasure, is an important part of the relationship.

In our private universe, pleasure pervades everything, we are soaked to the bone in it.

Let us now take a look inside the flat in Exarcheia, where these two strange beings are spending this summer night. V has chosen to use a metal ruler on her. D is trying to be patient, not wanting to disappoint. She finds it difficult to accept it calmly but knows it will soon be over.

Indeed, V stops. He ties her up in an uncomfortable position, lying on her back on the couch, forcing her to keep her feet high up on his chest. He likes to put his fist inside her. D likes that too. Such strange creatures.

He orders her to touch herself. Very quickly D begins to shake all over. She forgets about the ropes that have wounded her ankles, forgets the uncomfortable position, forgets the black welts adorning her body. She comes like an animal. She comes in his hands. This is not a lonely orgasm. The soles of her feet rest on his hairy chest, his silver hair shines in the moonlight, as he bends over her. No, it is not lonely like that.

But why does he keep going? Oh, why doesn't he stop?

'You will do it again.'

'I cannot do it, Sir.'

He unties her and has her stand in front of him.

'Touch yourself while standing.'

D is rubbing her aching clitoris, up and down, round and around. It is hot in the room, and the sweat is trickling down between her breasts. Her tangled hair hangs on her shoulders, her eyeliner is smudged around her eyes.

'I cannot do it, Sir.'

'You will.'

He sits in the armchair in front of her, watching over her torment. She is doing the best she can, moaning, sighing, tensing her muscles. She resorts to her favourite fantasies: the cruel foreman who would punish Marie Gabrielle; the terrible Adam who liked to use his belt on Emmy Bobretzberg in the book by Tsirkas; Steinbeck's Yelka, who needed to be whipped to feel loved.

'I cannot do it, Sir.'

'You will.'

Now she is kneeling in front of him, the fingers of her right hand moving fast over the wretched flesh that has become the source of her agony. V is sitting comfortably in his armchair, puffing at his cigar. He always smokes Romeo y Julieta cigars, as if to spite her. He knows her story.

D rests her head on his knees and begs. But V will not relent.

'You will come when I tell you to come.'

D obeys and comes. Her legs begin to shake, she trembles like an animal gone crazy, an animal caught in a trap. Even if she could, she would not try to get away – where would she go anyway? There is nothing out there. Here everything is crystal clear, the symbols have aligned with their meaning. A man and a woman are persistently poking at the thing overlooked by most, unseen by most. But these two know of it, their dreams have whispered it to them. They come as close as they dare, perhaps even cross the line sometimes, taking

care not to get completely lost in the ensuing whirlwind. They taste this terrible thing, astonished that it is so deep, so primal, that the mind will have no conception of it, no name for it, even as the body readily recognises it. They enter the place where they do not exist, where they are only body, where the emptiness of the flesh is allowed to find its ultimate pleasure. Afterwards, they return, feeling a remarkable completeness.

This should be our last look in this room. We should leave walking backwards with small, light steps so as not to disturb them, and we should always remember them like this. Bent together, trapped in this eternal moment, the silver-haired man with the cigar, the naked woman still trembling, the moon almost immobile now, no longer travelling.

But no, just a little more, it is important. They finally get up, feeling a little numb. A sweet exhaustion has taken over them, as if they had to fight for their lives and won. They put their clothes on and sit in the veranda, V in the chair, she at his feet. She is rubbing herself against him, moaning softly. A long time passes. D is thinking of everything that has happened to bring her here, everything she felt and thought. She is like a lost puppy that ended up following a stranger, like Chekhov's Kashtanka. If Morpheus were here, he would laugh at her for trying out, even now, another character from a book – how fitting, a puppy! But Morpheus seems distant, a dream from which she woke up. Here, at V's feet, she has found the closest thing to happiness, as she imagines it. This is it and there is no more.

The time has come. V will fit the padlock now. *Your body belongs to me.* Ah, yes. We have arrived at last. D stands in front of him, calm, with her legs open. She surrenders to his hands trustingly. V examines the rings of surgical steel that hang from her inner labia. When the rings are pulled together, the opening to the vagina closes sufficiently to forbid penetration. V puts the padlock in place carefully. The piercings stretch with the weight, elongating her labia unnaturally. With a tiny screwdriver, he tightens the side screw of the padlock into place. There, a chastity belt. The padlock hangs heavily from her tender flesh. V seems satisfied.

'It is finished,' D whispers.

She is unable to focus her gaze fully. A strange mix of feelings in her chest, unknown, unnameable. Small explosions of light in her mind. An unprecedented clarity. *Claritas.* There is no past, no future. She continues to float a few centimetres above reality. It is much better this way.

BDSM AND THE GOD-RELATIONSHIP

A CRITICAL PAPER

by

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1. BDSM: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It has been impressed upon me by people whose opinion I value that I know nothing.

Practically nothing, to be precise.

I will gladly admit it. I have read widely, of course, philosophy and psychology mostly, but I cannot claim to know enough to write a paper on those subjects – not at this academic level. I will therefore refrain from venturing into those areas, much as my fingers are tingling on the keyboard to spout forth spectacular theories on the whys and hows of sadomasochism.

There is one thing, however, that I do know something about: I was a member of the Greek BDSM community for more than a decade. My experiences from that period, as well as the process of writing about my initiation into BDSM, are therefore the subject of this paper.

This essay will also include comparisons to sadomasochistic experiences as they are narrated in two books; Dominique Aury's *Story of O*, the cult book on sadomasochism; and *Cleanness*, by Garth Greenwell, who is possibly 'the finest writer of sex currently at work.'¹ The reason I have chosen these two books is that they are both by people who do only that: they write about the complexity of sexual desire. Aury never wrote any other fictional work² and Greenwell's writings³ focus consistently on queer sex and longing, often revolving around domination and submission, as in his short stories 'Gospodar' and 'The Little Saint'. I

¹ Michael LaPointe, *Times Literary Supplement* <<https://www.garthgreenwell.com/>> [accessed 19 March 2024].

² Aury also wrote *Return to the Chateau*, a sequel to *Story of O*, in 1967. 'Aside from the standard description of the author of *Story of O* as a "literary critic," Dominique Aury's criticism is rarely mentioned in English analyses of her novel, as she says in an interview (without being asked) that she had "written another book [besides O] of literary criticism, which is quite ordinary and honest and hasn't made any scandal at all" (Gallus 20). If the reader foregrounds themes, concepts, and images, rather than plots and events, it seems as if Aury wrote the same book twice, in two disparate genres: criticism and pornography.' Anne Young, 'Subversive Complicity: A Story of O(r)', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 24:4 (2013), pp. 318–341 (p. 318), doi: 10.1080/10436928.2013.843119.

³ Greenwell's novella, *Mitko*, is the first part of *What Belongs to You*. Also, 'Garth Greenwell's new book, *Cleanness*, is both a formal and thematic expansion of the world of his first novel, *What Belongs to You*.' Garrard Conley, 'The Right Wrong Note: A Conversation with Garth Greenwell', *The Rumpus*, 15 January 2020 <<https://therumpus.net/2020/01/15/the-rumpus-interview-with-garth-greenwell-2/>> [accessed 3 April 2024].

am of a similar mind and practice: I only write about sexual desire, especially as it pertains to the sadomasochistic experience.

I propose to start at the beginning: the beginning, for me, was the end of the innocent 1970s.

I was a mere *puella* when I went looking for treasure in a drawer in my parents' bedroom and came upon an old-fashioned erotic photo: a nude man embracing a nude woman. The man's genitals were hidden behind the body of the woman, and the woman's body was hidden by her long dark hair cascading down to her feet. I think the woman's breasts were visible, small and uplifted, but I cannot be sure, as the image is clouded by the passage of time. I do remember the embrace though: the man was tall and muscular, and held the girl from above, like a kidnapping god, bending her backwards at the waist so he could kiss her – a little like the famous painting by Klimt (which I was not familiar with at the time). She was completely abandoned in his hands, surrendering to him and to the ecstasy of their kiss. I was titillated in an awkward way, feeling uncomfortable and hot at the same time.

That was my first contact with my sexuality. I stole the photo, took it to the bathroom – the only other room, apart from my parents' bedroom that could be locked – and, looking at the photo, I attempted to reenact the sentiment it evoked. I then did something painful to the genital area – the details are not important – which resulted in my first orgasm. The next thing I remember is intense fear. I thought I would be struck dead; this was surely a sin. I immediately went down on my knees and prayed to God for forgiveness. I promised I would never do that again, if only I would be spared.

I was always a good child. My dad had taught me the principles by which to live my life: do your best, be kind to others, and a bunch of similar rules – a strict code of ethics that adhered to justice and doing the right thing. My mother had taught me one thing: shame. Funny how it is mothers who teach such things to their daughters. I don't think she taught my brother shame. This seems to be a thing mothers and daughters very often do, or at least used to do back then in Greece: perpetuate the state of things as they are, as if mothers were the wardens of a peculiar jail that would keep girls fettered for ever in their own inner, inescapable chains. It certainly felt that way to me, and even if I hope there were also mothers who encouraged their daughters' aspirations to personal freedom, I doubt it.

After that day, and since I was not struck dead, nor did I keep my promise, scenes of sexual domination became my permanent companion. I sought them in books, in films, in paintings, in songs. I saw the film based on *Story of O* when I was sixteen and it shook me

up. This went on and to some extent it became part of my life – initially as kink in the bedroom. Gradually, even this was forgotten, cast aside, as there were more pressing matters at hand: motherhood, juggling two jobs, and the demands of a difficult everyday existence, especially as a divorced mother of three.

When I turned forty, the need returned as urgency. Dante Alighieri was right to place his Divine Comedy in mid-life, *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*. That is most likely when assessments of one's life begin to take place. Searching now for a different kind of treasure, without knowing full well what I was getting into, and prompted by the discontent of a bad relationship, the boring job of a bureaucrat, and the burn-out of teaching English grammar day-in and day-out, I came across the Forum, an online BDSM community. I met some interesting people who had similar desires to mine, and I had some extraordinary sexual experiences. I kept notes, wrote everything down, and began posting these tentative narratives, to begin with on the Forum. Eventually, I started sending them to a dominant man who initiated a lengthy correspondence with me (there are literally hundreds of pages which form the background to my story).

Soon, what began its existence as an attempt to lure that man, Morpheus, into a D/s relationship with me was gradually transformed into a *de profundis* confession of my exploration of the BDSM world. A series of sadomasochistic sexual encounters and the influence of Morpheus, with whom I fell in love without ever meeting him, led me to reconsider my entire life and my perception of it. I felt reborn as I embraced my body and my often-conflicting desires. To my surprise, I did not end up seeing myself as a chattel, objectified by the other's desire, in a position of mindless sexual servitude. I saw myself as a woman fully capable of choice, contrary to the original sentiment of my parents' photo, as I had perceived it.

In other words, I became somebody who chose how to live, in and out of bed. I threw shame out the window and did what I thought best. To those who, like Simone de Beauvoir (especially in *The Second Sex*, 1949), see female submission as an abomination, insisting that a woman should never submit willingly to the fiend of patriarchy,⁴ I will counter-propose the 'world-travelling' approach of Maneesha Deckha. She feels we need to reconsider the legitimacy of SM as a feminist practice, by 'listening to unfamiliar experiences in a critical

⁴ 'Beauvoir exhibits horror at the constraints of modern womanhood and disdain for what she sees as women's weakness, their complicity.' Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh* (NYU Press, 2014), p. 66 <<http://www.jstor.com/stable/j.ctt9qfwk7.6>> [accessed 29/7/2020].

yet respectful way in order to reduce tendencies to see cultural practices as “different” and inadvertently slip into an imperial position’.⁵ Deckha comments: ‘S/M is something that many people actively seek out and enjoy. It holds value for some women and it is too dismissive to regard this value as an expression of false consciousness.’⁶

Angelika Tsaros agrees: ‘A recognition of the validity of choosing a sexual role, admittedly within a skewed and patriarchal system, would enable a more honest dialogue.’⁷ This is an inclusive position that does not dismiss women like me, who, having full capacity, have made an informed choice about the sexual role they wish to assume in their relationships. The same applies to the multitude of men who have made similar choices and embraced a submissive role, contrary to the demands of a clearly patriarchal society.⁸ As for dominant men and women – a true rarity – I am tempted to use Wittgenstein’s aphorism: ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’; I will, however, offer some personal views based on experience, further below.

Perhaps even more useful are the words of Paulhan, from his essay ‘A Slave’s Revolt’ that accompanied *Story of O*: ‘there is a grandeur and there is a joy as well in abandoning oneself to the will of others (lovers and mystics are familiar with this sense of grandeur, this taste of joy).’⁹ I believe Paulhan knew very well what he was talking about when he brought mysticism to the BDSM discussion. I have to say that for me, what I call ‘a God-relationship’ was very much a part of my experience.

I would like to clarify that I will be speaking strictly for myself and my own needs and desires. I do not advocate, propose, or recommend sadomasochism to anyone. BDSM should be practised only by those who cannot avoid it (as Morpheus used to say in the olden days).

⁵ Angelika Tsaros, ‘Consensual non-consent: Comparing EL James’s *Fifty Shades of Grey* and Pauline Reage’s *Story of O*’, *Sexualities* 16 (8) (2013), pp. 864-879 (p. 869), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/136346071350890>.

⁶ Maneesha Deckha, ‘Pain as culture: A postcolonial feminist approach to S/M and women’s agency’, *Sexualities* 14 (2) (2011), pp. 129–150 (p. 141), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/136346071139903>.

⁷ Tsaros, ‘Consensual non-consent’, (p. 869).

⁸ In the scope of this paper, which is of a limited range, I am obliged to refrain from commenting on the variety of criteria that determine hierarchies of control and power in a homoerotic context.

⁹ Jean Paulhan, ‘A Slave’s Revolt: An Essay on *The Story of O*’, Preface to Pauline Réage, *Story of O* (Corgi Books, 2012), pp. 267-287, (p. 287).

The first draft of *In Bed with Kierkegaard*, written in Greek, was submitted to one of the largest publishing houses in Athens in 2010. Two weeks later I received a phone call from the editor – or rather one of the readers. He wanted to meet me and discuss the book. I agreed and soon after I took the train and met him in Athens.

He was a young man, about fifteen years younger than me. He ordered a Greek coffee and I a cappuccino, which, since my days with the Hammer, is the only coffee I drink.

‘Will you publish it?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘We cannot publish a book like this!’

‘Why not?’

‘We have a specific niche of the market. Those who buy our books are mostly middle-class, educated, financially independent women. They will lynch us.’

‘But... I don’t understand. Why am I here then?’

‘Because it’s a good book. It really is a good book. It’s just that we can’t publish it.’

‘So, what do you want me to do? I don’t get it.’

‘Write a different book,’ he said.

It is hard for me to resist a suggestion, once made. This, I have been told, is a major characteristic of submissiveness. Once, I was chatting with a Dom, exploring the possibility of a relationship. It was late at night and I happened to mention that I suffer from insomnia. He told me that some people don’t need all that much sleep and this is perfectly natural. He suggested that if I wake up in the middle of the night, instead of trying to get back to sleep, I could get up and read a book, cook, or watch a movie. He devoted less than half a minute to this and we soon began to discuss more important matters at hand. The next time we chatted, I told him how much better I felt ever since I stopped trying to sleep. In fact, I enjoyed sleep that was longer and of a better quality, since I had relaxed about it and no longer felt obliged to sleep. He was very pleased about that. He said he often used this trick of making a small suggestion about something or other to see if the prospective partner would take him up on it. If they did, he could be sure they were submissive and therefore suitable for what he was looking for. Indeed, we soon embarked on a very fulfilling D/s relationship which lasted for five years.

Being so very susceptible to suggestions, I did what the editor/reader told me to do. I wrote another book, in which I disguised D/s with some romance, sugar-coating the pill, so to speak, while I refrained from depicting explicit SM scenes. It was a novel about a man who was the best chef in the world, as well as the best lover in the world. He seduced women by figuring out the perfect menu for each one of them, but he also intervened in their lives,

helping them to overcome their self-defeating convictions. There was a snobbish art critic, for example, whom he convinced to participate in a little game that showed her how silly her arrogance was and how much it detracted from her charming personality. He was a real hero, the perfect Dom, though the sex was vanilla, except one scene where he blindfolded a woman and asked her if she could guess what he was feeding her (she could). It took me nine months to write the book. I submitted it to the same publisher, and it was immediately accepted for publication.

I mention this anecdote for two reasons. The first one is to give an indication of the cultural climate in which I wrote the first draft of the book that was rejected by the Greek publisher. It was so important to me to tell this story that I was willing to forego my anonymity, knowing I would open myself to major adversity in my country. Innocuous romance novels were well accepted and in demand, but publication of a BDSM novel was out of the question. The only solution was to move to another country and write the book in another language. This I did, at great personal sacrifice; I gave up my home, my friends, my job, and my country.

