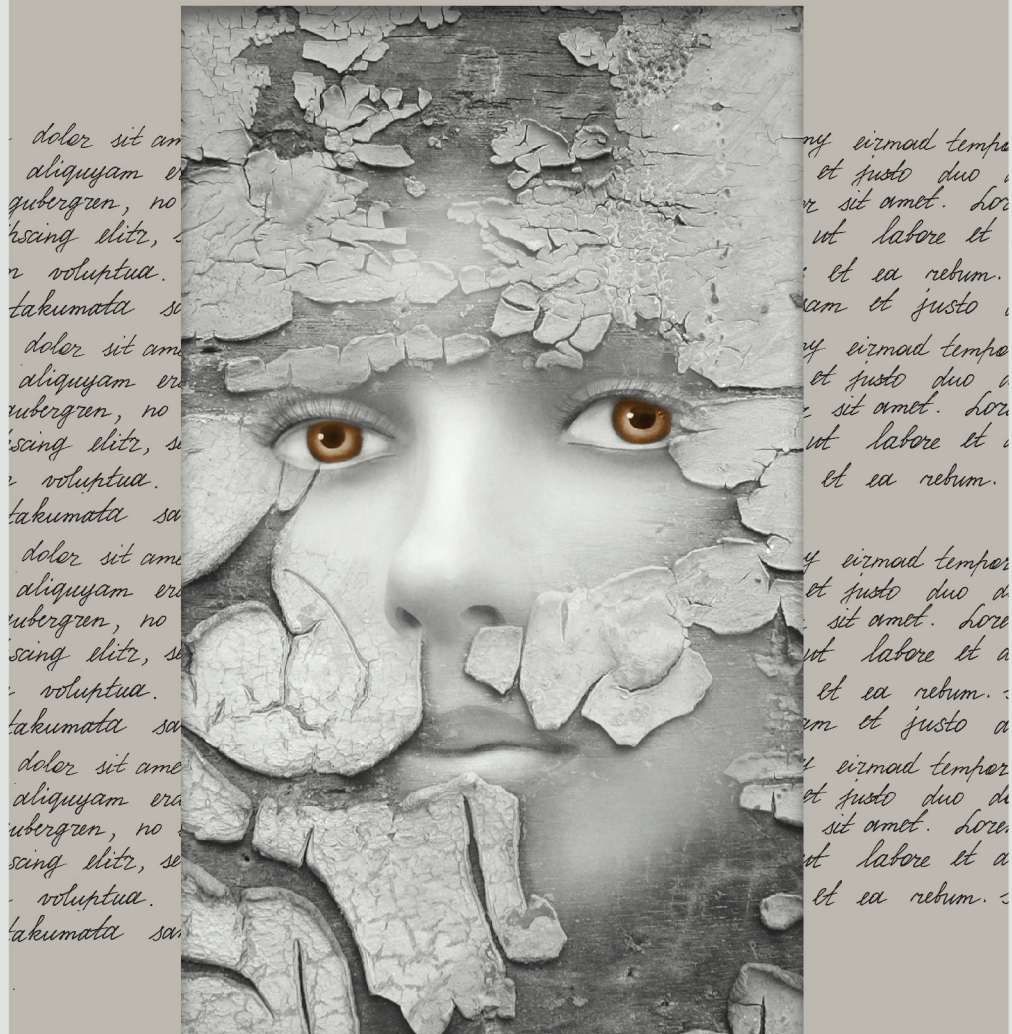


REAL STORIES



OF REAL PEOPLE

30 SHORT STORIES OF PECULIAR
CHARACTERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

DIMITRIOS FANOURIOS PISCHINAS

Real Stories of Real People

30 short stories of peculiar characters from around the world

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Preface

I have always experienced a peculiar kind of relationship with society. Since I remember myself as a part of it, I've been going through frequently alternating periods of extreme attitudes regarding my feelings towards my fellow humans. I have loved them and hated them passionately beyond intervals of utter indifference, teetering on a conceptual, emotional scale between altruism and misanthropy.

Throughout my entire life, I've been basically living over and over this cycle: I am weary of people... I have to retreat from public life... I sequester myself in a dim room or amid some remote wilderness... Solitude, privacy, relief, tranquility, enlightenment... Loneliness... My mind grows discordant and my soul wild by the day... Who am I? I have approached the threshold of madness... I need someone to talk to; someone to touch; someone to remind me I am a human... I long for company. I crave humanity. I'm coming in... Hello, city! Hello, friends, brothers, affection! Let's party, interact, inspire, create. Let's evolve together!... I am getting a little tired of people...

During my life's sociable spells, I've been regularly reaching out to disparate factions of civilization. Already since the time I was growing up in my small hometown – an unusually unrestrained and clinically curious kid – I enjoyed associating with individuals spanning the full range of ages and coming from an utmost diversity of backgrounds. I never had a best friend, and I rarely developed connections of meaningful intimacy, but I changed circles of companionship as often as I changed underwear (literally; I was less bothered about washing clothes than your average person is).

Coming to age, I was running out of choice for sensory novelty and decided to roam the globe. I have since lived and traveled in more than a third of the world's countries, where I've bumped into an astounding diversity of cultures and characters. So many people I have indeed met in my life that I hardly make an effort to remember someone's name anymore. I do, though, have a tendency to retain stories.

And I love telling stories. I value my recollections as my most treasured possession and principal mental currency. Collecting and expressing memories is my equivalent of wealth-building and spending. Naturally, a considerable part of my retrospection and wistfulness is centered around personalities; mainly personalities of bizarre, extraordinary characters; characters that resemble beach puddles splattered off the ocean's margins.

What I consider as such is not the likes of people you would watch on TV or read about in lifestyle magazines and idealized novels. They aren't the sort of decorated, huge-success, fancy-life personas you will skim through on Instagram...

They are unattended, enigmatic characters with passions, vices, eternal dreams, and *real stories* to tell. They are what I perceive as raw, unembellished personalities or, simply, *real people*.

It was about four years ago it dawned on me to start writing stories of such people. My sole criterion for picking protagonists out of a boundless pool of such remarkable, memory-sticking encounters was momentary inspiration. A common characteristic that, with a few exceptions, the stories shared is that they feature people I maintained no contact with and whose subsequent fates I am wholly unaware of.

These stories eventually grew into a small collection that, combined with a few more, similar stories I translated from my Greek travelogue *From Cape Town to Alexandria*, I decided to publish in this book.

A Vietnamese prostitute

It was one of those hot Saigonese evenings. I was sitting in one of those depraved pubs of Bui Vien Street, having some beers with two Japanese fellow travelers, while watching the motley crowd rambling up and down the road. It was then when, all of a sudden, that cheery, young local girl darted out of the throng, and by the very next instant, had taken the liberty to occupy the vacant fourth chair around our table.

As our interaction thus commenced, and despite her superficial appearance differing in nothing from that of so many a common prostitute sauntering around that area, she quickly made it clear, employing speech and manners, that she wasn't such an ordinary one after all. What mainly impressed me about her person was her grit, frankness, and eagerness to speak openly about her situation. So, finding that situation of hers intriguing, I urged her to narrate a great deal of her peculiar life story, which I here cite...

“How did your childhood go by?”

“No differently than the one of any typical Vietnamese child. I grew up in a farmers' family in a small rural town. Like all other kids, I went to school every day and played games in the afternoons.

“That until my sixteen... I then started to drink. I was boozing every single day throughout my teens. I became a proper alcoholic. Then I also lost my virginity, and I right away became equally addicted to sex as to alcohol. I may have slept with half the male population of my hometown.

“I quit school and stopped associating with other teenagers altogether. I was finding them tormentingly dull, speaking only about stupid Korean movies and boy bands and stuff. I began hanging out with old gay guys. I looked up to them as sages. I was fascinated by their sense of freedom and their guts to disregard public opinion.

“That was pretty much my life until I moved to Saigon after I turned eighteen.”

“How come you moved to Saigon in the first place?”

“I always wanted to leave my hometown. That place was too narrow for me, too restricting for what I dreamed for my life. Furthermore, during the last few months of my stay there, my position was incredibly unpleasant due to a problematic relationship I was in.

“I was together with that boy... He was constantly upset because I had sex with lots of other guys, especially when they were his friends. I loved him, but I could not do otherwise, as he was away most of the time. He worked as a male prostitute, gay-for-trade, and had to go to the cities to find clients. I was waiting for my chance to leave him.

“The opportunity finally arose with the aid of one of those gay friends of mine. He introduced me to that girl he knew in Saigon, a few years older than me she was, and he asked her to host me in her apartment and help me start a new life.

“So it happened. I moved to Saigon and stayed with her and her boyfriend for the first month. But the situation there was very intense for me. He was a drug dealer, that dude. They were smoking meth the whole time, screaming and fighting like animals. It was very wild. I also tried to smoke with them a time or two, but I didn’t like it. I could not stand it anymore. So I ran away and endeavored to make a living on my own.”

“And how exactly did you proceed with making a living on your own?”

“I was always charmed by white men. In my hometown, I had mostly known them from American movies. I’d rarely see one in real life, and I was utterly bewitched every time I happened to run into one. And then, in Saigon, I was suddenly surrounded by all those handsome tourists everywhere. At that time, I’d have gladly paid to have sex with them. But then, I found out that a great many of them were willing to pay me for sex instead. Those were the happiest days

of my life. It felt like living in a dream.

“It wasn’t prostitution for me, the whole thing. It was fun. My primary objective for sleeping with someone was my pleasure. The money was just what came along with it, a convenient side-effect, so to say. I never slept with someone I didn’t like. And unlike what girls here normally do, I was never asking for money before the act. Nor was I asking afterwards, actually. It’s just that those men would always give me some money on their own initiative, as a sort of gift for the satisfaction I offered them.”

“You were, let’s say, a prostitute-on-donations, eh?”

“Hmm, you may say so. But I was more than a mere prostitute. Look, the clients I usually picked were guys who, despite being handsome, had some serious confidence issues. Besides sex, they needed someone to talk to. We spent some quality chatting time together, and they appreciated that. I had my steady clients, who would come to the bars looking specifically for me. I could easily clear 200-300 dollars a day, far more than the average girl earns.”

“So I guess you rather were a prostitute-psychologist-on-donations... And how come you stopped practicing the profession?”

“I only practiced it for a few months, in fact, less than a year. I stopped when I met my ex-boyfriend. He was a 66-year-old Englishman, a man of great intelligence and strong character. He taught me English. He taught me everything I know. He made me all I am.”

“And what did he do about your financing?”

“Oh, I wasn’t with him for the money. Imagine that, when we first met, he even lied to me that he doesn’t have any money to give me – so to test me. But I slept with him several times, anyway, because I liked him. Only later, when we got in a proper relationship, he divulged that he’s extremely wealthy. But I never was with him for the money. I loved him with all my heart.”

“I see... And how much money was he giving you anyway?”

“He was super rich, yes. But he wasn’t giving me much. A thousand pounds per month only.”

“That was by far less than what you used to make before, no?”

“Yes, sure. But that was just for my pocket money. I was living with him then and didn’t really need any money. He was paying for everything, and we had lots of fun: drinking, dancing, traveling... He also bought me gifts all the time. I didn’t want them, but he was insisting, you know.”

“How long were you together? And how did it end?”

“Quite a few years. We split up after I met my current husband... I fell in love with him at first sight when I saw him in a bar. That same night, we slept together, and I right away knew where my heart belongs. My ex-boyfriend, I understood then, I did not love him; I admired and revered him, but I did not love him. The very next morning, I let him know of the situation and broke up with him. He took it badly, got furious at me, but I hope he’ll understand over time.

“I then left with my new boyfriend. We traveled around Vietnam and Southeast Asia for some months, and we got married. Now he is back home in Sweden. I’m moving over to him next week.”

“I suppose you must be pretty happy about this outcome. Moving to Europe, that’s what all girls around here dream.”

“Nonono! I hate Europe! I love Vietnam! I prefer a thousand times to stay here! But I sacrifice myself for the sake of love!”

“Interesting... That power of love, eh? But what about your comfort? Your husband is a young guy. I bet he can’t afford giving you as much money as your previous boyfriend could.”

“I told you, it’s about real love. He doesn’t give me any money. Well... of course, as a man, he pays for everything. But it’s not as if

he gives me money. It's just that whatever money he has, we have it together. Plus that I have a job of my own, anyway."

"Job? What about it?"

"I was always fond of dancing. It's my ambition to become a famous stripper. I aspire to chase after my dream in Europe eventually. But for the moment, my husband discourages me. He understands it's about art, but he doesn't feel comfortable with the idea of other men fondling me and cheering for me. He's afraid my feelings might get hurt, you know. He is overprotective, sometimes, my sweetheart.

"However, he doesn't mind if I dance on the Internet. It's already quite some time I've signed up for a cam-girl on a relevant site. I make some good money, doing nothing but what I like: dancing. The clients pay 5 dollars per minute. I earn one, and the site gets the rest. I have my regular clientele."

"The psychologist-camera-stripper kind of thing, may I assume?"

"Exactly, my sessions last up to more than an hour, and my clients will always come back to me."

"So, starting a new married life in Sweden next week, how do you foresee your future?"

"I do not want to foresee it. I never plan. I go, I see. Life is a mystery."

A North Korean slave-worker in Russia

I was sleeping heavily in the narrow upper berth of that 3rd-class carriage of a dated Soviet train traveling east along the Trans-Siberian Railway. My instinct, motivated by a desire to stretch my muscles and nicotine-yearning, aroused me as the train was coming to a halt. I slightly drew the curtain aside to have a peek out the window. It was early morning. We were at the Krasnoyarsk Railway Station.

I placed a cigarette in my mouth, climbed down the berth, and began striding along the aisle towards the exit. Halfway through, I found myself sandwiched between an unordered mob of boarding Asians.

Forming a human chain of up to forty individuals, they were hauling a heap of suitcases and cardboard boxes from the platform into the carriage, raising quite a clatter in the process. The last ones on the line were cramming them on the racks and under the seats. I had to laboriously jostle my way past them to reach the platform. I assumed they were villagers from northern China, bringing in merchandise from Russia.

The whole Asian gang, together with a few more Russian passengers, were eventually ensconced inside the train, and the hubbub subsided.

“Zahodim, zahodim!” (we move in!) the conductor’s voice resounded sharply over the now half-vacant platform, aimed at me and a handful of more passengers still lingering outside the train. I tossed the butt into the bin and climbed the steps back into the carriage.

Getting back to my place, I found the opposite seat occupied by one of those newly-boarded Asians. He was a man in his fifties or late forties. His stature was small even for Asian standards. He was already undressed and was sitting crouched with his feet on the seat, wearing only a pair of shorts. A hefty suitcase was lying on the little table between us.

“*Shang, shang!*” (*up* in Mandarin) I began repeating to him while pointing alternately between his bag and the empty spot on the upper rack with my index. He let off a slight smile after the few repetitions it took him to understand what I meant. With me giving him a hand, we lifted the heavy article and settled it in its proper place.

I couldn't put what exactly it was in a neat thought, but something felt truly bizarre about him and the rest of his group. I mean: Chinese folks often seem strange to us Westerners, but these particular folks gave a profoundly incomprehensible, utterly otherworldly impression. There was something about that frigid and timid, yet earnestly curious at the same time, way he peered around while sitting in that never-changing phlegmatic pose.

I attempted to strike up a conversation with him – at least something of the sort, utilizing gestures and what little Mandarin I could muster. But he didn't seem to understand a shit of what I was trying to say. My Chinese pronunciation must be really terrible, I concluded.

The day progressed in that slow tempo days usually go when traveling on a train through endless plains and taiga. Then night fell. I moved up to my bed and let my co-passenger fix the seats and the table into his underneath.

Strong sunlight penetrated inside the carriage and woke me up in the morning. The Asian chap below had unfixed his bed and sat in the same pose staring out of the window. I took my seat and did the same.

We were traveling along the shore of Lake Baikal. Its tremendous water mass was spreading beyond the horizon. Its boundless surface had adopted the deep blue color of the sky and was ripped apart by a glistening golden stripe aligned with the sun. Waves were splashing rhythmically on the cobble beaches. And gentle, green slopes were taking off after the lakeside, leading to numerous peaks of various shapes in the distance.

“Beautiful nature,” said my fellow traveler in strongly accented Russian. Surprised by both his ability to speak Russian and his will to

talk, I nodded in agreement.

“Where are you from?” he asked, giving in to his loquacious mood.

“Greece,” I responded... again and again.

“*Xila*,” I tried in Chinese when I got convinced he wouldn’t understand the Russian word for it.

After several repetitions – bewildered and disappointed by how bad my Chinese accent may be that I cannot even make a single word understood – I had to take out my mobile and show him Greece on the map. An expression manifesting the successful – and excitedly curious – reception of this new information was then depicted on his face. He continued after a brief stop: “*I am from North Korea.*”

I experienced a fervent emotion. This otherwise tedious trip had just become very amusing. It goes without saying that I’d never met a North Korean before. I was, in fact, quite sure that such an occurrence could never take place out of North Korea. I was accustomed to believing that they never and for no reason leave their country. And now, all of a sudden, I realized I was sitting in a train carriage half-occupied by North Koreans.

Throughout the next few days (how many exactly it’s hard to keep count of when traveling on a train across consecutive timezones as if across suburban stations), we got to gradually get better acquainted with each other and had several short conversations. During the days’ calmest hours, when most of his comrades were either asleep or dozing in their seats, utilizing his rudimentary Russian, a tiny notebook with a handwritten Korean-Russian dictionary he kept hidden in his jacket, and Google Translate on my mobile when bandwidth was present, we engaged in communication exchange. He revealed particulars about his countrymen’s situation; things he apparently yearned to say to some of those uncanny inhabitants of the allegedly evil, Capitalist-Imperialist outer world.

One of the first things he told me was that there was a snitch among them. He was undercover. No-one knew who he was. But he

definitely was there, working and living together with the rest of the team as if a perfectly normal member of it, but covertly assigned with the task to visit the secret police after their return and denounce any reactionary behavior on the part of his colleagues, selling the misdoer's freedom or life for a bonus or favor.

Speaking too much with a foreigner was, of course, misdoing of the severe kind. That's why he had to be highly cautious while carrying out his communication with me.

They were there for work. He spoke about an obscure agreement between their state and Russia, whereby the former has agreed to send over cheap workers to man the latter's massive construction projects. This was his fourth time in Russia for such a working trip. Depending on the project, they stay between two months and a year each time. They always work hard, 7 days a week, 17-20 hours a day.

The work is depleting, but they earn money, so they endure it. The Russians pay ₱500 (around \$7) per day for each worker. Half of it is paid directly to the North Korean government, and only the other half is paid to the worker. He was aware that this was a humiliatingly low wage for the capitalist world standards. However, he was still reasonably satisfied with getting hold of any amount of money whatsoever. In their country, they work as hard only to receive back their means of subsistence; they never are given any money. With the money he earns working in Russia, he will afford to buy something other-than-necessary for his kids.

At some point, he carefully extracted a photograph out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me under the table. It was a couple with two daughters posing under a portrait of Kim Jong-un. "*My family in our apartment,*" he described what I'm seeing.

As an extra means of security, they purposely select only workers who have a family to send abroad. It would anyhow be nearly impossible for anyone to escape. They live guarded inside the construction site; they are fed there and never are allowed to leave for any place. Even if they managed to run away, they wouldn't go far. Not speaking the local language and with absolutely no knowledge of

how a capitalistic society functions, it wouldn't take long before they get arrested by the Russian police and deported back home to face execution. However, keeping their families back for pawn guarantees that even the slightest thought of escape is eliminated upon its inception.

Aside from speaking about his life, he was also keen to know about mine. He asked me different questions about how we work, what we earn for it, what we can obtain with what we earn, and many others concerning how we live in general. He was particularly curious about the internet: that baffling miracle thing they've been hearing rumors of taking over the outer world. I tried to explain to him simply what the web is about and demonstrated some of its applications on my mobile phone, but he seemed mystified and somewhat more perplexed than before, not being able to fathom what all this implied.

