

“ALEXANDROS”

“I’ll remember *his* name all right,” Ethel thinks as her airplane leaves behind the northern coast of Scotland. “Alexandros.” Nice. The accent on the *e*. Classic, but not pompous or obscure. (“Do they still use names like ‘Zeus’ or ‘Iamblichos’ in that crazy country?” she wonders. Probably.) “Alexandros.” After the first boy who wanted to conquer the world.

Ethel knows what “Alexandros” means in Greek. “The man who will shield me from all men.” Forever. With a little luck. And help from her left ovary and foreign guests. She will know soon. “Look at the ocean. Relax. Skip the after-dinner drink. Take a nap.”

Ethel has not always remembered the names of her lovers. “Benjamin Yamada” she remembers, of course. He was the boy who held her hand when her father died, then went on to become her first boyfriend, first lover, her first dumpjob and guilt trip. Forget that name, dammit. Never look it up again. He’s gone. (For the past six years he’s been living in Cincinnati, with an unlisted phone number. Surfs the Net, beginner level. Even uses her stuff occasionally.) “No need to feel guilty, he’s probably happier than I am,” she thinks. Forget him, he’ll hurt you like the others if you give him another chance. You can’t look back in this game. Next!

“Andrew Leitman” comes to mind next. But again, she has good reason for remembering. He was her first boss at Exegesis, back when the company was still Webus Inc. Soon to become her lover, her mentor. Then her tormentor, her corporate nemesis. Next, after patient months of maneuvering, her equal and close collaborator. Then her lover once more (“once” here is numerically accurate, even a bit of an exaggeration). And finally, the summer of ’99, Andy became her victim: humiliated, defeated, decapitated, purged from the

company, Andy hasn't been heard from since. This must be Greenland, right?

But, for instance, what was the name of her Viking, her boyfriend during junior year at Santa Cruz? She remembers his running shoes, his favorite poet, his pubic hair (grey New Balance, Guillaume Apollinaire, blond). But his name? And how about the black guy she met at Helen and Ralph's party? Or the nerd from Berkeley with the covert violent streak? Blank.

What Ethel does remember are the names of everybody she desired and never had. Summer crushes, her college math professor ("Dr. Christopher L. Bates"), the shy genius in the programming class ("Tommy Ng"), the others—every single painful one of them, their names, their faces, their eyes squeezing her neurons, never letting go. Nor can she forget the ones whose names she never knew but wanted nevertheless. Like the man who walked into the Palo Alto restaurant the night she was dining there alone. Short, slender, business suit, no cheeks, huge eyes staring at her with unabashed fire. She never looked at him—but did so in an equally fiery way. He ordered the exact same things she did, from appetizer to dessert wine. The whole restaurant was hot, diners were breathing heavily, waiters wiping sweat from their eyebrows watching them. She was delirious. He paid and left, still staring. No chance to forget *his* name.

Ethel's work is about making sense out of the chaos of the Net. And she has the relatively rare gift—not that it ever helps—of applying her skill to herself. For example, she knows that her love life is two-dimensional, she has long ago identified the only two axes that really count: abandonment and change. Pain and evolution. Father and mother. It's almost boring once you think of it.

When her father died, Ethel had almost anticipated her mother's words: "Everything will be like before, my love, you'll see." Because Dorothy "Iron Lady" Young, once described as "the only true conservative

in Congress,” has always loathed change. (No wonder she’s becoming immensely popular in a world traumatized by algorithm-driven, paradigm-toppling, consciousness-numbing change.) Ethel had cried silently in her mother’s arms, horrified by the promise of continuity. Because it debased the decency of her loss and threatened the only consolation that it contained.

Abandonment has punctuated Ethel’s life. Painfully and densely. “All my important men have left me,” Ethel thinks. Not a tragic, self-pitying statement, just a circular construction: As Ethel knows well from her work—from the Net—a statement is not only a declaration of fact, but also a definition of its own terms. “Good guys die young.” “Fit organisms survive.” “Important lovers leave us, father first.” How can you argue with that?

It was almost two years ago, in the wake of yet another dump, that Ethel met Sola. She found her at the Colony—where those who love fantasy fantasize about love. Beautiful, mysterious, exotic, brilliant Sola. “Sola, Sola, Sola, where are you now?” During their blissful sprees together, she had fulfilled her as nobody ever had, and in those endless hours and days in between, Ethel had felt an unbearable loneliness—of a new kind. Not the loneliness between relationships, not the loneliness *in* a relationship, but intense, mind-numbing loneliness while waiting for the next date, the next game.

