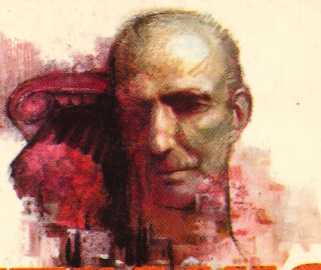




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NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

REPORT TO GRECO

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THE STORY OF HIS OWN
PASSIONATE, TUMULTUOUS LIFE.

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by Nikos Kazantzakis

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REPORT TO GRECO

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

TRANSLATED FROM THE GREEK BY P. A. BIEN



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But his heart never lightened. One day Captain Elias from Messará dared to ask him, "Why is there never a laugh on your lips, Captain Michael?" "Why is the crow black, Captain Elias?" my father replied, spitting out the cigarette butt he was chewing. Another day I heard him say to the verger of Saint Minas's, "You should look at my father, not at me, at my father. He was a real ogre. What am I next to him? A jellyfish!" Though extremely old and nearly blind, my grandfather had taken up arms again in the Revolution of 1878. He went to the mountains to fight, but the Turks surrounded him, caught him by throwing lassos, and slaughtered him outside the Monastery of Savathianá. The monks kept his skull in the sanctuary. One day I looked through the tiny window and saw it—polished, anointed with sanctified oil from the watch lamp, deeply incised by sword blows.

"What was my grandfather like?" I asked my mother.

"Like your father. Darker."

"What was his job?"

"Fighting."

"And what did he do in peacetime?"

"He smoked a long chibouk and gazed at the mountains."

Being pious when I was young, I asked still another question: "Did he go to church?"

"No. But on the first of every month he brought a priest home with him and had him pray that Crete would take up arms again. Your grandfather fretted, naturally, when he had nothing to do. Once when he was arming himself again I asked him, 'Aren't you afraid to die, Father?' But he neither answered nor even turned to look at me."

When I grew older, I wanted to ask my mother: Did he ever love a woman? I was ashamed to, however, and never found out. But he surely must have loved many women, because when he was killed and the family opened his coffer, a cushion was found there, stuffed with black and brown tresses.

THE MOTHER

MY MOTHER was a saintly woman. How was she able to feel the lion's heavy inhalations and suspirations at her side for fifty years without suffering a broken heart? She had the patience, endurance, and sweetness of the earth itself. All my forebears on my mother's side were peasants—bent over the soil, glued to the soil, their hands, feet, and minds filled with soil. They loved the land and placed all their hopes in it; over the generations they and it had become one. In time of drought they grew sickly black from thirst along with it. When the first autumn rains began to rage, their bones creaked and swelled like reeds. And when they ploughed deep furrows into its womb with the share, in their breasts and thighs they re-experienced the first night they slept with their wives.

Twice a year, at Easter and Christmas, my grandfather set out from his distant village and came to Megalo Kastro in order to see his daughter and grandchildren. Always calculating carefully, he came and knocked on the door at an hour when he knew for sure that his wild beast of a son-in-law would not be at home. He was a juicy, vigorous old man, with unbarbered white hair, laughing blue eyes, and great heavy hands covered with calluses—my skin was flayed when he reached out to caress me. He always wore black boots, his Sunday foufoúla, which was deep indigo in color, and a white kerchief with blue spots. And in his hand he always held the same gift: a suckling pig roasted in the oven and wrapped in lemon leaves. When he laughingly uncovered it, the entire house filled with fragrance. So completely has my grandfather blended and become one with the roast pig and the lemon leaves, that ever since those days I have never been able to smell roast pork or step into a lemon orchard without having him rise into my mind, gay and undying, the roast suckling pig in his hands. And I am glad, because although no one else in the world remembers him now, he will live inside me as long as I live. We shall die together. This grandfather was

the first to make me wish not to die—so that the dead within me should not die. Since then, many departed dear ones have sunk, not into the grave, but into my memory, and I know now that as long as I live they shall live too.

As I recall him, my heart is fortified with the realization that it can conquer death. Never in my life have I met a man whose face was circuiteed by such a kindly, tranquil resplendence, as though from a watch lamp. I cried out the first time I saw him enter the house. Dressed as he was in his wide vrakes and red cummerbund, with his luminous moonface and merry manner, he seemed to me like a water sprite, or like an earth spirit who at that very moment had emerged from the orchards smelling of wet grass.

Removing a leather tobacco pouch from beneath his shirt, he rolled a cigarette, reached for the flint and punk, lighted the cigarette, and smoked, gazing contentedly at his daughter, his grandchildren, and the house. At rare intervals he opened his mouth and spoke about his mare that had dropped a colt, about rain and hail, about the overprolific rabbits who were ruining his vegetable garden. I, perched on his knees, threw an arm around his neck and listened. An unknown world unfurled in my mind—fields, rainfalls, rabbits—and I too became a rabbit, slipped out stealthily to my grandfather's yard, and devoured his cabbage.

My mother would ask about this one and that one in the village—how were they getting along, were they still alive?—and grandfather sometimes replied that they were alive, having children, flourishing; sometimes that they had died—another one gone, long life to you! He spoke about death just as he spoke about birth—calmly, in the same voice, just as he spoke about the vegetables and rabbits. "He's gone too, Daughter," he would say. "We buried him. And we gave him an orange to hold in his hand for Charon, also some messages for our relatives in Hades. Everything was done according to order, praised be God." Then he puffed on the cigarette, blew smoke out through his nostrils, and smiled.

