

**Emilios Solomou, *The diary of an infidelity*, E.U. Prize for Literature 2013, (fiction)**

**Synopsis:**

Yiorgos Doukarelis, an archaeologist and professor at the University of Athens, returns to an island in the Small Cyclades, Koufonisi, 20 years after the excavation that made him famous and changed his life forever. At that excavation, he discovered the prehistoric remains of a young pregnant woman murdered 5000 years ago. They gave her the name Kassiopi. During this trip, he had an affair with one of his students, Antigoni. They got married after Yiorgos' divorce from his former wife Maria.

He returns to the island, six months after Antigoni disappeared mysteriously. The order and the routine of his daily life are destroyed. He is left with his memories and the only person close to him, his daughter Ismini. Going around the island, passing by the places he lived during the time of the excavation and meeting people from the past, he also wanders amongst his memories, exploring the secret ties that connect him with the three women of his life, moving from the present to the past. This is a second excavation for him, an excavation into the deepest places of his soul. He tries to remember and put in order all that happened during that summer which had a decisive impact on his life. In his fantasy, Doukarelis goes back to the prehistoric times of Kassiopi, recreating the story of the murdered pregnant young woman.

At the end, he learns that his wife Antigoni was found murdered, after being raped and kept for some time as a prisoner by a man. Doukarelis immediately leaves the island that connected him with the destiny of the three women who played such decisive roles in his life: Kassiopi, the mortal remains of the prehistoric past, Maria, the woman from the past, and Antigoni from the present.

This diary of an infidelity is also a novel about time, destruction, memory and love, which balances the present and the past.

**Excerpt:**

*Translated by Irene Noel-Baker*

*No sooner had she said it than they heard voices, and then shadows appeared flitting in the lamplight among the rocks, coming up the hillock to where they were. There were about twenty of them, mostly inquisitive islanders who had come up to see what was going on, what the mystery was that had revealed itself that evening in their neighbourhood. It would be too much to say that they were racing to get in touch with their roots, the human relic that had walked on this very turf thousands of years before. The constable was with them, with the village president Koukoulés in front: their natural leader, Mr President. He was a sly one, glancing first at Doukarelis and then at Antigone standing side by side next*

*to the grave, rather than at the skeleton beneath their feet. They couldn't hide from him, something was going on between them. He didn't show much interest in their find. He was not moved by ancestry, such foibles were for people who fancy themselves and have their head in the clouds. The dead with the dead and the living with the living. If they would insist on disrupting a body's sempiternal rest and confusing the living with the dead, then let them sort out the mess. The pupils of his tiny eyes were dilated and gave him a spooky look. Doukarelis felt them shining in the dark like two miniscule incandescent coals. The constable couldn't understand why they had been called out into the wilderness at this hour and Doukarelis explained to him that the excavation would have to be guarded tonight, their find was exceptionally significant, perhaps the only one to be found intact in the entire Cycladic civilization. The village president asked himself how remarkable a pile of bones could possibly be, they never guarded their cemetery, there were tens, hundreds of skeletons resting in those graves and as far as he knew, none of them had broken out all these years. It was apparent that he was the brains while the constable was the extension, the long arm of power...*

*All that evening the mist penetrated to his very bones. To escape it, he curled up under the tent. He felt dirty in his clothes, soaked in sweat and the night's damp. Now and again he would close his tired eyes, but his worries kept him awake. He could hear the monotonous tick tock, tick tock, of his watch and he caught himself every so often counting the seconds.*

## Short Stories

### 1. Hadjiyorkena

It seemed to me strange, absurd. They saw her, or so they claimed, one day roaming the village once more. With that black plereza wrapped around her head and the same staff she was holding thirty years ago, since the time that Hadjiorkena had breathed her last breath.

I didn't pay much to it- moonstruck people had always flourished in my village- until she made an apparition a few days later. And this time she was not seen by just one, but many. And so, our childhood was revived along with a creature that had lived on the boundary between imagination and reality, gruesome, like Medusa. A creature akin to those archetypal figures of the distant past, the umbilical cord that links today to centuries passed. Hadjiorkena was what we dreaded the most, bogeyman in the flesh. She must have been around a hundred years old: humped, emaciated. The few teeth she had left in her mouth looked rusty, oxidized, of a mixed green and black colour.

From deep inside her chest, an ongoing noise came out, like a sob, a perpetual murmur akin to pigeons gurgling, on account of her being too weak and helpless to drag her tormented body two steps ahead. For years, decades on end, she suffered from arteriosclerosis that made her incapable of looking after herself. Yet she persevered, totally forgotten by death, as her aged daughter prolonged her life with a plate of food, day after day.