Suddenly Ethel knew that this love affair, strange and intense and all-consuming, and yet inherently incomplete, was a dead end threatening her very survival. But leaving Sola was not easy. Not until she met the real-life Sola.

Eerie resemblance. Stanford student, Spanish literature. (“Peninsular literature, amor, not Spanish. Big difference. You lose García and Borges and Onetti, and a few poets I suppose, but you get a three-year scholarship from the Queen.”) Part-time model, she claims. And part-time call girl, she confessed once. And full-time liar, Ethel knows. But Ethel never double-checks her on the

Net. Sola has total control. Even though, at twenty-six, she is more than a decade younger than Ethel.

Sudden and total bliss. Imagine, a sexy, fascinating lover with whom you can giggle in restrooms. True love. Sola moves in. Then out, then in again. True humiliation, true pain. True love. Shopping in San Francisco, the bed-and-breakfast in Point Reyes, the weekend in Mexico. Lies. Sola flies home for the spring break. (“The boys in Madrid are sooo boring, amor, and the girls sooo uptight. Sure I’ll come back.”) Weeks go by, no sign of Sola. Then the telephone call. (“I have been thinking, Ethel, need to think some more. And serious work at school, amor, serious.”)

During her worst mourning period ever, Ethel thought about death. And then she thought her plan.

Not a plan, really. No subgoals, no algorithm. A fantasy. She would spend the second half of June on a Greek island. Carefully timed. Burn some stock. Meet a Greek God. At least a reasonably smart, healthy, passably good-looking man—and bear his daughter. That was her plan.

She had been warned by “The Bad Girl’s Guide to the Greek Isles” (www.astro.cam.ac.uk/saraht/guide/, abysmal Exegesis rating) that Greek men are (a) no longer Gods, and (b) nonexistent in the islands. Except for old fishermen, gay playboys, and the *kamakia*, the professional lovers referred to by the Greek word for *harpoon*, so rough and naive about everything, especially Disease. Apparently she had to choose between German men in Crete, French and Dutch in Paros, Scandinavians in Rhodos, Austrians and Israelis in Ios, Americans in Santorini, Englishmen and Italians in Corfu. (No men in Lesbos. No straight men in Mykonos.) She chose Corfu.

Convenient flight, beautiful island, charming dilapidated hotel in the old town (homepage in the weirdest English). Easy lifestyle, no overhead, you fit right in from day one. A bus to the beach around noon, swimming, sunbathing, late lunch. Late afternoon bus back

to town, long siesta, then out at ten. (Ten! At ten, Palo Alto waiters are yawning as they lock up.) A drink, dinner, a stroll through town, dancing, coffee, another stroll, more dancing. You can score hashish in some bars—they say there is also coke—but why bother; the island is a continuous high. You only drink at the more expensive bars, the others can give you a weeklong hangover with nasty bootleg. Back to bed in the three-bit morning hours, sleep or whatever until noon, back to the beach. And so on. Compare today's date with your return ticket once in a while.

At night the town radiates with a strange glow that comes from white cotton cloth on seriously suntanned flesh. Eyes seek eyes all the time, admiring, contemplating, flirting, proposing, teasing, daring. At first you are embarrassed to death, then you have a drink and try it yourself, then you can't stop. Your eyes seek eyes all the time. Couples in love (almost always straight on this island) hold hands or cross arms, their eyes also seeking eyes everywhere. All the time. The second day you feel you recognize everyone, thousands of them. You can spot the newcomers.

Alexandros was not a newcomer. Ethel had noticed him the previous night, medium tall, slim, mid-fifties, long white hair, white beard. Dark skin, a Hindu guru. Clever little eyes. Brown. A grand master of the eyes game. He had stared her down, had made her lose her breath, her step. Deep and wide red scars in the small visible parts of both cheeks, the left much larger than the other, probably extending all the way to the chin under the beard—a souvenir from the colonels' dictatorship in the early seventies, she would find out. Now sitting with a teenage girl at the next table in the outdoor café, occasionally holding hands, talking very fast in the language she could already recognize as Greek. A Humbert Humbert and his nymphette, Ethel thinks.

But wait . . . isn't the eroticism between them strictly paternal? The kind she missed in her own adolescence, the kind she'd jealously spied in her friends'

homes? Suddenly, eye contact. No retreat now. “Pleased to meet you, Ethel. This is my daughter Aloé.” The same paternal eroticism flows from Alexandros’s eyes to Ethel’s eyes, spine, pelvis. Together with curiosity, an almost boyish fascination, and a hint of shyness. Serious and playful at the same time, eyes you want to look into, eyes you want to trust. Ethel melts.