The second reason is that Dominique Aury, the writer of *Story of O*,¹⁰ was also faced with similar adversity. When her lover, Jean Paulhan, took the manuscript to Editions Gallimard, they rejected the book for the same reason mine would be rejected sixty years later (this just goes to show how little things have changed in the field of explicitly stated female sexuality). In a television interview, Dominique Aury revealed what Gaston Gallimard had said to Paulhan: ‘We can't publish books like this.’¹¹ In the US, a few months before the book's publication, Irving Kristol of Basic Books decided they could not distribute *Story of O* through their Readers' Subscription book club. In a letter to Richard Seaver, the editor of Grove Press, Kristol characteristically said: ‘The people here who have read it believe that our members – mostly good family men and women – would be outraged at receiving it as an automatic selection.’¹²

¹⁰ Anne Desclos published the cult book under the name Pauline Réage but was also known as Dominique Aury, which is the name I will be using for her in this paper.

¹¹ Geraldine Bedell, ‘I wrote the story of O’, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/jul/25/fiction.features3>> [accessed 22 February 2024].

¹² Letter from Irving Kristol to Seaver, 25 December 1965, Grove Press records, quoted by Amy Wyngaard, ‘The End of Pornography: The Story of *Story of O*’, *MLN*, vol. 130, no. 4, September 2015, pp. 980-997 (p. 988) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43932877>> [accessed 5 June 2024].

Despite the adverse cultural climate, Aury went on and published *Story of O* – anonymously, but at such great risk to her reputation. Aury, who knew Jean Paulhan’s predilection for sadomasochistic literature, since he had written the preface to *120 Days of Sodom*, admitted openly that the initial purpose of her book was to rekindle his interest in her: ‘I wrote it alone, for him, to interest him, to please him, to occupy him. I wasn’t young, nor particularly pretty. I needed something which might interest a man like him.’¹³

I enjoy the way my story mirrors that of Aury’s. *Story of O* has been important in shaping the form and content of my desires. Also, I used her book a little like a palimpsest, the story of D echoing the story of O in many ways. Not because I had no ideas of my own, but because with my consent, I was given the opportunity to live out Dominique Aury’s fantasy – to the extent that I could do so, without serious harm to myself or others.

This is the background story of my novel, *In Bed with Kierkegaard*. Whether it is in the genre of philosophic pornography, or pornographic philosophy, in the vein of the Marquis de Sade’s writings (*Justine*, *Juliette*, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*) or other pornographic works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries known in France as *livres philosophiques*, or even if it is a twisted re-telling of the story of O, taking place in the digital environment of our modern times, is not so important. What is important, for me at least, is the nature of the events that took place between the years 2007 and 2009 in modern Athens, the castle of Roissy having been replaced by a very realistic and accessible online Forum, that provided the opportunity for sadomasochistic encounters with like-minded individuals.

‘Too much sex and *voilà* for a literary audience?’¹⁴ Robert Glück wondered, while discussing New Narrative.

Possibly. My writing seems to have so much in common with New Narrative, a movement of experimental writing launched in San Francisco in the late 1970s, that I cannot refrain from alluding to it briefly. Like the writers affiliated with New Narrative, I also happen to believe that exploring intimate aspects of the author’s sexuality allows us to approach the authenticity of the author’s interior life.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robert Glück, ‘Long Note on New Narrative’, *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* (Coach House Books, 2004), *Wikipedia* < https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Narrative > [accessed 4 October 2023].

Authenticity is paramount in New Narrative, and is possible with a variety of devices, including fragmentation, meta-text, identity politics, explicit descriptions of sex and undisguised identification with the author's physicality, intentionality, interior emotional life and external life circumstances.¹⁵

These devices are very much part of my novel too. The text co-exists with the meta-text that reveals how the writing came to be, as part of my communication with a man whom I never met. There is commentary on the text by him and there is also commentary by me. There is a series of sexual encounters, with men and women. Fragmentation is achieved through emails, diary entries, lyrics from songs, poems, descriptions of music videos and many other cultural elements in the environment of the narrator. Finally, little effort is made to disguise the author/narrator, her inner life, her physicality, or her external life circumstances.

Georges Bataille was one of the thinkers who inspired the founders of New Narrative, as can be seen from their manifesto, the 'Long Note on New Narrative':

Bataille was central to our project. He finds a counter-economy of rupture and excess that includes art, sex, war, religious sacrifice, sports events, ruptured subjectivity, the dissolution of bodily integuments – 'expenditure' of all kinds. Bataille showed us how a bath house and a church could fulfill the same function in their respective communities.¹⁶

Indeed, Bataille was explicit about the connection between erotic life and the human psyche. 'Erotic activity can be disgusting; it can also be noble, ethereal, excluding sexual contact, but it illustrates a principle of human behavior in the clearest way.'¹⁷

There are many writers associated with New Narrative, who display in their writings a subversive treatment of sex, including sexual violence; Dennis Cooper, for example, or Kathy Acker. Dodie Bellamy is another writer connected with the beginnings of New Narrative, whose writings, characterised by porn, queer identity, and transgression, exemplify the tenets of this literary movement: 'to be frank and detailed about sex in one's writing, to use one's own name and biography, to blend high and low cultural references in an intermittently casual tone.'¹⁸

The story of D is narrated in a similar manner: high and low cultural references are juxtaposed, from popular songs to the philosophy of Agamben and Žižek, and from the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (1976) (Zone Books, 1991), p. 104.

¹⁸ Lidija Haas, 'Tell It Slant', *Bookforum* Sept/Oct/Nov 2015

<<https://www.bookforum.com/print/2203/dodie-bellamy-and-eileen-myles-delight-in-reinventing-form-other-writers-and-themselves-14956>> [accessed 4 October 2023].

sexually explicit baseness of sadomasochistic scenes to the paintings of Gauguin or the poetry of Cavafy, Gatsos and Neruda. D reflects on her relationship with Morpheus:

It was already evident to me that the entire western civilisation had become the terrain of our affair. We were grappling with slippery concepts – tearing each other apart in the process – but we could also communicate on a higher level, using literature, films, songs, the Bible, philosophers, and poets (p. 80).¹⁹

There are also scenes of sexual violence in which D inwardly recites poetry, which she feels might prevent her from becoming lost in her fantasy world:

Maybe poetry will save me. Maybe the words will be like the breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left behind so they would find their way back home. I must maintain some sort of connection to reality before I get utterly lost and can never return (p. 47).

The writing is frank and detailed about sex, regardless of whether this is too much sex and voice for a literary audience, regardless of whether this is a book that can be published or not. However, a series of careful decisions have been made during the editing process: people's identity has been protected by changing the information about their circumstances, as well as their real name or even their alias; crude sexual details that might have offended a non-BDSM reader have been omitted, if they did not contribute anything essential to advancing the story or developing the characters; finally, the emails by Morpheus have been edited to provide a more compact final form, so as to advance the development of the plot in a more facile way.

This is a true story; fictionalised but true. It was important to me, and I suspect it is relevant and important to other women too. I dread to think that the concept of shame, as it was taught to me in the 1970s, may still be taught in the same manner in countries like Greece, other European countries, or the United States – despite the contributions of writers such as Dominique Aury, Angela Carter, Catherine Millet, Elfriede Jelinek, and others. With this literary project, I sought to reconcile conflicting desires in me and express the core of a more authentic female identity (authentic in the sense that I created it myself through free choice) than that of the pitiful *puella* who prayed on her knees for forgiveness in the bathroom of her youth.

This paper is meant to be read as a companion to the novel. It is a personal look at BDSM, as it has been a lived experience. Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated

¹⁹ Theodora Valkanou, 'In Bed with Kierkegaard', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2024). All subsequent quotes from the novel will be referenced only with a page number.

knowledge'²⁰ points to the usefulness of a partial perspective: 'It is precisely in the politics and epistemology of partial perspectives that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests.'²¹

Gary Taylor and Jane Ussher, in their study, 'Making Sense of S&M', comment on the tendency of researchers to ignore the subjective experience:

Almost without exception, researchers and clinicians have ignored the individual experiences of those who engage in SM, whilst its subjective meaning has been relegated, dismissed as fixed and unitary, or irrelevant.²²

BDSM is clearly a multifaceted phenomenon, experienced in a different way by each individual engaging with its multiple practices. I do remember the online fights of Homeric magnitude on three BDSM forums, two of which I owned, whenever we discussed theoretical aspects of sadomasochism. Each person had their own theory, and each person believed their BDSM was the best. Naturally, I also have my own theory and I also believe my BDSM is the best. There is not much point, however, in presenting an unverifiable theory. Nor is it reasonable to think that what is good for me is necessarily good for others. I will therefore try to stick to the facts and focus on my thoughts and feelings about the events of that period of my life. I will also discuss certain matters I have researched, to the extent these relate to my own story. Finally, I will compare and contrast some literary characters that are similar to D, my narrator. I hope that this brief study, connected as it is to the personal experience of an author who went, saw, experienced, and now reports on aspects of sadomasochism that are usually reserved for the initiates, may shed some light on a phenomenon that is more widespread than is believed and less understood than the scientific inquiries indicate.

Popular erotic books, such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*, uphold and reaffirm the current economy of bodies and pleasures. Indeed, despite the BDSM element, Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele enjoy a traditional, monogamous relationship in the end. Even *The Sleeping Beauty Quartet*, by Anne Rice, ends with a happy marriage. The popularity of such erotic

²⁰ 'Knowledge that is embedded in, and thus affected by, the concrete historical, cultural, linguistic, and value context of the knowing person.' 'Situated knowledge', *APA Dictionary of Psychology* <<https://dictionary.apa.org/situated-knowledge>> [accessed 26 November 2022].

²¹ Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol.14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), pp. 575-599 (p. 584), doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

²² G.W. Taylor & J.M. Ussher, 'Making Sense of S&M: A Discourse Analytic Account', *Sexualities*, 2001, vol 4 (3), pp. 293-314, (p. 295), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/136346001004003002>

novels, in my opinion, stems precisely from the fact that, ultimately, they do not digress from what is conventionally expected from a sexual relationship. Most people seem to be very reluctant to be shaken out of their complacency.

Polyamorous and insatiable D, sacrificing all for a taste of the ultimate pleasure, stands no chance in such a world. However, the writer must persevere and present her view of the world, her story such as it is. In the words of Garth Greenwell,

the ideal development of the artist is libidinal, spurred not by the demands of the academy or the world of professional publishing, but by the imperatives of desire, by seeking out complicated pleasures.²³

It is sincerely hoped that *In Bed with Kierkegaard* has managed to stay true to the quest for complicated pleasures in which it was born.

²³ Ilya Kaminsky, 'Promiscuity Is a Virtue: An Interview with Garth Greenwell', *The Paris Review*, 14 January 2020 <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/01/14/promiscuity-is-a-virtue-an-interview-with-garth-greenwell/>> [accessed 21 January 2024].

2. FANTASY AND REALITY

I am sitting in front of the window in my room at Moniak Mhor, a writer's retreat in the Highlands of Scotland. It is the middle of March of 2024. It was raining the whole night and now a glorious rainbow is rising above the mountains in the horizon.

Fifteen years have passed since Morpheus and D exchanged the last email: D, an earlier version of the author, who existed briefly in time, as all our earlier versions do, and experienced an unrequited love; and Morpheus, a man who, for his own reasons, conducted an experiment of seduction, regardless of the consequences. Why do I keep returning to that period of my life? Here I am, devoting good chunks of my writing time to this old affair that almost happened. Did it happen?

Sometimes I wonder if love is a need so strong that it can take over our entire being, completely incinerating our human essence, our thinking capacity, the centre of reason. Or is love the core of our human essence and we have no choice but to keep returning to it, sacrificing all to burn in its flames, gloriously, even if briefly?

I do not have answers. Being a writer, I propose we turn to literature for our answers.

O will always point the way, for me. O and Dominique Aury, her creator.

Those oft repeated reveries, those slow musings just before falling asleep, always the same ones, which the purest and wildest love always sanctioned, or rather always demanded, the most frightful surrender, in which childish images of chains and whips added to constraint the symbols of constraint.²⁴

These are Aury's memories from her essay 'A Girl in Love', in which she recounted the creation of O, late at night in her bed, using a pencil to avoid staining the sheets. D, my narrator, is also obsessed with these childish images, the symbols of constraint.

I spent my teenage years daydreaming, roaming in castles and thinking of men who would whip me for the slightest transgression, forcing me to submit to their whims and desires. I never had another sexual fantasy. This, and variations on this, is the only fantasy I've ever had (p. 13).

The world of fantasy is our own, in the sense that we are free to roam in it in any way we see fit (even if our fantasies are a product of our environment to a large extent – a topic whose exploration I cannot pursue in the scope of this paper). Nobody can touch the world of our

²⁴ Dominique Aury, 'A Girl in Love', quoted by Molly Weatherfield, 'The Mother of Masochism', *Salon*, 6 August 1998 <https://www.salon.com/1998/08/06/feature_12/> [accessed 21 March 2024].

fantasy. It is not censored, it can remain secret, it does not need to be acted upon. It is a private, inner life.²⁵

Aury felt the need to clarify the difference between fantasy and reality, in the famous interview with John de St Jorre, in which she admitted, forty years after she wrote it, that she was the author of *Story of O*: ‘There is no reality here. Nobody could stand to be treated like that. It's entirely fantastic.’²⁶

But what happens when the fantasy no longer wants to be just a fantasy and becomes a pressing need? There are quite a few people who steer their life straight into the heart of their fantasies, to the extent that it is realistically feasible. Then, the symbols of constraint stop occupying the mere symbolic order and seep over to reality.

How many people exactly are ‘quite a few’? The relevant literature on the matter revealed some interesting facts. One minute you think you are alone in the entire universe, tormented by childish fantasies of chains and whips, and the next minute you find yourself to be part of a large minority.

2.1 The BDSM Minority

It is unclear how many people are sadomasochists. Thirty years ago, Norman Breslow (1992 & 2015: 21) placed the estimate at about 5% of the population (which, in the United States alone, is a rather large figure):

If this is true, then approximately 13,250,000 Americans are sadomasochists. My suggestion to straight people is: The next time you are in a room with twenty people, I think you can be certain that at least one of them is into SM.²⁷

This is a modest estimate compared with the findings of the second volume of the Kinsey report (1953): ‘twenty percent of the men interviewed and twelve percent of the women had

²⁵ When Dorothy Kaufmann interviewed Aury, she asked the latter what she thought about the fact that most people view *Story of O* as the manifestation of a male fantasy. Aury replied: ‘Everyone has the right to all realms of the imagination.’ Dorothy Kaufmann, ‘The Story of Two Women: Dominique Aury and Edith Thomas’, *Signs* 23.4 (1998), pp. 883–905 (p. 900), quoted in Anne Young, ‘Subversive Complicity: A Story of O(r)’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 24:4 (2013), pp. 318–341, DOI: 10.1080/10436928.2013.843119.

²⁶ John de St. Jorre, ‘The Unmasking of O’, *The New Yorker*, 1 August 1994 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/08/01/the-unmasking-of-o>> [accessed 4 June 2024].

²⁷ Norman Breslow, *Sadomasochism: A report of a scientific research project*, 1992 & 2015, p. 21 <<https://archive.org/details/Sadomasochism/page/n3/mode/2up>> [accessed 4 June 2024].

at least some erotic response to sadomasochistic stories.’²⁸ The Kinsey report, however, does not mention how many people have crossed the Rubicon, from fantasy to reality.

Another study in the UK (Holvoet et al., 2017) is more to the point. The findings indicate a substantial prevalence among the population, with submissive acts reported by 9.8% of the participants, masochistic acts by 15.3%, dominant by 8% and sadistic by 11%.²⁹

The most current estimate of those engaging in BDSM activities was placed at 20% of the population, in a 2020 study by Brown, Barker and Rahman.³⁰ This is a staggering estimate, comprising literally millions of people. For all these people, the symbols of constraint have become elements of reality, to a larger or lesser extent.

Based on my knowledge of the BDSM community, people I have met in munches and parties, people I befriended and conversed with, and even people I have played with,³¹ I can say that most members of the community engaged in BDSM activities occasionally, to spice things up; a few others did so on a more permanent basis; and for a smaller minority – I do not have the hard figures – BDSM had become a defining factor in their lives (I admit I belong to this last group).

It is comforting to know that there are millions of people sharing one’s peculiarities of sexual desire. When I was growing up, I thought I was a freak. When I found the BDSM community, I felt I was no longer alone. In fact, I could discuss anything relating to my secret desires in the safe anonymity of the Forum.

How natural, though, or accepted as natural, is a preoccupation with sadomasochism as part of our sexuality? Judging by the hateful comments I received – mostly by women – when I gave an interview about ten years ago to a large online newspaper in Greece,³² the stigma attached to sadomasochism is strong, in Greece at least. Most comments were of this type: ‘Just another whore who hopes she will not be considered a pervert only because she is well educated.’

²⁸ Charles Moser & JJ Madson, *Bound to be Free: The SM Experience* (Continuum, 2005), p.38.

²⁹ Ashley Brown, Edward D. Barker & Qazi Rahman, ‘A Systematic Scoping Review of the Prevalence, Etiological, Psychological, and Interpersonal Factors Associated with BDSM’, *The Journal of Sex Research* (2020), 57:6, pp. 781-811 (p. 2), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1665619>.

³⁰ Ibid., Abstract.