On the last evening of the trip, I went to have a chat with a new girl who joined in the carriage. When I returned to my seat, he asked me where she was from.

"From South Korea," I replied. "You should be able to understand each other, right? Why don't you go talk to her?"

"Nonono! I must not talk to her. That would be very wrong," he uttered out from a stunned countenance.

"Why so?" I asked rather stupidly.

Ideology stood written on that part of the notebook's page he pointed his finger at.

Throughout the previous days, he had kept a cautious and conservative stance every time I tried to bring forth the subject of his country and its regime, basically meeting my inquiries with indifferent silence. But on this last evening, he showed a different mood – perhaps he'd been waiting for it to manifest his honest perspective. When I asked him to know *what about that ideology* of his, he furtively passed me the notebook. Words like *poverty, repression, fear, violence, injustice* stood on it, followed by a

complete sentence: *You must help, your country must help, the world must help.*

We looked at each other silently and intently for a length of time. We bid each other goodnight – but not goodbye, as I expected they would also get off at Vladivostok. I climbed up to my berth. He fixed his underneath.

Sometime in the middle of the dark night, I abstractedly registered that same hubbub that took place during their boarding repeating. When I woke up, a few hours later, still dark, my co-passenger and his colleagues were not there anymore. They were dropped off at some obscure station shortly before we arrived in Vladivostok. They must have been boarded on some other train to bring them back to their homes and everyday lives.

An Albanian junky

A cool spring night had just fallen over the Albanian coastal city of Saranda. A pleasant breeze blew on the balcony. The Greek villages of Corfu glowed faintly from across the coal-black sea.

They were in lockdown over there. Here was one of the few places on earth you could still walk around unmasked and at will these days. A mellow aura of freedom diffused the neighborhood. It was a good time for a beer. I half-tied my shoelaces, threw a jacket on me, and left the house for the shop. As soon as I hit the orange-lit street, I ran into my neighbor.

It was that junky who lived somewhere nearby. He was scraggy; you couldn't see the outline of his legs inside his sloppy jeans, but you could clearly see all his facial bones. I often came across him during the last few weeks I was living there. He was usually smoking crack on the narrow, dark concrete stairway that led to my yard door, where I had to almost jump over him to pass through.

But now he was on the pavement. He stood lurkily in the shadow of an orange tree. The already faint orange streetlamp hardly illuminated his facial expressions; enough though to discern in them things like agony, lust, restlessness, affliction...

Every time I passed him, he would whisper English words like *smoke*, *weed*, *grass*. This time he seemed particularly distressed, and he rather yelped them than whispered. I'd been ignoring him every time so far, but this night I was gripped by a beguiling wistfulness. I halted and told him: "If it's something good."

Hope glowered mightily from deep inside his cavernous eye sockets. With a complicated, improvised, partly-English, partly-Albanian articulation, he basically asked: "*How much money do you have?*"

I told him I could spare the Albanian-currency equivalent of five dollars. He tried to raise the stake, first at twenty, then at ten, until he

accepted the original proposition. We walked down the street towards the shop for the beer and his supplier for the pot. The supplier popped suddenly out from the shadows in the form of another junky, as scrawny but a quarter shorter.

They conferred privately with each other, shouted a few things in Albanian, and he dashed back to me, pushing his hand under my nose with urgency. He held a tiny little foil wrap containing hardly a morsel of cannabis. It smelled alright, though. "This is a sample, we walk down the stairs, you give me the money, and I give you the stuff, good amount," he explained in his peculiar language.

We entered a particularly dark patch of shadow. He produced an oval plastic wrap, but wouldn't loosen his grip on it when I tried to snatch it. "The money first, the money first," he insisted. When he understood I wasn't going to part with a dime before I make sure I want what he has, he let me have a closer inspection of the item between his fingers clasping it.

Whatever the content, it was cloaked with several layers of transparent adhesive tape. I could barely discern something greenish in there that could have been leaves or grass, but certainly not marijuana.

"Are you a bloody idiot, man?" I told him off. "What the dickens is this? Did you really just try to hoodwink me?"

He seemed embarrassed and agitated. He said something on the line of "Nonono, it's okay. Just wait a bit. He'll go fetch it for you now. You just wait one minute".

His countenance radiated distress like a star does light. I sympathized with him and pitied him. Plus, I'd warmed up to the idea of having a spliff tonight. "Alright," I conceded.

"Vraaapo!" he then howled as he swiveled his torso to face the other guy standing by the top of the stairs. I correctly guessed that the word meant *run!*, seeing the chap taking to his heels at once.

The two of us remained on the same spot, waiting. I then told him that I'm from Greece after him asking. A trace of excitement surfaced from deep down his emotional abyss. He told me that he used to live in Greece until some twelve years ago. He had toured several of the country's prisons. His two brothers were still there on life sentences. His Greek was pretty decent. We'd found a common language to communicate a bit more properly.

"You on crack, eh?" I said conversationally.

"Hm, crack, yes, only crack," he returned, sort of apologetically.

"And how about heroin? Don't you use smack? You look like you do," I pried curiously.

"Heroin? No, I don't use it," he replied unsurely.... "Well, not for a long time. I've been clean for eight whole weeks. Only crack now," he added after registering my incredulous stare.

He went on to narrate snippets of his life story...

A long time ago, he used to work as a kitchen carpenter. Still a young boy, he moved to Greece to join his two older brothers and work to save some money. He originally intended to exercise his profession, but he soon found out that the drug-pushing business was a much more lucrative occupation.

He made good money at first, but as his addiction to his own merchandise grew ever more voracious, in the end, he was pushing for merely affording his doses. He eventually got arrested and did a few years. Heroin was scarce and dear in the slammer. He would occasionally get a shot, which he'd inject with a makeshift syringe made of a Bic pen, but for the most part, he'd have to suffer on sober.

He was resolved to change his life after he got released. He returned to his hometown and picked up his old profession. It only took months till he got sacked because of stealing for fixing his doses. He never worked again ever since.

Now he was going through one of his countless undertakings to quit smack. And it'd been one of his most successful ones ever. He'd enrolled in the state rehabilitation program and was on methadone sustenance. He claimed he hadn't had a single heroin fix in nearly eight weeks. Only crack.

But crack has a unique money-hoovering quality that not even heroin can match. He held that he needs a minimum of 100 euros per day to provide for his self-detrimental habit.

"How do you find this money?" I asked, rather dumbly.

"How do I find it?" he echoed my question in a heavy tone and terrified demeanor that aptly answered it...

Selling his methadone surely contributed a part. The problem with that, though, was that the opiate cold turkey kicked in together with the crack craving, making his ordeal all the more unbearable. He kept complaining about his aching muscles as, in the meanwhile, we had started walking down the street in search of his pot supplier.

The short chap was apparently more late than his edginess could handle. We meandered through some narrow, inclined, gloomy streets and stopped at an inconspicuous crossroad, where several other junkies hung out. He asked one of them for a rolling paper and rolled the cannabis morsel he'd been carrying with him all along. We smoked it together, and he became testier with every toke.

His last drops of patience had dried up by the time he tossed the burning crutch in the sod beside the road. He set off trudging up and down the street, shouting the chap's name among other Albanian stuff I could not understand, but to no avail... The road was as dead-quiet every time one of his cries faded out into the night.

I also began to grow impatient. I wasn't eager to wait the whole night to buy a bit of weed. "Are you sure he hasn't gone back another way?" I suggested.

He could well have, he realized after giving it some thought. He

metaphorically dragged me back to the main road and towards the neighborhood. Along the way, he did some preliminary work on his begging backup plan, just in case the chap had gone missing.

“You must help me,” he said. “You must understand me. I’ve not had my methadone. I’m in pain. Show compassion. You give me some money; I bring you pot tomorrow. In the morning. I promise.”

To his great luck – as there wasn’t much of a chance he’d get a penny from me for nothing – his friend was there, indeed, waiting all the while. He frantically swayed his arms up in the air as soon as we appeared around the corner, and they jogged towards each other along the street like two reuniting lovers.

When I reached them, ambling over at my leisurely tempo, he turned around and handed me a thick handful of marijuana. It was good and much more than I expected; an absolute bargain. I searched my pocket and produced a few coins together with the pre-agreed 500-lek note.

“A tip,” I told him as I placed the money in his expectant, open palm.

Joy flared in his eyes. “You’re a good man,” he said and patted me on the shoulder. He turned around, ready to sprint, but the other guy cut him short with a squeal. He told him something in Albanian, and he turned back to me. “Will you give me a joint?” he requested hastily. I untied the bag and handed him a good bud. “You’re a good man,” he repeated, and this time, he went off running unstoppably at full speed.

I went upstairs and prepared my spliff. As I was puffing it on the balcony, I could imagine the man sitting on the stairway, behind my building, smoking his seven-dollars-or-so worth of crack. He would be content for about an hour.

A nonagenarian shepherd in the Greek mountains

The harsh midsummer sun had plunged a good deal and was approaching the western horizon. A soft, pleasant breeze was sliding soundlessly across the mountain col. The firs, the gently chirping birds, and even the rocks seemed to rejoice in the gradual receding of the relentless heat. The high surrounding peaks, the low valleys and plains, and the distant sea radiated all with the warmest tints the human eye can perceive.

Two friends and I witnessed this alluring scene from a vantage point someway downslope from the ridge crest. We had just ended up there after a long day trekking through the pitiless incalascence of the Greek summer. We were soaked in sweat, and our muscles ached with the sweet pain of exercise. The strenuous walk had come to an end, at last; the car was situated a mere few minutes away. So we decided to stop at that beautiful viewpoint and enjoy the sunset while smoking a fat joint.

The lulling scent of burning marijuana, blended with bromhidrosis and thyme and oregano fragrance, pervaded the sweltering air. Our spirits got mollified, and our moods cheered as we, solemnly and silently, began to inhale the fumes. The quiet felt ever more gracious with every puff... until it suddenly got interrupted by the clacking sound of dislodged stones.

All three at once, we turned our gazes towards the origin of the noise. A dark figure had just emerged over the distant purview and was now briskly loping down the trail towards our position. As it got closer, I discerned it belonged to an old man.

He wore a long-sleeved shirt and trousers of the blackest coloration. His worn, black boots were white with limestone dust. His head bore dense, white hair and a short beard. His complexion was tanned like a grilled beef steak and wrinkled like a plowed field, yet it beamed with

almost uncanny vitality. His bloodshot, contracted eyes suggested he was stoned, but he seemed superordinarily alert at the same time. A cigarette hung from his mouth, and smoke wisps frolicked around his aged face.

“Evening, lads,” he said as he came to a halt two meters before us and after a few moments of quietly examining us.

“Good evening, old chap,” we all voiced simultaneously.

“What brings you around these parts?” he then asked, in a sort of demanding tone.

“Just doing some trekking; climbed to the top of the mountain,” I replied, pointing at the summit that loomed imposingly over the landscape.

“Bravo!” he exclaimed enthusiastically; and continued wistfully: “I’ve climbed it hundreds of times; nay, thousands! Back in the day, I used to go up there almost every second day... But now it’s been a few years since I did it last. I always say I will, but I always postpone it. Maybe I could climb tomorrow...” – long pause – “...I must be getting old.”

“How old are you, if I may ask?” I inquired.

“Damned if know,” he said with genuine puzzlement. “Ninety-eight? Ninety-nine? They said I was ninety-five some years ago. But how many years ago that was, I can’t remember... I’m old anyhow.”

“You’re pretty agile for your age,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, the mountains keep me young,” he affirmed.

Meanwhile, he had finished his cigarette and lit a new one with the still-burning end of the previous one before tossing the stub onto the ground.

“And you smoke quite a lot, too, eh?” I noted.

“Hm? Oh yeah,” he said casually. “Always have, since I was a boy, four packs a day. What? Oh, those doctors of yours in the city, yes? It’s harmful, they say. It kills you, no? Bullshit. What do *they* know? I was already old before they were ejected from their mothers’ pussies. Smoking has kept me hale, too. I’m telling you.”

The joint was then in my possession, and I was about to pass it around. I had noticed the air of familiarity with which he stared at it, so I extended my arm towards him. “Want a toke?” I asked.

“Nonono,” he snapped disdainfully, waving a splayed, creased hand. “I don’t smoke that shit. I grow my own good stuff. I don’t have any with me right now, unfortunately. If I see you again around here, I will treat you to some proper cannabis. Aw, that crap you new generations get high on...”

“Where do you plant it?” I pried.

He sneered. “Over there,” he said, pointing vaguely at the vast woods. “Near my shelter.”

“Do you often stay up here in the mountains overnight?”

“Huh? The mountain is my home. I live here permanently. I have my shack; I have my animals; I have my stove; I have my weed. There isn’t much I need from the village. I only go down there to visit once or twice a month.”

“Wow, those goats require a lot of attention, eh?”

“Hm, the goats? No, they mostly do fine on their own. I live up here because I like it... and to avoid the granny, my wife. You don’t know what a pain in the ass she is.”

“I see. She grumbles, yes?”

“She’s a fine old woman,” he sort of apologized. “But you know, we’ve lived under the same roof for eighty years... It’s a long, long

time. Only life itself is bearable for that long. At the end of the day, she's also better off ridden of my presence."

"And what do you eat? I understand you have meat and milk, but is that sufficient?"

"I hate milk. I only eat meat. Vegetables, fruits, bread... I hate them, too; always had. I've been eating only meat throughout my whole life. Well, sometimes I may pluck a few mushrooms to garnish it with for the variety. Nowadays, I go to the village only to sell milk and buy cigarettes; and to see my great-great-grandchildren. The oldest one is pregnant. I will soon become a great-great-great-grandad."

"You must have plenty of offspring, right?"

"Phew, I don't even know how many anymore. I've had fourteen kids; around a hundred grandkids; onwards, God knows. Some are in the village; some in the city; others in Athens; quite a few in America; in Australia, Germany, England... all over the place. And that's not counting the bastards. I've executed my purpose in spades: my seed is spread all around the world. Now I can live for myself."

By then, he was smoking his fourth or fifth consecutive cigarette, and our joint was long gone. The sun had disappeared behind the western ridges, and only the cap of the summit was still illuminated. It was about time to get going.

"It was nice talking with you, old chap. But we'll have to move on now. It's getting dark. Have a good night," we said, lifting our backpacks.

"Sure, God be with you," he nasalized. A tinge of disappointment showed in his senescent features. "Come back for a chat sometime," he added before he turned around and set off striding towards the forest.

An Arab man, his wife, and his Filipino girlfriend

Dusk was imminent over the immense desert expanses of Arabia. Somewhere in the peninsula, a friend and I were striving to drive a 2WD sedan along a random, narrow, sand-sheeted dirt road, searching for a camping spot.

An old military-style jeep did then appear in close distance within the rearview mirror, patently demonstrating its driver's frustration over the road being blocked and aggressively pursuing its advance. I made way. Starting its overtaking maneuver, I noticed its right window dropping open and looked out of mine in expectation.

Upon seeing we are foreigners, the anger on the Arab man's face was instantly replaced by a huge smile of contentment and curiosity. He sped up ahead, pulled over abruptly, exited his car, and beckoned us to stop before him. He was a casual Arab man in his fifties, dressed in an everyday grey thobe and a blue keffiyeh. Quite expectedly, he introduced himself as *Mohammed*.

"Just looking for some place to camp for the night," I satisfied Mohammed's quandary about our business.

"You are in my land!" he exclaimed in an enthusiastic tone and a broken English accent. "You are my guests. Follow me," he added, and without waiting for a reply, he got back into his jeep and led the way along the sandy tracks.

A few minutes later, we wound up on the top of a tall dune. A shack and a sty stood there. Scattered throughout, camels and goats grazed nonchalantly whatever little was to be grazed. A shepherd boy napped in the shade and jumped to his feet surprisedly upon his master's unscheduled arrival.

Following the man's instigation, we came out of the car and regarded

the broad surrounding view. Numberless smooth dunes spread far towards the horizon, interspersed by small lively oases here and there. The sun's low angle cast a pleasantly warm hue over the ubiquitous sand.

“This is my land. *Hamdullah*, everything you see belongs to my family,” Mohammed stated with eye-watering pride. “My home – your home,” he added with genuine selflessness and magnanimity. “You can camp wherever you wish.”

We thanked him earnestly for his much-appreciated hospitality, agreed to settle on the very spot for the night, left our car be, and followed his prompt to enter his car.

We sat snugly in the old jeep's seats and enjoyed the short tour he gave us around his property. He took us to several of the little oases, plantations, and herbages that were to be found throughout his otherwise parched, vast acreage. He also took us on a short ride to the threshold of the Empty Quarter (the Earth's most barren territory outside of Antarctica), which bordered his land.

Most interestingly, we visited his traditional family house: a picturesque, semi-ruined, mud-and-stone mansion with a lofty tower. We walked inside it for a brief look, keeping a cautious eye for potential wall or ceiling collapses. He commented grumblingly on his government's refusal to fund the building's restoration as a part of the national cultural heritage preservation program.

It was dark by the time we came back to the original spot, where our car lay parked. He dropped us off and left for his house in the town with a promise to be back before long. We pitched our tent by the lee side of the shack and waited.

We should have normally begun working on our dinner, but that would be unnecessary. Although we repeatedly insisted that we have our own food and there was no need for him to prepare tea, we were sure that he wasn't going to return empty-handed. As expected, he came back carrying two bags full of comestibles. What we hadn't anticipated, however, was him returning accompanied by one more

car.

Mohammed introduced us to some of his children, grandchildren, children-in-law, and his wife, who had all joined him for this outdoor supper. They lay a large cloth on the sand and placed on it a variety of delectable dishes. We formed a circle around it and sat nibbling and chatting under the dim moonlight.

Mohammed's wife sat in the margin, slightly off the circle, and didn't utter a single word during the whole evening. An untraveled feminist Westerner reading this story may be already formulating a description of the woman's husband along the lines of *bigoted misogynist, chauvinist, sexist male-supremacist*... Having an understanding of the region's particular cultural reality, however, one should appreciate Mohammed's progressiveness. The typical middle-aged man from the Arabian Peninsula does not habitually bring along his wife to have dinner with two foreign men in the middle of the desert – without even wearing a niqab but a mere hijab instead.

Some time passed. Only licked-off platters and flatbread crumbs remained on the cloth. The young man who was Mohammed's son-in-law took everyone in his car and drove back home in town. Mohammed himself stayed longer and served tea for the three of us.

It was then he talked about what seemed to principally occupy his thoughts during those days: He could not postpone it any longer; he was getting old... This year, *inshallah*, he was resolved to finally get married.

He eagerly satisfied our curiosity concerning *what he means since he's already married*... He clarified that he, of course, is referring to a second wife. He narrated how he came to get married to his first wife...

She, of course, was his first cousin. *Naturally*, like every man in his culture, he was obliged to marry a girl from his close family while he was still a young man. He must have necessarily chosen one of his first cousins for his first wife. Only an unfortunate man who doesn't have any first cousins may marry a second cousin instead. Since, like

most men, he had plenty of them himself, he couldn't even consider looking for a spouse out of their circle – his parents would never have accepted and allowed it.

Picking one of his suitable cousins wasn't an easy procedure, especially since he couldn't see their faces before the wedding. He had to entirely rely on his sisters' opinions, who were allowed to see their female cousins' faces and appropriately advise him on the matter. Luckily, he made the right decision. The one cousin he, in the end, picked turned out to be very beautiful and proper in every respect.

She was his first and official wife – his *consort*, so to say. He loved her and honored her more than anyone else in the world... But the time had finally come to move on and acquire a second one as well. All his friends, after all – some much younger than him – already had a second wife – a good bunch even had a third and a fourth one. He was the last one left; he had to give some regard to his status...

“So, are you then planning to get married to your girlfriend?” I asked...

Earlier, while still driving around in his jeep, he had already spoken to us about his Filipino girlfriend. A good friend had *fixed* her for him on the internet and, furthermore, had helped him take care of the logistics. They worked out the visa paperwork and booked a flight to bring her from the Philippines to Arabia.

