



Shipwrights

The Review of De-centered English

www.shipwrightsreview.com

Life is a Bum Story

By Belica Kubarelli

Had it been a birthday party? He couldn't remember. Regardless, he had been testing his new camera. His three girls had emptied their closets, put on different frocks for his sake, assumed poses full of grace and coquetry. Soon the novelty wore off and they looked at him in exasperation. They sat on the sofa; three sulky faces denied him. With his eye stuck on the camera, he accused them of disrespecting art. He saw his wife and mother exchange glances; then they whispered something to his daughter. Out of the blue, they turned their backs to him, kneeled on the sofa, pulled off their knickers and wiggled their bums. Click!

He'd enlarged the photo with their bums and hung it in his study. Upon entering the room to correct his students' papers, no matter how tired he was, Ourania's childish unshaped bum, Maro's curved and taut and his mother's saggy one, seemed as if they were still moving mockingly. One glance at the photo made his day and he got down to work with a smile.

"Kardia mou, life is a bum story," his wife used to say.

"Is our marriage a bum story too?" he'd ask, afraid she'd say 'yes'.

"Boredom is a serious disease," Maro would reply and leave the study.

He would be left gaping at the closed door, before managing to answer, "there's no way to contract it, we are immune," always annoyed at himself for his inability to catch up with the speed of her humour.

Now stuck at the bottom of the marble church steps, Lefteris strained his head and saw feet emerging from the dimness within: feet in black patent leather shoes, black trousers and black jackets over white shirts. Penguins. A black oblong box balanced on their shoulders. Before he could grasp the picture, six more penguins appeared carrying a second box of rosewood—his mother's favourite. What were these oblong boxes for? Why did the first one have silver handles and the second gold? He heard sounds of metalwork, unstrung violins, jungle drums, a bedlam in his mind, giant pincers squeezing his temples; he held his head to quench the panic.

Lefteris turned his attention to his own feet. They were treading on the red carpet in a faltering manner. *Am I drunk? – I must be, or else . . .*

When the first oblong box reached the end of the stairs, the second was in the middle and then a third white one materialised at the church gate. Three boys and three girls

carried it on their childish shoulders, all dressed in school uniforms and caps, their faces swollen from tears. The kids paused as if waiting for something. The velvet purple curtains of the church created a background that gave the third box a blinding whiteness.

Somebody must have given the kids the signal to move again. Lfteris watched as the three coffins reached the church courtyard. He saw that they were covered with funeral wreaths and colourful bouquets. No, wrong. The first two had colourful bouquets, the third only white wreaths.

The procession with the coffins left the church courtyard slowly. An old couple approached him and took him by the arms. Lfteris felt like a marionette. He looked at them. Strangers. To his left was a tall man with a pale wrinkled face and a runny nose, and to his right an old woman with curly hair, puffy eyes and a faint moustache on her upper lip. They took a step forward, forcing him to do the same, following the coffins and the priests.

Every now and then they paused. Lfteris thought that one of the bearers was constantly stepping on his shoe-laces and had to kneel to tie them again and again, while the others struggled to balance the tilting coffin. He was sure that the shoe-laces belonged to one of the penguins who carried the large ones. For an inexplicable reason he ruled out the idea that one of the crying kids carrying the white coffin would ever stop to tie a shoe-lace.

“Good God, they are photographing us!” he said, and the two strangers tightened their grip to silence him.

They crisscrossed numerous paths while the psalms drilled into his ears and the incense nauseated him, before reaching a huge, deep pit. Lfteris bent his head to peer into its depths: bottomless. On both sides there were two mounds of fresh soil. He saw four men with lowered heads holding spades. He scanned the area to find his girls. Wrong. His girls were not escorting him this time.

“This is a mistake! Wrong! Everything is wrong! Stop!” he cried and started kicking at the heaps of soil. Somebody grabbed him under the arms, as if he were an empty coat. Lfteris turned and punched him.

“This is a bum story!” he shouted, laughing hysterically. “I am telling you there is some mistake here!” He kept shouting and kicking the air.

Two more men jumped at him and held him down. He was writhing as if having an epileptic fit. The men fought hard to hold him tight. The old moustached woman approached them. With a stony face she opened Lfteris’ mouth and pushed a pill in, pressing his lips together and ordering him to gulp it down. “My daughter wanted you to be happy,” she murmured, while the tall old man rearranged his tie. Lfteris felt these strangers were accusing him of something he couldn’t identify. The priest waited until he calmed down to resume the liturgy. “Kyrie eleison. God have mercy on us.”