³¹ In the BDSM jargon, to play with someone means to have a BDSM session, with or without sex.

³² Theodora Valkanou, ‘The Most Famous Greek Sadomasochist’, interviewed for *iefimerida*, 5 March 2013 < <https://www.iefimerida.gr/news/93448/d> > [accessed 19 May 2024].

Charles Moser, clinical sexologist and sex educator, author of numerous books in the last 35 years, sees sadomasochism as a natural part of human sexuality:

As S/M behavior is seen transhistorically (Ellis, 1936) and cross-culturally (Ford & Beach, 1951), we can assume it is part of the repertoire of innate human sexual behaviors. Behavior which appears to be analogous to S/M is also common among mammals. For example, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard (1953) name 24 different mammalian species which bite during coitus. Additionally, Gebhard (1976) remarks ‘From a phylogenetic viewpoint it is no surprise to find sadomasochism in human beings’ (p. 163).³³

Another important consideration relates to the question whether BDSM practitioners are dysfunctional or not. If we turn to characters of popular female erotic literature, for example, and specifically Anastasia Steele from *Fifty Shades of Grey*, we see that she thinks Christian Grey is a sick man. E.L. James, the author of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, puts the blame for this ‘sickness’ on Grey’s troubled childhood. And though *Fifty Shades* is not strictly literary fiction, but a product formulated to appeal to mass markets, it is nevertheless a book that helped popularise BDSM.³⁴ As such, the book puts forward the notion that BDSM is a sick activity resulting from early trauma – justifying thus its existence in the context of mainstream sexuality, as conservative and conventional and commodified as that may be.

How valid is this notion of BDSM as a ‘sickness’?

Pamela H. Connolly (2006), among other researchers, who are too many to mention for the purposes of this paper, studied thirty-two practitioners of BDSM in relation to seven psychometric tests.

Although psychoanalytic literature suggests that high levels of certain types of psychopathology should be prevalent among BDSM practitioners, this sample failed to produce widespread, high levels of psychopathology on psychometric measures of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsion, psychological sadism, psychological masochism, or PTSD.³⁵

Similar findings from extensive research carried out in recent years suggested that it was not appropriate to include BDSM as an instance of pathology in the Diagnostic and Statistical

³³ Charles Moser, ‘The Psychology of Sadomasochism (S/M)’, S. Wright, ed., *SM Classics* (Masquerade Books, 1999), 47-61, p. 48.

³⁴ Tsaros mentions ‘a rise in sex toy sales in the wake of the *Fifty Shades* craze.’ ‘Consensual non-consent’, p. 866.

³⁵ Pamela H. Connolly, ‘Psychological Functioning of Bondage/Domination/Sadomasochism (BDSM) Practitioners’, *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality*, (2006) 18:1, (p. 79) doi:https://doi.org/10.1300/J056v18n01_05 .

Manual of the American Psychiatric Association – and indeed it has been removed from DSM-5.³⁶ According to current views, the widespread understanding is that,

having BDSM sexual interests alone no longer meet the criteria of a paraphilic disorder. In order to meet the diagnostic criteria for sexual masochism or sexual sadism disorder, an individual must have experienced clinically significant distress or impairment due to their sexual desires or must have acted on these sexual urges with a nonconsenting person (American Psychiatric Association [APA] 2013).³⁷

Despite the stigma still attached to BDSM, some behavioural scientists, like Gregory Gorelik, consider sadomasochistic sexual behaviour to be extraordinarily beneficial sometimes: ‘The dynamic between dominance and subordination is not only natural but is also capable of illuminating the furthest reaches of human pleasure – while playing, paradoxically, on human pain.’³⁸

Personal testimonies are often extremely positive:

In SM, sex becomes a musical instrument with its strings tightened, raising the key to a sharper and clearer sound. Sharper: the tingling is no longer centered on genital orgasm, but can involve sensation and release through the body. Clearer: an intense interchange of communication, trust, openness and caring is part of every SM experience.³⁹

The sociologist Gini Scott refers to a spiritual dimension that is sometimes achieved in sadomasochism:

For some, this intensity yields an extremely profound, extremely intimate, and sometimes even spiritual experience in which they come into touch with their own deep feelings and those of their partner. [SM] offers them not only immediate sexual satisfaction but a lingering spiritual or psychic fulfilment. They speak of a blissful surrender in which they communicate with their partner in an unmediated mental or physical fusion in which the pleasure the dominant gives and gets and the submissive receives become intermingled.⁴⁰

The spiritual element will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 2: Lovers and Mystics.

³⁶ ‘The American Psychiatric Association “depathologized” kinky sex – including cross-dressing, fetishism, and BDSM –, despite retaining a clinical justification, in the fifth edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Henceforth, the paraphilias are considered “other sexual interests.” ‘Consenting to constraint: BDSM therapy after the DSM-5’, ‘L’ Evolution Psychiatrique’ vol. 84, issue 2 (April-June 2019), pp. e1-e14, Abstract, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evopsy.2019.02.005>.

³⁷ Brown, Barker & Rahman, ‘A Systematic Scoping Review’, p. 1.

³⁸ Gregory Gorelik, ‘What Sadomasochism Can Teach Us About Human Sexuality’, *Quillette* 4 April 2017 <<https://quillette.com/2017/04/04/sadomasochism-can-teach-us-human-sexuality/>>[accessed 12 April 2022].

³⁹ JJ Madeson, in Moser & Madeson, *Bound to be Free*, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Moser & Madeson, p. 75.

2.2 Author and Text

What interests me most, as a writer, is the relationship between author and text. During the interview Aury gave to John de St Jorre, at the age of 86, Aury was still wearing a gold ring in the shape of a scarab, given to her by Paulhan, for whom she wrote *Story of O*, to ‘ensnare’ him, as she characteristically said. From that interview, I isolate the following:⁴¹

Aury: ‘What could I do? I couldn’t paint, I couldn’t write poetry. What could I do to make him sit up?’

St. Jorre: ‘What fascinated and excited Paulhan, Aury told me, was the relationship of the story to her own life.’

Aury: ‘The first sixty pages flowed out of me. They wrote themselves. Why was it like that? I don’t know. Probably because I had been dreaming – not dreaming, exactly, but thinking about it, I suppose.’

St. Jorre: ‘Their relationship underscored the centrality of love to life, the creative and destructive forces that passion can unleash, and the ease with which a human heart can be broken.’

Aury: ‘I saw, between what I thought myself to be and what I was relating and thought I was making up, both a distance so radical and a kinship so profound that I was incapable of recognising myself in it. I no doubt accepted my life with such patience (or passivity, or weakness) only because I was so certain of being able to find whenever I wanted that other, obscure life that is life’s consolation, that other life unacknowledged and unshared – and then all of a sudden thanks to the man I loved I did acknowledge it, and henceforth would share it with any and all, as perfectly prostituted in the anonymity of a book as, in the book, that faceless, ageless, nameless (even first-nameless) girl.’

These lines seem to indicate a strong connection between the life of the author and the fantasy from which this extraordinary book was born. Aury’s interviews, as well as testimonies by people who knew her, provide insight into the ways the fantasy sometimes encroaches on the life of the author. *Story of O* became important to both lovers, Aury and Paulhan. The O fantasy rekindled their passion, and their thirty-year love affair lasted to the end of their lives. As Paulhan lay dying in a Paris hospital, in the spring of 1968, Aury slept for four months in a fold-up iron bed by his side. When he died, she closed the book of her life too.

From the article, ‘I wrote the story of O’ (2004), I isolate the following⁴²:

⁴¹ John de St. Jorre, ‘The Unmasking of O’.

⁴² Geraldine Bedell, ‘I wrote the story of O’.

Jacqueline, Paulhan's daughter-in-law: 'She kind of gave up her interest in the world. She pulled back from the world and lost her short-term memory.'

Aury: 'I lived with him for 11 or 14 years, I can't remember [...] The last part of my being alive, of my life being alive. After that, I didn't. I stopped. Everything.'

This echoes the end of *Story of O* and I think it is not a coincidence. Aury imagined a character who could have a God-relationship⁴³ with a man, because she experienced one for Paulhan. Or was it the other way round? What came first, reality or fiction? Or did the two go hand in hand, as they did in my case?

In 2007, I joined a small BDSM community in Greece and remained its member for ten years. D is my alter ego, so to speak, the person I wanted to be, a person very different to what I had been up until then. I do not know how or why D and I converged so much during the events narrated in the novel, but, at some point, I realised that I had undergone a radical transformation. Perhaps it was the result of a mid-life crisis, or the reaction to a disappointing life. The truth of the matter is that by wishing D to come to life, I made it happen. I wrote down my first sadomasochistic encounters, my many disappointments, but also my wish for submission (in response to dominance), belonging, passion, transcendence, and for what I called 'the ultimate pleasure'. I posted these first tentative texts on the Forum in the hope that someone would hear me, and when someone did, I sent him everything I wrote, until we ended up with a correspondence of hundreds of pages of emails. In the process, what I wrote and what was happening in my real life converged.

The two worlds, fantasy and reality, fiction and life, had become identical. I was no longer a deeply unhappy woman in search of an elusive idea. I felt myself grow into something larger – a woman in love, a woman scorned, a woman who had been made to taste despair: a Regine Olsen (p. 90).

A small parenthetical note may be needed here: D compares herself to Regine with good reason. Kierkegaard, who came up with the term 'God-relationship' to denote a relationship of extraordinarily deep devotion in strictly subjective, almost mystical, terms, had a similar relationship with Regine Olsen. Despite being unable to commit himself to this relationship, he kept thinking of Regine and communicating with her to the end of his life,

⁴³ This refers to a phrase by S. Kierkegaard in 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments', http://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/82477/frontmatter/9780521882477_frontmatter.pdf > [accessed 10 April 2024]. The God-relationship will be analysed in the next chapter.

upon which it was revealed that he had left her everything he owned in his will. As for his text, 'The Seducer's Diary', it could have served as a manual providing seduction advice for people like Morpheus. Sometimes I wonder if Morpheus had read it and was attempting to emulate Kierkegaard's seducer (though I very much doubt that he will remember D in his will – should he die first).

In a sense, I believe we all invent ourselves and we keep doing it to the end of our lives. In this case, I had the chance to write my own character quite literally: a character in a book, created by an author who is subsumed by that character. It was not intentional. I was simply struggling to keep afloat in a life that was losing its meaning.

The transformation was spectacular. A woman with a previously sheltered middle-class life, a teacher, a mother of three, in just a couple of years I was having extraordinary encounters with extraordinary people. I remember the day I visited Athens for a big BDSM party, where I met many of the members of a second forum, owned by a professional Dominatrix. The party was held at her dungeon, a large apartment in an office building, very discreet and sound-proofed. There was a large lounging area, with a small stage where certain SM performances took place (a few years later I would also be part of an SM happening right there, on a St Andrews Cross). A smaller room at the back was furnished with leather benches and a gynaecologist's chair. There was one other room, much smaller, that served for foot fetish and contained a 'throne' for the Mistress. A multitude of high-heeled shoes and boots lined the shelves on the walls. There was also a beautifully furnished bedroom that belonged to the Mistress.

I met some of the girls who worked at the dungeon and many of their clients – submissive men and fetishists. Everyone was happy to meet me at last, as they had been reading me on the Forum. It seemed a little unreal that my life had changed so much, so quickly. I was pleased with this change, but also apprehensive. My main worry, most times, was whether I was true to myself (that is what I mean when I use the word 'authentic' – true to your own 'demon', or 'kata ton daimona eautou' as the Greeks used to say). Many years had to pass before I realised that the new reality was now my own and I need not worry. I would never – could never – go back to who I used to be.

The fantasy had become a guiding beacon for me. What had started as an obsession, soon became part of my reality. What I was writing took the form of a fictionalised memoir – a work of autofiction – and in fact helped me put things into perspective. When it was finished (a different version to the finished book submitted here), I gave it to my last Dom (the one who had diagnosed my submissiveness by suggesting I slept less), and he read it.

‘Did you like it?’ I asked.

‘It is very accurate. It is your truth,’ he said and that pleased me very much.

Authenticity had been my concern from day one – in the sense that I did not want to reproduce facets of sexuality that I had been unconsciously made to espouse from various external sources (parents, the Church, education, television, etc).

I knew what I wanted to transcend – that shallow life I was living – and why Kierkegaard’s text had spoken to me. *Passion is the culmination of existence for an existing individual...* I badly needed to feel like an existing individual, trapped as I was in a prison made of fake pleasure. I was dying for a little authenticity (p. 78).

I am glad I allowed the fantasy to take over, to the extent that it did. In retrospect, I think the fantasy was more authentic than the woman who lived a sheltered middle-class life, taught English, and cooked for her three children. That woman was the fake one. How do I know? That’s easy: lack of pleasure. In my opinion, that is always a clear indication that something is terribly wrong in our life, that somewhere we took the wrong turn and lost our way.

Garth Greenwell is another writer who seems to be producing work that is very close to his own truth. His writings are deemed by many to be autofiction, since his stories on queer sexuality seem to have been inspired by his life in Bulgaria as a teacher of English. However, in an interview on his second book *Cleanness*, Greenwell insisted that his literary work is pure fiction:

I give myself full license to invent when I’m writing. Where the work makes use of details from ‘real life,’ it does so because those details are aesthetically or dramatically effective, not because it is chronicling any lived experience. And it treats them as a visual artist might treat a found object – processing and altering them in various ways such that any easy connection with nonfictional reality is severed.⁴⁴

In another interview, in which Greenwell discussed his views on autofiction, he admitted the connection of his life experiences to his writings:

The book meditates on some of the circumstances of my life—I did live and teach high school in Bulgaria—but it was very clear to me from the get go that this was not autobiography. It was a work of fiction.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Ellen, ‘The Ethics of Claimlessness’, interview with Garth Greenwell, *Hobart Pulp*, 5 May 2020) < https://www.hobartpulp.com/web_features/the-ethics-of-claimlessness-elizabeth-ellen-interviews-garth-greenwell > [accessed 3 April 2024].

⁴⁵ Lauren LeBlanc, ‘Garth Greenwell on Why Desire Is a Writer’s Greatest Plot Device’, interview with Garth Greenwell, *The Observer*, 25 January 2020 <<https://observer.com/2020/01/garth-greenwell-cleanness->

In an earlier interview given in 2016, after the publication of his debut novel, *What Belongs to You*, he also referred to the fact that some of the events narrated in the book were lived experiences:

Cruising has been central in my life since I was 14 years old. It was the first gay community I found in the pre-global internet in Louisville, Kentucky, where I grew up. I do think ‘community’ is the right word for those places, which have not disappeared. When I found this cruising bathroom in Bulgaria where the novel begins, I immediately knew what it was. I barely spoke Bulgarian, but I descended into this place, and I suddenly had a complete fluency.⁴⁶

Greenwell’s writing is not a chronicle of specific lived experiences. It is a fictionalised amalgam of bits and pieces, a mixture of mannerisms and descriptions borrowed from an array of real characters, snippets of encounters, a multitude of details from the author’s observations in his real life. Autofiction works like that. According to the writer, ‘it’s a kind of writing that blurs the boundaries between narrative and essay and between invention and, you know, reportage.’⁴⁷

The fact remains that Greenwell is engaged in producing literature of the highest quality in the domain of queer sexuality. He does not hesitate to scrutinise the gay scene with sincerity, expressing complex feelings and desires, and attempting to understand more fully the depth whence these feelings and desires arise. That depth is the big ‘unknown’, hidden well in the recesses of the psyche. He has a name for this unknown: the ‘abyss’. ‘Art is about plunging oneself into the abyss, and any time you plunge yourself into the abyss there can be no certainty that you will return.’⁴⁸

The abyss, of course, is desire. In *Cleanness*, this abyss of desire is meticulously explored, through physicality, to the point that it becomes almost pornographic (it never does,

[interview/#:~:text=That%2C%20to%20me%2C%20is%20what,are%20not%20clear%20to%20us](#) > [accessed 3 April 2024].

⁴⁶ Stephen W. Thrasher, ‘Garth Greenwell on his Debut Novel’, interview with Garth Greenwell, *The Guardian*, 25 January 2016 < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/25/garth-greenwell-new-book-what-belongs-to-you-interview> > [accessed 3 April 2024].

⁴⁷ LeBlanc, ‘Garth Greenwell on Why Desire Is a Writer’s Greatest Plot Device’.

⁴⁸ Liv Lansdale, ‘Incredibly Vulnerable Beings’, interview with Garth Greenwell, *Guernica*, 2 July 2020 < <https://www.guernicamag.com/garth-greenwell-incredibly-vulnerable-beings/> > [accessed 21 January 2024].

it maintains a strong sense of human dignity), as well as through the narrator's persistent thoughts and perceptions, meditating on the experience of sex:

In *Cleanness*, I wanted to think about sex much more deeply—as a form of sociality, as an excavation of the self, as an attempt to engage ethically with the other, an attempt that often fails. I wanted to try to get to the bottom of the abyss desire is for me. Of course, one never gets to the bottom of an abyss, an abyss has no bottom – but I had the experience, especially writing ‘Gospodar’ and its companion chapter, ‘The Little Saint,’ of going far enough I was afraid I wouldn’t find my way back.⁴⁹

I find this fear of ‘not being able to return’ extremely interesting. I see a parallel here between Aury’s exorcising the fantasy as ‘just fantasy’, where she would never willingly go – not in reality, that is – and Greenwell’s venturing into the unknown in literature as part of the artistic journey – coupled with the insistence that this is just ‘a work of fiction’.