Yes, we were afraid of her. But at the same time, we badgered her. And she would try to beat us with her staff, bulging her eyes whilst whipping the air back and forth, in vain, as agony emerged through the iris, reminiscent of the fatling's agony at the very moment the knife draws near its neck.

Next to her single-room house, built on plinths, stood the coffee-shop of the young, something like a Centre for Youth. So each time we made fun of her, she didn't stand a chance. A swarm of children would run inside the coffee-shop, locking the door behind them, while she kept banging on doors and windows with her frail hands. For quite a long time we would listen to that persistent pigeon gurgling, the sob from deep inside her chest, as she stood outside and kept watch, besieging us. And when she finally stopped, we knew she had given up, and gone away defeated.

Sometimes we even betted on it. Who would dare crawl up to her dark house, explore it, stand behind her back and scare her? Of course, it wasn't that big a deal, considering that Hadjiorkena was a deaf as a post. However, the whole endeavour loomed like a horror film. A couple of us had ventured forth and won the bet. One day I went there too. I almost peed my pants, when she turned around and looked at me with the gaze of the trapped bird that suddenly becomes aggressive, in its effort to save itself from its victimizer. Yet, before I darted out pale with fear, shivering, I managed to notice, inside a wooden heard-shaped

case with a glass that was affixed to the wall, her wedding wreaths. After so many years! Who would have imagined. She kept them, looked after them. That woman who, we thought, illness and the long ago interrupted communication with people around her had deprived her of a conscience or of any sensibilities. It was truly unthinkable, bizarre.

And so I began wondering about her past. Could it be that she too was once a normal human being like the rest of us? Had she ever been a child? I racked my brain trying to understand the meaning of her name, but I couldn't find the thread. Did it stem from orkos as in oath, or the orca? And when, one day, my mother revealed to me her Christian name, I was taken aback. Her name was Hope! I couldn't believe it, it looked completely unfitting to her appearance. Hope!

Hadjiorkena preserved the distant memory of property a bit outside the village, an estate with a few olive trees and a huge sycamore on the edge that was sold by her children decades ago. Its long branches looked like trails, and within its foliage, under its thick shape, we used to hide often. One day we saw the old woman wandering on the ground below, picking up the olives that had fallen from the olive trees. We got scared and hushed, lest she should track us and start throwing stone on us.

This is who Hadjiorken was, the one we had left behind in our childhood. Until those rumours emerged, of her strolling around the alleys thirty years after her death, and that those who saw her listened to that incessant gurgling rising out of her chest. It occurred on the days that a bulldozer had demolished what was left of her plinth-built house, then disposed of the rubble in a wasteland. Perhaps she came back looking for that house she had spent her whole life in; perhaps she was seeking for her old wedding wreaths. And seeing that nothing was left of them, she disappeared from our world once and for all.

From the short stories unpublished collection *Miniatures*

Translated by Despina Pirketti

## **2. THE DESERTED CEMETERY**

I coasted down the ravine. The morning mist had swallowed everything around me. From time to time I could make out the trunks of pine trees peeping out through the dense cloud. Dead silence, all around me. Every now and then it was interrupted by my father's drawn out voice, calling my name to make sure we kept in touch, and by my own voice in response, returning its echo. On occasion, a piercing gust of wind sounded amidst the pine needles, its cold breath caressing my cheek.

Lost as I was in the mist, looking for mushrooms amidst bushes and saprophytes, I found myself in front of a fence. I raised my gaze to follow its perimeter until I reached an iron door. It was a small cemetery in the middle of nowhere, concealed by trees and wild vegetation. How strange, that it would emerge in this wilderness!

As I slid back the rusty bolt, it creaked. I stepped inside. And I bulged my eyes. There, where the mist was torn in stripes, iron crosses emerged, one after the other. In between them, weeds and bushes had flared up. I began reading the names, the age, the date of death. Andreas Georgiou, 9 years old, died on 13.11.1941, Costas Theophanous, 40 years old, died on 1.9.1940, John Smith, 27 years old, died on 5.6.1947. All of them were young people and children, and I didn't know why death, so cruel and relentless, had prematurely cut the thread of their youth.

I stayed there, in the wilderness, gaping at this macabre picture – crosses, sprouting up from the ground like haunted creatures, as I wondered who had forgotten them here. Are there no relatives to look for them, light a candle in their memory? I was thinking that death is the loneliest act of our life, in fact our last one, when my father's voice interrupted my reverie, breaking the silence as it resounded, anguish-ridden, across the ravine. I slid back the bolt and ran towards him. The air hissed, the humidity pierced my bones and I felt as if the shadows of the dead had touched me for one fleeting moment.

