

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARD 2022



AUTHOR NOMINEE

ANNA KOUPPANOU

CYPRUS

Biographical information on the candidate

Anna Kouppanou is an author of children's and young adult books. She is also a teacher, a philosopher of education – writing on several topics, concerning education, childhood, technology, literacies and literature, and a devoted promoter of the love of reading. Currently, she is working at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, focusing on areas, such as the design and delivery of professional learning programs for in-service educators – specifically about children's literature, the teaching of literature, creative writing, etc.

She holds a BEd in Primary Education (University of Cyprus), an MA in Intercultural Education and Psychology (University of Cyprus), a PhD in Philosophy of Education (UCL Institute of Education, University College London), while having completed a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program at the University of Cyprus, concerning the characteristics and workings of literary texts and technological artifacts. Academically, Anna has published widely, and her latest academic book is titled: *Technologies of Being in Martin Heidegger: Nearness, Metaphor and the Question of Education in Digital Times* (London: Routledge).

Anna has taught in Cypriot primary schools, the Cyprus Educational Mission of Great Britain, and in-service training programs for teachers. She has also taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Philosophy of Education, Children's Literature, Didactics of Children's, and Postmodern Philosophy, at the European University Cyprus and at the University of Cyprus.

Anna loves literature – books, novels, words, signs, pictures, the workings of textuality, the textuality of the world, reading and writing. Anna grew up listening to her grandma's stories, losing and constructing herself in different worlds, since through story telling she found a way to relate to and to change the world. Anna has always been writing poetry – but her true passion is writing children's and young adult books, as she considers this realm of literary creation to be more fitting to the way she experiences the world. 'What if?' is her favorite question – a question of imaginative play and full of potentiality for social change.

Anna's literary work has won numerous awards and accolades (Cyprus State Award for Young Adult Literature in 2010 and 2015, The Reader literary magazine Award in 2015, Cyprus IBBY Award for Contemporary Fairy-tale in 2001 and 2015, Women's Literary Society Award in 2013, and others). Her first children's book – written at the age of twenty-one – received first prize in Cyprus IBBY competition for an unpublished for Contemporary Fairy-tale and that sent her off on to the path of writing fiction. Anna continued writing nonstop, experimenting with and mixing different genres of realist and fantasy literature, while her work is largely concerned with matters such as otherness, social equality, the environment, poverty, the lack of education, body image, gender issues, etc. Her book *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore*, a political allegory about dogs' struggles to be recognized as thoughtful and speaking beings and legal bearers of rights, is representative of these concerns.

Anna is especially interested in the promotion of the love of reading. She has been organizing programs and actions towards this aim for years. She regularly visits libraries, schools, and universities and teaches children and learners of any age the many ways, through which they can put together a story – and, perhaps their own story. Anna considers storytelling a

liberating and an empowering practice and wish to share this knowledge with everybody who wants to listen. She has organized the action 'The Readers of the Suitcase' during which chains of reading were unfolding through and connection different schools. In cooperation with the Museum of Fairytale and Cyprus media, Anna has participated in programs of creativity that built up children's emotional resilience during quarantine, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With this action, Anna narrated stories to children, created videos for creative writing and invited children to respond to isolation through creative activity. Anna is also an Official Advocate for the Children's Rights Campaign, as initiated by the Cyprus' Commissioner of Children's Rights. Her dream is to be able to listen to children and to continue writing stories for them. Academically, she writes about new conceptions of childness, and she aspires to create books that will inspire children to write.

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A statement describing candidate's contribution to literature for young people

Anna Kouppanou was born in Cyprus in 1979. She has completed her undergraduate studies in Education Sciences (University of Cyprus), her postgraduate studies in Intercultural Dimensions of Education and Psychology (University of Cyprus), and her Doctoral Studies in Philosophy of Education (UCL Institute of Education, University College London). She has worked as a teacher in primary education, as an Education Officer at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, as a Specialist Scientist, and as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Cyprus, teaching philosophy and education, and researching issues related to philosophy of education, philosophy of technology and literary theory. Her research work has been published in international academic journals.

Kouppanou's work has many different dimensions and is celebrated both in Cyprus and abroad. With books such as *The Incredible Revelation of Sebastian Montefiore*, which was awarded the Republic of Cyprus State Award for Young Adult Literature, 1st Prize at the Competition for Contemporary Fairy-tale of the Cyprus Association of Books for Children and Youth (Cyprus IBBY), the Award for a Book for Children by the literary magazine "O Anagnostis" (The Reader), and was included in the honorary list of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY Honor List 2018), Kouppanou's literary work promotes inclusion and acceptance through the genres of fantasy and realism, while encouraging interspecies coexistence, respect for otherness – in all of its forms, and cultivating the need for social change.

With her works, *Aria Changes Worlds* (IBBY Cyprus, 2001), *The Argonauts of Time* (Republic of Cyprus State Award, 2010) and *The Day we Broke the World - The Club of the Lost Children Vol. 1*, Kouppanou contributes to the renewal of themes and narrative techniques in children's literature not only in Cyprus, but also in Greece, giving special breath to the genre of fantasy. With her books, such as *Grandpa, Superman and a Little Cherry*, (Kedros, 2018, Women's Literary Fellowship Commendation, 2013) and *The Disappearance of K. Papadaku and what happened that summer* (2018, Nominated for the Hellenic Republic State Award, Shortlisted for the Republic of Cyprus State Award, Shortlisted for Greece IBBY Award) she has also immersed herself into realistic fiction, dealing with important psychological and social issues and capturing contemporary depictions of childhood and adolescence.

Kouppanou's work is rich and multifaceted. Apart from awards and distinctions, Kouppanou's work has been especially embraced by the reading audience in Cyprus and Greece. Her fiction is often organized through the creative combination of real and imaginary, drawing on enchanted and mythical elements that take on new meaning and forming clear intertextual connections with the original texts (Spanaki, 2010). Kouppanou also achieves impressive ideological transformations and combinations, while her work is characterized by a thoughtful and playful philosophical organization (Svoronou, 2015). Indeed, Anna Kouppanou is constantly developing her art of storytelling. When we read, her books,

On the one hand, we can't wait to turn the page so as to see the development of the story, and on the other hand, we pause in order to delight in the narrative intensity of the excerpt, the linguistic power of the words and anthropological depth of the characters. Such dialectical intensity that combines suspense with the self-sufficiency of the scene is a proof of the writer's mastery in controlling the narrative speed. Clearly, Kouppanou has the gift to write narrative (she has ideas – even stories, able to torment her if they are not put on the paper). What's more, it is not difficult to see the writer's care for every comma and every seemingly inconsequential word of her book. Her capacity as a poet is not irrelevant to this (Karatasou, 2020).

Staying a little longer with Kouppanou's narrative artistry, we need to note here of her choices in language. Indeed, her literary work engages in 'a constant play, a dialogue between the signified, the thing, and the signifiers – the form. It is so difficult to find the balance between sharpness and chatter, between richness of expression and laconicism, between what we call immediacy and indirectness in linguistic practice, but Anna Kouppanou succeeds in this' (Ioannidou, 2018, p. 135) It would be also an omission not to mention 'the play with the narrative techniques that the author seems to develop. On the one hand, this refers to a game in language, and on the other, to a negotiation with social issues played out through a game of different voices. The text belongs to both the author and the reader, the voices are many, and they come together harmoniously' (Ioannidou, 2018, p. 137).

The characters in Kouppanou's works are also quite important and always well-wrought, a dynamic force that organizes her books. These are three-dimensional heroes, with past, present, and future, desires, problems, and dilemmas (Karatasou, 2020). In Kouppanou's works, there are also often anti-heroes who evolve through constant questioning and hardship (Ioannidou, 2018). Through the depictions of struggles, deaths, loneliness and other everyday problems, Anna Kouppanou enters gently the psychic world of her heroes, avoiding melodrama and the barriers of stereotypes (Karatasou, 2020).

With her visits in schools, her academic and research work, with publications on philosophy, literature, and literacies, Anna Kouppanou promotes the importance of literature, the love of reading and literacies in Cyprus – especially, creative writing. With the column she keeps in the literary magazine "Chartis" [Χάρτις], she gives prominence to children's and young adult literature. She has interviewed philosophers and writers from Cyprus, Greece and from all over the world, such as Bernard Stiegler, Andri Snaer Magnason, and many others. She contributes to Greek Cypriot teachers' professional learning, and through her professional and her capacity as an author, she gives lectures and organizes workshops and conferences, concerning the teaching of children's literature.

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Appreciative essay

Changing worlds/Changing the world: An introduction to Anna Kouppanou's children's and young peoples' literature

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Introduction

Anna Kouppanou, with her celebrated literary body of work and her daring fiction in the fields of children's and young adult's literature, is the most versatile author and the main representative of the literary generation of 2000 – that is, of a new generation of Greek Cypriot writers, who are currently renewing children's literature in the country. Her books move in the realm of the postmodern, while her writing allows for the convergence and mixture of literary genres. Her books, either situated in the land of fantasy (*Aria Changes Worlds*, 2003; *The Dwarf Who Fell in Love with Snow White*, 2005; *Santa Claus Wants a Present*, 2008; *The Argonauts of Time*, 2009; *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore*, 2015; *The Day we Broke the World – The Lost Kids Club, Vol. 1*, 2019) or located in the area of realist fiction (*Rivers change... And the mystery of the red shoes*, 2016; *The disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer*, 2017; *Grandpa, Superman and a Little Cherry*, 2018; *Phoebus and the Whale*, 2021), arise out of a complex fictional poetics, challenging the linearity of narrative and the closeness of meaning, while acknowledging the active role of semantic composition unfolding in the experience of reading, with the active participation of the reader. Apart from the convergence of writing and reading, Kouppanou's books are also founded on polyphony and on the main characteristics of the novel – in the Bakhtinian sense of the term. In what comes next, I will first discuss Kouppanou's fantasy and then move on her realist fiction.

Following Ariadne's thread into time and space

Kouppanou's literary work intertwines literary genres and narrative techniques. It is also characterized by intertextual composition allowing the narrative to unfold like a web of conversational threads, extending from the classic texts of children's literature to various philosophical and theoretical sources and traditions (phenomenology, existentialism, metaphysics, posthumanism, second worlds, etc.). Her work also weaves together sources from the literary canon, mythology, and pop culture, as they often relate to scientific topics, such as the nature of space-time, quantum physics, and the multiverse. This takes place with Kouppanou's very first book, *Aria changes worlds* (2003), where the writer offers a contemporary treatment of the myth of Aria (Ariadne) – allowing the story to become hers (belonging both to the female protagonist and to the writer) and not Theseus'. In this coming-of-age story, Aria, a young girl with quite relatable problems concerning her physical appearance and personal identity, is caught up in a journey moving her between worlds that change because of her, while Aria herself is changed by the journey. Kouppanou enters children's literature with this first book, written at the age of twenty-one, and which has brought her the 1st Prize in the Competition for Contemporary Fairy-tale of Cyprus IBBY for 2001. The book combines elements from different genres, and techniques, such as fairy tale, adventure, humor, and so many other motifs and modes.

The feminist connotations of the first book are echoed quite strongly in Kouppanou's book, *The Dwarf who fell in love with Snow White*, which is a very successful reworking of the classic fairy tale, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Here, the dwarfs have their own histories, names, narrative space to develop as characters, but also the autonomy of action within the narrative plot. One of the dwarfs is Freddy, who is passionate about music and dancing. He will meet Snow White, fall in love with her, and they will become close friends. The protagonist, here, however is Snow White, as a young woman of ambition. Snow White wants to break away from the stereotypical expectations of her gender and position, wishing to study and become a doctor. With the dwarfs and especially in the figure of the oldest one, she will find a mentor, while at a later stage Doctor Prince will promise to help her with her dreams. These promises will prove false. Snow White will leave him and run to save Freddy in his hour of need. Both Freddy and Snow White will realize that they cannot depend on others for their self-actualization, and that the work on themselves will allow them to become open and truly love each other. Matters of disability, humanism and posthumanism, feminism, autonomy, gender and identity come into play with this cleverly rewrite of the classic story. *Santa Clause wants a Gift* (2008), is Kouppanou's first illustrated book. It is a contemporary fairy tale starring little Angelina, and a wonderful Santa Claus who, similarly to any child or perhaps to every other human being, wants what is right – a present for Christmas. He brings presents every year, but no one thinks of him. With this book, Kouppanou moves along similar paths with the Snow-White adaptation, problematizing at the same time the notion of gift, social action, and the responsibility of caring.

Moving back to longform, *The Argonauts of Time* (2009), won Kouppanou the Republic of Cyprus State Award in the category of Literature for Young Adult, while the book was shortlisted for the literary magazine *The Reader's Award*, in the category of Literature for Young Adult Book. *The Argonauts* tell the story of Sonja Jones, who lives in Scotland, and of Hercules Olympious, who lives in Rhodes, Greece. Both youths have dark and complicated family histories, and they meet online. The commonalities between them are not exhausted, however, here. They will soon find out that they belong to a new generation of Olympian descendants, bearing names and abilities similar to those of the first heroes of the Argonaut campaign, and that they will take on their own extremely difficult mission – that is, to preserve the integrity of the historical timeline. They will also need to protect the three gemstones of time from a hidden sect of the Malta Knights, who want to change the route of history. With the unfolding of the story, people will lose their lives, fierce clashes will take place, and the time will come that young heroine, Sonja, (Son/ja – Ja/son), the newest version of Jason, and young Hercules, will lead Argo and the new generation of Argonauts to victory. In short, *The Argonauts of Time*, offers a narrative that weaves together historical with fictional events, coincidences with meaning, Scottish legends with Greek mythology, old with new love, mythology with history, adventure with mystery. The narrative also features abandoned babies of mysterious origin, evil characters who turn out to be good and good ones that turn out to be sinister. The book also touches upon the mystery/detective plot, while subverting gender stereotypes. *The Argonauts*, finally, combine narrative motifs and genres with ingenuity and freshness, while implicating topics concerning the idea of controlling time, time ramifications, and time connections.

The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore (2015), is the book, which brought Kouppanou the most awards and accolades. It has won the Republic of Cyprus State Award for Young Adult Literature 2016, the 1st prize of the Competition for Contemporary Fairy-tale

of the Cyprus IBBY (2013), the Award for Children's Book of the literary magazine "O Anagnostis" (The Reader, 2016), and it was included in the honorary list of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY Honor List 2018). The book stars Sebastian Montefiore, an eccentric young, risk analyst in a large company, living a life free of risk and imagination. Sebastian makes an incredible discovery: Dogs can think, express what they feel, and speak the language of humans, following a scientific project conducted by Dr. Thomas to 'improve' them. The government that gave him the mission is behind a shocking conspiracy to control dogs but also society at large: fake news, manipulation of social events, fabricated images, directed television, exploitation of fear of the unknown. Dogs will revolt and claim respect and their rights. Next to them will stand the pianist Cecilia, daughter of Dr. Jones and Sebastian's neighbor. After the initial shock, Sebastian, will prove to be a person of integrity and a defender of dogs' rights. The characters will face many political issues and existential dilemmas: *Should the truth be told at all costs and, above all, how do we recognize it when we find it? If we use the means of our opponents, do we become them?*

In Kouppanou's *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore*, fantasy writing introduces a radical political critique of the present day through allegory, science fiction and dystopia. In particular, it deals with the way through which power controls representations (and therefore the domain of the real) and determines identities. The book also explores, something that can prove valuable for readers – that is, the mechanisms that build pockets of resistance and autonomy, and it does so in an enjoyable, comprehensible and not at all simplistic way. It is amongst the author's books, that interwinds fantasy with realism, while exhibiting an impressive analysis of social depth! From this point of view, the book illuminates, a more general feature of Kouppanou's writing: Her writing of fantasy, as it is elaborated, maintains close ties with social reality and with our existential and cultural truths.

Turning now to Kouppanou's fantasy series (The Lost Kids Club) and to its first volume, *The Day We Broke the World (2019)*, we see that the writer's preoccupation with time and space, with the world, its nature and the possibility to change it, comes to the fore once again. What is more, the story presents an entire fictional world without being exhaustive; it illuminates only some of this world's territories, while the others are almost invisible but deducible by the reader. This is how this book enchants us. The place, the people, the heroes, and the objects claim an independent existence, endowed with their own past, present and future. But above all, the existence of the heroine, Lizzie Green, is three-dimensional. The undisputed protagonist of the series, Lizzie does not control in any case the stories of the other characters. Still, Lizzy has a rich and enigmatic past: It is dark for the reader, but also for Lizzy herself. This fruitful and liberating distance between the existence of the fictional self and its self-knowledge has its special significance and value. Lizzy has a labyrinthine psychological life and a future that she longs to unravel. So, do we! The past, her internal life and Lizzy's future are given in the book neither linearly nor in whole, nor from a point of view from which the reader can exclaim 'oh, yes... now I understand, I have caught up with you and with all the other mysteries that you meet and attract' – because this is the case with Lizzie. In fact, the heroine does not seem to be able to say such a thing to herself. With both the illuminated and hidden parts of her world, Lizzy wins you over at once!

In short, I need to underline that Kouppanou's writing of fantasy, makes good use of multiple social, ideological and aesthetic discourses that establish kaleidoscopic fictional worlds. Her writing is restless, youthful and at the same time mature; reflectively fictional and socially

sensitive; rooted in a well-understood locality but also involved with the cosmopolitan and the universal. Next, I turn to Kouppanou's literary work in realistic fiction.

Following the thread of writing into change

In *Rivers Change... And the Mystery of the Red Shoes* (2016), Kouppanou tells the story of Arto, a small boy living in Indonesia, loving the river passing in front of his house, and admiring his English teacher, Mr. Stephens, and of course his teacher's bright red 'LIFE' sneakers. The book also tells the story of Antigone, a little girl living on the other side of the planet, who herself is enamored with the 'LIFE' brand and wishes for a pair of these expensive training shoes, even though the ones she now owns are absolutely fine. Antigone thinks that there is no problem throwing away her shoes as these can be recycled. Both kids are up for some revelations. Arto, taken on a trip with his class, by Mr. Stephens, will discover firsthand how 'LIFE' shoes are manufactured – that is, by children's labor and damaging the environment – even Arto's beloved river. Antigone, will also sense that something is wrong with throwing away perfectly wearable shoes, just so that she can fit in with her football playmates. The book is quite fresh in the ways that it builds up mystery and brings to the fore different children's outlook on things – indeed, placing the characters and their dilemmas in specific cultural contexts. The story also masterfully employs the narrative perspective, cleverly setting its plot, and ultimately becoming an exemplary representative of truly remarkable green literature!

Kouppanou's book *Grandpa, Superman and a Little Cherry* (Kedros Publications) has been honored by the Women's Literary Fellowship in 2013 and was published in 2018. The protagonist of the story, Timotheos, is an unexpected character, not because fictional grandfathers are rare – but because Kouppanou's grandfather stands out from the stereotypical figure of grandpa. Timotheos's daughter is expecting a child and his life begins to change dramatically, but not in the usual way – not in the way that grandfathers are usually portrayed, that is, as waiting for the offspring (preferably a boy), who is going to continue the family name. Rather, the story conveys Timotheos' feelings and deep sentiments, his experiences of insecurity and uncertainty about his future role, but also his concern about the rules that a good grandfather should obey. After all, Timotheos does not want to be simply a grandpa, but rather the best grandpa in the world – a real super grandpa. Timotheos' constant and anxious reflections, brings to the fore awareness of the value of each and everyone in the family (father, future grandfather, daughter, son-in-law, spouses). Timotheos is full of innocence and passion for life. He has also a fresh outlook, making him the grandfather that all young readers would like to have! Along the way, Timotheos will meet a little boy who needs adult care and support, and through this friendship both Timotheos and the book's little readers will find out that a good person does not care only for their own, but rather about all the people in the world. Any person can be my person, and everybody needs care. The novel is a bildungsroman – one, in which the main character enters into an apprenticeship, allowing him to unlearn whatever is conventional, individualistic, patriarchal and 'old-fashioned' about his new family/social role.

The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer (2017) is perhaps Kouppanou's most impressive narrative work. It was shortlisted for the Republic of Cyprus State Award for Young Adult Literature, Hellenic Republic State Award for Children's Book,

the Greek IBBY Award for Novel for Young Adults ,and the “O Anagnostis” (The Reader) Literary Magazine Award for Children’s Book, while it has repeatedly enticed specialized literary criticism. The protagonist of the story is a teenager, Alexis Sotiriadis, who is pressured by his family situation for so many reasons: he has lost his beloved aunt Antigone, his father is in prison, his lawyer-mother works non-stop – trying to acquit her husband. Alexis’ dealings with his friends are not easy either. He harbors feelings of bitterness towards Petros, for something he once told him, and he is also in love with Marisa but does not know what to do about it. In general, Alexis does not understand his feelings, not even if he has these feelings. So, Alexis experiences multiple types of disappearance in his life but chooses to focus on the disappearance of his favorite author, Myrsini Nefeli K. Papadakou and on the fourth installment of her series, which is long awaited and yet nowhere to be found. Alexis sets himself on the mission of finding Papadakou and also finding out what happened to the fourth book. Marissa and Petros follow him on this journey. Together they will face dangers, the intricacies of first love, the impasses and glorious victories in the arena of understanding themselves, others, and their different positionalities. In this young adult novel, the detective and thriller genres are closely tied together, constituting the other side of a whole other series of mysteries, such as the mystery of one’s self, the self’s connections to others, and the fragmentary narratives through which we try to understand our lives. For all these reasons, the book has a strong self-referential character concerning the nature and the construction of narrative itself. Indeed, the detective plot proves to be a spacious arena for ideological hybridization, incorporating elements from biography and autobiography, essay writing and journaling, epistolary writing and fairy tale, coming of age stories and bildungsroman.

Phoebus and the Whale (2021) is Kouppanou’s most recent literary work, a return of the author’s to short form, which she does not visit often – unfortunately, judging by the masterpiece that this book is. This particular illustrated book (to be precise, this picture book) unfolds narratively around the questions ‘*What happens when fear is too great? What happens when it no longer fits inside you and when you can no longer suffer it?*’ Phoebus, the little hero of the story, is very scared. He does not suffer from a specific childhood phobia, for example, concerning the dark or some animal, etc. Rather, his fear is one of those fears that takes the upper hand and overwhelms the child, and the human being. We sometimes say ‘my fear overflowed’. Somehow this is Phoebus’ fear. At school, their teacher talks to them about marine mammals. The huge whale, the blue whale, attracts the hero’s attention, magnetizing him. He takes cartons and blue paper and builds his own blue whale. When his girlfriend Rosie asks him about that which he is making, Phoebus explains that he is creating his fear. As he gives shape to his fear, and as he shares his artistic creation with others, Phoebus is filled with other emotions that put fear aside. *Phoebus and the Whale* is a short story, quite different from the usual publications, which are concerned with overcoming negative emotions. In a simple and at the same time deep – in fact, almost wise way, Kouppanou writes a story about the transformation of fear and about the stage at which the artist finds themselves before realizing their own identity.

By way of conclusion

Anna Kouppanou’s literary work in the field of children’s and youth literature is rich and renowned. Her books have won numerous awards from major institutions, as well as from prestigious literary magazines. With exceptional insight and artistry, the author respects and

innovatively represents children's and young people's voices. Kouppanou also constructs these children's distinctive understandings of the world, while her stories address issues, which are of concern for young people – indeed, relating to current contexts of family and social life. Themes and values are defined narratively, but only from the different perspectives of these characters. Each heroine and every hero have their own story. Kouppanou's heroines and heroes are born out of great love and are bursting with life. This is the reason that any kind of agenda is absent from Kouppanou's work.

Kouppanou's work is also multidimensional and ideologically bold: Her texts combine and transcend discrete genres. The foundational modalities of imagination, adventure, humor, and realism are combined in an apt and functionally aesthetic way. A multitude of narrative genres are ingeniously hybridized in Kouppanou's stories: detective plot, mystery, science fiction, dystopia, diary, fairy tale, fantasy novel, coming of age stories, parody, mythological novel, literary dream, green literature, etc. In fact, there is a rare intertextual current running through Kouppanou's work, which avoids becoming 'academic' or weakening the role of the reader. On the contrary, this energy illuminates and strengthens the narrative strength of her stories.

Kouppanou's texts respect the reader. They ask questions and are multidimensional. They are also deeply thoughtful and at the same time open and relatable. Kouppanou's books address the major issues of today in a combinatory mode – each with a different intensity and emphasis, as befits the particular plot of the book in which they are the subject. These issues have to do with gender identities, the human and the posthuman, technology, nature, and culture, adulthood and childhood, friendship, love, the social existence of the human being, social justice and social inequality. Kouppanou's multi-thematic books about the world of today and tomorrow, do not sacrifice good fiction to good intentions about the social. Her books, instead, capture the readers' interest, activating feelings of curiosity, suspense, and surprise, pushing them to ask questions, to think, to imagine and to cultivate their critical and reflective thinking. Kouppanou's heroes change worlds; her stories change well-known stories; her books long for world change!

The scope and breath of Anna's work can certainly be approached parametrically through its main features: ideological and narrative hybridization, youthful gaze, a new perception of the world that pushes adult censorship to the corner. Kouppanou's body of work also exhibits density of thought, originality and thus interesting narratives, polyphonic organization of fictional worlds and of the novels in general, multifaceted literary dialogue and her amazingly characteristic writing voice – her own style par excellence! For this reason, I think it impossible for a reader not to recognize one of Kouppanou's books. Anna has construed her writing style, which is of course evolving, but is certainly her own – and that is another reason that she has to show a body of work and not simply as series of individual books.

Interview to George Kiouisis for Press Publica

Kiouisis, G & Kouppanou, A. (2016) Anna Kouppanou: 'Children need the arts' [Anna Kouppanou: "Ta pedia exoun anagki tis technes], *Press Publica*. Online: <https://cutt.ly/5j5Cpsy> (last accessed 25 January 2021).

Sebastian Montefiore is a risk analyst; he mows his lawn with a razor, walks on two and sometimes crawls on all fours. Maximilian Discovery is a future father, revolutionary, but also a little hesitant. Josephine is an expectant mother, determined, fearless. Cecilia Thomas is a world-renowned pianist, and a reflective person that moves on six legs. Marvellous George is a TV star, worshiped by thousands of fans. One day and one night their paths and thoughts will cross, and from the moment on the history of the world will change forever. A fast-paced novel, which touches with great sensitivity on important social issues.

The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore by Anna Kouppanou, illustrated by Despina Manolarou, is published by Kedros Publishers. The author was born in Cyprus. She is a teacher and holds a PhD in Philosophy of Education. She received awards and commendations for her work in literature in Cyprus and Greece, while she regularly publishes in the fields of philosophy of education, philosophy of technology and literary studies.

She was awarded the State Award for Young Adult Literature of the Ministry of Education of Cyprus for her books *The Argonauts of Time* (2010) and *The incredible discovery of Sempastian Montefiore* (2016).

- *Magic and fantasy from an amateur lawn barber?*

And from a professional risk analyst, as well. Modern societies have idealized spontaneity and authenticity, but they offer them to us after calculation, employment of statistics and detailed planning – something similar to a vacation to an exotic destination. Sebastian is obsessive, a perfectionist, weird and he even shaves his lawn. Here is the challenge. He is a quite obnoxious antihero at the beginning of the book. But this is the interesting thing about such a hero, that is, we get to see his inner conflicts and the gradual change in his views through the depiction of his emotions. We also watch how he comes out of his orderly world, how he is moved by the support he receives from strangers, how he gradually turns into a defender of things that he used to consider inconsequential.

- *An award-winning book...*

The book was awarded the first prize of the IBBY Cyprus' competition for an unpublished book. Following this, a competition for its illustration was launched. The winner was Despina Manolarou. With its publication, the book received quite positive reviews and also won the State Award for Literature for Young Adult. What can I say? I'm excited that even six-year-olds are intrigued by this peculiar guy who shaves the lawn with a razor, and I enjoy talking to them. When I ask children if they liked him, they say something like 'Erm, at first, not...' and look at me with an inquisitive look. This is where our discussions begin.

- *Ultimately, what does Sebastian Montefiore discover?*

The book did not intend to uncover the truth. The truth is multifaceted and multi-layered and that is why it cannot be accurately portrayed. However, Sebastian knows something that is true, he learns that a part of the population is being wronged and are fighting for their rights. A revolution is underway. So, I hope the book helps the reader to discover the complexity of the subject or to at least discover the processes in which we all participate at some point or other. These are coming-of-age processes, assuming of course that maturity comes with age. We all have to make decisions, and this is a difficult process, however decisions are what allows us to move forward. It does not matter where these decisions take us. What matters is the risks we take even when we know that all odds are against us. Perhaps this is what Sebastian learns, against his professional practices and despite his personal philosophy, which maintains that nothing should change and for no reason. He learns that life cannot be planned or measured and that our moral condition is something other than the quantities we handle with numbers.

- *What issues does the book raise?*

It raises issues such as: What does it mean to have a voice? Unfortunately, we may all have experienced it or continue to experience it every day. We know about justice and injustice. Injustice may be experienced by us or others; we may watch injustice every day on the news, but somehow the voices, our own and others', are silenced or become someone else's means for a certain end; and this end might even go against our beliefs. Sebastian's voice, for example, and everyone else's, becomes a televised product for entertainment. The book addresses issues of claiming rights and issues of identity and acknowledgment of the Other. Sebastian faces a dilemma. What do I do when the Others are in the right? Do I betray my own species; namely, humans – if I defend the dogs and what is fair? It also raises the issue of the power of the media. Even in a digital society that proclaims that the citizen and the consumer have a choice, we know that choices are shaped before they are even presented to us. Power structures and relationships of the offline world are often maintained in the digital one. There are of course ways to claim a presence, to strengthen our voice and this is a rather constant struggle. I believe that through the construction of heroes, who are not one-dimensional – kind or evil – but rather multidimensional, whether canine or human, the book reflects on the complexity of behaviors. Especially the heroines, a blind pianist, and a demanding mother-to-be, who also happens to be a dog, subvert prejudices about gender roles or about people with disability. Finally, there is a concern about the role of science, but also about the non-legislative nature of life in general. All these matters are presented as open questions. Children readers are invited to construct their own meanings.

- *Can adults provide answers to these questions?*

There are answers to some questions, but it is not enough to know what is right. For example, I do not think that anyone disagrees with the view that the destruction of the environment must stop or that all people of the planet, must have equal opportunities. But in the process of discussion and life, this always get distorted, because obviously the sacrifices are great, there is a lot we must give. It is not simply a matter of learning about something but about live according to our beliefs. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get out of our comfort zone. There are also truths that are unknown. For example, no one can know in advance the outcome of what has begun. This however should not paralyze us or stop us from dreaming. Chaos is part of life and our dream need to move beyond calculation, planning, and restraint.

- *What does true literature reveal?*

True literature speaks, it has something to say, apart from the noise of everyday discussion, gossip, and the satisfaction of immediate desires. True literature can make us feel uncomfortable, because we can often see our own behaviors, our own issues reflected in a book's characters' and in their struggles. True literature speaks indirectly, so children's books should not be labeled as 'books for a specific matter', as is often the case. A true book talks tells a story that opens up different paths and invites the reader to enter one of them and then another and then another.

- *Is the world of Marvelous George responsible for the cultural crisis we live in?*

The world of Marvelous George is the world of television. In this book, I approach television not just as a medium, but as the symbol of a form of power that essentially monitors, records, and controls thought in order to preserve balance and serve financial interests. In this sense, the world of television is something broader; it is that force that tries to suppress free thinking under the pretext that it knows better what people want. This world is also the sum of political beliefs, economic interests and tactics that make up our societies. It is data processing systems that under the pretext of personalization, create new needs, desires and ways of satisfying them. These elements are the very crisis of civilization to a large extent.

