

«Meeting of men», a sample chapter from the novel "Obsession with Spring" (A' Ellinika Grammata, 2006, B' Topos 2009)

There was a large part of the island they hadn't visited yet, fairly densely populated, as far as Sanidopoulos now made out, looking out of his friend's car. It was situated in the northeast part of the island, well sheltered from the wind, about an hour and a half drive from the centre. Its port was larger than the main harbour, and that's where the Public Services were established: the Police Headquarters, the 'crippled' Hospital, the Magistrate's Court, the Tax Offices etc. He took particular notice of the Police Headquarters, an imposing neo-classical building, dating back to the beginning of the 20th century that surely must have seen better days. Now, it needs restoration, he thought, and smiled ironically. You could easily see the bullet holes in the walls, which reminded him of Flora's account of the second Civil war and her friend Captain Bogas –he cast a furtive glance at his friend driving, for he had a rather foolish instinctive fear that his facial expression might have betrayed his thoughts which were still running towards Flora. He noticed that the building site at the top of a small hill beside the port was ideal for surveying both the sea and the island across it, on the one hand, and arrivals from the central road, on the other.

On their arrival, they looked for somewhere to sit down as soon as possible, as it was noon and the heat was stifling. They were also overcome by the sensation that they were in a different place. It was quite obvious: the atmosphere was different, and the people living here looked different. Sanidopoulos immediately recognised the Third World country that Greece is with all that goes with it: fashionable clothes, television sets constantly on at the cheap cafeterias, the deplorable bouzouki-like songs blaring at the eateries, hundreds of local faces, the elated egos of minor municipal dignitaries and others of related professions (tax collectors, city planning men, local electricity power plant officers, hospital and public telecommunications managers, lawyers, solicitors and pharmacists, big tradesmen, owners of supermarkets and Rooms to Let); they were all talking in groups of threes and fives, planning the next trick they would play to defraud the state, having parked their flashy saloon-cars at forbidden places like nonchalant monarchs of Uganda. It was a place full of tourists who had no reason to complain about shop hours, as they did in the other part of the island, though they might complain here about the filthy kebabs, moussaka, tzatziki, greek salad, and the foul smelling dirty lavatories.

"Why have we come to this place?" grumbled Sanidopoulos as soon as they sat at a café with a wonderful view of the sea. The sudden change of climate made him feel uncomfortable, exactly as he had felt before, twenty years back, when, nearly mad, he returned to Greece from France to keep that famous appointment, which he had arranged, with his four old flames in the National Park. That's how he had felt the very moment he set foot at the airport, and after the taxi had gone two or three kilometres, passing through small factories of glassware – destined for the small, silly parlours of the time – and storehouses – home industries – hovels; the Greece of the little man who reverently polishes his car on Sunday as if he did part of his keep-fit routine, while inwardly worrying about the next loan instalment. All this had hit him full in the face, having a nauseating effect on him similar to that caused by the smell of mummies when one gets too near them.

"Maybe we could have a chat here under real circumstances," Panagis answered slightly annoyed, and coming straight to the point, he conveyed to him not so much his fear of this peculiar island –a fear which, at this moment, he could not anyway base on facts– as his anxiety about his friend's attachment to Flora. "I don't care what you do in your love life. You've known me for so long, I've never interfered. It was you who chose to tell me so much about Andiclea and Violetta. Fine, but this woman is so different . . . she scares me". "She is a devil," he was about to say but he didn't.

Sanidopoulos turned and looked at him fondly. He was pleased that his friend really cared for him. He gave him a slightly mocking smile as one would to a frightened child, but this lasted only a few seconds; it was a prelude to the main theme because he changed his air abruptly to anger, saying:

"Panagis, listen to me carefully. More than half of Greek women today are half-witted, behaving like nouveau riche whores, they are actually whores: that global hybrid between a whore and a Barbie. The other half are what most women have always been, pathetic wives waiting for their husband's death. Flora does not belong to either of these categories; she is a different, rarer breed, our breed, which is why I like her company, you understand?" As he was saying this, he shook him by the arm. "Look at the young Flora. Do you know what it is that has saved her entering either of these categories? The fact that she could almost have become a junkie, which she is not aware of. She is not in a hurry to do anything, she takes nothing for granted, she is still curious, and though a full woman in her twenties, she is still a 'young girl'. You cannot buy her at any price. And that's her redeeming quality. Now look at your own Maria. What is she? A half-witted Barbie, like all the others. It's true and you know it and don't

make faces. It's just near you – and near us – she has been changing little by little, not dramatically, but she has made a few steps forward. If she stays near you long enough, if she learns something from you, she may become a different person. Perhaps marriage is not her ultimate goal in life. She is receptive, she'll manage to do something. All women would be different if they could cut off ties from their fucking mothers and television.” He snapped, as if he was talking to himself, while the veins in his throat had stood out and he had gone red in the face. He paused a little to calm down, but it was obvious he had more to say. Panagis did not interrupt him. “Look around you,” he went on, “look at these people over there, how they are dashing to grab the chair lest somebody else should sit on it. Bastards! Look at them, they are encroaching on public space. For them public space does not exist. Nobody has ever taught them to respect the citizens' public space. All they know is how to grab, steal and cheat. Look at their silly gold chains, their podgy children, their hysterical wives, their little madams of daughters. Now tell me frankly, how can one escape from this long drawn-out inferno of the fucking petit bourgeoisie who, having gone to build their silly apartment, exclaim: “Thank God, now I can settle down”. As if they were convicts who had just been spared the death penalty.”

“They go on holiday, neither to rest, nor to take a break from the daily routine, but to do the same as before and even worse. Just look at them closely ...over there... -as Panagis did not seem to understand who his friend was referring to, he continued pointing rudely- ... yes, it's about that large group, they are here on vacation. Well, do you want me to tell you what they are talking about with so much excitement at this very moment? It's what they are talking about all the time: what they will eat, where they will eat, when they will eat. How old are these people, do you think? Thirty, thirty-five? Say forty, at most. Look at them; they are already dead, they simply don't know it. Besides they go on holiday because –you know why, let's not talk about such nonsense, it's not the issue.” He looked at him in the eye with affection and broke off with his rhetoric.

Panagis was not in a hurry to answer back. He was well aware that this indeed was not their topic. He calmly placed an order for both of them with the hopeless and bored girl who came to serve them, and paused for a while. He enjoyed listening to Sanidopoulos talking, even when angry, as he was now. In this reserved man, in this frail body rested the soul of a warrior. Indeed, he was a fighter in his own way. He didn't like to lecture or admonish, as for example, Mr. Bogas did. His element was the battlefield. If his argument was not disputed, if he was not irritated, he might keep quiet, but if he felt a blow coming, attacking his tried convictions, his face would contort and he would be left speechless. Then Benjamin would pounce on his opponent like a panther and tear him to pieces, making him look deplorable and ridiculous. And he did that with incredible force, with unimaginable poetry while at the same time developing his thought (as when, the other day, he gave an account of an old accident he had had on Poseidon Avenue). That was the state he was in now. Anyway, Panagis could not disagree with what he said. What could he say? He was more or less of the same opinion. As for Flora's native land, well, it was unique and so was she.

On the other hand, Panagis was thinking that half and more than half of Greece was basically like Flora's native land. Simply, one couldn't see it so clearly. He believed that if, for instance, there were enterprising co-operatives everywhere like the one here, if television remained turned off, like it did here, if people took an active part in local affairs, like they did here, one might probably discover that people had an equally dynamic stance about things. Besides it is well known that the Greeks have always managed to rise to the occasion in times of a crisis –at least in words as, for example, every time a war broke out as a result of American intervention-. All was not lost, then. On the contrary, he believed that Greece has not quite “sunk into this fucking consumerist bog” as his friend constantly claimed. Quite the opposite. The Greeks had a highly developed political instinct; Panagis believed that, but he couldn't explain it convincingly, though he was able to convey it to Sanidopoulos in one way or another. He went on to add:

“But Ben, something more is happening here, correct me if I'm wrong. I'll say it following my train of thought: these guys are alright but, well ... they seem to me to be like Soviet citizens, that is, they allow themselves to be ruled by somebody or other, as, for example, by Flora. I have a feeling, correct me again, they behave like sheep. Or if they are not sheep, they place too much faith in those who make the decisions before them for them. I mainly mean Flora and those strange, silent guys, her people, her guard, I would say. It's as if the residents have authorised them to make all sorts of decisions on their behalf. You may ask: “Where have you seen this?” I don't know. Everywhere. Here is an example: did you notice at the Co-operative the other day how her whole crowd were up in arms when that young man put a question to poor Bogas about those junta torturers Wells and Mallios? The rest of them just clapped their hands as if they had taken their cue from an animator in a television show.”