His wife was among the departed; she had died many years before. Every time my grandfather came to our house, he mentioned her and his eyes filled with tears. He loved her more than his fields, more than his mare. And he also respected her. Though poor when he married, he had persevered. "Poverty and nakedness are nothing, provided you have a good wife," he used to say. In those days it was the long-

established custom in Cretan villages for the wife to have warm water ready for the husband when he returned from the fields in the evening, and for her to bend down and wash his feet. One evening my grandfather returned from work completely exhausted. He sat down in the yard, and his wife came to him with a basin of warm water, knelt in front of him, and reached out in order to wash his dusty feet. Looking at her with compassion, my grandfather saw her hands that had been corroded by the daily household chores, her hair that had begun to turn gray. She's old now, poor thing, he thought to himself; her hair has turned gray in my hands. Feeling sorry for her, he lifted his foot and kicked away the basin of water, upsetting it. "Starting today, Wife," he said, "you're not going to wash my feet any more. After all, you're not my slave, you're my wife and 'lady.'"

One day I heard him say, "She never failed me in anything . . . except once. May God have mercy on her soul."

Sighing, he fell silent. But after a moment: "Every evening, naturally, she stood in the doorway and waited for me to return from the fields. She used to run and relieve me by taking the tools from my shoulder; then we entered the house together. But one evening she forgot. She didn't run to me, and it broke my heart."

He crossed himself.

"God is great," he whispered. "I place my hopes in Him. He will forgive her."

His eyes shiny again, he looked at my mother and smiled.

On another occasion I asked him, "Grandfather, don't you hate to kill the little pigs, don't you feel sorry when we eat them?"

"I do, my boy, God knows I do," he answered, bursting into laughter, "but they're delicious, the little rascals!"

Every time I recall this rosy-cheeked old peasant, my faith in the soil and in man's labor upon the soil increases. He was one of the pillars who support the world upon their shoulders and keep it from falling.

My father was the only one who did not want him. He felt displeased when he entered his house and talked to his son, as though afraid my blood might be polluted. And when the feast was laid out at Christmas and Easter, he did not help himself to any of the roast suckling pig. Nauseated by its odor, he left the table as quickly as possible and began to smoke in order to dispel the stench. He never said anything,

except once when he knitted his brows after grandfather had left, and murmured scornfully, "Pfff, blue eyes!"

I learned afterwards that my father despised blue eyes more than anything else in the world. "The devil has blue eyes and red hair," he used to say.

What peace when my father was not at home! How happily and quickly time passed in the little garden inside our walled courtyard. The vine arbor over the well, the tall fragrant acacia in the corner, the pots of basil, marigolds, and Arabian jasmine around the edges . . . My mother sat in front of the window knitting socks, cleaning vegetables, combing my little sister's hair, or helping her to toddle; and I, squatting on a stool, watched her. As I listened to the people pass by outside the closed door and inhaled the odor of jasmine and wet soil, the bones of my head creaked and opened wide in order to contain the world which was entering my body.

The hours I spent with my mother were full of mystery. We used to sit facing each other—she on a chair next to the window, I on my stool—and I felt my breast being filled to satisfaction amid the silence, as though the air between us were milk and I was nursing.

Above our heads rose the acacia; when it flowered, the courtyard filled with perfume. How very much I loved its sweet-smelling yellow blossoms! My mother put them in our coffers, our underwear, our sheets. My entire childhood smelled of acacia.

We talked, had many quiet conversations together. Sometimes my mother told about her father and the village where she was born; sometimes I recounted to her the saints' lives I had read, embellishing them in my imagination. The martyrs' ordeals were not enough for me. I added new ones of my own until my mother began to weep. Then, pitying her, I sat on her knees, stroked her hair and consoled her.

"They went to paradise, Mother. Don't be sad. Now they take walks beneath flowering trees and talk with angels, and they've forgotten all about their tortures. And every Sunday they put on clothes all of gold, and red caps with pompons, and go to visit God."

My mother used to wipe away her tears and look at me with a smile, as though to ask, Is it really true? And the canary in its cage used to hear us, stretch forth its throat, and chirp away with drunken contentment, as if it had descended from

paradise, left the saints for a few moments, and come to earth in order to gladden men's hearts.

My mother, the acacia, and the canary have blended in my mind inseparably, immortally. I cannot smell an acacia or hear a canary without feeling my mother rise from her grave—from my vitals—and unite with this fragrance and the canary's song.

I had never seen my mother laugh; she simply smiled and regarded everyone with deep-set eyes filled with patience and kindness. She came and went in the house like a kindly sprite, anticipating our every need without noise or effort, as though her hands possessed some magical, beneficent power which exercised a benevolent rule over everyday needs. As I sat silently watching her, I reflected that she might be the Nereid mentioned in the fairy tales, and imagination set to work in my childhood mind: My father had glimpsed her dancing beneath the moon one night as he passed the river. He pounced, caught hold of her kerchief, and that was when he brought her home and made her his wife. Now my mother came and went all day long in the house, searching for the kerchief so that she could throw it over her hair, become a Nereid again, and depart. I used to watch her coming and going, opening the wardrobes and coffers, uncovering the jugs, stooping to look under the beds, and I trembled lest she chance to find her magic kerchief and become invisible. This fear lasted many years, deeply wounding my newborn soul. It remains within me even today, still more indescribably. It is with anguish that I observe all the people or ideas that I love, because I know they are searching for their kerchiefs in order to depart.