Later on I found out that those wretched people, about twenty of them, had died of tuberculosis and were discarded there, offhandedly, in a deserted cemetery, far away from the sanatorium and the inhabited area, lest would they desecrate the living.

**Translated by Despina Pirketti**

### 3. Ilarionas

Ilarionas lived in our block of flats. I remember him from the time I was a small child. He wanted to study philosophy. He applied to university. And he got it. He completed the first year and then gave up. Something happened to his mind. To tell the truth, Ilarionas had never been completely all right. He was very reserved, excessively shy, smiled easily at the slightest thing. Sometimes, when he passed by, we saw he was trembling slightly, for some reason, he seemed to be suffering.

Ilarionas was about fifteen years older than me but that was not an obstacle exchanged a few remarks. Afterwards he began to open up to me, to talk more, to admit to me things he told no one. It was a need. He seemed to trust me. I don't know why. Perhaps because I was the youngest resident in the block. He said that innocence would save the world. He believed that children were angels sent to earth but they lost their qualities when they grew up.

I shall never forget that winter. The first winter after he abandoned university. He used to sit on a bench, on the pavement outside the block of flats. He wore only a pullover and watched the passersby. They were wearing overcoats, caps, scarves, gloves, warm boots and possibly thermal underwear. They held umbrellas. They walked quickly, to get away, to escape the cold. In the midst of all those clothes he saw their faces sticking out sullenly. Occasionally they glanced at him, looked at him out of the corner of their eye, disparagingly, puzzled.

"Aren't you cold, dear, sitting naked in this freezing weather?" an elderly neighbor asked him.

He jumped up, startled. He stood there perplexed, gaping, his mouth wide open. A man who was passing by looked at him from head to foot, frowning. Ilarionas looked at himself too, in fear.

It was then that he began to behave oddly. Then that my friend Ilarionas turned ninety degrees and then one hundred and eighty. He stood out there, in the freezing cold, and began to whisper in terror, to talk to himself.

"I'm... I'm naked... naked!" he stammered and walked up and down in total confusion. He passed me at the entrance to the block.

"Ilarionas! Are you all right Ilarionas?" I asked him but he did not reply.

"I'm... I'm naked!" he murmured and then ran up the stairs.

He remained in the flat all day with his elderly parents. And the next day, in the morning, I saw him again from above, sitting there on the bench. He was wearing an overcoat and boots; he was swamped by heavy clothes. It was drizzling and windy, but he sat there unruffled like an embalmed bird. The passersby looked at him curiously from under their open umbrellas. One shook his head condescendingly and said something to himself.

Ilarionas jumped up again like a spark from his seat. He looked at his body again down to his nails. And he began to whisper again, "I'm naked... I'm naked!"

He brought his hands down below his waist to hide, supposedly, his nakedness. He blushed, turned as red as a beetroot and began to shiver from the bitter cold as if he really was naked. He ran into the block and up the stairs again.

Thus Ilarionas gradually came to believe that he was naked, however many clothes he was wearing. After that he rarely came down the stairs; he was ashamed. I saw him sometimes, with his hands hanging below his waist, hiding whatever he had hidden from the eyes of the world. But most of the time I heard his news from others.

One day, when I was sitting on the steps waiting for a friend, he unexpectedly came up to me. I heard footsteps, turned and saw him.

"Please", he said, "don't look at me. I'm ashamed".

"Why are you ashamed, Ilarionas?" I asked, as if puzzled.

"Bu... I'm naked, don't you see? He said sadly.

I didn't say anything. He sat next to me. He wanted to talk to me. He babbled on, as if I was not there, as if he was talking to a ghost, to himself in the mirror. He seemed so tired, it showed on his face, that the words came out with difficulty.

"I'm a poor soul lugging a body around. I feel ashamed. The body is the grave of the soul, do you understand this? When I was a child", he continued, "they had taken me camping in a forest. While I was walking there one day, I came across a carcass. Vultures were sitting all around it and pecking at its flesh. That's what vultures do, so you understand me?"

I nodded without knowing why.

"All these people passing by", he started again, "are vultures. Do you see their wings, their pointed beaks? Take care! One day they'll eat you. For the moment they're hanging around. Do you understand what I'm saying? They're all vultures looking for carcasses. They circle over them. Before they die. Closer and closer, closer and closer. Then they sit next to them, on the ground. They approach cautiously. At first they quarrel amongst themselves, who will get the biggest share. Then they all go for it together. They peck here and there, tear off bits. They push their heads and long necks right into the innards. And eat. Until they have picked it clean, they keep tearing at it and quarreling, fighting each other. Do you understand?"

No, I didn't understand. I didn't know what to say. He was silent for a while and then he continued.