- *Why do not we help children develop critical thinking?*

For me, critical thinking includes elements such as experiencing challenge, imagination, creativity, and empathy. Critical thinking involves both cognitive and metacognitive processes. It is the realization of how I think and the decision to change this way into something else. Critical thinking is broader than rationalism and is a project that many societies have begun thousands of years ago. However, we seem to be failing to approach or teach it. Maybe, this is because we are not yet ready to have free-thinking citizens. To do this, education systems – the word 'system' here indicates an organized restriction of subversive and critical thought – must exist within free and critically thinking political structures. Letting children's minds fly, demands that our own minds are truly free and not governed by policies that serve the purpose of maintaining the status quo.

- *You are a teacher and an author, and you work at the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute. How do we cultivate the love of reading for children?*

For me, cultivating the love of reading demands primarily one thing – that is, time. Children need to have time to read, they need to feel that the classroom and the school are forming into a community of readers. This means that every day children should have time to choose books, read books and discuss them. We know that this kind of activity helps children to develop their reading skills more than anything else and yet we look for solutions elsewhere. The love of reading is cultivated within a wider context of love for all cultural activities, sciences, and arts. The school should not be cut off from culture, however this is how things work at the moment. Children need the arts. We witness this truth, whenever children are allowed to create and escape from their daily routines. Children respond to art. When you ask them 'what do you want to discuss today?', children mention matters such as the refugee crisis, scientific theories that they want to explore and yet are taught much later in their school career, or their own experiences. Children are there waiting for that question, or that book that will give rise in them a thousand other questions.

- *Are you satisfied with the existing guidelines of the current educational system?*

We have a long way to go. I insist on what I said about time. Think of a child's day and how is defined by limitations concerning time. What kind of message is conveyed by the fact that during the school day, we change the topic and subject every forty or eighty minutes? It is like telling children that the world is tidy, organized like the products on the shelves of a supermarket. The same applies with school space. We might think that we try show to children how to overcome the constraints they meet in life, but in reality, everything around them is demarcated. Think of something simple, a child who wants to take a break or read something at a time that they choose. The school will rarely offer them such opportunity. Children should feel that the school is an environment that meets their needs, rather than an environment that is established in such a way as to satisfy its own.

- *Our beloved Eugenios Trivizas wants schools full of humor and imagination. Do you agree?*

I absolutely agree. I have already talked a little bit about fantasy, but I want to talk about humor as well. Humor is a special type of intelligence. Humor, as found often in irony or in metaphor, presupposes that I simultaneously keep in my mind different meanings and detect analogies and correspondences between these two things, through my imagination. Humor is something that few really achieve and is neglected by education. However, the most important thing is that humor makes us happy; it makes us laugh. Laughter is very much needed in a society that emphasizes success and achievement and measures us up against productivity standards, instead of allowing us to grow as unique individuals. A school focused on humor would create happier children and happier adults. Why shouldn't we want something like that?

- *You dream of writing books with heroes who write about their dreams in the future...*

I have been writing since the time I didn't know how to write. I had a grandmother who had very little formal education but used to tell me fairy tales and stories. Maybe this was how I learned the structure of the narrative from and came to the realization that stories and storytelling are connected with love and happiness. Yes, my dream is to continue writing – especially writing about real heroes who have dreams and some of them dream of becoming authors. Self-referentiality has no end.

List of awards and other distinctions

1. 2019, The Day we Broke the World - The Lost Kids Club: Volume 1, Athens:

Patakis

2019, Τη Μέρα που Σπάσαμε τον Κόσμο - Το Κλαμπ των Χαμένων, Μέρος 1,

Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Πατάκη

- Shortlisted for The Reader [O Anagnostis] Literary Magazine Award for Young Adult Book (2020)
- Shortlisted for the National Award for Young Adult literature, Republic of Cyprus (2020)

2. 2018, Grandpa, Superman, and a Little Cherry, Athens: Kedros

2018, Ο Παππούς, ο Σούπερμαν και ένα Κερασάκι, Αθήνα: Κέδρος

- Shortlisted for the National Award for Young Adult literature, Republic of Cyprus (2019)
- Commendation from the Women's Literary Fellowship (as an unpublished book; 2013)

3. 2017, The disappearance of K. Papadaku and what happened that summer,

Athens: Patakis

2017, Η Εξαφάνιση της Κ. Παπαδάκου και τι έγινε εκείνο το καλοκαίρι, Αθήνα:

Εκδόσεις Πατάκη

- Shortlisted for The Reader [O Anagnostis] Literary Magazine Award for Children's Book (2018)
- Shortlisted for the National Award for Young Adult Literature, Republic of Cyprus (2018)
- Shortlisted for the National Award for Children's Book, Republic of Greece (2019)
- Shortlisted for the Greek IBBY Award for Novel for Young Adults (2018)

4. 2015, The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore, Athens: Kedros

2015, Η Απίστευτη Αποκάλυψη του Σεμπάστιαν Μοντεφιόρε, Αθήνα: Κέδρος

- IBBY Honour List (2018)
- The Reader [O Anagnostis] Literary Magazine Award for Children's Book (2016)

- State Award for Young Adult Literature, Republic of Cyprus (2016)
- First prize, Competition for Contemporary Fairy-tale, Cyprus Association of Children's and Young Adult Book – Cyprus IBBY (as an unpublished book; 2013)

5. 2009, The Argonauts of Time, Athens: Kedros

2009, Οι Αργοναύτες του Χρόνου, Αθήνα: Κέδρος

- State Award for Young Adult Literature, Republic of Cyprus (2010)
- Shortlisted for The Reader [O Anagnostis] Literary Magazine Award for Young Adult Book (2010)

6. 2007, Santa Wants A Present [O Agios Vasilis thelei doro]. Nicosia: Parga Publications.

- Shortlisted for the National Award for Children's Book, Republic of Cyprus (2008)

7. 2003, Aria changes worlds, Nicosia: Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation

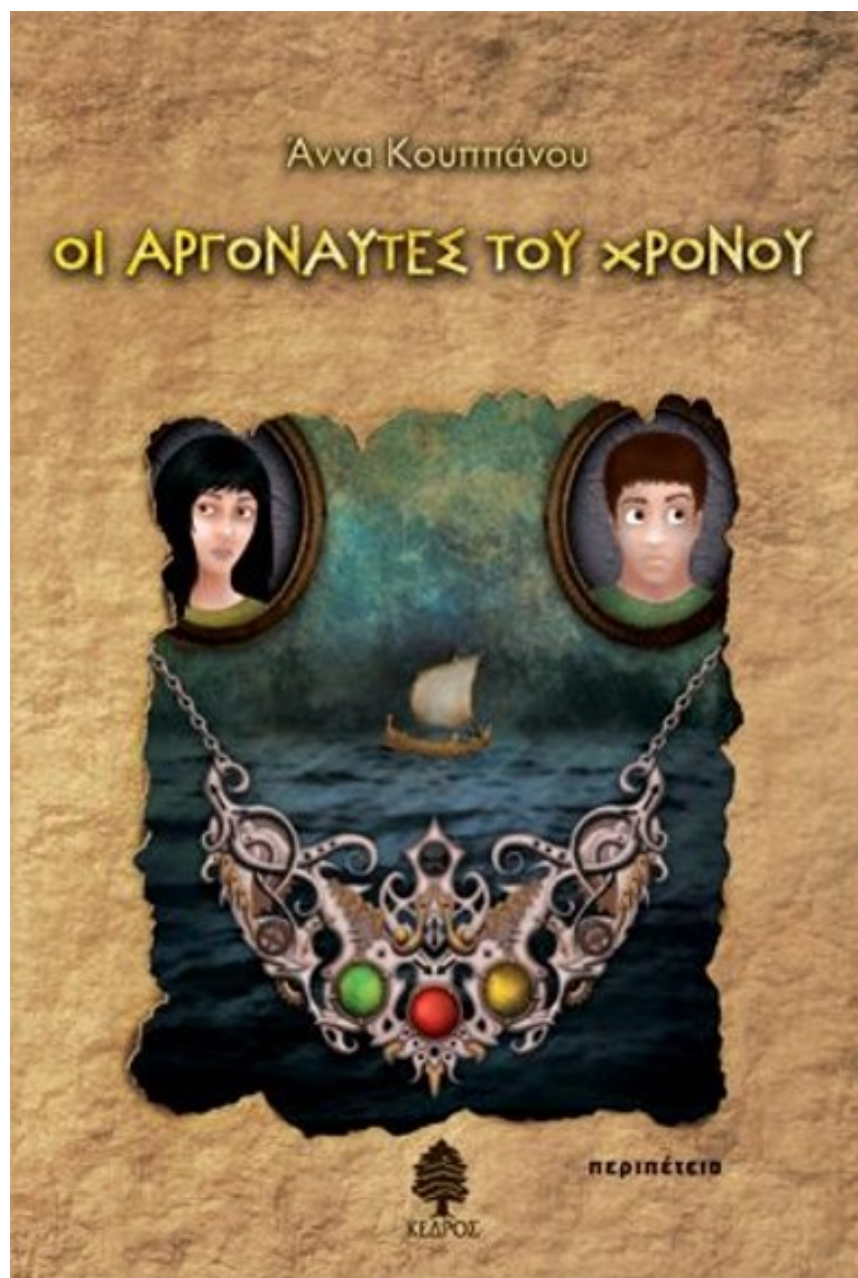
2003, Η Άρια αλλάζει κόσμους, Λευκωσία: Πολιτιστικό Ίδρυμα Τράπεζας Κύπρου

- First prize, Competition for Contemporary Fairy-tale, Cyprus Association of Children's and Young Adult Book – Cyprus IBBY (as an unpublished book; 2001)
- First prize, Jean Monet Competition for Young European Authors (2003)

Ten of the most important titles by the candidate

1. **Kouppanou, A. (2021). Phoebus and the Whale** [O Fivos kai I Falaina], Athens, Patakis. (picture book)
2. **Kouppanou, A. (2019) The Day that We Broke the World – The Lost Kids Club: Volume 1** [Ti mera pou spasame ton kosmo – To Club ton Hamenon], Athens, Patakis. (young adults' book)
3. **Kouppanou, A. (2018) Grandpa, Superman and a Little Cherry** [O pappous, o Superman kai ena Kerasaki], Athens, Kedros. (children's book)
4. **Kouppanou, A. (2017) The disappearance of K. Papadaku and What Happened that Summer** [I eksafanisi tis K. Papadaku], Athens, Patakis. (young adults' book)
5. **Kouppanou, A. (2016) Rivers may Change... And the mystery of the red shoes** [Na to parei to potami... Kai To mistirio ton Kokkinon Papoutsion], Cyprus CYBC. (children's book)
6. **Kouppanou, A. (2015) The Amazing Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore** [I apistefti anakalipsi tou Sebastian Montefiore], Athens: Kedros and Cultural Foundation of the Bank of Cyprus (young adults' book)
7. **Kouppanou, A. (2009) The Argonauts of time** [I Argonautes tou Hronou]. Athens: Kedros (young adults' book)
8. **Kouppanou, A. (2007) Santa Wants A Present** [O Agios Vasilis thelei doro]. Nicosia: Parga Publications. (children's book)

9. Kouppanou, A. (2005). **The Dwarf who fell in love with Snow White** [Ο nanos που agapise ti Hionati]. Athens: Mikri Militos. (childrens' book)
10. Kouppanou, A. (2003). **Aria changes Worlds** [I Aria allazei kosmous]. Nicosia: Cultural Foundation of the Bank of Cyprus. (childrens' book)



List of the five representative books sent to the jurors

1. 2019, The Day we Broke the World – The Lost Kids Club: Volume 1

[Ti mera pou spasame ton kosmo], Athens: Patakis

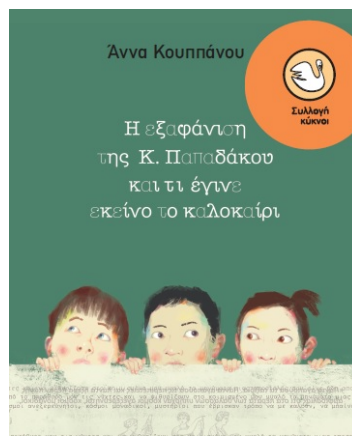
2. 2017, The Disappearance of K. Papadaku and what happened that summer [I eksafanisi tis K. Papadaku], Athens: Patakis

3. 2015, The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore [I apistefti anakalipsi tou Sebastian Montefiore], Athens: Kedros

4. 2018, Grandpa, Superman, and a Little Cherry [O pappous, o Superman kai ena Kerasaki], Athens: Kedros

5. 2009, The Argonauts of Time [I Argonautes tou hronou], Athens:

Kedros



Published reviews of the books submitted to the Jury

1. 2019, *The Day we Broke the World – The Lost Kids Club: Volume 1 [Ti Mera pou Spasame ton Kosmo – To Club ton Hamenon: Tomos 1]*, Athens: Patakis

Review 1: By Georgia Galanopoulou

Galanopoulou, G. (2020), Anna Kouppanou: *The Day we Broke the World [Anna Kouppanou: Ti Mera pou Spasame ton Kosmo]*, *Diastixo*. Online: <https://diastixo.gr/kritikes/efivika/13614-mera-spasame-kosmo> (last accessed 25

January 2021)

What could a contemporary Athenian school, ‘an institution of new methods of education and discipline’ and an ocean liner that disappeared in the waters of the Atlantic in 1950 have in common? And how could this lost ship could be connected to another one that is vanishing right now? According to logic, these two cannot be connected in any way. However, when it comes to a fantasy novel, where the author’s ingenuity invents characters who are capable and willing to connect what cannot be connected, all these peculiarities, and many others, become interesting, arouse curiosity, and stimulate creative thinking.

The link between all these oddities is a certain light. A mysterious light that flickers for a little in the school’s stadium and then stops. Everyday, exactly at noon, ‘at twelve past twelve’. A web of action is woven around this light and brings the main characters together. They are ‘the club of the lost kids’ who manage to ‘break the world’ metaphorically and literally. How and why are they lost though? According to the narrator, who informs us in advance about their ‘fatal and predestined friendship’, this is a question that even them cannot answer. As it is mentioned in the book:

Now, if you asked the lost kids whether they felt losers, as in dorks, none of them would say that they did. However, if you asked them whether they felt lost, because they suddenly found themselves, and without knowing the reason, in a new school, just because their parents thought it best for them to attend a school which used to be a museum and it was now filled with gifted students and scientists from around the country, well, then they would definitely say ‘yes’. Yes, they were lost in the translation of a play without a title. In fact, it was them that they would give the title, but they did not know it yet. That is why they felt lost, lost like birds in the ocean depths; lost like pieces of cheap coal in a safe deposit box; lost like polar bears on a Caribbean island.

None of the ‘lost kids’ has been chosen at random by the author. Each one of them has what it takes to serve the narrative plot. The self-illuminated Dinos Loulis is a mathematical genius and a model of self-confidence. The lonely Antonis Chrysos is lost in the depths of the school library, where he writes lyrics and listens to songs that speak ‘of dark skies and ominous futures’. The delinquent Stefanos Avgerinos is

usually found isolated in the school's basement and is also the son of the principal and the descendant of the founders of the museum. The multitalented Lizzy Green has recently arrived from the US (she is originally from Salem) and is also multilingual, possessing the power to read and listen to thoughts, even those that belong to people who are not still alive.

With a variety of secondary characters surrounding the protagonists, important social issues come to the surface such as the disintegration of family relationships for the sake of fame, prominence, and professional priorities. Everyone has their role, no one can be spared: the ambitious Dr. Magda Avgerinou who is the mother of Stefanos and the principal of the school, the famous and complacent parents of Antonis, the friendly and modest mother of Dinos, and Lizzy's protective father who is a professor of linguistics. There are also relatives, classmates, teachers, and school staff, as well as characters who magically appear from the past.

Apart from its masterful narrative, the matching of characters and the tight plot, this is a multilayered groundbreaking novel. Dr. Magda Avgerinou invites students to join clubs to showcase their talents and abilities, so that her school excels in a competition, but the four 'lost kids' have other priorities. Under the pretext of tidying up the messy warehouse, they organize a completely surreal club of their own in the school's basement. After all this is where the boxes with the collections of the old museum are kept. From that basement, they will try to interpret the mysterious light and decode the signals it emits. An old radio from the time of the German Occupation, an ancient metal Alexandrian cylinder carved with hieroglyphics, family photos of the museum's founders, old newspaper clippings with 1950s articles about a lost ocean liner in the Atlantic Ocean, and the news of the disappearance of another ship in the present complicate their search. Then time ceases to exist and through a crack, a black hole in the foundations of the school, the past and the present become one.

The book captivates the reader and excites them from the very first page. It is inspired by a variety of ideas that it utilizes with admirable simplicity, humor and economy in less than 200 pages. The Ancient Egyptian's views about life, death and eternity, stories about the Bermuda Triangle and the Philadelphia Experiment, scientific views about space and time, and theories about black holes that lead to parallel universes are just a few of these ideas. All these are combined with philosophical theories where the past coexists with the present.

Anna Koupanou received a number of prestigious awards in Greece and Cyprus for her work in literature for children and young adults. She also works as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Cyprus and publishes regularly on philosophy of education, philosophy of technology and literature theory. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to assume that her new book is, among other things, an attempt to present temporality in ways that can be comprehended by both children and adolescents.

This is a novel belonging to a series in which imagination, narrative comfort, personal style, subtle irony, and of course humor transform what is strange and inexplicable into lightness and fun - turning curiosity for the outcome to anticipation.

Review 2: Kos Voice

Kos Voice (2020) *The Magic World of Children's book: Young Adult books (The Day we Broke the World) [O Magikos Kosmos tou Pedikou vivliou: Vivlia gia efivous (Ti Mera pou Spasame ton Kosmo)]*, *Kos Voice*. Online: <https://cutt.ly/Tj7iiny> (last accessed 25 January 2021)

This first book of a fantasy series by Anna Kouppanou transports four teenagers from their present-day model school in Athens to an adventure in space and time. In the book's 186 pages young readers follow its heroes on a mystery journey, encountering theories about space, time and black holes, and exploring fascinating connections between the present and the past.

The story begins on the 29th of November at the Anthopyrgos Model School, a school that 'applies all the new methods of pedagogy and discipline' and accepts talented children from all over the country. On this day, the four teenagers, the 'lost kids', who according to the author, may not have even realized that they belonged to the 'lost kids' Club, begin forming their friendship. Dinos Loulis who lives with his mother, is a mathematician and has a business mind. Antonis Chrysos is the son of a famous pop singer and a famous dancer who do not pay any attention to him. Stefanos Avgerinos is the son of the Anthopyrgos Model School principal, Martha Avgerinos, and a delinquency legend after flooding his former school and then trying to burn down his mother's school. Lizzy Green is the new student who moved from America and speaks so many foreign languages that her classmates remain speechless. However, as it is revealed later, her greatest gift is the ability to listen to the voices of people who lived in the past and also to enter their lives.

The group is brought together by a strange light that appears in the school's football field at exactly twelve past twelve. The first to notice it are Dinos and Lizzy and this knowledge brings them closer. Soon, the other two boys will join them. This flickering light is an SOS message in Morse code. The four teenagers decide to set up a school Club for Cleanliness in order to solve this riddle, which is connected to the school's warehouse and the history of Stefanos' family.

So, who is sending the distress signal? What is the role of the metal cylinder with the hieroglyphic writing 'The game of death - The eternity of life' on its case? How does the shipwreck of Sir Lancelot in 1950 relate to the shipwreck of the Broad Sea that happened this November? How are the two girls, Nefeli Foka and Nancy Sotiropoulou, connected to each other? What is the secret that Lizzy Green does not know and how this will change everyone's lives? There are many questions and even more adventures for the four young protagonists of the book. They begin a journey that will lead them to a rift in time and will bring the past and the present together. What will happen next and how will everything unfold? We will probably need to wait until the second book of the series comes out!

Besides the main protagonists, the book introduces a number of other characters: Stefanos's cold and arrogant father, Ioannis Polyvios and his ambitious mother, Dr. Martha Avgerinou, who are preoccupied with their personal ambitions and have

stopped listening to their son's needs. There is also the kind Mr. Pelopidas, the old caretaker of the school, who tells a beautiful love story to the four teenagers, and of course Lizzy Green's aunt who reveals to her the strange fate of their family and causes many troubles as she brings Lizzy face to face with her mother's past.

With this first book of the trilogy, the author whets the appetite of young readers for what will follow. The plot develops between reality and fantasy and the narrative is vibrant, full of emotion, humor and teenage thoughts and concerns. Furthermore, she manages to talk about theories of philosophy and physics in an extremely comprehensible way, without resorting to didacticism.

The heroes, who are completely different from each other, must deal with their own issues and insecurities and they are sometimes lost in their own quests. An adolescent universe is manifested through their personal thoughts and the discussions between them.

So, brace yourselves for a trip to the day the four friends broke the world and – who knows? – you may also discover that, as Manos, the talented football player and classmate of the heroes did, that 'life is more interesting out there, outside mathematics'.



2. 2018, *Grandpa, Superman, and a Little Cherry* [O Pappous, o Superman kai ena Kerasaki], Athens: Kedros

Review 1: Eleni Korovila

Korovila, E. (2019) A Book for Children: Grandpa, Superman, and a Little Cherry [Ena Vivlio gia Pedia: O Pappous, o Superman kai ena Kerasaki], *Book Press*. Online: <https://bookpress.gr/stiles/ena-biblio-gia-paidia/9959-kouppanou-anna-kedros-o-pappous-o-souperman-kai-ena-kerasaki> (last accessed 25 January 2021).

Book Press recommends a book for children and young adults.

This week we recommend Anna Kouppanou's novel 'Granpa, Superman and a Little Cherry', published by Kedros Publishers.

A few words about the book

There are at least fifty books currently in Greek and in the market with a grandfather in the lead. Whether written originally in Greek or translated, they highlight, more or less successfully, the importance of family ties and bring to the fore the man, who as a father used to represent the 'outside world' for the child, and now is found in his new role, being responsible for the transmission of the wisdom of the past and of family values. Books on this subject often deal with loss and attempt to alleviate the grief that this brings. In most cases, the character of the 'grandfather' is there to offer support, to give advice, to educate, and to bring harmony between parents and children, while the grandfather is always biologically related to the child or the children of the story.

However, in this recent novel by Anna Kouppanou, the grandfather is the main character of the story. The reader observes Mr. Timotheos', a sixty-year-old, anxiety of becoming a good grandfather, his efforts to improve where he finds himself lacking and to rise to the challenge of his new role, while gradually realizing that nothing is self-evident or should be taken for granted. The decalogue, that the protagonist is seeking in order to become a super-grandpa, functions as a revelation as he gradually realizes that this new role is much broader than he originally had in mind. His connection with his beloved daughter, his respect for the new father, his love for his pragmatist wife, his relationship with his long-time buddies, an unexpected meeting with a new friend and the realization that the social need for a 'grandfather' is huge, transform Mr. Timotheos to a true super-grandpa.

What ages is this book for?

The book is addressed to primary school children from the third grade onwards.

Who is the author?

Anna Kouppanou was born in Cyprus in 1979. She is an author and an educator with a PhD in Philosophy of Education and substantial research work in the fields of literary studies, philosophy of education and philosophy of technology. She works as a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Cyprus. Her books "The Argonauts of Time" (2009) and "The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore" (2015) received

the State Award for Young Adult literature of the Republic of Cyprus in 2010 and 2016 respectively. "The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore" also won first prize in the Competition for unpublished Contemporary Fairytale of the Cyprus IBBY in 2013 and the award for Literary Book for Children of the literary magazine 'The Reader' in 2016. It was also included in the honor list of the International Book Organization for Youth (IBBY Honor List 2018). Her book "Grandpa, Superman and a Little Cherry" (2018) received a Commendation from the Womens' Literary Fellowship in 2013, as an unpublished book.

Who is the illustrator?

Emilia Kontaiou was born in November 1984. She is a graduate of the School of Health Visitors, Technological Educational Institute of Athens. She also graduated with honors from the Comics Department of AKTO school. Currently she collaborates with various publishing houses as an illustrator of children's books.

Why will children love it?

The children will initially laugh at the anxious efforts of the expecting grandfather who is preparing for his new duties. As the story progresses, they will come close to little Timotheos who will win them over with his straightforwardness and naive sense of omnipotence.

Why should adults choose it?

To remember the basics: what it means to offer selfless love, support, understanding and companionship within, but mainly outside of one's family. To discuss with children about the grandfather they had or would like to have, the grandfather they are or want to become, the grandfather that every society deserves.



Review 2: Eleni Betinaki

Betinaki, E. (2018) Books that make you think about the ephemera, today, life itself [Vivlia pou se kanoun na skeftis gia to efimero, gia to simera, tin idia ti zoi], *Zitountai Anagonstes*. Online: https://zhtunteanagnostes.blogspot.com/2018/08/blog-post_10.html (last accessed 25 January 2021).

Listen to this!

User manual, survival manual or otherwise a decalogue on how to become a great grandfather. Excellent idea, unique, but also difficult to implement! Is there a school for grandmothers and grandfathers? Probably not! Then how can you handle panic when a joyful announcement such as 'Hey, dad, you are going to be a grandfather!' comes? This means that you are two times a dad, but now things get tough, while doubts, insecurities, ignorance, fear and an unprecedented feeling of love emerge.

Anna Kouppanou's book talks about all the above and much more. Mr. Timotheos becomes a grandfather in two ways. By blood and also because he wants to. A smart six-year-old kid will inadvertently teach him how to be a 'good grandfather'. A beautiful story will begin at the park, with fairytales, and with young Timotheos whose nose looks a little bit like Pinocchio's, and with a family's everyday life. Contemporary issues of survival, thoughts and feelings about a grandfather who wants to be a Super Grandpa for this grandchild and prepares for this role.

He puts together a decalogue for being a good grandfather step-by-step. A decalogue full of turns, antics, joyful moments, and advice that the future grandpa receives through his experiences, lessons and hopes. This is a story written for all grandfathers and about truths that only a few people can acknowledge. It's a story about the love for children, happiness, and about mixed feelings that come out when roles in life change. Finally, it is a story about the anxiety, thoughts, new experiences and the great joys of life.

Two stories unfold in this book. One about parental love and one about a young immigrant who also needs...a grandfather. And Mr. Timotheos becomes a super grandpa for everybody!

This is a book that children and grownups will enjoy. A book about the grandfathers in our life, about those who give everything, about those who fill our daily lives with unconditional love, support, and beauty!

The illustration by Emilia Konteou is exceptional. Despite being in black and white, the reader can 'see' the color in every picture and every word of this book.

If you feel up to the task, you can create your own decalogue for grandfathers, grandmothers, mothers, and fathers. You can do this with your own child or grandchild or with any other child that is important to you.

For children from 9 years old and grown-ups.

3. 2017, *The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer* [*I Eksafanisi tis K. Papadakou ke ti egine ekino to kalokeri*], Athens: Patakis

Review 1: Eleni Svoronou

Svoronou, E. (n.d.) The disappearance of K. Papadakou or The adventure of writing and life [*I eksafanisi tis K. Papadakou i I peripetia tis grafis kai tis zois*], *The Reader*. Online: <https://cutt.ly/bj7aDev> (last accessed 25 January 2021).

Anna Kouppanou, from Cyprus, has a strong presence in the fields of children's and young adult literature. Her previous two books, 'The Argonauts of Time' and 'The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore' received the State Award for Young Adult Literature of the Republic of Cyprus in 2010 and 2016, respectively. The latter also received The Reader's Award for Children's Book. Her new book, 'The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer' not only does it meet the expectations created by the author's previous works, but rather raises the bar even higher.

Alexis Sotiriadis, a 14-year-old boy, with a particular temperament, on the autism spectrum even though it is not named as such, spends his summer in Athens. But he has many more difficulties to deal with than the heat, the boredom, and the loneliness of the city. His father is in jail, his aunt, who had come to help the family, left, and his mother, a busy lawyer, does not seem to have time for her son. The messages she constantly sends him with instructions for the creative use of his free time and the effort she makes to surround him with friends, the obnoxious Peter and Marissa, probably make things worse.

Alexis desperately wants only one thing; to find out why Myrsini – Nefeli K. Papadakou, the author of the books 'Water. Me', 'Heaven. You' and 'Earth. She' has not published her fourth book yet, as she should have. Papadakou already announced the publication of her next work which would be about Fire. She is consistent with her readers. She publishes a book every three years on the 22nd of June, Alexis' birthday. So, what went wrong? Why the book on Fire is not out yet?

The mystery does not end here. Papadakou has announced that her new book would be titled 'Fire'. A word is missing, according to her previous titles. There is something going on here. The publishing house refuses to give any information, and Alexis decides to find out what happened to Papadakou and her promise that was not kept.

But what is it that makes the protagonist desperately looking for a writer when he has much more serious problems to deal with? Papadakou's books are the thread that connects him with his father and his aunt, two persons he adores and who were forcibly removed from his life. His father was reading these books, his aunt continued reading them, and now Alexis is orphaned of a father and of stories.

In his quest for the discovery of Papadakou, who takes care to conceal her existence with a veil of mystery, Alexis has two companions, Peter and Marissa, who although they were a 'mandatory' company imposed on him by his mum, prove to be the best

investigation team. Marissa's attractiveness and strong character make Peter and Alexis potential antagonists. However, what keeps this team together is Marissa's and Peter willingness to help Alexis at every step of his dangerous mission.

The conception of the plot is ingenious and the resolution of the mystery does not disappoint. However, what makes this book special is the weaving of the plot, the writing style and its multileveled story. Closing the relatively short book, 157 pages that are read in one sitting, the reader might still wonder what they have read: a fascinating mystery novel, an emotional coming-of-age story, an anthem to life, no matter how hard it can get, an adventure in complex human relationships, or a self-referential story about storytelling? This is because the hidden protagonist of this book is writing itself.

With her writing, which carefully leaves traces and gives the reader a clue at a time, the author creates three-dimensional heroes, offers plot twists, misleads the reader asking them to test their own certainties, avoids stereotypes and moves the reader without exhorting emotions, Kouppanou teaches how to write a good story. Her writing has feeling, but she does not attempt to demonstrate her skill. She loves her hero, but she does not go easy on him. She helps him to realise his delusions, but also to appreciate his strengths. None of the characters of the book are who they seem to be. They all turn out to be others. Because that is the way people are – multidimensional.

The content of the book and the focus of the story illuminate the adventure of writing as well. What is the meaning of writing a book or, more simply, of telling a story? Is it just a personal matter? How do we synthesize the notes, the scattered pieces of our lives, into a story? How do people relate to each other through listening to or reading a story and how do they relate with the author? Papadakou is the multidimensional function of storytelling. She is Heaven, Water, Earth, and she is Fire! And there is no end to it. We look forward for the next book by Papadakou/ Kouppanou.

Review 2: Andreas Kounios

Kounios, A. (July 21, 2017) *The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer* [I Eksafanisis tis K. Papadakou kai ti eGINE ekino to kalokeri], *Aletheia*, p. 19.

Anna Kouppanou's clever, in fact brilliant, inspiration unfolds in this book and captures young reader's attention. Personally, I believe that *The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer* is a book for adults too, that is, of adults who still feel like children or try to feel like children in their baffling everyday life. The main characters in this fascinating novel are Alexis, who is curious as a cat and extremely stubborn, Peter who is cool and settled, and Marissa who struggles to maintain a balance between the two of them, usually without much success.

Anna Kouppanou adds mystery in her story that increases gradually as in every good detective novel. Who on earth is Papadakou and what is her real name? Is it possible that she has two names? If she has two names, then why not three? Why hasn't she

published her fourth book on time as she did with her previous three? Why is this fourth book simply titled 'Fire'? Are we right to assume that where there's smoke, there's also fire? And what about Antigone. What is going on with sweet Antigone who stood by Alexis in his difficult times?