They drink more coffee. People here drink coffee in the early morning hours, and there is not a decaffeinated bean on the whole island. Ethel studies Alexandros. How singular, she thinks. A real-life Greek god, unfortunately of the Zeus variety—her fantasy had been more along the lines of Apollo. And his English is funny. Beneath the unapologetic Greek accent, you discern a strange combination of lyricism, roughness, and scientific precision. He volunteers that he has learned English by reading Marxist texts in English translations and listening to rock music. Curl up with Gramsci and Lukács, then relax with the Sex Pistols. “We are going back to Athens on the early morning flight,” he surprises her. Aloé is looking at Ethel attentively, studying her reaction. Somehow Ethel is not devastated by the setback. Alexandros kisses her goodbye, a butterfly kiss on the lips, Aloé kisses her the same way. Beautiful child, Ethel thinks. Goodbye, Alexandros.

She goes to bed happy but resists sleep, seeking the roots of her strange euphoria. Is it because this encounter, both erotic and chaste, is not going anywhere? Is this her rational side feeling relieved? Despite a promising start, she is not, after all, making progress in her plan, so impulsive, so irrational. Or is it that she has just met Rusty again—her name for her father—after twentysomething years? Or maybe her fuzzy vision of a child was suddenly bound to the image of Aloé?

The next morning, she wakes up knowing the source of last night’s euphoria. She runs to the café. Alexandros is waiting there, at the same table, beaming smile, burning little eyes. “You didn’t leave!” she cries. But she had known.

They hug, they kiss. “Aloé flew back alone to her mother,” he explains. “She did not mind at all, I assure you.” They swim, they talk. An archeologist, specializing in the technology of the ancient Greeks. His studies in France were cut short by the dictatorship. More accurately, by an order from what he calls “the Movement” to come back to Greece and work underground. Prison, torture, “the most creative face-lift in the whole cell block,” he laughs. Ethel wants to kiss his scar.

It is three in the afternoon when they take the bus to town. Without asking her, without discussing it, as if he were following, hypnotized, the steps of an ancient ritual, he picks up his suitcase from his hotel and brings it to her room. She tries to talk Disease with him, but he doesn’t seem to understand. She tries again. “You wouldn’t cause me to get sick and die, would you?” He looks into her eyes, caresses her cheek. “No, little sister, I would never hurt you.” He is almost in tears. She kisses him, realizing that she trusts this man as she has trusted no one else. This both fascinates her and bothers her.

He’s slow and sweet, and yet intense, a man whose life is hanging in the balance. She’s close to coming when he stutters something improbable, something like “I am embarrassed I forgot to ask you earlier, but are you doing anything about the overpopulation problem?” Dizzy, somewhere else, she translates, she laughs. “Don’t worry, I’ll send you a picture.” He smiles, relieved. “No, seriously,” she thinks. For a moment she feels a stab of guilt, then they kiss, and it is over. Nice.

They smoke. “This was not the first time I made love with you,” he says slowly. “I first made love with you in my fantasy, last night.” She translates. Can he mean that? He does mean that! Touched by Alexandros’s openness, guilty again, Ethel kisses his right hand.

They talk about his name. “Andros” is Greek for man, he says, and the prefix “alex” signifies resistance, protection, cancellation of effects. Like “anti” in “anti-theft,” like “proof” in “waterproof” and “runnerproof.”

“Alexandros” is a great warrior, someone who can resist every man’s attack.

“The man who will shield me from all men, forever,”

Ethel secretly reinterprets. Mainly to tease him and show off, she doublechecks it on the Net. She puts on her custom headset (fourteen gigahertz* processor, Seamless Net connection), dictates a few words. Piece of cake. She scores with a single query (strong on “alexandros,” stronger on “etymology,” negative on “history”). With her own relevance engine, www.xsearch.exegetsis.net. Only two authoritative documents, www.deadlanguages.org and www.alexandros.com, both with near-perfect Exegesis ratings, both supporting the too-good-to-be-true etymology.

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* Notes in the margin, such as the one on this page, refer the reader to a discussion in the Afterword, starting on page 245.

Alexandros is watching her, amused, impressed, interested. He asks about her work. He surfs the Net too, he says—his cheeks are now red with embarrassment beyond his scars. For his research, for obscure left-wing connections, for rock lyrics. (“They are hard to understand if you are not a native speaker of English,” he says. She lets him believe they’re easy if you are.)

And it was precisely then, as she was lying next to him in their Corfu hotel room, wearing only a tiny computer on her head, that Ethel told Alexandros about Turing.

“How on earth did I remember Turing?”