Panagis felt relieved. He had finally uttered some simple truths even if indirectly. In his effort to be cautious he had perhaps given the impression of being unfair towards the locals but in the end that was the only way to plant the seeds of suspicion in his friend's mind about the whole situation.

"Okay, but you're overreacting now" Sanidopoulos hastened to answer. "I remember very well what happened at the Co-operative. Why, weren't we glad when they got that son of a bitch, Mallios? And you yourself, didn't you use to tell me all the time: "Won't 17th November rid us of that shitty?" I don't now remember who it was. And that wasn't just once or twice, you said it many times. Is that what is bothering you? Big deal! These people here, do you know what they have been through? They haven't had a moment's peace. I'm not talking about old times either. You can see what condition their island is in still; in the year 2000; damn it; they still haven't got a decent hospital. You saw what happened with the fire. The whole place nearly burnt down. They were just lucky. These people are deserted by the mainland. But can they live on tourism? And what tourism, hardly two months. Why shouldn't they, then, support 17 November? On whose side do you want them to be? On that of the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece?"

Before Panagis had time to refute him with the right arguments, a convoy appeared, those three monstrous cars he had seen the day before in the central square, which, for a moment, distracted them. The pompous cars once again parked one behind the other on the pavement, directly in front of them, thus obstructing their view of the sea. About fifteen people got out of the cars, men, women, children, two Filipino girls, three burly characters looking like bodyguards. Sanidopoulos smiled sardonically, strangely. He was reminded of the incident of the young man with a similar hearse of a car and gave him a humorous account of it as if he had forgotten their earlier discussion. Panagis' face clouded over. The incident his friend described reinforced his worst fears about what was happening in the part of the island, which Flora seemed to control. But he did say something, in an indirect way, without revealing the full extent of his concern.

This time Sandinopoulos did not try to reassure him. "I'm not sure about anything" he replied. "But this is precisely what I like about it. Surely something is going on here, which I haven't understood yet. No they are not 'Soviets', though I more or less, see them as you do: strangely sure of themselves, strangely secure. That's the word, I feel, that describes the situation better. (Panagis was intuitively reminded of the bank cashier). Yet, let me tell you something, I like that. Between the comfortable little Greece, land of diminutives –that we were talking about the other day– (flataki, mounaki, mezedaki, brizolaki, frapedaki) and this place in which people feel, even with the authorisation that you mentioned, that they decide for their lives, I prefer the latter, no doubt".

"Be patient for a while, we'll see. As for this woman, its what I've told you already. She is not a saint, I'm no fool. But she's alive, she thinks with her body. That's what intrigues me, how else can I tell you? I have a need for it and you can't find it anymore. Its like old dry wine, which, however, warms the body. I need it, let me be, my boy, you'll see, do you take me for a fool? Whatever you see, I see too. Simply, I'm not in a hurry. I'm being patient. I'm on holiday – after so many years, I don't even know how many. And that's thanks to you. How long are we going to stay here? Another ten days? How long can this affair last? That long? Patience then. I'm not a child. Obviously, I'm also looking for something. I'll find it, never fear. Give me a chance, just a little more time; that's all I'm asking from you, you'll see".

He spoke with such self-confidence, such certainty, with his eyes fixed on his friend; all that – and less the logic of his sayings – was temporarily reassuring to Panagis. He himself had a need to tell him a lot more, but he couldn't. He was a practical man. Words had not come out because deeds had not "come out" yet. He ought first to take action as he had worked it out, and then the deeds would speak for themselves.

"Come on, friend, to truth and beauty," Sandinopoulos cheerfully said as they clinked their glass of raki, letting their eyes wander, with justified disgust, towards the flashy metal that blocked the view to the life-giving sea.