"Do you see the raindrops? They're souls falling. And the particles of dust which whirl in the sunlight are souls. Do you understand?"

I nodded again, as if understood a single word. The truth is that I was afraid, ashamed to say no.

“You know”, he said “my clothes and shoes have abandoned me. That’s why I’ m naked. I got up from bed one morning and went to get dressed. They refused. They detest people, they said, detest their sinful bodies. My shoes said that once they were a crocodile living in the swamps of Africa. He lived there happily until men came and killed him with their rifles. And afterwards they cut him up and made shoes of him. Some dreadful feet, stinking of sweat and fungi, have wearing them. And my gloves told me that they were once a wild creature running in the forest. They killed it, butchered it...”

“Ilarionas”, I said suddenly, “I honestly don’ t understand you. Perhaps... perhaps you need help... Perhaps if your parents took you...”

He jumped up in anger.

“You didn’t understand anything, then. Don’ t you know that you should not hunt butterflies with an adze”, he shouted. He went away, up the stairs, and hid in his castle.

I didn’t know what he meant but his words kept going round in my head for days. “You should not hunt butterflies with an azde”.

One evening, ad midnight, he went up to the flat roof, naked. It was full moon, a huge pale moon. He started to howl up there like a wolf calling its mates from the top of a precipice. “Ouuuu!” he went and cupped his hands so that he would be heard far away. “Ouuuu!” The lights of the blocks opposite went on. Some heads popped out of windows, peering through the darkness. Then they went in again, the windows were closed, the lights went off. Then Ilarionas began the same hymn again. “Ouuuu!” Until his parents went up and took him back to flat. He caught cold and once again remained shut up in his room for many days.

He came down again, with his hands again hiding his “nakedness”. “You know”, he told me, “one day I’m going to leave this world, to escape”.

“Where will you go?” I asked, with a show of interest.

He smiled.

“To the moon”, he replied.

“And how will you go to the moon?”

“Ha... I know to go... I’ll tell you but don’t tell anyone. It’s time now for me to look for the bridge which leads to the moon. Only the wolves know where the bridge is. They see it at midnight, when the moon is full, as they howl in the forest. Do you want to come with me, when I find it?”

“I don’t know...”

“All right. When I find it, I’ll tell you. If you want...”

“Look, Ilarionas”, I started to say something but I checked myself. “You shouldn’t”, “I confined myself to saying, “hunt butterflies with an adze!” I scarcely knew, it’s true, why I said it.

“You say this? You?” he said. “You didn’t know anything!” he told me and went off in anger. I heard him many times at night howling like a wolf on the roof. It caused me heavy sorrow, which crushed my soul. “It’s time now for me to look for the bridge”, I heard his words echoing in my ears.

The residents of the block made a fuss. They complained that they had lost their peace and quiet. They could not sleep at night, they said, because of the howling. They pressed his parents to shut him up somewhere, to recover his health. Or leave here, for tranquility to be restored. One evening everyone got up and kicked up a row. There were shouts from the surrounding blocks of flats, too. It was pandemonium.

I saw him the next day. He was going into the block. He was forging straight ahead and did not notice me or pretended not to notice me. He was holding something tightly in his hands.

“Ilarionas”, I said.

He jumped. He lowered one hand, to conceal his “nakedness”. He blushed.

“Don’t look...” he said breathlessly.

“what are you holding?” I asked.

“Do you want to know?”

“Yes!”

“Well, then, I’m holding innocence!”

“Innocence? What Innocence?”

“Innocence, the idea!”

“And where did you find it?”

“In the street, where I was walking. It jumped out in front of me. “Where are you going?” I asked. “Far away”, it replied, “from this city”. “You’re not going anywhere” I said, and grabbed it”.

“And where are you taking it now?”

“To my room, to lock it up there so it doesn’t escape”.

There was the sound of a dog barking. It was coming with its master along the alleyway. He had let the dog off its lead and he called it to heel. But the dog did not obey. The man went to the dog and began to hit it with a stick.

“Move! Move, you wretch! Get a move on!” he shouted.

I noticed anxiety on Ilarionas’s face. Then he began to tremble, to change colour. To turn pale. And then he opened his hand, let go of innocence and ran outside. He fell on the man and pushed him.

“Don’t hit it”, he screamed.

“Why? Is it your dog?”

“Don’t hit it” he screamed.

“Why? Is it your dog?”

“Don’t hit it! It’s my brother!”

“Bah! Are you a dog too?”

“I’m not a dog. I’m a wolf! He’s my mate, a wild animal, from the mountains!”

“You’re crazy...” the man said and hit the dog with his stick. It hurt and the dog snarled.