Besides her unique writing style, Anna Kouppanou masterfully builds a fascinating plot; nothing excessive, many surprises and unexpected turns, and interesting secondary characters that cause mixed feelings. Humor is also a key element; the dialogues especially between Alexis and Peter spread laughter and add a comedic tone to certain parts of the novel.

4. 2015, *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore* [I Apistefti Apokalipsi tou Sebastian Montefiore], Athens: Kedros

Review 1: Elena Ioannidou, Elena Xeni, Vangelis Iliopoulos

The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore by Anna Kouppanou [I apistefti apokalipsi tou Sempastian Monrefiore tis Annas Kouppanou] (July 2, 2015), *Kathimerini*. Online: <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politismos/biblio/211849/?ctype=ar> (last accessed 25 January 2021)

A new publication in the *Children's and Young Adult Literature* series of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation.

The new publication in the *Children's and Young Adult Literature* series by Anna Kouppanou, titled 'The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore' has been released. The book, which is co-published by the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation and Kedros Publishers, won first prize in the Competition for Contemporary Fairytale of the Cyprus IBBY in 2013 and was illustrated by Despina Manolarou, who won first prize in the book's illustration competition of the Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation in 2014.

Sebastian Montefiore, a risk analyst and amateur lawn barber, hears something he does not want to hear and sees something he does not want to believe. All the characters in the book face certain dilemmas and will have to decide how the story should go on and how our world should go forward. Some people want revelations and others do not. Some will manically try to hide the truth and others will fight till the end to share it. There are plenty of books with a dog as the main character. This book though, wonders how something like this could happen. It puts its characters, Maximilian Discovery, Josephine, Cecilia Thomas and the Marvelous George, through the greatest of troubles, crammed between military tanks, protests, enchanting melodies and television studios, and asks: 'Who can find the truth and who can actually listen to it?'

Some critical comments on the book:

Elena Ioannidou, Associate Professor, University of Cyprus

The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore is a children's book that relates to classics, like *Animal Farm* by G. Orwell, *Last Black Cat* and *Froutopia* by E. Trivizas. In all three cases, there is the human world that possesses the power and authority and oppresses everyone else, whomever they may be. Also, in all three books the diversity of the oppressed is highlighted, both in terms of resources as well as in terms of thoughts and minds, while the subject of revolution is brought to the fore. Anna Kouppanou's book balances between myth, fantasy and allegory and addresses key political issues: equality, justice, sharing of resources and representation, all the while remaining a book for children or people who are children at heart. The author clearly proves that you can write about social issues, offering the space for children to develop critical thinking and language while having some fun and enjoying it.

Elena Xenii, Special Teaching Staff, University of Cyprus

The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore is a piece of exceptional literature, a term that may not have been sufficiently defined yet, but still attributes honor, pride, responsibility, and commitment. Responsibility and commitment for ensuring continuous enrichment of local literature experiences with quality, originality, and opportunities for reflection. Responsibility and commitment, so that Kouppanou continues to 'uncover the paths covered in shrubs and weed'. Writer George Panayiotakis suggests in a recent survey of *The Reader* literary magazine that the qualities of a good book 'may be odd and uncertain, but at the same time they can awaken the desire for wandering' or, as the title of the book suggests, "discoveries".

Vangelis Eliopoulos, President of IBBY Greece

In her book *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore*, Anna Kouppanou enchants young readers with her writing and takes them on a journey to worlds of literary enjoyment. This book deals with numerous current issues, for which not even adults have answers. The way the author approaches them by including them in the plot does not 'burden' children with troubles incompatible with their age and it does not lean towards moral teaching. On the contrary, it helps them become tomorrow's critically thinking citizens. Relationships within modern family and society, animal rights, the reality of television, which is projected to us as the real life, and so many other current issues will help children to think critically. Isn't this what real literature should do? And Anna Kouppanou writes real literature.

Review 2- Apostolos Pappos

Pappos, A. (2015) *The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore* by Anna Kouppanou [I Apistefti Apokalipsi tou Sempastian Montefiori], *Elniplex*. Online: <https://cutt.ly/7j7pRt8> (last accessed 25 January 2021)

Sebastian Montefiore's job is a rare one. He is a risk analyst. A client goes to him and asks him about his plans to open a business with such and such products, and Sebastian takes numbers, statistics and data and calculates the risk of such a move. He is exceptionally good at his job. However, when one day he listens to something that he is not supposed to and sees something that is beyond unbelievable, everything in his life change. Dogs can talk! Dogs can think! Dogs want rights! Dogs have a meeting in a warehouse at the harbour to start a revolution against humans! Wouldn't such a thing be a threat to humanity? Sebastian is a human, not a dog. So, he needs to do everything to prevent dogs' plans. He has to save the world. He has to be a hero, a superhero, a leader!

Everything began when two guys attacked Sebastian and managed to take the watch that his father had left him. They beat him up, and Sebastian suffered a concussion and fainted. No other human was there to help him. A dog was there, however, Maximilian Discovery! From that moment on, Sebastian starts listening to dogs talking. Now he has only seventeen hours to stop their revolution. The dogs have an assembly

at a warehouse in order to organise a fight against the humans. Or could things be more complicated? Dr. Thomas found out some years ago that the government's plan to train dogs to think and talk, was not so innocent. His daughter, Cecilia, will do now, in the present, whatever she can to hide the truth from weird and initially naive Sebastian. Will the dogs' revolution turn things upside down for humans or are dogs simply the victims who are trying to stand next to humanity? And alas... whose side will Sebastian Montefiore take?

Who are we? Who are the others? Could it be that our interests as a species are opposing those of other beings? The writer, avoiding preaching and morals, without any emotional animal-loving cries and outbreaks that would cause the readers forced emotional reactions, creates an allegorical novel about reality. She discusses the true nature of this reality and how everyone perceives the reality of animals, their oppression, their exploitation by humans and the systems that they have set up to do so (star system, showbiz, celebrities, reality shows) while their own truth, the dogs' truth, becomes yet another pawn in the silly overconsumption of the raging public who are fretting to get away from their indifferent lives by watching shows. The books comments on television, as a means of promotion of an artificial reality that claims the place of the 'real' reality and manipulates mediocre lives.

Some thoughts and reflections about morality arise: What are your options when the 'enemy' uses unethical means? In what ways can you convince others about your own truth when the reality forces you to think as the 'enemy'? Should the weak and the 'Mute', the helpless, and those who are not developmentally at the same stage as adult humans be protected? Do they have rights? Have people learned to make way for the rest of their cohabitants on the planet, especially the... different ones? What is the role of thinking and knowledge? An abstract from the book:

My name is Anselmo Ignatius and I represent all the dogs that believe that humans made a great mistake – causing such transformation to our nature. You shouldn't have given us the capacity to think. Without thinking, life would go on as we had always known it, short of pain and problems. The one who doesn't think is a happy being [...].

The nature of thinking, its quality and the ways it can change the life of a being is examined through the rich symbolisms of the book, as well as in dialogues and reflections, as the one above.

Reading "The Incredible Discovery of Sebastian Montefiore" can lead young readers' (and also older ones) thinking process to remarkably interesting paths, such as, thoughts' about the nature of reality, about true alliances, friendships and common commitments, about justice that you can't have unless you claim it, about the nature of decisions. The dilemmas. This is a process all the characters will go through. The reader will follow them without realising it. What should I do? Every decision I make has a risk, it goes against other decisions, against logic, against emotions.

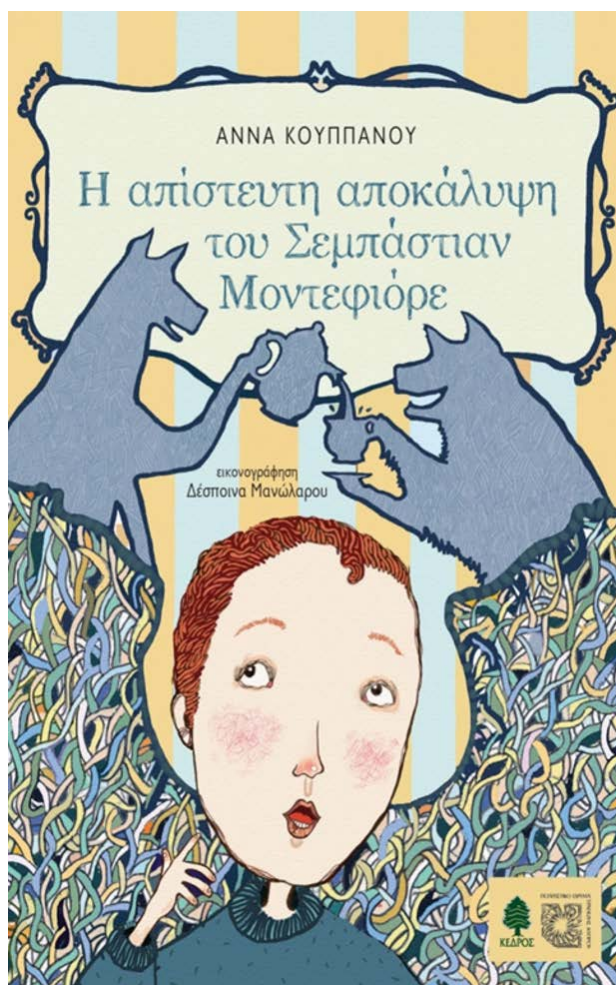
With Sebastian Montefiore, Maximilian Discovery, Josephine, the strange pianist, Cecilia Thomas, and the TV star, Marvellous George, the reader will face their own dilemmas and be prompted to find their own answers, which are not to prescribed by the book.

As a person living with a dog every single day and night for the last seven and a half years of my life, I would like to reassure you: dogs can talk and think, and of course they have rights. They have the right to have company, a roof over their head, food, walks, water, a family. They just express their needs and claim their rights in their own unique way. The more you are willing to get down and listen to them, the more likely is that you will get Sebastian Montefiore’s concussion that allowed him to start listening to them talking...

Here is an extract I adored, which every reader who loves the art of storytelling will:

Tomorrow wasn’t coming soon. Tomorrow wasn’t coming easily. It wasn’t coming at all. Sometimes you need to persevere. To fight with all of your strength, and tomorrow might still not come. Cecilia and Sebastian wanted it to come. Marvelous George wanted it as well, but every dawn was bringing just another today. Again, and again. Emptiness, broken souls and bodies, deafening silence. Every night, delivering ruin and despair.

Anna Kouppanou’s book won the first prize in the IBBY Cyprus’ Competition for Contemporary Fairytale of the Cyprus IBBY and was illustrated by Despina Manolarou, who won first prize in the book’s illustration competition.



5. 2009, *The Argonauts of Time* [I Argonautes tou Hronou], Athens: Kedros

Review: Marianna Spanaki

Spanaki, M. (2010) The historical novel for children with reference to Greek and English Children's Literature [To istoriko mithistorima gia pedia me anafora stin Elliniki kai Agglikiki pediki logotechnia]. *Inter- Texts: Children's Literature today*. Thessaloniki: Laboratory of Comparative Literature AUT, p. 89-98.

Anna Kouppanou's writing moves within the context of postmodernity. Her work consists of a creative blend of reality and fantasy, drawing elements from fairytales and mythology which are re-imagined in the form of stories with clear allusions to the original texts. School, family, and online environments are woven with travel, adventure, and fantasy.

As evident in her published work, the author has moved to lengthier narratives with careful combinations of different genres, with clarity of description and characters from different ontological levels and alternating cinematic scenes. Her most recent book, 'The Argonauts of Time', is defined by the text's connection to contemporary fiction, especially English, with young heroes who can move in different worlds and times. It combines elements from the historical novel and fantasy genre, while sometimes handling stories from mythology through a contemporary creative and theoretical perspective.

The second campaign of the Argonauts is one of the main themes of the book that unfolds in the Mediterranean Sea. The ship Argo becomes the place of analysis of multiple reinterpretations of the original myth. Key characters of the myth are re-imagined, especially Hercules and Jason. The latter is renamed Sonia, which is an anagram for the original name. Sonia is a Scottish schoolgirl who will play a central role in the story and will take on the mantle of the leader of the Argonauts. The different worlds, through which the young Argonauts move, also bring the history of the Maltese knights to the fore. The reception of Greek antiquity in combination with the modern world, the borders between magic and everyday life, and our era's interest in inter-subjectivity are popular topics in young adult and children's literature internationally. In this sense, Anna Kouppanou's novel renews the writing style of historical novel for younger readers and of meta-narratives based on topics inspired by antiquity significantly.

© ANNA KOUPPANOU

The Argonauts of Time

© 2009 Kedros, Athens

translated by John Thornley © 2011 this translation

CHAPTER I

The Researchers and the Discovery of the Yellow Stone

June 1798 - Valletta

As the Grand Master cried out in anguish and despair, the shadows in the marble hall seemed to freeze on all its memorial plaques and coats-of-arms. The helpless situation of his knights – even more his own powerlessness – was so painful to him that he roared in rage, while his head was bowed in resignation over the oaken meeting table of the Order.

One by one the high officers of the Eight Tongues left the room in their useless crowns of office and their vainly ornate ceremonial robes: the Grand Commander of Provence, the Marshal of Auvergne, the Hospitaller-General of France, the High Keeper of Aragon, The Great Admiral of Italy, the Supreme Bailiff of Germany, the Lord Chancellor of Castile, and the English Knight Commander of Horse.

‘So much glory, so much history, so many battles – and all for what? For nothing, nothing at all!’ bellowed the Grand Master into the empty room. Yet he was not entirely alone. In the isolation of that dreadful hour, at a moment so decisive not only for him but for the history of the world, he had at least the company of his faithful secretary, his personal Chaplain.

‘May your Most Eminent Highness pardon my boldness,’ began the secretary in his subservient tone, and with the preamble he always used. The Grand Master turned and looked at him with a sceptical, bitter expression that nonetheless contained a glimmer of hope. Here he was, in the most awkward quandary that any man had ever confronted, and most probably his Chaplain had no significant suggestion to offer. And yet on several occasions the man had helped him out of a difficult dilemma. He nodded his permission to speak.

‘I am aware that my life is imperilled by what I am about to impart to your Highness. Indeed I am already in danger merely because of my knowledge of it. But then, our final end is approaching in any case, is it not?’

The Grand Master remained silent, but the metallic gleam of his eyes betrayed his desire to know more.

‘Your Princely Highness knows that the order is divided into three classes: the Knights of Justice, the humble Chaplains such as myself, and the Serving Brothers.’

The Grand Master made an impatient gesture: the Chaplain understood he must waste no further words.

‘There are rumours of the existence within the Order of a secret fourth class, tasked with discovery and invention, a clandestine group that carries out research, that does not accept anything as true fact without subjecting it to examination and analysis: even Holy Scripture itself!’ The Chaplain trembled as he spoke, realizing that the words he had dared to utter placed him in deadly peril. The Grand Master threw him a look in which rage was mingled with revulsion. ‘What you are saying is heresy!’ he hissed. ‘You must know that it could cost you your life: even worse, it could rob you of your honour!’

‘This I know,’ replied the Chaplain, ‘but it is our only hope. Let the Researchers be revealed, and brought into the open.’

The Grand Master picked up his small but powerful telescope and looked out through one the narrow castle window. Napoleon’s ships waited out in the bay, basking like hungry sharks, like greedy predators of the sea smelling fear. There were dozens of them, with thousands of soldiers aboard.

‘What good are thirty-two knights and a few hundred rough Maltese peasants who persist in the illusion that they can take on an experienced military commander?’ he asked himself.

It was Napoleon, the man whom everyone had started to call ‘Ruler of the World’, who had put him in this terrible plight. His Most Eminent Highness, Prince and Grand Master of the Order of Malta, once the most powerful man on earth, a man who took orders from no one, not even the Pope. ‘His Holiness will certainly be most gratified at this turn of events’, he reflected sourly. For if Napoleon were to occupy the island, the Order of the Knights of Malta would be dissolved, and the Pontiff need have no further worries about the extent of his own power.

‘If I had men...if I had weapons...’ he brooded, but he realized his hands were tied. The holy rules of the Order laid down that there was one truly sacrilegious act that no knight could ever commit: to raise a weapon against another Christian. The only way for the Order to survive would be if he betrayed the very principle of its existence. And whichever path he chose, he would end up as the villain of the piece. At that thought he felt his knees buckle.

He recalled the day, nearly a year ago, when he had taken on the highest office. Even now, as the earth was giving way beneath his feet, he could still hear the

triumphal roll of the drums; he saw the flags of the Eight Tongues fluttering in the summer breeze, recalled the sense of enormous pride he had felt then. Many had voiced objections to his election: that he was an unsuitable choice, that he was not decisive enough.

'Dear God, they were right!' he thought, with a shudder. 'I inherited a great knightly order, and now I shall be forced to dissolve it.'

For a moment he imagined what the history books would say about him. Tears came to his eyes, flowing freely like the tears of little children.

'Tell me,' he asked the Chaplain, 'how can I find one of these...Researchers?'

'Give me a brief space of time,' replied the Chaplain conspiratorially, as with a deep bow he left the hall.

The Grand Master had just sent back the salver with his midday meal – untouched and untasted – and had resumed giving orders to the officers of the knights, when the Chaplain returned with a person the Grand Master had never seen before. The Grand Master observed him amid the gloom of the shuttered windows. Such conversations must always take place in semi-darkness, he thought. He requested his Chaplain to leave the room, and the Chaplain obeyed with a sigh of relief. Whatever exchanges were to take place in there, they were capable of casting any virtuous man into the everlasting fires of hell.

The Supreme Ruler of the Order studied the knight who stood before him. He wore a Chaplain's robes, just like his secretary. He looked older than fifty, but his compact frame had not an ounce of surplus fat. His cassock was worn and ragged from constant use. The Master went nearer, to get a closer look at him. Everything about him was vague and hazy. If the Master had ever met him somewhere before, the meeting had left no trace in his memory. The man facing him looked as everyday and as commonplace as could be. Only his eyes betrayed a restless spirit.

'I hear you are one of these...Researchers,' said the Master. The man seemed disconcerted for a moment, but rapidly altered his facial expression to one of apparent indifference. The Master noticed.

'Tell me all that you know: you've not been summoned to be judged: you're here to offer help.'

The man remained just as expressionless as before. He finally spoke.

'I am a Chaplain. I have worked in the Treasury ever since I was received into the Order. I classify documents and archive the spoils of war. It is humble work,' he added – though his manner suggested that he did not think it humble at all. His eyes radiated the arrogance of one who feels himself to be several rungs above the others.

'There is not a single page in the entire archive, not even the merest scrap of paper, about which I could not tell you who wrote it, why, and even which ink he used to write it,' he blurted out eagerly.

'That is of no interest to me now. Tell me something more to the point!' snapped the Master irritably – but his attention was plainly riveted on the wiry ascetic.

'I am highly competent in my work, and the entire contents of the Treasury are precisely organized and catalogued,' said the Researcher. 'I make a note of every single object. One day, working among the "remainders" – that is the name we give to the unidentifiable articles of minor importance – I discovered a sword. It was silver, of medium length – about as long as from my shoulder to my wrist. There was nothing particularly eye-catching about the way it had been crafted – except for the hilt, which was superb. The cross-guard had been carefully fashioned into the form of a ship: an ancient trireme, I would have said. Inside the back of the sword hilt there were three small compartments. The first contained an apparently unremarkable yellow stone – I took it to be an amber from the Baltic Sea. The other two compartments of the hilt were empty. That awoke my interest. I asked questions, I followed various trails, I investigated patiently – until another knight who also works at the Treasury told me he was acquainted with the knight who had handed in the sword. I found out that man's name, and searched him out. I tracked him down here, on Malta. I questioned him about the sword, but he appeared reluctant to talk. However I eventually managed to ... to persuade him.' A malevolent glint flashed across the dark eyes.

'And? What did he tell you?' demanded the Master sharply.

'He divulged everything. The stones have powers, powers that allow whoever knows how to wield the sword, to be able to control time.'

'To control *Time*?!'

'The yellow stone freezes time, the green stone brings it to life, and the red one makes it flow as fast as a river.'

'What you say is preposterous!' hissed the Master. 'Preposterous, and sheer heresy!'

'Indeed no!' protested the scrawny archivist. He lowered his voice once more. 'It is the truth, and there have been others who also believed in it. A retinue of foreign visitors came to Malta about a year ago. A princess ...'

'The Princess of Scotland, and her attendants!' said the Master with emotion, for the woman's beauty had made a lasting impression on him.

'They came for the stones. They located the sword here in some marketplace or other. Then they tried to divide it up. The princess took the green stone, her attendant knight equerry took the red one, and a third person, another knight among her retinue, carried away the yellow stone along with the sword. Why they did that I cannot say. Perhaps they fell out, and went back on their original agreement; or perhaps this division of spoils was always part of their plan. Whatever their reason, the knight who had taken the third stone, the yellow one, repented of what he had done. He felt he had treacherously defrauded the Order. He felt remorse, and so he donated the stone and sword to our Treasury, hoping that nobody would question him about it.'

'I'm wasting precious time with you,' said the Master. 'This is not only heretical, but utterly insane!' He called out to his secretary: 'Giacomo, come in, and see this madman to the door!'

'No!' cried the wiry priest with all his might, extending his sword towards the startled secretary.

The Grand Master was convinced that the stranger's madness had reached its height. Clearly, a moment of stress had unhinged his troubled mind, and he was just about to kill poor Giacomo. But that was not how it turned out. Giacomo did not leave his life, he simply stepped out of time. His foot remained suspended, his mouth open, his words unspoken. The Master watched, spellbound.

'What have you done?' he demanded with breathless urgency.

The thin cleric muttered something that was almost like a prayer.

'I have frozen time. For Giacomo, time has stopped; for us, as you can see, time proceeds as usual, but for him it has been halted.'

'That is...magic!' said the Master, with a shudder of revulsion.

'It is not magic. This stone is the result of a work of analytical research such as you cannot imagine.'

The Grand Master went up to his hapless secretary and took a close look at him. For the first time he noticed the tiny freckles on his cheeks. He took the glass of water that had stood untouched on his desk for the past two days, and threw it over Giacomo: but his secretary did not react or move at all.

'Wake him!' he ordered the mysterious cleric.

Holding out the sword once again, the Researcher murmured the same incomprehensible formula of syllables as before.

Suddenly, Giacomo put down the foot that had remained so long suspended in mid air, and stood bowing before the Master. Only then did Giacomo realize that something was not in order. He touched his wet hair, and swivelled a puzzled look from the Master to the Researcher, deep in conversation with each other.

'Your Most Eminent Highness summoned me?' he asked, trying to hide his confusion.

'Yes, Giacomo, I did. Please go and wipe yourself down. You cannot show yourself in that unseemly condition,' said the Master, gravely.

'Of course, your Highness. Forgive me,' said Giacomo, still wondering what on earth had happened. He hurried away to find a towel and some dry clothes.

'Where are the other precious stones?' the Master asked in a low urgent tone.

'Only when we have found the Princess and her knight adjutant shall we be able to discover the other two stones. When that is accomplished, the three stones reunited will make us invincible!' said the gaunt Researcher with a note of triumph.

'You mean, they will make *me* invincible!' the Master corrected him. 'Listen to me then: this is what we must do...'

CHAPTER 12

An Invitation from the Argonauts

'What on earth happened just now? What was *that?*' screamed Sonia as soon as she could draw breath. She felt as if she was going mad.

The voice of grandfather Herakles seemed completely at odds with the horror of the moment. It was cool and steady, intended to help calm down the two terrified friends.

'Did I kill him?' asked Sonia. 'Tell me, did I really kill him?'

Grandfather Herakles looked at her without speaking. He tried to approach her, but she was too frightened to let anyone near her.

'Tell me! Tell me!' she persisted. 'Am I a murderer? Did I really just kill him?'

'He is dead; but you didn't kill him, my child, said the old man, taking her gently in his arms.

She was still trembling. She couldn't believe what had just occurred.

'How could it not have been me that killed him?'

'It wasn't you. It was the stone, dispensing justice in its own way.'

'I don't understand. What do you mean? Tell me,' pleaded Sonia with a cry of entreaty.

'Sonia, it's like this: Webber was trapped in the past, frozen in a moment of his life centuries ago. When he tried to take the medallion from you, he touched the green stone, which reverses the operation of the yellow one. So Webber suddenly found himself restored to the present. And in the present, Mr Webber the teacher was not a human being; he was just a memory, as are all the dead.

Slowly and laboriously, Sonia got to her feet. She looked granddad Herakles straight in the eye to see if he was telling the truth. She wanted to be sure it was not simply a lie to make her feel better.

'How can you be so certain about the stones?' she asked mistrustfully.

'Because I've known all about them ever since I was a boy. I'm only sorry I didn't tell you about them before now.'

Then he went up to young Herakles, who had collapsed on the floor in shock. The boy was crying, rocking himself rhythmically backwards and forwards.

'Hey, calm down young man,' said his granddad, trying hard to keep his voice steady.

He realized that the time had arrived to explain things: it couldn't be put off any longer. Old Herakles knew that the hour of departure and separation was fast approaching. He had to remain calm and explain the whole story to his grandson. Everything about his real origins, his parents, and the duty that had been hanging over his young head for years.

But young Herakles wasn't in a state to listen to anything. He couldn't hear, he couldn't see, he couldn't feel. He was just staring at the spot where Webber had

been only a few moments earlier, and in his mind the words he'd heard him say were playing over and over again like a record that's got stuck.

'Deep down I knew something like that had happened,' said Old Herakles, as he tried to ease his grandson into a more comfortable position.

The youngster's shirt was stained with blood. Strangely, that didn't seem to disturb the old man at all.

'Your father was stubborn,' continued Old Herakles. 'More stubborn and determined than any other man. And he was bright - he was really clever. But he forgot something very important.

'What was that?' asked the boy.

'That this mission wasn't his.'

'What mission?'

Old Herakles looked at his grandson, trying to banish the final doubt that tortured his mind.

'Granddad, that's enough of the riddles. Do you know something I don't?' asked the boy, turning his gaze on the distressed old man.

'I'll tell you everything, and hopefully when I've finished things won't seem worse than they are now.'

'OK, Granddad,' nodded young Herakles, wiping the tears from his face.

Then he sat down next to his grandfather, and grasped his hand.

'Tell me everything you know,' he said. The old man heaved a deep sigh.

'Well, here it is, young man. Webber, or whatever other name that monster may have had - he was right. What he told you was the absolute truth. The stones really are from Olympia.

'Come on Granddad, you're kidding me now!'

'Let me explain. Olympia is where time began. All life was born there. It's a magical, peaceful place, where all things - people, animals, trees, and all the elements of nature - live together in concord and harmony. Gorgons, sirens, centaurs, nymphs, human beings with unique abilities, these are the inhabitants of Olympia. And all of them are born of the Power.'

'Granddad, what is all this rubbish? You said you'd explain about my parents and here you are telling me fairy stories.'

'Look young man, everything I'm telling you is truer than any truth you'll hear from this moment on. You see, Olympia is our home. You were born there, as were your father, myself, and all our ancestors. There we all lived, once upon a time, as a community, united, happy. Only one thing cast a shadow over the serene, dream-lit sleep of all the Olympians,' said the old man, nodding his head in recollection.

'What was that?' asked young Herakles.

'It was those stones,' said his grandfather, pointing bitterly at Sonia's medallion. All of us Olympians had heard about them, though none had seen them.

It was Medea who created the stones, thousands of years ago: they're everlasting and indestructible. Jason used them in order to complete his legendary mission, then he made sure he removed them far from Olympia. He knew there were many who would want to get hold of them, which is why he buried them here, in the earth of mortals, where no one could know about them. So for many years we lived without care, until we had forgotten them entirely. But when a great power was created on earth, the Twelve Wise Ones of Olympia were alarmed. They decided the stones should be brought back to the place they came from. So then we sought help from three of the Observers.'

'Observers?' asked Sonia, and threw a puzzled look at young Herakles, who just shrugged his shoulders.

'Yes, the Observers: they're people of the earth who know of our existence and who give us advice and help when needed. The Observers managed to locate the stones, which had been placed inside a sword, and each Observer took one stone. For you see, my children, each stone has its own special powers. But the three stones together form the most powerful weapon that exists in the entire universe.'

'So two of the Observers were the Princess and the knight who was guarding her?' asked Sonia in suspense.

'Yes, that's absolutely right; they were,' said grandfather Herakles. 'Unfortunately the knights of the Order discovered that they had taken the stones, since the third Observer gave them away. The knights thanked him kindly for the information, then killed him. Later they tracked down the other two Observers and demanded they hand over the stones. When they refused the knights tortured them horribly. When they held out and remained silent, they were both murdered. The knight attendant was left to starve to death without bread or water in his cell, right here in the cellar under our shop: the Princess was thrown from the castle tower, on the very day of her birthday.'

'Despite the awful death of two valuable Observers, we were freed from our worries. For the stones had been robbed of their potency, and the knights of the Order did not know where to look for them. At least, so we thought. Until around fifteen years ago, when we learnt that the knights had actually managed to use one of the stones in order to conceal themselves in the past. We were panic-stricken, and unable to think what to do. The Power commanded us to launch an expedition.'

'An expedition?' Sonia was completely at a loss.

'Yes, an expedition - like the one Jason made. But this time round the mission was different. We were to bring back the stones and hide them in a safe place. The bravest men and women of Olympia volunteered to take part in the expedition, but the great Power had other plans. Curiously, children began to be born in Olympia who had the special abilities and talents of those first Argonauts. Chiron, who had educated that original group of heroes, identified the new ones in infancy, and each was given a suitable name. It was around that

time that you were born, dear Herakles. Your grandmother was overjoyed, and your parents considered themselves the happiest beings on earth. Until...'

'Until what?'

'You were just a baby when we discovered how unbelievably strong you were. Chiron recognized in you the powers of the first Herakles. Your parents pretended to accept the fact, pretended to rejoice that their son would take part in the sacred mission. But when you were about five, your father decided he could not bear to see you grow up and throw yourself into such a dangerous task. Your grandmother and I agreed to leave Olympia and come here, so we could search for the stones ourselves. It isn't just chance that brought us to Rhodes, or that we took this little shop in the Street of Knights, nor is it chance that your parents also made the same journey.'

'Granddad, what is all this? You can't believe this, surely?'

'But I do: it's the truth.'

'Granddad, pull yourself together. I can show you that it's all nonsense. Like, how do you explain that I don't actually have any powers or strength at all?' asked Herakles desperately.

'You don't remember that you managed to grab hold of Webber round his waist and lift him right up in the air?'

'Hm, yes... ' Young Herakles thought that over for a moment. 'But what does that have to do with special powers? I've read somewhere that when someone finds himself in a real difficulty, he can work miracles... There was that man who lifted up a whole car when his child was trapped underneath it. I saw that in the newspaper.'

'Herakles, stop all this doubting. The reason you haven't noticed your powers until now is that your parents and I have been trying to make you forget about them. But we can't hold things up any longer. As long as you stay here you're in danger - you and the girl. the Researchers can arrive at any moment.'

'You mean, there are more of them?' asked Sonia in panic.

'Yes, of course there are,' responded the old man. 'What Webber did with the sword, other knights have also managed to do.'

'In that case we have to leave,' shouted Sonia, grasping her neck with shaking hands.

The stones seemed to have sunk into her skin, to have become one with her body. Herakles went across, determined to help her, took hold of the loop of chain that stood out from her skin and tried to pull at it. Sonia let out a cry, begging him to stop. It felt like someone trying to tear out her eye, or pull off her arm. She heard the old man's warning voice: 'That is why I say that you both have no choice. Only if you can find the third stone will you be sure that the knights cannot harm you, and only then can you succeed in protecting the world from the return of the Order.'

'But that stone is located in the past,' said Sonia, beginning to recovering from the pain and shock. And it's guarded by the same people we're trying to avoid.