From a literary perspective, the three works examined in this critical paper display a differentiation stemming from the connection between author and text: Aury’s *Story of O* is purely a work of fiction, despite the fact that Aury found inspiration in her own love affair with Paulhan; Greenwell’s *Cleanness* is a work of autofiction, utilising a multitude of elements borrowed from the author’s own experiences, which are fictionalised to a large extent; *In Bed with Kierkegaard*, on the other hand, despite being also a work of autofiction, inspired as it is by true events in the author’s life, displays a tendency to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, while the author and D, her alter ego, merge so often and so intensely as to become nearly identical in the end.

The reference to the abyss echoes an important moment from D’s explorations too, pointing to the similarity of experience for an author whose character undertakes a journey into unconventional sexual desire:

I had taken a leap of faith over the abyss, without knowing if there was anyone there to catch me as I fell to my demise – moral, and possibly physical too (p. 155).

D is not oblivious to the danger involved. She is also keenly aware of the risk such journeys into the abyss carry:

How many times had I travelled on that same train! A journey with no return – *kein zurück* (p. 11).

In her mind – a little naïve at the beginning of her quest – it is mostly the danger of physical harm and possibly a vague anticipation of trauma. Now I know that the greatest danger when

⁴⁹ Kaminsky, ‘Promiscuity Is a Virtue’, interview with Garth Greenwell.

you cross over to the other side – the world of your fantasies – is the fact that you cannot unlearn what you learn about who you are – whether you like it or not.

D is a female Nero. She seeks the poetry and the magic of the authentic. She is brave but unworthy. Persistent but incompetent. To write the great poem of her life, she burns it (p. 86).

This is one of the first instances when D begins to look at her own actions and motivations with a critical eye. It will be a long time before she begins to like herself again. At this point of the narrative, I felt it was appropriate to show how an individual who embarks on such a journey into the abyss of unknown desire may experience intense inner conflict. It is not easy to undo a lifetime of convictions – externally planted within us – and to go against the grain in the difficult field of sexuality, one of the most sensitive aspects of our human life.

Greenwell recognises the reluctance displayed by people – readers or writers – when faced with the opportunity to gaze at themselves:

One of the things that interests me about narrative, and about having the same narrator over two books, is the possibility that presents of repeatedly putting this person in situations where he undergoes a process of coming into self-knowledge and is forced to look at things he'd prefer not to look at and to discover things that maybe he would prefer not to know, or things that frighten him.⁵⁰

I am particularly touched by Greenwell's sense of responsibility towards his creative writing students when they wish to delve into similar explorations of the human psyche:

Sometimes when I teach workshop and I read a story and I feel that the author is flinching away from something they're desperate not to look at – and pretty often when a story is failing, it's failing for reasons along those lines – if I feel like the art demands that this person plunge into the abyss, that's very much in conflict with what I feel as an educator [...] I think it's true that when you are doing the real work of making the kind of art that I care about, you are going to scary and dangerous places. You are going to those places without any guarantee of safety or of return. If you look at art and artists, that history is full of people who have not returned. And that's never something I ever feel like I can say to a student.⁵¹

This explains partly why literary explorations of queer sexuality, as well as the peculiarities of female sexuality (especially of the kind that fascinated Aury and fascinates me and others like me) is a terrain that is in our days shunned to a large extent. Here it might be useful to differentiate between erotica and literary fiction:

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lansdale, 'Incredibly Vulnerable Beings', interview with Garth Greenwell.

Erotic literature comprises fictional and factual stories and accounts of eros (passionate, romantic or sexual relationships) intended to arouse similar feelings in readers. This contrasts erotica, which focuses more specifically on sexual feelings.⁵²

This is a definition I agree with: erotic literature, and erotica more specifically, seeks to stimulate in the readers similar feelings; in the case of erotica the aim is sexual excitement. Literary fiction, on the other hand, does not seek to promote the readers' sexual feelings.

Greenwell has a lot to say about the literary establishment, including what he calls the 'professionalized artist':

I also think there's something falsifying in the professionalized, bureaucratic artist that I feel is sometimes suggested by the academicization of art or the professionalization of the artist.⁵³

Writers who engage with literature that delves into human sexuality, especially when it is considered taboo or controversial, might find it difficult to return from the dark places they visit; loss of innocence, a broken heart, feeling different and alone, being ostracised by the community, family, or friends; all these are very real dangers to the writer. Perhaps the writing itself will be met with disapproval. It is possible that few people will be interested in an author's experiences if they are unconventional, and many might react to the writing with adversity, hostility, contempt, or even hatred. However, Greenwell is clear about the role of the writer:

My whole life I have been told that my experience is marginal, inconsequential to a central human story, vulgar, uninteresting, perverted, disgusting. I have been told those things about my life, too. My whole life I have been told to shut up, that people don't want to hear what I have to say [...] An artist has to make the work they have to make, without waiting for someone to give them permission.'⁵⁴

I find a great deal of solace in this testimony.

⁵² 'Erotic Literature', *Wikipedia* < [https:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erotic_literature](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erotic_literature) > [accessed 10 November 2024]

⁵³ Kaminsky, 'Promiscuity Is a Virtue', interview with Garth Greenwell.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Ellen, 'The Ethics of Claimlessness', interview with Garth Greenwell.

2.3 Shades of Light and Darkness

In 1958, Aury was keen to differentiate between two truths in a woman's existence: 'those concerning submission and folly in love – and those regarding daily life.'⁵⁵

Gregory Stephenson, a lifelong correspondent of Aury, who met with her twice, points to the opening of the novel to discuss the dichotomy of day and night in the life of a woman who is just beginning her journey in the forbidden world of sadomasochistic desire: 'Appropriately, the story begins at dusk, a time of transition between day and night, just as O is about to undertake her own transition from the one realm to the other, from the familiar to the forbidden.'⁵⁶ The days at Roissy are a blur; time loses its meaning in the dark dungeons where O suffers under the whip, in a world of shadows, far removed from her ordinary life which was erstwhile governed by light, fashion and beautiful women.

At Roissy she had felt herself to be as one is at night-time, deep in a dream one has dreamt before and which begins anew... (p. 102).⁵⁷

The interplay between day and night is a recurrent pattern in the novel, exemplified through the persistent use of imagery of light and darkness.

The poles of *Story of O* are those of the daylight world and the nocturnal world. The day world in the novel is that of familiar, quotidian reality, a realm of jobs, offices, apartments, furniture, clothes, tea, plants, restaurants, city streets, the weather, even cinemas and ice-cream. The nocturnal world is one of clandestine obsession and solemn ceremony, of instruments of restraint and torture, of willing submission to extremes of pain and humiliation, and of the relentless pursuit of ecstatic self-annihilation.⁵⁸

Aury was very conscious of the strict line that must be drawn between the two worlds. The portrait of O must necessarily remain the portrait of a woman who cannot possibly exist in the light of day. In fact, Aury plucks O out of the quotidian to place her in the darkness of Roissy. Her journey is a gradual but persistent journey towards the world of the night,

⁵⁵ Sasha Watson, 'The Smuttiest French Novel Ever Written, Still Shocking 50 Years Later', *Slate*, 4 March 2010, < <https://slate.com/human-interest/2010/03/a-review-of-a-new-graphic-novel-based-on-the-pornographic-story-of-o.html> > [accessed 21/3/2024].

⁵⁶ Gregory Stephenson, 'Name Upon Name: Encountering Pauline Reage, Dominique Aury, Anne Desclos', *Rain taxi* online edition (2014), < <https://raintaxi.com/name-upon-name/> > [accessed 22 March 2024].

⁵⁷ Pauline Réage, *Story of O* (Corgi Books, 2012) (first published by Société Nouvelles des Editions Pauvert, 1954). All subsequent quotes from the book will be referenced only by page number.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

culminating in the last climactic scene, in which O, wearing a formidable owl mask, is bathed in the light of the full moon. She becomes a legitimate part of the nocturnal world and the quotidian is conquered by the dark world of fantasy.

O's goal is to surrender to the imperatives of the night domain to such a degree as to overthrow in her mind and spirit the daylight world. She desires to cast it off and repudiate it utterly, allowing the night world to invade and subdue the day, and ultimately to obliterate it altogether: 'henceforth the reality of the night and the reality of day would be one and the same. Henceforth—and O was thinking: at last.'⁵⁹

When the world of fantasy and desire, with the symbols of constraint, the whips and chains, mingles with reality, O's secret life takes over. In the interview with St Jorre, Aury alluded to her own 'secret and nocturnal' self that she had never allowed to surface to reality:

Who am I finally, if not the long silent part of someone, the secret and nocturnal part which has never betrayed itself in public by any thought, word, or deed, but communicates through subterranean depths of the imaginary with dreams as old as the world itself?⁶⁰

Evidently, Aury always considered O's desire for submission a mere fantasy. She wrote the book and separated fiction from life – to some extent at least. I still think that she experienced an extraordinarily deep love for Paulhan, almost a religious type of love, which gave birth to the book. However, she seemed adamant to keep the fantasy in the realm where it belonged; she would never allow it to surface to reality 'by any thought, word, or deed.'

For some, this existence is insupportable; they feel the inner life must come to the light, regardless of the consequences. D is certainly an instance of that crossing over from fantasy to reality. Here I wanted to show the motivation behind an individual's decision to pursue what for others is no more than a dream. For that purpose, I presented the misery of her life of domestic drudgery, the boredom of living with a shallow, unimaginative man, and the repetitive monotony of bureaucratic tasks at the office; a life that had become a burden she could no longer bear.

I did nothing at first. I waited for time to cure me of these fantasies. But the nights were sleepless, and the days a struggle to achieve a semblance of sanity. All in vain. The dream wanted to invade reality, to live my life. If I did not let it, I would die inside (p. 14).

The reader is provided with glimpses into the despair born in the monotony of D's life. Vignettes of her everyday life paint a bleak picture: she is already living the life of a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ John de St. Jorre, 'The Unmasking of O'.

‘slave’, subservient to all those around her, from the Manager of the hospital where she works, to the boring lover who takes advantage of her. Even the children seem to participate in this game, even if involuntarily.

When D takes the big decision to exchange her mundane life with the life she imagined for herself, images of darkness begin to imbue the text, as in her encounter with the little man in the Gauguin suite:

I am O and I am at Roissy and I am being punished. I count one by one the steps of my descent into darkness [...] Maybe poetry will save me. Maybe the words will be like the breadcrumbs Hansel and Gretel left behind so they would find their way back home. I must maintain some sort of connection to reality before I get utterly lost and can never return (p. 45).

The development of D’s character is carried out through such peculiar moments of juxtaposition: though seen to be engaging in raw sexual scenes, a different picture emerges through the interior monologue afforded to the reader. Snippets of poetry, that supposedly sustain her and provide a firm connection to the person she aspires to be, co-exist with intense acts of violence; poetic analogies, such as the one with Hansel and Gretel, are interspersed through the sexual scenes; and of course, the ever-present cultural environment (Gauguin, Schubert, the Bible) provides the backdrop for her encounters with sadomasochists.

In the passage above, the fear of no return is explicit. Now it has become clearer to her that she is moving away from the real towards the world of her fantasies. Later, Morpheus will dismiss D’s perception of the dichotomy between the two worlds as a romantic illusion. For him, the two worlds are one:

A romantic (someone who is voluntarily sleeping) is someone who believes that reality and fantasy are two separate worlds (p. 89).

As D begins to feel a deep connection to Morpheus, viewing herself as his submissive, the two worlds begin to merge for her as well. The boredom, the monotony, and the lack of sexual pleasure are gradually replaced with a life filled with passion and unprecedented sexual intensity.

I could not help it. Deeper and deeper I descended into madness, unable to get back to reality. I was in ecstasy most of the time – and sexually aroused, constantly, beyond belief (p. 158).

One of the devices used in the novel to communicate this ‘descent into madness’, as D develops an obsession for Morpheus, was a sense of ambiguity contained in the narrative. The reader is never given definitive information as to how much of this relationship is real

and how much is a product of the narrator's imagination. The possibility of an obsession that is developing into a full-blown psychosis is keenly felt as the narrator finds herself entangled in affairs with dubious personas and digital, anonymous presences, all envoys of the elusive Morpheus.

The descent into an alternative reality progresses, until the story D is recounting leads the reader into a fantasy which is no longer a fantasy. On a moonlit night, D completes her journey into darkness:

We sat outside, on the veranda. It was the middle of June, and the moon was travelling over Mount Lycabettus. I continued to be alone, a stranger among strangers, just as I had been at the start of my journey, an eternity ago (p. 202).

What was erstwhile a dark world of fantasy, a threatening place, has now become a beloved place, in which a sort of harmony with reality has been accomplished.

But we had entered a parallel universe, which, almost magically, was in harmony with that thing around us, the shapeless and harsh thing the rest of the people lived in. It was as if we had built, with what we knew, and with what we had chosen, a bubble that was reserved just for us, floating over the rooftops and the antennae and the terraces of Athens (p. 202).

The world of fantasy made real is simply a parallel reality – and this sounds to me like a very good definition of BDSM; the type of BDSM that I prefer, at least. And if the reader has been offered a taste of how the fantasy world can encroach on reality and merge with it, enrich it, make it a better place, then the novel has fulfilled its purpose.

The dichotomy between day and night, light and darkness, is present in all three of the books examined in this paper. It is certainly also present in most of the stories in Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness*. Garrard Conley observes that '*Cleanness* renders relationships in shades of dark and light, cruelty and tenderness, and, yes, filthiness and cleanness.'⁶¹ Greenwell clarifies the title of his book as stemming from the juxtaposition of purity and filth: 'One of the journeys my narrator is on is an attempt to shape a life that accommodates both urges, that acknowledges and makes room for his competing desires for purity and for filth.'⁶²

It seems that for Greenwell filth is connected to a view of the body as devoid of personhood, the way it is depicted in modern pornography:

I'm not at all antiporn, but sometimes pornography (maybe especially Internet pornography, with its arms race of extremity) seems to want to evacuate bodies of

⁶¹ Garrard Conley, 'The Right Wrong Note: A Conversation with Garth Greenwell'.

⁶² Kaminsky, 'Promiscuity is a Virtue', interview with Garth Greenwell.

personhood, to present them as objects. I think literature is the best technology we have for representing consciousness, and so I think there's a kind of intervention that literature can perform in representing sex explicitly: it can reclaim the sexual body as a site of consciousness.⁶³

A chapter of *Cleanness*, 'An Evening Out', deals with a teacher's betrayal of his own ethical code, when he touches one of his ex-students. He is ashamed and filled with anguish over his inability to control his desires.

In the morning you'll know, and I feared what I would feel, how my actions would look in the light of day, those were the words I used, the light of day, I was thinking in old phrases (p. 220).⁶⁴

The ambivalence experienced between the darker urges of desire and more pure aspirations for meaningfulness, kindness, compassion, are the proper terrain of literature, according to Greenwell: 'I think art is the realm in which we can give full rein to the ambiguity, uncertainty, and doubt that we often feel we have to suppress in other kinds of expression.'⁶⁵

Greenwell's character is struggling to reconcile the light of day with the darker, lowly desires of the physical body. This becomes more poignant in the powerfully rendered story of 'Gospodar' (meaning Master in Bulgarian). The narrator of that story explicitly refers to the dichotomy between the quotidian and the world of unconventional sexual desire. At the end of the story, he makes a conscious effort to move away from the allure of the night, towards the bright lights of the boulevard and the regular life they stand for. It is interesting that he experiences the world of his fantasies of submission as a 'low' place, a descent of sorts, a 'new depth', whereas the world of reality is connected to what he calls his 'human face'.

I felt too that my resolution was a lie, that it had always been a lie, that my real life was here, and I thought this even as I struggled to climb from the new depth I had been shown [...] There was no lower place, I thought, I would strike ground only to feel it give way gaping beneath me [...] then I stood and turned back to the boulevard, composing as best I could my human face (pp. 46-47).

In ending this section, I would like to point out that in my novel the world of fantasy and desire gradually shifts from being a scary, dark place at the beginning, to something quite different by the end: desire is legitimised and is metamorphosed to a lofty ideal, a private

⁶³ Mitsi Angel, 'On Writing About Sex', interview with Garth Greenwell, *FSG: Work in Progress*, <<https://fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/07/17/cleanness/>> [accessed 3 April 2024].

⁶⁴ Garth Greenwell, *Cleanness* (Picador 2020). All subsequent quotes from the novel will be referenced only with page number.

⁶⁵ Kaminsky, 'Promiscuity is a Virtue', interview with Garth Greenwell.

bubble of happiness. My wish was to convey the joy and grandeur Paulhan mentioned in his essay, a joy and grandeur that transformed my main character/narrator too.