He opened a jewelry shop in the capital for her to work in and bought a flat nearby to house her in. It was a huge success; brilliant arrangement. Not only did the business fully cover the girl's maintenance, but it also yielded a profit. Before, his meeting his sexual needs was limited to his costly, yearly trips to Southeast Asia. Now, he could just drive to the capital and stay over for a night anytime he wished.

But then, when I inquired on whether he's intent on marrying her, he was outright baffled. “Why, but of course not,” he replied.

He went on to explain that, although for a second wife he's not anymore restricted to his close family, marrying a non-Arab girl was out of the question, utterly unacceptable. His Filipino girlfriend was well taken care of and had her rightful place in his life, which she was going to keep, but that's all, nothing more. Any girl who's going to be named his *wife* ought to be a proper Arab Muslim.

He briefly lamented the extreme inflation the wives market in his country has lately been subjected to... Whereas back in the day, when he married his first wife, he had to pay for her the equivalent of \$600 in his local currency; nowadays, a wife's price has increased thirtyfold. But it doesn't matter. He will have to conciliate with the fact, he concluded.

He was ready to make the big step. He had, in fact, already chosen a bride. There was that one daughter of a male second cousin of his whom he coveted. He had already hinted his intentions to him; *hamdullah*, he looked positively upon the prospect. In a few months, the girl would finish her studies and return to her family in the hometown. He was then going to, *inshallah*, officially ask her father for her hand.

...With that long and entertaining chat, the night had progressed. It was time to go to bed. Mohammed checked for one last time to make sure that we would insist on camping instead of coming over to his house, enunciated a hearty *good night*, and departed.

We were up by dawn on the next day to behold a marvelous sunrise over the dunes. Mohammed was there shortly afterwards. We packed, got in the car, and followed him to his house, where we had an exquisite breakfast his wife had prepared. Still early morning, we thanked him for his outstanding hospitality, bid farewell, and resumed our way through the Arabian desert.

A Polish man imprisoned in India

It was that other evening in Ziguinchor, Casamance, Senegal. I was in that random hotel's neat garden, sitting and sipping that Gazelle Senegalese beer I had just ordered. The moment was of a highly exhilarating quality. Some interesting company was the only thing I could wish for to have it elevated to something closer to ideality.

It was that exact moment I heard that wonky door of the room beside my position opening abruptly, whereupon I saw a tall, old white fellow dressed in an Arabic robe coming out of it. His green eyes met mine at the very instant. In them, I discerned a sort of bold defiance against some inner agony that gnawed his soul. Equally bold as his gaze was his gait as he, solidly and unhesitatingly, set off swaggering towards my part. He sat and spoke...

"I must fuck off from here! It's too hot, and the whole bloody place is full of fucking rubbish. But I'm out of cash. I have some dollars, but the banks won't open until Monday, and I can find nowhere to change them. Do you maybe have a clue where I could change them today?" he explained his problem in fluent English with a strong Slavic accent.

I advised him to go out and ask at random – in hotels, stores, whomever in the streets – offering a tempting exchange rate. He did that...

He was back in half an hour. He had not managed to change his dollars and uttered a profuse load of curses commenting on the issue. "*Have a beer,*" I suggested. He followed my suggestion promptly, striding straight to the bar and returning with two Gazelles a few moments later. We spent the rest of the evening there, me endeavoring to extract his peculiar life story and he narrating it eagerly. And here comes a summation of it...

He was born in 1948 in the outskirts of Warsaw and grew up amid the acme of Communist Poland. Since those days of his youth, his whole

existence got centered in what was to dominate his entire life thenceforth: women – or, more specifically, *the treasure between their legs*, in his own words.

“Girls, girls, girls... I had scores of them back then, four at the same time before I left. I had to meet them all every day. I got tired of it. So I think: I will go to the West and see what’s happening over there.”

He managed to get a passport from the Communist administration and left for London, where he sought asylum. He never returned to his homeland until Communism fell. Having stayed in London for a year, he embarked on a ship and reached Australia after a few weeks. There he spent some years working in mines and construction until a friend suggested to him: “Why don’t you go to the psychiatrist and get a leave?”

He visually demonstrated how the conversation with the loony-doc went by, which was not a conversation really, but rather him pronouncing an array of picked-out-at-random words mixed with other freaky noises, and the man on the other side of the desk signing a six-month leave for him.

“I had just found the secret,” he exclaimed enthusiastically. He claimed that he never again worked in his life ever since. But he lived for some three and a half decades on the Australian welfare until he, more recently, got a fat Australian pension.

Saying he didn’t work, however, only stood to mean a lawful, taxed job. He did take up a variety of alternative occupations. One of the most profitable was smuggling gold from Hong Kong to India. He completed quite a few trips successfully until he finally got busted at the New Delhi airport. The customs clerks found 1.5 kg of gold hidden inside his hollow camera, which cost him a six-month imprisonment sentence.

He did not find living conditions in the Indian slammer particularly harsh. He described the Indian prisoners as *peaceful dudes*. Apart from them, there were also many European and other international prisoners, being there primarily for smuggling as well: gold, heroin,

electronics, and pretty much anything that was to be smuggled. An exception to this was the notorious mass murderer Charles Sobhraj (who killed at least a dozen Western tourists in Asia during the 1970s) and stayed in the cell next door. The fact that he had to share a nasty cell with another 70-80 men and manifold as many rats and cockroaches, he did not find pleasant, though tolerable.

When he was released, he found himself in the dreary situation of being an incognito in India. His passport was confiscated and never returned. And on top of that – for a reason I did not quite understand – the Australian embassy in India could not issue him a new passport and exhorted him to cross the border to Nepal clandestinely to get one from the embassy over there. And so he claimed he did together with an East-German bloke who had befound himself in the same situation. They traveled with rickshaws and buses to the border, made it across through the fields in the night, and ultimately ended up with new passports in Kathmandu.

Returning home to Australia after this adventure... that was when he received the hardest blow of his life. A boyfriend had moved into his house together with his wife.

Her cheating on him wasn't the novel thing; that happened regularly ever since they got married. One time, he said, he busted a lover having entered his house ten seconds after him leaving – when he turned back for the car keys he had forgotten. The novelty now was that he was definitely thrown out of his house and separated from his two daughters. He could do nothing about it. The law constituted an insurmountable barrier between him and his family.

He concluded with a lengthy and fiery speech blaming Australia's legal system for his predicament and praising some alleged, long-bygone days when he could have slaughtered his wife's and daughters' lovers without needing to face any consequences. Even though many years had passed since, the bitterness of the incident was obviously still nestling deep inside his thoughts.

As we kept discussing it, he didn't seem to grasp my idea: that to marry a hardly adult, fifteen years younger than him, random Filipino

girl whom he met in the streets of Manila and could not speak a single word in English, just because she was *very pretty*, wasn't quite the right thing to do in the first place. However, he understood rather well by himself and admitted that the family issues they experienced were primarily caused by his faulty behavior. During his married life, he would spend at least ten months of the year traveling around the world, living in brothels in Indonesia and stuff, without ever bothering to give some sign of life back home.

He said he hadn't slept with a woman for the last four years because he came to despise them after the bad experiences he'd had with them, but one may suspect other reasons of biological nature. From what I understood, however, his emotional needs were as high as ever.

He confessed that he still was in a quest for a wife and soulmate. But he gave me a deriding look when I asked him whether he's thinking about a *Polish woman near his age, for example*.

"Are you fucking serious!? Near my age!? I am seventy years old! Seventy-year-old women are ugly... Look at me! I am old! I am ugly too... But at least I can refrain from looking myself in the mirror... her, no!"

He plunged into his thoughts for a bit...

"But you know what... I'm also thinking of another thing: I can buy a caravan in Poland and live there the rest of my life alone... No, I will get two dogs, too... Yes, that's what I will do... That's what I must do."

An Ethiopian refugee

People often ask me how my relationships are with other humans while I travel all the time; whether I experience any emotional deprivation, being compelled to only develop strictly superficial ties, since limited time does not allow for a connection to deepen.

My answer to such questions is what I have understood. To wit, that they fool themselves terribly if they believe that the emotional depth of human contact depends on time; that they do not comprehend the nature of emotion, nor the one of time. Often, a brief interaction, the exchange of a few words, or even the fleeting intersection of two glances are over-sufficient to tighten an inextricable bond between two people.

Such was the case with that rare human being I was destined to meet that morning. We only hung out together for a few hours. I'm never going to see him again in my life, nor will I ever hear anything from him. But no doubt, the remembrance of him and the feelings he awakened in me will never fade until the last of my days.

All of us, I believe, are perpetually swinging back and forth on an emotional scale, at whose two extremes lay misanthropy and altruism. Getting acquainted with some of these people alone can give you a good push towards the latter.

So was I then ambling down Dar Es Salaam's Morogoro Road towards the harbor when I suddenly took notice of that lad walking by my side. He began telling me stuff to which I initially paid no attention because I formed a biased presumption of him being a tout of the ferry companies. That impression of mine got soon dissolved, though; firstly by remarking his sophisticated English speech, and then by noting on his physiognomy that he wasn't a local but came from the Horn of Africa instead.

I then halted for a moment to examine him. He was a young, shabby, emaciated chap. From whatever angle you looked at him, his whole

appearance evinced dire hardships and affliction.

I got a bit puzzled over this, as I wasn't used to seeing people in such extremely miserable conditions in that city, where the standard of living was generally decent for the African average. I observed his two tiny eyes lying deeply, like in two small caves, inside his fleshless eye sockets. A vague, bizarre glow that they emitted, transmitting some kind of superhuman serenity, was what motivated my curiosity to listen to his story. After I bought my ticket at the port, I invited him for a meal at a nearby canteen. While we sat there, he slowly recounted his life.

His name was Marty. He was 27 years old. He came from a village of Tigray in northern Ethiopia, where his father used to maintain a coffee plantation. There he lived a happy, peaceful, and well-off life with his family until, one morning, they got attacked by a group of Somali guerrillas who had crossed the border on a looting raid.

They plundered and set ablaze the entire property of his family. By and by, they tortured and slaughtered his parents and his fourteen siblings. As for him, they chopped off three of his one hand's fingers with a machete and planted three bullets in his abdomen when, at some point, he took to his heels to save himself.

After all, he didn't only manage to flee but to survive his injuries as well. Having gone through many adventures, he made it to a refugee camp in Kenya, where he gave himself up and remained a prisoner for three and a half years. And I say a *prisoner* because they, too, refugee camps, operate on precisely the same principles as all prisons worldwide: They receive funds by the state (the UN in this case) per capita. Hence they do their best to increase the numbers of convicts and consequently their revenues. *Goodwillers* to embezzle their shares will always emerge; it goes without saying.

There, in the refugee prison, Marty learned to speak English. Eventually, when he understood for good that to be released was impossible, he escaped by jumping over the fence, slashing his arms severely on the barbed wire.

Thereafter, he made his way to Dar Es Salaam, hoping that he'll manage to settle down and start a new life. Things did not turn out as ideal as he had imagined them, however. He had been there for a year already, living in the streets and running the constant risk of being arrested and imprisoned for having no papers – since, in our modern world, someone who does not carry an identification document is not considered *someone*, but rather *no-one*.

For all that time of his stay in the big city, he invariably ate thrice a week: on Sunday, on Tuesday, and on Friday when the church, the mandir, and the mosque respectively held their charity handouts. To the mosque, he went every day, as the *wudu* fountain was his sole reliable water source. On top of all the rest, he also had to fight against diabetes and arthritis, diseases which he had developed.

I've heard a lot, I've seen a lot, and I've learned how to remain dispassionate. Listening to and looking at that guy, however, I confess that my blood seethed, and I outright freaked out.

But Marty's singularity did not inhere as much in his story itself as in his attitude towards it and life in general. While we were together, I was striving within me to understand: What could it be that gave him such strength to fight? What could it be that gave him the drive to constantly smile and laugh heartily at the slightest thing he deemed funny? What could it be that made him want to continue to live? Indeed, I never remember having met a more cheerful, smiling, and positive person.

After all, though, I think I figured it out. It was the ability to dream; to dream of something pure, noble, and high. I realized this when he spoke to me about his future plan, his dream. He yearned to return home. Deeply touched, I listened to him talking long about his birthplace while something like a divine thrill was flashing in his eyes.

We stayed together until the afternoon, nonstop discussing various intriguing topics: politics, history, society, man, soul, God... How wiser I felt after that association is beyond description.

In the end, I bid him farewell at the bus station. I had just bought him a ticket to the Kenyan border. There he would have to cross back clandestinely and... figure out what to do. A long journey back home was just beginning for Marty. I wished him good luck.

A random girl, a random night in Cape Town

...Quite a few hours must have passed since the moment we were clinking the first beer glasses in an Irish pub until the next vivid memory I have: wondering “*where the hell am I?*” while drifting wasted along a dark narrow street.

Only a few blurry images remained in my recollection from the blank interval in between: a Rastafari guitarist playing a Gibson off the drummer’s beat and singing blissful stoner songs; a band of South African virtuosos playing some frisky cape-jazz rhythms; a beautiful black-eyed female violinist shifting her fiddle to an *f*, producing mellow melodies; music and dance; different people in various places moving their lips up and down, emitting sounds, they too, which must have been words; glasses clinking; and yet more clinks...

That’s pretty much all I remember... and, of course, a constant alcohol effluvium. I have no idea how I ended up lost, alone in a mesh of cramped streets, in the middle of the dark night.

I kept walking in search of something familiar or someone to ask for directions. Even though it was night, I could not say the city was deserted. Many human voices frequently resounded through the dingy streets. As I was crossing a junction, I glanced aside and saw a dozen dudes, apparently homeless, all at the same time turning around to look at me. I did not find it a particularly smart idea to ask them and tell them I was lost. I thought it wiser to keep my way straight.

Another guy was now prancing up against me. I could only distinguish his spindly silhouette in this grimy backstreet. Only when we passed next to each other, I was able to detect a glow from his staring-directly-into-mine eyes. I also saw a prison tattoo on his throat, which was rendered visible by the dim light for a fraction of a second.

In a bit, I'd found myself in a well-lit street – relatively well-lit. I noticed a young girl walking down the pavement. Mostly instinctively, she seemed to me like the right person to ask. I proceeded straight towards her.

Eventually, we wound up in a park, carrying a bag of beers. We shared the place with a small colony of homeless people.

“Do not worry about them,” she told me after we had sat. “Here’s their home. I know most of them. They are good dudes. I also used to stay here.”

“But you don’t anymore?” I asked her.

“No! Now I have a job, and I rent a room,” she proclaimed, turning to face me with eyes radiating pride.

“But you used to be homeless, too, yes?”

“Yes,” she said indifferently. “I grew up in an orphanage. Then I lived in the streets for some time. Now I have a home.”

“Your parents, if I may ask?”

“I never met them. I don’t care.”

“Life can be hard sometimes, eh?”

“Life’s nice,” she said after some pondering.

I guzzled down a copious gulp from my beer and plunged into my thoughts for a spell.

A patrol car drove by the road in front of us at a crazy speed, siren screeching madly.

“Criminality levels must be high around here, eh?”

“Yes, indeed, very high,” she averred, giving a categorically

affirmative nod. “A dozen people are being murdered daily in Cape Town, on average. Robberies, beatings, rapes... You do not do well rambling around here all alone in the middle of the night... You know, poverty, that’s what’s to blame.”

“Poverty, yes. I have already noticed. As a matter of fact, it does not take much to notice. But who do you think is responsible for it?”

“How should I know?” she said after casting a perplexed gaze straight into my eyes. “Some say the government, others say the whites, others fate, others God... I... do not know.”

Such things we talked about, we emptied two or three beer cans each, and we set about leaving. It was going to dawn soon.

Soon after we left the park, a gang of four or five guys, who did not seem exceptionally friendly, began stalking us. My new friend pulled me by the hand to pick up the pace.

As they kept nearing, scurrying along behind us, she about-faced abruptly, and in a thundering voice, told them something in some African language of theirs. I have, of course, no idea what exactly she may have said. But whatever it was, it worked. They stopped following us at once. *She has some guts*, I thought.

Some twenty steps later: “They wanted to rob you,” she told me.

“I know, I understood that,” I responded.

Soon after, we were on the Main Road, where I had asked her to lead me to in the first place. My hostel was about a kilometer straight from there.

She offered to accompany me all the way, telling me how dangerous it is, that they will rob me, and so on. I assured her there was no need, I will be fine, and the rest. The truth is I wasn’t much worried about getting robbed, as all I carried with me were my cheap clothes, an all but empty tobacco pouch, a lighter, a few coins (leftover from the beers), and a dagger.

So I bid her farewell and started walking up the Main Road.

A hungry guy in the streets of Cape Town

...So I bid her farewell and started walking up the Main Road. I longed for my bed. It had been a long night, and everything around was orbiting my head. It did not take long before I heard footsteps approaching me from behind.

I turned to check and saw a lad, alone, coming almost running from the opposite pavement, getting ready to cross the road to my side. In anticipation, I immediately brought my right hand discreetly into my right pocket, where my dagger lay. But as he neared me, I relaxed since my intuition did not judge him to be a threat.

He reached me and got to walk by my side, gazing at me hesitantly, without uttering a word, while I was also staring at him intently, waiting for his intention.

“I’m hungry,” he finally enunciated and kept looking at me in an imploring, plaintive way. The truth is I could see that by myself; poor fellow, he was like a bag of bones. I commiserated with him. I took out the few coins that remained tinkling in my pocket and placed them onto his palm. He lifted the handful forthwith, right in front of his eyes, and began to count.

“Give me more,” he opened his mouth for a second time.

“Sorry, amigo, that’s all I have.”

“Give me more! I don’t want to rob you.”

“You shouldn’t say that. It’s not polite.”

“Don’t make me angry! Give me everything you have! Or I’ll take it by force!” he then said, trying to look cruel, though he wasn’t.

“By force? How? I don’t think you have the capacity to do that... physically, I mean,” I told him in an indifferent tone that denoted genuine bewilderment as to *how* he could possibly exert force on me, comparing our physiques.

He remained silent for a few seconds, looking at me awkwardly, until he grasped what I had just said and reassumed his beseeching attitude: “I’m hungry.”

We continued walking together. Along the way, I explained to him that I fully understand him and sympathize with him, but I am not responsible for his condition; that I was only a stranger in his city who just arrived yesterday; and whatever help I could offer, I had offered it already.

He also explained to me that he is not a bad guy. Necessity presses him; the struggle for survival. He spoke to me about his family; his minor siblings who waited famished in the shanty for a bite of bread.

In the meantime, we’d made it to the gate of my inn. “Good luck,” I wished him. “Good luck to you too,” he also said before he turned around and set off, resuming his quest for the day’s food.

A Senegalese man waiting for his fortune

It was an enchanting afternoon in front of the Atlantic, a couple of kilometers up-beach from the village of Palmarin, somewhere along the Senegalese coast. A friend and I had just arrived there after a long, hot, and dusty day driving in an about-to-break-apart, curio car, first; and on top of a luggage load on top of a small bus, then; through the flat, arid, and dirty desolation of the yonder environs. Our stuff left in that Mauritanian tent we found to rent, it was the right time for a refreshing dip in the immensity of the ocean.

Upon the very moment I stepped on land again, I noticed a man approaching me at a vivid and hasty pace. He was in a football outfit and reminded of a footballer given an excellent opportunity to score a goal. The possible chance of a lifetime I presented him with made every muscle of his face dilate with joy. He introduced himself as Dominic.

Throughout the conversation that thus started between us, I came to the following conclusion...

I had already observed that the majority of people you get to talk to in this part of the world have their thoughts directed towards two principal objectives: 1) to extract from you a profit by any of the possible immediate means, varying from begging to fixing girls; and 2) to realize their dream of migrating to Europe, which alone, in their understanding, equals to living the life of an African football star. Most of them – out of experience, I guess – will aim the bulk of their efforts towards the first goal. Dominic, making the exception, was rather more focused on the second, higher goal. He was spending his days patiently waiting for the beautiful blond bride, the football talent hunter, or any sort of mentor/benefactor who would elevate his life forever to dimensions of greatness. Dominic was an idealist.