It's sheer madness for us to throw ourselves into such an adventure. Even if we wanted to carry it out, I haven't any idea how we could manage it.'

'Perhaps not - but there are others who *do* know, and they are ready to help you.'

'Who are they, Granddad?' asked Herakles.

'The other Argonauts: they are waiting down in the bay. You see, Herakles, yesterday, when you were out doing the shopping, they came here to see me, and explained everything. At that time I still refused to speak to you about it. I was hoping some other solution could be found - but now I see there is no other way out. If you stay here, you are in deadly danger. The Researchers may already be on your trail.'

Herakles looked across at Sonia, signalling to her that there was no more room for delay. They would have to leave: events allowed them no other choice. Both the Researchers and the great Power itself seemed to be pushing them inexorably towards the same course of action.

'All right then, let's go,' she said simply. 'My rucksack's already packed.'

'Yes, it's time for us to say goodbye, my dear children,' said the old man.

'What do you mean, Granddad?' asked Herakles. 'We're all going together. I'm not leaving you here.'

'I'm too old and slow,' his grandfather pointed out. 'I'd only hold you up.'

But young Herakles wouldn't take no for an answer. Granddad was the only remaining member of the family, and he had no intention of leaving him behind. They were taking Granddad with them, no matter what the price. He was just about to say so, when there were several knocks at the door. The three of them froze, exchanging a worried glance. The old man spoke first.

'Better let me answer. Whoever it is, I'll keep them occupied. Herakles - bring me the meat knife from the kitchen.' Then they heard the clear youthful voice from outside the front door.

'Let us in, old Father Herakles. We're from the Argos. Chiron has sent us.'

The grandfather relaxed his watchful stance, and signalled to the two youngsters to stay where they were. Then he went to open the door. His grandson tried to stop him, but the old man told him he knew what he was doing. Sonia instinctively touched the stones around her neck: they seemed to be telling her that there was no risk.

The door was opened: there were two boys standing there - obviously twins, and about the same age as Herakles. They were disturbingly alike, and they were dressed rather strangely, with garments draped over their shoulders, and sandals with leather leggings reaching up to their knees.

'We're just about to set sail!' said one of the twins.

'Herakles and Jason will have to come now,' said the other one, glancing around and trying to identify the two they were looking for. 'What's going on in here?' he asked, with genuine interest.

'One of the Researchers was here,' explained granddad Herakles.

'Really?' they both asked together. 'Is he still here?'

'No. Sonia destroyed him,' explained the old man.

'Who's that?' they asked, throwing an inquisitive look at the young Scottish girl. 'And what has she to do with the mission? We came to fetch Herakles and Jason.'

'This is Herakles, this is Jason,' said grandfather Herakles, introducing the two children.

'You mean, Jason is a girl?' asked the twins.

'It appears so,' said the old man.

Now it was Sonia's turn to be mystified. She tried to protest, but couldn't find the right words. Her thoughts were all in a tangle.

'Look, this isn't possible,' she cried, in a weird voice that veered up and down. 'I mean, I don't have any idea at all what all this is about. And I'm a girl. I mean, Jason was a man, right?'

'My dear child,' said Old Herakles as he embraced her tenderly, 'No doubt you have many questions, but now is not the time to answer them. Chiron will explain everything to you later.'

The twins were restless.

'We have to leave,' they insisted once more. 'The Argos is waiting to set sail this evening. It's already tugging impatiently at its mooring.'

Granddad Herakles took his grandson and the Scots lassie inside the house for some final private words of advice. His voice was gentle, reassuring.

'Don't be afraid on my behalf. I'll be much safer here than where you two are going. My dear, dear young grandson, I would never let you go on this journey if I did not know that nobody can avoid his own fate, and that our fate is bound up with the fate of others.'

'Granddad...'

'Yes, my boy?'

'You take care of yourself.'

'Come here and let me kiss you,' said Old Herakles. 'Oh, and I want you to promise me something.'

'What is it?'

'As long as you are on this mission, I don't want you to worry at all about those of us you've left behind. That's the only way for you to keep your mind properly concentrated on the task in hand. That's the way you can best help yourself and your comrades. Will you promise me that, my dear boy?' As he spoke, the old man cupped his hands gently around the young lad's head.

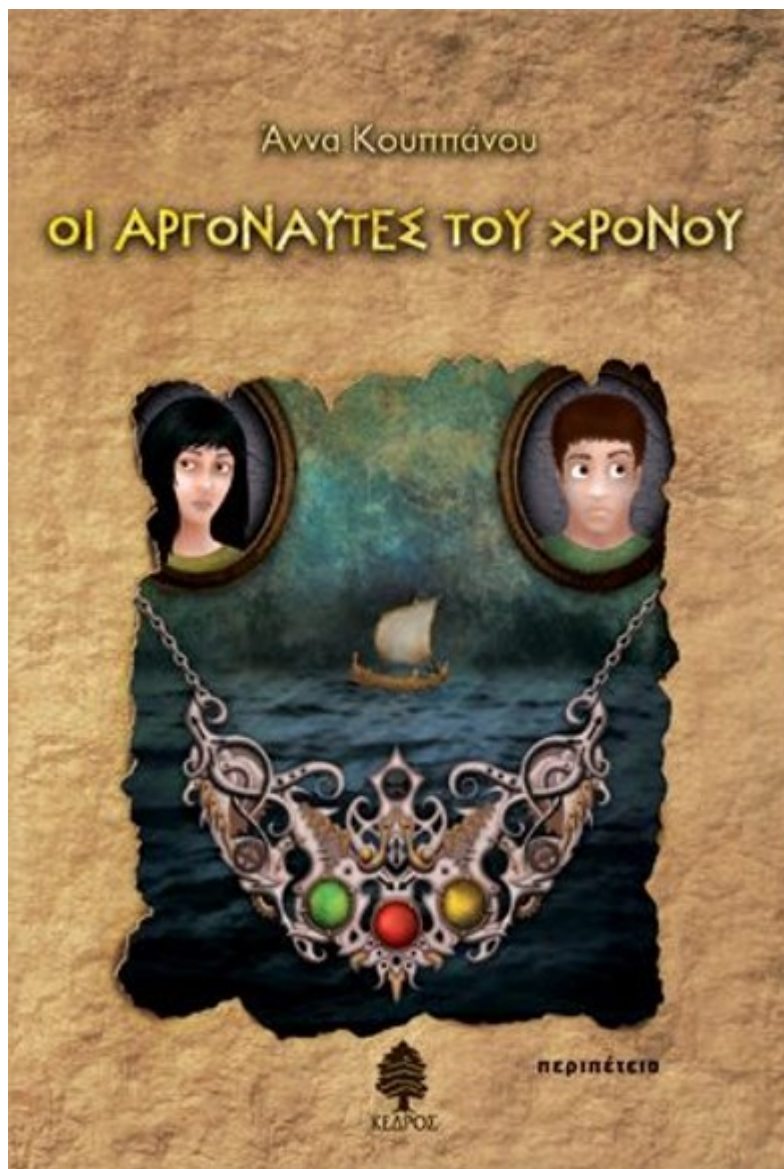
'I promise,' said Herakles, folding his grandfather in a tight embrace.

As Sonia watched the love that bound grandfather and grandson together, she felt as if she was in a lonely, faraway place, where there was only her and her own anxieties. Her thoughts reached out to her parents. She sort of knew that they probably loved her, even though they rarely showed it; they were so closed

in and secretive, and yet also much too over-protective towards her. What would they do now, if they knew?

Her first thought was to get in touch with them, but she rejected it straight away. It was ridiculous to make her parents worry when they were thousands of miles away; they had no idea of what she was going through, and would be completely unable to help her.

'Shall I ever see them again?' she wondered. But there was no answer to that.



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“The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.”

Alice Walker

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Sebastian Montefiore was mowing the lawn as usual, his eyes fixed on the grass with an expression of intense mistrust, and his eyebrows curled in an inverted V-shaped frown. Suddenly he raised his head and looked all around him, scrutinizing the neighbourhood. Then with abrupt, mechanical movements he walked back to his house, and disappeared inside.

If somebody had the time and patience to wait for him to come back, they'd have noticed that Sebastian had brought a ruler with him. And if that somebody was curious to see what he was going to do with it, they'd have observed him first of all scanning the neighbouring houses with a penetrating look, from the nearest white single-storey house with the yellow-painted fence, to the furthest single-storey house with the purple fence. Nobody to be seen anywhere! He got down on all fours, and measured the height of the grass.

'Two inches,' he whispered to himself. 'Two-o-o inches!'

'TWO-O-O-O IN-CHES!!' Softly, he repeated the words in the kind of rhythmical chant he'd heard from football fans celebrating their cup win – though of course they hadn't won, their team had. He gave a satisfied grin, but then suddenly froze. At his garden gate, just by the white rails of the fence, he noticed something... 'Two and A HALF inches?!!' He gave a horrified cry.

He glanced to the left and to the right, to make sure nobody had heard him, then vanished inside the house again. When he returned, he was far too preoccupied to check if anyone was watching: he just threw himself into his work. He switched on the electric shaver he'd brought with him, made sure it was working properly, then deftly began to cut the grass with it.

'Two inches!' he breathed triumphantly: for his personal philosophy was that nothing should ever alter one bit – not for any reason. It was then that he heard something that sounded like a laugh, a little derisory laugh. He looked anxiously around him. Nobody else was up yet. It was only six o'clock, and those lazy neighbours of his were all still in their beds. The only one who was awake was Maximilian, the dog belonging to Leopold Memorious, the man next door.

'Ah,' murmured Sebastian under his breath. 'I see Maximilian's up and about over there. I wonder why they don't just call him Max, like everyone else.'

By 'everyone', he meant the people who had dogs, took care of them, gave them baths, and talked to them. Sebastian wasn't into any of that doggy stuff. He hated touching them, looking at them, or hearing them bark. Just then he gave a sneeze. The mere thought of dogs brought on an allergic reaction.

Now, somebody may well ask, why didn't Sebastian like dogs? Was it because one of them had bitten him on the bottom? Was it because his sister liked playing with the dog more than playing with him, when they were both children? Was it because one Christmas Day the family dog had chewed one of the pair of slippers his Uncle Caspar had given him as a present? No. Though all those things had actually happened, the reason why Sebastian Montefiore didn't like dogs was that he considered them unnecessary – useless animals, who just ate and drank and frolicked around without having to do an ounce of work, when really it should be the other way round. Dogs ought to live somewhere far away from the city, at a farm maybe – or at least they should do the bidding of human beings, just like little robots.

With those thoughts in his mind Sebastian went into the kitchen, looking first at the kitchen clock, then at his watch.

‘We’re behind schedule, Linguine!’ he said to the fish that was swimming around without a care in the confines of its little bowl. ‘First some breakfast, and then off to work.’

Sebastian glanced at the goldfish. Yep, that was a proper animal – it didn’t understand a thing. When you got angry with it, it didn’t answer back. When you approached it, it moved respectfully away. When you went out of the room, it couldn’t care less. With a dog, if you got angry with it you’d be lucky if it didn’t bite you, or else throw you one of those sorrowful looks full of reproach. Just at the thought, Sebastian felt his flesh creep.

He opened the fridge door, and absentmindedly surveyed the contents: his eye rested on the second shelf from the top, where the bacon and the melon were kept. He took them both out, weighing them in his hands.

‘Bacon or melon? Bacon or melon?’ he muttered, waving his hands up and down, like a pair of scales. ‘Arrgh, now I’m well behind schedule!’ he exclaimed, more urgently this time. He put the bacon back in the fridge, and using a knife with a broad, sharp blade, he cut the melon into two-inch cubes. The last piece seemed rather smaller than the others: he threw it away in the bin without a second thought.

‘All done, Linguine,’ he announced to the fish, and put the pieces of melon into a plastic container. Then clattering up the wooden stairs very rapidly – but still only one at a time – he went to his bedroom. Quickly changing out of his grey sportswear, he put on a grey suit, a grey shirt and a grey tie, and stood in front of the mirror. What he saw shocked him nearly out of his skin. He changed colour, went closer to the mirror, and took a long, careful look. Yes, he was right!

‘Good grief! Why is everything going wrong today? And why is it all happening to me?’ he exclaimed. Like a maniac, he rifled through the chest of drawers beneath the mirror. He searched the pockets of his jacket, looked under the bed – nowhere to be found. Then the little lamp inside his head lit up. He hurtled headlong down the wooden stairs and onto the lawn, still in his socks.

Just as he had suspected: he had left his electric shaver out there. He looked at his watch. He was dangerously late. And yet... That faint reddish pencil-moustache of his had grown by very nearly three-sixteenths of an inch - but only on the left side! What was he going to do about it? Clumsily he thrust on his shoes and double-locked the front door behind him. As he headed towards the electric shaver he was calculating that he’d just have time to get rid of that extra bit of moustache. There and then, in the middle of the garden, he switched on the shaver and applied it to his upper lip. He’d done it heaps of times. It should be easy-peasy, nothing to it at all. ‘Just a simple bit of shaving,’ he thought, while the shaver trimmed the red hairs on the left side of his face. He hid the shaver behind the plant pot with the cactus. At that moment he noticed that the neighbours were out in their gardens, all of them staring at him with bleary-eyed grins on their faces. He gave them an awkward ‘Good morning,’ then got onto his grey moped. It was only when he looked in the wing mirror to put on his helmet that he grasped the reason for his neighbours’ enigmatic smiles. Half his moustache had disappeared! ‘Oh good grief!’ he cried. ‘What else is going to go wrong today?’ He thrust on his helmet and rode off, with his neighbours’ laughter still ringing in his ears.

Chapter 2

Maximilian Discovery waited until the neighbourhood had emptied: the big human beings had gone to work, the little ones to school, and the cats had sauntered off to the fish-market. Then he untied his leash and fastened it round his neck. He wanted to be able to roam around freely, but not to give the impression that he was homeless, as that would put him in danger of being caught, and perhaps even killed – ‘put down’ was what the humans called it, to make themselves feel better about doing it. Once the last car and the last red school bus had disappeared, Maximilian, a distinguished-looking German shepherd dog with a rich coat of fur, his ears proudly erect, padded as far as the very last house of the neighbourhood, where the famous pianist Cecilia Thomas lived.

Maximilian wasn’t going there to visit Cecilia Thomas though, but her little lady-dog – she too was famous, renowned for her skills as a trained guide-dog for the blind. Cecilia owed a lot to her dog, and she knew it. Without her, she wouldn’t be able to move freely outside the house, to travel to faraway countries and give concerts, and she wouldn’t have such an easy and comfortable life. That was the undeniable truth. And Josephine was so very smart and sociable, and told such amusing jokes – Cecilia regarded her as a real friend.

Cecilia heard knocking at the front door, and then a bark. ‘Josephine,’ she called, ‘it’s for you. Maximilian.’

Josephine ran and opened the door. She barked with delight as soon as she saw Maximilian. He came inside hurriedly, and she closed the door behind him.

‘I wasn’t expecting you at all,’ said Josephine, in a tone of mock-surprise. ‘To what do we owe the pleasure?’

‘Hi, Cecilia,’ said Maximilian, sitting down on the sofa.

‘Hi Maxi,’ said Cecilia affectionately, using his pet name. ‘How are you doing?’

‘Fine. Really fine, it’s just that...’

‘O-oh. Something’s going on. I can hear it in your voice.’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ said Maximilian. ‘Something’s going on all right. I have information that they’re on to us – we’re being watched.’

‘Wow, that means we’ll have to call an extraordinary meeting,’ said Josephine.

‘Exactly,’ said Maximilian. ‘You can organize that, right?’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Josephine, but then she paused.

‘Go on, tell him,’ said Cecilia, who sensed her hesitation.

‘Tell me what?’ asked Maximilian.

‘I’m just going,’ said Cecilia, ‘to leave the pair alone together’.

‘No, I want you to be here too,’ said Josephine.

‘Oh for heaven’s sake, tell me what’s up!’ cried Maximilian, who rarely lost his cool.

‘Maximilian, this is rather difficult. I don’t know if it’s the right moment to tell you, what with all that other important stuff going on – but...’

Maximilian stretched out and gently nuzzled his long head against hers, then stroked her with his paw.

‘Whatever it is, we can face it together.’

Josephine was looking at him emotionally. Her eyes filled with tears.

‘Maximilian...’ she said, ‘I’m pregnant. Look, I know that right now we should be preparing ourselves for new challenges, so this isn’t the ideal moment...’

But Maximilian wasn’t listening. He was crying with joy. Embracing her with his forepaws, he looked deep into her eyes:

‘I’m really happy! Probably the happiest dog in the world! I’ve always wanted puppies – a great big enormous litter of them. If you want us to put the project on hold for a while, we can do that.’

Josephine lowered her head for a while, then suddenly pointed her muzzle proudly up in the air.

‘Our children really deserve to be born into a better society,’ she said. ‘But yes, perhaps we really ought to delay our other plans. I’m not really up to it: in a little while I probably shan’t be able to run as well as I can now.’

‘I understand,’ said Maximilian. ‘Let’s wait a bit longer.’

The two dogs embraced, then suddenly realized that Cecilia was still there.

‘What do you think, Cecilia?’ they asked.

Cecilia was one of the very few people in the whole world who knew their big secret – that dogs weren’t the stupid animals everyone thought they were: that they could think, had their own language, were able to form families and friendships, and now the time had come for them to rise up in their own revolution, to end their exploitation by humankind.

‘I think it’s entirely for you to decide. I don’t feel I should say anything on that score. But I do think you should hold a General Assembly, to make a decision together with all the dogs. That’s the fair, democratic way.’

‘Cecilia’s right,’ said Josephine. ‘We need to let the other representatives know, and form a joint resolution as a team.’

‘Will you help me spread the word round immediately?’ Maximilian asked Josephine.

‘Sorry, no,’ said Cecilia firmly. ‘Josephine can’t right now – we have an appointment with the vet. He’s going to examine her and tell us how things are going with her pregnancy.’

‘Can I come along with you?’ asked Maximilian, his eyes lighting up.

‘It’d be better if you start to spread the news,’ said Josephine.

‘All right, sweetheart,’ said Maximilian, gently stroking her belly. ‘You take care of yourself now!’

The front door of the house with the purple fence opened, and there emerged two strikingly attractive dogs, and the beautiful, world-renowned pianist Cecilia, with her tiny waist and her luxuriant head of brown hair. At the corner of the street, they said their goodbyes, and Maximilian went off in the opposite direction. The two companions carried on their way,

turning keenly attentive glances at everything going on around them, each of them lost in her own thoughts.

‘Look here,’ said Josephine, gently nudging Cecilia. ‘Don’t you worry about me. Everything will turn out all right.’

But something was obviously bugging Cecilia. When they arrived at the crossroads, Josephine had to make an extra effort to force Cecilia to halt at the curb. A car swooshed past with its horn blaring.

‘Cecilia, tell me: what’s wrong?’

‘Dear, sweet Josephine – you know, you’re my bestest friend in all the world,’ said Cecilia, ‘And you’ve been in my life since you were a little puppy, so it feels almost as if you were my younger sister. If anything were to happen to you, I don’t think I could bear it. You must be really careful. I know I haven’t said anything about it up till now, but I’m afraid for you. Maybe you really should postpone this revolution of yours – it is awfully dangerous.’

‘Oh come on,’ coaxed Josephine. ‘I’ll think about all that when the time comes. Perhaps you’re right – but now we’re going to do something really nice, so think nice thoughts instead. I can hardly wait to hear what the doctor will have to tell us.’

The two friends continued their conversation in a much more relaxed mood. Perhaps the future wasn’t so grim after all. Sometimes danger was all in the mind. And maybe, just maybe, people would change. Maybe somebody would explain it to them so they’d understand that dogs were also beings, creatures with rights. Yes, everything seemed different now. The sun caressed their hair, and the leaves were shining with a deep green. It all made them feel more optimistic. They walked on for nearly a mile without even noticing the distance.

At the surgery they found a roomful of people waiting with their dogs. Somebody recognized Cecilia, and asked her for an autograph. With her mouth Josephine pulled a photo out of Cecilia’s handbag, then gave her a pen as well, so she could sign her name. Cecilia’s fans were really thrilled.

After they’d waited for about an hour, the doctor asked Cecilia and Josephine to come in.

‘Such a pleasure to see you, Cecilia,’ said the doctor, kissing her hand. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘My little dog is pregnant,’ she said simply.

‘I see,’ said the vet, who had a long beaked nose that made him look rather like an obnoxious, chattering parrot. ‘I can appreciate how you must feel.’

‘What d’ you mean?’ asked Cecilia.

‘Naturally you’re thinking about how difficult things will get for you. I can well imagine how extremely inconvenient it will be, to have to use a guide-dog who will soon be unable to walk properly.’

‘But I don’t use my dog,’ declared Cecilia.

‘Ah yes, of course,’ replied the vet. ‘I understand – you’re a musician, you have sensitive feelings. Well then, let’s have a look at her.’ And he signaled to Josephine to follow him. She gave a vexed growl, but went along with him. She couldn’t wait to see her puppies showing up on the doctor’s computer screen.

When the doctor placed the scanning machine above Josephine's little belly, an endless series of delightful little beeps echoed round the surgery, as if from a chorus of well-synchronized digital watches.

'Just as I expected,' said the vet. 'Five healthy puppies.'

Josephine gave a joyous bark, and Cecilia waved her hands in the air excitedly.

Finally, the vet led the two friends into his office. He gave an embarrassed cough and his face set in a frown.

'So, my dear Cecilia, what are we going to do, going forward?' he asked.

'What do you mean?' asked Cecilia.

'About the puppies. What do you want us to do? Terminate the pregnancy, or let them be born, and then arrange to have them sold off? As you know, your dog is a very valuable breed – a mastiff, and a black one too. An impressive looking dog with an amiable temperament. And of course, you are – ahem! – quite a celebrity. You should be able to get a lot of money for them.'

Then came something no one was expecting. Josephine, the calmest, least excitable dog in the world, hurled herself at the doctor with such violent force that he fell over on the floor. He shouted out, struggled to free himself – but all in vain. He couldn't work out what had happened – but Cecilia certainly could. How dared this miserable quack talk like that, in front of a mother-to-be, about selling her babies?

'Get this ghastly dog off me!' the doctor was screaming. 'Quickly, bring the tranquillizer,' he ordered his assistant.

Cecilia heard footsteps approaching closer and closer: she could smell the nurse's perfume as she came up to rescue her boss. She was probably holding the hypodermic needle for the injection. Cecilia jumped to her feet, and cried:

'Stop! Anyone who dares to harm a single hair of my little dog will have to do it over my dead body!'

Everyone who had rushed into the office to see what was happening suddenly stood still, frozen in shock.

'Let's go, Josephine,' said Cecilia. This doctor isn't any use to us.'

Cecilia swept out of his office with her head held high, and followed her four-legged friend out of the surgery, leaving the vet still trembling with terror. As they left they could hear him yell: 'They should both be chained up! Put in straitjackets! I never want to see them in here again!'

Chapter 3

Sebastian Montefiore was riding his moped as if it was a horse, bouncing up and down on the saddle, in his grey yellow-striped helmet, and his leather gloves. He really was behind schedule – that was all too clear. Of course, he might have taken official leave, or asked for a half-day off, to see what he could do about his ridiculous semi-moustache. But he couldn't just be late without notice like this! Five years he'd been working for this company, and never absent for even half a day. Not a single half-day off work! He couldn't turn up late now, simply because a chunk of his moustache was missing!

Such a lot of traffic. Of course, he could have overtaken much of it with his moped, zoomed niftily round even the biggest cars, and still have arrived on time – but he just couldn't do a thing like that. It went against his nature to take any kind of risk. That was why he was so good at his work, which involved assessing and avoiding risk. For instance, a customer might come along and ask him: 'I'm planning to start a business manufacturing children's toys. I'd use first class materials, and the toys would be both educational and entertaining: so what financial risk would I run?'

Sebastian would input all the figures, the statistics, and the data, and would do a calculation. Then he'd give his answer: 'Thirty-five per cent risk – that's actually very high. My advice is – forget it. OK, some children might enjoy playing with the toys, but these days it's all about electronics - end of story!'

And so it came to pass that many such dreams – of making toys, writing books, or creating parks – were all steamrollered and crushed in Sebastian's metallic, high-tech office, swatted and flattened like so many worthless flies.

His colleagues couldn't work him out at all, he was a mystery to them. They weren't afraid of him, but they never felt at ease around him. They had no idea what to say to him, how to engage him in a conversation. When they threw a party, they never invited him, because they knew he wouldn't turn up.

By the time he reached work, all the others were sitting on their leather office chairs, hunched over their computers, nearly exhausted before the day had even half begun. Sebastian hurriedly walked in without taking off his helmet, keeping his head well down. His colleagues knew it was him, but they didn't even raise their heads. They didn't even look at him, or say anything to him. After all, what on earth could they say? It didn't bother Sebastian that nobody took the trouble to greet him. He didn't even realize that they were all avoiding him. He simply thought they were wrapped up in their work - just as he was.

As soon as he found himself within the yellow-painted walls of his office, he closed the blinds. Then he took out the little pocket mirror he kept in his desk drawer. Phew! The damage was enormous – but at least he was the one person who could always find a solution to everything. Always. Suddenly he had a fantastic idea! What was the cause of all his embarrassment? This silly half portion of a moustache. And so he fished a red permanent marker pen out of his desk, and with a steady hand he began to paint the moustache over the area where he'd accidentally trimmed it off. There! Now it was symmetrical again. As symmetrical as everything else in his life, and just how he wanted everything to be, always and forever.

There was a knock at the door, and before he could react, Martin came in: Martin, his worst, most ruthless enemy. Sebastian heard him speak his name, and he tried to hide away the mirror and the marker pen. But his hand slipped, and suddenly he'd drawn a thick red line as big as a medium-sized carrot right across his left cheek. Martin looked at him, puzzled, then burst out with a great guffaw. He was still laughing as he left the office. The others ran up to see what was going on. They peered at Sebastian's face. They put their hands to their mouths

in an effort to suppress their reaction, but then a great wave of laughter broke out all over the entire office floor. Sebastian didn't know what to do.

'Wake up!' he told himself. He was caught up in his worst nightmare, as if paralysed. That this should be happening to him, Sebastian Montefiore, the foremost risk analyst in the country!

Then Delia Lefevre came in – a French colleague, who had recently been recruited by the office.

'The boss wants to see the whole team,' she announced, and they all hastily abandoned Sebastian's office like soldiers following the summons to a parade.

He looked at her, completely helpless, while she regarded him with a little smile.

'What about you? Aren't you going too?' he asked despondently.

'Where?'

'To the boss's office.'

'What for?'

'But you said...'

'I said it so those idiots would leave you alone,' she said, in her charming French accent.

'Aah,' said Sebastian.

'Can I help you with that?' asked Delia, gesturing to the ink line on his face.

'I'm afraid not. That marker ink is permanent.'

'That's not a problem. You see, before I became an economist, I was a beautician – but that's a long story. Listen, I know what we'll do. I can remove that stain with a special fluid that I always keep in my handbag for emergencies. And then we can shave off your moustache.'

'But that's out of the question!' cried Sebastian in horror. 'I've had this moustache since I was eighteen years old! Besides, to do something like that I'd need to make a risk assessment first. I don't know yet what psychological damage such a radical change might bring.'

His reply made Delia giggle. She took the necessaries from her handbag, and deftly began to remove the red stain from his face.

'Oooooouch!' cried Sebastian.

'Sorry, I forgot to say – it stings a bit. But it's very effective. Just close your eyes.'

'OK,' said Sebastian obediently. 'And thanks, by the way. But we're not getting rid of my moustache. Not until I've measured the risk!'

'Hmm,' she said enigmatically. 'We'll see... Now take a look.'

He looked. The red ink-stain was no longer there. It had vanished without trace. But the moustache had vanished too! The mirror confronted him with a face he knew. But whose face was it? It looked like a boy whom he'd known a long time ago...

'It's me!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, it's you.'

'But I look...'

'Actually, you look quite sweet,' said Delia, pushing away a lock of hair that had fallen over her eyes.

'But how could you do such a thing without a proper risk assessment? To shave off my moustache just like that, without considering my possible reaction, or the reactions of others?'

'I just had an idea!' said Delia simply.

'You had an idea? An idea?? I don't know what to say. Look, I'm really in your debt.'

'That's all right,' she returned. You can invite me for a meal someday.'

'When?'

'Whenever.'

'That's definitely on then,' said Sebastian. As Delia left, he noticed how the curled ringlets of her beautiful hair wafted around her as she threaded her way along the narrow passages of the office floor.

Alone in his office once more, he had to keep on examining himself in the mirror. It was like seeing some other Sebastian who had hidden himself behind that moustache, many years ago, and who had now re-emerged into plain sight.

He wanted to play, to laugh out loud: he felt ready to conquer the world. Well – perhaps not totally ready. Not right now. But maybe soon. Maybe even tomorrow...

Chapter 4

Maximilian Discovery dialed the numbers with ease. He was calling, Benedict, one of his oldest friends. It's not as if he was expecting Benedict to pick up– it was certain that he wasn't. Instead, Timothy Noble, Benedict's human – as dogs used to call their owners – picked up the phone.

'Hello!' Noble said, but the only thing he was able to hear was some lurid barking. 'Who is it?' he insisted. 'Someone is barking, he then explained to his wife. I don't get it.'

Benedict, however, being quite close to Timothy, got it. He headed to the phone.

'What kind of barking?' Timothy's wife wanted to know.

'Regular barking. Woof-woof, like that. Here. I am putting them on speaker. Listen to it yourself.'

And just like that, Benedict got Max's message loud and clear: 'General Assembly, tomorrow. At the docks. Midnight, at the Warehouse, Number 7. Be there. Pass the message on.'

Benedict began to bark enthusiastically and responded: 'Count me in – in fact, count all my clan in.'

Max thanked him and put the phone down, and then Benedict barked again joyfully.

Timothy and Victoria Noble burst into laughter.

'How cute,' Victoria said. Benedict thinks he's talking on the phone.

'How little they think of us', Benedict pondered. He then serenely moved towards the table, where Victoria Noble kept her collection of rare crystal animals, and grabbed the tablecloth with his mouth. He then pulled it with decisive force. The crystal animals fell down, one by one, and soon all that there was left of them was hundreds of pieces and pretty little rhyming sounds.

'Stupid dog. Go away', Timothy shrieked, throwing his slipper at Benedict.

The dog managed to skip it. 'I am not part of the decoration', he thought. 'Unlike the crystal dogs, I hurt and I bleed'.

'Now that he is older, he has gotten quite grumpy', Victoria was ranting in tears, attempting to salvage whatever she could.



After the call, Maximilian thought about visiting the national tv channel, which was in charge for making a series that everybody in the country was watching. Indeed, children and adults alike were infatuated with *Marvelous George*. The series' protagonist was a very special dog. People, of course, don't call dogs who can act 'actors'; they call them trained. *Marvelous George*, the dog, leading the series, was playing a secret agent with superpowers and some connections to the mafia. All this made *Marvelous George* quite marvelous and undeniably the most popular show on tv. So popular, really, that it was running twice a day. In the afternoon, for little humans, and in the evening, for the big ones.

Everybody was dying to meet *Marvelous George* in person and everybody was showering him with gifts: biscuits for dogs, clothes for dogs, baskets for dogs – everything that they imagined a dog would love. In return, *Marvelous George* enthusiasts were only asking for a measly paw-signed autograph. *Marvelous George* couldn't accommodate all these requests, and for this

reason the channel had a stamp made especially for him, while insuring his paws for two million euros. It was clear – the channel wasn't letting Marvelous George's future to chance.

Maximilian knew that the channel had a park made especially for George – this was common knowledge, after all. The park was a bit on the small site, but extremely secured, so that George could rest undistracted during his breaks. Maximilian was well aware of all this and unsurprisingly found George munching on some biscuits near his carps' pond. He had, however, no way to enter the park, as it was surrounded by an electric fence. Get too close, and you get fried. Marvelous George often wondered if the electric fence was there to keep his fans away from him or just to keep him locked inside, while Max wondered if he would ever see eye to eye with George.