Greenwell's concern over the effect the 'abyss' has on our 'human face' is not without merit. For when the 'nocturnal' self takes over, there seems to be an unavoidable abandonment of the regular, daily self. That is why I make a point of presenting D's struggles in trying to take care of her children or carry out her regular tasks at the office. There is no doubt that she is experiencing an almost ecstatic type of pleasure. But how long can one exist like this, cut off from ordinary life, from the dull quotidian of offices, shops, and trains, from the light of day, the plain light of our daily existence?

In other words, how much sex is too much?

Back then, having surrendered to the world of D, I never dared to ask myself that question. Now I do.

2.4 How much sex is too much?

I hadn't gone back to teaching after the summer. I could not concentrate enough to teach. My relationship with Morpheus demanded an immense investment of personal energy, which I had stolen from my relationship with my kids and my friends and my job (p. 143).

For D, things are clear: invest it all, everything you have, sacrifice everything to live out your dream. For others, this is not an option. Most people balance their activities in such a way that they avoid excess; they manage to keep their 'human face' intact – even if they are not completely aware of what they are doing.

There is a very good reason for that: it is not truly necessary – not when the goal is a mere sexual encounter or a series of encounters, including the goal of marriage and procreation. According to Diana S. Fleischmann, 'For men to be reproductively successful, they need, on the low end, to only engage their time and resources as much as is necessary to have sex with a woman.'⁶⁶

BDSMers, on the other hand, seem to devote more time and energy to sexuality than a vanilla individual. The reason for that may be that BDSMers tend to immerse in sexuality activities which are conventionally not considered related to sex. Can licking a woman's shoe

⁶⁶ Diana S. Fleischman, 'An Evolutionary Behaviorist Perspective on Orgasm', *Socioaffective Neuroscience & Psychology*, 6 (25 October 2016), doi: [10.3402/snp.v6.32130](https://doi.org/10.3402/snp.v6.32130).

be construed as a sexual activity? Is a vinyl outfit erotic? Perhaps the answer would surprisingly be *yes* to both, by more than a large minority. But how about a woman who dons a French maid outfit, with the hidden addition of an anal plug, only to serve her lover his cappuccino? What about a man who – like Thomas – visits pro-Dommes and pays them to humiliate him, encase his penis in a chastity belt and beat him with a rattan cane until he bleeds? Are these also part of the usual repertoire of sexual behaviours? Probably not.

And yet BDSM practitioners will habitually visit those unlikely sexual behaviours. I can corroborate this: my sexual preferences expanded over a decade in the BDSM community to include a vast array of new sexual games, which I consider pleasurable and very natural (though I am reluctant to share the specifics with non-BDSMers). I also know for a fact that a few members of the BDSM community have adopted such sexual behaviours as a 24/7 lifestyle. Why?

That is a question that does not lend itself to an easy answer. It might be easier to consider this question: why will the majority *not* engage in those behaviours?

My research into this question led me to some interesting findings. It seems that on average most people do not consider activities such as the ones mentioned above sexual. A large Canadian study in which 1040 persons participated, found that, ‘no paraphilic desire or paraphilic experience was reported as being frequent by more than 10% of the sample.’⁶⁷ In another study by Juliet Richters et al, which was carried out by phone in Australia among 19,000 respondents, ‘the authors concluded that sadomasochists should be seen as sexual gourmets or adventurers.’⁶⁸

JJ Madeson, a BDSMer who collaborated with Moser in the writing of the book *Bound to be Free*, says: ‘The “missionary” position without orgasm was standard for me, and even oral sex was a little “kinky!” No one ever came along to suggest that it could be otherwise.’⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Christian C. Joyal and Julie Carpentier (2017), ‘The Prevalence of Paraphilic Interests and Behaviors in the General Population: A Provincial Survey’, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54:2, pp. 161-171, (p.169), doi: [10.1080/00224499.2016.1139034](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1139034).

⁶⁸ Juliet Richters, Richard O. de Visser, Chris E. Rissel, Andrew E. Grulich, and Anthony M.A. Smith, ‘Demographic and Psychosocial Features of Participants in Bondage and Discipline, “Sadomasochism” or Dominance and Submission (BDSM): Data from a National Survey’, *International Society for Sexual Medicine*, 5 (2008), pp. 1660 – 1668, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2008.00795.x>

⁶⁹ Moser & Madeson, *Bound to be Free*, p. 50.

In a recent Netflix film, titled *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*,⁷⁰ a mature woman who has been widowed hires a male sex worker for one night. She claims she has never had an orgasm. The young man asks her how she used to have sex with her husband, and she replies:

He would take all his clothes off, and lie in the bed without putting his pyjamas on. And I would take all my clothes off, put my nightie on and lie in the bed next to him, He would rub my shoulders and breasts a bit, then climb on top, do the business, kiss my cheek, roll off, put his pyjamas on, and go back to sleep. That's it. Always. No deviation for thirty-one years.

Men often face a similar plight, when they have unconventional desires. I have met many who had serious hangups about their sexuality: men who liked anal stimulation, who wished for humiliation and pain, men who liked to spank their partner, others who were secretly bisexual, or were crossdressers, men who wanted to hold my feet – just hold them. And they were all afraid to tell their partner anything about their secret desires.

What we are often told by parents, teachers and our social environment is that unconventional sexual behaviours are impossible, undesirable, and moreover *forbidden*. Sexual pleasure is meant to be sought through the usual, permitted channels. Gradually, distinct channels of sexual stimulation and pleasure seem to be instilled in us by the environment through largely unconscious processes. These channels are then viewed as sexual, contrary to other channels which are rejected as non-sexual.

For those who engage in BDSM activities, it seems that sexual channels are not so distinct.⁷¹ Sex therapist Dulcinea Pitagora points out the divergence of BDSM practitioners from the conventional sexual channels:

Many BDSM interactions deconstruct the expectation that erotic acts should be genitally focused, in the exploration of non-genital, atypical erogenous locations on the body or in the mind for arousal (Hopkins, 1994; McClintock, 1993).⁷²

⁷⁰ *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, dir. by Sophie Hyde (Align Genesis Pictures, 2022).

⁷¹ A survey carried out in Australia in 2008, concluded that ‘engagement in BDSM correlated strongly with a large number of sexual practice measures associated with greater sexual activity and interest in sex.’ Specifically, ‘men who participated in BDSM in the year prior to the interview were significantly more likely to have: ever had vaginal, oral, or anal sex; ever paid for sex; had more than one sexual partner in the last year; and been non-exclusive in a regular relationship.[...] Men who had engaged in BDSM were significantly more likely to have: masturbated; had phone sex; deliberately visited an Internet sex site; watched an X-rated film or video; used a sex toy; had group sex; or engaged in digital anal stimulation, fisting or rimming.’ For women who had participated in BDSM the previous year, the findings were very similar. Juliet Richters and others (2008), (pp. 1663-1664).

⁷² P. Hopkins, ‘Rethinking sadomasochism: Feminism, interpretation, and simulation’, *Hypatia*, 9(1) (1994), pp. 116-141, and McClintock, A., ‘Maid to order: Commercial fetishism and gender power’, *Social Text*, 37 (1993), pp. 87-116, quoted in Pitagora, ‘The

There is no end to the range of channels considered sexual in BDSM. There are many BDSMers who enjoy urophilia (water sports or golden showers), podophilia (foot fetishism), vinyl fetishism, algolagnia (excitement derived from physical pain), and so on, almost *ad infinitum*.

This great variety of sexual channels is also part of the gay culture.⁷³ I quote from Greenwell's short story 'Gospodar', in *Cleanness*:

It's what I love most about the websites I visit, that you can call out for anything you desire, however aberrant or unlikely, and nearly always there comes an answer; it's a large world, we're never as solitary as we think, as unique or unprecedented, what we feel has always already been felt, again and again, without beginning or end (p. 38).

The behaviour of sadomasochists, according to Moser, may be clarified via sociological explanations, rather than psychoanalytic ones. In his words, 'these people develop a concept of self as a sexual being, realize these needs, find other people with whom to act them out, and, finally, begin to establish an SM identity.'⁷⁴

O certainly views herself as a sexual being. Her sexual self gradually takes over her regular self, until in the end she becomes entirely objectified under the mask of the owl. In O's case, the objectification is taken one step further and becomes complete when at the end of the novel she dies. On the other hand, D lives a life largely devoted to sexual pleasures, but is never objectified, nor does she seek self-annihilation. In fact, she is always careful when she meets dominant men for the first time and asks that they meet in public, to protect herself. But, in all truth, she cannot protect herself from the excess of pleasure: she ends up neglecting the regular life of her daily world constantly and consistently, and, I dare say, consciously too.

Admittedly, if this were a majority perspective, civilisation as we know it would collapse. Bataille, in discussing the findings of the Kinsey Report, and specifically the

BDSM Power Exchange: Subversion, Transcendence, Sexual (R)evolution', (Sept. 1, 2020) <<https://www.dulcineapitagora.com/post/the-bdsm-power-exchange-subversion-transcendence-sexual-r-evolution>> [accessed 19 April 2024].

⁷³ BDSM's affinity with the gay culture is well documented. 'Much of the BDSM culture can be traced back to the gay male leather culture, which formalized itself out of the group of men who were soldiers returning home after World War II [...] The *Leatherman's Handbook* by Larry Townsend, published in 1972, [...] describes in detail the practices and culture of gay male sadomasochists in the late 1960s and early 1970s.' 'BDSM', *Wikipedia* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BDSM>> [accessed 5 June 2024].

⁷⁴ Moser & Madson, *Bound to be Free*, p. 43.

diminishment of sexual behaviour in modern society, observed that ‘each man has only a certain amount of energy and if he devotes some of it to work he has to reduce his sexual energy by that much.’⁷⁵ I believe this to be true, as well as the opposite: if we devote more energy to sex, the remainder of our energy for work – and other things – will necessarily be diminished.

This probably answers the question, ‘how much sex is too much?’ It is too much when you can no longer meet the demands of your work, the demands of motherhood (or fatherhood), the demands of a productive and creative life, a life of enjoyment and connection to others.

I think it is easy to see how BDSM practised on a 24/7 basis may be viewed as a political stance. The political nature of sadomasochism has been suggested by great thinkers of our time, like Deleuze. ‘It is Gilles Deleuze who most sharply insists on the linkage between masochism as a practice of living and as a technique of political resistance.’⁷⁶ This is a huge topic, which cannot possibly be undertaken here. I am merely hinting at the political consequences of reversing the demands made on us by civilisation in the process of immersing ourselves into a largely sexual life.

BDSMers are aware of their divergence from the rest of society. Sometimes we discussed this in the community: would we enjoy BDSM so much if it were not so stigmatized, so out of the ordinary? Opinions were divided. Personally, I do not think so. Every time I was put in bondage to be whipped, it was as if I was saying to the world, *I don’t like the way things are; there’s not enough passion, not enough love, not enough pleasure, not enough tolerance of what is different.* I loved being whipped, not only for the intense physical sensation, but also because it was a statement of rebellion. Embodied politics? It sounds marvellous to me.

Emma Turley (2016) researched the politically and socially transgressive nature of BDSM and seems to have an answer to this question:

The inherently transgressive nature of consensual BDSM participation was found by this analysis to be an important experiential aspect of BDSM, enabling an embodied liberation. Although the accounts differed between individual participants, all participants’ accounts involved interpreting BDSM as a conscious rejection of the social norms surrounding sex, and creation of a fresh set of sexual rule, which prompted feelings of embodied liberation. This was not necessarily a rejection of

⁷⁵ Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (City Lights Books, 1986, first ed. 1957), p. 158.

⁷⁶ Michael Uebel, ‘Masochism in America’, *American Literary History*, (Summer 2002), Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 389-411, (p. 395), <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/14.2.389>.

normative, vanilla sex, but rather a rejection of the social and political rules and constraints attached to sex by society.⁷⁷

I hope some interesting questions have been raised on the affinity between fantasy and reality. From a writer's perspective, both are important elements of our writing craft. Aury gave voice to her fantasies to celebrate her deep love for a man. Greenwell explores the abyss of desire through his literary craft. I gave life to my fantasies and came to know intensity of emotion and an extraordinary type of pleasure, prolonged and all-encompassing to the point that it overshadowed all other facets of existence.

⁷⁷ Emma L. Turley, 'Like nothing I've ever felt before': understanding consensual BDSM as embodied experience, *Psychology & Sexuality*, 7:2 (2016) , pp. 149-162, (p. 158), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2015.1135181>.

3. LOVERS AND MYSTICS

Let us take as an example the knowledge of God. Objectively, reflection is directed to the problem of whether this object is the true God; subjectively, reflection is directed to the question whether the individual is related to a something *in such a manner* that his relationship is in truth a God-relationship.⁷⁸

I think this quote by Kierkegaard encapsulates the essence of the main question I keep asking myself about the events narrated in my novel: was the relationship with Morpheus, my correspondent, a real relationship? Was he a true ‘God’, my *bona fide* dominant, or a product of my imagination?

Sometimes I think it was mostly wishful thinking on my part, and Morpheus was an unwilling participant, someone who began a correspondence with me which went on for longer than he had expected. Perhaps he was mildly curious about this woman who would go and meet strangers only to be subjected to acts of profanation, in the hope that she might achieve a sense of sacredness. Or perhaps, for reasons of his own, Morpheus indeed orchestrated my seduction and my subsequent submission to his wishes.

If Kierkegaard is right – and I think he is – the only thing that matters in this case is whether *subjectively* I related to my correspondent in such a manner that my relationship with him was in truth a God-relationship.

The discussion below will focus on what constitutes a God-relationship in a BDSM context. With a view to illuminating the concept, I will refer to three literary characters: Greenwell’s narrator from *Cleanness*, Aury’s O, and my D.

3.1. Sacrifice and the God-relationship

The person who seems to have understood perhaps more than anyone the meaning of a God-relationship was Jean Paulhan. Geraldine Bedell, in the article ‘I wrote the story of O’, observes that according to Dominique Aury,

Paulhan had nothing to do with the writing beyond recommending that she remove one word, 'sacrificial'. (You have to wonder if this is some kind of in-joke, since the book is about nothing but sacrifice).⁷⁹

⁷⁸ S. Kierkegaard, ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments’, <http://assets.cambridge.org/97805218/82477/frontmatter/9780521882477_frontmatter.pdf> [accessed 10 April 2024].

⁷⁹ Geraldine Bedell, ‘I wrote the story of O’.

I think that Paulhan was right to ask for the deletion of that word from the book. The request – which was honoured – was perfectly serious and of great importance. Because, despite what Geraldine Bedell claims, the book is certainly *not* about sacrifice – just as the narrator of ‘Gospodar’ or wanton D are not in the business of self-sacrifice. Quite the opposite.

In a conversation between Octavio Paz and Paulhan, Paz suggested that O might be a sadist who identifies with her tormentor. Paulhan did not accept that: ‘No, that book is the confession of a lover. It is a book of devotion.’ Paz insisted: ‘Pauline [Réage] confuses love with religion. O is a saint and saints have a tendency towards martyrdom.’ To which Paulhan replied with a sweeping statement: ‘Perhaps masochism, more than a perversion, is an idea.’⁸⁰

In my opinion, the reason why Paz saw in *Story of O* a strong connection between love and religion is that Aury was writing about a God-relationship. This type of relationship is quite uncommon in our modern times, because it requires a very large investiture of time and energy. Moreover, God-relationships, being mystical in nature,⁸¹ involving ecstasy or altered states of consciousness, are impervious to the understanding of outsiders. That may be the reason for Andrea Dworkin’s interpretation of *Story of O*, in her critical essay of 1974, ‘Woman as Victim: *Story of O*’, in which, like Paz, she views Aury’s novel as a book about self-sacrifice:

O does more than offer herself; she is herself the offering. to offer herself would be prosaic Christian self-sacrifice, but as the offering she is the vehicle of the miraculous – she incorporates the divine. here sacrifice has its ancient, primal meaning: that which was given at the beginning becomes the gift.⁸²

Dworkin continues in the same vein with a long passage on the original notion of sacrifice. But, as Paulhan pointed out, this is not a book about sacrifice, but a book of devotion. A book – if I can amplify the term ‘devotion’ – about a God-relationship. Perhaps we need to ask the

⁸⁰ Octavio Paz, *An Erotic Beyond: Sade*, Harcourt Brace and Company, (1998), p. 78, quoted by Bonnie Shullenberger, ‘Much Affliction and Anguish of Heart’: *Story of O* and Spirituality’, *The Massachusetts Review*, (Summer 2005) 46, 2, Literature Online, pp. 249-272, (p. 261),

<<https://www.proquest.com/docview/215668072/fulltextPDF/2118E6572F6C422CPQ/1?accountid=14540&sourcetype=Scholarly%20Journals>> [accessed 4 June 2024].

⁸¹ ‘Mysticism is popularly known as becoming one with God or the Absolute, but may refer to any kind of ecstasy or altered state of consciousness which is given a religious or spiritual meaning. It may also refer to the attainment of insight in ultimate or hidden truths, and to human transformation supported by various practices and experiences.’ ‘Mysticism’, *Wikipedia* <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism>> [accessed on May 4 2024].