That introductory interaction of ours ended with an agreement to meet again on the same spot later that evening. He had invited us to his house in the village for dinner.

A couple of hours passed, and we headed down to the beach once again. We found out that Dominic had never left, but had been waiting for us there all the while. A broad smile manifesting deep satisfaction appeared on his face as he started to run towards our part upon the very instant he took notice of us coming. So we began striding along the broad, exotic beach while the sun was slowly plunging behind the distant oceanic horizon.

By the time we made it to the little village of Palmarin, it was forsaken to absolute darkness. There was no lamp illuminating the sandy roads and the shadowy figures of the few people walking along them. A faint light coming from a small tv led us through the outer yard into the inner yard of Dominic's house.

There was his grandma sitting on a stool right in from of the light's source, barely noticing our arrival at all. And that was the exact thing she kept doing during the entire time of our stay: sitting on the stool, still as a statue, abstractedly watching the soap opera on the screen, without giving any attention to anything else happening around her. She gave me the impression that she'd lost faith in her grandson's grand aspirations, and she would prefer him to go out fishing or get any regular job, like the rest of her grandchildren.

Besides the old lady, there also was a group of four little children waiting for us in the yard – Dominic's siblings, cousins, siblings' children? It's never easy to say in an African family. They knew we were coming, and they perfectly played the role they were instructed to play every time a candidate family benefactor was visiting. They ran and gave us a hug, each one in turn. And then they all sat still and quiet on a bench by the wall, attending us curiously.

We moved into the house's interior. It was quite spacious and tidy for

the average of an African village and neatly and frugally furnished. The walls were plentifully decorated with paintings of the last supper, various saints, and other Christian artifacts, on which people often rely to sustain their hopes for this life and relieve their fears for the afterlife. We sat on the couch and enjoyed the delicious fish dinner that some of Dominic's neighbors cooked and delivered.

Having abundantly filled our stomachs with food, it was time to fill our heads with merriment by means of alcohol. We proceeded to the larger village of Djifer. We spent a long night roaming around that bizarre, debauched village and interacting with its many drunkards.

The night ended with Dominic joining us all the way to the beach in front of our lodging, the exact same spot where we had earlier met him. We bid each other good night and agreed to meet again there sometime tomorrow.

Coming down to the beach, by late next morning, the first thing we saw was Dominic trotting joyfully towards our part, no sooner than we appeared within his sight. He let us know that he'd been waiting for us there since sunrise.

Thenceforth, for all the rest of our stay, that exact coincidence was repeated many a time. Every time we headed down to the beach, we knew with absolute certainty that Dominic will be there, running towards us as soon as we passed the lodge's gate. Every day, from sunrise to sunset, he'd always be there waiting for us patiently.

He apparently had laid too high hopes on us. I could not surmise what sort of logic led him to regard my friend and me as his potential benefactors. We'd already made it clear that we have no relation to the football industry, and our ability to fix for him a contract in a European team was no greater than our ability to have him employed by NASA and sent to Mars.

We also made clear that we do not operate a dating agency, and fixing a European wife for him is not as simple a task as he imagined, no

matter how many local girls he was willing to give in exchange.

The only thing I managed to do for him was to offer some advice on the following matter: There was that Dutch dude with his French girlfriend staying in the same lodge. Dominic had already proposed to him to swap his girlfriend for four local girls from Palmarin – but in vain. One noon, the couple was relaxing on the beach. I suggested to Dominic that four girls was a somewhat low offer. Was he to offer ten instead, the guy would surely reconsider the proposition. He pondered my recommendation for a few seconds and walked towards the couple to place his new bid... The middle finger the French girl pointed at me signified that he was turned down again.

Dominic was not daunted, however. He kept insisting on his effort indefatigably. He came up with many creative ideas for services he could provide us with in case we bring him along with us to Europe. But none of them was enticing enough. So, that last noon of our stay there, we bid him goodbye and wished him the best. He mournfully watched us walking away for some moments, and then he sat on the sand, staring at the ocean and waiting for his fortune.

A German dude stabbed by his Thai girlfriend

It was a summer evening in the Norwegian capital, Oslo. It would already have been night if it wasn't for the sun, which, as accustomed in such northern latitudes that time of the year, was lingering above the horizon, seeming hesitant to part with the one-half of the firmament visible from the northern hemisphere; so rendering the people, too, equally reluctant to quit the day and go to bed, despite the clock being in disagreement with the sky.

After a long, pleasant day of boozing and sunbathing in a park, I, finally and quite randomly, ended up among a large company at a friend's apartment. The party was mainly composed of jolly Mozambican and Portuguese drinkers. There was only that one fellow who made a notable contrast in the uniformity of the group.

A young fellow he was, hardly twenty-five. He was evidently European but neither Norwegian nor Portuguese. I did not initially exchange any words with him; nor did he with anyone else. He sat by himself on a stool in a corner, not drinking, lost in some private reverie, hardly paying any notice to whatever happened around him.

I did not judge him to be shy, but rather introverted by choice. It seemed he had wound up in that place and company by some accident and felt quite alien there. He naturally attracted my curiosity, and I set about examining him. The result of my preliminary, visual examination of him was that he was the kind of semi-lunatic, lonely and solitary, socially dysfunctional, highly depressive, easy-to-get-excited, and emotionally impulsive guy who's played too many video games in his life.

My opportunity to learn more about his personality finally arose when I stood up and made for the balcony.

"Are you going out to smoke?" inquired the fellow, simultaneously

reaching for his cigarette pack in his pocket, a strong desire to express all that his mouth was soon to utter being pronounced in advance by a fiery glance in his eyes.

A few moments later, we were both standing on the balcony. The after-midnight sky over the Norwegian capital was still illuminated in dim tints of orange and purple by the sun, which still lurked shallowly below the horizon. Two little flames glowed momentarily through the imperfect darkness, lighting our fags. And without any further delay, my company began to yearningly disclose what obsessed his thoughts; and I to eagerly listen.

He was half-German and half-Norwegian in blood, but he'd grown up solely in Germany and couldn't speak any Norwegian; he'd never met his Norwegian father. That was, in fact, his first time ever setting foot in Norway, just a couple of weeks prior to our crossing ways there.

The reason that brought him thither, as well as his current life mission, was one of financial nature. He'd got himself a job in Norway so to rapidly raise some dough. He definitely didn't seem like the greedy, money-loving kind of man. Instead, he looked like the sort of person who wouldn't care a whit about wealth and would happily spend his days in idle scarcity if it wasn't for some idealized purpose.

I didn't need to strive much to get to hear of that purpose. He was rather too anxious to speak to me about it on his own initiative. He proceeded straight away...

"I am in love. I am seriously in love with that girl. You know, I just came here from Thailand. I'd been there for the last year or so. I originally planned to travel around Southeast Asia. But then, soon after I arrived in Bangkok, I met that girl. I fell in love with her instantly and never left. I stayed over with and for her in Bangkok until I recently ran out of money.

"As I was boarding that plane, a couple of weeks ago, coming here to Oslo, I was swearing to myself that I will never contact her again; that I never want to see her or hear anything from her again in my life; that I will utterly forget her as soon as I land in Europe the day after. I was

resolute to come and work and earn some money to go traveling for real this time.

“But here I am now, after all these days, thinking of nothing but her. I tried hard to take her out of my mind, but it is plainly impossible. I love her. So I’m now here earning money only for going back to her.”

“That’s alright, mate. I don’t see anything wrong with all that. I mean, sure, traveling is great. But if you really love her so much...” I attempted to spirit him up.

“It’s not about traveling. There is more... You see, our relationship had been extremely problematic throughout this year. There was too much conflict between us. We fought the whole time. Almost every day, there was an epic battle between us. She has a very irascible character, and she can get very violent, too...

“You see this one scar on my belly? And this one on my arm? And this one over here? And this one too? And this, and this...? She did them all to me!

“I was just trying to calm her down every time, but she was only getting further exasperated. There was a point after which her temper would explode, and there was no turning back. She was getting blinded, completely mad, grabbing the first knife, scissors, fork, or whatever sharp happened to be within reach and coming straight for me. She was furious. There was nothing I could do to stop her. Most times, I would manage at least to run away and get cover. Only two times I ended up in the hospital.

“You may be wondering how I can still love her and want to go back after all that. I also do wonder myself. But I really think we could work it out this time. It’s worth a try, at least. It’s because I can now clearly see that I was the main culprit for our strife.

“Our fights would always start after me rebuking her for her job and prompting her to quit it. I could understand, then too, that that wasn’t good behavior from my side. I was sharing all the money I had with her, yes, but I am not rich, and it could not be enough for her and her

family. It wasn't right to expect her to quit her job.

"It's just that I couldn't stand it sometimes... It was too painful to see her coming back home drunk in the morning, knowing that she's slept with who knows how many random, perverted scamps for money throughout the night...

"But I have now thought of it better. I am pretty sure I can go back, live with her, and abstain from scolding her altogether. And then I can work out some way to make enough money and bring her out of her predicament...

"I know what you are thinking! I know exactly what you are thinking right now! You are thinking that I'm that deplorable sociopath who's spent most of his life playing video games isolated in a dark room... You are thinking that I'm that lamentable coward whose heart was about to leap out of his chest and was overwhelmed by dreadful panic every time he had to speak to somebody; who's never had any friends and was to all a sucker and a subject of mockery... You are thinking that I'm that weak, awkward, naive, childish idiot who went to Thailand and fell madly in love with the first nasty whore who opened her legs for him... That's precisely what you are thinking!

"Well... you are perfectly right! That's exactly who I am!

"I know it's pathetic. But this is my fate which is far beyond my power to alter. I must go back there and suffer it... because I love her."

I would have liked to allay his disquiet, but there wasn't much I could say. We remained there silent for the time it took to inhale the last few drags of the third of the fags we'd lit up to accompany the narration of this bizarre story until we, both at the same time, quenched the butts in the ashtray.

"Wish you good luck, mate," was the only thing I managed to say, trying to hide the pity and emphasize the empathy in my voice, as he first stepped back into the apartment's interior, where he occupied his previous post on the stool in the corner and sank once again into his

lonely, afflictive thoughts.

A heroin addict in Greece's holy mountain

There was that bloke I knew a long, long time ago. He was an excellent guitarist and had a Metal band. He was also very bright overall and could have certainly made a name for himself in music... if it wasn't for heroin.

Heroin ruined him. Like for pretty much everyone who's ever tasted her sly sweetness, she opened for him a perpendicular path to his downfall and demise. It would be a rare stroke of luck if he's still alive by now. The last time I saw him, more than a decade ago, he didn't seem all that willing to resist death.

That last time was the first time I was seeing him after yet a number of years. He'd vanished entirely in the meantime. Everyone thought he was dead. I bumped into him at random, downtown Athens. He was still in as bad a condition as he used to, but he was alive.

At the time, he lived in a hill park in central Athens. He invited me over for a coffee, and I didn't turn him down.

At the mouth of a depthless cave, a reasonable distance from the closest walkway, well-hidden in between thick growth, there lay two tattered tents. The second one belonged to an old junkie with whom the protagonist of our story shared the spot. Our arrival rose him. His topped with long, unkempt, grey hair head first appeared out of the tent; his emaciated body followed. He was nervous and impatient; he was out of his medicine. No sooner than he greeted, he was off to sell some tissues on the buses and score. My acquaintance and I were left alone.

It was an early summer afternoon. The shade and the freshness of the forest offered relief from the surrounding heat. He plucked out from the tent two excessively reused plastic cups, a small can of instant coffee, and a water bottle. He shuffled the mixture hastily with a twig

and passed me the one cup.

The tent only contained that coffee paraphernalia, a small sack with clothes, a charred teaspoon, some scattered syringes, and a worn acoustic guitar. He brought the guitar out and began strumming a sort of angry, Black or Death Metal progression. He suddenly muted the instrument in discordance and peered at it with a gaze of abysmal distress for a few moments...

“I have taken my decision,” he exclaimed as abruptly as he raised his gaze to look at me. “I will push it today!”

He was in a deplorable condition. I knew the guy. He lived for music – even more so than he lived for heroin. The guitar was his sole unrelinquishable personalty: the only item he’d not do without under even the harshest of circumstances... the guitar and his teenagerhood leather jacket. It’d been keeping him warm on homeless winter nights for many winters... until he sold it two days ago.

I tried to persuade him not to do that: “Ok, you sell the guitar, you score for today, and perhaps tomorrow... and then what? What’s to do then? Sell the tent and your underwear?”

I could see that the sudden reminder of *tomorrow* disturbed him but only for a glimpse. His thoughts were nailed to the *right now* like a compass is to the north. It took me many reiterations of the word *tomorrow* to make him ponder it for real...

“I don’t know. I don’t care. I might beg or steal... otherwise, I kill myself. I don’t have much to do.”

“Why don’t you try to quit?”

He released a slight, scoffing grin. His face then consolidated into a fixed relief of terror. He spoke with the minimal muscular effort that’s required to do so intelligibly...

“I cannot quit. I’ve been a junkie for more than ten years, well beyond the point of salvation. I have tried everything there is and failed. I

cannot take up this martyrdom another time. I'm utterly helpless. Not even God can save me."

He continued after a brief, thoughtful pause...

"I was clean, you know, for sixteen months – the most I ever did. And I was clean from *everything*. It's been only a few months since I relapsed. For sixteen whole months, I didn't shoot smack; I didn't smoke weed nor drank wine; I didn't have a single aspirin. I hardly spoke to or saw anybody; I only ate as much as needed to remain alive... I quit *everything*."

"And what did you do then?"

"... I... worked, prayed, slept, and repeated."

"Where have you been?"

"Far, far away. I was in a monastery, in Mount Athos."

Phew, that was getting interesting. I was dying of curiosity to hear of how he had fared lately, and the revelation of it was intriguing beyond expectation. I'd never got to talk with a drop-out monk before, and especially with one from Mount Athos!

Also known as the *Holy Mountain*, Mount Athos is an autonomous monastic community in northern Greece. The fairly large peninsula is home to twenty Eastern Orthodox monasteries and nothing more. The monks, who are the only inhabitants of the region, enjoy full self-governance and fall only under the partial jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. This has been so ever since an 885 AD Golden Bull by Byzantine Emperor Vasileios I, which proclaimed the mountain a monks-only zone. All other secular people, including farmers and shepherds, were evicted and restricted access. Visitors, mostly pilgrims, may acquire a special permit to enter for a limited period, given that they are men. Even after a 2003 resolution of the European Parliament to lift the ban, access to women remains altogether prohibited. Curiously – and imagination-disturbingly – female domestic animals, such as goats and sheep, have

also been banned.

The place is the perfect asylum. All sorts of runaways have sought refuge there throughout the centuries; men escaping the law, qualms, sins, psychopathy, or any other persecutory force that society and their minds imposed on them. I was aware that it isn't uncommon for addicts as well to retreat there. And here was one who did...

“And how was it? How come you left?”

“It was just... just perfect, at first. From day one, as soon as I set foot on that blessed ground, I got infused with divine elation. It was like I was reborn; like all my past life was expunged from my memory in a single instant; so simple, no effort involved.

“Since day one of my arrival, I was put to hard work. I was given no time to think about anything. Late in the evening, I was led to my cell and given the Bible. I was overwhelmed by a sweet kind of exhaustion. I lay in bed and opened it on a random page. I began reading a sentence but was fast asleep before I could complete it. That was it. God had forgiven me and opened his arms to embrace me.

“Heroin... I hardly ever thought about it again until the day before I relapsed; not even during the first days. I didn't even suffer a cold turkey. I had my routine: I would wake up at dawn, work hard till sundown, eat, withdraw to my cell, pray, and sleep like a baby.

“It may sound dull to you – it also sounds so to me now – but at the time, it was all I needed. Everything there was so quiet, so peaceful, so divine. I was totally content. God was inside me. I could have just continued like that for as long as it'd take for him to lift me to heaven... But then I let him down... those bloody demons... I couldn't resist. I failed the test.”

He fell silent.

“Test?” I urged him to keep on.

“The test, yes. I failed. I wasn't worthy of God... I stayed in the

monastery as an apprentice for one year. But then I had to pass the test to be appointed as a full monk...

“They led me to the edge of a vertical cliff over the sea. They put me in a basket and carried me down – me, the worn robe I wore, and the Bible; nothing more. They carried me down into a small cave, only slightly larger than enough to prostrate. There was nothing to see other than the cave’s walls and the endless blue of the sea and the sky. I had to stay in there on my own for six months. That was the test.

“They only came once a day before sundown and passed me down a loaf of bread and a flask of water. They never said a single word to me. I read the whole Bible over a number of times and prayed intensively while staring at that endless blue monotony. I was growing mad and weak day by day. Then the demons began to visit me.”

“What did the demons look like? What did they want from you?”

“They looked like women: women I knew, women I didn’t know, women from the Bible. They wanted to divert me from the path of God, of course. I resisted for days, but they wouldn’t give up. I prayed ceaselessly, but their attacks only became fiercer and more frequent. They haunted my mind day and night. I stopped sleeping. I could stay up all night, biting my hands, sitting on top of them, punching the cave walls... all to prevent them from reaching down here.”

He pointed *down there*.

“It was one morning about a month after I entered the cave when I finally succumbed. I was reading a part about Maria Magdalena, I think. Very naturally, I let my hand slip down and gave it a good wank. That was the end. I had sinned, and God abandoned me altogether.

“I stayed in the cave for three more months, begging for forgiveness between brief intervals from unremitting, vile masturbation. I must have been jacking off twenty or thirty times a day during those three months. I couldn’t take it any longer. If God wouldn’t help me, I

knew what would.

“When the monks came to bring me food and water in the evening, I shouted to them to lift me up. I quit and didn’t even pass by the monastery. I had no belongings there, anyway. I walked the trail through the night and had made it to the town by dawn. I was in Athens by late evening. That night I passed out on a pavement after a heroin injection.”

He fell silent again.

“Do you still believe in God?” I asked him.

“Of course, I believe in God. That is, I believe that he exists at least. I know; I’ve met him. But he’s just not there for all of us. Some of us are better off with smack than God.”

He paused suddenly as if he just remembered something.

“I have to go now,” he said, grabbing his guitar under his arm.

“Good luck,” I told him and watched him disappearing through the bush.

A blind doorman in Addis Ababa

...Another man who caused me a particular impression in that place was the afflicted, aged, scrawny, eyeless doorman of the inn. I do not know it positively, but he was probably mute, too. I never heard, not a word, but any sound whatsoever coming out from his oral cavity. At least, he undoubtedly wasn't deaf withal...

He would only appear late in the evenings, after the denizens thinned out. He emerged out of the shanty where he lived, in the yard's corner by the gate, and slowly advanced towards us, groping the way with his walking stick. He would then sit discreetly in some chair by himself, where he seemed to be tuning himself in and attending our various discussions with great interest.

He always gave me the impression – by twitches of his body parts and other reactions – that he very well understood what was said. That amazed me, for even among the younger generations, very few people in this city knew even the most basic English.

Some nights again, when we stayed up playing music until late, he would get closer and stand right in front of us. He listened to the music keenly, with deep emotions depicted on his face, which suggested that if he had eyes, they would have teared.

An amputated old chap in Lusaka's bus station

...By early afternoon, I was finally roused by the squealing blares of some vendors who had invaded the bus. All of them, cardboard boxes on shoulders, were striving to sell their wares, consisting of water bottles, soft drinks, cookies, fruit, and various other edible-or-not products. Only the faster ones had made it into the vehicle's interior. The rest had formed a mob outside and attempted to sell from the windows.

Somewhat bemused, still trying to properly wake up, I observed those proceedings, when:

“Good morning!” the guy next seat addressed me. “We’ve arrived in Lusaka. We are stopping for lunch.”

Great hustle was ongoing at the central bus station of Zambia’s capital city. The area around the parked buses was congested by a disorderly horde of passengers, staff, vendors, and other irrelevant folks.

As far as I could see, I was the only white person at the station. As a Greek saying goes, I resembled *a fly floating on milk* – but *a dandelion floating on petroleum* would be more literally befitting in this case. However, to my pleasant surprise, I didn’t get into the awkward position of being the center of everyone’s attention – as is often the case throughout Africa. Nobody seemed to care much about my presence.