“Don’t hit it, I said” shouted Ilarionas and went for him.

He threw the man down and began to hit him. I tried to pull him back but he rushed forward again, as savage as a wolf, to rip his victim apart. Someone called the police. They came and took him in. They quickly realized that Ilarionas was not a normal person. And they sent him elsewhere.

I went to see him one day. He was again concealing his supposed nakedness with his hands. He seemed tired, like the time when he talked to me about his soul and the vultures.

“I was not made for a better life. Perhaps this is what I deserve”, he said in a low voice. He was looking somewhere in the distance, at some vague point. “My mind is working non-stop; going round like a wheel. I’m tired. It’s an endless torment. Sometimes, very seldom, there’s a break. And afterwards I think... he’s a lucky man who is free from the torment of thought in his seething brain”.

“Ilarionas, do you need anything?” I asked him.

He smiled bitterly.

“A pair of trousers, an adze and a bridge”, he said.

The man in charge said that a night he howled like a wolf. Less and less, recently. He often talked about a bridge, but they didn’t understand what he meant.

“Beware of the vultures. They’re after carcasses”, Ilarionas told me just before I left.

“I’ll be careful”, I assured him.

And I left. I never saw him after that. Often, in my sleep, I heard him, again, howling like a wolf on the roof. Often, his words echoed in my ears: “You shouldn’t hunt butterflies with an adze!” His riddles tormented me for many years. Until, when I was old enough, I found that they applied perfectly to my life.

Translated by Christine Georghiades

#### **4. Not even a bone wasted**

To “Contemporary City” daily

Dear Editor,

This is the first time I’ m writing to you and I consider it my duty to express my appreciation for the excellent work you have been doing. Please accept my infinite respect for the way you so impeccably serve the vocation of journalism.

Much is said lately about the energy crisis facing our country, therefore I wish to share with you my recent experience from a visit to the West-in the light of our scientists’ unfeasible suggestions to exploit the methane trapped in ocean sediments and seek new sources of energy in other planets.

Anyhow, I was lucky enough to visit the West as the guest of a colleague, a successful businessman. On the way to my hotel from the airport I had the chance to admire the city’s wonderful town planning, its parks and skyscrapers. I saw the citizens strolling down the wide streets carefree and happy, enjoying the merits of a contemporary, urbanized society. I have to admit, it was the first time I had glimpsed so many shining, smiling faces. All citizens were young and seemed to never grow old. So when I expressed my surprise over the prosperity and happiness of the people, something we in our country have been short of for a long time now, my fellow businessman replied with a smirk. I asked why the enigmatic smile.

“You’II fond out tomorrow”, he said.

The next day we went to the city’s industrial area. Ladies and gentlemen, it was beyond belief! At a time when our own economy suffers the relentless consequences of energy crisis (thousands of ruined enterprises, shut down factories, millions of unemployed) the industrial sector in the West is thriving.

You cannot imagine my surprise. It was there that I realized to what thing the West owes its impressive prosperity: to the alternative combustibile matter it utilizes and the developed technology of its factories. Indeed, these imaginative people have resolved their energy problem. Their society, their democracy is 50 years ahead of ours!

Let me explain: After my tour across the factory’s areas, my colleague accompanied me to the engine-room. There, I asked how it came to be that industries in the West ran smoothly when in the rest of the world every combustibile matter had run out. When all is said and done, which is the secret ace up their sleeve?

My colleague smiled. He gazed down at the far end of the factory. He raised his right hand and waved towards that direction.

I heard a machine warming up. The tractor approached us, drawing a cart with piled-up oblong boxes, like trunks. I admit that my first thought was-coffins. Workers dressed in black began carrying the trunks near the stainless furnaces. They used slice bars to remove the nails. And then, dear editor, I was hit the biggest surprise in my life! Inside the trunks lay stiff people, dead and naked! They brought yet another coffin. Inside it, there were sticks made of human flesh, odds and ends of what used to be human bodies. Someone grabbed a leg, then a hand, and threw them as kindling inside the furnace. The fire flared up. Then they picked up the corpses and hurled them inside, two workers at a distraught. For a few moments I was not able to utter a single word. Gradually I managed to gather the letters in my mind to shape the words that would come out with a stutter.

“Is that... is that... the combustible matter? This is preposterous!” I heard myself mumbling.

“Don’t be ridiculus”, he answered with... humor.

“But, how can you use human beings as combustible matter?”

“Don’t look so surprised, my dear. The truth is, this is how we too reacted at first, as well as our fellow citizens. But you see, to serve the common good... After all, they are no longer human beings. They are things meeting the needs of humans”.