⁸² Andrea Dworkin, ‘Woman as Victim: *Story of O*’, *Feminist Studies* 2 (1):107 (1974), pp. 107-111, <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3177704>> [accessed 4 May 2024].

sadomasochists themselves, the submissives to be precise, if they perceive themselves as martyrs (some of the less experienced do, but the reason for this will be clarified below, in section 2.2).

To a reader who is not familiar with the ‘idea’ of masochism, O’s torments might indeed seem like martyrdom, as she is subjected repeatedly to severe pain and humiliation. The reason for this view (which in my opinion is erroneous, especially after I had the opportunity to meet many sadomasochists in person and getting to understand their motivations and mindset), is on one hand the mystical nature of this type of relationship, which does not lend itself easily to the understanding of an outsider. On the other hand, this view is also facilitated by the fact that Aury borrows heavily from the Bible and from religious imagery.⁸³

Here are a few extracts with religious overtones from *Story of O*:

It was painful to be on her knees, seated on her heels in the position nuns take when they pray (p. 17).

It was a pretty display, as harmonious as the wheel and the pincers in the pictures of Saint Catherine’s martyrdom, as the hammer and the nails, the crown of thorns and the lance and the scourges in the representations of the Passion (p. 222).

He gave her so as to have her immediately back, and recovered her enriched a hundredfold in his eyes, as is an ordinary object that has served some divine purpose and thereby become infused with sanctity (p. 48).

Despite the religious imagery, there are many passages in the book indicating that O is not a suffering martyr or saint. She is often depicted as a deeply happy woman in the throes of a quasi-religious ecstasy. And there is nothing sacrificial about her predicament, despite the religiosity connected with it. The religiosity is there not to denote the sacrificial nature of her relationship to Sir Stephen, but the ecstatic element of such a relationship – a God-relationship.

That she should have been ennobled and gained in dignity through being prostituted was a source of surprise, and yet dignity was indeed the right term. She was illuminated by it, as though from within, and her bearing bespoke calm, while on her face could be detected the serenity and imperceptible smile that one surmises rather than actually sees in the eyes of hermits (p. 64).

I think this passage, among others, justifies Paulhan for asking to have the word ‘sacrificial’ removed from the text. It also explains the comment he made in his essay ‘A Slave’s Revolt’: ‘lovers and mystics are familiar with this sense of grandeur, this taste of joy.’ O is undoubtedly

⁸³ Susan Griffin famously commented: ‘All the elements of sadomasochistic ritual are present in the crucifixion of Christ.’ *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge Against Nature* (Harper & Row, 1981)

<<http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/wstudies/griffin.html>> [accessed 2 October 2023].

deriving great pleasure and even pride from her slavery. Moreover, she is a willing participant in the sadomasochistic acts. Her consent is given implicitly, as well as explicitly:

This time what they wanted from her was not obedience to an order, it was that, voluntarily, she come forward and acknowledge herself a slave and surrender herself as such. That's what they called her avowal of consent (p. 101).

Consent is of vital importance for the sadomasochistic relationship and will therefore be examined in more detail further below.

D, the narrator of my novel, is a modern woman, a little naïve perhaps, who begins her exploration of BDSM guided by her fantasies, without much awareness of the 'idea' of masochism. I chose to portray her in a way that acknowledged that naiveté without allowing what she came to understand in retrospect interfere with her initial misconceptions. The reason for that was that I wanted to show her personal growth as a result of her journey into the unknown territory of her sexuality.

In her first session with the Seducer, I have D use the (forbidden by Paulhan) term 'sacrificial', despite her willingness (eagerness even) to climb 'onto the altar' and offer herself to Morpheus, the one and only god-figure that matters to her:

I know there could be no other way. He is desecrating me. He has delivered me like a sacrificial lamb to the hands of this man. I am his sacred offering, his only daughter, climbing onto the altar of my own volition (p. 153).

At that point, the portrayal of my narrator does justice to her ignorance; she views herself as a 'sacred offering' for a series of desecrations. And though her willingness to undergo these desecrations is acknowledged, I chose to emphasise to a large extent the pain she feels while being violated again and again, conflicting as this pain is, since it co-exists with a deep thrill and overpowering emotions of love and devotion. These experiences allow my narrator to gradually change through the novel as her knowledge of BDSM deepens. By the end of her journey, my portrayal of D has changed radically: she has stopped seeing herself as a victim. If anything, the strength of her character and the conviction of her choices are shown to be a very positive side-effect of her immersion into BDSM. Indeed, she is stronger, not weaker, than when she embarked on that journey.

I feel that the question of sacrifice in sadomasochistic practice is an important issue, one that can easily be misunderstood by non-initiates into BDSM. That is the reason why, at this point, I felt it was appropriate to present the views of the community on the subject.

Indeed, the question is seen to be discussed extensively among members of the community during D's first BDSM party at her home in Thessaloniki.

The night went by swimmingly, with BDSM discussions until late. The question that was put under the microscope was if the lambs taken to slaughter really want to be killed.

'It is in their nature,' Elias insisted. 'They are drawn irresistibly to their own death, there is no doubt about it.'

Everyone disagreed with that, especially the subs. Their voices intermingled, male and female alike. 'No, they do not want to die.' 'They are led to their slaughter, willy-nilly.' 'Forced.' 'Helpless' (p. 111).

The answer to the question is finally offered by D's friend, Belle de Jour: 'They want what they don't want' (p. 111). The key word here is 'want'. Volition implies more than passive acceptance or consent; it implies eagerness, and an active pursuit of sadomasochistic acts.

Wanting what one does not want contains another layer of meaning. When confronted with the sadomasochistic relationship, some feminist critics tend to view the submissive as a victim and the dominant as a perpetrator. In my view, though, the dominant and the submissive are two partners complementing each other in a dynamic balance of opposites (my favourite term is 'conspirators'). As Morpheus used to say in his correspondence, 'surplus plus deficit equals zero.' When D tries to persuade him to accept her as his sub, that secret symmetry between them is allowed to surface:

If you have so much in surplus and you choose not to offer to someone like me, who has nothing, who is nothing, how important does that make you? (p. 125).

This is an idea that is quite difficult to convey. Instead of presenting the theoretical background to the idea of compatibility between the dominant and the submissive, I felt that exploring concrete incidents in the life of a sadomasochist would be more effective in getting to the heart of the matter. During the masturbation marathon, for example, D voices her assessment of her own 'deficit': 'I am truly the best there is. Because I am the biggest nothing of them all' (p. 124). If indeed the dynamic between opposites is to be perfectly balanced, it follows that a sub of great 'deficit' would need a Dom of great 'surplus' (the terms have no meaning other than a sense of vital energy, self-control, clarity of thinking, and will-power). That is the reason why I dwelled for quite some time on the constant failures of D to regain control of her life; these failures did not render her a 'bad' sub, but simply a sub who would one day be compatible with an exceptionally good Dom.

There will be further discussion below on the way the nothing of the sub and the everything of the Dom may complement each other. One thing is clear, to me at least: BDSM participants are very familiar indeed with ‘this sense of grandeur, this taste of joy.’ It is a quasi-religious ecstasy, stemming, in my personal opinion, from the God-relationship.

3.2 Consent and its Nuances

Let’s be honest here. Wanting what one does not want is mostly an act, a game. Detailed negotiations, including limits and safe words, ensure informed consent, the cornerstone of BDSM, precluding thus the notion of sacrifice.⁸⁴

In the Greek BDSM community, submissives who were melodramatic about the ‘torments’ they ‘endured’ at the hands of their dominant were called laughingly, and quite affectionately, ‘drama queens’. Self-victimisation was considered by the more experienced BDSMers a sign of immaturity, reserved for ‘newbies’. Everyone knew that the subs were enjoying their role and were, in fact, quite lucky to have found a dominant.

A parenthetical note on the issue of finding a dominant: Dominant men or women are so rare that they are almost always shared. In my experience, few dominants are monogamous, and rightly so; that would be a waste of resources. Furthermore, I believe the sub is there to increase the Dom’s freedom, not to decrease it – again, within the context of the secret symmetry between the two conspirators of pleasure. That is why jealousy on the part of the sub is incompatible with the sub’s role in the relationship. That is a personal view; there are countless other subs who will tear their Dom’s head off if the Dom considers playing with another sub – and to be honest I’ve been there too at some point of my journey. I am only human, and jealousy is one of the hardest emotions to control.

Within the context of consensual sadomasochism an interesting phenomenon takes place. If all the acts were negotiated and decided upon in advance, it would be impossible to achieve the deep, trance-like, very pleasurable state (called substate for subs and top-space for dominants) that sadomasochists achieve⁸⁵ (which I have also personally experienced

⁸⁴ ‘Consent is the *sine qua non* of BDSM practice.’ Alexandra Fanghanel, ‘Asking for it: BDSM sexual practice and the trouble of consent’, *Sexualities* (2020), vol. 23 (3), pp. 269-286 (p. 269), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460719828933>.

⁸⁵ Altered states of consciousness among BDSMers are well-documented. See J.K. Ambler and others, ‘Consensual BDSM Facilitates Role-Specific Altered States of Consciousness: A Preliminary Study’, *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Advance online publication (22 September 2016), doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cns0000097>.

numerous times and which I vouch is downright addictive). One cannot step out of their comfort zone by following a prescribed list of acts; the sub needs to feel violated to achieve substate and the Dom needs to step into the ‘forbidden’ (by our social norms) realm of violation. Strict adherence to negotiation, in my experience, is usually appropriate for one-off sessions (the equivalent to vanilla one-night stands), where the two participants do not know each other’s preferences and limits. In long-term BDSM relationships, however, consent is usually implicit and negotiation redundant. Ideally, long conversations about limits, fears, and sexual fantasies have already taken place at the start of the relationship and the dominant can navigate in and out of the sub’s comfort zone with relative ease and without causing any harm (physical or psychological).

But again, it must be said that even in those latter cases the sub should be able to stop all action, either by using a pre-agreed safe word, or by simply indicating that the sadomasochistic session is no longer working for any number of reasons (fatigue, stress, sickness etc). The dominant is obliged by an unspoken honour code (very important among BDSMers) to cease immediately and provide after-care to the sub (after-care is provided invariably after successful sessions too). Pitagora, a well-known American sex therapist specialising in alternative sexuality, observes:

It is important to note that if a BDSM scene continues after a safe word has been used, or after withdrawal of consent has been communicated in any other way, it becomes a non-consensual act of violence.⁸⁶

Indeed, BDSMers know from experience what many researchers insist upon: ‘the hallmark feature that distinguishes BDSM activity from abuse and psychopathology is the presence of mutual informed consent of all those involved.’⁸⁷

Though the notions of negotiation and consent ensure the safety of all those involved, and the avoidance of abuse, it must be said that BDSM in our days has become an erotic game with its own rules and rituals (even its own jargon), which increasingly steers away from D/s relationships that require a serious investiture of time and energy. Thus, most BDSM participants learn to engage with what is expected of them in the manner that is expected of them, depending on the role they have chosen for themselves, and simply follow the guidelines, lest they be called ignorant or abusive.

⁸⁶ Pitagora (2013), quoted in Pitagora, ‘The BDSM Power Exchange: Subversion, Transcendence, Sexual (R) evolution’, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Cara R. Dunkley & Lori A. Brotto, ‘The Role of Consent in the Context of BDSM’, *Sexual Abuse* 1-22, doi: 10.1177/1079063219842847, abstract.

One thing is clear, however, in *Story of O*: O willingly engages with Sir Stephen as if he were a God. Indeed, O embraces the God-relationship and even dreads losing it:

When she'd been a child she'd read a text written in letters of red upon the white wall of the room she'd spent two months living in, in Wales: a passage from the Bible, one such as Protestants inscribe in their houses: 'It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' No, she said to herself now, no, it isn't true. What is terrible is to be rejected by the hands of the living God (p. 130).

The worst thing O can imagine is to be abandoned by her living God. When that happens, she chooses to end her life – just as Aury withdrew from life when Paulhan died.

Greenwell's narrator in 'Gospodar' is fully aware of the role he has agreed to take in his encounter with the Bulgarian Dom. He views his consent to the session as a contract. In fact, he is very tolerant of many dubious acts by the Gospodar (who is a disgrace of a Dom, in my honest opinion):

Mnogo si debel, he said, you're very fat, and I looked down at myself, at my thighs and the flesh folded over them, the flesh I have hated my entire life, and though I remained silent, I thought Not so very fat. It was part of our contract, that he could say such things and I would endure them (p. 27).

The narrator honours their contractual, negotiated relationship, and accepts the humiliation. And before things start to go terribly wrong, he experiences the right feeling for the whole affair:

I was eager, and as I took him in my mouth I felt the gratitude I nearly always feel in such moments (p. 32).

There is nothing coercive in the session, until a hard limit is broken: the Dom refuses to wear a condom. That instantly breaks the contract and consent is withdrawn; the session ends at once.

D offers her incontestable consent to the relationship. She willingly accepts the training Morpheus has decided for her, the first time with a man she finds unattractive and crude, and the second with a man who makes it clear they will never meet. It seems she has found her living God, even if he is somewhat unwilling.

I thought of the references Morpheus had made to the Bible and to the Psalm of David. Having to pray while holding a burning candle between my teeth had strengthened the sense I had of the religious nature of our relationship (p. 148).

Morpheus embraces the role of father to begin with, and that of a god-like figure as the relationship deepens. Apart from my own personal quest for a father figure, the concept of

the dominant as a father is very widespread in the BDSM community and many submissives enjoy the role of the little girl or daughter ('good girl' is the most common praise offered to a female sub). I wanted therefore to explore the concept in D's relationship with Morpheus.

And then he got angry with me. He had received a whole bunch of emails, he said, from female members of the forum, who always liked to engage in a bit of gossip, asking him about that woman claiming to belong to him and at the same time enjoying cheap joy rides in Athens. And all the while defying the third commandment!

The third commandment? What bloody third commandment? What was he talking about?

Then I noticed the title of the email, which had escaped me: 'Using a name in vain.' *Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain!* He was referring to the ten commandments! Jesus! Or rather... Yahweh? (pp. 100-101).

The God-relationship begins to unfold after that moment. And throughout the relationship, D continues to express her consent in the most unequivocal terms:

What choice did I have, with D breathing down my neck? I sat down, swallowed my pride, and wrote to Morpheus again. I did not have much to say, but what I said was loud and clear.

'I want more...' (p. 91).

There is never a hint of any coercion or abuse in the whole affair. And instead of asking in her prayers for mercy or a reprieve, D simply asks for more – and more, and more.

While consent ensures that sadomasochism does not constitute abuse in any way, imagination ensures that the sadomasochistic acts breathe life to one's sexual fantasies. Deleuze has pointed to the importance of the masochistic imagination, connecting it to ritualistic behaviour:

The masochistic contract generates a type of law which leads straight into ritual. The masochist is obsessed; ritualistic activity is essential to him, since it epitomizes the world of phantasy.⁸⁸

A submissive – and possibly a Dom too, though I do not have personal knowledge of that – often needs to become the director of their own fantasy to make it work fully. If a sub's imagination were not necessary, they would get sexually stimulated when they visited the dentist. That does not happen; it is not the right scenario.

⁸⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (G. Braziller, 1971), p. 94.

To explain what it means to create the right scenario, I will describe an incident I witnessed about ten years ago. My friends and I, five individuals in total, travelled from Greece to Italy for a few days. We rented a large country house in Campagnano di Roma, a town north of Rome, where we held a BDSM party. About twenty of our Italian acquaintances from an international site (FetLife), as well as a young woman from London, attended the party. At some point, an Italian girl started to play with Thomas. While others gathered around them too, she removed all his clothes, tied him down to a chair, and wrote swear words on his chest with a red marker pen. Then she started being very rough with him, dripping hot wax on his body and especially his exposed genitals. As she did not know his limits or preferences, I was keeping an eye out for him, as I always do. Thomas kept moaning in pain and repeating these words:

‘What are you doing to me, bad people? Why are you so nasty? What have I ever done to you?’

With some pretext, I intervened and stopped the play, as I felt Thomas was going to get seriously hurt. The Italian girl, realising that Thomas and I had a relationship in which I had some authority, complied, and released Thomas from his bondage.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked him.

‘Why did you stop the scene?’ he said. He was clearly disappointed, which surprised me. I thought he would have been grateful; instead, he was upset. He had been enjoying the play, despite what he was saying and despite his moans of pain.

My interpretation of the incident, connected to the notion of sacrifice discussed earlier, is that Thomas, though a willing participant in the sadomasochistic activity, had employed a fantasy to transform the consensual SM play to a sacrificial scene. He had injected into the play a little unwillingness on his part and a little ‘nastiness’ on the dominant girl’s part – both of which were entirely untrue. In reality, the Domme was doing him a favour, catering to his wishes (having some fun herself at the same time), and he was truly grateful for her attentions. Though sacrifice was nowhere to be seen, Thomas decided he needed a little bit of the grandeur of martyrdom, even if it were a mere re-enactment of a fantasy.