We were going to remain at the station for about an hour. After giving my joints a good cracking and discharging my urinary bladder, it was time to fill my stomach up with something. I got myself three massive biff skewers with plenty of fat and a portion of chips, and I started chowing down on them.

Having swallowed the last mouthful – as required after every good

meal – I desired to light a cigarette. I headed towards a secluded edge of the station, intending to hide between two parked trucks. I did that so to take advantage of the shade, as well as to avoid the gazes of the patrolling cops – who would eagerly attempt to charge me, for their personal profit, a fine for the fag I was to smoke within the no-smoking-allowed station's premises.

Upon sneaking into the narrow space between the two trucks, I saw that I would share it with someone. An old chap he was. He was amputated from the groin down and attached to an improvised wheelchair made of a wooden frame and bicycle wheels. He didn't take his eyes off me for a single moment while I neared. He stared at me persistently in agony and anticipation until I came to a halt beside him.

“You finally came! I've been waiting the whole day for you!” he roared as I was bringing to my mouth the cigarette I was theretofore holding in my hand.

“Who? Me?” I asked, baffled, swiveling my neck from side to side.

“Yes, you! And the pack of smokes you're carrying in your pocket. Give me one, please.”

I took one out, gave it to him, and stood there observing him.

Without a word, he grabbed the cigarette and squeezed it between his lips, firmly, as if to make sure it won't fly away. He lit it up with a match and began to suck it with deep, successive, protracted drags. There was a highly exhilarating emotion I could discern in his glittering eyes as they attended the rising fumes. It must not have taken more than ten drags for the whole fag to burn out. Due to inertia, he drew a couple of puffs off the filter, too, before discarding the butt on the ground. He then remained silent and pensive, staring at the sky.

I also finished smoking and reached in my pocket for a pack of cookies I'd bought before.

“Want a cookie?” I asked the man, spreading my hand out to him with one.

He turned and looked at me, speechless and bewildered, for a bit, as if he just remembered I was there.

“A *cookie*? No! I want no damn cookie! Give me a smoke if you will... You see, I only sit here, all day, every day. I don’t spend much energy. I don’t need food. I need cigarettes... cigarettes, and the fucking time to pass quickly”.

I pulled out my open, half-full pack and placed it as it was on his palm. He was going to say something, but it wilted at the edge of his lips. He shoved the pack into his underwear, looking at the same time around him distrustfully in case anyone sees him.

“Goodbye,” I told him as I set off striding back towards the bus. He also greeted with a weary gesture.

A Beduin in Mount Sinai

...By noontime, as I was climbing down the mountain from the same path and reapproached that little village in the narrow valley, a jovial Bedouin man, standing by his garden's threshold, invited me to his home. His name was Ramadan. He was one of the 15-20 *patres familias* who had created this heavenly oasis amid this inhospitable, divine environment.

We perched in a shady little corner of his garden, under a thin, fluttering cloth, stretched by strings tied on his clay hut and an acacia tree, and we engaged in conversation, using a mixture of simple English and Greek, gestures, and a little pantomime.

He was the father of thirteen children. One of them – his eldest daughter, I think – a beautiful, tall and lean, scarfed girl around twenty, came out from the house and shyly served us with coffee, tea, bread, and olives. Another one, Fatima, a little girl of about twelve years, not a bit shy, was constantly sitting opposite me, peering at me intently with her coal-black eyes.

At some point, Ramadan requested me to stand up to show me around his garden. He flauntingly exhibited various vegetables, lots of olive trees, peach trees, and other horticultural plants that surrounded his house.

Sheep and goats were carelessly grazing on whatever little grass grew in the crannies of the earth. Two donkeys had a lazy day off, slumbering on the ground. A burly camel, fallen on her knees, was indolently ruminating her brunch, observing us with her big, passive eyes. A dozen hyraxes were running aimlessly here and there, up and down the branches they had inside the large, improvised cage where they were imprisoned.

There also was a large cat family who perceived that garden as home. The kittens were incessantly frolicking, scuffling with each other. The mothers waited for lunch: some patiently, standing still and staring at

us imploringly; others impatiently, meowing complainingly. And the obese father had occupied a cool corner, immersed in sweet sleep.

“All did alone,” Ramadan told me in broken Greek, boastingly displaying his palms.

“Nice place you have here,” I said and explained that I just yesterday had come from Cairo.

“Ah, aah – hubbub,” he demonstrated this word with gestures and sound-mimicking. “Me never Cairo. Cathrine most far, few times,” he concluded in English, adding a tone of disdain in the utterance of the big city’s name.

An American Mormon in Thailand

Throughout my extensive travels, I've been fortunate to meet and interact with a vast number of people of the utmost diversity of cultural and ideological backgrounds. As it happens to be one of the most profound and enigmatic human sentiments, religion has always excited my curiosity to a high degree of keenness. And the more obscure, occult, or just unique someone's beliefs are, the more my curiosity flares wild.

Having already had plenty of opportunities to discuss with people of various well-, less-, or un-known religious castes, I had never chanced to run into an adherent of the so notorious, yet arcane, church of the Mormons. And honestly, I never really deemed it probable to come across one if I wasn't going to Utah or some other place in the US, at least. However, fate brought it about so that I finally met one where I least expected it. I met a Mormon in Thailand.

I was staying in that hostel in Chiang Mai. Quite a big one it was. People were coming, people were leaving... casual European and American young party-travelers in their majority. There was that one guy who came one day and mobilized my interest.

He was part of a group of four from some southern American state – South Carolina, I think – touring around Thailand. The rest of the group closely complied with my mental stereotype of an American Southerner: obese, bearded, good eaters and drinkers, loquacious, loud, jocular...

That guy, on the other hand, was a totally different story. He was strikingly distinct from his mates, who all looked identical as if they were cloned, wherefore I got puzzled as to how they ended up forming a traveling party together. In appearance, first of all, he was puny and nerdy. In manners and habits, most notably, he was discreet, taciturn, introvert, slightly shy... He didn't smoke and never drank a sip, whereas his buddies had two beers each for breakfast.

Throughout the days of our concurrent sojourn in that place, I had several chances to engage with him in conversation. We never talked for too long. Still, our short discourses on a wide range of general topics were always of high quality. I had found him particularly likable for his modesty, composure, and knowledgeability. It was a pity that the best subject we could have touched on was reserved for only a brief chat before their departure.

It was early morning, and I was drinking my coffee on the deck. The American group was preparing to set off. Their motorbikes were parked in front of the hostel, and their luggage lay packed by the entrance. The three were inside having their breakfast-beer. The fourth was outside, sitting opposite me, having a talk with another American dude. My half-asleep brain, absorbed in some other, drowsy process, wasn't paying much attention to what was said until the overheard word *Mormon* made its way into it. "Who is a Mormon?" I broke in. "Are *you* a Mormon?"

During the half-hour or so it took until they left, we had an intriguing conversation about his newly-revealed-to-me faith. Following his mother's conversion when he was four, he was raised a Mormon and remained a devout disciple ever since.

One of the first questions I asked him was whether it is his intention to marry more than one woman in the future. He replied in the negative. He explained that polygamy is an outmoded practice among his cult, no longer officially accepted.

In fact, he claimed, their doctrine and rites deviate very little from traditional Christianity, the principal differentiating point being the acceptance of Joseph Smith as a divine figure, a prophet sent to Earth by God to restore humans on the right path. He asserted he bears no doubt about Smith's divinity and the supernatural origin of his texts, which he found by God's guidance, engraved on some golden plates hidden somewhere in South America.

However, I entertained strong doubts about him having no doubts. On the previous day, he told me that his principal reason for visiting Thailand was to explore and study Buddhism. He rationalized this

inconsistency by arguing that the two creeds do not contradict each other, as they are of a totally different nature.

Whereas he saw Mormonism as the true religion; the ultimate answer to all humans' existential questions; the only path to salvation and eternal after-life bliss... he saw Buddhism as an earthly philosophy; merely a method to help him alleviate the burden of physical and mental subsistence while on Earth, thus rendering his soul better prepared for being lifted into heaven to assume his place by the side of Jesus and Joseph Smith.

That's pretty much what he talked about until it was time to go, after his companions had finished their second beer. He hopped on the bike and rolled off, resuming his spiritual journey through Thailand.

A Polish lad hitchhiking with a double bass

It was one of those wonted summer afternoons, somewhere deep inside an alluring, ancient forest atop a hill in the periphery of the Norwegian capital, Oslo. For us people present on the spot, there was nothing extraordinary about being there, as that was the exact place we were, as of then, accustomed to call *home*.

We maintained a few tents and makeshift lodgings made of branches and tarpaulin, scattered here and there between firs and hazelnut trees. In a glade amid that improvised little village of ours, a cluster of logs formed a circular bench around an ever-burning campfire. A charred, old, tin teapot nestled atop the embers. A lean steam jet was ejected out of its elongated nozzle. Blended with smoke, it frolicked its way up the sky against the sunlight bundles that penetrated the forest canopy.

And we, witnesses of these marvelous moments, did nothing but solemnly passing the joints around while observing nature in awe and strict silence – as if a single word or sigh would have irrevocably forced the magic to collapse into plain commonness. It was just one of those wonted summer afternoons in the Norwegian forest...

But then, the quiet was interrupted. Suddenly, the reverberation of trampled twigs and dry leaves betrayed the presence of someone walking up the hillslope towards our position. Letting the fumes rise unattended through the air, our gazes got nailed at the slope's purview, curiously anticipating the arrival of our impending visitor.

It was a young fellow whose curly, blond hair, light green eyes, puerile facial features, and puny physique made him look like the hero of some adventure children's movie. The hippy clothes he was dressed in, the small backpack he carried on his shoulders, and especially the double bass he dragged along added a tone of surrealism to that imagined movie.

The persisting on our part silence upon his appearance suggested that he was equally unknown to all. The gratified smile he gave off upon seeing us indicated that we were precisely whom he was looking for.

“Hi guys,” he exclaimed mirthfully when he came to a halt beside our circle.

As advised, he got rid of his burden and took a seat in the circle around the fire. Taking the few moments he needed to catch up with his breath, he proceeded with stating his business. He had set out from his small hometown in Poland to undertake a hitchhiking journey around Europe, exploring the continent and his soul, seeking adventures and meaning for his life. He solved our puzzlement about the double bass by explaining that he’s constrained to only catch rides with truckers or private automobilists with a rack atop their vehicle, which definitely made the whole venture significantly harder, but evidently, far from impracticable.

He was dropped off by one of those truckers outside of Oslo earlier in the morning. By chance, he ended up asking people by the hill’s foot to put his tent inside their garden. One of them made him aware of our little encampment inside the forest, where it should be an ideal place for him to settle.

It took him quite some time and effort wandering around the woods and looking for us at random. He had grown weary and daunted enough to be just about to give up. But at last, he managed to find us and was very happy about it. We unanimously granted him the liberty to pitch his tent at any spot he finds suitable and have some rest.

He stayed with us for a length of time I cannot gauge – Time loses a great deal of its measurability when living in the woods. But I reckon it must have been anything between one and three weeks. For all this period, he kept a rather strict program. He would wake up very early every morning; spend an hour or two breakfasting and chilling in the camp; take his instrument and head to the city on business; and come back late at night to retreat straight to the privacy of his tent.

During the few morning hours he spent at the camp outside of his tent, he wouldn't speak much. He would mostly listen eagerly to what was said around him and, at intervals, blurt out hints of the philosophical cognitions he'd been going through during that ongoing life-changing mission of his. One day, he also spoke to me about his imminent plan. He wanted to go to some place in northern Norway, where he would volunteer on some clay building project, aiming to acquire the skill and know-how to someday build his own clay house in Poland.

As for the nature of his business in town, he didn't say much, either. However, throughout those days, I happened to run into him a few times in the city, so I became aware of what he was up to by chance. He was often stationed somewhere along Karl Johans Street – Oslo's main shopping street – where he busked with his double bass, striving to raise some cash. Other times, I met him roaming around the center, letting me know that he's either about to meet some friend or in the middle of some city-foraging mission: scouting for accessible dumpsters or the various charity-food-rationing-sort-of-places around the city.

That's pretty much how our Polish visitor was keeping himself busy while in Oslo. And then, one morning, his tent was missing. As suddenly as he had appeared, he did that day disappear. Without saying anything, as usual, he had packed his stuff and departed. I envisaged him standing by the side of some highway, his arm extended and his thumb raised, the double bass laying on the asphalt beside him.

A Zimbabwean rubbish artist

...There was only that one bloke whose trust I managed to win. Akasinga was a toothless, fifty-year-old man who used to patronize the inn in the evenings. You would never see him mingle with the rest of the throng that frequented the place. He always sat alone in a dark corner of the yard, near the wall. His lit cigarette glowing through the darkness made me aware of his presence when he was there. A few meters in front of him, he always had a stall placed in the light, where he exhibited his artifacts to prospective buyers.

He created some pretty peculiar gimmicks. He used cardboard, fabrics, tin cans, and various other materials he found in the trash, which he transformed into something like an automated puppet theatre. With a complex system of made-entirely-of-wire shafts and cranks hidden in the base of the maquette, he gave life to his figurines. They worked, danced, and did various crazy things, like that one who made love doggy-style to another. “The one standing is Mugabe. The one stooping is the people of Zimbabwe,” Akasinga explained.

I visited him in his corner nearly every evening, and while we smoked weed, we engaged in various intriguing conversations. He fearlessly recounted several unbelievable incidents of brutality carried out by the country’s terroristic regime, in some of which he personally was the victim. Although I already knew that man is in general capable of the most abhorrent of acts, I have to admit that I freaked out listening to his stories.

But we did not only talk about macabre topics – life generally does never have a single side. He told me, for example, the story of how an American tourist, a few years ago, had bought one of his contrivances for an amount of money that sufficed for the purchase of a brand-new Hyundai i10 car which was now his wheeled house.

One night, he invited me to his home to go out on a brief excursion he called *city safari*. It was not considered a particularly safe practice to

walk around this town at night, not because of crime, but because of the wild animals that take control of the streets when people and baboons – who are the town's diurnal inhabitants – are sleeping.

We saw an elephant hanging around in a supermarket's parking lot. We chanced upon a large buffalo herd running down the main street. This town was built amidst an area where *non-intelligent* life still has the upper hand.

A homeless man in a Saigonese alley

Oftimes, you encounter people with whom you cannot exchange a single word and hardly even share an intelligible gesture with each other. Nonetheless, as if an invisible flow of some uncanny energy conveys ineffable meaning between you, such people may sometimes earn a prominent position in the realm of your memories. One of those people was that homeless guy I once bumped into in Saigon.

In a narrow, dirty alley in one of the countless neighborhoods of this vast and chaotic Vietnamese city, there was a cheap hostel I once spent some ten days of my life. There is something unique about the people you commonly see in an alley. Unlike any ordinary street, an alley does not lead anywhere. Thus you know that almost all the people you see there are there because that's precisely where they want to be. They must have a definite reason for being present. Rarely is anyone there by chance.

Out of all the same different people I kept seeing walking in and out of that alley, there was that one man who particularly attracted my attention. Like everybody else, he had his reason for being there. And like many others, his reason was that there was his home. But unlike all the rest, his home was there solely because he decided so. He was one of those folks who have the liberty to freely choose where home is. He was one of those people we call *homeless*.

The man was following a strict schedule. He would every day appear at the alley entrance by late afternoon. He would slowly yet steadily advance to the inner part, carrying a rather huge canvas sack, supporting it with both hands over his shoulder. I did not get to know of the sack's contents, as I never saw him open it. But I doubt it could have been clothes, as I never saw him wearing anything other than the same, once-white-but-now-grey briefs.

In a ritualistic manner, he would then gingerly place the sack on the exact same spot, next to a cluster of rubbish bins and a pile of some more of his stuff that he always kept there, and he would take a

guardian-like post, sitting cross-legged on the pavement with his back leaning against the wall.

Judging the sack by its size, I doubt it could have weighed less than 20 kg. He did not seem to toil much in order to carry it, however. And that was especially impressive because he could not have weighed more than 30 kg himself.

The guy's build was somewhat scanty. It seemed like heredity had altogether omitted to add the related to muscles and fat piece of code in his DNA. And what remained was a skeleton wrapped with a condom-tight layer of skin.

He seemed to be lacking appetite, or maybe the sensation of hunger altogether. He always had plenty of food, which some of the alley's residents provided, but he wouldn't make much use of it. Not because he wasn't eating, but because he was a rather slow eater. He would always hold a bun in his hand, which he would be munching over many hours, chewing every bit as if going through an inner moral struggle before he managed to swallow it.

Besides the imperceptible chewing motion of his jaw and the periodical lifting of his hand to his mouth, the only other parts of his body moving were his neck and eyes. They were constantly scanning the alley, registering every person who entered. And they were getting intently fixed to some one of them when traffic was low.

As I often happened to be out on the balcony, right opposite his position, late at night – doing people-watching meditation, just like him pretty much – our gazes met each other regularly. It was through those long confrontations of our eyes that I got to understand he was living in some deep trance, somewhere far away from the material world.

He gave me the impression that his vision could only detect people and cats, all non-living matter being but a blank background to him. He seemed genuinely happy for as long as any legged objects were within sight, staring at them with a contented smile that contorted whatever muscles his face had.

His contentment would gradually recede as traffic got sparser. And by the time we'd end up with our gazes fixed at each other – the two of us being the only ones out in the alley – I could discern in him a terror of impending darkness.

I tried to communicate with him from across the narrow street via words, gestures, and nods. But he couldn't make the slightest meaning out of them. He would, though, every time, no matter what my signal, respond with an outburst of joyous laughter and words, gestures, and nods of his own – from which nor could I derive any meaning.

Then, as my expression went flat again, fear returned in his mien. I suspect he could not perceive me or anyone else as ones of his own kind. Maybe his own physical substance was, too, a part of an enveloping vacuum. Perhaps he could only see scattered legged objects roaming through a blank, two-dimensional space, which he observed from some other, outer dimensions where there was only still blackness.

That's pretty much how the man passed his evenings, immersed in an abysmal trance. He would always sit on the exact same spot, in the exact same pose, tormentingly slowly nibbling a piece of bread, and meticulously scanning the alley with his gaze for people or cats who'd give him a good laugh.

After there were no people or cats left to keep him entertained, he'd end up supine in front of his sack, under a rough, dirty blanket, sleeping soundly and smilingly.

In the mornings, now, he seemed quite a different person: more of a person in the sense of a person who is aware of being a person. He would nimbly fold his blanket and place it back onto his stuff pile. Then he would spend some time sauntering around the alley and exchanging merry salutations with some of the residents. And finally, just before the shop – in front of whose entrance his home was – was about to open, he would shoulder his sack and make for the maze-like city.

What he might have been doing there, I do not know. But I can well imagine him wandering around planlessly until the shop closed again in the afternoon, when he could return home and indulge in his peculiar meditation process.

A Tanzanian tourist tout

...Another nice chap I got to meet in Dar Es Salaam was Ibrahim. He was one of those tout-hustlers who parasitized the tourists. I, however, as a Greek, ought to have been a sailor and not a tripper. So I wasn't a prospective client. I had known him since the very day of my arrival. He constantly shuffled around the neighborhood, and I bumped into him all too often.

One evening, as I desired some company, I came across him sitting on a curb and scanning the surrounding area for tourists.

"Hey, Ibrahim! How's it going? What are you up to?" I said.

"Aw, nothing really. Just waiting here to see if any Mzungu passes by, perhaps make some shillings, you know. But nah, I think I'll get going soon. It's been very quiet today," he responded.

I invited him for a beer, and he, of course, accepted.

Various interesting things I heard from that guy that day. He was the first to explain to me the meaning of the term *Mzungu*. It is a Kiswahili word widely used in many east African languages to denote a European or a white person in general. It etymologically means *the one who wanders aimlessly*.