I remember only one occasion when my mother's eyes gleamed with a strange light and she laughed and enjoyed herself as in the days of her engagement, or when she was a free, unmarried girl. It was the first of May and we had gone to Phódhele, a village full of water and orange orchards, so that my father could sponsor a child in baptism. Whereupon, a violent downpour suddenly broke out. The heavens turned to water and emptied onto the earth, which opened chucklingly and received the male waters deep into its breast. The village notables were gathered with their wives and daughters in a large room in the godchild's house. The rain and lightning entered through the windows, through the cracks in the door; the air smelled of oranges and soil. In and out came the

handsels, the wine, the raki, the mezédhes. It began to grow dark, the lamps were lighted, the men grew merry, the women lifted their normally downcast eyes and began to cackle like partridges. Outside the house God was still roaring. The thunder increased, the village's narrow lanes had been transformed into rivers, the stones tumbled down them, laughing wildly. God had become a torrent; He was embracing, watering, fructifying the earth.

My father turned to my mother. It was the first time I ever saw him look at her with tenderness, the first time I heard sweetness in his voice.

"Sing Marghí," he said to her.

He was giving her permission to sing, giving it in front of all the other men. I became angry, though I don't know why. Rising all in a ferment, I started to run to my mother as though wishing to protect her, but my father touched my shoulder with his finger and made me sit down. My mother seemed unrecognizable; her face gleamed as if all the rain and lightning were embracing it. She threw back her head. I remember that her long raven-black hair suddenly became undone and fell over her shoulders, reaching to her hips. She began . . . What a voice that was: deep, sweet, with a shade of throatiness, full of passion. Turning her half-closed eyes upon my father, she sang a mantinádha which I shall never forget. I did not understand at the time why she uttered it, or for whom. Later, when I grew up, I understood. Looking at my father, her sweet voice filled with restrained passion, she sang:

*I'm amazed the streets don't blossom when you stroll,
And you don't become an eagle with wings of gold.*

I looked the other way to avoid seeing my father, to avoid seeing my mother. Going to the window, I pressed my forehead against the pane and watched the rain fall and eat away the soil.

The deluge lasted the entire day. The night had borne down upon us; the world outside grew dark, heaven blended with earth, and the two turned to mud. More lamps were lighted. Everyone moved toward the walls. Tables and stools were moved aside to make room; youngsters and oldsters alike were going to dance. Installing himself on a high stool in the middle of the room, the rebecist grasped his bow as though it

were a sword, mumbled a couplet beneath his mustache, and began to play. Feet tingled, bodies fluttered their wings, men and women looked at each other and jumped to their feet. The first to step out was a pale, slender woman, about forty years old, her lips tinted orange because she had rubbed them with walnut leaves, her jet-black hair anointed with laurel oil and glistening sleekly. I was frightened when I turned and saw her, because her eyes were circled by two somber blue rings, and the dark, dark pupils shone from deep within; no, did not shine, burned. I imagined for a moment that she glanced at me. I clutched my mother's apron, feeling that this woman wanted to seize my arm and take me away with her.

"Bravo, Sourmelína!" shouted a robust old man with a goatee. Jumping out in front of her, he removed his black kerchief, gave one corner to the woman, took the other himself, and the two of them—transported, their heads held high, their bodies as slender and straight as candles—gave themselves over to the dance.

The woman was wearing wooden clogs; she beat them against the floorboards, beat them down forcefully, and the whole house shook. Her white wimple came undone, revealing the gold florins decorating her neck. Her nostrils flared, sniffed the air; the masculine exhalations all around her were steaming. She bent her knees, pivoted, was about to fall against the man before her, but then all at once with a twist of her hips she vanished from in front of him. The elderly dance-lover neighed like a horse, grasped her in midair, held her tightly; but she escaped again. They played, they pursued each other, thunder and rain vanished, the world sank away, and nothing remained above the abyss except this woman, Sourmelína, who was dancing. Unable to remain on his stool any longer, the rebecist jumped to his feet. The bow went wild, gave up trying to stay in command, and began to follow Sourmelína's feet now, sighing and bellowing like a human being.

The old man's face had turned savage. Blushing deeply, he eyed the woman, his lips quivering. I felt that he was about to pounce on her and tear her to bits. The rebecist must have had the same foreboding, for his bow stopped abruptly. The dance came to a standstill; the two dance-lovers remained motionless, one foot in the air, the sweat gushing off them. The men ran to the old dancer, took him to one side, and massaged him with raki; the women surrounded Sourmelína to

keep the men from seeing her. I worked my way in among them; I wasn't a man yet, and they did not stop me. Opening her bodice, they sprinkled orange-flower water over her throat, armpits, and temples. She had closed her eyes and was smiling.

It was then that the dance, Sourmelína, and fear—the dance, woman, and death—blended within me and became one. Forty years later, on the high terrace of the Hotel Orient in Tiflis, an Indian woman got up to dance. The stars shone above her. The roof was unlit; some dozen men stood around her, and you saw nothing but the tiny red lights from their cigarettes. Loaded with bracelets, jewels, earrings, and golden ankle bands, the woman danced slowly, with a mysterious fear, as though performing at the brink of the abyss, or of God, and playing with Him. She approached, retreated, provoked Him, while trembling from head to foot lest she fall. At times her body remained stationary while her arms wrapped and unwrapped themselves around each other like two snakes and coupled erotically in the air. The tiny red lights died out; nothing remained in the whole of the vast night except this dancing woman and the stars above her. Immobile, they danced too. We all held our breath. Suddenly I was terror-stricken. Was this a woman dancing at the brink of the abyss? No, it was our very souls flirting and playing with death.

THE SON

W^{HATEVER} fell into my childhood mind was imprinted there with such depth and received by me with such avidity that even now in my old age I never grow tired of recalling and reliving it. With unerring accuracy I remember my very first acquaintance with the sea, with fire, with woman, and with the odors of the world.