The fire inside the furnaces had heated up. A suffocating smell of burnt flesh soaked my lungs. I felt sick. They brought me a mask and I wore it. The rest of them were in no need of a mask, they had gotten used to the odor. Try to imagine, ladies and gentlemen, how perturbed my soul was, how morbid the moment that I was living. Even so, I was still curious to find out more. This is precisely what was exchanged during the dialogue that ensued:

“And... may I ask where you find these poor souls?” I asked pointing to the bodies being hurled inside the furnaces.

“Why... in the morgues. There, they are sealed, packaged and dispatched to us”.

“I suppose all your factories run on the same combustible matter...”

“Certainly...The engines, our whole system, is adjusted to this alternative farm of energy”.

“And how exactly does it work? I mean, how... hundreds. Thousands of corpses are required to meet your needs”.

“Yes... The Office of Research and Energy takes care of that”.

“How do you mean, it takes care of it?”

“It’s quite simple, really. It collects from the morgues those who died of natural causes or accidents, for instance car accidents and so on and so forth”.

“And so on and so forth...”

“Yes, in fact there are various categories of died people, of combustible matter”.

“Like?”

“The elders, the dying, the critically wounded, the crazies, patients with a disturbed genetic code without any hope of treatment...”

“You mean to tell me that all these people are being murdered and tossed inside furnaces?”

“Surely... you’re exaggerating. All of you Easterners are prone to exaggeration. At long last, if you want to move forward, you must put your superstitions to rest. The Office is simply providing these people with... euthanasia! It rids them of the unbearable weight of their existence. The wounded and the sick are relieved of their horrible pain; the old of their helplessness. As for the crazies... well, either living or not is probably the same to them”.

“This can’t be happening! I must be having a nightmare! It is outrageous, it is preposterous. Not even Hitler himself...”

“If you please, my dear colleague, refrain from dissimilar comparisons which are insulting to our country. This, dear sir, is social work in the making!”

“Social work!”

“And nothing less. You know the benefits, you have already witnessed them: our happy citizens, our plentiful goods, financial prosperity. What is more, need I remind you of our might across the planet? Whenever we get the chance, which admittedly happens very often, we impose severe punishment on our enemies. In these cases we import bountiful combustible matter from abroad. The dead bodies of our enemies supply our economy. But... we were discussing something else... Right, social work! For instance, there are no hospitals in our country, nothing but external clinics treating superficial wounds. There are no homes for the underprivileged; no amount of money is wasted in pensions and social welfare. All these allocations are instead invested in research, in technological development, for the good of our citizens. I hope now you can appreciate why this is indeed social work, social work at its best!”

“Still, you could use animals, any kind of animals, instead of people for combustible matter”.

“You can’t be serious, sir. Do you know the cost of one kilo of veal, one kilo of pork? It would bankrupt us, we would soon end up like you! There is no handier or cheaper combustible matter than this. Trust me, we’ve really looked into it. Besides, opinions vary on the quality of human and animal meat. I’m afraid that our country cannot boast of a deep history, we’re not endowed with many ancestral remains, not that many wars were fought on our land. We could have utilized such reserves. The few indian remains we had, the outcome of our civilizing campaign to the Wild West, or even remains from the War of Independence or the Civil War, are long gone. Heraclitus’s “war is the father of everything”, a saying so aptly corroborated in Europe over the centuries, was not really the case for us here. Of course, we have ventured a few drillings in search of new deposits, but there isn’t much room for success. At least we’ve got international conflicts. That’s something”.

“So”, I asked in shock, “you get these corpses for free?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say for free... but they come quite cheap”.

“Meaning?”

“It depends... from fifty cents to two dollars apiece, depending on the size, the weight, the thickness of the bones, whether they were inflicted by arthritis or osteoporosis. At the end of the day, the final price is reached depending on supply and demand, the requirements at hand. Let’s not forget market regulations. The market inspection police check prices at the morgue’s open market... They are alert for any cases of profiteering or black market incidents. You know, I am embarrassed to admit it, but I suppose there’s no harm in you finding out: our country will never get rid of slicks... So..,”

At that point, the general manager of the factory, a gentleman dressed in cheap black suit and tie approached him.

“They’ve brought in the criminals”, he said.

“Okay guys, throw them in. Today we’ve got increased needs, we have to catch up with the orders”, he commanded.

“Four hundred?”

“Yes, up it to four hundred degrees. And go easy on it, be careful. Don’t forget to prepare the papers for the imports”.

“Which imports?” The manager wondered.

“Haven’t we been through this already? Fuel from Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Georgia, Palestine, Iraq”.

“Right... right...”

The tractor delivered new trunks. Workers began unloading, then feeding the furnaces. A tall man, a weed, approached them. He was unshaven and his Adam’s apple sliced up and down his throat, like an elevator. He held a huge saw. I thought it dripped blood.