Lfteris barked: “Your God is a mother-fucker” and turned his back on the abysmal pit. In his mind, this was the easiest way to fall in. He recalled a memory of Ourania, who used to fall with a jump onto her parents’ bed. He’d hold her tiny palm in his, a fragile soft hand abandoned with complete trust. They both waited for Maro’s order: “Jump!”

A feathery touch on his cheek, a sudden breeze cooled his feverish skin. “Softly, Mother, softly,” he mumbled.

Happiness is timeless. Time started ticking for Lefteris once darkness came, with a triple funeral. First he saw his nine-year-old daughter's coffin, second his thirty-six-year-old wife's, and third his sixty-two-year-old mother's coffin descending somewhere into the darkness of an inconceivable abyss. It seemed that his wife squashed his child and his mother planted herself on the two of them, marking her territory. He saw his three women being eaten up by the soil then, when time started ticking.

He had seen them nodding approvingly, for he had managed to buy a family grave and three coffins in no time. The funeral manager had been so obliging. "Please, sign these papers, here and here, yes, triple signature please, now we are ready. The rest is our job, don't worry."

"What is left to worry about?" Lefteris had asked, and the man had gaped.

Once he had left the funeral office, the manager said to his employees: "We were so lucky. Only the offices on the National roads get triple funerals. And he didn't even ask for a discount!"

Lefteris hadn't fallen in love with Maro. Or at least this is what he'd believed. For nine years he hadn't felt any paternal instinct. He'd caressed Ourania like a visitor. Now he missed her. He missed the father who had an adorable daughter. He hadn't liked his own mother either. Before his marriage she had baited him with the words, 'I, who gave you my life, I am the best mother in the world. Once I am gone you will understand.' Now she was gone. Lefteris understood.

Orphaned, he listened to a weak voice in his head, a childish unnerved voice whimpering in the darkness, "Mummy, Mummy," but Mummy was lost in the black woodlands.

He made an effort to think coherently. He had to make sure that what he saw was what had happened. Was the one coffin over the other? All he could see was a fraction: . Somebody had stolen three quarters of his life—of his nature. Lefteris was looted, abandoned, one single quarter, saying goodbye to his completeness, to the disappearing three quarters of his existence. Not a single tear. No tears, no comprehension. Had he realised what had happened, he would have dropped dead instantly.

He found some soil in his palm. Not knowing what to do with it, he ate it. *Soil, boil, spoil*. He wished for more, but no. What a pity. The soil was tasty. It had the taste of his women. A taste of spice, his lovely sexy Maro; he adored a woman with black eyes and hard breasts, same as her bum; a woman who gave him her fever. A taste of milk and bananas: Ourania, his daughter. He always felt like biting the little girl but pretended he didn't care. He was shy and hesitant to show his affection, yet there was something else, something obscure and thus more dreadful. Lefteris had feared that if he ever admitted his astonishment about this little girl, this masterpiece which grew up in front of his very eyes day by day, he would have had to admit that without Maro, he was half, since without Maro, no Ourania would have come into his life. With this thought he felt envy suffocating him, for he would never possess the feminine power to give birth.

The third taste in the soil he ate: his mother, Mrs. Demetra. Thick cucumber soup in midsummer; unexpected, like the watermelon in the bowl she would leave on his bedside-table, inside a larger bowl with ice, to keep it cool until Lefteris would wake up from his siesta; a consolation for the heavy perspiration which made him dislike his hairy male body.

Three women, three tastes, six hands, six legs, three mouths, six eyes, three noses, six ears, three sexes: his mother's had given birth to him, his wife's had taught him what life was, his daughter's that life would continue forever.

“When you are nervous, count.”

“Why?”

“Because, my son, numbers never get nervous. When you start counting you relax your mind.”

He was counting. As long as the funeral lasted he was counting. One hundred and twenty-seven kids with twenty-four teachers—eighteen women, six men. Too few teachers for so many pupils, Lefteris decided. They all offered him their condolences. The texture of the adults' hands was so rough and cool compared to the children's chubby softness. Then his colleagues: five from the high school and seventy-two from the classes, out of which fifty-three were women and twenty-nine men; a total of one hundred and fifty-four people. Luckily they hadn't brought any children. But are they all married? Lefteris wondered. But he had nobody to discuss it with. Besides, he had no tongue left in his mouth. His women, his own flesh and blood, had been submerged underground. Or was it under his skin? Hadn't he just eaten their soil?

Inconceivable 'ifs' howled in his mind: if he hadn't given Maro the car. What's that nonsense? The car had been bought for Maro; he had hardly used it, as he'd preferred his motorbike to manage high school and tutorials. If his mother hadn't suggested to his wife to go to Sounio and pick wild berries. Why shouldn't they have gone? They were always making their homemade jams with wild berries. If they hadn't taken the child with them. But why should they have left Ourania behind? Why shouldn't she enjoy a day out of Athens?