The earliest memory of my life is this: Still unable to stand, I crept on all fours to the threshold and fearfully, longingly, extended my tender head into the open air of the courtyard. Until then I had looked through the windowpane but had seen nothing. Now I not only looked, I actually saw the world for the very first time. And what an astonishing sight that was! Our little courtyard-garden seemed without limits. There was buzzing from thousands of invisible bees, an intoxicating aroma, a warm sun as thick as honey. The air flashed as though armed with swords, and between the swords, erect, angel-like insects with colorful, motionless wings advanced straight for me. I screamed from fright, my eyes filled with tears, and the world vanished.

On another day, I remember, a man with a thorny beard took me in his arms and brought me down to the harbor. As we approached, I heard a wild beast sighing and roaring as if wounded or uttering threats. Frightened, I jumped erect in the man's arms and shrieked like a bird; I wanted to go away. Suddenly—the bitter odor of carob beans, tar, and rotten citrons. My creaking vitals opened to receive it. I kept jumping and pitching about in the hairy arms that held me, until at a turn in the street—dark indigo, seething, all cries and smells (what a beast that was! what freshness! what a boundless sigh!)—the entire sea poured into me frothingly. My tender temples collapsed, and my head filled with laughter, salt, and fear.

Next I remember a woman, Anníka, a neighbor of ours, newly married, recently a mother, plump and fair, with long blond hair and huge eyes. That evening I was playing in the

yard; I must have been about three years old. The little garden smelled of summer. The woman leaned over, placed me in her lap, hugged me. I, closing my eyes, fell against her exposed bosom and smelled her body: the warm, dense perfume, the acid scent of milk and sweat. The newly married body was steaming. I inhaled the vapor in an erotic torpor, hanging from her high bosom. Suddenly I felt overcome by dizziness and fainted. Blushing terribly, the frightened neighbor put me down, depositing me between two pots of basil. After that she never placed me on her lap again. She just looked at me very tenderly with her large eyes and smiled.

One summer night I was sitting in our yard again, on my little stool. I remember lifting my eyes and seeing the stars for the first time. Jumping to my feet, I cried out in fear, "Sparks! Sparks!" The sky seemed a vast conflagration to me; my little body was on fire.

Such were my first contacts with earth, sea, woman, and the star-filled sky. Even now, in the most profound moments of my life, I experience these four terrifying elements with exactly the same ardor as in my infancy. Only then, when I succeed in re-experiencing them with the same astonishment, fright, and joy they gave me when I was an infant, do I feel—even today—that I am experiencing these four terrifying elements deeply, as deeply as my body and soul can plunge. Since these were the first forces which I consciously felt occupying my soul, the four joined indissolubly inside me and became one. They are like a single face which keeps changing masks. Looking at the star-filled sky, I sometimes imagine that it is a flowering garden, sometimes a dark, dangerous sea, sometimes a taciturn face flooded with tears.

Every one of my emotions, moreover, and every one of my ideas, even the most abstract, is made up of these four primary ingredients. Within me, even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand—when I can smell, see, and touch.

In addition to these first four contacts, my soul was also deeply influenced by a fortuitous event. Fortuitous? Such are the prudent, unmanly nebulosities with which the cowardly mind, which quakes lest it utter some nonsense and wound its dignity, characterizes whatever it is incapable of interpreting. I must have been four years old. On New Year's Day

my father gave me a canary and a revolving globe as a hand-sel, "a good hand," as we say in Crete. Closing the doors and windows of my room, I used to open the cage and let the canary go free. It had developed the habit of sitting at the very top of the globe and singing for hours and hours, while I held my breath and listened.

This extremely simple event, I believe, influenced my life more than all the books and all the people I came to know afterwards. Wandering insatiably over the earth for years, greeting and taking leave of everything, I felt that my head was the globe and that a canary sat perched on the top of my mind, singing.

I recount my childhood years in detail, not because the earliest memories have such a great fascination, but because during this period, as in dreams, a seemingly insignificant event exposes the true, unmasked face of the soul more than any psychoanalysis can do later. Since the means of expression in childhood or dreams are very simple, even the most intricate of inner wealth is delivered from all superfluity, so that only the essence remains.

The child's brain is soft, his flesh tender. Sun, moon, rain, wind, and silence all descend upon him. He is frothy batter and they knead him. The child gulps the world down greedily, receives it in his entrails, assimilates it, and turns it into child.

I remember frequently sitting on the doorstep of our home when the sun was blazing, the air on fire, grapes being trodden in a large house in the neighborhood, the world fragrant with must. Shutting my eyes contentedly, I used to hold out my palms and wait. God always came—as long as I remained a child, He never deceived me—He always came, a child just like myself, and deposited His toys in my hands: sun, moon, wind. "They're gifts," He said, "they're gifts. Play with them. I have lots more." I would open my eyes. God would vanish, but His toys would remain in my hands.

Though I did not know this (did not know it because I was experiencing it), I possessed the Lord's omnipotence: I created the world as I wanted it. I was soft dough; so was the world. I remember loving cherries more than any other fruit when I was little. I used to fill a bucket at the well, toss them in—red or black, crunchily firm—lean over, and admire how they swelled the moment they entered the water. But when I removed them, I saw to my great disappointment that they

shrank. I closed my eyes, therefore, to avoid seeing them shrink, and thrust them—still monstrous, as I imagined—into my mouth.

This insignificant detail exposes in its entirety the method by which I confront reality, even now in my old age. I recreate it—brighter, better, more suitable to my purpose. The mind cries out, explains, demonstrates, protests; but inside me a voice rises and shouts at it, "Be quiet, mind; let us hear the heart." What heart? Madness, the essence of life. And the heart begins to warble.

"Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality," says one of my favorite Byzantine mystics. I did this when a child; I do it now as well in the most creative moments of my life.