He also disclosed lots of curious details regarding his profession: the various methods he employs to earn money from a visitor; the multiple tactics he can follow to succeed... he also analyzed a bit the psychology of the Western tourist... etc. I found him quite an expert in his craft, I must admit.

"*Ibrahim*, said I to myself when I was a kid, someday a Mzungu will change your life! So I have twenty years of working with them already... But I still hope," he concluded.

A Japanese chap busking on acid

It was that summer I was wandering around Romania on my bicycle. I had spent the past few weeks in deep isolation: pedaling across broad plains or up and down lofty mountains during the day; sequestered in my tent, pitched in some vacant field or deep woods, during the night. That feeling of isolation had become further intensified throughout the last week I'd spent high up on the ridge of the Transylvanian Carpathians.

Humans lately had become quite an alienated notion to my mind. That's why an intense desire to see and speak with some of them had taken over me while, toilsomely pedaling through a mad rainstorm, I was that day approaching the Transylvanian town of Sibiu.

Water dripping down from all over me, I finally made it and settled in a hostel in the town's center. I remained there for about a week and took plenty of advantage of the amenities I'd lacked recently: mattress, shower, kitchen, internet... But most of all, that brief sojourn in civilization was a great opportunity to see and socialize with my kind afresh.

Every day, I unremittingly indulged in extensive walks and long sessions of people-watching. The town was abundantly vivified by a sundry agglomeration of folks, varying from begging gypsies to high-class international tourists.

Out of them all, there was that Japanese dude who formed a notable contrast to the general commonplaceness of the crowd and particularly ignited my curiosity. Right there, on the exact same spot, at the busiest part of the city's most frequented pedestrian street, from early morning till late night, he always was there. He *always* was there, dressed in a hippie outfit, sitting cross-legged on the ground, eyes closed, fondling the surface of his hang drum.

Music-wise, the chap wasn't a genius. He invariably played the same one-minute-long tune, round-and-round in endless repetition, only the

tempo gradually quickening as the day progressed. However, insofar as a street musician's value is measured by the volume of dough landing into his instrument case... phew, he was a tremendous success!

I don't know what he did – he did nothing basically; he rarely even opened his eyes at all – but something in his calm, meditative demeanor, perhaps, attracted people to him like mice to a cheese bit. A thick assembly was perpetually stationed before him, and a constant stream of coins flowed into his hang drum case.

Even more astonishing than his ability to attract people's attention by doing nothing was the very fact that he could bear staying there the whole day doing nothing – nothing other than sitting in the same still, rapt pose, only moving his arms in the same repetitious pattern. This definitely is a pretty extraordinary skill that requires patience, strong nerves, and supernatural composure.

Although his body was present, his mind was evidently absent, sailing through some far-flung, extradimensional cosmos of its own. I doubt whether he registered anything at all of what happened in our world during his performances. He was in a deep, abysmal, unfathomable trance.

It seemed to me quite impossible that someone could achieve such a trance state by meditation alone. He must have been tripping on acid recurrently, day after day. Or if not, his brain must have remained imbued by LSD since some past trip, in pretty much the same way it happened with Obelix when he fell into the magic-potion cauldron.

The principal reason that had brought me to Sibiu in the first place was the Transylvania Calling psytrance festival, which was to take place inside a secluded gorge of the nearby Apuseni Mountains. While I was at the festival, that Japanese guy and everything else related to the world outside the party was temporarily erased from my mind.

But then, somewhere near the main stage, there he suddenly appeared in front of my sight, his eyes wide open, a joyous flare beaming out of

them, oscillating between this and another world. He gestured a cordial greeting as if we'd known each other forever, perhaps from the other world.

An Albanian immigrant in Greece

It was sometime midway between sunset and sunrise of a summer new-moon night at a secluded beach somewhere in Greece. Due to the moon's absence, the sky, the earth, and the sea were veiled in deep darkness. Only the dim lights of a cluster of villages across the bay and the countless radiating other worlds of the Milky Way overheads were interrupting the absoluteness of the enveloping gloom.

A campfire was burning at one of the beach's ends, illuminating a limited piece of surrounding space in warm orange tints. A bunch of some 15-20 teenagers – one of whom was I – formed a circle around the fire, passing around a large number of joints, joking and laughing, and enjoying the magic of the summer night.

This same course had been repeated for many a consecutive preceding night at the same spot. Nothing would have been exceptionally memorable about that night to distinguish it from all the previous ones. But a human silhouette did then appear within reach of the firelight, heading straight for its source.

Who could our impending visitor be? all wondered during the first few moments of silence that followed the strange figure's appearance.

“Just a bypasser,” an indifferent voice said. “*Maybe some friend,*” another curious one followed. “*The police, guys! Hide all the stuff!*” a paranoid one begged...

All three suppositions had to be ruled out... The beach border, which came after the fire, was a dead-end; nobody could be passing by. We didn't expect anybody, and no-one unexpected could know where we were. Lastly, the silhouette's paraplegic-like gait – shoulders hanging forward and feet warped outwards Charlie-Chaplin-style – could not belong to a policeman, no matter how hard he tried to pretend not being one if he was. All speculation failed. We'd have to see to find out, any moment now.

He was a dumb-looking Albanian bloke. Without showing the slightest sign of hesitation, he found a vacant place for him in the circle and sat comfortably on the ground. He made his entrance in such an easy and confident manner that he obliged everyone to assume that someone from the company must know him.

For something like half a confounded minute that followed, he kept staring at the fire and the sky alternately, whereas all the rest looked at him and one another in expectant silence, waiting to see who knows that mysterious bloke. It had started to become evident that no-one knew him when the silence was finally broken...

“Who the fuck are you?” asked one of the guys.

“Who? Me?” he enunciated in broken Greek.

“Yes, you. Who are you?”

“Me DeeJay.”

“We don’t care if you are a deeJay. What’s your name?”

“Yes. Me name DeeJay.”

“What in hell are you talking about, man? You cannot be called DeeJay. You must have a real name.”

“Yes. Real name! Me all know DeeJay!”

“Alright then, DeeJay,” he said resignedly. “And what do you want?”

“Me want smoke. Me come Albania. Me walk. Smell and come smoke.”

How he had forcibly invaded the company, without even bothering to introduce himself or something, and demanded to be given to smoke was rather rude. That initially urged many from the company to harshly refuse his request. Tensions arose. A couple of them got so offended that they needed to be appeased by the rest to not oust him

by force.

But in the end, as he seemed to be an okay and, most importantly, funny chap, the impression of his insolence, seen as the result of cultural differences and his inability to communicate well in our tongue, came to be mitigated and forgiven. That led to his wish being fulfilled. The leftovers of a joint finally ended up in his hand.

His countenance radiated with joy. Without dawdling for a moment, he brought the spliff to his mouth and, applying the fullest of his lung capacity, sucked two or three consecutive deep drags. That was all there was to it. He was then expected to fling the butt in the fire. But no! What Deejay then did still accounts for one of the best laughs I've so far had in my life.

He fixed the crutch of the joint in one of his nostrils, shut the other with his finger, and got to maniacally inhale the burning paper. Wow, the bloke was insane, utterly mad! He took a deep sniff, then stopped for the half-minute or so it took him to repress the severe coughing and choking, and he repeated the process over and over again, feeding the crutch with the lighter while sniffing until there was nothing more he could grip. His face had turned red to the point you thought his veins might crack open, and his eyes were tearing a stream. Ours did the same due to extreme laughter.

Deejay settled in our company for the rest of the night. Many joints he smoked (and sniffed) and high as a kite he got. Slowly and painfully, making use of his poor Greek and gesticulations, he told us his story...

He came from a small village in northern Albania. He recently had run into trouble. The law and a mafia family were after him for several infringements. Threatened by prison from one side and death from the other, he managed to escape and make his way to the Greek border. He crossed clandestinely over the wild mountains and, ultimately, a few weeks prior to our meeting there, wound up in our city where a cousin of his lived. He now intended to get a job and start a new, peaceful life.

However, his life in our city did not turn out so peaceful after all. He soon got hooked on heroin. He got involved in a variety of shady ventures: drug-pushing, pimping, burglaries, robberies... He managed to get by with the police for some time, working for them as an informant, but he consequently gained a bad reputation amongst the city's crime circles, Greeks and Albanians alike, so that he was forced to live and act surreptitiously, like a mole. He wasn't going to last long.

The last I saw of him was only a few months after his initial appearance in the city. It was a late night at a quay. I was chilling there with some friends. Two local blokes I knew were smoking pot a little further away. Deejay, together with another Albanian dude, showed up suddenly and joined the two blokes. They seemed to be conversing in rather friendly (at least not hostile) terms for the time being. The two Albanians, at an unsuspected moment, stood up and started walking hastily away. I did not know what had caused the startling events that followed during my attending them. Only after, I got to know that Deejay attempted to steal something from them.

The two Albanians must have walked no more than fifty steps when the two offended blokes realized that their goods were missing. They abruptly stood up and started running after them. They, in turn, noticed them right away and started running, too, down the quay to get away.

The second Albanian proved swift; he vanished like a bat out of hell. Deejay, though, could not – and didn't want to – fly like a wimp. He was left alone against two. When he was just about to get caught, he plucked up a leftover beer bottle, smashed it against the concrete ground, and clutching the razor-sharp remainder of the glass bottle tightly in his fist, he turned around to confront his persecutors.

He wasn't quick enough. They seized him, removed the glass from his hand, and beat the hell out of him. For a length of time long enough to make me feel pity for him despite him having clearly asked for it, the two enraged blokes kept violently kicking and punching his bleeding, writhing, begging, and cursing body. They only stopped after I managed to convince them that "guys, okay, it's enough, you are

going to kill him, he's learned his lesson," upon which instance they shoved him off the quay, three meters down the rocky shore, and walked away.

That was the last time I saw DeeJay. I later got to hear that he spent a good two weeks in the hospital with a head injury and several broken ribs; and that he then came out and started looking for trouble once again. What may have become of him, I have no idea. But I suspect he must have either ended up in prison or in a grave.

An Italian penniless traveler

Throughout my many years roaming around the globe, I have had the good luck to become acquainted with a multitude of other people doing the same. Out of them all, many fell into the category of the so-called budget travelers.

Some possessed a fair amount of savings and would strive to keep their expenses as low as possible to extend their traveling time to the greatest achievable length. Others had no savings but a secured influx of a small recurring income, instead. And a few, like the protagonist of this story, had taken the concept of budget traveling to the next level: the level of literally moneyless traveling.

The bloke was outright broke. Vittorio was a guy from the Italian region of Puglia I once met briefly. His boldness to defy common sense, public morality, and absolutely every obstacle to pursue his dream of seeing the world has earned him a prominent place in my memories.

It was summer in an ancient forest near the city of Oslo. Out of a tiny camp two friends and I had set there at the beginning of the summer, mainly owing to the rave parties we then started to organize, an entire little village eventually evolved in the middle of the woods. Our small forest-hippie community was attracting a lot of attention during its peak time. All sorts of folks were visiting for many different reasons; a common reason being to find free accommodation in the otherwise insanely overpriced Norwegian capital city.

One day, upon returning home from the city, I got introduced to a new member of the community who had just wound up there seeking a place to crash. His violet, checkered, two-sizes-smaller trousers and the bowler hat on top of his curly hair gave him a funny and trusty look. He had a calm demeanor, and his words were thriftily and prudently pronounced. Because of this first impression, as well as the Mediterranean temperament that we shared, I took an instant liking to him.

Though taciturn he generally was, he spoke to me a good deal about his mission during the week or two he, after all, stayed with us. For starters, he didn't really have a mission; he was looking for one. It'd been a few months since he left his village in Puglia with only a small backpack and a few coins clinking in his pocket.

He wasn't very eager to speak about his previous life. Still, I may suspect a tormentingly dull, meaningless life that, combined with some emotional affliction or heartbreak, is the usual reason urging one to undertake such an adventure.

He wandered around Europe without a particular destination in mind. He'd just stand on the side of the motorway with his thumb raised and accept any ride fate brought forth: the "where are you going to?" – "to the same place as you" kind of thing.

He passed his nights in fields, forests, and public parks inside his tiny backpacking tent or in some squat while in big cities. As for food, he exploited various methods for getting hold of it, but his primary one, which provided the bulk of his nourishment, was what he dubbed *supermarket donations*.

He valued a lot and was proud of his shoplifting abilities. I asked him whether he had any special technique or tricks he used to rid the shop shelves of their merchandise. He said: Yes, you just walk into the shop, throw everything you need – from candy to a whole chicken – inside a bag, and you walk away. The trick involved is to not bother about devising unnecessary tricks. At times, in case he'd be short of a bag, he'd use the supermarket basket, all the same.

Since he didn't drink or smoke, and he could fix transportation, accommodation, and food for free, he was basically money-independent in the full sense. However, he had come up with a gig to raise some small cash and afford some relative *luxury*.

He liked to describe himself as a juggler, but after I one day bumped into him performing in the city, I would refrain from calling him a such to not do injustice to real jugglers. Well... he had a triplet of

juggling balls which he switched between his hands in a rather clumsy manner, but his gig mainly consisted of directly asking – or rather shouting at – the passersby for money.

He'd be like: "Eh, you with the green shirt! Give me some coins! Don't walk away like that! You are Norwegian! You have lots of money! Give me some!" Due to his persistence, as well as his occupying the most central and frequented spot in the city, he seemed to do fairly well.

So did Vittorio make it to Oslo but so far had no significant mission other than to keep surviving and moving. One sunny morning, as we sat in an open meadow near our camp, he told me how he's fallen in love with a girl he met while in Germany. They spent some sweet time together, but she then went back to her studies. So for the moment, until a clear prospect of meeting her again was to arise, she was more of a dream than a mission.

During the last couple of days of Vittorio's stay in our camp, I heard from him something like a plan to continue his journey to northern Norway sometime soon. But then, one morning, some Czech dudes, who as of recent squatted on a little island in the fjords, showed up at our camp.

They were just about to head to the Netherlands by hitchhiking to attend a festival. "*What festival?*" asked Vittorio, who was seeing those Czechs for the first time in his life. About a quarter of an hour later, he had packed all his belongings and was setting off to the festival together with them.

That was the last I saw or heard of him. I wish with all my heart he is alright and has found his mission and happiness in his life.

A Czech man and a dog walking to Istanbul

Quite many hours had passed since I woke up, concurrently with the sunrise, at that random field somewhere in southern ex-Yugoslavia. After enjoying a cup of coffee in the company of the world's awakening, I set off pedaling right away. Many kilometers I'd covered and many hills I'd surmounted while defying the extreme summer heat throughout that day. And now, late afternoon, heat as relentless as ever, I was toilsomely pedaling along that long, straight road, ahead of which lay Lake Doiran, the Greek border, and the end of yet another tough cycling day.

Several hours must have gone by since noting the last signs of human presence. The entire surrounding landscape with me amidst it felt utterly desolated. It was then I discerned what I first took for a single black dot, and then for two – a taller and a shorter one – moving figures at my vision's diffracted ken.

I was moving slowly towards them, and they even more slowly towards me. We were only a few meters short of our ways meeting when I finally could distinguish them clearly for what they were: a man and a dog.

We stopped by each other. "Hey there," I said. The man greeted back with a Slav-accented "hello" and the dog with a curious, intent look, a slight snort, and a delighted waggle.

During the half silent minute or so that followed, we got to examine each other while catching up with our breaths. The man was excessively tall; dirty and drained; with a long, frowsy beard and a serenity-radiating countenance; wearing a torn and unwashed-for-weeks set of black clothes; carrying an enormous backpack with a tent and a mat attached on the outside and cooking utensils hanging out from it. The dog was an all-black, phlegmatic Miniature Boxer carrying a pair of panniers loaded with stuff seemingly as heavy as himself.

“Where do you guys come from?” I initiated the talk.

“From the Czech Republic.”

“Where are you coming from, and where are you heading too?”

“We started from home four months ago. We walked to Istanbul through Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. We are on our way back home now through Greece and Yugoslavia.”

That was pretty much all we said. We stayed there silent for a few more seconds, wished each other good luck, and resumed our ways in opposite directions... I, pedaling; they, walking.

A dating sites' chat moderator

Being, to a certain extent, the traditional and romantically nostalgic kind of person, I was never much into dating sites and apps. Apart from some brief sessions on various platforms for the sake of research and experimentation, I've never made any serious use of them. However, as with pretty much every other aspect of modern life, the way the internet has revolutionized people's interactions in the erotic-romantic level has kept my curiosity high since the days of its inception.

Besides the obvious reasons urging people to use such platforms (be it to find their soulmate, a one-night stand, or just chatting while exciting their imagination and masturbating over their mobile phone screen), I've been particularly interested in other, not-so-obvious, profit-oriented uses people such as scammers, blackmailers, and the platforms' creators and managers themselves make of them.

I've long known that individuals operate fake profiles on such sites for a great variety of purposes. One thing I wasn't aware of until recently, though, is that the platforms themselves set up their own fake accounts and hire specialized (apparently legal!) companies to have them managed.

That I learned the other night while attending an underground techno party in Athens. I was introduced by a friend to a French expat. We had a talk which became especially interesting when I asked him what he does for a living. He said he has an online job in a company providing chat moderation services. I hadn't heard of this term before (tell me if you have!).

A number of different ideas passed through my head, attempting to define what *chat moderation* and the task of a *chat moderator* may be, but none of them succeeded in even getting close to the truth. I had to ask...

It turned out that *chat moderation services* was but a fancy, tactful

term for *dating sites' fake profile management*. Due to the novelty of what I just heard striking me as intriguing, I asked my new friend whether he'd like to meet me in a few days and give me a detailed interview about his occupation. He agreed. And here's the summation of it...

"So, my friend, what's your profession?"

"Well, as I told you before, I work as a chat moderator. It is a 100% location-and-schedule-free job. What I basically do is sitting at home and replying to messages...

"Look, it works like this: There is always an extreme imbalance between male and female accounts on all dating sites and especially the erotic ones. I mean, if you are a girl and want sex, no matter how bad you look, you hardly even need to go to the bar. You will probably have plenty of choices for good-looking guys to pick up along your way there.

"Furthermore, they don't want the men to be chatting much with real girls – even when there are some. They don't want them to get married or anything and quit the site. Because of this fact, the companies need to cure the imbalance in order to keep the platform running and generating income. They do this by creating a corresponding to the males' one number of fake female profiles. So they can keep the males' interest alive, and thus their subscriptions streaming in.

"There comes my part. I just log in to the system whenever I feel like working, I see all the guys waiting for a reply from all the different bogus girls' accounts, and I start answering them one after another. One says: 'Hello sexy! How are you?' And I'm like: 'I'm good and you? Lol'... And the conversation goes on. That's the thing."

"Are you given some guidelines on how the answers should be like?"

"Yes, of course. We basically need to keep the guys entertained while perpetually postponing the meeting. When a guy presses for a meeting, we need to keep the line of '*you know, dude, I'm not here*

looking just for sex; if I want to have sex, I can go to the bar; I need to get to know you better before I agree to see you.'

“Some of them are too anxious to meet up with the girls. We cannot satisfy their needs, and they will soon drop out of the app. Some others enjoy chatting – or even, due to being married or any other reason, they are there for chatting alone. They are the sites’ ideal clients.”

“And how did you find this job in the first place?”

“It was recommended to me by a guy I knew in Estonia who did it already. He sent me over the link, I applied, I was hired... That was all.”

“Is it mandatory to have a direct link to the company for getting hired?”

“No, it’s open on the internet. They have a website where anyone can apply. It’s a perfectly legal company based in England.”

“Legal? Isn’t there any law prohibiting to be faking a personality?”

“Basically... no.”

“Do you enjoy this job?”

“Yes, quite much. It can be fun. I hear lots of funny stuff from our clients, and I also get to speak to them about my own vices and perversions; things I could not easily say to anyone in person. They tell me about their fetishes, and I tell them back about my own kinky experiences in bed, reversing, of course, my role as if I were my girlfriend. Anyhow, it allows me to work whenever and wherever I want, and I get fairly well paid for it.”

“How much do you earn for doing this?”