'George, how are you, my marvelous friend?' Maximilian asked in his usual cool style.

For a moment, George believed that a fan was in his vicinity, but when he realized who it really was, he became quite serious.

'What are you doing here Max?' he asked.

'I came to see you'.

'The last time we saw each other, you were talking crazy – you know, about uprisings and things like that'.

Max growled.

'Come on. Please, get ahold of yourself', George said. 'You are older now. Don't tell me you are none the wiser'.

'It was a mistake coming here', Max said. 'You, my friend, will never change'.

'And why should I change? How could I possibly have it any better? I am a tv star. Thousands of humans and dogs are watching me on reverently. I do anything I like. I live how I choose'.

'Yes, on tv', Max said with a smirk.

'What are you saying?' George asked.

'You know very well what I am saying. On tv, you have powers, you live on your own, you are free to do as you please. In real life, you cannot even walk across this street'.

'You are talking nonsense'.

'Come out then'.

'This park was made especially for me – so I won't get bothered by the fans.'

'Yes, what a marvelous park – with such a marvelous electric fence. This park was made so that you won't get snatched. The channel knows how to keep its property safe. You are insured, after all'.

'It's because they love me'.

'No, it's because they need you. They are making all this money off of you. You are a good investment, George, aren't you? The only thing is, I am not sure what you are getting from all this'.

'What am I getting? Let me think. I am Marvelous George – don't you know that?'

‘Yes. That you are. Oh, well, George the Marvelous, what can I say? If you ever change your mind, yelp on your show that there will be a general assembly tomorrow, at midnight, at the docks, Warehouse, Number 7’.

Marvelous George growled but didn’t say a thing. Maximilian gave him one last irritated look and left him.

As George was still a bit distressed though, he didn’t notice that he leaned over electric fence. And then, a strong electric current rushed through his body, tossing him over against the wall. George stayed there long after he recovered consciousness. It was in this condition that Markus, his assistant, found him.

‘What’s up, Marvelous George? Have you been sleeping?’ he asked.

‘Possibly, I have been, for years, Markus’, George murmured. ‘And quite possibly nothing is real. Do you think that all this will be gone one day? My star erased and forgotten?’

‘I don’t understand. What are talking about?’ his assistant asked, a dog that looked exactly like Marvelous George, often taking his place in the stunt scenes.

Marvelous George gently touched the perfectly shaped black star that was sitting on top of his beautiful white head. The whole country was making speculations about that star, but almost no one had ever disputed its authenticity. And he never told anyone the truth, not even to Markus, who apart from being his assistant and body-double, he was also his brother.

‘You know, Markus’, he told him. ‘We look like two drops of water, you and I. We are almost the same dog’.

‘No, that’s not true’, Markus objected and pointed to the black star. You are George the Marvelous. Do you know how rare it is to be born with such a perfectly shaped star? This star made you into a star. A TV Star, nonetheless! It doesn’t get better than this’.

‘And you truly believe that I am a star?’

‘Everybody loves you. Everybody follows you around – dogs and humans. What more can a dog ask for?’

‘Yes, you are right’.

‘You know that journalist who came here before... He wants a picture of you wearing those expensive diamond collars.’

‘No way. I told you, I don’t like collars.’

‘But the channel will get a lot of money.’

‘Hm...’

‘George, let me ask you. Did Maximilian come by?’

‘Yes, he did’.

‘Please don’t tell me he went on with his weird ideas about the revolution.’

‘That’s exactly what he did. However, I can’t help but wonder if his ideas hold any merit.’

Markus seemed to be a changed dog now. His handsome face disfigured. Perhaps he was getting ready to jump at George, but after a short deliberation he managed to hold himself back.

‘Look at all this’, he said and showed around. ‘All these humans working for you, all this is for you, and you want to throw it away?’

George the Marvelous didn’t know what to say, so he was delighted when they informed him that he was expected in the makeup room. Mark was still thinking about their chat and run after him. When he got there, however, the makeup artist shut the door to his face, and it was at that moment that Markus realized for the first time in his life that no one was allowed to enter that specific room. Why was that?

Mark decided that he would find out that very day. He waited for the corridors to clear and hurried into the next room. He then surveyed the place very carefully and didn’t stop until he found a small hole behind the staff’s fridge. Mark tried to look, but he couldn’t see anything. When he lowered his body, however, he glimpsed at something that would change his life and the life of everyone else forever.

A human hand was stroking gently George’s star and then wiped it out completely. ‘Poof!’ The star was gone. Then the hand got a large sized metallic biscuit star cutter and placed it on Marvelous George’s pure-white coat, leaving behind a marvelous black star – even more defined and more marvelous than the one he had before. When everything was said and done, George looked himself in the mirror quite satisfied, barked happily and had another one of his special treats that was costing the channel a fortune. Then, the make-up artist left the room.

Markus was now breathing faster. What he had seen was so crazy that he refused to believe it. Marvelous George’s star was not real – he was not born with a star at all. His star was fake, just like the one that the makeup artist was painting on him every time he had to perform a stunt for the car chasing scenes. “How about them humans!”, he thought. Here they are, himself and his brother – two dogs looking exactly the same, but humans decided that only one of them would have a nice life. What was all this injustice for? Mark was now growling with hatred. He couldn’t digest the mockery, and it was exactly at that moment that he conceived a plan; the next journalist coming in for an interview was about to find out that his brother was a fraud. But then he had second thoughts. What good would that do? What kind of atonement was that? And what about all those years that he was working for George the Impostor? No, he had to take a different form of action.

Mark slipped quietly into the make-up room. George looked disturbed upon seeing him.

‘What are you doing here? You know that you are not allowed in here.’

‘Why?’ Mark asked in a casual tone.

‘Beats me. I don’t make the rules Markus, you know that’, George said.

‘Really, my brother?’ Mark said, stroking Marvelous George’s star.

‘Cut it out, can you? What are you doing?’ George wanted to know.

‘Nothing. Just admiring what mother nature gave to you. The only thing setting us apart. If I had this star, I would be a different dog now – with a different life’.

‘My life is not that great’, George objected.

‘Yes, but there are so many people who want it’, Markus said, with his claws now deeper into George’s flesh.

‘Are you mad?’, Marvelous George screamed. ‘What are you doing?’

Mark wouldn’t stop. His nails were now digging into his brother’s head. George looked at him with a puzzled expression, which became even more so, when he received a punch in his face.

'Everything is a lie. I know!', Markus said crying. 'I know!'

'Be quiet. What are you talking about?'

'The star is a lie. And you have been feeding me lies all these years. My own brother...'

'Markus, please calm down. I couldn't say anything... I can't explain why...'

'Because it suits you, doesn't it?' Markus said, while hitting his brother again.

And then the show's crew came in. They saw the two of them fighting like a couple of rabid dogs.

'The dogs have gone mad', they yelled. 'They are out of control. They will attack us.'

And then, amidst the panic, a gentleman with special equipment arrived and started shooting the dogs with high intensity electricity. George and Markus were thrown forcefully on the wall. And then they lost consciousness.

Chapter 5

When Marvelous George came around, all his marvelous qualities were largely decreased. His body ached and his head was buzzing. Markus, chucked beside him, was not in a better condition. Still in shock, he couldn't even stand up.

Then two humans came in – first, the show's director and then the dog trainer who was responsible for Marvelous George's and his brother's training, since they were young puppies. Mark smiled when he saw the trainer.

'I wasn't expecting this kind of behavior from these two', the director said.

'Neither was I, to be honest. I poured so much time and effort into their training'.

'Should I be worried? We are shooting today, and we are already behind schedule', the director wanted to know.

'Let us think calmly'. 'George has received quite intensive training, and he has never shown any signs of violent behavior before. Markus, then again, has always been quite spirited. Or maybe he wasn't trained enough. Shall I take him back to the training camp and work some more with him?' the trainer asked.

But the director wasn't listening. His eyes were now strangely lit. He had an idea.

'Do you suggest that we should...', he muttered.

'That we should, what?'.

'You know, maybe you should take Markus away'.

'You mean destroy him?'

'Oh, please, mind your language. Let us not use such indignant expressions. I would say, that maybe, you should put him to sleep...'

'For a single incident? I don't think it is reason enough for such drastic measures', said the rattled dog trainer.

'I wouldn't say drastic. Have you any idea how much George is worth? Millions, my dear fellow. Millions. Now, I am warning you. If by any chance something happens to him, I will only have you to blame.'

'Yes, of course', said the trainer like a scolded child. 'I will take care of it right now'.

Then, embarrassed, the trainer took one good look at Markus and another at the injection, while could easily put the dog to eternal sleep.

Markus was still quite dizzy and in disbelief about his impending doom, but it wasn't until he felt the syringe touching upon his neck that he realized that things were almost final. He tried to growl. He wanted to show that he was a living being and not some kind of prop, but the trainer's hand was on its way. Markus then tried to move his legs, but that was also difficult. The director, seeing his little effort, grabbed Markus tightly and pinned him to the ground. Markus shut his eyes. The end was near. No way back, now. But then he heard screaming and saw blood. Was it really Marvelous George? But how? Was such a thing even possible? Yes, it seemed that it was. George had his nails deep into the director's hand – in an attempt to save his brother. The man looked at George with rage, shouting furiously:

'You mutt! How dare you? Biting the hand that feeds you?'

George's mind was now drowning in a thick fog. He had never done such a thing before, and he wasn't really sure how he did it. He looked away in shame. Did he take it too far? He had to think.

'See? We were wrong, after all. Marvelous George has gone crazy. Have you witnessed such violence before? I will have him eliminated right away. Markus is younger. He has a lot more good years ahead of him. He can replace George at any moment, and nobody will notice. They look exactly the same, after all. Of course, you know that George's star is fake. Help! Please, help me' the director then shouted, and the space was now full of armed security people.

'Shoot at Marvelous George!' the director continued screaming. 'He is dangerous. He's gone completely mad.'

Marvelous George was staring at his brother.

'Are you ready to go?' he woofed at him.

'Go where?' asked Mark, also in barking.

'Away. Don't you see what their plan is?'

'Yes, I see. But it is you that they want to eliminate now' Markus responded.

'We cannot trust them, can't you see? Look at them.'

'What I am looking at is my big chance!'

'Markus, don't be naïve', Marvelous George said.

But Markus wasn't speaking any more. He was acting scared in the presence of the supposedly violent George. In fact, he removed himself from his brother and moved closer to the director, caressing the man's leg in complete obedience.

'Shoot him, I tell you', the director said, but the security people were stalling. They didn't want to kill Marvelous George. Who would?

'Shoot him or you are fired', he screamed.

George realized that he couldn't wait any longer. He started running – he had never run so fast in his life. And he kept running and running and running...

Chapter 6

Maximilian Discovery went home late, but before calling it a night, he decided to do something else. He was feeling disappointed, with all the worries of the revolution weighing on his back. Thinking about Josephine was the only thing that sparked something inside him. He therefore cut a flower from the garden and headed to Cecilia Thomas's house. He rang the bell and waited. As soon as he saw Josephine, his face lit up, but his joy didn't last for long. Something was up. Even before asking, Cecilia gave him every little detail about the visit at the doctor's office.

'Oh, my dear. I am so sorry for what you've been through. I should have been there for you', he told Josephine.

'No', she responded. 'If you were there, you wouldn't be able to hold back and things would have been much, much worse'.

'Come on. Don't be sad', Maximilian said. 'Everything will work out... But maybe we should...'
'Yes...'

'You know... Maybe we should postpone the assembly. Maybe we should wait for our little ones to come into this world and then we will see'.

Josephine faced him head-on. A tangible light was glowing in her eyes. She was feeling different – already a mother.

'Maximilian,' she said serenely. 'The revolution needs to begin. I don't wish for our children to come into the world as it is now. No! We need to change it for them!'

Maximilian hugged and kissed her tenderly.

'Ok, then. It will happen as you want it to happen'.

'Perfect! Cecilia', sang out. 'Now, I am going to fix up a delicious dinner', she said, disappearing into the kitchen.



At that same moment that Maximilian, Josephine and Cecilia were getting ready for dinner, Sebastian Montefiore was returning home from work, feeling quite excited for the future. Yup, everything was going to work out fine. This was the mood he was in, when he realized that something was off. His moped was making creaking noises, and then it completely stopped in the middle of a deserted road, just before the first house of his street. And then, completely out of the blue, he spotted two shadows coming out of the bushes, moving closer and closer. "Wonderful!" he thought. "What am I to do now?"

'Help!' he started yelling. 'Help!'

Soon it became quite clear, however, that he was in the presence of two threatening strange men, in black clothes and black masks, and with help nowhere to be seen.

'Hand over whatever you have on,' they ordered him.

'Give me a second,' Sebastian mumbled.

'Don't talk,' they warned him. 'Just give us everything of value'.

Sebastian went through his pockets, realizing at that moment right there that his wallet was missing. It was probably still at the office, in one of the drawers of his desk. He had forgotten all about it up until now.

'I don't have any money,' he muttered,

'Throw your watch over here,' one of them shouted, the tallest of the two.

'It's my father's watch. I can't possibly give you my...'

'Friend, we are not asking for a donation, here,' said the short one with a smirk. 'Hand it over, now...'

'No, I can't', Sebastian kept repeating in his trembling voice.

And then the two men came closer and started beating him up, trying to remove his watch.

'Help', Sebastian kept yelling. 'Help!'

"It can't be", the solemn risk analyst was thinking, while receiving the punches, one after the other. "It can't be... There is a considerable percentage of probability for someone from my street to hear my pleas. I am not that far away."

And just before he completely lost his consciousness, Sebastian saw a trembling light and then spotted a very tall dog approaching and grabbing one of the muggers by the leg.

'Max!' Sebastian shouted, holding out his hand.

And then everything was dark again.

Chapter 7

When Sebastian opened his eyes, an excruciating pain was hitting every muscle of his body. He tried to move his hands, but he soon realized that his efforts were quite ineffective. He felt extremely dizzy and was certain that something quite unusual must have happened, since he almost believed that he was looking at his neighbor, Cecilia Thomas, the world-known pianist, and two dogs, sitting around the table, enjoying a happy meal like old buddies. Then something even more curious happened that made him lose it completely. He heard Maximilian, the dog that rescued him, speaking in human words.

'Be quiet. I think he is coming round'.

Cecilia, with the help of her dog, approached him at that precise moment and addressed him in a sweet tone.

'Sebastian,' she told him. 'This is your name, right? You were attacked by two muggers. Do you remember?'

'Yes,' Sebastian whispered.

'We notified the police. We also had a doctor come, and he told us – he told me, I meant to say – to look after you until you feel better.'

'Thank you so much,' Sebastian muttered.

'So, are you well?'

'I don't know. Maybe. I don't think so, because at some point, during the attack, I thought that I heard Maximilian, you know, Memorious' dog, talking. I am probably in a very bad condition. The punches were quite strong.'

Cecilia pretended that she was laughing.

'What? Maximilian talking? What are you talking about?'

'Yes, I could swear, I am telling you. I must have a concussion. Please, tell me, how I ended up here?'

'I made food', Cecilia told him. 'Would you like something to eat? Or would you like to call someone, a friend maybe?'

Sebastian gave it a little thought. Who could he call? But, of course! Delia. He would tell her what happened and she would run to save him just like he did in the morning. With a pounding heart, Sebastian reached for the phone and dialed her number.

'Hello?' Delia answered.

'It's me Sebastian,' he said awkwardly.

'Hello, Sebastian, how are you?' she asked.

'I was mugged, by muggers', he said.

Delia laughed.

'Would you like to come over here?'

Silence. Nothing.

'Yes, Sebastian, of course I would, but I have plans to go to the movies'.

'Yes, of course. I understand', he answered.

'We will talk tomorrow at the office, right?', she said and put the phone down.

'It seems that I can stay. If it is not too much trouble', Sebastian told Cecilia.

'Yes, of course. I am bringing you a plate'.

Sebastian tried to move to the table, using a chair to keep his balance. He then counted three plates with left overs. Could it be that he really saw what he thought he saw? Two dogs having dinner with Cecilia – and what is even stranger – talking to her?

'Please sit down', Cecilia told him gently, having forgotten about the plates.

'Do you have company?' Sebastian asked.

'No', she said casually. 'Why do you ask?'

'No, nothing, just a question. And where are the dogs now?'

'The dogs?'

'Yes, I heard barking'.

'Oh, just in the garden. Where could they be?'

'And what about Max?'

'Max as well'.

'Max belongs to my neighbor, to Leopold Memorious. Don't you think he would be looking for him?'

'No', Cecilia responded abruptly. 'What I meant to say', she explained soon after, 'Leopold asked me to look after his dog for a while. Max was here, when we heard your screams'.

'Hm', said Sebastian. 'He is such a brave dog. He really saved my life. I had no idea that a dog can help people in general – not just its owners'.

'Well, it depends on the dog', Cecilia said strictly. 'Max is like this. It's the same with people'.

'Yes, of course', Sebastian said. 'I would really like to thank him. Maybe I could buy Leopold some flowers'.

'Why not buy Max some flowers?' Cecilia asked.

'Max is a dog. What is he going to do with flowers? Eat them?'

'Hm. Yes, of course', Cecilia said. 'The world cannot change so easily'.

'What did you say? I didn't get it'.

""Do you want fries?" That's what I said'.

'Yes, that would be lovely. However, I took so many punches that I don't know if I can really eat'.

'Come on, try to have something', Cecilia encouraged him.

After dinner, Sebastian took a painkiller and lied down on the couch. Cecilia brought him a glass of warm milk and said goodnight. Before falling asleep, Sebastian looked at her and said: 'I don't know how to thank you'. And his eyes began to mist.

'You need not thank me', Cecilia said and switched off the light.

Sebastian tried to sleep. Maybe he did catch some sleep for a while. He then woke up, while his mind was recreating all that happened the previous day. It could have easily been the worst day of his life. The morning was just terrible, you couldn't argue with that. He became the laughingstock of the whole neighborhood and then of the office. And as if this wasn't enough, he was mobbed and nearly killed. So much violence – he couldn't understand it. And his screaming... Nobody came, no one, apart from Max – that is. Still, Max was not a person. He was a dog. Cecilia was trying to tell him something, wasn't she? And he could have sworn that he had heard Max speaking, during the attack and later at the dinner table.

Sebastian thought that perhaps he was going mad, and this scared him a great deal. He simply couldn't throw away years of beliefs, of absolute truths. Dogs cannot talk, and that's should be the end of it. He had of course heard stories about talking animals, but they were just that that, stories – fairy tales. Sebastian shut his eyes, trying to sleep again, but tears kept welling up in his eyes.

He didn't know what was happening. He switched on the light and went to the mirror. Yes, it was tears – tears of affection, since at that very moment Sebastian Montefiore felt that he had a friend for the first time. He got up. He had to find Maximilian and talk to him.

Chapter 8

Walking on his toes, so he wouldn't wake Cecilia up, Sebastian Montefiore reached for the garden door. He then heard noises and barking and hid himself without really thinking. For a moment, a light lit up the space. Probably someone was trying to get in. Perhaps, the muggers that almost killed him. Sebastian was in shock. He didn't know what to do. He ran to the kitchen and returned with a long ladle.

The light lit the space up once again, and Sebastian clearly saw three dogs: Maximilian, Cecilia's she-dog, and quite surprisingly that stupid Hokkaido with the silly name, Marvelous George, the star of the famous tv-show with the same title. His coat of fur didn't look as good as it did on tv. On the contrary, the Hokkaido looked drained and his famous black star faded. Sebastian considered telling Cecilia, but then something happened that didn't allow him to move.

'What is going on my friend?' Max asked. 'Did you get in a fight?'

Sebastian shut his mouth with his free hand. So, it was true! It was all true! Dogs could in fact speak! He couldn't deny it anymore.

'Don't you think it's safer talking in barks?' Marvelous George asked.

'No, said Josephine. Barking will draw attention to us.'

'You are right,' he responded.

'Well, what happened?' Max asked again.

'I still can't believe it. My own brother, Markus, tried to kill me – only to get my job. Nobody really cared for me, certainly not the director, not even the dog-trainer', Marvelous George explained with a cracked voice.

'Only a few people care about others. Perhaps it's in their nature not to care'.

'Perhaps. But I learned this the hard way'.

'Hm...So, are you in?' Max asked without delay. Are you now convinced that we need to have a revolution?'

'Yes, of course, I am in' George exclaimed, and almost barked of determination.

'Hush', Josephine noted.

'Why? You said that Cecilia knows, doesn't she?' George asked.

'Yes, Cecilia does. But tonight, she has a guest'.

'Hm... My only regret is that I didn't manage to do the announcement of the assembly on tv', George said. 'How will the dogs know?'

'Don't worry about it. The beginning is everything', Max said.

'See you tomorrow at Warehouse, Number 7, at the docks, at midnight', Josephine said and they shook feet.

Sebastian waited until the dogs left, and then lied down on the couch still holding his long ladle. He was now a small ball of matter, trying to think. What was he to do? What was the right move? What would his father do were he in his place? Dogs were talking and thinking and having friendships just like humans did. And they were getting ready for a revolution. What

kind of revolution? Against people, for certain. So, was he in danger? Was every human being on the planet in danger – of extinction, even?

Sebastian wasn't sure what to do. If he went to Max and asked him, he wouldn't get a straight answer. Max could even get angry or even worse violent with him – perhaps bite him. He was a dog, after all. He couldn't simply trust an animal. Even if dogs could speak, that wasn't enough for them to miraculously turn into human beings. "They are guided by instinct, rather than by rational thinking", Sebastian thought. And now they are getting ready for a revolution. A violent revolt that would end humanity. How many dogs were there in the city? More than humans, certainly. And what if you counted the strays? And all those canines at animal shelters? No! It was his duty! As a human being, he had to take care of his own species. And his species was clearly the humans. On the other hand, of course, Max had helped him – he had – but he couldn't trust him. And, what about Marvelous George? He couldn't be trusted either. He seemed so different on tv. No, there was a devious plan at work here – a plan to end humans, and he had to intervene. He had to become a hero, a superhero – a leader.

He decided to wait until dawn. This gave him a few hours to get organized. And, what about Cecilia? What a traitor she was – going against her own kind! He couldn't even believe that she took the dogs' side in all this. But what if she had no idea about what was really going on? What grand manipulators they were, those dogs! As soon as the clock made six distinct sounds, Sebastian was already dressed and ready to go. He had gathered all his things, leaving behind only a 'thank you' note.

It was difficult to walk and it would be more difficult to execute his plan. In reality, there was a great percentage of risk for such a plan – he couldn't figure out the number exactly – but he was determined to put it into effect. He thought about riding his moped, which was now parked in Cecilia's front yard, but he remembered that it broke down the previous day. He dragged his body to the bus stop and took the first bus to the city center. He got off at the 13th stop, opposite the big sign of the "National Marvelous Channel" and enter the big building. He then was stopped by the guard asking him for the purpose of his visit.

'It is in regards with that dog', Sebastian said. 'You know, the Marvelous George!'

'Yes, I see', the guard said, remembering what happened the other day. 'What about Marvelous George?' he asked inquisitively.

'I want to talk to someone in charge'.

'Yes, of course', said the guard.

Sebastian was taken aback with the guard's willingness to accommodate him. He was taken to the lobby, where a fashionable gentleman informed him that he was going to meet the director of the famous show. Very soon after that, he was shown into the conference, which was decorated with Marvelous George's pictures and awards. The director was there waiting for him, not fashionable at all. He was wearing jeans and a torn army jacket, looking as if he hadn't slept for days.

'Please tell me what you want', he said with an air of urgency.

Sebastian was still perplexed with the easiness that everything was moving.

'Yes. The thing is...', he said.

It was the first time that Sebastian was meeting someone as important as a television director, and he didn't know how to behave. He then pointed to one of the Marvelous George's pictures.

'I am here for him. I saw him last night at my neighbor's house...', he said.

'Not possible', the director said. 'That dog is in his dressing room, getting ready for shooting as we speak.'

'No, I am telling you. I saw him. He had the star and everything'.

'Whatever you say. What else?'

'Hm... Well...'

'Spit it out. Why are you balking?'

'He was with some other dogs. Talking. And the thing is that they are getting ready for a revolution'.

'They were talking?' asked the director. And then he laughed.

'It's true. I remember it very well. They are meeting at midnight, near the docks, at the old Warehouse, Number 7'.

'Number 7?'

'Yes'.

'Good. It's because dogs have seven lives. Oh wait, it's not dogs. It's cats that have seven lives. Huh... Well, dear fellow, is that all? Can I be of any further assistance? If not, I have to go, as some of us have jobs to do. I cannot listen to this foolishness any longer'.

'It's not foolishness. I am certain of what I saw. That is, I think I am. I had an accident last night. A small concussion perhaps'.

'Oh well. Here is your explanation', said the director. 'But of course, it could also be that...'

'What? asked Sebastian. Please tell me'.

'Yes, it could be that you are mad. Completely and utterly mad'.

'I am telling you that I saw him. He was there, talking to the others, like you and I are talking right now'.

The director then got up and asked Sebastian to follow him to the set with the roads and the buildings and the police cars. He made him look, and Sebastian did. Marvelous George was there! With his shiny fur and his indelible black star, running to arrest some burglars who managed to snatched the country's biggest diamond, 'The Precious Julie'.

'No, it can't be', Sebastian said missing a step.

'Come on my dear fellow. Can you accept now that what you saw was a figment of your imagination?'

'But it seemed so real'.

'Like on tv?'

'I guess...'

'Well, it's not uncommon. Many of Marvelous George's fans are delusional. Are you ok now? Have some water, and then you can go to your job, that is, if you have one...'

'Of course, I have one', Sebastian protested. 'I am very sorry for having wasted your time', he said soon after.

'That's quite alright my dear', the director said. 'And if you don't mind, I will use your idea for an episode at some point in the future.'

Just before leaving the studio, Sebastian heard the director talking to his assistant, the elegant man in the suit.

'Who was that?' the assistant wanted to know.

'A crazy person', the director responded and laughed it off.

Chapter 9

By the time Sebastian had returned home, it was seven o' clock. Seven in the morning. That gave him exactly seventeen hours to stop the revolution. For a moment, he thought that he was not up to the task. He looked at his watch once again. He was already too late for work. He looked himself in the mirror. His face was bruised. He couldn't show his face anywhere. Maybe he should have gone to the police. No, that's a bad idea. They wouldn't believe him. They will just blame everything on the concussion. Still, someone had to do something – to protect humanity from the devious kin of the dogs. Someone had to come forth.

Sebastian went up the stairs as quickly as he could. He really wanted to put his plan into action right away. With every step, he was stopping and gasping for air. Those thugs destroyed him. When he finally reached the attic, he was completely and utterly drained. He went, however, straight for the old boxes.

“But is it possible that the dogs are right?” he pondered for a while. Of course, it was not difficult to accept that dogs didn't have it easy, even though some of them were living the life. Getting up in the morning, taking a walk with a caring human, having delicious meals for free, and then off to sleep. That wasn't so bad, was it? Not bad at all. There were, of course, some other dogs that didn't have much, wondering around the city and eating out of garbage cans. They were also some others being chased by humans, run over by cars, tortured. A dog's life – that sort of thing. Could it be that there was a possibility for them to be in the right? Dogs talking. Such a strange notion. And nobody had a clue – human beings going about their lives as everything was ok. And what about the dogs' plans? Who knew what kind of twisted plans they had?

Sebastian moved on more decisively. He opened the dusty wardrobe and found some black trousers, a black sweater and a black mask. He put everything on and looked himself in the mirror. He was now a shadow – an imperceptible presence. He raised his stature. Nothing much changed. He then looked through the bottom drawer of an old bureau that he had inherited from his aunt Eugenia. He took some thread and scissors and got started. He was cutting and cutting, but he couldn't end up with something he liked. He then found an old yellow shirt and decided to cut out a lightning bolt. He knew that it wasn't anything too innovative, but he couldn't think of anything better. Then, quite meticulously, he sewed the lightning bolt on the sweater. He took another look. That was it! He raised his shoulders even higher. Was he waiting for this his whole life? The moment that would turn him into the greatest hero humanity had ever seen? A superhero? A fearless leader?

Sebastian arranged for some supplies. A long robe. Shoes for climbing. A ladle to be used for digging and as a lethal weapon, a flashlight, his mobile phone, and his professional camera – he had to take pictures of the historic event. Was he ready? Not, really. He had to rehearse the whole thing – to calculate the risk and analyze the situation. He decided to run up and down the stairs so that he toughens up. The third time exhausted him. Panting, he sat on the couch. Then he thought of something else. He went to the backyard, tied the rope into a noose and threw it on the roof. When the noose got stuck on the tv antenna, Sebastian started climbing. First, he took some steady steps, but then his right foot got locked into an inverted L shaped movement. He didn't know what to do. He was glued on the wall like a big black fly, stuck in honey. “What kind of superhero am I?”, he wondered ready to burst into tears.

At the moment of great desperation and self-doubt, Max showed up again. Sebastian saw him from afar and grew even more desperate. He then saw him jumping over the fence and coming closer. He started barking as if he wanted to give him some courage. Did he get that right? Was it true? Perhaps it was. For some strange reason, Sebastian's legs started working again

until he safely reached the ground, full of relief and full of shame. He then looked left and right, doublechecking for any curious neighboring eyes, and he finally turned to Max.

'Thank you', he mumbled, looking for an insect on the ground. 'You saved me'. 'Again'.

Max started walking away, but before leaving he muttered something.

'It was nothing,' he said.

Sebastian was once again stunned. He run after him, but Max had already left.

That was it! Sebastian was now more determined than ever. Dogs could talk and think, and who knew what else they were planning to do. He gathered his ropes and went up the attic again. He searched online, found the docks' blueprints and studied them for hours. Afterwards, he printed them and studied them even more. He really had no idea what he was about to do. Should he give all the information to the media, perhaps to the police or even to the prime minister? No clue... The only thing he knew for certain was that someone had to do something. And what if, he thought, what if that someone was himself, Sebastian the Fearless?

Chapter 10

Warehouse, Number 7, was a decrepit place, the current residence of humongous spiders enjoying their lives in containers of every possible size. However, thirty year ago, as the story goes, the most important event in dogs' history took place at that particular place. Indeed, that was the place where the first word was ever uttered by a canine – the same place where the first ever thought presented itself in a dog's head. Sebastian Montefiore didn't have a clue about all this. The only thing he was aware of was that something strange was afoot and thus quickly found a good hiding spot. As the time was passing, Sebastian's heart was pounding and his thoughts were running fast. He tried to control his breathing and when he did, he switched on his camera. He was ready. This time he would show them – this time he would have proof.

The moon was dallying with the clouds, when the town's clock sounded twelve times. Sebastian saw dozens and dozens of dogs gathering quietly. Amongst them, he spotted Max, Marvelous George, and some other dogs he often saw strolling around the town. To his great surprise, he also took notice of a human being dragging his feet amongst the dogs. It was an old gentleman with white hair and an agreeable face.

Sebastian was now in panic mode. The gentleman, who was using a walking cane, gave the impression of someone important, and Sebastian was certain that he had seen him before. Where though? Sebastian tried to remember, while looking at Cecilia Thomas, who was entering the warehouse, accompanied by Josephine, and moving towards the gentleman. She then stopped and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. What was going on, already? Sebastian couldn't wait to get the answers he needed.

After all the commotion, the crowd hushed rapidly. Max jumped on one of the biggest containers and started barking, while the rest of the dogs were moving their heads as a sign that they wanted to hear more.

Sebastian looked bored and disappointed. His filming seemed to be of no use. It consisted of some barking dogs. What kind of proof was that? Before losing hope, however, Sebastian realized that silence had returned in the old building, and then he finally heard Max talking in human voice, calling attention to the old man.