Truly, what miracles are the child's mind, eyes, and ears! How insatiably they gobble down this world and fill themselves. The world is a bird with red, green, and yellow feathers. How the child hunts this bird and tries to catch it.

Truly, nothing more resembles God's eyes than the eyes of a child; they see the world for the first time, and create it. Before this, the world is chaos. All creatures—animals, trees, men, stones; everything: forms, colors, voices, smells, lighting flashes—flow unexplained in front of the child's eyes (no, not in front of them, inside them), and he cannot fasten them down, cannot establish order. The child's world is made not of clay, to last, but of clouds. A cool breeze blows across his temples and the world condenses, attenuates, vanishes. Chaos must have passed in front of God's eyes in just this way before the Creation.

When I was a child, I became one with sky, insects, sea, wind—whatever I saw or touched. The wind had a breast then; it had hands and caressed me. Sometimes it grew angry and opposed me, did not allow me to walk. Sometimes, I remember, it knocked me down. It plucked the leaves from the grape arbor, ruffled my hair which my mother had combed so carefully, carried off the kerchief from our neighbor Mr. Dimitrós's head, and lifted his wife Penelope's skirts.

The world and I still had not parted. Little by little, however, I drew myself out of its embrace. It stood on one side, I on the other, and the battle began.

As the child sits on his doorstep receiving the world's dense, turbid deluge, one day he suddenly sees. The five senses have grown firm. Each has carved out its own road and taken its

share of the world's kingdom. The sense of smell was the very first to grow firm within me, I remember. It was the first to start establishing order over chaos.

Every person had his distinctive odor for me when I was two or three years old. Before raising my eyes to see him, I recognized him by the smell he emitted. My mother smelled one way, my father another; each uncle had his special odor, as did each woman of the neighborhood. When someone took me in his or her arms, it was always because of his smell that I either loved him or began to kick and reject him. In time this power evaporated. The various smells blended; everyone plunged into the same stink of sweat, tobacco, and benzene.

Above all, I distinguished unerringly between the smells of Christian and Turk. A kindly Turkish family lived across the street from us. When the wife paid a visit to our house, the odor she emitted made me nauseous, and I used to break off a twig of basil and smell it, or else stuff an acacia flower into each of my nostrils. But this Turkish lady, Fatome, had a little girl about four years old (I must have been three) who exuded a strange smell neither Turkish nor Greek, which I found very pleasing. Eminé was white and chubby, with palms and soles dyed with cinchona, and hair done up in tiny, tiny braids with a shell or little blue stone hanging from each to ward off the evil eye. She smelled of nutmeg.

I knew the hours when her mother was away from home. I used to go to our street door at those times and watch Eminé sitting on her threshold chewing gum. I signaled her that I was coming over. But her door had three steps which seemed immensely high to me. How could I ever scale them? I sweated, I slaved, and after a struggle mounted the first. Next, a new struggle to climb the second. Stopping for a moment to catch my breath, I raised my eyes to look at her. She sat on the threshold completely indifferent. Instead of offering her hand to help, she just looked at me and waited without budging. She seemed to be saying, If you can conquer the obstacles, everything will be fine. You'll reach me and we'll play together. If you cannot, turn back! But I conquered them at last after much struggle and reached the threshold where she was sitting. She rose then, took me by the hand, and brought me inside. Her mother was away the entire morning; she hired out as a charwoman. Without losing a moment, we took off our socks, lay down on our backs, and glued our bare soles together. We did not breathe a word. Closing my eyes, I felt

Eminé's warmth pass from her soles to mine, then ascend little by little to my knees, belly, breast, and fill me entirely. The delight I experienced was so profound that I thought I would faint. Never in my whole life has a woman given me a more dreadful joy; never have I felt the mystery of the female body's warmth so profoundly. Even now, seventy years later, I close my eyes and feel Eminé's warmth rise from my soles and branch out through my entire body, my entire soul.

Little by little I lost my fear of walking and climbing. Going inside the nearby houses, I played with the children of the neighborhood. The world was growing broader.

When I was five years old, I was taken to some woman vaguely a teacher to learn how to draw *i's* and *kouloúria* on the slate. This was supposed to train my hand so that I would be able to write the letters of the alphabet when I grew older. She was a simple peasant type, short and fattish, a little hump-backed, with a wart on the right side of her chin. Her name was Madam Areté. She guided my hand (her breath smelled of coffee) and expounded on how I should hold the chalk and govern my fingers.

At first I wanted nothing to do with her. I liked neither her breath nor her hump. But then, though I don't know how, she began to be transformed little by little before my eyes: the wart disappeared, her back straightened, her flabby body grew slim and beautiful, and finally, after a few weeks, she became a slender angel wearing a snow-white tunic and holding an immense bronze trumpet. I must have seen this angel on some icon in the church of Saint Minas. Once again the eyes of childhood had performed their miracle: angel and Madam Teacher had become one.

Years went by. I traveled abroad, then returned again to Crete. I called at my teacher's house. A little old lady was sitting on the doorstep sunning herself. I recognized her by the wart on her chin. When I approached and made myself known to her, she began to weep with joy. I had brought her some presents: coffee, sugar, and a box of *loukoums*. I hesitated a moment, ashamed to ask her, but the image of the angel with the trumpet had become so firmly established inside me that I could not restrain myself.

"Madam Areté, did you ever wear a white tunic and hold a large bronze trumpet in your hands?"

"Saints preserve us!" the poor old lady cried out, crossing

herself. "Me a white jelab, me a trumpet? God forbid! Me a chanteuse!"

And her eyes began to flow.