“I get paid on a per-message basis. I earn €0.09 for every answer I send. The best money is in the evenings and weekends when most of

the guys are online chatting, and there's a constant stream of pending replies. During rush hour, if you are productive enough, you can type at least 100 answers per hour, thus securing a €10 hourly wage. I usually work 2-3 hours every evening, but I miss the weekends because I party too much. If I wasn't partying and was a little more focused, I could easily clear a €1.500 salary out of messaging alone. I forgot to mention I've also got a morning side-gig with the same company, taking up phone calls for the dating site's customer service."

"Can it then be that the same guy who chatted with you last evening, taking you for that busty Latin girl in the profile picture, might call in the morning to complain about her behavior?"

"No, not really. The customer service supports only financial issues. But it can theoretically be that the same guy who was yesterday writing to me about his kinky fantasies calls me up in the morning to complain about an overcharge on his credit card... You never know."

"So, if I get it right, any of the employees can take up any of the fake accounts at any moment. Wouldn't it be more efficient if each individual employee was responsible for one or a few unique girls' profiles?"

"Yes, precisely so. Once you log in to the system, you will see a complete list of all the messages waiting for a reply. The first available employee will rejoin.

"It could, indeed, be more practical if we could take up specific profiles. This way, we could sustain coherent conversations with the clients from start to finish and increase their engagement with the site. On top of that, it would also be more fun for me as an employee..."

"But I suppose it would be challenging to manage. Since we work on a free-schedule basis, it wouldn't be easy to keep the conversation running with the clients. It wouldn't be good to let a client waiting for a reply for a whole week, for example. But nor do we need to communicate with them too frequently. When they pay, let's say, a €30 monthly subscription, and each message they receive costs €0.09,

if you send them more than 300 messages in a month or 10 in a day, you are in the red.

“I believe there must be an algorithm in place to take care of this; showing, hiding, and prioritizing messages to be answered accordingly for maximizing profits.”

“Do you and each one employee of the company work for only one site? Or can you take up profiles across multiple sites?”

“Each employee gets assigned to work for one site only. I, for instance, work for a French-language erotic app. The company serves a great multitude of dating and erotic sites in many different languages, who are the ones creating the fake profiles in the first place. Our company only provides them with the appropriate staff to manage them.”

“I assume the profiles are created strategically according to statistical research...”

“Of course. They know their male clientele very well. They set up accounts according to demand. They throw in profiles of diverse nationalities, ages, personalities... All the range is covered: from the super-sexy, exotic girl with the lecherous pictures to the Puritan Christian girl looking to start a big traditional family... You name it.”

“And what about the girls’ pictures? Do you know where they come from?”

“No clue. They may be downloading them from Google. They may be buying them from stock repositories. Some profiles have only one picture; some others have many... I get paid to write messages. Wherever the pictures of the girls I feign come from... nothing I care to know.”

“Does your company also serve mainstream dating sites like Tinder or Badoo?”

“I assume they do. Knowing all the company’s contracts is none of

my business. If not they, however, someone else does for sure.”

“Has it ever crossed your mind to try to earn some extra cash by insidious means? Like in: *How are you pretty? - So-so. The thing is that my mother needs to undergo a serious operation, and I have to work the whole time to cover the expenses.*”

“No, no, definitely not. That would be straight-up fraud. That’s left to the Nigerian scammers; they’re experts in this. The company would never allow such a thing to happen, lest they fancy being shut and prosecuted. They monitor all conversations closely. Everything is recorded to make sure employees do not cross the line.”

“Speaking about scammers, there must be plenty of their kind hanging out in these apps, eh?”

“Even when I operate my real profile, looking for girls, I haven’t run into any myself. They most often need to pay for registration, and that deters them from trying. The platforms also do their best to keep such pricks out. Once they appear, it doesn’t take long until they are discovered and deleted. Still, there are loads of unserious apps allotting a consistent field of action to them, too.”

“Can you recount some funny or anyhow unusual conversations you’ve had with your clients?”

“Phew, there are countless. Let me tell you about two cases I remember...

“First, there are the *copy-paste* guys. They will start a chat with each and every girl on the site by saying the exact same thing. They are demanding clients. I will initially reply to them from a few different profiles, but I will soon need to start ignoring them, running out of ideas. I mean, how many distinct answers can one give to the same question? They’re left to those of my colleagues with a richer sense of imagination.

“Then, I remember that guy who was asking all girls whether they’d want to...” – hm, how to put it? *Penetrate his anus* would do decently,

I guess – “...with a penis belt. I answered him through quite a few profiles. He was Swiss, around forty years old. At one instance, I asked him whether he also likes doing it, besides getting it done to himself. ‘Yes,’ he said. He does it regularly but has never found a girl who agreed to do it to him. He has asked his girlfriend, but she categorically refuses to do it. That’s why he’s on the site.

“I have also heard of golden showers, coprophilia, and pretty much any fetish you can imagine or not.”

“Can you be sure that that Swiss guy or any other guy goes online by his true identity and not an alias?”

“Most of them go with real profiles, I suppose. Some surely use fake ones, too. It never bothered me much to know. Whether real or not, they pay the site to pay the company to pay me €0.09 per message. That’s all there is to care about from my end.”

A Czech dude crazy-tripping in the Norwegian woods

Subtle bundles of meridian sunlight penetrated the foliage and reached the forest floor. Enormous conifers and thick clusters of hazelnut trees seemed to rejoice in the warmth. Delicate smoke wisps ascended idly from the forgotten campfire towards the forest canopy, and ash danced in the air. A charred teapot lay on top of the embers. The quiet would have been absolute if the group of us weren't hard at work with the preparations.

Hammers banged, and saws rattled. Rushed footfalls scurried noisily all over the place. Urgent voices merged with each other into an incoherent jumble.

We were, at the time, some ten people living permanently in that makeshift camp. We maintained a few improvised shacks, made of branches, palettes, and tarpaulin; a broad and neat communal area around the fire in the middle of the clearing; and a messy but functional outdoor kitchen.

Now, we had some ten more people helping with the additions. We were almost ready. A bar and a stage had been given shape. The bar was basically a plank nailed between two tree trunks, roofed with canvas and complemented by shelves, and was equipped with a few bin bags full of cheap, smuggled Polish beer. The stage featured fairy lights and an impromptu sound system, powered by car batteries, mounted on an off-road-tired pull cart. As the long summer day neared its nightfall, people began to thicken. The party would start soon.

Dusk did at last befall at around midnight. Creaking bass and jolly melodies were released in the ambiance. The earth pulsed, and the air throbbed. Deep darkness gradually prevailed. Bizarre things began to happen within the attendants' minds.

A good old forest psytrance party was ongoing. Many members of Oslo's psy-hippies community had shown up. And so had a bunch of Czech guys, who were camping on a tiny island out in the fjord while summer-working in Norway. Two of the group's individuals came to cause a little trouble for the event.

Firstly, there was that Czech girl who went missing. Nobody had noticed that until she called from the police station. She got arrested while roaming naked on the provincial road, a mile or two of somber forest away from the party.

Then, there was that dude...

He was huge, rough, rancorous, and imbecilic, but innately gentle. In his presence, you were reminded of a frisky Great Dane puppy kept in a living room. Carrying his towering body around, he caused havoc upon his passage. Even the trees could get a headache when he opened his mouth, and he hardly ever closed it. He was, in fact, the only person we ever had to reject moving in our forest camp when one day he showed up and started building a shelter for himself, without asking anyone. But now he was there for the party. And on top of his chaotic mind, he was also tripping... tripping hard.

He'd been downing the mushrooms like candy and the acid drops like a bloody coke. It was to be expected. We'd braced ourselves up for the disturbance. We tried to appease him for some time, but eventually, he went completely out of control, outright berserk. He was screaming stuff that I couldn't understand, and I doubt whether the Czech guys could either. He was plodding around the place manically, crushing everything and everyone on his way; injured a couple of people. Peremptory action had to be taken.

A couple of us did eventually leap at him and got him on the ground. At first, he screamed and fought. People were suggesting to tie him on a tree and gag him. But others, we advocated against that; he could come out with severe mental trauma.

At an unexpected moment, his flattened body stopped writhing. It stopped moving altogether. His limbs didn't budge an inch. His eyes,

wide-open, didn't blink but were fixed abysmally into the infinity of the night sky between the fir tops far overheads. His only muscles still in use were the ones along the way from his diaphragm to his lips, driving air out of his mouth, lots of it. He screamed two intelligible words interchangeably: *svetlo* and *zivot*, meaning *light* and *life* in Czech.

We tried to bring him around for a bit, but he was as unresponsive as a computer would be to a living mouse. We decided to let him be. He was undoubtedly tranquilized; wouldn't cause more issues. His screams, though audible even when standing beside the speaker, couldn't quite outshout the music. And he seemed reasonably sound and safe, too... I mean, if he shouted *darkness* and *death* instead, I would be more concerned.

The party went on. His cries, though persistent in frequency, did gradually diminish in volume. Other wondrous things taking place in their minds, everybody forgot about him. The batteries ran empty and the speaker quiet at around sunrise. People began to slowly disperse.

Hours later, only a handful of us were present and awake, sitting in the bar and sipping coffee. The sun was soaring invisibly behind the bleak cloud veil that hid the sky, yet it was steadily dissolving the mist in the forest. Only a fine haze mantle remained, carpeting the moist soil. It was just low enough to discern the top layer of a thick pile of blankets we'd covered the Czech dude with, who still lay in the exact same position. His face was no more ruddy than the mist. His eyes, bloodshot, stared as abysmally through the humid whiteness. His lips twitched imperceptibly, and if you put your ear on them, you could still hear *svetlo* and *zivot* being pronounced effortfully.

We hadn't checked on him in a while, when leaves rustled. A bunch of mouths shut, and necks swiveled in unison. Twice as many eyes focused on him curiously. He had cast the blankets aside and was laboriously trying to get up. His hulking body towered over the vapors. He stretched and looked around him bewilderedly before shuffling towards us. He stepped under the kitchen roof and came to a halt. He sighed. Everyone stared at everyone for some quiet seconds;

he in confusion, the rest in interested amusement.

“How is it going?” I then broke the silence, addressing the revived man.

His face brightened. “I was happy!” he exclaimed.

An American woman in Communist Cuba

A searing tropical sun was approaching its zenith in the blue sky of Havana, but hardly any light had made it through the tiny, curtained window of my dingy room. The antiquated wall fan was whirring madly, pointed firmly over my prostrated body, but I was drenched in sweat all the same. I was just beginning to wake up and become aware of my mild hangover.

Half-sleepingly, I tried to recollect my last night's memories: Latin tunes, pretty female faces, rum effluvium... there wasn't much more than that. I needed a cold shower and a strong dose of caffeine. After the third cup, I got hungry.

I threw some clothes on me and hit the streets in search of a belated breakfast. I meandered a bit around the busy, torrid streets of Habana Nueva district until I caught a whiff of freshly-baked pastry. A little bakery-cafe was wedged in the corner of a narrow alley – one of the still scarce private enterprises that had begun to pop up after the then-recent economic reforms. I stepped in.

An intelligent-looking, elderly, black woman nailed a raring gaze at me upon my entry. She was the place's only customer, sat at the cornermost table over a long-empty cup of coffee. She curiously attended my advance towards the display case. Various tempting treats lay in there, but I was most attracted by that fluffy and melty pizza.

“Cuanto por una rebanada?” I asked the girl behind the counter in my broken Spanish.

“50 pesos,” she replied, understanding that I'm a foreigner and attempting to rip me off big.

“Ohoho,” I snarled. “Me refiero al precio normal.”

“Es 2 pesos,” the woman behind me then chimed in to provide the answer.

“Gracias,” I said, briefly turning around to face her.

Back to the cashier: “Entonces, si es 2 por una, sería 4 por dos, correcto?” I inquired, displaying the numbers with my fingers.

She nodded *yes*, and I requested my two pizza slices served. I paid and turned around, intent on leaving to eat outside, but my intention was hampered by the old woman who had meanwhile broken out into hearty laughter.

“Good math,” she pronounced, between her laughing bursts, in unmistakably American-accented English. “Will you have a seat?” she invited me to her table when she managed to restrain her merriment.

I wasn’t accustomed to running into foreigners, and especially Americans, in this part of the town. I was actually missing a proper conversation in a language I knew well, plus that she seemed to make for an agreeable company. So I welcomed her invitation rather earnestly.

“Would you like a coffee?” she offered no sooner than I sat down.

“Well, I’ve had three already, but a fourth one wouldn’t do any more harm.”

She raised her arm assertively and ordered two cups in a perfectly Cuban accent.

“Are you American?” I asked her with a tinge of uncertainty.

“I used to be,” she replied curtly. “I’m Cuban now, since a long time.”

She registered my confounded stare and explained further: “I was born in the USA by American parents, but I was raised in Cuba by

Cuban parents.”

She kissed off a question that was just about to form on my lips and changed the topic to me. I answered a few questions about my situation perfunctorily, and I eventually managed to revert to the more intriguing subject of how she’d ended up there. Over the next hour or so, she narrated the gist of her peculiar life story...

She was born in Alabama to African American parents in 1944. Her mother passed away shortly after her birth, and she was placed in an orphanage while her father was serving the army in Europe. After his return, she was taken under his care and grew up as a military brat in different bases around the States. They finally moved to Guantanamo in 1955.

One day in 1958, amidst the culmination of the civil war, her father brought her to a Cuban family in a nearby village and left her there. He assuaged her sobs with promises of return, but he never returned. Did he abscond out of fear of the revolution...? Did he renegade to join the revolutionaries...? Did he simply elope with some Cuban woman...? Did he remain alive for long or short after his disappearance...? She never got to know.

It didn’t take her long to forget her roots. Her new family tending to her more lovingly than her father ever had significantly expedited the progress of oblivion. She got fully integrated into her novel society and lived in the village until her mid-twenties. Then she got married, moved to Havana, got a job as an English teacher, and had many children and grandchildren. She never left the island.

“Did you never wish to return to your homeland?” I wondered.

“What for? To begin with, it would be bureaucratically complicated, if not impossible; I didn’t have any document proving my origins. I was registered in the census under the new regime. For what the state is concerned, I am a Cuban. If it wasn’t for my husband, I wouldn’t be permitted to even move to the capital, let alone the United States.

“And then, why would I want to go there anyway? In the years before

I got married, blacks in my home state were water-cannoned and batoned to death. Here, I may have been poor, but at least I am treated like a human being.”

“Do you then approve of the Communist regime?” I whispered cautiously, glancing sidelong.

“Approve? Of course not,” she said in unaltered volume. “They’re but a bunch of corrupt rascals – just like all politicians are – but they here are even worse, being left completely unchecked. And Fidel is the chief villain; nothing in this country is going to change for the better before he dies.”

Somewhat shocked, I exigently surveyed the surrounding space, looking for ears on the walls. I had never up to that point heard anyone in this country criticizing the regime so openly in a public area. No-one would even refer to the leader by his name publicly. They would instead mumble “el Abuelo” or discreetly rub their chin to denote him.

“Are you not afraid to express that?” I asked her.

“I’m not afraid of anyone or anything. I have lived my years. Everybody in this neighborhood knows who Reina is and respects her,” she exclaimed, puffed with pride...

With that engaging chat, the time passed quickly. She offered to treat me to one more cup of coffee, but I had to refuse as I was waited for in the city center. Instead, she gave me her phone number and asked me to join her son’s birthday party that was to take place in a few days.

I gladly accepted her invitation and got to meet her entire family. None of them spoke the slightest English. They were but a typical Cuban family, only distantly aware of the American origin of their progenitor.

A few more days later, we met again for the last time. She helped me to rent a car to travel to the east of the country. We bid each other a

warm farewell, and I stared at her waving a hand in my rearview mirror.

An old guard of a Ugandan inn

...Finally, the time had come to get going and head towards new places. The sun had set for some time already. The electricity was back on, and in about half an hour, I needed to be at the station whence my bus was to depart. The station was on the other side of the city, and I had phoned someone to come and pick me up with a motorbike taxi.

Then, while I waited outside the door, that guy who was the inn's guard approached me. The inn was a low-budget, unfenced one. Only that bloke was tasked with providing security to it, unarmed.

He was a calm and genial man, around sixty years of age. His physical robustness and rough facial features testified the vigor that must have once pervaded his youth. He would only turn up in the garden in the evenings. He would sit quietly in a corner, and only after the place was deserted entirely, he would cover himself with a bristly rug and crash on the couch.

We'd never talked much. He would only greet me cordially every time we happened upon each other; in a way that manifested love for life. Late in the evenings, I would also be sitting in some corner of the garden, captivated by the broad sky's lure, playing melancholic tunes on the guitar and singing in a low and doleful voice. Now and again, I would apprehend his sparkling eyes staring at me through the darkness, whereupon he'd let out a perturbed grin and turn his gaze abruptly either to the ground or to the sky...

So, as I then stood waiting by the curb, he approached me.

"You're leaving, eh?" he said.

"Yes, I'm waiting for a piki piki to take me to the bus station," I responded.

"No, you don't need a motorcycle! Let's walk to the station together,"

he proffered in an earnest tone, zealously trying to shoulder my backpack at the same time.

But I stopped him and explained that there is no need for that since we don't have enough time, anyway. That conduct of his took me by surprise because he was a proud man, and I had never seen him engaging in beggarish errands. But what *shocked* me was the incident that followed...

The motorbike came. He helped me with fervor to load my luggage, and at the moment the driver throttled the bike up, he pronounced in a voice that exposed an inner sob: "*I will miss you, young man.*"

I managed to observe his face for two seconds before we drew away into the darkness. These two seconds, however, more than sufficed to discern a soul scream that found its way as a tear out of his bloodshot eyes.

That scream managed to invade my own soul, which felt as if being pricked, since the cry was reproduced in waves within me, and I could not understand it. It only broke off when we reached the bus, where I began dealing with *how are we going to fit in there* and such things. So I forgot for the moment what had just gone by.

We set off, and I stuck my face against the window to see and farewell the city's dark streets one by one. We left behind us the last ones of them and took the way to the unknown. It was then I turned my gaze towards the sky's infinity, and I saw in it again those bloodshot eyes, and I heard again that scream. But this time it was converted into speech, a passionate speech; and I understood it; and it said:

"Live! Live young man! The time is passing. Live now, today! Live every day, every moment! Live intensely! Live courageously! Live mercilessly! Live audaciously! Defy time! Defy death! Defy God! Defy existence! Defy life! Live, I'm telling you! Live forever! Grab that bitch, life, by the hair, and drag her through the mud! Flip the whole world over and turn the universe upside-down! LIVE! LIVE! LIVE!"

A dude eating cocaine in the police station

The hero of this story, who, for discretion's sake, will be referred to as G, used to be a good friend of mine. By *used to be*, I don't want to mean that he at any point stopped to be my friend, but simply that he altogether ceased *to be*. His passion for drugs drove him to an early grave.

G has long been dead, but his legacy lives on in the memories of the lucky ones who chanced to know him and hear some of his crazy stories. Indeed, G was particularly prone to getting involved in all unimaginable sorts of trouble throughout his short, fervent life. However, that life of his will not be the subject of the present story; that could only be the subject of a voluminous book.

This story will be solely concerned with one out of the many extraordinary instances of G's reckless life; one that I positively know to be true to its very last detail...

It was a chilly autumn evening in Kypseli, the most densely-populated neighborhood of the city of Athens. An old, beige Ford Sierra car was driving round and round the neighborhood's dark, narrow streets, looking for a parking spot. It finally came to a standstill beside a scaffold lying against the facade of a tall apartment building. G – because he was the car's driver – turned the engine off with an abrupt motion and...

"Give me the money, guys," he said to his two companions: a bloke from Rhodes and another from Ukraine.

They were cocaine addicts, the lot of them. Earlier that afternoon, when they again were in the same place buying five grams of coke, they were intent on having a long fun night; the last one before they *take it easy*, starting with the following day. Now, still evening, here they were once more – teeth grinding against each other like

millstones; faces contorting as if they had no muscles but bouncing balls underneath their skin; pupils about to be ejected out of their eyeballs – bound to buy another fiver.