'And now, I give you the human being that gave us, canines, a voice. Ladies and gentlemen, Doctor Cornelius Thomas'.

"Sure, as eggs is eggs, this is Cecilia's father", Sebastian thought to himself. He had seen him before, visiting his daughter.

The old guy moved closer to the big container, giving his hand to Max and then coughing for a while. He was now ready to speak.

'Dear friends', he said. 'It wasn't me that gave you your voice. I was just lucky enough to be able to listen to you. In this very warehouse, thirty years ago, I took on a mission, assigned to me by the government. I was to train some of your ancestors in some complicated tasks – involving language and thought. I wasn't given the reason behind this task, even though at the time I was an accomplished scientist. I had studied canine behavior for years, and I had a good grasp of the workings of the dogs' minds. I proceeded determinedly and tirelessly, and after many trials and errors, perhaps a few too many, I discovered that one little adjustment in the dogs' brains could give them the capacity of using it in several complicated ways. Of course, I couldn't know then that this modification would also allow you to use words and symbols and to have thought similar to humans. This is what happened though! So, it came to be, that one day the first canine word was spoken in this warehouse. I was excited with this development,

and I was looking forward to distributing the outcomes of my research. When I was called for a meeting by my supervisors, I put together some of the recordings that proved that dogs could speak. I also put on the jacket that my wife had gotten for me especially for this occasion. I was so proud!

The polite gentleman stopped at this point and looked at Cecilia. He then coughed again, carrying on with the story.

‘Before going into the meeting, I stopped to make sure I had everything I needed, and without trying to, I overheard an army general explaining the purpose of my research. What they wanted to do was to teach dogs a few words, so they could use them in experiments. In fact, they intended to perform several procedures on them, which at the time, as it is still now, are not allowed on humans. In other words, they wanted dogs to know a few phrases, so that they could report their feelings during experimentation. These phrases were: “It hurts!”, “It is excruciating!”, “I can’t take it anymore”. With the completion of these experiments, the dogs would be eliminated’.

A murmur spread through the cold space of the warehouse. What the dogs were listening to was not easy to process. Noise, barking, clamoring. Some of the dogs were feeling offended and hurt. Some others considered Doctor Thomas responsible for a great misdeed. A big black Doberman, with a kind physique, stepped forward and started barking ferociously. When Doctor Thomas stopped talking for a while, the dog gave them a piece of his mind.

‘My name is Anselmo Ignatius and I represent all the dogs that believe that humans made a great mistake – causing such transformation to our nature. You shouldn’t have given us the capacity to think. Without thinking, life would go on as we had always known it, short of pain and problems. The one who doesn’t think is a happy being’, the dog said at the end.

Maximilian then stepped forward, barking firmly. He then requested so that Doctor Thomas go on with his speech. After the speech, there would be plenty of time for explanations and discussion.

Sebastian was watching everything quite attentively, making sure for the hundredth time that his camera had enough memory to record everything that followed.

‘I stepped in the office determined to not disclose the results of my research. I didn’t want anybody to know about it. Humans wanted to steal thought from dogs, at the very moment they had begun acquiring it with much strain and effort. When I went into the room, everybody was especially welcoming. They offered me lemonade and stated right away that in case I had positive results; I would be offered a large bonus – large enough to secure my family financially until the end of my days. I tried to smile as much as I could, and I told them that my news was not good at all. Dogs weren’t thinking and they would never be in position to think. Their nature made such a thing impossible. No scientific intervention would ever allow it.

The general looked at me irritated. He was screaming that his information told him otherwise. He then went through my suitcase like a crazy person, finding the tape I had hidden just moments before. He played it straightaway and everybody there found out that dogs had started talking and thinking and that I was clearly lying. I panicked and I run away. I got in my car and headed to the warehouse. I led the dogs into my car, and then I called home. Nobody was answering. When I reached the house, everything was upside down. Cecilia was hidden in one of the kitchen cupboards, and my wife was nowhere to be seen. They took her, and I haven’t seen her since’.

With these words, Doctor Thomas chocked up. He sat down next to Cecilia and held her hand. These were some painful matters, that they were discussing. Maximilian hopped up on the wooden container again.

‘Dear friends’, he said. ‘I will carry on with the story, telling it just like my great-great-granddad – who was the first speaking dog – did with me. Doctor Thomas took his daughter and the speaking dogs and disappeared. They found a farm somewhere, where they could live peacefully, and he started teaching those and other dogs how to talk like humans. They lived together as a family’.

‘Yes, but at what cost?’ Anselmo Ignatius interfered again. ‘Without speech and thought, we would have never understood how bad a dog’s life is. Everything would be easier. We wouldn’t be able to experience the kind of pain that we feel right now. We would exist just like the Voiceless. The Voiceless have not even a thought about all this; they have no thoughts about having rights, and they have no notion about what a notion is. If somebody kicks them, the Voiceless cannot understand hatred or animosity. Everything is easier for the Voiceless’.

Sebastian wondered who the Voiceless were, but then he got his answer straightaway.

‘Yes, it is true’, Maximilian said, ‘that not all dogs can speak’. ‘The Voiceless are exactly what humans believe dogs to be: they do not speak – they cannot put down their feet. This fact, however, makes it imperative for us to talk – we need to talk on their behalf, as well. We know what it is to be knocked down and be left without food for days. We have to protect their rights. We are responsible for them’.

‘What rights are you talking about?’ Anselmo yelled. ‘The Voiceless cannot have rights. There is no sense for them and therefore no nonsense. They are just like little humans. Helpless. Without a mind’.

‘We need to protect them for this exact reason. To care for them’.

‘What for? The Voiceless have no care in the world. It is We, the Thinking Dogs, who do have problems. And we wouldn’t have any problems, if that man hadn’t intervened with our nature. Dogs were not intended for thinking. For this reason, we need to stop teaching our children how to think. Only in this way, will we return to the good old days – to our true essence’.

It was quite again. The matter was confounding. Some dogs were thinking that Anselmo was right. If dogs were to gradually forget how to talk, they would have no care in the world. They would turn into the Voiceless, without speech and thought and thus without problems. Living in the moment. Eating whatever you could find – not being able to get hurt if the neighborhood children were stoning you or your owner was hitting and burning or even talking ill to you’.

And then Josephine took the floor.

‘No’, she said. ‘We are not receding’. ‘I am determined not to bring five little dogs in this type of world. I want them to be able to make their own decisions’. ‘Injustice is injustice – even if you cannot perceive it fully as such. I cannot bear it anymore. I have a duty towards my children’.

‘All this is unnatural’, Anselmo yelled at her.

‘And how do you know? How can anybody know what is natural and what is not?’ Josephine asked. ‘And how do you know, how do the Voiceless feel or do not feel something, since they do not have a voice to say anything? The problem is not thinking in general, but rather bad

thinking. Human beings only think of themselves. If humans changed, the world would change too’.

‘Yes. Humans, however will never change and neither is the world’, shouted Anselmo.

‘No, it will!’ Josephine growled.

Anselmo seemed stupefied. He couldn’t get through to them. He lowered his head and decided to walk away with some other dogs that shared his beliefs. Just before he left, though, he uttered some last words calmly.

‘We secede from the revolution. And, please, don’t come back to us when all this comes tumbling down’.

Not a word was said to his response. Max took the floor again.

‘It is time to vote’, he said. ‘Who are in favor of the revolution?’

Some of the dogs barked timidly and then some others more decidedly and at the end everybody was barking enthusiastically! They were ready! Ready to change the world!

‘Is this our final decision?’ Maximilian asked. And the dogs barked louder in agreement.

And then it happened. The doors cracked open and humans in bizarre military uniforms, holding guns, barged in. They were violently drugging Anselmo and the other dogs that left with him. Anselmo was screaming, but his barking sounded different now – lacking of strength and confidence.

Maximilian’s and Sebastian Montefiore’s gaze were directed towards the same thing. Anselmo’s back was bleeding and the human being who was dragging him from a leash was now stepping on his wound.

Chapter 11

Doctor Thomas was upset.

'It is the same thing happening all over again', he muttered, while trying to protect his daughter with his sickly body. 'Don't harm her. She hasn't done anything', he yelled at the military people.

'Harm her?' asked the man in charge, removing his mask.

'I know you army people!' said Doctor Thomas with a steady voice.

'Army people? No, my dear fellow. I am not involved in that kind of business. I am a person of the arts – or better yet, of television', the man said while his boot kept pushing deep in Anselmo's wound. 'The uniforms are just for effect! Nice, aren't they?'

In a daze but also without wavering, Marvelous George stepped in the front. His fearless gaze and his erected tail were proof of his readiness to fight.

'I don't see the meaning of all this cruelty', Marvelous George said. 'You were looking for me, and now you found me. Why torture an innocent dog? Come one, let's go'.

'No', yelled Maximilian. 'You are not going anywhere with him'.

Sebastian Montefiore adjusted the lens of his camera, which was now focused on the man's face. At that moment, he nearly let a scream out, because he recognized him. He was the famous director of the Marvelous George series, the director he had visited that morning – the very person who treated him so poorly.

'So, it's all true!' said the director. 'Not even in my wildest dreams. You really surprised me Marvelous George', he added. 'I came all this way to save you. You cannot live amongst these savages, like some kind of stray. You are a tv star, don't you remember?'

'Yes, I remember. I am a star that you chose to torture and humiliate, whenever I didn't act as you wished'.

'Oh, the astonishment, when I heard this dog talking', said the director, referring to Anselmo. 'I came here with good intentions – to get you out of this jail and bring you back, but I now see that I have so many more delicious choices. So many dogs that can be turned into tv-stars. The only thing that saddens me is that I don't have a camera crew with me, but never mind. We will go together to the studio – for the breaking news. We will tell the world! We will report the injustice you have been suffering all these years, my poor fellows'.

And he was saying all this, with his boot still sunk in Anselmo's aching back.

'What do you mean? That you want to help us?' Marvelous George asked.

'But of course. Why not?'

'And how am I to believe this kindness? Poor Anselmo is still suffering under your boot!'

'What would you have me do? If I let him go, he will attack me'.

'How do you know, if you don't talk to him?'

'Talk to a dog? What an idea!' the director said, but then his face changed. 'Anselmo, can I trust you?' he asked as if he really wanted to know.

Anselmo growled in pain and then showed that his intentions were peaceful.

'Listen. Please listen', said the director, while climbing up on the container. 'I will talk straight from the heart. Short reckonings make long friends. I might not appear as an animal-loving individual, and the truth is that I am not. However, I am a professional. And this proposal, that I am about to offer you, will do everybody good. I will of course bring to the world an incredible piece of news, a revelation that is going to change the planet. I will become famous! A celebrity! On the one hand, I will get an award - possibly, I don't know. And you, on the other hand, will get the chance to start your revolution on tv. And you all know tv's power. Whatever appears on tv becomes the truth'.

Sebastian Montefiore was waiting in anguish to see how the dogs will respond.

'Can you say more about your proposal? Can we really get a job on tv?' asked a handsome dog.

'Of course. If you want, you can work with me. This is a done deal'.

'Hm, said the dog. I have always wanted to be on tv'.

'Being on tv is not what you think it is', Marvelous George screamed. 'It is hard and undignified work'.

'What are you saying?' asked the same dog. 'That you are the only one that can possibly be on tv?'

'Am not saying such a thing. Not at all'.

'Look. You might be a tv-star but that doesn't make you better than us. You are not going to tell us what to do'.

'It's your decision', Marvelous George responded in a vexed tone.

'No', Maximilian shouted. 'We didn't come here to discuss career options. We came here to change the world. I can't see the point of talking about these matters. Our most important concern is the revolution. And we are all in agreement that we are ready for it to start. Having a human ordering us around is not good for us.'

Maximilian looked around at all the dogs. The longing for freedom that was shining in their eyes a few minutes ago was now replaced by something else. They wanted to become famous. To make money. To be known and loved. To become Marvelous George in the place of Marvelous George. Maybe even better than him. That is what their eyes were saying.

'It is not all that you think it is. Believe me', Marvelous George tried to explain for a second time. 'This man is a liar. He attacked me. Tried to kill me – me and my brother'.

'Is that so?' the director asked. 'I really wonder who the liar is between the two of us. Markus, please come here'.

George was stunned. No, it can't be. Did his brother really stoop so low? And yet here he was, walking proudly amongst the military men – the director's assistants, in reality. He was nervous at first, but then grew more determined.

'It is Marvelous George's brother!' everybody yelled.

'Don't do this', George asked his brother.

'Why big brother? Is it because everybody will find out that you are a liar? I will show them then', he added and started rubbing off George's star.

George hushed, waiting for the crowd's reaction.

'It's fake! He's fake!' dogs whispered.

'Precisely. Truly, we can say that his star's shine has faded', the director commented, proud for his wordplay.

Silence.

'I am coming with you', the handsome dog said to the director.

'Am also coming', said another.

'I am with you', said a third one.

'It is settled then! Just let me get a cage in here. And please don't worry for the revolution. Things will take their due course'.

'No, we won't accept this', Maximilian shouted.

'We cannot trust you', Josephine added.

'Yes, but they can. Majority rules. This is what democracy is all about' the director said again.

After an hour, the warehouse was almost empty. The only ones left were Maximilian, Josephine, Cecilia, Marvelous George, Doctor Thomas, Anselmo, and Sebastian Montefiore, still hidden behind a box.

Things are tough, Maximilian said and gently hugged Josephine.

Television's power is stronger even than brute force, Cecilia commented resolutely.

PART TWO

Two Months Later

Chapter 12

It had been two months since that dreadful night. Two months filled with fear, insecurity, and also joy. Josephine had given birth to five healthy children, and Maximilian was over the moon. He enjoyed raising them – reading them stories and playing games. They were pretty smart, those little puppies, even begun uttering their first words.

Josephine was very proud, but very worried as well. That painful night at the warehouse kept coming back, but her mind was not wavering. She was holding firmly onto the belief that her children needed to grow up in a different world, a better world. Cecilia's father told them that they couldn't trust anyone, so after the whole commotion they picked up and left, leaving behind the big city and putting roots in his farmhouse. There, they lived off the land. It was a beautiful and quite way of living, but Josephine was restless, often having discussions with Maximilian, insisting that something had to change.

'We cannot just leave everything we worked for behind', she was telling him.

'Things are different now', he insisted. 'We have children now. If we don't take care of them, who will? Family is above all'.

'We are not alone in this world. If we don't change it, our children will inherit an unfortunate future', she kept saying.

'Our children are fine, right here, with us', Maximilian was objecting. 'They can't be harmed'.

Cecilia was very concerned, wondering about the next move. She was also debating, if she had to say something more to her canine friends. She had no idea where things were going, until one day something completely unexpected happened. She was in the garden, picking up some vegetables, when she heard her name being called. It was her father, Doctor Thomas, telling her to go immediately to the tv room, that they were hardly ever using.

'It's on! It's on!' muttered Doctor Thomas with eagerness. 'Could it be, that he was telling the truth?'

'Who are you talking about, father?' Cecilia sked, while everybody was gathering around.

'You know, that tv director. Is it possible that he is going to reveal the truth? What if he actually created a show where dogs talk freely? That's what the trailer advertises'.

'Nothing good can come from that awful human being', Marvelous George said, and then they watched together the new add: 'After the unfortunate demise of *Marvelous George*, comes a new series: *The Marvelous Six*. With six marvelous, intelligent dogs that speak, think, fall in love, and fight.'

'Ha!' said Marvelous George. 'I didn't know I was dead. So be it'.

'They said it!' Anselmos cried out with joy. 'They said that dogs speak and think. He kept his promise, after all'.

'Things are not that simple on tv', George cautioned them, but Doctor Thomas didn't want to hear anything else. Now, he only wanted to watch.

And then the exciting new series was on. It was about six dogs – six common dogs – that transformed when a butcher fed them some radioactive bones by accident. After eating the bones, the dogs began to talk, think, act just like humans. They even helped the police to solve crimes. So, there was the proof! The dogs were performing wonderfully – nobody could question now their capacity to think and talk and have abstract ideas and specific desires.

When the show was over, everybody was looking stunned. They didn't know how to react. What was the meaning of this? Was it to say, that the revolution had begun? That their message was actually sent and delivered? They didn't know. So, they just stayed there, waiting for the director's interview that was coming next.

And then they saw him – in an unbuttoned black shirt and in a very chatty mood. The interviewer, the famous Mirella Vinaceous, congratulated him and got ready to ask him everything.

'So, first there was only one dog, and now there are six! What glorious turn of events!'

Oh, my dear Mirella. When you have a vision – an artistic vision, that is, you can succeed in everything', the tv director said.

'Bravo! Bravo! But then again, you are the only director who could pull something like that. We all know how difficult it is to work with children and animals.'

'You are telling me', the director said, trying to show that he was all worn-out. 'Dogs are beautiful and charming, but they are not humans. It takes so much time, hours and hours, for them to be trained, even for the smallest task. Did you know that?'

'No, I didn't know that', Mirella said. 'But I can imagine'.

'You don't need to. I can show you', the director offered, bringing out one of the stars of the show.

'Sit' the director ordered, but the dog wasn't moving at all. After the repeated commands, the dog finally started chasing its tail. The director gave it a bone-shaped biscuit, and after a lot of effort, the dog managed to sit down. Mirella and the live audience were cheering in ecstasy. When the director took his seat again, Mirella had more questions.

'Of course, your actor-dogs are quite special, since they speak using such truthful expression'.

'Yes, the benefits of technology, of course. It is all added during post-production. You didn't really believe that dogs can talk, did you?' the director asked and burst into laughter.

Sebastian Montefiore was watching this exact scene from the coziness of his house. He was sitting in his leather sofa, watching and biting his nails in the most symmetrical way. He actually had an intense feeling that he never had before. It was a feeling of utter disgust and outrage for that particular human being. He knew that dogs were dying to convey their message and remembered the director promising to do exactly that.

'Yet, I am a human being too', Sebastian thought. 'Why should I take their side? Such risk would be immense, going over 80%, for sure'.

Then again, the dogs were the victims in all this. That much was clear. The director was abusing them, so that he could get more money and fame for none other but himself. Still, who could stop him? Someone, had to do something, but who could that someone be? "What about me?" Sebastian wondered. "And if not I, then who?" Sebastian ran to the loo and threw up. Then, he made a decision, the most important decision of his life.

Chapter 13

Cecilia was playing her imaginary piano. She was sitting in the last car of the train, right between Maximilian and Josephine, playing Mozart's Sonata No. 11 in A Major with her long steady hands. Her fingers were jumping gracefully from key to key – making it almost impossible for the people watching not to feel the melody, especially when her shoulders shrunk upwards for a while and then let loose, while approaching the keys again.

When Cecilia heard that the train was reaching the town center, she got up.

'We have to get down', she said serenely, putting on her jacket.

Max and Josephine barked and led Cecilia out of the car. As they moved amongst the passengers, gasps of excitement were bursting out. "It's Cecilia Thomas", people were telling each other. "It is her!" Some of them were amongst the lucky ones, who had tickets to her concert. Some others simply followed her to the Concert Hall asking for autographs, whereas some others were already there waiting for her to arrive.

Cecilia avoided her cheering fans as much as she could and entered the remarkable building with Max and Josephine. A loud applause was waiting for her inside. The Director of the Hall and some musicians were there ready to greet her. Cecilia was given flowers, which she received with gratitude, but the truth is that she was finding such social niceties to be quite tiring. The most enjoyable time of her day was when she was having long discussions with Josephine and Maximilian and of course when she was playing the piano.

When the musicians left, Cecilia looked to get ready and check that the piano was perfectly tuned. She tried out a few notes, and when she made sure that the sound was exactly to her liking, her fingers tried out a soft melody. Max and Josephine looked at each other and sighted in relief. Cecilia was pretty distraught lately, and the pain for her mother's disappearance had all come back. At that moment, though, while sitting in front of the piano in that big hall, she was herself again. The notes infused with the strength of her soul. And then, while the two dogs were finally calming down, they spotted someone looming behind the curtains and then looking at them in bewilderment. The dogs watched him approaching Cecilia, and Maximilian began barking in warning.

'What's wrong?' Cecilia wondered aloud, while her hands left the keys.

'I simply want to talk to her; to talk to you', a strange voice said.

"Who could it be? Why did Maximilian stop barking? Was he in danger? Why is Josephine silent?" Cecilia was thinking.

'Cecilia, I don't know if you remember me. I am Sebastian Montefiore, your neighbor. I had that accident a few months ago, do you remember? And you, and also you, he said, looking at Max, well, you took care of me'.

'Sebastian. Of course, I remember you', Cecilia said. 'We lived on the same street not that long ago'.

'Yes, but you went away. You disappeared, and I really wanted to see you', Sebastian said looking at Max once more. 'There are matters that we need to discuss. Urgent matters.'

'What kind of matters?' Cecilia asked and her hands now looked for the sides of her stool.

'Cecilia, I know...'

'Sebastian. I don't know what you think you know, but...'

'I heard them... I heard you talking with my own ears, Sebastian said looking scared but also straight at Max.

Cecilia then stood up. The lilac color of her dress filled up the room. She adjusted her belt around her tiny waist and got ready to talk in a calm voice.

'I can't really know what happened to you that night Sebastian, but you were badly hurt. You had a concussion. You can't really think that...'

'No. I know the truth, Sebastian interrupted her. Dogs do talk'.

'Sebastian, please. You should go', Cecilia asked sharply and then she sat down again, waiting for him to leave.

Cecilia straightened up her dress and took a long breath. By the time the curtains opened, she was once again gathered. Her fingers were now telling the most enchanting stories about dragons, and fearless explorers who fought evil and won every fight. People were watching with bated breath, and she, Cecilia Thomas, was feeling in command, determined not to let anything or anyone stop her from enjoying her music.

Chapter 14

Cecilia, Max and Josephine changed three stations in order to reach the farmhouse. They didn't have to, of course, but they preferred to be safe than sorry. After three knocks, the door opened to reveal the white color of Doctor Thomas's hair. Cecilia went in and threw her coat on the sofa. Max and Josephine run to see their little ones and found them already asleep.

'How did it go?' Doctor Thomas asked his daughter.

'It was ok', she said letting out a sigh.

'Something 's wrong. What is it?'

'Well, someone was there at the concert hall, waiting for me. An old neighbor. I don't know if you remember him. He told me that he knows. Do you think that we are in danger?'

'I don't know. I don't trust humans. They only fend for themselves. I am quite convinced about it', Doctor Thomas said, while Cecilia was finding a cozy spot on the sofa.

And, then there was some tenacious knocking on the door. Doctor Thomas stared at the others. He approached and looked through hole.

'It's some guy in a raincoat. He seems flustered'.

Max barked and Josephine went to her children.

'Max, it's me', the stranger said. 'It's Sebastian. Cecilia, please open the door. It's raining out here'.

Doctor Thomas continued looking with the same intense way. The others nodded approvingly, and Sebastian came in soaking wet and exhausted. He was trying to catch his breath.

'I run after you', he explained.

Max moved close to his face and started barking menacingly. Sebastian gathered whatever courage he had in him. The truth was, however, that he didn't have much.

'Please, Max. Listen to me. I know,' he said.

Max was now quiet. Things were getting dangerous, and he had five children to look after. Still, he couldn't keep pretending that he didn't understand. Finally, he realized that they had to listen to what Sebastian had to say.

'Sort yourself out', Maximilian said, offering him a towel with his mouth.

Sebastian looked surprised. Of course, he knew that dogs were able to speak – some dogs, at least. That was his great discovery! The great discovery of Sebastian Montefiore! But to be there, talking to Max, as if they were friends was incredible. Because, he was now realizing, Max wasn't some creature you could tie down, take for a walk, or even feed. Max was a sentient being, capable for thought and speech and emotions. Sebastian had to be really careful with his behavior.

'Max, thank you for the towel', he said. 'And for that time that you helped me – you know when I was attacked. And for that other time that I was hanging from the wall. Now, that I come to think of it, you saved my life so many times. I am truly in your debt'.

'It's ok. You don't owe me a thing', Max replied. 'Just answer me this: what are you doing here?'

'Well... I hope you won't get angry with what I am about to say, but do you remember that night? The assembly at the docks, at warehouse, number 7?'

'How do you know about that?' Cecilia asked agitated.

'Don't get upset, Cecilia. I first learned about the assembly the night I stayed here. I decided to go to the meeting, and there I learned everything. I saw everything'.

'If you saw everything', Marvelous George said, while entering the room, 'then you will know that that man, the director, who was telling me how to stand and how to bark all these years, was lying. And some naïve dogs believed him. And, please tell me: Why would they believe a human being?' Marvelous George asked and then growled.

'Come on, George, calm down', Max said. 'Let's listen to what the man has to say'.

'Yes, please listen to me. I am partly to blame for the incident at the warehouse, but I think that now I have the solution to all of your problems. We can expose him. Him and everybody else. We can reveal to the world what we know to be true'.

'Sebastian, please be reasonable', Cecilia asked him. 'You can't possibly know how much we believed in the cause and how disappointed we all are'.

'Yes, I know. But look'.

And then they watched together all the evidence that Sebastian had gathered from that night. Doctor Thoma's revelations, the dog's cheering, the director's interference, his false promises.

'The proof is here', Sebastian said proudly.

'Indeed, it is', Doctor Thomas said with watery eyes. 'We finally have something tangible'.

'So, I thought that now we can do something. The whole world needs to know about this. I want to help'.

'Why?' Cecilia asked frankly.

'Because the only people who ever cared for me are right here, in this room', he said with a broken voice.

'Hm... We need to think about it', Marvelous George finally said. 'We cannot trust anyone, especially no human.'

Chapter 15

The dogs were conferencing in the big room, behind closed doors. A bark or a few words were coming through at times, but in general there was a thick silence you couldn't cut with a knife. They all felt that something was beginning to take shape, but they also felt that something was constantly in the way.

'Why are you here instead of in there?' Sebastian asked Cecilia, while moving closer to the fireplace.

'Because I do not want to meddle', she said point-blank.

'Am sorry. I didn't mean to judge'.

'You should know, Sebastian, that everybody has their own voice. And when a matter is important to you, you should be able to have your voice heard'.

'Cecilia, I just want to help'.

Cecilia's eyes were now stuck on the fire. Sebastian wondered if Cecilia could only see darkness and what that darkness looked like. Cecilia was truly a mysterious young woman. To her, sounds, voices and melodies bore greater significance than the things that everybody could see. For Cecilia, Josephine was a voice, no different than the voice of a human being. Cecilia got to know a different world from the one that Sebastian knew. He learned to understand things from the way they looked and appeared to his eyes. She learned to be patient, to guess, to interpret silences.

Sebastian felt how much different he and Cecilia were from each other. He looked at her once more. Her luscious locks were entangled. Sebastian wondered what it would be like to touch one of them, but of course he didn't say a thing. And at that very moment, the door opened and the humans were invited in. How did time go by like that? When everybody was sat, Maximilian decided to speak.

'We all know that the revolution has been our greatest dream. And that, time and time again, we tried to send the message that dogs do speak. Unfortunately, we have always failed', Max said.

'Now, however, we have something concrete. Proof of what is actually going on. Everything is here, on this film. Our history, the explanation about the way we came to speech and thought, and of course the most recent events with the director', Marvelous George added. 'We can finally talk to humans in a way that they will understand. When something is on tv, it is important for them', he explained.

'Yes, but there is nothing important on tv', Anselmo objected. 'Marvelous George, am sorry, but this is the truth'.

'I think we need to move on', Josephine said, 'and I think that the right person for representing us is...'

'Yes?'

'It's Sebastian'.

'Sebastian?'

'Me?' asked Sebastian himself.

'Yes, you', said Josephine. You need to go on Mirella's show and discuss our issue. It will be easier for humans to accept it that way – you know, coming from one of their own'.

Sebastian now was looking terrified. Of course, he wanted to become a hero – he knew that. What they were asking of him, though, was too much. Him, on tv? To do what?

'Are we all in agreement?' Josephine asked.

'Yes', everybody nodded.

'Sebastian? What about you?' she asked again and all eyes were now on him.

'Yes, I agree' he said, lowering his head.

'Maybe, it's better that I go', Cecilia commented. 'I am used to doing interviews. Sebastian doesn't have such knowledge. Maybe, it is dangerous. I am ready to suffer the consequences. I will take the risk...'

'What risk?' Sebastian asked.

Cecilia's face now looked distraught.

"What about me? Am I ready to take the risk?" Sebastian wondered, but after a moment of hesitation, he made his decision. Some things are worth the risk, any risk, how much great, he thought.

'I will do it!' he said, finally.

Chapter 16

Sebastian's legs were shaking. His hands were also shaking. His lips were trembling. His heart, as well. Yet, he didn't back down. The show was about to go on air. Some sequences from what he shot on that historic night were already playing. The last scene – showing the dogs deciding whether to follow fame and the director or the revolution and Maximilian, was now ending.

'So, Sebastian Montefiore, you are a risk analyst, aren't you? And, you shot this, did you?' Mirella Vinaceous asked in disbelief.

'Yes, I shot it', he said but his voice was really low, almost indiscernible.

'Excuse me?'

'Yes, it was me. I shot it'.

'Hm...What I want to know is how did you come to know about this assembly? Why were you there? Surely, not by chance'.

'No, I followed one of the dogs, Maximilian, to be precise'.

'And is this something you often do? Stalking dogs, I mean'.

'I don't stalk dogs. No, of course, I don't, but just before the assembly I was attacked by some scoundrels, you see, and Maximilian saved my life'.

'Maximilian?'

'Yes, the dog'.

'I see...'

'And on that night that I was attacked, I stayed at Cecilia's place'.

'Which Cecilia are you referring to?'

'I am talking about Cecilia Thomas'.

'The famous pianist?'

'Yes'.

'And what happened at Cecilia Thomas' place?'

'Well, I heard some dogs talking, just like we are doing right now'.

'And this was the night that you were attacked?'

'Yes'.

'And, was the attack quite violent?'

'Yes, I got hit everywhere – on my legs, on my hands, on the head. Everywhere'.

'Hm, I see. And then you heard the dogs talking'.

'Yes. Listen, I know how it sounds, but you just 've seen the video – with your own two eyes'.

And then the famous journalist touched her ear and said “wait a minute” and “please, forgive me, but an unexpected guest will soon be joining us”.

Sebastian was now watching the people in the studio moving around in frenzy, bringing another chair, which they placed right next to his own. “At long last, what is going on?” he wondered but soon realized what was happening. The director, that same director whom he met at the studio, that he watched fooling all those dogs in the warehouse, was there in the studio, with his wry smile and his crumbling clothes. “This is not going well” Sebastian thought to himself.

‘The director of the brilliant series *The Marvelous George* and of the even more brilliant series *The Marvelous Six!* is here with us and will explain everything’, Mirella said... ‘Dear director, we have Mr. Sebastian Montefiore in our company, and he claims that dogs talk. He even brought proof! This video, right here. This is the amazing discovery of Sebastian Montefiore!’

The director was quite for a while. He then looked at Sebastian with hatred almost and started laughing as if he was watching some kind of comedy.

‘This is not the incredible discovery of Sebastian Montefiore! This is his great ruse. This so-called gentleman stole the tapes of my latest show. Of course, dogs cannot speak. Whatever you just saw is just tv magic. Do I need to explain the production process to you?’ he asked the journalist in a fake innocent look.

‘Of course, not’, Mirella responded in a sore tone. ‘We all know that you do the shooting and that you add the voice-over later. However, who are the actors doing the dogs’ voices? It’s strange, but they are not mentioned in the credits.’

‘This is because... It is because it’s the dogs that actually speak’, Sebastian stated with courage.

‘Really, sir. I cannot believe the nerve! You are not merely a thief. You are also mad, quite mad. We need to call the police’, said the director and got up like a clumsy frog.

‘Do we have to?’ asked the journalist.