All things were magically re-kneaded in my yeasty childhood mind; they were brought beyond the reasonable and very close to madness. But this madness is the grain of salt which keeps good sense from rotting. I lived, spoke, and moved in a fairy tale which I myself created at every moment, carving out paths in it to allow me to pass. I never saw the same thing twice, because I gave it a new face each time and made it unrecognizable. Thus the world's virginity renewed itself at every moment.

Certain fruits, especially, had an inexplicable fascination for me, cherries and figs above all. Not simply the fig itself, the fruit, but the fig leaves and their aroma. I used to close my eyes and smell them, turning pale from dreadful bodily contentment. No, not contentment—agitation, fear, tremor, as though I were entering a dark, dangerous forest.

One day my mother took me with her and we traveled to a secluded beach outside of Megalo Kastro, a place where women went swimming. My brain filled with a vast boiling sea. Protruding from this fiery indigo were bodies, very pale, weak, and strange, so it seemed to me, as though they were ill. They were emitting shrill cries and hurling armfuls of water at one another. I could see most of them only as far as the waist; from the waist down they were in the sea. Below the waist they must be fish, I decided; they must be the mermaids that people talk about. I remembered the fairy tale my grandmother told me about the mermaid who is Alexander the Great's sister. Roaming the seas in search of her brother, she asks all the boats that pass, "Is King Alexander alive?" The skipper leans over the gunwale and shouts, "He's alive, my lady, alive and flourishing!" Alas if he says the king is dead, for then she beats the sea with her tail, raises a tempest, and shatters all the boats.

One of these mermaids swimming in front of me rose out of the waves and beckoned. She shouted something at me, but the sea's din was so great that I could not understand her. I had already entered the world of the fairy tale, however, and thinking she was inquiring about her brother, I cried out fearfully, "He's alive, alive and flourishing!" Suddenly all the mermaids shook with laughter. Ashamed, I ran away in a furor. "They were women, damn them, not mermaids," I

ago an animal set out to reach this goal, but it has not arrived yet."

"Which animal?"

"The monkey. We are still only at the halfway point—the Pithecanthropus. Be patient."

"God can afford to be patient. He's immortal. What does time cost Him? But man? . . ."

"Man is immortal too," I replied. "Not all of him, though. The immortal part, inside him, can be patient."

We rose from the table and went down to the shore. The sun was about to set; not a leaf was stirring. Two gulls, their wings folded, were pushing the sea happily with their white breasts.

"They must be man and wife," remarked my friend, looking at them with admiration.

"Or two friends," I said, and picking up a pebble from the beach, I flung it in order to separate them.

As I pore over this ancient diary now in my old age and see our quixotic campaigns of that time—the ramshackle lance, worm-eaten shield, tin helmet, the mind filled with nobility and wind—I am unable to smile. Happy the youth who believes that his duty is to remake the world and bring it more in accord with virtue and justice, more in accord with his own heart. Woe to whoever commences his life without lunacy.

We toured the Holy Mountain, and the more we inhaled its atmosphere, the more our hearts caught fire and blazed up in a furor. My god, what decisions we made, what vows we took! How weightlessly we jumped the boulders as we proceeded from monastery to monastery, feeling not solely in our imaginations but with our entire bodies that we were being supported by the wings of angels! Such, surely, is the atmosphere which at times begets lunacy, at times sanctity and heroism. In the years which crushed down upon us afterwards, however, neither my friend nor I ever mentioned those sacred, quixotic hours again. We felt ashamed, not because the flame had subsided—alas! it did not subside—but because our strength proved to be lax, inferior to our desire. We still wanted, as we always had, to create a new and better world, but we saw that we could not do so. I admitted this, but my

ago an animal set out to reach this goal, but it has not arrived



Water Immaculata

however, neither my friend nor I ever mentioned those sacred, quixotic hours again. We felt ashamed, not because the flame had subsided—alas! it did not subside—but because our strength proved to be lax, inferior to our desire. We still wanted, as we always had, to create a new and better world, but we saw that we could not do so. I admitted this, but my

friend kept it hidden all his life. That was why he secretly writhed and suffered more than I did.

Only once, one evening many years later when a huge harvest moon rose sadly from the sea as we were leaving the convent on Spetsai, I turned to my friend and said to him, "Angelos, do you remember . . . ?" But he became pale—he realized that I had been reminded of the moon at Athos. Placing his hand over my mouth and commanding me to be silent, he quickened his pace.

Now I lean over my old journal once more and thumb through its pages.

Karakállou Monastery. Clouds had covered Athos's foot and summit, leaving free a wide zone of sparkling snow in the middle. It began to rain—sun showers. Our guide ran ahead and fired a rifleshoot. The sound of the monastery bells came festively from behind a clump of fir trees, and the abbot, holding the tall crosier symbolizing his office, appeared on the threshold to welcome us, accompanied by the commissioners.

We entered the refectory; it was long and narrow, with columns painted blue and black. The abbot sits at the head of the table, severe, taciturn, black-bearded; above him a fierce Christ with knotted brows, done in black and green paint. In a small elevated pulpit, the lector, a pale monk of tender age, declaims from the lives of the saints in a monotonous, chanting voice. Everyone bends over his plate, no one talks. The abbot scarcely touches his bread and food; then suddenly he takes a small bell standing at his right side and rings it three times. All the monks spring to their feet, still chewing their half-finished meals. The one who is waiting on table runs, prostrates himself before the abbot, and receives his blessing. Then the lector does the same and begs to be forgiven if he read poorly. In comes the Host on a tiny tray, a piece of bread from which each monk pinches off a small bit which he nibbles as holy *antídoro*.

That night we lay awake talking into the early hours. We told each other that the time was ripe, the world was ripe, for a new way to love Christ. Earlier that day we had met a monk standing outside the monastery graveyard. When we asked him why the paintings over cemetery entrances always represented Christ crucified and not, as would be fitting, Christ

«SALVE» DE LOS MONJES DEL CISTER

Aña. I. T.