Bataille makes an interesting point as to the relevance of the imagination in a modern world devoid of the opportunity of sacrifice:

It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening on to the unknown. Here life is mingled with death, but simultaneously death is a sign of

life, a way into the infinite. Nowadays sacrifice is outside the field of our experience and imagination must do duty for the real thing.⁸⁹

In other words, Thomas was attempting to experience the transcendence of sacrifice, even if he would never get the opportunity to encounter the real thing. He was simply looking for the living God. And though he has never found her, I know he is still looking.

3.3 The Ruthless Submissive

I think it has been made clear that self-sacrifice is foreign as a notion to BDSM. In the BDSM community submissives were never seen as martyrs or victims. In fact, submissives were often ruthless in pursuing their desires. In my novel, I have portrayed D as stubborn and ruthless in pursuing what she desires; she will sacrifice everything to get what she wants. She nearly loses her job, she loses her vanilla friends, she jeopardizes her relationship with her own children, and she often puts herself in danger too. However, she never backs down, determined to get what she wants at all costs. And when she gets it, she achieves great joy:

A strange mix of feelings in her chest, unknown, unnameable. Small explosions of light in her mind. An unprecedented clarity. *Claritas*. There is no past, no future. She continues to float a few centimetres above reality. It is much better this way (p. 204).

O finds a deep sense of happiness in the different ways in which her tormentor takes his pleasure with her:

Would she ever dare tell him that no pleasure, no joy, nothing she even imagined ever approached the happiness she felt before the freedom wherewith he made use of her, before the idea that he knew there were no precaution, no limits he had to observe in the manner whereby he sought his pleasure in her body (p. 246).

There is nothing O would not do to prolong the joy and happiness she feels in being used as an object of pleasure. She therefore agrees to seduce Jacqueline, only to deliver her to Roissy upon René's request. And when a young man, Eric, asks Sir Stephen to give O back her freedom so he can marry her, she refuses and asks instead to be whipped, only to be displayed to the young man in all her glory.

And when an hour later, brought into the presence of an O spread grotesquely open between the two columns, the young man turned white, stammered and vanished (pp. 225-226).

⁸⁹ Bataille, *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*, p. 91.

The narrator of Greenwell's 'Gospodar' is just as ruthless in pursuing what he desires. At the beginning of the story, he is worried the Dom he has been chatting with for days will turn him away.

He neither spoke nor gestured, and the longer he appraised me, the more I feared that having come all this way I would be told to leave (p. 28).

At this point, he fervently wants to have a session with this 'unhandsome' man. When, however, a hard limit is reached, he gets up and leaves, after a violent altercation. It would have been reasonable to give up on his desires at this point. However, he never does, despite the traumatic experience, in which violence sadly became non-consensual. The story ends with a powerful assertion of the predominance of desire:

I wouldn't go back to such a place, I thought, this would be the end of it. But how many times had I felt that I could change [...] I knew that having been shown it I would come back to it [...] for a time I would resist my desire but only for a time [...] I felt with a new fear how little sense of myself I have, how there was no end to what I could want or to the punishment I would seek (pp. 46-47).

Neither a victim nor a martyr. This is a man who recognises how far he is willing to go to get what he wants. He accepts the intensity of his desire, recognising the simple fact: he will not be able to resist his desire and will keep returning to such experiences eagerly, again and again.

Greenwell comments on the importance of understanding the nature of one's desire:

I want to recognize that even when characters are doing things that seem degrading, even when they are seeking abasement, there is a kind of dignity in living out one's contradictions and in confronting one's desires.⁹⁰

By connecting this personal confrontation of one's desires to a sense of dignity, Greenwell's comment echoes Paulhan's essay, where a similar word to 'dignity' is used: 'decency'.

There is another sort of decency, invincible and quick to punish, a decency which very sharply humiliates the flesh in order to return it to its former integrity, which forcefully sends it back to the days when desire was as yet undeclared in it and the rock had not yet sung: a decency into whose grip it is dangerous to fall.⁹¹

Cryptic as Paulhan's essay is, I believe he has a point. I had the opportunity to see for myself the integrity of succumbing to the wishes of the all-powerful flesh, tirelessly chasing after the

⁹⁰ Angel, 'On Writing About Sex', interview with Garth Greenwell.

⁹¹ Jean Paulhan, 'A Slave's Revolt', p. 287.

ultimate pleasure, disregarding all danger, while confronting the most formidable enemy: the self.

3.4 Return to the Body

The literary characters discussed above follow the demands of their desire without ever donning the sacrificial cloth, with the exception perhaps of D, whose journey is one of self-knowledge (the novel is largely a bildungsroman). Her self-growth leads her to agency and personal freedom and renders her very dissimilar to Dworkin's view of a 'woman as victim', a woman 'defined by the hole between her legs'.⁹²

It is interesting how Dworkin keeps referring to female genitalia with contempt, using the derogatory terms 'cunt' or 'hole'. To this, I would like to juxtapose the terms used by Morpheus and D – terms that point to a sense of sacredness attributed to the body:

I had to accept my desire, he said, instead of transposing it onto someone else, someone I called 'the One'. My desire was mine and only mine; it belonged to me and my sacred genitalia (p. 66).

Then D takes over. I can feel her rising from my very bones. It is a mist, a moisture, the priestess of my sacred genitalia (p. 123).

I do not see here what Dworkin sees in sadomasochism: the 'self-hatred found in all oppressed peoples.' On the contrary, what I see in the juxtaposition above is a feminist view that despises the female body and its pleasures, whereas for Morpheus and D the female body is exalted and revered (that is true also of the male body, manifested in the worshipping acts towards the dominant).

Paulhan's essay is becoming clearer: what Aury suggested with O, and Paulhan tried to explain in his essay, what D instinctively tried to do when seeking strangers who would defile her body, what the narrator of 'Gospodar' experienced with his sojourn to the abyss of his complicated desires, is the wish for a return to the body. The body not as a lowly, dirty remnant of our animal origins, nor as an instrument of sin, but the body as a valued, nearly sacred vehicle towards a deep, ecstatic connection to the other and to ourselves.

In my experience, BDSMers tend to view the body as the mediator to one's inner world. As such, there is a wish to return the body to its former integrity, which has been lost through the

⁹² Andrea Dworkin, 'Woman as Victim'.

ages since antiquity and the Greeks, since it became connected to Christianity and the original sin. One could also make a case of the capitalism's commodification of the body as one of the factors contributing to the loss of the body's integrity, not to mention the ways in which modern pornography has turned the body into an empty shell, devoid of any spiritual interiority, as Greenwell has correctly pointed out.⁹³

Among BDSMers – submissive or dominant – I found there was a strong interest in the body. There was a sense of empowerment, the feeling that the body was an asset in the existential wonderment summarised in the phrase, 'who am I and how do I connect to the world?' Rarely have I seen people investing so much in the pleasures of the body with a view to conversing with their soul. Thomas, for example, spent literally thousands of hours on the Internet researching potential dominant women, caning and whipping techniques, materials such as rattan and the manner in which it marks the body, ways to intensify pain (and therefore pleasure), sizes and shapes of feet and toes, leather attire, erotic comic books etc. This was his way of approaching the unfulfilled dream of a 'God-relationship'. I did something similar over a period of seventeen years. It was time well spent.

The importance of the body in BDSM can perhaps be demonstrated with an incident that happened a few years ago, at an anniversary party for a forum I owned in Greece together with three fellow BDSMers.

That year, we decided to invite the swingers too, from another forum. Indeed, they attended. We soon realised that we had absolutely nothing in common. Our BDSM members engaged in bondage, impact play, needle play and other similar SM acts. You could see the ecstatic abandon in the body language of the subs; it was quite moving. Some of them told me they would never forget it, especially since they had the opportunity to play in public and many of them, like Belle de Jour, were exhibitionists. There was no sex at all, of course. I have never seen any sex in any of the BDSM parties I attended or organised over the years – not only in the public parties, but even in our private ones. Many BDSMers – and I am one of them – believe that everything is sex, except sex. In other words, we tend to eroticise mostly control and power, whereas the idea of penetrative coitus does not seem sexually stimulating if it does not involve an exchange of power. (Once a man, supposedly dominant, sent me an email in which he described graphically the intense sexual activity we could enjoy together. My reply was: 'I am willing to even have sex with you, in return for a little BDSM.' He did not pursue me any further.)

⁹³ See footnote 62.

The swingers, on the other hand, who were mostly very beautiful men and women (in contrast to our BDSMers who were somewhat plain and a little overweight, unfortunately), performed sexual acts in public and achieved multiple orgasms too. When they had an orgasm, they did so with smiles and laughter, as if they had merely sneezed. It did not seem that their engagement with sex involved in any way their inner world or the imagination. I may be wrong, of course; they may have been attempting to give voice to a different dream.

I remember a funny incident from that party: at some point we realised a girl among the swingers had the tendency to squirt heavily when she orgasmed. We placed the Forum's anniversary cake on the stomach of a sub girl, asked her to lie down on the floor of a metal cage, and we lit the birthday candles on the cake. The swinger stood above the cake with her legs open, and masturbated furiously for about two minutes, until she started squirting. That was how the birthday candles were extinguished that year.

Despite the good-natured fun and the laughs, we never invited the swingers again. It was as if they had come from another planet. I suspect, however, that we were the ones who had come from another planet: the planet where the body is a valid conspirator in the search for the God-relationship.

The sadomasochistic explorations of D reveal to her an astonishing glorification of the body. In her vanilla encounters, with the gigolo for example, the exaltation of the body is absent:

Sex with him was so boring that I had to write supermarket lists in my head. He panted away, pushing in and out of my unresponsive body, always in the same, identical movement – a piston that had found a convenient hole in which to spend its mindless existence (p. 19).

This mechanistic approach to the body, for D at least, is devastatingly meaningless. Later, a different picture emerges, when D is asked to worship the body of Master X:

‘You must kiss my nipples as if you were a hungry baby. You must worship every inch of your Master's body (p. 33).

And when she witnesses Tina worshipping her Master's feet, the realisation sinks in: this is a completely radical stance vis-à-vis the body:

It was a gesture that changed the rules of the sex game: the entire human body could be worshipped (p. 27).

The conventional set of rules that governs sexual relations is gradually abandoned. A new way of relating to one another emerges, one where the body is king.

Greenwell also describes a scene of worshipping the body in 'The Little Saint', during an act of fellatio:

It was a kind of love, or what felt like love, reverence maybe, worship, and it filled me up with something like pride... (p. 185).

When the narrator explores his sadistic, more dominant side of his personality, he realises there are aspects of his sexuality he had not been aware of until now. He is surprised at the violence with which he responds to his submissive partner, recognising how far from his principles a scene like that is:

You know what you are, I said, you're a whore, this is all you're good for, I said, this is all you deserve. Maybe they had always been there, these words, maybe once you have heard such language it infects you... (p. 194).

In the end, he breaks down and begins to cry.

I realized that I had been wrong before; it did have an end, what I had felt, its end was here, he had brought me here. Finally, he laid his head on my chest. Don't be like that, he said again as I put my arms around him. Do you see? You don't have to be like that, he said. You can be like this (pp. 195-196).

What the character learns through a sexual scene involving the body's degradation is that he needs to engage with two things sorely missed and evidently important to him: tenderness and intimacy. Rather than continue to re-enact the sexual violence he has witnessed or has been subjected to, the narrator ends up connecting to his partner in an embrace that is the exact opposite of the violent scene they just engaged in. Consensual erotic violence has led them both to a point where they are capable of great intimacy and a strong personal connection. BDSM is often a game of paradoxes, which is one of the reasons it remains incomprehensible to the non-initiates. How can one achieve happiness through suffering, pleasure through pain, strength through submissiveness? And yet there are testimonies to all the above.

The body's importance is incontestable in the above two literary pieces. Aury does something very interesting with O's body: she removes the body from its rightful owner, forbidding access to it as if it were a sacred object.

Your hands are not your own, neither are your breasts, nor, above all, is any one of the orifices of your body, which we are at liberty to explore and into which we may, whenever we so please, introduce ourselves (p. 25).

O's relationship with the world changes drastically because of the various violations of her body and the subsequent sense of sacredness she experiences. O gradually learns how to engage with the God-relationship:

O told herself that she had only loved René as a means for learning of love and for finding out how to give herself better, as a slave, as an ecstatic slave, to Sir Stephen (p. 240).

The knowledge O has acquired is how to be an 'ecstatic slave' offering herself in the best possible way to the God-figure. She connects to her body, realises its worth, and offers it with great joy to her 'living God', again and again.

3.5 Shedding Social Identities

In the literary tradition of texts dealing with sadomasochistic practice, the reader will often encounter an affinity to Christianity's rituals, as well as a desire for a negation of the self. These two concepts seem to be the backbone of the power exchange, manifesting a longing for a larger experience than ordinary human existence can afford us.

The deconstruction of O's social self begins in the very first scene, when O is taken to Roissy and her lover takes her bag from her. A woman's bag contains items connected to her social identity: her ID, driver's license, money, photos of her family, and all the paraphernalia that render a woman a social entity. From the moment that O surrenders her bag, she begins to distance herself from her social self and increasingly embrace the body. At Roissy, she will be liberated from all the constraints imposed on a woman by the social environment and her social identity.

The chains and the silence which ought to have sealed her isolated self within twenty impenetrable walls, to have asphyxiated her, strangled her, hadn't; to the contrary, they'd been her deliverance, liberating her from herself [...] she sank, lost in a delirious absence from herself (p. 57).

The process of deconstruction is strict and methodical. Aury is explicit about the purpose served by the violations of O's body: they are recurring rituals of profanation.

She had groaned under the stranger's mouth as never she had under René's, cried before the onslaught of the stranger's member as never her lover had made her cry. She was profaned and guilty (p. 46).

Daily and, as it were, ritualistically soiled by saliva and sperm, by sweat mingled with her own sweat, she sensed herself to be, literally, the vessel of impurity, the gutter whereof Scripture makes mention (p. 64).

O is ritualistically soiled, made dirty, impure; in other words, she is desecrated. Through these profanations, O experiences a religious feeling, a 'sacred submission' which goes beyond mere sexual arousal.

O was aware of the splendour of her mouth, of its beauty, since her lover deigned to enter it, since he deigned to make a spectacle of its caresses, since he deigned to shed his seed in it. She received him as one receives a god... (p. 30).

The word *open* and the expression *open your legs*, when uttered by her lover, would acquire in her mind such overtones of restiveness and of force that she never heard them without a kind of inward prostration, of sacred submission, as if they had emanated from a god, not from him (p.77).

There are numerous mentions of the religious feeling overwhelming O. Through the torments of her body, O experiences a mystical joy that vindicates Paulhan's phrase equating lovers and mystics. This mystical joy has been recognised by many BDSM participants as an instance of transcendence. Shullenberger comments:

When pain is received as a goal beyond itself, when it becomes an expression of devotion for that which is beyond oneself, suffering and degradation can turn into exaltation. Such has been the experience of the saints, and such, I think, is the experience of some of those who practise sadomasochism.⁹⁴

It seems that the more O is desecrated, objectified, led away from her humanity, the more she perceives her lover as a God. O sees Sir Stephen as someone who is more than human, and herself as someone who is less than human. That is their secret symmetry, a cosmic seesaw requiring one to sink as low as possible into nothingness, only to elevate the other as much as possible into omnipotence. The one clearly depends on the other.

For O, absence from herself means increased presence in her body. That is why O is grateful to her bondage and rejoices in the opportunity to be enslaved: 'O blessed chains that bore her away from herself' (p. 68). The more she progresses on her journey towards presence in her body, the more her objectification will increase too. This objectification reaches its climax in the last scene of the novel, in which O attends a party wearing an owl mask.

Was she then a thing of stone or wax, or a creature of some other world, and was it that they thought it pointless to try to speak to her, or was it that they didn't dare?' (p. 262).

O becomes a 'thing', whereas in the alternative ending of the novel she dies – and therefore becomes a corpse. In both cases, her humanity is lost and her reification is complete.

⁹⁴ Bonnie Shullenberger, 'Much Affliction and Anguish of Heart', p. 258.

The writers affiliated with New Narrative were keen to bring about the disintegration of social identities. In the words of Robert Glück :

I wanted to write close to the body – the place language goes reluctantly. We used porn, where information saturates narrative, to expose and manipulate genre's formulas and *dramatis personae*, to arrive at ecstasy and loss of narration as the self sheds its social identities.⁹⁵

Baumeister has proposed a theory of masochism based on the need to escape the demands placed on the self by modern western societies. For Baumeister, masochism can help the individual escape from a high-level awareness of the self:

Awareness of self as a symbolic, schematic, choosing entity is removed and replaced with a low-level awareness of self as a physical body and locus of immediate sensations, or with a new identity with transformed symbolic meaning. Masochism may therefore be classed with physical exercise, intoxication, meditative techniques, and perhaps even being a fan or spectator, all of which facilitate escape from normal self-awareness. Masochism may differ from these in being an unusually powerful form of escape and in its link to sexual pleasure.⁹⁶

And according to Shullenberger:

It is not empty obliteration that masochism seeks. It is rather the loss of self into the desire and spirit of the Other.⁹⁷

In other words, a God-relationship.