‘Of course, we do. This man stole the tapes of my very special episode. And you are also forcing me to give out exclusive information that could most likely spoil my very successful series. Is this what you want?’

‘Of course, not. I am sorry’, Mirella said.

Sebastian was now quite distressed. He had calculated the dangers, the risk, the possible consequences, but at the moment he was finding himself just a few steps short from being thrown in jail. A small stream of sweat was now running down his forehead. Was this end? Alone, behind bars? A criminal? Without a job? Without friends? Wait a minute. He never had any friends anyway, apart from the ones he got recently. His only friends were Maximilian, Cecilia, Josephine and Marvelous George. And who was it that he was looking at right now? Was that Marvelous George – coming to his rescue?

‘This man is lying’, someone said.

Sebastian tried to see if it was really him, his friend. The journalist did the same.

‘Marvelous George?’ Sebastian mumbled.

‘Yes, it is me’, he responded.

The journalist now looked frozen.

'How is this possible? How do you do it? Stop it', she told the director.

'I did not...'

'Stop it. You cannot come here and mess about with my show. And how do you do it, anyway? Is this a robot? How do you control it? Stop it'.

'But... I did not...'

'Come on... If dogs cannot talk, as you insist, stop this dog from talking'.

'I can't...'

He can't because there is nobody controlling me – at least, not anymore. Dogs speak. We have a voice. And it is about time that everybody knew it. We have rights and we are claiming them...'

'What is going on?' the journalist asked again. 'Tell me what is going on'.

She was the only one still wondering. Everybody watching at home was quite certain about what they were seeing. There couldn't be any other logical explanation. The great director of the Marvelous George series had found yet another way to enchant them. It was tv at its finest! Where does he find all these ideas? He was a real genius! And what happened to Marvelous George? Was he really him, without his star? Surely, it was some kind of trick. And everybody loved it! Everything was marvelous! Just marvelous!

'Dogs have rights!' Marvelous George shouted in despair, but the show was clearly over.

'Perfect! I don't know how you two came up with this idea, but we made great viewing figures' Mirella stated. 'I would love to have you on the show again', she added, looking at Sebastian and the director. 'Only, next time give me a heads up, will you? I need to know about your little sketches. And please, just take this thing away from here', she said pointing to Marvelous George, 'whatever it is'.

'I am a dog', George said. 'I am Marvelous George!'

'Ha, ha... How do you program such a thing? Maybe you should give him some more interesting orders. It is quite realistic; I can't deny that. It is a shame that you forgot his star. It makes him look cheap', Mirella said while leaving the studio.

When the lights went out, the director was left alone with Sebastian Montefiore and Marvelous George.

'You 've done it again', George said, feeling utterly defeated.

'Without lifting a finger', the director agreed, laughing. 'It is the power of television, you see. Humans are so used to it, that they can't tell truth from lie. I am really sorry, but as I see it, the world will remain like this forever', he said.

Wonderful George and Sebastian Montefiore set off on the sorrowful road back. They couldn't fathom how it was possible for them to be offering the truth and for everybody else to decline it. They took the train, found two empty seats and just sat there, looking as if the world was ending for them. They now saw that truth sometimes is not enough!

Marvelous George looked around; his eyes empty of emotion. The car was packed. At some point, he spotted Benedictus, an old friend of his, standing there with this owner. Marvelous George considered talking to him in human voice. All these years of silence, made him feel like puppet.

'Benedictus, are you ok?' he finally asked with human words.

Benedictus looked at him in horror. What was George trying to do? Why was he talking in human language? He froze. Didn't know what to do. His lady-owner had the same cold look.

'Pardon me sir, but what kind of humor is this?' the dog owner asked Sebastian. 'You know, I watched you on tv with that famous director. Will you please do something with your robot?'

'It's not a robot. And it's not mine. He is a free-thinking dog', Sebastian readily responded.

'A free-thinking dog! What a notion! Please, tell me sir: Are you a ventriloquist then? You are making it look as if the dog is talking. Do it again!'

'I am not some kind of toy', Marvelous George said angrily. 'I talk just like many other dogs do... Benedictus talks to me...'

'Ha, ha', the lady grinned. 'I wish Benedictus had such a talent! But, unfortunately, Benedictus is just a dog, nothing more nothing less. An animal. What else do you want me to say?'

Marvelous George looked Benedictus straight in the eyes.

'Speak! I am telling you to speak!' he yelled at him.

Benedictus turned his head to the other side and chose to bark.

'I can't. Don't you see? If I talk, she will throw me out. And, then, what will happen to me?'

'She won't throw you out. She is your human and she loves you. Hasn't she been taking care of you all these years?'

'Yes, but...,' he continued barking.

'So, come on', Marvelous George barked gently in order to give him courage.

Benedictus didn't listen though. He chose to pull his owner towards the door.

'Oh, this is our stop' the dog-owner said. 'Well, would you look at that! The dog remembered that this is our stop. The force of habit, I guess. Toodle-loo', she then told Sebastian. I will gladly watch you again on tv. Today's sketch was really something'.

Marvelous George looked at Sebastian.

'This world will never change' he said.

Chapter 17

When they woke up the world was still the same, or so they thought. Cecilia made breakfast as always. She then put her hair in a bun and sat in front of the piano. Her music reached the most delicate flowers and the most miniscule insects in the farm, waking them up from their deep slumber. Doctor Thomas, Maximilian, Josephine, Anselmo, Marvelous George and Sebastian gathered around the piano, looking all puzzled.

'Are we celebrating something?' Sebastian asked.

'Yes, we celebrate yesterday's revelation! Your great revelation!'

'Yesterday was a big failure', he muttered.

'No, it wasn't a failure. Words are like musical notes. You never know when they are going to enter your mind or heart. Sometimes, however, when you least expect it, they do come inside'.

'My dear!' Doctor Thomas said and kissed his daughter's hair.

'Come on, then. Let's celebrate', said Sebastian. 'I can make pancakes.'

'Can you?' everybody asked.

'I mean... I never made them, but I've seen it done on tv. We just need some flour, milk and eggs. Do we have any?'

'No', Anselmo said.

'What are we missing?'

'The flour, the milk and the eggs.'

'Let's go to the supermarket, at the city center', Cecilia said with joy.

Sebastian was in awe of Cecilia, because he realized what she was doing: she was attempting to cheer everybody up. She wanted to share her strength through her music and optimism. He was thus convinced to do the same.

'Let's go', he exclaimed.

They got in the truck quickly and headed to the city-center. As they were approaching, and the houses began to thicken, they noticed something quite strange. A bizarre turmoil. Most of the humans were outside, in their neat gardens, looking awkwardly at their dogs. Some of them were hugging the dogs. Some others were talking to them, asking the dogs to openly speak. More than a few were saying goodbye to their once beloved pets. When the gang arrived at the supermarket, tens of dogs were inside looking at the shelves, having no clue what to do.

'What is going on?' Doctor Thomas asked.

'The dogs', said the man at the till.

'Yes?'

'They talk. Not all of them, but some of them actually do talk'.

'Yes, we've heard', Doctor Thomas responded.

'Most of the humans threw them out. That's what I did with mine'.

'Any why is that, dear sir?' Doctor Thomas wanted to know.

'Can't you see?', the man insisted. 'All of these years, I have been feeding him, taking care of him, confessing my deepest secrets to him. Now, I am ashamed to look him in the eye. I feel betrayed. He could have said a word, all these years.'

'And what about all of them?' Maximilian asked, looking at the dogs in the supermarket corridors.

'Oh, you are one of them', said the man making his disapproval quite clear. 'They forced them out of their houses, and now they are looking for something to eat. They are penniless and homeless. I called the police. I don't know what will happen next'.

'They are not going to steal anything. They are dogs. They have pride', Sebastian said.

'I don't know about that. What I do know is that hunger and poverty don't go well together. Do the math'.

And then they heard the breaking news on the radio. The new reality was shortly described. Yes, it was true. Some dogs could speak and think. And their owners had no clue what to do. Maybe it was a good idea to discuss the matter with them. Maybe it wasn't. Something had to give. And quickly. The experts ought to talk. But who were the experts in this case? Nobody knew. All these years, nobody had picked up on this. Maybe, the police needed to take action. Maybe, humans had better lock them all in. An economics professor stated that such a cost would be unbearable for the economy. Maybe, they should chase them out of the cities. Still, where would they go? And who would accept them?

Sebastian, Cecilia and Max shopped hurriedly, while the others were waiting for them in the truck. Things were taking a dangerous turn. While getting in the car, they heard the dogs barking like crazy and they soon saw them approaching their car and banging on the windows.

'It is him. It is all his fault', they yelled and barked and growled, all pointing to Marvelous George.

Chapter 18

Their heads were down. Some of them, crying. Others, growling, and some others simply closed off. The pain was too great to speak. Sebastian thought that humans had the word 'humanity' to express the kindness of their hearts but now he wasn't sure of the meaning of the word.

Then the scenery on tv changed. The dogs weren't calm and peaceful any more. They were standing outside of banks, ministries, the tv station, demanding medicine, food, shelter. The signs hanging around their necks had slogans like: "Equal rights", "We are thinking beings", "We are all equals". The press was not there, however. No reporter was asking them anything. Where were the media at? The dogs were growling. They were talking about freedom, democracy – things repeatedly discussed throughout history. Why the need for such repetition? Why humans hadn't yet to learn to make room for others, for the ones who were different from them? Weren't humans the same beings who enjoyed equality independently of background, color, gender, and race? Hadn't there been enough struggles, wars, revolutions up till now? Why wouldn't they listen? So many years of oppression. It was enough! Enough! Do you hear? The dogs couldn't fathom why there was nobody to listen to them now that they were using their voice. The cameras were merely rolling. None of the humans wanted to know nothing. Now there were some dogs on tv, playing blissfully and without a care in the world with their owners in the park. Some others, were relaxing in the yards of their houses, enjoying the sunshine. Were these the same dogs that could not think or speak, and that the speaking dogs were calling "Voiceless", or were these dogs simply scared – too scared to show that they had a voice? Who knew?

And then the decorated general appeared on the screen and told everybody to calm down, to take a breath and listen. And they did listen. He said that the country was in a state of emergency and that for this reason the military had to take over. Everything was going to change; he assured them and gave further explanations: "All dogs and all dog-owners are called to comply as a token of good will. Coming tomorrow, there would be check points. The dogs will be examined. The ones who cannot think or speak will be returned to their owners. The ones that do possess the capacity to talk and think will follow us into spaces especially made for them in the outskirts of the city. They will live in spacious farms, abiding their own laws and regulations, attending their own schools and having hospitals especially for their needs. All convenience will be at their disposal. So, do not worry. Everything will be all right".

'This might be good', Anselmo offered.

'Where did all these spaces come from, all of the sudden?' Josephine asked.

'Is it possible that they were preparing for this all of these years?' Maximilian asked, and they all turned to Doctor Thomas.

The pictures that follow were pictures of celebration and of great joy. Dogs on tv were cheering: "We did it! We did it!".

Maximilian, filled with anguish, now looked at Josephine, and in turn she looked at their children.

'Father, what do you think?' Cecilia asked.

'We need to go', Doctor Thomas responded. 'I do not trust them – not any of them'.

'Let's go then', Sebastian agreed.

'Then again, maybe things won't be that bad. The dogs will live in farms and the humans in cities. This will give dogs some very needed protection. They have suffered enough all these years', Doctor Thomas argued.

'No, you don't get what is going on. They will take care of us,' Marvelous George said, while his paw was passing like a knife from his neck. They will either wipe us out or make us stupid'.

'You don't know that', Anselmo said. 'And there is always the other solution'.

'What solution?'

'A dog can simply pretend that they don't have thought, so they can pass the test and carry on living as before'.

'To live how exactly?'

'As the Voiceless do'.

'As a slave, you mean', Josephine cut him off.

'Maybe it's the best for our children', Maximilian pondered hesitantly.

'Maybe this is treason', Sebastian murmured.

And then there was banging on the door. They were taken aback. This couldn't be good. Or could it be someone asking for help? Before they managed to move, the entrance door – in fact all the doors of the farmhouse swung open, as if someone kicked them with violent force. Canine and human beings stood next to each other, creating a small wall protecting Maximilian's and Josephine's little ones. Cecilia was lost, not able to understand what was happening, since nobody had time to explain it to her. She then felt two hands embracing her.

'Father?' she mumbled.

'Don't worry. It's me', Sebastian told her and swiftly explained what was going on.

Sebastian told her that mercenaries with heavy gear were all over the place and that their guns were pointing to their heads. He then explained that the mercenaries parted into two groups and that the general that they watched on tv was now standing in front of them in all of his frightening glory.

'Hush. No more whispering,' the general said, clapping his hands. 'Doctor Thomas?' he then asked, spotting Cecilia's father. 'Well, sir, I am glad we found you. You need to come with us'.

'I am not going anywhere', Doctor Thomas said.

'Sir, your assistance is urgently needed'.

'I am too old', Doctor Thomas insisted. 'I cannot help anybody with anything'.

'Doctor Thomas, I have read your CV, and I think I know better than you if you can help or not. We have big plans for you. You are to supervise the thought recording process. This is one of the most advanced plans ever devised. You will be proud to take part in this historical project'.

'Your words bring shame to humanity and to all of the dogs. And there isn't a way, no way on earth, for you to convince me to do something like this', Doctor Thomas said, attempting to control his exasperated voice.

'There isn't, huh?' the general asked.

'No'.

'What if I told you that we know something that is quite important to you?'

'I would say that I am not interested'.

'Look at this picture then', the general said.

Doctor Thomas refused.

'Please, look at it', said the general, bringing the photo close to Doctor Thomas's face.

'What do you mean to say?' Doctor Thomas asked, now looking terrified.

'Yes, it is indeed your wife', the general confirmed, really enjoying the scientist's bafflement. 'As you can see, she is well and very much alive. In fact, you can meet with her really soon. She is not living very far from here'.

Doctor Thomas asked for a chair to sit. They handed him one.

'Your mother', Cecilia. 'It is her. Really, it is. Older, but it is her'.

'No', father. 'It is not possible. They are lying to you'.

Cecilia was welling up. She never wanted anything more in her life but to be able to look at her mother again.

'Well?' asked the general.

'What about my daughter? And everybody else?' Doctor Thomas asked, and his voice revealed a tone of regret about that which he was going to do.

'We will protect them all. They will be provided with special accommodation. They won't be touched'.

'Is this certain?'

'Of course'.

'Then, I am coming with you', Doctor Thomas stated.

'Father, don't!' Cecilia yelled.

But her father wouldn't listen to anybody. Doctor Thomas kissed his daughter on the forehead and tried to loosen her grip on him. Then he followed the military men who were leaving in an orderly fashion.

Chapter 19

Doctor Thomas was far gone, and a few mercenaries were left behind, standing in full combat mode.

'You need to follow us,' the mercenaries told the humans and the dogs.

The bunch looked at each other. Sebastian held Cecilia even more tightly. He wanted to protect her; to keep harm at a distance. Then again, she wanted to move freely, and when she did so she took a step in the front.

'No', she said. 'Let the dogs go. They have small children to care for'.

'They are not children', said one of the military people, the one responsible for the completion of the mission. 'They are puppies. Animals. Mutts. I do believe you need to be more careful when you speak. You are a sophisticated woman, after all', he said with a silly smirk on his face. 'And, now, you need to follow me. All of you. These are the commands I was given'.

Maximillian growled, but soon controlled his voice.

'Let us leave', he said in a domineering tone.

'I do not talk to dogs. I cannot understand what you say. I don't understand barking', the army man objected.

'But I am uttering human words, just as you are'.

'I do not understand. Please, do not go on. It is embarrassing... Well, listen, humans go on the right and dogs on the left', ordered the man and waved at the others to come closer, so that a hem of hands and guns was formed around the bunch.

The frightened puppies were crying, and Josephine was thinking that were she without her children, she would have attacked the menacing humans without a second thought. She wouldn't mind dying in order to resist this madness. She was in a frenzy. She looked at Max. He had the same feeling, but his look was saying "no", turning towards their children.

They did as they were told, following the mercenaries – humans on the right and dogs on the left. Finally, they all ended up in the same truck. Maximilian and Josephine gathered in a corner, protecting their crying children with their bodies. The uncertainty about the future kept them quiet. Sebastian was sitting next to Cecilia, looking at the farmhouse vanishing as their hopes were evaporating in thin air. Where were they taking them? Nobody knew. Why did they arrest him? What went wrong? Why did he get involved? Sebastian was an unassuming man. An average man. A man. Now shoved in a cage full of dogs. Like a dog. He looked at Maximilian. He was caressing Josephine, who was looking fearless.

'Are you crying?' Cecilia asked him, sensing some drops rolling down her hand.

'What do you mean? I? Crying. Why would you think that?'

His eyes were filled with tears. Not, because he was scared, which he was, but because nothing was making sense anymore. Humans, he came to realize, weren't human at all. So, he was crying for them. He was also crying for dogs. For those dogs who had honor and dignity and cared for each other. They cared for humans as well. They cared for the future. First and foremost, they did care. It was clear as day; things weren't going as they were supposed to be going. The world had turned upside down. And he, Sebastian Montefiore, was partly responsible for this change. Were they wrong? Was he wrong? Things should never alter one bit – not for any reason. Wasn't this his most precious principle?

‘You did nothing wrong’, Cecilia explained to him. ‘You did what was needed to be done’.

‘Cecilia, I am sorry’, Maximilian said. ‘I know that you are quite shaken with all this – more than us, for sure’.

‘I still cannot believe that he left with them’, she whispered, as if she was a little girl confessing her troubles. ‘And I certainly don’t believe that my mother is alive’.

Sebastian was out of words, still struck by the fact that Cecilia, this beautiful accomplished woman, was thrown in there with the rest of them, as if she wasn’t the most precious thing that ever existed in the world. At some point, the military vehicle swerved into a pot hole. They all lost their balance, and Cecilia’s head neared a sharp edge. Sebastian managed to put his hand between her head and the edge, just in time. He then let out a cry.

‘What’s going on?’ Cecilia asked.

‘It’s ok. Everything is ok’, Sebastian responded, holding his bleeding hand.

Max and Josephine saw everything. Their smile was quite strange – their glance likewise. He had never been looked at in this way. He was stunned. What had happened? It was as if someone acknowledged his existence for the first time. The glance was telling him that he was worthy of something and that his life had a purpose. He looked at his hand. It was still bleeding, but he didn’t care.

‘I think it’s best for you to jump off the truck’. ‘You can do it and you won’t get hurt,’ Cecilia explained to the dogs. ‘There is no reason for you to stay here’.

‘No, we are not leaving you’, Josephine said.

‘This is the best choice your children’, Cecilia insisted. ‘For your family’.

‘No, this is not negotiable’, Josephine said.

‘Still. If you think about it, there is no reason to go with them’, Maximilian said. ‘If we get away now, we can return at some point and free them’.

Josephine wouldn’t change her mind. Cecilia was like a sister to her. She couldn’t abandon her. Cecilia insisted some more, and then Josephine approached her with teary eyes and touched her with her soft paw.

‘Together, we are stronger’, she told to her. ‘We are family. We cannot be apart’.

Marvelous George was moved. He went closer, while everybody did the same. This made them feel a little better. They wouldn’t let anybody keep them apart. And then there was a loud bang. They turned their heads and saw Anselmo running off down the street.

Chapter 20

The army truck stopped in front of an imposing spherical glass building with an impressive gate – suggesting an even grander interior. Stands of cypress trees were bringing out a dark green color, while the rich rose bushes gave a joyful touch. In the front, there was a huge screen playing scenes from various tv shows.

‘Here we are’, said the driver of the truck.

‘Where are we?’ Sebastian wanted to know.

‘At the central studio. This is where the movies are made’, Marvelous George explained. ‘I did the shooting of three of my movies here. You know, *The spy and his dog*, *It’s a dog’s life*, and *Underdog*’.

‘For lack of a better solution, you will stay here. Follow me’, the driver ordered them.

Marvelous George, knowing the place well, headed the group. The others simply followed. Sebastian stopped for one minute to appreciate the grass – it was so neatly trimmed that he felt the urge to get on his knees and measure every single blade. But, of course, this wasn’t the time.

Inside the building, dogs and humans carrying props and recording equipment were moving around like crazy. What was going on? Nobody knew – at least, the bunch didn’t know. Everything was giving out an air of urgency. Everybody wanted something. Everybody was doing something. Sebastian and the others weren’t doing anything at all and didn’t have a clue about nothing. Moving further inside, they found several tv sets constituting separate worlds. The first one was a space station, with a rectangular control system in the center that was doing absolutely nothing. In the back, featured a bright purple chair meant for the captain of the space mission.

‘This is where they made *The Travelers from Planet Z*’, Sebastian exclaimed. ‘I remember seeing that movie as a young boy’.

‘I remember the Z Travelers’, Cecilia said. ‘This set must be very old’.

‘Yes, they keep some of them for tourists. They pay a handsome fee, as well. Tv has its ways to make a profit from everything – even from things that are long dead’.

‘What are we doing here?’ Cecilia asked one of the mercenaries that was accompanying them.

‘This is where you ‘ll live’.

‘On the set?’ Josephine asked.

‘Out of necessity. We don’t have any other spaces available. You must be pleased though. There are other sets if you want to choose something closer to your taste’, he explained then. ‘But of course, they are occupied by other prisoners – guests, I mean, who were here before you did’.

He then seemed ready to go but stopped for a moment.

‘Make sure that you live well, here. You ought to see how some of the others live’.

‘Wait a minute’, Sebastian said. ‘How does this place work? I mean, what cautions should we heed?’

‘Try not to get killed’, he said and left in a hurry.

‘What do you mean?’ Josephine persisted.

‘You will soon understand’, he responded, and left.

“Where is he going?”, everybody wondered and they all had this overwhelming feeling that something of significance was about to happen. The residents of the place were all running. All of them in a hurry. Dogs and humans, the ‘guests’, were rushing towards the open space that joined the separated sets, looking anxiously upwards.

Suddenly, small grey packages started falling down. The dog-guests started barking ominously, and the human-guests began screaming, giving instructions to each other. A relentless battle was now unfolding. Humans tried to fool the dogs, as they used to do all these years. Dogs, however, now had a mind of their own, and some of them possessed the physical strength to dominate everybody as well. The humans, without guns and equipment, simply couldn’t measure up to the physical superiority of some of the largest dogs. When the fight was finally over and the dogs had gathered most of the packages, they growled in pleasure and left with an air of triumph.

Sebastian approached a few of the humans that were left behind and tried to find out what was going on. One of them, was wearing now torn clothes and had blood on his right leg. His face was changed by a feeling of immense frustration.

‘What’s going on?’ Sebastian asked.

The man was now looking very tired.

‘Oh, you are new. Ok, then, let me break it to you. We get food only in the evenings, but we need to fight for it. And as I am sure you have witnessed; the dogs usually take the lion’s share. And to think that I stood by them and their cause. How could have I known? In the end, the ones arguing that dogs with rights will simply obliterate us were right. ‘A dog is a man’s best friend. Ha. That is rich!’

‘But, it’s not the dogs’ fault’, Sebastian said.

‘Then, whose is it then?’

‘Whoever invented this awful system of rationing. Whoever decided to keep us here like puppets and to feed us in this cruel way’.

‘I don’t know. What I do know is that I wouldn’t be here, if dogs hadn’t risen’, said the man. ‘And I have an advice for you, my friend; stay away from them. Things are clearly divided here. Dogs and humans live with their own species each. Don’t even think about living with dogs. If the other humans get wind of this, you’re going to get lynched for sure. Get rid of the dogs!’ he concluded, showing the others around Sebastian.

‘These are not just dogs’, Sebastian said. ‘These are my family. I will never give up on them’.

‘Hm’, the man said. ‘You won’t last two minutes here. If I get hungry, I will ask other humans for some food. What are you going to do? How are you going to make it through the night?’

Sebastian looked at his friends – dogs and humans. What was happening was barbaric. He couldn’t fathom that there were people putting humans and dogs in this impossible situation – fighting for a morsel of bread.

‘How are we going to survive the night?’ Cecilia asked. ‘There is no food. There are no blankets from what I gather. What about your children, Josephine? How are they?’

Josephine looked at the pianist in despair. The children had suffered a lot of discomfort, but she and Maximilian could take care for them. What she couldn't do was to change the situation.

At that moment, a tall imposing dog, with a big basket hanging from his mouth, approached them. He left the basket on the floor and looked at them in wounded pride.

'This food is meant for the dogs. Now, what you are going to do with it, is up to you. Coming tomorrow, though, something has to change. You can't live with humans.'

'Yes', Sebastian said. 'Coming tomorrow, something has to change'.

Chapter 21

Tomorrow wasn't coming soon. Tomorrow wasn't coming easily. It wasn't coming at all. Sometimes you need to persevere. To fight with all of your strength, and tomorrow might still not come. Cecilia and Sebastian wanted it to come. Marvelous George wanted it as well, but every dawn was bringing just another today. Again, and again. Emptiness, broken souls and bodies, deafening silence. Every night, delivering ruin and despair.

Cecilia, the famous pianist, Marvelous George, the great actor, Maximilian, the revolutionary, Josephine, the compassionate and capable leader, and Sebastian, the meticulous risk analyst, were reduced to miserable beings without substance, strength or hope. The dreadful situation that they found themselves in stripped them of their histories, dreams and accomplishments. What was vital in there was skills like jumping, biting, tacking the one next to you so as to get some food. In contrast to everybody else in there, however, this bunch of friends hadn't forgotten what they believed in – that they had once imagined a different future. Everything had changed, but one thing remained constant for them: their bond. Day by day, it was getting stronger, branching and extending, grabbing onto anything that could make it live longer.

Daily survival could not grant them time for thought or action. Why were they in that place? When were they going to be free? What was happening in the outside world? They lived inside a TV studio, and yet they didn't know anything. Each day was the last one's repetition. Struggling for food. Exchanging goods and constantly trying to escape danger and hardship.

That day, though, was different. Surprised, they all watched Cecilia sprucing up her clothes and fixing her hair, as if she was expected somewhere. As if she had a purpose. Where did she find one? Cecilia was now shaking her long brown skirt that used to be yellow. She also straightened her blouse. Her belt was missing, because she 'd exchanged it for a carton of milk for Josephine's children. And, then, she was ready! For what? Nobody, could guess.

'Where are you going?' Josephine asked. 'I am coming with you'.

'No, you are not. It's dangerous'.

'Precisely, why I am coming', she said and barked to show that she wouldn't take "no" for an answer'.

'Maybe, it's best that I come, as well', Sebastian proposed. 'I have a decent grasp of the space, around here' he said, trying not to irritate Cecilia. 'I also know the best places for exchanging goods.'

'What is your plan Cecilia?' Marvelous George asked.

'I want to find the piano'.

'Which piano?'

'I can't sleep at nights. I rarely do, and sometimes, just before dawn, I hear notes, two-three notes from a sonnet by Debussy'.

'It's not real', Sebastian said. 'It is probably a dream. No way, there is a piano in here', he said in agony, as he didn't want Cecilia to fall in any danger. No, that kind of risk was too big for him. "Survival, above everything", he thought.

'You are not going to tell me what is true and what is not', Cecilia cut him off. 'I am going'.

'I understand what you mean', George exclaimed. 'I can't stand being in here anymore'.

Cecilia took some tentative steps, having Josephine and Marvelous George on her right side and Sebastian on her left. Max stayed behind to mind the children. Cecilia felt a pain in her gut, but not because she was scared. The feeling was different. It was as if she was getting ready to perform. She stood tall and had a feeling like the old times, when thousands of people were listening to her mesmerized. She then sensed that she was being watched – and it was true. Everybody had heard of her. They heard that she was playing the piano like nobody else, and also learnt that her music could make you laugh and cry and lift the weight from your shoulders. And they also learnt that she was living with dogs – that her group was the single mixed group in the whole building.

Cecilia got in front of the camping set, where a clan of the black pitbulls was living. These were amongst the strongest and most relentless dogs, when competing for food. Nobody dared fight them. Josephine thought that it not a good idea to talk to them, but Cecilia looked determined.

‘If it isn’t Marvelous George’, said one of the pitbulls, the shortest one. ‘I can’t believe my eyes!’

‘What is going on?’ the rest of the gung asked.

‘Why! It’s is Marvelous George! TV’s Marvelous George!’

‘No, it isn’t. He doesn’t have a star!’ another pitbull argued.

‘No, it’s him, the short pitbull insisted. Come on George, do the spy’.

Marvelous George looked quite uncomfortable. He wanted to forgot who he used to be, and he didn’t want to return to that individual again. He knew, however, that doing the spy could help things a little bit.

‘Well, I would need some kind of prop to use as a gun’, he said smilingly.

‘Here you are’, said one of the dogs, throwing a fake gun at him.

Marvelous George held it, looked everybody straight in the eye and said: “We don’t need guns! There is something quite precious amongst us! There is friendship here!”. This was a famous line from one of his blog busters. It was something he said, while his beloved police partner was dying in his arms.

‘You are magnificent, my friend!’ someone said in tears, while the others were cheering.

‘There is only one Marvelous George’, the shortest of the pitbulls declared in awe. Are you looking for something, my friend?’ he then wanted to know.

‘Yes, we are looking for a piano. Have you seen something like that?’

‘No, this is a camping set. It’s not a place for a piano. Maybe you should try the Victorian set, just down the road’.

George nodded, and the four of them went down the road, while noticing that the pitbulls were now accompanying them.

‘Marvelous George is looking for a piano’, they shouted all around. ‘He is going to put on a show – the Underdog, perhaps. Can you imagine?’

The Victorian set was quite remarkable, with a lot of attention to detail. A road with beautiful red-brick houses, with gardens and real rose-bushes. There used to be a show shooting there about a count and his seven children, who were fighting for their father’s estate. Cecilia

requested for a description and then asked to be led by Josephine to the house with the green door at number 13. Cecilia knocked three times, and the door opened. Josephine and Marvelous George were very curious to see who was living there. The inside was quite something. The wall paper, with its small blooming country flowers, and the smell of fresh baked bread made the room especially welcoming. Then they noticed that the lady was holding a plate with a big buttered chunk of bread. Josephine gave Cecilia an ever so light notch, telling her that it was time to speak.

'I am Cecilia Thomas', she said. 'And I am a pianist. Playing the piano is my whole life. My hands without piano keys are useless. If you have a piano in this house – in this set, I meant to say, you need to let me play'.

The lady was quite shocked. Was it actually true? She couldn't believe her eyes, and yet Cecilia Thomas was actually there, as she lived and breathed. The lady has attended one of Cecilia's concerts, some years ago, and she fell in love with her music. Or was it, just a few months back? She couldn't really recall. The only thing she knew for certain was that Cecilia's music made her happy.

'There must 've been a piano in this set', she explained, showing an empty space in the middle of the living room. 'Someone must have moved it. Could it be in the New York set?'

Cecilia thanked her and her partner, who was now eating the delicious bread, and got ready to walk to the next set. The lady, however, and everybody that witnessed the scene, wanted to follow her. Josephine and Marvelous George barked belligerently.

'Please', said the lady. 'Let me come with you. Listening to some music is the only thing that can help me keep sane in here'.

'Let her come', Cecilia consented.

The New York set proved to lead to nowhere and so did the news set. Still, the residents chose to follow Cecilia and the others. By noon, they had thoroughly searched every little nook and corner but with no luck.

'The only place left is the storage site', said the lady from the Victorian set. 'I went there once for cleaning supplies.'

Everybody looked at her angrily. Were there cleaning supplies? Where there provisions as well? Probably, this was the reason that lady's house smelled of fresh bread and cleanliness. Fury was shooting from the human eyes; wrath from the dogs' mouths.

'When we are done from here, I will share everything with you', she said in regret for her actions.

'What is important now is to find the piano', a powerful voice uttered.

They all turned around. It was Max with his children.