S AL-VE * RE-GI - NA. Ma-ter mi-se-ricórdi æ,
 vi - ta, dul-cé - do, et spes nostra, sal - ve. Ad te
 clamá - mus éxu-les, fili-i E-væ. Ad te suspi-rá mus ge-
 méntes et fien-tes in hac lacrymá-rum valle. E - ia ergo
 advo-cá - ta nostra, illos tu - os mi-se-ricór - des ócu-los
 ad nos convér - te. Et Je - sum benedí - ctum fructum
 ventris tu - i, no-bis post hoc exí-li - um o - sténde. O
 cle-mens, o pi - a, o dulcis Virgo Ma-rí - a.
 (T. P. Al-le - lú - ia.)

MONASTERIO DE PORLET

Con licencias.

trap door, leap out into the light, and begin straightway to act saucily toward God, its eternal adversary.

I had found it necessary to purge my bowels and expel the demons inside me—wolves, monkeys, women; minor virtues, minor joys, successes—so that I could remain simply an upright flame directed toward heaven. Now that I was a man, what was I doing but enacting what I had so ardently desired as a child in the courtyard of our family home! A person is born only once; I would never have another chance!

Night had already fallen when I arrived back in Jerusalem. The stars seemed like mouthfuls of fire suspended over the heads of mankind, but no one in Jerusalem's hallowed streets lifted his eyes to see them and perish with fright. The great fear was conquered by everyday passions, minor concerns, food, the pocketbook, and women. Thus the people were able to forget, still, and keep on living.

As I tossed and turned on my hard mattress, I thought to myself, The time has come for me to make a decision, to bring to completion what I divined as a child when the milk of God was still upon my lips.

At Mount Athos a monk had taken my hand and gazed at my palm; he said he wanted to read my fortune. His face was indeed a gypsy's: black and leathery, with thick goatlike lips and eyes that spit fire.

"I don't believe in your sorcery," I told him with a laugh.

"That doesn't matter," he answered. "What matters is that I believe."

He regarded the lines of my hand, its stars, crosses, and wrinkles. After much study he said, "Don't put your nose in other people's business. You were not made for action; keep your distance. You cannot struggle with men, not you, because at the very moment you are fighting, you keep thinking that your enemy might be right, and no matter what he does to you after that, you forgive him. Understand?"

"Continue!" I said. I was a little shaken, because I saw that although this monk had never seen me before, he was right.

He regarded my hand carefully once more.

"You are being devoured by many cares; you want a great deal and ask many questions. You are eating away your heart. But take my advice and do not be overanxious to find the answer. You must not go out to find it; it will come to find

you. Listen to what I say, and rest at ease; it is coming. Let me tell you what my superior once told me: 'A monk searched all his life for God, and only when he was breathing his last did he realize that God had been searching all the while for him.' "

He bent over my hand again. Then he stared at me with bulging eyes. "You shall become a monk in your old age," he said. "Do not laugh. You shall become a monk."

Sometimes a false prophecy can be fulfilled; one must simply believe in it. I recalled that other prophecy uttered by the midwife when I was born and she regarded me in the light: "One day this child will become a bishop!"

Overcome by terror, I shouted, "No, no, I don't want to become a monk," and I drew back my hand as though I scented the danger.

I thought I had forgotten the monk's words after so many years, and then suddenly, on this night, they rose again into my mind. I tried to laugh but could not. The words seemed to have been working on me secretly all that time and pushing me precisely where I did not want to go. It was no longer a laughing matter.

I closed my eyes in order to fall asleep and escape. . . . Suddenly I was a rebel being pursued through the streets of a large city. I was captured, tried, and condemned to death. The executioner took me and made me march in front while he followed behind with the axe over his shoulder. I started to run. "Why are you running?" asked the executioner, who had begun to gasp for breath. "I'm in a hurry," I answered him, and as I said this, a warm breeze blew and the executioner vanished. It was not an executioner, it was a black cloud and it had scattered. I wanted to continue on but could not. A mountain rose up before me and blocked my path. It was solid rock, all flint, with a large red flag waving at the summit. I said to myself, If I want to go farther, I shall have to climb it. Well then, in God's name! Crossing myself, I began to ascend. But I was wearing hobnailed boots, and sparks flew as the hobs rubbed against the flint. I climbed and climbed, slipped, fell, regained momentum, climbed some more. And as I came closer and closer to the top, I saw that it was not a flag that waved at the summit, but a flame. I continued the ascent, my eyes riveted to the peak. No, it was not a flame either—I could see it clearly now—it was God. Not God the

passionately, had placed Himself between the abyss and me to keep me from seeing it and being frightened.

I began to provoke my soul, to torment it. Although it desired to become entangled with the flesh and be granted a mouth and hands with which to kiss and touch the world, although it no longer desired to regard its envelope the body as an enemy, but rather to become friends with it so that the two could journey hand in hand, separating only at the grave—although the soul desired all this, I stood in its way. Which “I”? A demon inside me, a new demon—Buddha. This demon kept shouting, Desire is flame, love is flame, virtue, hope, “I” and “you,” heaven and hell are flames. One thing and one thing only is light: the renouncement of flame. Take the flames that are burning you, take them and turn them into light. Then blow out the light!

In India, when the day's work finally ends and the shadows fall upon the rooftops, the village lanes, and the people's breasts, an aged exorcist leaves his hut to make the rounds of the village. The magic reed between his lips, he proceeds from door to door playing a melody sweet and lulling, like the charm which cures souls. It is the “tiger's melody,” that is the name given it, and it is said to cure the day's wound. This was the melody I wished to hear more clearly, and in order to do so I locked myself in my room and leaned day and night over huge manuals, studying the sermons and teaching of Buddha.

