

Fragment of the novel Valleys of Fear (2019)

CHAPTER TEN

In imaginary time

According to the first and fundamental argument that supports and justifies all the others, the freedom that someone seeks when the chain around his neck threatens to choke him is linked to the imagination that plays the role of light in the darkness. From the flights of the imagination, its possessor discovers, in the midst of brutal necessity, his ability to be free.

And to return to the case at hand, his grandson Stefanos allows the pragmatist objector to counter-propose to the freedom that nestles in the psychic depths of the chained prisoner convenient and effective practices and the cost-efficiency they deliver, and maybe other advantages or affordances, however paltry.

6. (pp. 301-317)

With these thoughts, which gave him a respite, he escaped his calculations and felt Rexha beside him. Wasn't that how he himself had met her, years ago? Before that, of course, there had been the unexpected acquaintance with Samir, in one of the second-year lectures on applied physics that they were taking at Cambridge. At that time, finding a true friend among your fellow students was the most incredible gift of fortune, like the single chance of winning the lottery that an establishment of suspicion and cynicism withheld from you.

Because in fact, for years now, most people had stopped wishing for unexpected encounters, nor were there any efforts made to fulfill such wishes. The law that prohibited procreation was also to blame, poisoning the atmosphere to an extent that had been unimaginable before it was passed. Very quickly after the edict went into effect, everyone became weighty and ponderous as if someone had given them a seriousness pill or as if they had been dressed in gowns hung on boards on their backs, obliged to stand for hours straightened on them, unsmiling and silent. In particular, the directive not to break out in giggles that would make them look ridiculous was the strictest. No one spoke to anybody, unless there had first been a mediating SMS on messenger or message on Gmail or Yahoo, etc. Anyone who asked for direct, live communication was derided, while in fact he provoked suspicions about his motives and had to be decisively and discreetly isolated. Direct communication indeed! Ever since the members of the old Islamic State hadn't hesitated to slaughter and behead with their own hands at every opportunity, direct communication with any aspiring friends from the same or the opposite camp was considered a sure way of getting involved in deadly and death-dealing troubles.

In the dejection caused by the fear of others, as if the others were wild beasts dropped into the valleys of megalopolises and small settlements, Stefanos spoke for the first time to Samir, one day when they happened to be sitting next to each other in the central

lecture hall. He was puzzled that he did not have his mobile phone next to his notes, and the ancient watch he wore on his left wrist had hands and Arabic numerals, a souvenir from the age of the third industrial revolution. Then it was natural for the thought to occur to him that the watch of his neighbor was a talisman from a place in all likelihood very far from cold-blooded Britain. He was the first to ask him where he was from, and Samir at first pretended he had not heard him. The third time he turned and told him that he had been born in northern Syria, but had lived almost all his life in Greece, close to Greeks who had raised him and his sister.

«And your sister?» Stefanos asked him, «is she a student, too?»

The Syrian from Greece bent down and wrote, on a sheet of paper that he tore from his notebook, that he couldn't talk during the lecture. Stefanos returned the paper suggesting that they meet in the College cafeteria immediately afterwards. His neighbor kept the paper for a long time without replying. Then he turned and looked at him, and when he noticed that Stefanos also didn't have a mobile phone beside his notes, and didn't wear a watch, he introduced himself:

«Samir Hasan».

«Stefanos Hoping, junior».

In the cafeteria, they did not ask each other personal questions. They were content to discuss issues related to what the professor of astrophysics had said in his lecture. From then on, a common impulse brought them to discover whether perhaps what was happening on Earth was analogous to what had happened or was happening in distant areas of the universe that had not temporarily lost their balance and descended in short order into catastrophe. How temporarily it was impossible to say, maybe for ten or for twenty light years, but that, instead of discouraging them, excited them, because unlike Earth, where *an hour can be a lake, a day, an ocean, a night, eternity*ⁱ, in space, which has none of the earth's resistance and is inert, a light year can be as long as a century, a day or just a moment, equal to the duration of a centenarian and now stationary.ⁱⁱ

It did not take them long to realize that what they were looking for was actually to learn from their science if there was any hope that Earth might find a new balance in place of the one she had lost, wasting her energy reserves on wars; wars justified by the petroleum demanded by the use of private cars, one for everyone in all five corners of the planet, or with the pretext of the information that its production and immediate distribution required huge internet centres equipped with the most powerful magnetic radiation antennas in inexcusable numbers and sizes, set up on every square block and every farmer's field. Even though the cars for the most part ran on electricity and all information on broadband, the wars not only did not stop, but paused momentarily only to expand into one more area of the planet. The Near and Middle East had become a universal slaughtering ground, much more famous than the onetime international music festival of Bayreuth, which from its beginning, in the heart of the summer heat wave that was slowly roasting Europe, had never lost much in formality, if not in fame, for more or less a century now.

Often it happened that they discussed with Samir the misinterpretation that for centuries the warmongers had given to the Heraclitean «war is the father of all things». The only necessity that caused wars, stripped of the pretexts that justified them, was the need of

those that provoked them to maintain or expand their power. That was why, a century now since the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the constant perfection of weapons systems, wars resembled games like chess, with the prize being control of the redistribution of wealth and resources and the exclusion of the losers from the sharing of the loot, which forced them to prepare for the next fatal round of the game.

i Joseph Roth, *The Radetsky March*, Granta Books, 2003. Greek transl. Maria Angelidou, Agra, 2009.
ii Paul Virilio, *The Open Sky*, Verso, 1997.