“Will you need me to cut off any pieces for kindling?” he solemnly asked.

“No”, a foreman replied, “we still have enough material to go on”.

I saw him leaving, somewhat downcast, then sitting in a corner. He took a worn-out cloth and wiped the blood off the saw. He then grabbed a file and began grinding it. He took out his snack, placed it on the trunks delivered by the tractor. While grinding he picked at his food and ate eagerly.

“Take it easy on the fuels, guys, bit by bit”, the manager’s voice urged, “no more for today. Tomorrow, we’ve got criminals again”.

I turned to my colleague.

“Criminals?” I inquired.

“Yes, criminals. They receive euthanasia together with the other lot”.

I was beside myself.

“Don’t tell my you’re going to rattle away at me again about your social work!”

“Why, would I be lying? Do you know what a relief it is for the citizens to safely enjoy the merits of our democracy? Do you know what it means not to pay taxes for maintaining prisons and sustaining incarcerated criminals? Let me tell you one more thing, since you provoke me. Do you know which other category we buy here? Anarchists, misfits who fight the system. Talk about killing two birds with one stone, ha-ha...”

“It seems incredible... incredible”, I mumbled.

I kept my silence, trying to grasp his logic. The black-dressed workers were exchanging jokes while hurling corpses in the furnaces. They even commented on a swollen body.

“Ha-ha... Do you reckon he was pregnant, poor guy?” one said.

“You know, lately they’ve made a habit out of getting knocked up themselves...” someone else added.

“How long do you think it will take him to burst? Another wondered and then they placed their bets.

“Are there any more categories of corpses warming the furnaces?” I then asked.

“Yes, there are. Suicides. But those we channel through the other furnaces, at the back, those gilded on the outside. We don’t throw them in with the rest, by order of the government, as a tribute to those that voluntarily sacrifice their lives for the common good. Their names have been carved in the huge memorial at the central square. You must have seen it... it’s right across the port...”

“No I didn’t get the chance”.

At that precise moment a small explosion was heard. A worker leaped up for joy. He had won the bet. The corpse burst inside the furnace, as per his prediction. Two-three others retrieved a pack of paper money from their pockets and gave it to him, mumbling in discontent.

“With the suicides”, my interlocutor went on, “we manufacture our highest quality products, the most luxurious ones: Learjet, cutting edge mobile telephony and computers”.

“Tell me something. How about the relatives of all those elderly people, the mad people, the unhappy-don’t they react to what’s going on?”

“As I said, at the beginning we all reacted, but then, as we came to fully grasp the immense profit... Only gravestone carvers and morticians kept protesting. You do understand, those fellows had lost their jobs. However, democracy took care of them too. They have been absorbed in factories. They’re standing here before you... All those workers, foremen, engineers, sawyers, they all used to be gravestone carvers, undertakers, wreath makers, employees in such businesses. Funeral directors, owing to their experience and

administrative skills, have been promoted to general managers. Some of them have not yet shaken off their old habits”, he said pointing with a smile to his general manager, dressed mourning.

“In other words, if I’m getting this right, nobody can escape-they all end up in the furnaces, either due to illness or old age”.

“Ha-ha-ha... I can see you are quite fascinated by it, my friend. Indeed, no one can get away. On the other hand, here’s another way of looking at it: would you rather suffer? After all, you serve the common good, you help your children, your grandchildren. Why do you honestly believe it’d be nobler to burden them, for years on end, financially or even mentally? At the end of the day, where’s the nobleness in being buried six feet under? Would you rather be eaten by worms?”

“There are religious reasons too...”

“Superstitions, you mean to say... Listen, my friend, this is not the way the world advances. Our citizens understand. All of them, will at some point end up in the furnaces.

“Even you?”

“Even me”.

We stepped outside. I felt queasy, I wasn’t really well. A limousine drove me to the hotel. The next day, my colleague and I met again.

“Well”, he asked me, “did you sleep over what we discussed yesterday? What do you think of our system today?”

“I keep finding it as nightmarish as I did yesterday”, I replied despite the fear that amassed inside me.

“My dear, you are exaggerating! Things are not as tragic as you might think. In order for us to survive in this world, we need to utilize everything that’s going to waste. We advocate general recycling. We simply recycle whatever is useless and nothing more. We turn the dead, so to speak, to airplanes and mobile phones. The phone you have in your hand right now has been produced by us. The best and cleanest fuel went into its making.