“In the flower of my youth, with my curly black hair, at the very acme of contented youthfulness's joy, in the first pride of manly strength, I shaved my hair down to the roots, donned the yellow robe, opened the door of my house, and entered the desert. . . .”

Here began the struggles of ascetic discipline. “My arms came to resemble dried-out reeds. For nourishment I took only a single grain of rice from sunrise to sunrise, and do not suppose that rice was bigger then than now; it was exactly the same. My hindquarters became like the legs of a camel, my spine like a chaplet; my bones protruded like the framework of a dilapidated half-timbered hut. As water glitters at the bottom of a deep well, so gleamed my eyes. Like the gourd which dries in the sun and cracks, such was my head.”

But salvation did not come from this harsh road of ascetic discipline. Going back to his village, Buddha ate and drank, seated himself beneath a tree, at peace, neither happy nor

sad, and said, "I shall not rise from this tree, shall not rise from this tree, shall not rise from this tree, unless I find salvation."

His sight limpid, his spirit pure, he saw vanity, saw life emerge from the earth and disappear, saw the gods disperse like clouds in the sky, saw the entire cycle, and leaned back against his tree. And as he did so, the tree's blossoms began to fall upon his hair and knees, the Great Message upon his mind.

He turned left and right, before and behind; it was he himself who bellowed in beasts, who bellowed in men and gods. Love took possession of him, love and pity for his own self that was scattered and struggling throughout the world. All the suffering of earth, all the suffering of heaven, was his own suffering. "How can anyone be happy in this pitiful body, this skein of blood, bones, brain, flesh, mucus, sperm, sweat, tears, and excrement? How can anyone be happy in this body governed by envy, hate, falsehood, fear, anguish, hunger, thirst, disease, old age, and death? All things—plants, insects, beasts, men—proceed toward perdition. Look behind you at those who no longer exist; look ahead of you at those not yet born. Men ripen like grain, fall like grain, sprout anew. The boundless oceans grow dry, mountains crumble away, the North Star wavers, gods vanish. . . ."

Pity—that is the Buddhistic journey's unfailing guide. By means of pity we deliver ourselves from our bodies, demolish the partition, merge with Nothingness. "We are all one, and this one suffers—we must deliver it. If but a single trembling drop of water suffers, I suffer.

"The 'Four Noble Truths' dawn in my mind. This world is a net in which we have been caught; death does not deliver us, for we shall be reborn. Let us triumph over thirst, let us uproot desire, let us empty out our bowels! Do not say, 'I want to die,' or 'I do not want to die.' Say, 'I do not want anything.' Elevate your mind above desire and hope—and then, while yet in this life, you shall be able to enter the beatitude of nonbeing. With your arm, you shall halt the Wheel of Rebirth."

Never had Buddha's form towered up before me bathed in such brilliant light. Formerly, when I considered nirvana identical with immortality, I saw Buddha as just another of Hope's generals, leading his army contrary to the thrust of the world. Only now did I realize that Buddha urges man to

give consent to death, to love the ineluctable, to harmonize his heart with universal flux, and, seeing matter and mind pursue each other, unite, beget, and vanish, to say, "That is what I want."

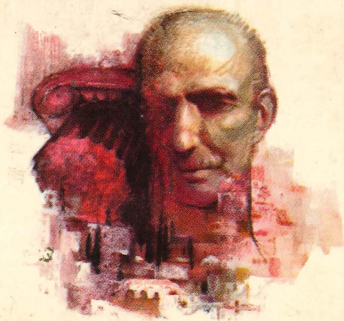
Of all the people the earth has begotten, Buddha stands resplendently at the summit, an absolutely pure spirit. Without fear or sorrow, filled with mercy and good judgment, he extended his hand and, smiling gravely, opened the road to salvation. All beings follow impetuously behind him. Submitting freely to the ineluctable, they bound like kid goats going to suckle. Not only men, but all beings: men, beasts, trees. Unlike Christ, Buddha does not single out only humans; he pities everything, and saves everything.

In his heart he sensed the cosmos forming and vanishing—alone, without the aid of invisible powers. Ether condensed in his sun-baked skull and became a nebula, the nebula a star; the star, like a seed, formed a crust and put forth trees, animals, men, gods; then fire came into his skull and everything turned to smoke and perished.

I lived for many days and weeks plunged in this new adventure. What an abyss is the human heart! How the heartbeat breaks into palpitations and takes unforeseen routes! Was all my yearning and passion for immortality leading me then to absolute mortality? Or could it be that mortality and immortality were identical?

When Buddha rose from beneath the tree where for seven years he had struggled in his search for salvation, he went, saved now, and sat down cross-legged in the square of a large city. There, surrounded by lords, merchants, and warriors, he began to speak, preaching salvation. At first all these unbelievers ridiculed him, but gradually they felt their bowels emptying, felt themselves purged of desire, and little by little their festively white, red, and blue garments turned yellow, like Buddha's robe. I, in the same way, felt my bowels emptying and my mind dressing itself in the yellow robe.

One night when I went out to take a short walk in the Prater, Vienna's large park, a girl of the painted sisterhood stepped up to me beneath the trees. Frightened, I increased my pace, but she overtook me and caught hold of my arm. She exuded a heavy scent of violets; in the light I could make out her blue eyes, painted lips, and half-exposed breasts.



"...reader, in these pages you will find the red track made by drops of my blood... My entire soul is a cry, and all my work the commentary on that cry."—*Nikos Kazantzakis*

REPORT TO GRECO

BY NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

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