D, on the other hand, at the start of the narrative, seems to be blinded by romantic musings carried over from her youth. She is certain that a great passion will lead her to transcendence. An outside observer might equate that great passion to simply love. But is it?

Morpheus, who comprehends in greater depth the function of a sadomasochistic experience, clarifies matters for her from day one:

You will have something to deconstruct when the time comes. Some women tremble and drool and mumble words without meaning. It would be interesting to see what happens to you (p. 56)

Deconstruction is hardly appealing to D, at first. In fact, she is apprehensive about losing her

⁹⁵ Robert Glück, 'Long Note on New Narrative'.

⁹⁶ Roy F. Baumeister, 'Masochism as Escape from Self', *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 25, No. 1, Feb 1988, pp. 28-59, (p. 29), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498809551444>.

⁹⁷ Shullenberger, 'Much Affliction and Anguish of Heart', p. 268.

social identity:

What would happen to me? Would I turn into an object? Meat for use? Would I lose my humanity? (p. 35).

However, when the time comes for her to experience the ultimate pleasure, it is an empowering experience. In the last section, titled 'Return to the Flesh', D and Belle engage in an unlikely carnal act, without being romantically involved, without any expectations, without any desire other than to attempt to achieve great physical pleasure. And the ultimate violation of the body brings about the deconstruction of the social self, just as Morpheus predicted. Memory collapses, culture collapses, and D enters the realm where she does not exist as a human being; there, she can finally exist as a body. The dominion of the body is complete.

The time has come to see what is concealed in the small oasis of the flesh, in the desert of the real. Here is the thing I have been seeking, the thing for which I have sacrificed so much [...] That is the closest punch there is: the fist of the Other, inside me. I touch myself wildly, obsessively, my juices drip on the bed, my moans are muffled on the pillow. Suddenly my spine curves backwards, creaking in the final crescendo of an unearthly harmony. I surrender to the orgasm, kneeling in front of the universe, trembling and mumbling words without meaning (p. 197).

After the ultimate violation of her body, D understands finally what it means to be an O. What Morpheus had said to her is the key to the power exchange: 'Are you a zero or the One?' The initial O is indicative of a circle; the submissive experience indeed resembles a circle, with the sub fluctuating between two points, a strong self that enjoys agency and personal choice, to being nothing, a plaything in the hands of the dominant; and back again.

At the most extreme end of pleasure, there is no control. Complete surrender. It is a strange journey, from zero to one – and back again, from one to zero. Both are necessary. Without the self, you cannot find your way back to zero. You need to have something to lose – something to deconstruct, as Morpheus would say. And without the complete surrender of control, pleasure will always be incomplete (p. 197).

The deconstruction of D reaches its climax in the Epilogue, in a scene where she is made to wear a padlock of surgical steel, depriving her of the ability to control her own sexuality and to offer her body to anyone she wishes. D feels to be floating in a bubble a few centimetres above reality pointing to a break with the rest of humanity. She has finally managed to connect reality and fantasy and has invented for herself what G.W. Levi Kamel

calls a 'private reality'.⁹⁸ In her private reality she is nothing, a very happy nothing, following eagerly and voluntarily the God-figure of her life.

Greenwell's preoccupation with becoming nothing is present in two stories in *Cleanness*, 'Gospodar' and 'The Little Saint'. In the first one the narrator has the submissive role and in the second he explores his dominant side (he switches). Both narrated scenes deal with the notion of nothingness.

The narrator of 'Gospodar', when asked what he wants from the session, replies in very clear terms:

And I did tell him, at first slowly and with the usual words, reciting the script that both does and does not express my desires; and then I spoke more quickly and more searchingly, drawn forward by the tone of his voice, what seemed like tenderness although it was not tenderness, until I found myself suddenly in some recess or depth where I had never been [...] And I found myself at last at the end of my strange litany saying again and again I want to be nothing, I want to be nothing (p. 29).

This passage demonstrates how an individual can move gradually from 'the script' (referred to earlier in connection with BDSM in our days having become a little stilted, adhering too much to rituals and conventions practised in the BDSM subculture) to a more complex and at the same time simpler understanding of one's deepest desires: 'I want to be nothing.' The connotations of the phrase are riveting indeed; sexual surrender, existential surrender, utter surrender – of body and soul.

But how can a person become nothing? It does not seem a very easy thing to do. We all possess a self-preserving ego and are conditioned from a very young age to be competitive and display self-control in all aspects of our existence.

Here is a minor violation of all the above:

Good, he said a third time, his hand letting go of my cheek and taking hold of my hair again, forcing my neck farther back, and then suddenly and with great force he spat into my face (p. 30).

This is how the narrator reacts:

I had never stopped being hard, and when he said to me Breathe me in, smell me, I did so eagerly, taking great gasps. I had felt it before, too, when he spat on me it was like a spark along the track of my spine, who knows why we take pleasure in such things, maybe it's best not to look into it too closely (p. 30).

⁹⁸ Thomas S. Weinberg and G. W. Levi Kamel, eds, *S&M: Studies in Sadomasochism*, (Prometheus, 1983), p. 203.

Despite his shock at recognising the peculiarities of his desire, he eventually admits the truth about who he is:

Maybe there was pleasure for him after all. As there was for me, the intense pleasure I've never been able to account for, that can't be accounted for mechanically; the pleasure of service, I've sometimes thought, or more darkly the pleasure of being used, the exhilaration of being made an object... (pp. 32-33).

In 'The Little Saint', Greenwell introduces a submissive young man with a description that points to a peculiar sense of sanctity:

His name meant light, or that was the root of it, the root too of the word for holy, for any number of words associated with sanctity and the church [...] And maybe there actually was something saintly about him, his slightness and quiet in the hoodie that framed his face like a monk's cowl... (p. 173).

During the session, the young man proves to be a masochist who is not squeamish about his desires.

He had meant every word of it, what he had said about himself online, I wasn't sure I had ever met anyone who embodied so fully his fantasy of himself (p. 189).

This is an important observation, connecting the physical aspect of BDSM to the imagination of the participants and the sadomasochistic scenario, which has been alluded to earlier.

Please, he said again, his voice muffled, please, I'm nothing. He repeated this, I'm nothing, I'm nothing, and I echoed him, I said That's right...(p. 195).

Both the participants go to great lengths to violate the body and the usual norms of relating to one another, until in the end they achieve precisely what they wished for: one person is nothing, while the other is everything.

I think this is what is meant by a God-relationship: negating oneself as much as possible, sometimes to the point of reification, so as to allow the dominant partner to be elevated to a position of great control and authority within the power dynamics of the couple. One is nothing while the other is everything. Or rather, one is becoming nothing, more and more, while the other is becoming everything, more and more. It is a process, an approximation; the end can never be reached.

3.6 Some Feminist Critics

Apart from Andrea Dworkin, who has been mentioned earlier, there are some other feminist critics who condemned *Story of O* for proposing a love so absolute that seeks self-

annihilation. Susan Griffin says: ‘To exist fully as a body is to cease to exist as a soul.’⁹⁹ She views sadomasochism in a negative light as a process that negates our spiritual self.

According to Amalia Ziv, Griffin ‘condemns sadomasochism in general for attempting to divorce body and consciousness.’¹⁰⁰ Susan Sontag also is critical of the disintegration of O’s social self: ‘O progresses simultaneously toward her own extinction as a human being and her fulfilment as a sexual being.’¹⁰¹ Both Griffin and Sontag seem to understand well that in masochism the body is elevated to a position of dominion in the balance social self / body.

My counterpoint is that BDSM is a carefully controlled process, much more carefully controlled than most vanilla encounters and relationships; in the latter there is no negotiation, no discussion on any personal limits or preferences, and consent is implicit or reliant on body language, without even the safety valve of the safe word. In BDSM, the scene is controlled by the sub, who has all the power to stop everything with the safe word, as well as by the Dom/Domme, who is aware of the responsibility bestowed upon him/her by the submissive. If the social self is deconstructed, this will happen in a controlled environment. Moreover, the dissolution of the social self is not permanent; it is a brief occurrence as part of a scene.

In my experience, BDSM can lead one to a series of alternate states of subjective experiences, a very pleasurable oscillation between the social self and the sexual self. Without losing permanently one’s social identity, one can venture into a more physical, a more sexually intense, state of being, as many sadomasochists claim and report repeatedly.

Another important factor that Griffin and Sontag do not take into account is that both men and women – in fact, I think more men than women – desire the submissive role. It is inaccurate to talk about women as victims in that sense; the proper question should be ‘are people who assume the submissive role victims?’ Moreover, the word ‘role’ says it all: sadomasochism is an erotic game, a game reliant upon consent. Finally, it seems to me that these feminist critics erroneously take *Story of O* to represent sadomasochism.

The criticism of *Story of O* is not unfounded: O indeed pushes her masochistic tendencies towards her self-annihilation, as is evident in O’s increased objectification, or in

⁹⁹ Susan Griffin, ‘Sadomasochism and the Erosion of Self: A Critical Reading of *Story of O*.’ *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, (1982) p. 195, <https://umbrella.lib.umb.edu/discovery/fulldisplay?vid=01MA_UMB:01MA_UMB&docid=alma994034583503746&context=L&lang=en> [accessed 4 June 2024].

¹⁰⁰ Amalia Ziv, ‘The Pervert’s Progress: An Analysis of *Story of O* and the Beauty Trilogy’, *Feminist Review*, No. 46, Spring 1994, pp. 61-75, (p. 66), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.1994.6> .

¹⁰¹ Susan Sontag, ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, *Styles of Radical Will*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 58.

O's suicide when Sir Stephen abandons her. However, I believe that expanding this criticism to include the BDSM subculture is not justified; most sadomasochists, even when they regularly engage with edge play (play that pushes the boundaries of SSC), are very careful not to inflict or sustain permanent harm, physical or psychological. And when objectification is sought, it is part of an erotic game with strict time limitations. After the session, things revert to normal (I will never forget that V, my dominant, after a particularly harsh session, kissed my hand in all seriousness – a very romantic gesture).

Another important point to consider, before condemning sadomasochism on the whole, is that although *Story of O* was erstwhile considered 'the Bible' of BDSM, many practitioners of sadomasochism today would probably disagree.

Members of the BDSM community have distanced their sexual practices from the portrayals of BDSM in the book because the scenes do not involve established sets of rules and the issue of consent is made murky.¹⁰²

Admittedly, *Story of O* takes place in a fantasy land where the rules of realistic play do not apply; it therefore lacks the aspects that have become inextricably connected with BDSM since the publication of the book: namely negotiation of 'play', explicit consent given for the sadomasochistic acts performed, and the concept of SSC (activities which are safe, sane and consensual).

I think, therefore, that although *Story of O* gave birth to many aspects of sadomasochism as it is practised today, it cannot represent BDSMers and the principles by which they relate to one another.

3.7 Jouissance and the Reluctant Dominant

D's quest for what she calls 'the ultimate pleasure' – a vague wish on her part – triggers Morpheus to usher in the game the concept of jouissance. In researching the term 'jouissance', I found some interesting information relating to psychoanalysis. As promised, I will refrain from all commentary that is not relevant to my personal experiences or the literary texts examined here. I will, however, mention the words of literary critic Sandra

¹⁰² AV Flox, AV, 'The Troubling Message in Fifty Shades of Grey', *BlogHer*, (23 April 2012) <<http://www.blogher.com/troubling-message-fifty-shades-grey>> (accessed 6 March 2023), quoted in Amber Jamilla Musser, 'BDSM and the boundaries of criticism: Feminism and neoliberalism in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O*', *Feminist Theory* (2015), vol. 16 (2), pp. 121 – 136, (p. 122), doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700115585723>.

Gilbert from her introduction to *The Newly Born Woman* by Cixous, because I think they describe accurately D's sadomasochistic relationship with Morpheus:

To escape hierarchical bonds and thereby come closer to what Cixous calls *jouissance*, which can be defined as a virtually metaphysical fulfillment of desire that goes far beyond [mere]satisfaction... [It is a] fusion of the erotic, the mystical, and the political.¹⁰³

The erotic, the mystical, and the political were certainly aspects of D's connection to Morpheus. Erotic, because she fell deeply and obsessively in love; mystical, because she perceived Morpheus as a God, someone who controlled all her thoughts and feelings; and political, because sadomasochism set her apart from the rest of humanity (in the work environment, the social environment, and even at home).

One aspect of *jouissance* became apparent to me only in retrospect: I have come to understand the reasons for Morpheus's reluctance to come forward and form a proper relationship with D. He was clear about it in his last email, well in advance of the events that followed, revealing that he knew very well what he was doing and why he was doing it.

The desire of the impossible frightens you. Even the word 'jouissance' bothers you – the name destroys the awe of desire. You think you can possess both: jouissance in its entirety and your lover between your legs. You want to have your cake and eat it. I am sorry, but you are chasing the impossible, like all romantics. Don't you think that Kierkegaard knew that? (pp. 114-115).

It is clear to me now that if Morpheus had appeared in the flesh, *jouissance* would have been impossible. If an ordinary man – with all the weaknesses and imperfections of an ordinary man – had knocked on D's door, taken her out on a date, then to a hotel room for a session, all sense of awe would have dissipated, and the living God would have disappeared in a puff of smoke. Morpheus did not want to spoil it for poor, deluded D. He must have cared a little for her pleasure (the thought is very pleasing, even now, after all these years).

Possibly, that was also Kierkegaard's motivation for abandoning Regine Olsen. Why would a man like Kierkegaard, whose entire writing oeuvre had been an attempt to approach the divine, settle for the mediocre happiness of domesticity in a marriage? *Jouissance* does not reside in the relentless light of day. By foregoing a domestic life with Regine, he kept the flame going strong till the end of his life – regardless of the chagrin he caused to all those involved, and above all to Regine. His claim, that he felt inadequate for married life, was

¹⁰³ Sandra M. Gilbert, Introduction to *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, 1975, Trans. Betsy Wing (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), quoted in 'Jouissance', *Wikipedia*, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jouissance>> [accessed 4/5/2024].

most likely an excuse. Possibly, he came to realise that married life is inadequate for a love that touches upon the divine.

And Paulhan? To illuminate his views on the matter, I will borrow his words from an interview to Madeline Chaptal in 1967: ‘I prefer the kind of love one cannot speak of.’¹⁰⁴ He got what he wished for: he was offered the greatest love letter of all times. Even if the domestic life he subsequently shared with Aury put an end to any notions of *jouissance*.

Greenwell’s sentiments on the type of love examined in this section follow below. They are so crystal clear that, in my view, are a good way to end this brief, but very intimate, exploration of sadomasochism.

3.8 Yes, but what is a God-relationship?

In the short story ‘Mentor’, Greenwell’s narrator is talking to G, one of his students suffering with an unrequited love. The narrator is trying to comfort him.

Other people have gone through this, I began, finding it difficult to speak. Other people have felt it, they bear it and they get through it, they aren’t trapped in it forever (p. 20).

He could have been talking to D, offering solace, saying the logical things that everyone says to those suffering with the wound of love. He could have been talking to O, prompting her to forget her Sir Stephen, *there will be others like him, you will find someone else soon enough*, or to Aury, consoling her for Paulhan’s death, saying, *don’t pull back from the world, this is a beautiful life, full of many different joys*.

But the young student is of a different opinion.

I don’t want to feel it less, he said, I don’t want it to stop, I don’t want it to seem like it wasn’t real. It would all be for nothing if that happened, he said, I don’t want it to be a dream, I want it to be real, all of it (p. 21).

G goes away, holding on to the greatest story of his life, his love for someone who cannot be replaced, because God-relationships can never be replaced. And Greenwell’s narrator seems to understand that very well. He even feels ashamed for offering such meek comfort to his student, for imagining that a God-relationship could ever be forgotten. For thinking that Aury would go out into a world without her Paulhan, or that O would not choose death if

¹⁰⁴ Jean Paulhan, ‘Dominique Aury & their Artists Revised’, 6 February 2020 <<https://storyofoblog.wordpress.com/2022/02/06/jean-paulhan-dominique-aury-their-artists-revised/>> [accessed 4/5/2024].

abandoned, or that D would go back to being a middle-class mother of three, a teacher of English, opening her legs to boring lovers. He is ashamed, and rightly so.

He wasn't altogether mistaken in what he had said, that there would be loss in loving another, that the perspective that limited his grief would also limit his love, which, having taken the measure of its bounds, he could never again imagine as boundless. And I had thought this before, too, how much we lose in gaining this truer vision of ourselves, the vision I had urged upon my student, the vision it was my obligation to urge, though it carried us away from our dreams of ourselves, from the grandeur of novels and poems which it was also my obligation to impart. How much smaller I have become, I said to myself, through an erosion necessary to survival perhaps and perhaps still to be regretted, I've worn myself down to a bearable size (pp. 22-23).

That is a God-relationship: one that does not allow for erosion or survival, that does not allow one to become small again. A God-relationship leads to an aggrandisement of human life, offers the kind of transcendence Kierkegaard stubbornly insisted upon. A God-relationship dwells in dreams of ourselves, in silent fantasies that long to take over our lives, even if they tear us apart. A God-relationship does not come in bearable sizes. A God-relationship is an unbearable relationship.

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