Now, every mouth was shut. Every stare, calm. The Victorian lady approached Cecilia and gave her the key. It was a small storage room with mops and brooms. Yet, at the back of the room, they found another door. The key opened that one as well, discovering a large quantity of detergent. Everybody looked at the lady.

'I never went beyond this point. I was too scared', she admitted.

The detergent was stacked in boxes. Humans and dogs worked together to move them. Some of them thought this would be a good opportunity to steal some of the supplies, but Max's voice still echoed in their minds. They had to find the piano. That was the priority now. The

prospect to listen to some music, from the hands of none other than Cecilia Thomas, was giving them hope, promising them that their minds would escape for a while, that their souls would calm down, and that their bodies would feel alive once again. When they finally found the door, they were almost certain. They pushed it and entered a dark space.

'Music!', they then shouted.

'There!' Some of them pointed.

And there it was, in the middle of the room, a piano! Someone was sitting on the stool.

'Someone is there. Do you see?'

At that very moment, a weird light flooded the space. Nobody knew where it came from, but the darkness was gone. And then a whisper. They were all chattering about something, and the name Thomas was mentioned again and again. Nobody was moving anymore.

'What is going on?' Cecilia mumbled. 'They know it's me. Why do they repeat my name?'

'Cecilia!', then Josephine stammered.

'Tell me... What's going on?'

'Cecilia. Your father is here!'

Chapter 22

Humans and dogs encircled Doctor Thomas. A chilliness spread across the room. They all knew that Doctor Thomas was somehow involved with whatever was happening to them. In fact, was he responsible for their captivity? Was it all a trap?

'No, it's not possible', Cecilia said in a distressed tone and stepped forward. 'My father is not here. He is with the military, working on a plan to record thought. My father betrayed me. He betrayed everybody', she then muttered.

'Cecilia, he is here...'

'No, he isn't...'

'Cecilia?' Doctor Thomas mumbled.

'It can't be...'

'Cecilia, is that you?'

'Father, what are you doing here? Did you find mother? Are you involved in all this?' Cecilia asked, and all of her worries, all hopes and expectations tied her heart into a knot that wouldn't let her breath. She knew that she couldn't bear to hear that her father went along with the military's plans.

'Nothing happened. I, the great Doctor Thomas, the one that made dogs capable of thinking, I am the most thoughtless creature of them all...'

'Father, why are you here?'

'It was all a lie. Everything was a lie. The photograph of your mother... And the thought recording plan was in fact the opposite. A thought erasing plan. I had no intention to take any part in any of it. I objected, and they locked me up in here. In the dark. Where are we? Do you know? Thankfully, I found this piano. It kept me company, and this is the only reason I kept my sanity', he said and his eyes were now nothing but a proof that the Doctor Thomas was a broken man.

'The piano', Cecilia uttered, as though she was waking up.

She then touched the instrument as if she was touching a long-lost piece of her soul.

'She will play!' the crowd whispered again, and everybody's heart fluttered with impatience.

Even the very few that had never heard Cecilia play before, were convinced that something magnificent was going to happen.

Cecilia made her way to her father and sat next to him. She laid her head on his shoulder and raked his hair.

'Sometimes things happen – things, that seem bigger than us, bigger than everybody', Cecilia said, and she felt the wet tears on her father's face. 'And, we do the best that we can'.

Then their four hands worked together, moving in harmony, letting the moonlight to shine right through Claude Debussy's suite bergamasque. The notes were touching each and every heart, gently, just like the moonlight was touching the surface of the dark sea. Small drops of music were filling up their souls, reminding them of who they use to be. And then the drops turned into tears. The eyes that were watching Cecilia's fingers, were now crying. Something was already stirring inside them. The music was moving between the shadows, hiding the ugliness, revealing the missing pieces.

When the music stopped, they all felt as if the hand that was gently consoling them – had now left them in the cold. They wanted to hold somebody. They wanted to be held. And at that moment, Maximilian stepped onto the piano.

‘A series of events brought us here’, he said. And since we got here, ‘we kept being brought about by events; we are not bringing the events about. Something needs to change’.

‘We don’t take orders from dogs!’ someone shouted, but then the voice was quickly silenced by the others’ reactions.

Sebastian sensed that that was his moment. He had been expecting it. So, he approached the piano.

‘Now, we are not speaking as dogs or as humans. Now, we are speaking as companions. That is what we are. I used to be alone. I had no one. No one cared for me. And then I met them’, he said, showing Cecilia, Max and the others. ‘I am someone with them. Together, we have become something. We can do something’.

Sebastian noticed that dogs and humans were paying attention to him – to him, the tepid risk analyst that used to keep in the margins. Today’s Sebastian, however, was someone else. He had grown.

‘We all bear responsibility’ Josephine said. ‘We all should look after each other, in any way that we can, as much as we can. This is what we need to actually start living here’.

‘And the food need not keep us apart’, said Marvelous George, nearing the piano. ‘We can share according to our needs. We might have ended up here without choosing it, but we can now choose if we want to live with dignity or not’.

‘We can create a community’, the lady of the Victorian house said. ‘I can teach you how to make bread’.

‘There is no reason we shouldn’t be able to live in peace and in equality, humans and dogs’, the short pitbull intervened. ‘We can start forming a democracy’.

The rest of them didn’t know what to think. They were trying to estimate where all this was going. Some of them had stocked up on food and didn’t want to give away any of it. Some others had nothing, and a redistribution of goods would be in their best interest. Some had skills that made them quite important – indispensable even. Some others just needed protection.

‘We all need to begin thinking as if we belong to the weakest group. Life at times can place you high up, and at other times can shoot you down. We always need to have in mind that it could be us that we might need help. Only in this way, can we create a just society. We need to think from the position of the weakest link. Imagine that you are these children’, Cecilia said showing Josephine’s and Max’s little ones. ‘What is it, that you would not want to be without?’

Chapter 23

Cecilia couldn't see. If she could, she would be now taking in a surprising image: all the residents of the building – the same ones that used to fight each other for a crust of bread, were now hugging, their hearts beaming out rays of hope and freedom. Suddenly, however, this beautiful warm light became so strong that it blinded them. It made them feel more helpless than before and forced them to turn their gaze away. They begged for the floodlights to shut down, and when this happened gradually, the infamous tv director presented himself, elevated and well protected inside a glass box. He seemed irritated, lost perhaps in the new developments, but he then made a decisive move. He pressed a button and his voice flooded the space.

'I guess congratulations are in order!' he stated.

'Who was he talking too? Nobody knew. And what was the matter of discussion? Whom did he need to congratulate? Compliments are given to winners. Was there a winner in there?'

'Whatever I did was a means of last resort. You didn't give me any other choice', Doctor Thomas protested.

'I can barely believe it! The finale of my most successful tv series. I cannot grasp it. It's not true'.

Dogs and humans were now looking puzzled. Cecilia turned towards the director's voice and stroke harshly the piano keys. Her face was distorted by an unbearable pain. Her teeth, strongly pressing upon each other.

'What series?', Cecilia asked.

'It's not a series per se, but a reality show. Yes, that's it. A show about reality. Huh! It sounds funny, doesn't it? An experiment equal to none other. Dogs and humans, thrown in the struggle for survival. I reckoned that the show was going to finish with a violent confrontation. Your father, Miss Cecilia, was of the opposite opinion. He said "anything that is touched by my daughter's music will become better".'

Cecilia turned to her father, who was still sitting in front of the piano. She shook him up.

'Tell me!', she screamed at him.

He looked at her in silence.

'Tell me!', she cried again.

This went on for long.

'Tell me you that didn't do this! You let them throw your daughter in here? Treat me – treat all these humans and dogs as if we were lab subjects? We are not fictional characters on a tv show, you know. We are real living breathing beings. We have bodies that feels pain and souls that get hurt'.

'Nobody was deciding on anything. Nobody,' Doctor Thomas exclaimed. There was chaos all over the country. Some were arguing that dogs and humans could not live together. Some others were saying the complete opposite'.

'Why not take it to a vote then?'

'And who was going to have the right to vote? The humans? So that the fates of dogs would lie completely in their hands? Humans and dogs together? And, what about the future

generations? What about the Voiceless? Who was going to talk on their behalf? On the behalf of those who don't have thought? Nobody was equipped for such a decision. And then the director suggested this solution: Dogs and humans were to be thrown in the same space. If they managed to live together – indeed, in the most challenging of conditions, then the dogs' and humans' cohabitation bill would pass. Don't you see? Unbeknownst to you', he said and looked at each one of them – humans and dogs alike, 'you made it possible for the new bill to come to pass. You made the decision for the country's future. You proved that humans and dogs can live together'.

'Exactly', Cecilia said and pounded on the piano with a clenched fist. 'Unbeknownst to us! Nobody needs to know everything to make a decision. Life is not about that. However, nobody has the right to keep others from knowing. This takes away our dignity. From living beings, it turns us into things. Don't you see that?'

'Daughter, please understand my position. They didn't leave me any other choice. It was either the reality show or the enforcement of the dogs' and humans' thought removal scheme. They wanted to erase thought from anyone who didn't comply. That was their solution – the worst solution of all. Complete madness. Now, we have won! The right thing will finally happen. Despite the means.'

'Father, you betrayed me', Cecilia said. 'For a second time'.

'I didn't have a choice, but if I believe in something is you. I have always believed in you. I was watching you from this small screen. I knew that one day, you will wake up. And here it is! There is no other way now. You proved – you all proved, that humans and dogs can live together.'

'For this to happen, though, we lost every one of our rights.'

'You are heroes, now'.

'Not exactly' the director cut them off. 'I can't deny it. The show made great numbers. There isn't a household in the country that is not watching. The sales of television sets went up like a rocket. People waited for the very end – you know, to decide. If things resorted to violence, viewers would vote against the cohabitation bill. And things, at least for now, appear to be going in favor of the animal-lovers and their pets. However, I need to share with you that this episode – that is, whatever happened here today – is not broadcasted live. No episode does. I won't send anything out, before I edit it and give it its final shape. So, I am thinking to play some scenes of the most dramatic events for tomorrow's episode – you know, perhaps those scenes in which you kill each other for breadcrumbs. How does that sound?'

They all lowered their heads. There wasn't a way out. There wasn't any logic. There wasn't a way to win at this game.

'So, you win!', Marvelous George painfully admitted.

'No, not exactly', a white Hokkaido said. 'We are actually live. I gave the order' he added.

'Markus?' Marvelous George asked. 'Is it you?'

'It's me, George', he said. 'Do I look different, my brother? I think I've changed.'

'I think so too', George responded with eyes full of emotion.

'I know that we all make mistakes, but when I realized mine, it was too late', Markus explained.

'It is never too late', George was quick to say, but their conversation didn't go very far.

Because at that very moment, the studio's doors opened, and human and dog viewers entered the space, smushing cameras and lights, destroying everything.

'Enough!' they yelled. 'Enough!'

The screen was now filled with the angry mob, that surrounded the director, and was now leading him away. Where were they taking him?

'Trial!' they were screaming. 'Trial!'

Could it be that tomorrow was there? Could they believe that such a thing was true? Did they manage to bring tomorrow to them? No one had the answer but a feeling of change had overwhelmed them. They could breathe freely again, and they have been waiting for a long time to feel this way again.

When the bunch of friends made their way outside of the crumbling building, scenes from their life in captivity were still playing on the huge screen. The fighting for food, the blazing rows, the exchange of goods, the hunger, the yelling, the burning desire for freedom – all that they had lived was in repeat. The scenes were only interrupted by short ads warning the viewers not to miss the next episode. The six of them were watching silently. In tears. Because as much as they watched and as much as they listened, they didn't detect not even one small scene that could embarrass their own peculiar family.

Then, there was a loud noise, an annoying honk that interrupted their reflections. Sebastian was driving one of those military trucks that once had uprooted from their life.

'To the farm?', he asked.

'Yes, let's head home', the others said.

And at that moment, it was clear to everybody: Tomorrow had arrived.



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The Disappearance of K. Papadakou and what happened that summer

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translated by Anna Kouppanou © 2021

Chapter 1

Ok. I will tell you what I know about her disappearance, but give me some time, will you? No, I am not buying time. I am telling you that I need to think. Why? Why do you think? No, I am not being smart, but I need to go back at the beginning. Listen! No, I am not giving you orders, but will you listen for a moment? Please.

I remember those days. Everything was such a mess, such a big mess. People coming and going –mostly family I’ve never seen before. Nobody was paying attention to me or perhaps they had forgotten that I existed. To be honest, though, even if they were to say something, I wouldn’t know what to say back. Mum was telling me ‘Aunt Mary is coming’ and ‘you’d better go and say hello’, but I said ‘no thanks’. To tell you the truth, I can’t care less about Aunt Mary or Uncle John or whomever was pulling a guest star appearance.

Look. I am not a freak, and I talk to people, but I had other things on my mind. I was spending my time in my room or at the park or at the library, reading. Yes, just reading. You wouldn’t believe how much I read. Pathetic, huh? But you have to understand. I am not a nerd. Mother stopped talking to me at dinner, so I was talking to myself. In my head. She was staring at her plate as if it was getting ready to speak. But plates don’t speak. They don’t do anything. And I was reading trilogies and series and stuff like that. Antigone was gone. We packed her things, but she didn’t take anything. Yes, I know. You want to know about the disappearance. Ok, listen.

The school was over. ‘You are fourteen’ my mother said, and I agreed. That’s how old I am. My birthday was on the 22nd. It’s just a day, one’s birthdays I mean. She brought a cupcake and showed it to me. I blew the candle. We kissed. All good things. She asked if I was ok, babbling about the summer and the opportunities coming my way. She also mentioned that the world is my oyster. She said those words; really, she did.

So, I was fourteen. Two days went by and it was the weekend again. On Monday, we had breakfast together, and she handed me a list. Her ideas, she said. I didn't understand at first, and then she explained it to me. At 9 o' clock, I could read a book. At 10, have a snack – 'it's in the fridge, something with egg', she said – at half past ten, time for video games, at 12, I could take a shower, because it is too hot, and later, maybe take a nap. And, then, call Petros to hang out. Who is he? He is the one waiting outside. No, I don't want to talk about him. I said thanks to her offer, but I wouldn't take it even if she threw a free vacation in the mix. Spending time with Petros? Not in a million years.

You know, I prefer life without Petros. She gave me a strange glance, and you can rest assured that I know what that glance means. She is certain that I can't keep friendships, but it's not my fault. Some people you want to keep, and some others they won't keep you. I can't hang with Petros. And that's the honest truth. Then, she said, I could get some rest for an hour, and later I could read again if I wanted to.

I said thanks, but I was very annoyed, and I made sure I showed it. I left my plate on the table. Look, I am not some kind of a sexist. I am all for women's rights and everybody's rights and my mother's as well, but I left the plate to make a point. And, to be honest, she is welcome to stare at it as much as she likes. Then I got back to my room.

When I heard the front door closing, I went into the living room, picked up the phone and dialled the number.

"Sun Publications," a woman said.

"I am calling from 'Omega' magazine," I told her.

"I've never heard of you."

"Well, we are new."

"How may I help you?"

"I would like the address and telephone number of one of your most celebrated authors," I said.

Don't even ask how I thought of this 'celebrated authors' stuff. It just came out. "It's about an interview," I said.

"Which author are you referring to?" she asked very politely.

"I am referring to Myrsini-Nefeli K. Papadaku. I want her address and telephone number" I demanded.

And? What do you mean 'and'? And nothing. No answer. No nothing.

"We don't have her number sir."

"What do you mean?"

"We don't have her number."

"What about her address? Just give me the address."

"We don't have that either."

"She must be sending her manuscripts from somewhere."

"Yes, she sends them via email," the woman said.

"Yes. But who is it that sends them? Just give me her email. I found one online, and I wrote to her, but she didn't write back".

Silence, again.

"Look sir. People try to contact her all the time. It's impossible."

"Yes, I see. However, if you give me her real email address, it will be possible."

"It's impossible."

"But..."

"Look sir. We are bound by a strict clause in her contract. We cannot reveal anything without reaching a breach. She is our most famous author, you know. She is truly remarkable. "

"Yes, but the interview is..."

"Look, sir... Your name... Sir..."

"Papademetriou. Menios Papademetriou", that's what I said.

"You mean like the politician?"

"Yes, we are cousins."

"Books talk on their own, Mr. Papademetriou. What do you need the author for? And if you find her, please tell her that we had nothing to do with all this. Promise me that. Do you promise?

And if you find her, can you..."

"Thank you for the help," I said.

And I hung up the phone. And I didn't promise anything.

Chapter 2

Ok. I'll tell you what happened next. I sat tight and started putting down what I knew; I mean all the clues I gathered up to that point. I made a list, one to three. No. It is nothing like my mum's. Why do you even say that? I just wanted to have a plan, to know how to get on with my research. I wrote down everything I knew and everything that I needed to know. I have it on me, if you don't believe me. Hey. I am not disrespectful, but I have it on me, and you can take a look – that is, if you like to. Anyway, this is not what I wanted to say. Listen. Myrsisi-Nefeli K. Papadakou has written three books, right? "I. The water.", "You. The sky.", "Her. The earth." Everybody knows these books. I mean you've read them, haven't you? Ok. I'll mind my own business. What is the problem? The problem is that we haven't got a clue about what is going on with the fourth book. That is the problem. K. Papadakou publishes one book every three years, and the fourth book was due on the 22nd of June. On my birthday, that's right. And now it's nearly July and nothing. No news from the publishing house. No nothing. They are hiding something. This I know for certain. What do you mean *how do I know*? I just told you about the telephone conversation. Nope. That's not only it. There's something wrong with the title as well. I've read on her website that the fourth book is completed and that the title is "Fire." Can I show it you? I've printed it out. It's here in my notebook. Something is wrong. I feel it. I mean, what's this title supposed to mean? "Fire"! That's not a title. It's clear that something is wrong. The title must be "Fire. Something...". Not something, but you know what I mean. This story is full of holes.

After the call, I went back to my room. I put on some trousers and a 'rock will live forever' t-shirt. Yes, this one. No, I don't know that much about rock, and I certainly haven't got a clue about its eternal life, but this is what I found, and this is what I wore. My mum got it for me last year for some reason. So, I gathered all of my Papadakou's books and took them to the living room. I was looking at the pages one by one. The words were sticking out, waving at me. I could remember where I read each one of them: the word "sea" at the last sentence on the left of the page, the word "discovery" somewhere at the bottom. Things get stuck in my head.

The house was quiet. I listened for a while, and then I slipped into her room. I leaned on the wall. I touched the door, and it creaked, like saying something. It's odd. Things, I mean; they never leave. I entered the room really quiet, trying not to disturb the place. It was just like she left it. The curtains were moving a little because of the open window. When Antigone came into our lives, everything fell into place. Now, that she is gone, everything is out of place. I touched her desk, that's where she used to read. She was very interested in the ancient world. She even studied archaeology in Florence, Italy for two years.

During the Amfipolis' excavations, she couldn't take her eyes off of the TV. She was glued to the screen every step of the way, taking notes, making sketches. I looked around the place. There is a big bookcase in the back, with amazing books and lots of red notebooks, full of her writing. She never showed those notebooks to anybody, and I certainly wasn't allowed to read them. Now? Who knows? Maybe one day I could take a look. I opened the first drawer of her desk and fish out the lens that she used for looking at fossils and the small ancient statue replicas she kept

by her bed. I was holding it really carefully. "I'll bring it back," I murmured. I don't know who I said it to. Before leaving, I looked at one of her pictures. Taken last year. It was me, her, and mum. Antigone looks a lot like me, or maybe I look like her. I don't know.

I got back to the living room and went through K. Papadaku's books. "Fire," I kept mumbling. I mean, the title is all wrong. I looked closer and studied the books diligently. I couldn't find anything. So, what did I do? The only thing I knew. I decided to read the books from beginning to end. First, I settled onto a stool, and then I lied down on the dining table. This way I could get a clear view of all of the books. And then, just in the middle of the first chapter, I heard this annoying noise coming from outside – someone pounding on the door! Who was it? Maybe it's somebody selling stuff, I thought. I mean there couldn't be any other logical explanation, and I can tell you that I was not in the mood of buying. Come to think of it, I am never in the mood of buying. So, I was stuck there, being really quiet, waiting for the entire thing to go away. But it wouldn't. It wouldn't go anywhere. It kept going and going. And then the bell also rang, pounding and ringing, and I imagined a three-handed being disturbing my peace. So, I thought it best to go and check. Before reaching the door, the house phone and my cell phone started ringing as well, while an email was coming through. I ran to the door and looked through the hole. Who was it? I already told you. Petros, the most obnoxious person on the face of the earth. I opened the door. What would you do?

"Hey bro. Where are you? Everybody is looking for you," he said.

"Who is everybody?" I yelled, but then I noticed something and changed my tone.

Marisa was standing at the edge of the stairs, getting ready to leave. Who is she? She goes to my school.

"What is going on? Why won't you open the door?" Petros asked. "Have you talked to your mum? She is looking for you. She told my mum, and she sent me here. And of course you wouldn't open the door, and so I called her. "

"Why?"

"To check on you and get this over with", he said, making a stupid gesture with his finger. I have other things to do you know."

"Yeah? What other things?"

Petros looked at me with disgust, and before I manage to punch him – because I swear, this is what I intended to do – Marisa started asking me questions while looking at the lens and at my books. She is like that, you know; always doing two things: looking at you and looking around at the same time. I guess she is looking for something more interesting. Anyway, I nodded, they came in, and Marisa went straight for the books.

"You know Marisa, don't you? My mum and her mum are very good friends" Petros said.

"Hey. How are you?" I asked.

I remembered the last day I saw her at school: stepping out from her mother's car, going to class and then talking to some stupid tall guy. She always has this look, as if she is preoccupied with something. Petros, thank God, is going to a different school, a private one. My school is haven in this respect. Why are you looking at me like that?

"What are you looking for?", Marisa asked flipping through the books.

"I haven't got time to explain," I said.

"Why? Do you have anything better to do?", Petros continued with his dump comments.

I wanted so much to punch him in the face or to pull out some of his hair, perhaps that chunk that sometimes covers his left eye.

"What are you looking for?" Marisa asked again, this time more firmly.

"Yes, what is it?" Petros said not in the least bit bothered.

I mean the guy can't take a hint, and at that point he was messing with my stuff, mumbling something about the summer. When he was getting ready to snatch the lens, I managed to grab it first.

"I am looking for something," I said quietly.

"Marisa, do you want some water? It's so hot today, 36 degrees" Petros said.

"Are you scared you gonna melt?" I asked.

He is like butter, that's why I said it. He does whatever he is told, melting, spreading, you know. And, you never know what stupid thing his stupid mouth will shoot out. He gave me an 'I want to kill you' look and headed to the kitchen. After a while, he returned with a glass of orange juice and a glass of water and drunk both of them, because Marisa said that juice is full of preservatives and declined the water as well.

Now, I was standing close to her. She was examining something with the help of the lens. I was curious to see what she was looking at. Soon, I realized that it was the famous picture of the three Fates. Papadakou's books are split into two parts. On the last page of the first part, you can find the picture of the three Fates. I don't know why. It's a bit bigger than the page's number, and it is right on top of it.

"Maybe they symbolize the beginning, the middle and the ending of the story. Clotho could stand for the point at which the story is right now, Lachesis for whatever came before and Atropos for the ending that is yet to come" Marisa suggested. "Don't you think?"

"I've never thought about it like that," I said. "I just read the books."

Marisa's face then had a new expression, but I don't know what that expression meant. Something resembling excitement that fades away. You know?

The phone rang again, and this time I picked it up, but of course, I knew who it was.

“Why won’t you answer the door?”

“I checked in with all of your delegates,” I said.

“You could use some company...”

“I want my peace and quiet...”

“I am busy...” she said.

“I have better things to do”, I said.

“I love you rabbit.”

“I do too carrot”, I whispered, because Marisa was still there. “I am going to lie down,” I said afterwards, putting the phone down. “I am done for today.”

Nobody moved an inch. Petros was lying comfortably on the couch, and Marisa’s hand was resting softly on the table. At that moment, she looked like a paper ribbon attached to a flying balloon. It was then that I got the feeling that no matter how tight someone would hold her she was bound to fly away. It’s stupid, I know. I headed to my room, but again neither of them moved. I turned back, took the lens from Marisa’s hand and looked again at the Fates. They weren’t that old, and they didn’t look ancient, not one bit. I needed some more light. I drew the curtains open and went back to the table. I couldn’t concentrate though. I was looking at Marisa instead of the book, and she was going frantically through the first pages of the first book. Then she stopped.

“What are we looking for?”, she asked – this time her voice was very determined.

“I am looking for Myrsini-Nefeli K. Papadakou,” I said. “The writer of these books.”

“Why?”

“I have something to ask her.”

“What?”

“I want to know what happened to the fourth book of the series and why ‘Fire’ is not published yet. ‘Fire.’ I cannot even say it. I mean, it’s such an excuse for a title!”

“Why? What’s wrong with it? It sounds good to me” Petros said.

But I couldn’t be bothered explaining anything, especially to him.

“She might have not written the book yet”, Marisa insisted.

“No, she’s written it. I am certain she has. She publishes one book every three years; exactly three years. Not a day more, not a day less. Something is wrong. I think Myrsini-Nefeli K. Papadakou is in danger”, I said.

“What kind of danger?”

“Is she abducted by aliens?”, Petros casually said.

He tries to be funny in this stupid way.

“Let’s ask the publishing house,” Marisa said.

“I already did.”

“And?”

“Nothing.”

“Let's go there then,” she said, tipping her finger at a particular point in the book’s first pages.

“Where?” I asked.

“There!” Marisa said again handing me the book.

I read “The Three Fates’- Courtesy of Studio 13”.

“What’s this?”, I asked.

“What?”, Petros asked looking thirsty as always.

“What’s Studio 13?”

“It must be some kind of an artist’s studio. It probably belongs to the painter who created the Fates” Petros said.

“They might have created the covers as well”, he added, but of course what he said was stupid, because K. Papadaku’s book covers are not illustrated. The only thing that changes with each book is the color and the title.

“Hm,” I said.

His words made sense though – it must have been an artist studio, but I wasn’t going to admit it, especially not after the thing he said to me that time. I will never forgive him. Never. And, no, I don’t want to talk about it.

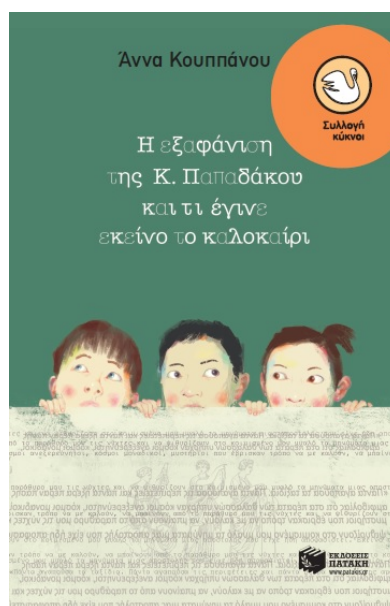
I was grabbing my backpack at that moment, and Marisa was already on the stairs.

“Ready?”, she asked anxiously.

“Wait a minute. I need to grab a glass of water”, Petros said, running to the kitchen. “We have to keep hydrated at all times.”

“Just give me a minute,” I told them.

That gave me time to gather Papadaku’s three books and put them in my bag. I also threw the lens in there, and then I remembered that I needed one more thing. I went back to Antigone’s room, and I picked up one of her notebooks. She must have had some new ones, I thought. I flipped through a random one. The pages were blank. I grabbed a pen as well. And then? Then we left.



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Grandpa, Superman, and a Little Cherry

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Chapter 1

Mr. Timotheos was looking at the small picture with pride. Those dots – those black, grey, perfect little dots – were displaying something wonderful, something almost incredible. Because those perfect little dots were representing none other than his grandchild. His daughter's child, his baby's baby – that would be twice his baby. Isn't this what they say? Isn't it true?

- Shall we frame it? Mr. Timotheos asked while his eyes were getting bigger and bigger and filled with small drops of deep emotion and bliss.

But no one took him seriously. Instead, they giggled, because they thought that he was making a joke. In fact, this was his routine – joking around and telling stories about the good old days. At that moment, however, Mr. Timotheos was dead serious. In fact, he hadn't been so serious ever again in his life. He thus let the others laugh it off, while he was proudly placing the ultrasound image in his pocket. He was going to show it to his friends in the afternoon. Before leaving, though, he looked at Margarita, his pride and joy, holding her flat belly tenderly, lost in her thoughts and dreams.

“What is she thinking about?” Mr Timotheos wondered. “Is she thinking about the days to come? The child that they are bringing? The child's ideas and notions? And what type of ideas and notions would those be? And the child, what kind of child would it be? Will it be funny or pensive? Will they like walking around in the city or will they be a homebody? What kind of movies will they watch and what kind of books will they read?”

Mr. Timotheos was certain that his grandchild would be so unique – similar to no other. His daughter's child would be smart, and beautiful and blessed in every way. And he, his grandfather, that is, would hold it in his arms and keep it warm and safe. He would tell his grandchild that everybody loves them and cares for them, and that it was such a blessing that they came into this world – if for no other reason – so that they will keep each other company.

When he was going to see his grandchild for the first time, he would introduce himself. He would say: “Hello! I am your grandpa. And you are my grandchild, and what you see around you is life. Here, you can try anything you like and as much as you like. And never listen to those who will tell you otherwise. You can do what you love here, and if you don’t make it with the first try, you can keep trying again and again. Until you can say ‘I did the best that I could’. Above all else, however, above everything, is to care and to help those around you – especially all those that suffer. And don’t you worry. I will be there beside you!” Yes, he was going to say everything to his grandchild. That was clear. But who this child was – that was not clear at all. Really, who was this child going to be, and was he ready for it?

[...]



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The day we broke the World

The Lost Children Club

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Chapter 19

[...]

Lizzy just took a sugar biscuit or so it looked, because before helping herself she made sure that she touched the china platter for a while and closed her eyes.

‘Pelopidas, my sugary treat’, she mumbled.

‘What did you say?’ Mr. Pelopidas asked.

Lizzy gave him a rushed smile. Why did she say it, if she didn’t want him to know? Something inside it her was dying to be released and live without constraints.

‘My dear girl, what did you say?’ Mr. Pelopidas insisted.

‘It was nothing’, she responded, looking at the ground.

She probably misjudged the situation. She made a mistake.

‘Child, tell me more, please’, Mr Pelopidas said, while his eyes looked enchanted.

‘Pelopidas, my sugary treat’, Lizzy said again.

‘How do you know dear? This is what my wife used to call me’.

Lizzy gave him a gawky smile. Stephanos understood that she was now anxious. She missed a step and fell over him. Her hands wanted to hold onto something. He held her hand tight in his own. Hers was a small shaking hand.

‘My mother told us about it’, Stephanos tried to explain.

‘Of course, when she was little, she used to come here and we took care of her. My wife would always prepare an apricot jam tart – your mother’s favorite. It was as if Martha were our own.’

'Really?' Stephanos asked.

'Yes, didn't you say that your mum told you the story, herself?', Dinos asked.

'Hush...,' Stephanos told him of. 'Of course, it's true' he added.

Mr. Pelopidas' eyes were now more confused than ever, but they were also hungry for more. Stephanos gently caressed Lizzy's hand, and she touched the platter once again. Her fingers were now brushing against the embossed grapes of the biscuit platter. The thoughts came rushing in like wild horses. Some of the thoughts belonged to Mr. Pelopidas – some others to his wife, and a few others to Martha, from the time she was a little girl. How could she tell them apart? She tried to focus even more.

"We didn't have children, but we had always had each other. I will leave earlier my beloved, and I will go up there to get our home ready," Lizzy muttered.

'It is as if she is here', Mr. Pelopidas sobbed. 'How can you know? How?' he asked Lizzy again.

[...]