I looked at my mobile phone with disgust, abhorred. I couldn’t take any more of that situation, of that absurdity. I wanted to leave, dear editor, return to my homeland. Yet, the funny thing is that the longer I stayed there, the more was getting used to this whole setting, this nightmarish revelation. My colleague insisted I waited, prolonged my stay in his country for a few more days.

“Besides”, he said suggestively, “I want to tempt you with a proposal for cooperation”.

I gave in. we visited other factories too. I gradually got used to the smell of burnt flesh and wore the mask less and less. The only thing that bothered me was the nakedness of those poor people, the dead. I thought it was insulting, disrespectful.

“They could at least have had their clothes on-burn decently”.

“Why, would that change something?”

“Well, what can I say? Some decency never hurt anyone”.

“Decency? Don’t tell me that the dead are shy! Come on, you can rest assured that we would have not hesitated to take care of that too. We would have dressed them in silk ties and suits with “Armani” shoes, we would have put make up on women and used push up bras to make them look more attractive. We would have even applied highlights or restore hair in bald men. However, there’s a very practical reason why we don’t do this. The clothes and coating would alter the quality of fuel. Nothing must be overlooked. Our products are destined for difficult customers. Nothing is left to chance. Imagine that during the autopsy, our medical examiners take every precaution possible for the corpses to come to us completely clean and unadulterated. All cardiac pacemaker implants are taken out. The same goes for bullets, screws, platinum implants for bone fractures, kidneys stones and silicone implants in women’s breasts – as well as foreign bodies in their stomachs. You cannot imagine what the medical examiners have found in there... Ha-ha... Pieces of glass, iron, surgical scissors, plastic, earrings, wedding rings. I tell you, it’s beyond your wildest imagination...”

I asked him why he had revealed to me the secret of the alternative combustible matter, a secret of the utmost significance for his country, and for his own interests too. He replied that his ancestral roots sprang from our country. He explained that he wanted to see our country move forward. Initially, he was seeking cooperation with my factory and would from then on gradually collaborate with other local entrepreneurs. He had big plans: to found here, in our own country, a large industrial unit. He said that conditions were more than favorable, that combustible matter and manual labor in our country were “dirt-cheap”. That our country’s strategic geographical position guaranteed its development into a regional center. That big Western companies had already worked out top secret studies on this matter and their conclusions were more than promising.

Before I left, my colleague threw a reception in my honor. He didn’t invite many people, but they weren’t few either. I met with managers, high-ranking business executives, government officials. At some point some of them withdrew to a corner table and set out playing cards. I stood over them, observing. One man in particular seemed to thoroughly enjoy the game. He was winning and a large smile spread across his face – whereupon he was approached by two employees of the Office of Resources and Energy.

“Mr N...?” They asked.

“Indeed”, said the man with the winning streak.

“You must come with us”, they remarked.

He smiled again.

“Just another hand, gentlemen, let me win just another hand and I’ll be all yours”, he said merrily.

He was the director of a bank, recently retired. He knew that before long, the time would come for him to be taken away for the common good.

“Full house, gentlemen”, he exclaimed and triumphantly revealed his cards. He had won once again. Then he rose.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, sir”, he said and cordially shook my hand. “You must ponder well on my friend’s proposition. You will benefit greatly, both you and your people”, he encouraged me.

“I’ll think about it, rest assured”, I replied and stood there, staring at his back as he was walking away arm-in-arm with the Office of Resources and Energy employees.

By the time I came back to our homeland, dear editor, I had fully understand everything that up until then had lingered. I am now convinced of the necessity of introducing the Western model to our own society. There is, of course, a legal hindrance to it all but I’m hopeful that the government, our Parliament, will accommodate the requests of the business world on this highly significant topic that pertains to our country’s interests. Thank God, our land is filled with corpses! It would really be a shame to leave such an abundance of cheap combustible matter to go to waste.

The most encouraging aspect is that we could utilize our cemeteries, our fields, our mountains and ravines, overflowing with remains. Just think of how many possibilities for prosperity would open up! Think of how many wars our nation has fought for its freedom since antiquity, how many massacres our ancestors suffered. Their bones are scattered everywhere, numerous, left to rot in the ground, unexploited.

At last, the time has come for us to retrieve from our glorious past the necessary values and push our country forward. We cannot afford to waste the dead, the heroes, our ancestors. Not even a bone, a coccyx, a radius, an ulna, a hipbone should go to waste.

Our land is in need of broad minds. Prejudice and superstitions will be our doom. I am willing to be the first to implement the Western model in our country. I will spare neither effort nor money. For the common good. For the good of the homeland!

Sincerely

A.S.

President of the Association of Industrialists

Translated by Despina Pirketti

The short-story “Not even a bone wasted” is part of the as yet unpublished collection of short-stories “Stories from the ruined city”.