If the lorry hadn't entered the opposite lane. How could it not since a tyre had burst? An empty lorry had had a blowout in the middle of the road. The driver had just unloaded the cargo and accelerated. He was listening to music—the radio was still on. Brains scattered across the burnt dashboard. Fire dancing to the music.

“Thank God it was not carrying gas or petrol,” said the cop.

“Thank God for whom?” Lefteris had asked, and the cop had shuddered.

Maro's car had been stuck under the lorry. The flames had reached the whole truck. The police said it would have taken days to find out what Lefteris found out the moment he stepped into his house, called “Maro! Mother!” got no answer and turned on the TV to watch the news.

The cameraman had been very good: he'd zoomed in and Lefteris read the registration number. The black paint was intact—“So that's why they are so expensive, these registration numbers,” Lefteris had said, addressing nothingness.

He had stood up, put on his jacket and gone to the Police Station, where he declared that “the charred corpses” (he copied the reporter's words, for he had no others) were his women.

What if somebody had stolen their car while the women were picking berries, while Ourania was running in the meadows with their dog? But how could that have happened? His mother was always alerting his wife. So, now Ourania's 'if' became crucial. If she had been playing with the keys, instead of chasing the dog, if the keys had fallen into a

bed of nettles, none of them would have attempted to search for them, so they wouldn't have been in the car.

If he had checked the oil in the car, they might not have been set alight. Perhaps the lorry had had the same problem. If there had been no fire, there might have been something left for Lefteris to see on the mortuary slab. Some fingers maybe? Out of how many? Yes. Thirty. Thirty-fingered women.

He was forced to stare at charred, unidentified remains, to accept the fact that these strange charred things were his girls. The image was appalling and unconvincing. And so his three women remained intact in his mind, intact as the moment he left them early in the morning.

His mother in her dressing-gown had served him a coffee. Maro had been brushing her teeth half naked. The bathroom's partly open door had given him a glimpse of her bum. He'd seen a hole at the side of her knickers. Such a sexy bum, I must give her money to buy silk underwear, Lefteris had thought and felt the hint of an erection. Ourania had jumped at him in her pajamas asking for cuddles. She'd nestled herself in his arms, purring like a cat. Lefteris had stroked her hair for an instant. The child had left him to drink her milk, as ordered by her Giagia.

Lefteris had seen exactly half of Maro's bum, his mother's chubby shoulder blades and Ourania's black hair while drinking the last sip of his coffee. He'd clicked his tongue as if something were left to be said, either by him or by them, but it had been a perfectly serene morning, so nothing had been said, or at least nothing memorable to hold on to now.

He'd left home already feeling bored and fatigued by the thought of the teaching hours ahead; on the way, he had been thinking of the conversation he had had the night before with Maro in their bedroom.

"Lefteris, I want us, only you and me to—let's leave for the weekend. I've missed us. I miss you—"

He had given her a rough almost vulgar laugh, although he'd known what Maro meant. They hadn't had time for the two of them with his endless tutorials. "You miss me?"

"Lefteris, agapi mou ... we've become a real married couple, I don't like it. I will end up leaving you."

And then she'd left him. For good. Without explanations, without a word. And they had never had her desired weekend tête-à-tête. And she had taken his daughter with her. And she had taken his mother as well. Now his three girls were having their own clandestine holidays without him. They had denied him. He had lost them.

Lefteris started counting again. But the 'ifs' popped up once more. If the child, or Maro, or his mother had been sick, they wouldn't have gone on that damned berry picking expedition; if it had been raining he would have used the car; if he had taken Maro's words seriously, they would have stayed home to pack for the weekend; if they had had visitors; if, if, if...

But it had happened. It happens. It's happening. It's done. It will be done. The cursed 'if' had occurred and he was left prey to nothingness, a victim of useless grammatical predictability, a dead quarter, mathematically unbalanced, redundant, whilst the other

three quarters of his existence had already disintegrated into a fact which happened. It's done, it's finished – a grammatical perfect you deny but cannot refuse.

Thanatos took his toll without explaining why he did what he did. Thanatos has no mouth to talk. Thanatos has no obligation to explain. Thanatos is death, brother of Hypnos; that's why Maro had hated sleep and called it "a death rehearsal." Now he understood her words, now that Thanatos was laughing at him, his chaotic mouth devouring love.

The old couple took him home. The old man undressed him and put him to bed. The moustached woman came in and kissed him on the forehead. They both promised they'd come again tomorrow.

Lefteris waited until he heard the door close. Then he got up, went into his study, took down the picture with the three bums, banged it on his desk, took a shard of glass, and severed his jugular with a smile.