An array of ecstatic musings streamed through G's neurons in anticipation of the imminent procurement of the treasured white dust as he hastily marched up the street to rendezvous with his Albanian dealer. As many a time before, they crossed paths somewhere midway along the central square of Kypseli. They halted briefly and exchanged a casual handshake, discreetly swapping the money for the ware, and kept on striding in opposite directions.

Something was different this time, though... For some reason G could not understand, the man passed him the five grams in five separate wrappings. "What a damn idiot," he mumbled to himself as he shoved the five wads inside the tiny secret pocket his jeans had behind the knee and, paranoically scanning everything around him, made straight for the car. That wasn't generally good because, in an unfortunate case of arrest, it'd seem like he was up to distributing them, and could pass for a dealer rather than a user. He couldn't, of course, foreknow that, if it wasn't for this coincidence, he wasn't going to see his home for many a night to come...

"Alright, guys. Let's sniff a line and get the hell out of here fast. I don't like this spot," said G to the others as soon as he got back in the car, reaching the glovebox for his paraphernalia at the same time.

"I'm not going to fucking sniff it, man," objected the Rhodite. "I paid a lot of money for this shit. I ain't wasting it in my nose. I'm going to shoot it up."

"What on earth are you talking about, dude?" G countered. "We are in the middle of the bloody road. We don't have time to do this here. Be patient. We go to a safe place first, and then we inject."

An obstinate fellow that Rhodite was. Whereas G and the Ukrainian had already sniffed their shares off the top of a jewel case and were now smoking their fags while indulging in that cherished I-am-the-king-of-the-world kind of feeling, he was still in the process of

dissolving his stuff and bulging up his abused veins while clenching the rig between his jaws like a dog does with a bone.

In short, all three were too busy to see the squad car getting close from behind them. Yet, that wasn't the case for the lawmen, who couldn't but notice a vehicle illegally parked in the middle of the road, marginally allowing for the traffic to pass through.

Next thing our dopers knew, the squad car was stopped next to theirs.

"Eh, guys. You haven't parked well here," the driving cop noted.

"Yes, officer. We just pulled up for a sec. We are leaving right away," G complied eagerly, immediately reaching his hand out for the starter.

"Phew, that was close," said G to the others, regarding the police car driving ahead.

Meanwhile in the police car: "Eh, man. Didn't that dude hold a syringe in his mouth?" said the driver's colleague.

The patrol vehicle hadn't advanced more than 10 meters when it abruptly braked to a halt. Both the cops jumped out in an instant, one pointing a strong torch at G's windshield, the other a gun, and one of them shouted: "*Put your hands behind your heads and get out of the car immediately!*"

It happened too quickly. There was no time to react anyhow. They could only obey. The two *lackey cops* got to preliminarily interrogate the three unfortunate hopheads while waiting for the *big guys* (the Drug Enforcement Agency whom they called) to arrive.

The line of defense maintained by the persecuted was like: "Yes, officer. We are addicts, but we do not have anything now. We were about to drive to the center and score from the street dealers there. You will not find anything on us."

The big guys made it on the spot in a big black jeep with tinted

windows, escorted by another squad car carrying four more lackey cops. Two of them were ordered to drive G's Sierra to the police station and rummage it.

All four vehicles proceeded to the police station in a convoy, the three suspects being transported in the back of the jeep with their arms handcuffed with each other's, crosswise behind their backs: so that the one in the middle had his right wrist tied to the left wrist of the one to his left and his left wrist tied to the right wrist of the one to his right; while the left wrist of the one on the right was linked to the right wrist of the one on the left under the middle one's crossed arms. If this last sentence sounds a bit confusing to grasp, it's because it describes a way too complex to even think of – let alone to implement – for how to handcuff three people with each other. The three heroes of our story were entangled like vines, utterly immobilized.

All sorts of pessimistic thoughts regarding his imminent fate to be thrown in the slammer kept orbiting G's head along the way. They were screwed. One of the five wrappings, the one they'd already opened to extract their last dose from, was still lying on the dashboard of his car. The cops would not even need to search in order to find it. They must have seen it, right in front of their eyes, as soon as they entered the car. The other four were still inside his secret pocket. They were sure to scout meticulously and find them, especially after the other cop shows up in the interrogation room, holding the fifth one between his thumb and index and announcing: *"Hah, look what I found!"*

Five grams of cocaine divided into five separate packings... G was not a politician, lawyer, show-business persona, or any sort of powerful, wealthy, law-immune white-powder enthusiast. He was but an ordinary, nameless fellow of the kind the law does not discriminate. He was sure to end up with a good two or three years in prison.

They were brought to a small room, some floors overground in the Kypseli Police Station building, together with a whole bunch of policemen. They got unhandcuffed and briefly interrogated before being searched. Luckily for all of them, they chose to start with the

Rhodite while they let the other two wait aside with their hands free. Now was G's chance.

I do not know how many of you reading this story are aware that a slight amount of cocaine poured into one's stomach can prove fatal and that an amount as big as four grams is rather certain to prove so, but G was perfectly aware of it. Being thrown in prison, however, was the last thing he fancied. So he decided to take his chances and go for it: eat them all and hope the bags are sealed properly.

That wasn't, of course, a simple proceeding with all those cops inside a tiny room. Standing against the wall, where they'd put him, he kept scrutinizing the space with his eyes, waiting for the right chance. The first one arose. With a prestidigitating movement, he put two fingers inside the pocket behind his knee and brought the first bag inside his mouth. Gulp... one was down.

The Ukrainian, standing against the opposite wall, noticed what G had just done and began speaking and doing stuff to draw the cops' attention. The second chance came. In a demonstration of legerdemain, he ingested the second gram... two more to go.

The cops finished searching the Rhodite. Luckily again, the Ukrainian came second. Third chance: gulp... Fourth chance: and the last one of the wrappings had made its way into G's mouth. Now he was out of saliva. He tried hard to swallow it without producing any suspicious sound, but his throat was so dry that it didn't want to go down.

G's turn to be searched came at last, and the gram was still lying in the back of his mouth. The cop started to scrabble G's pockets and asked him a couple of questions which G answered with nods. Another question was then asked that required words. It was now or never. If he failed to respond, the cop would become suspicious of what's going on and seize him by the throat right away. Mustering all the strength of his pharyngeal muscles, he achieved a robust swallowing motion and forced the last of the coke wrappings down his stomach, releasing a loud cough.

"Are you alright, man?" inquired the law enforcer.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine, officer,” *G replied.*

Success! G had managed to efface all the four incriminating articles. The remaining open bag, which would soon be brought to the room, shared between the three of them... they could get away with.

All of G’s pockets, including the one in question, his shoes, socks, underwear, and all places a policeman’s imagination can suffice to check were searched thoroughly, but in vain. Now, seated on a bench, the three afflicted friends waited for the cops who searched the car to arrive, hoping for lenient treatment.

But then surprise struck! “No illegal items found” was the inspection’s result. G was bewildered. He speculated on three possibilities: They either are such fools that they missed it right in front of their nose, or they found it and kept it for themselves, or there are also some good-hearted people amongst the police kind, after all. A momentary glimpse of the reporting cop’s eyes that G managed to catch suggested the latter.

“You see, officers? We told you we have nothing! Are we free to go now?” the detained argued.

“Not so fast, guys. You’re getting locked up for tonight.”

They tried to object, but there was no use. They didn’t have a moral right to complain, anyway, after so luckily getting away with a mere night at the police station. They were thrown into the holding cell together with some twenty or thirty other narcomaniacs, hookers, thieves, and other hoboes.

G occupied a piece of the cell bench and stayed there waiting patiently. No more than five minutes passed, and all of a sudden, he felt like his head was just struck by a sledgehammer. A persistent terrible pain took over his abdomen. All his body muscles began to quiver and his veins to throb. He got overwhelmed by horrible nausea and panic attack.

“Help!!! I’m dying! Take me to the hospital right now!” he wanted to shout, but he controlled the situation and suppressed this desire.

Instead, he stood up and made for the cell’s sole little window. That was looking out to the same room they were a while ago, some five meters across a dingy light well. He could clearly see all the same cops from before, joking and laughing, but the cell was too dark for them to see him.

He pushed the front part of his face between the two metal bars blocking the window and stuck two of his fingers inside his throat. He tried hard to vomit, but he couldn’t. He went around the room and snatched away all water he could find from the rest of the caged folks. He tried to vomit again but still couldn’t.

His torture persisted for the next hour or so. Many a time, he tried to throw up the swallowed items to no avail. He constantly oscillated between enduring the pain with the risk of dying and calling for the cops to take him to the hospital, followed by certain imprisonment, but he chose the former.

It was the right choice he made. The overdose symptoms began to retreat and he to calm down. It was going to dawn soon. For some reason, they released them separately, one after the other. Just like with searching, G was left to the end. His car keys were given to him, accompanied by the casual threats and recommendations, and he was let free.

The coke bag was in the exact same place where he had put it. He drove a few blocks away and pulled up to sniff a line. *Hah! How I fooled those suckers*, he entertained himself thinking while on his way back home.

The sun had risen by the time he made it there. It had been a long adventurous night, and he was used up. He felt an overpowering desire to sleep, but he was so over-stimulated that the prospect of lying in bed was out of the question.

He opened the little drawer of his bedside table, where he kept some

heroin, specifically for such occasions. He boiled... He injected... Next instant, the shutters were closed over his brain. His stomach's content was then stirred up. He grabbed a bucket, and without needing to use his fingers this time, emptied it all in it. Among the bile and the other nasty parts that made up his puke were also the four wrappings.

He plucked them out and cleaned them with utmost care. The three of them were still perfectly sealed. The fourth one had a small hole through which it had lost a part of its content inside his stomach. That was the cause of his earlier unpleasant experience. He placed them in the drawer, showing great solicitude, and passed out for the rest of the day.

An Englishman retiring in Thailand

Darkness prevailed abruptly, and a relieving breeze began flowing seawards. A mellow tropical night had just befallen over the Thai coast. The streets of Hua Hin, one of Thailand's most *Western* cities, would have normally been rammed. Street-food vendors would labor hectically to cater to the intoxicated tourists' peckishness. Touts and cocottes would blare incessantly, trying to entice male customers into the ubiquitous sleazy bars. Intemperance and lechery would reign on until dawn... But none of this happened currently. The streets were utterly desolate.

It was the peak time of the Covid pandemic. The tourists were in their countries, the bars were shut, the locals were sequestered in their homes... and we were riding around the quiet streets on our scooter, looking for the odd food place that defied the curfew and could allow us a quick meal.

In a random narrow bystreet, a menu board stood in front of an inconspicuous concrete wall belonging to a small decrepit house. A bare plastic table and two stools lay beside it. We pulled over. The menu featured a few pictures that, though amateurish, depicted the dishes favorably. The prices were as reasonable as you could possibly find in this city; befitting more a takeaway street-food stall than a sit-in restaurant. And we wouldn't find anything else, anyway.

I revved the bike up slightly to have a peek inside the open gate on the side of the house's facade. A couple more tables lay in there, crammed within the poky yard. Each one was clothed and bedecked with a lit candle, but there was no sign of either customers or staff. That until, moments later, a jolly-looking man popped out from the house door in the yard's rear corner.

He was an old white fellow in his late sixties or early seventies. He wore a tatty sleeveless undershirt – his belly formed an all but perfect sphere under it – smudged, sloppy trousers, and sliders. His curly hair was white and bedraggled but thick for his age. He was tanned, but

only as tanned as one gets when living in a tropical country and being exposed to the sun only when absolutely inevitable. His blue eyes and benign countenance radiated with the bliss and anticipation of a child before Santa.

“Are you still serving?” I inquired, understanding he is the owner of the place.

“Yes, sure, be seated,” he enunciated in a distinctly British accent.

He showed us to the table, pulled the stools out for us, and almost physically sat us down – as to make sure we ain’t going to flee.

“I’ll be right back,” he said and briskly scooted inside.

Seconds later, he reappeared out of the gate, carrying a colorful tablecloth, a candle, and a menu. After he made the table, he stood above us expectantly and gave us his recommendations. We placed our order, and he shuffled back inside.

He immediately gave me the impression that he wasn’t as excited about receiving customers as he was about getting company. This impression of mine got verified when, not long after, he came out again, this time carrying an extra stool, a beer can, and a pack of smokes.

He set his stool two meters away from our table, sat down, lit a fag, and initiated a small talk. We chatted about the pandemic, the weather, the city, Thailand in general... He used the opportunity to praise his little business and tell us how he has his regular denizens who dine at his every single night, year after year, during their holidays...

His peculiar character had animated my curiosity. I waited for a chance to switch the conversation to his person and get to know what fortuities had brought him there.

Eventually, a plump Thai woman in her late thirties walked out of the house. Smilingly, she served our dishes. She exchanged a couple of

waggish jokes with the man and stepped back inside the house. Starved as we were, we tucked into our plates in nothing flat.

“She’s a good cook, ain’t she?” said the man, patently gratified to see us devouring our food.

“Yes, delicious. And very decent portions, too,” I acknowledged. “She your wife?” I asked.

“Yes, my girlfriend, actually. We live here together and have run this restaurant for almost seven years now. She’s a fine woman.”

The subject was getting to where I wanted it. I was going to ask him questions to pry into his life’s particulars, but I didn’t have to. He rather proved too eager to recount his adventures of his own accord. Over the next hour or so that we remained seated there – having a second course and a few beers thereafter – he prattled on incessantly about his situation...

He was born in a small town in southern England, which he hardly ever left until he retired. He completed his compulsory education and worked in the same factory for his entire working life. He got married young and had six children. He led a pretty uneventful life until, shortly after his retirement, his wife broke up with him.

His drinking problem wasn’t the reason for the divorce; he had always been boozing heavily since he was a lad. Nor was it because he was cheating on her; he had regularly been visiting prostitutes, and he had a couple of steady girlfriends during the first years of their marriage, and she’d been aware of it all along... It probably was because she couldn’t tolerate him spending much time at home, now that he was retired.

He took it badly at first, but he got over it relatively fast. Specifically, he got fully over it upon the very instant he stepped into that now-shut bar around the corner...

In a sort of consolatory effort, his mates back home arranged to take him on a golfing holiday in Thailand. But not once did he play golf.

Hours after they landed, on his first night ever abroad, in the first foreign bar he ever entered, when he was just about to order his first drink... he fell in love, madly.

He was talked to by a twenty-year-old Thai girl. *She was very pretty*, in his words, and he got smitten at first sight. He bought her and her friends a few drinks, and later they had sex in his hotel room. He got a little peeved when she asked him for money, but she was in real need; her mother was seriously ill.

He altogether neglected his friends for the remainder of their sojourn in Thailand. He hung out constantly with his new girlfriend. They rented a car and went jaunting to beaches and malls during the day; boozed and danced in the bars during the night...

This holiday came to cost him much more than he had initially budgeted – gifts and his girlfriend's mum's medical expenses were particularly expensive – but it was totally worth it; he had the time of his life.

Profoundly grieved, he boarded that plane upon the holiday's termination. His mates went back to their families and daily routines. But he had none of those. Instead, he had a new plan involving enthralling prospects about the future...

He sold everything he owned – that is, everything his wife hadn't already grabbed from the divorce settlement – packed his personal effects, and moved to Thailand. His children got shocked and infuriated by that act. All but the youngest one cut all ties with him immediately after his departure; the youngest one cut them a few years later. He speaking about this was the only instance I noticed his intrinsic gleefulness briefly fading away from his mien.

He didn't think much about his kids – or anything else really – at that time. His being was wholeheartedly devoted to his love. They had fun, and that was all that mattered. Selling all his property, he had accrued some decent savings, which, combined with his pension, would secure them a comfortable living for the rest of his days... Only that the rest of his days were destined to be many more than the

mere year it took until he went broke.

Mum's health was deteriorating. She had to undergo a number of consecutive costly surgeries. It, of course, dejected him a bit that he had to squander his whole life's toil for somebody he hadn't even met once, but that was only a trivial sacrifice for the sake of love. Important was that his darling was contented – poor little sweetheart, she was so strongly attached to her mother. Onwards, they would need to be a little thriftier to make ends meet on his pension alone, but they would always have each other at the end of the day.

But the ends of the days they *indeed had* each other got steadily sparser after mum's last operation; they basically were confined to the first few days of each month when they met to go out partying. For the rest of the month – while he remained cloistered in some shabby hotel room or another, barely affording his meals as he waited for his next pension payout – she would go stay with her family in the village, caring for her recuperating mother. She wished she could bring him along to her house, but what would they think? They were a traditional, conservative family... their dear little daughter engaged to a farang who's older than her grandfather!? Scandal.

During the next few months, as he all the more often bumped into her accosting senior white gentlemen in various sleazy bars, he began to suspect that she was with him only for money; that she didn't love him, and perhaps even her mother was never sick. His suspicions eventually evolved to certainty. He couldn't take her excuses anymore. He investigated and got to know that she didn't have any family. She'd been lying all along.

This awareness, however, wasn't potent to efface his feelings for her. He was infatuated. He never stopped loving her. He kept on living like that – blowing his whole pension with her in a day or two and then fasting the rest of the month out – for a few years. But over time, after he met his current girlfriend and opened the restaurant, he got to put his life in order again.

Now he understood perfectly that she, too, was with him for money. But her needs were much more modest, affordable. She'd had her fun

in her time. But now, she'd grown old and fleshy. She couldn't go for the big wallets anymore. She'd had alcohol problems and hadn't managed to save up. Now she needed a kind and docile man to provide a calm life for her and her daughter – A sweet little girl kept walking in and out of the house, parading up and down the street and proudly displaying her various toys.

His current girlfriend would as well sleep with other men, occasionally, if an opportunity for a good take arose... But that was alright because he would also spend the odd night with his ex if he somehow got hold of a considerable sum of money. As for the rest, they ran their little restaurant and lived a simple and harmonious life together...

He had earlier spoken about his regular customers, and by the time we left that night, I didn't doubt in the least the truthfulness of his claim. Most of all, he made for a pleasant and engaging company. Over the rest of our stay in Hua Hin, we kept returning all too frequently for a good meal and a nice chat.

THE END

Since you are now reading this sentence, I may assume that you found this book compelling enough to read it through to the end. So I would here like to express my most sincere gratitude to you for having done so, as well as to humbly ask for your valuable contribution in placing this work in front of a wider audience. It would be heartily appreciated if you could recommend this read to your potentially interested friends and submit your review of it to Good Reads and/or the online book retailer whence you procured it. Cheers!

About the author

I know it is customary for *author bio* pages to be written in the third person even when written by the authors themselves, but since this sounds a little cheesy to me, I decided to go ahead and write in the first person instead. I am Dimitrios, born in Greece in 1987. After graduating from secondary school, I have wholeheartedly indulged in my passions and pursued a life of adventure. I have so far traveled and lived in more than a third of the world's countries, where I have done a great multitude of different jobs and extensively explored the Earth's wilderness and cultures. I suffer from pathological curiosity and an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Apart from learning anything that is to be learnt, my paramount purpose of existence is to satisfy my flaming creativity. Among a variety of other creative expressions, I am much into photography, composing music, writing, and above all, telling stories. I publish all my diverse work on my website theblogofdimi.com.

Connect with me

I invite you to subscribe to my blog's mailing list (theblogofdimi.com/about/#about-subscribe) to follow my creative work, as well as to be notified about future book releases.

I am also relatively active on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and [Instagram](#) (@theblogofdimi)

Other titles

I have so far written and published two more books:

- [*Tainting Passions*](https://theblogofdimi.com/tainting-passions/): a dark, dramatic, subtly sarcastic new-adult novel revolving around themes such as depression, addiction, prostitution, despondency, and nihilism. (<https://theblogofdimi.com/tainting-passions/>)
- [*From Cape Town to Alexandria*](https://theblogofdimi.com/apo-to-cape-town-stin-alexandria-vivlio/): An extensive travelogue in the Greek language recounting my adventures while traveling overland across the African continent. I intend to translate and release it in English as well at some future point. (<https://theblogofdimi.com/apo-to-cape-town-stin-alexandria-vivlio/>)

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