

TONIA LALOUSI

The Last Symphony

How far would you go
to reach perfection?

PROLOGUE

He opens his eyes. He finds himself lying on his back. He is surrounded by a trembling white light which fades into shadows. He slowly lifts his legs. He throws his head backwards and leans it on the ice. The skin of his head cools. It is a pleasant feeling of relief to an inflaming mind. His fair hair freezes from the microscopic crystals. He sways the lower limbs. He feels strong, capable for anything, at the same time he feels weak even for the slightest movement. He grabs his neck as if he is trying to restrict it. He shifts his weight from the waist to his knees. He falls forward. The fingers of his hands touch his overall, sleeveless, red tracksuit. He feels cold. He opens and closes his eyelids and faces a *man*.

The *man* is dressed in the shades of ice. He is wearing a grey shirt with grey trousers and a grey gabardine with scattered laces, which are hanging like long ribbons. His hair is fair, in the color of platinum, combed in one

perfect parting. His feet are bare on the ice, transferring the temperature to his gaze. His hands are intertwined vertically. The left supports the right and the fingers of the first point to his chin. The index finger moves along the neck and stops at Adam's apple. He half-closes his eyes and looks at the young man with the red tracksuit.

He retreats. He reaches a white wall standing on his knees. He stands up. The *man* opens his gabardine, takes it off with airy movements, as if dancing in the rhythm of a melody, and keeps it spread out in front of him. He shakes it in the void and throws down the young man. Fiery flames are created around him, but instead of melting the ice, they stabilize and trap it. The young man is forced to move between them. He keeps fighting until the fire retreats.

The *man* with the gabardine brings a full-body mirror and places it in front of the young man with the red tracksuit. The visual contact of the latter with his reflection completely throws the already disturbed balance of his mind off. He visualizes himself wearing black jeans and a white shirt. The *man*, the young man, and his reflection are the same person with a different look. The gabardine rotates with mastery in the air and lands precisely on the fingers of its owner. Simultaneously, the young man begins a new battle.

He wide-spreads the legs, falls on the ice, and forms a perfectly straight line. He faces his reflection in the mirror. He himself cannot manage it. His legs try to straighten but remain several inches above the ice. A

perfect turn of the *man* around his axis makes the young man get up.

He continues his attempt. He supports his weight on the left leg and lifts up the right. He catches a glimpse of the *man*, before looking into the mirror. He raises the right leg, lowers it bending the knee, and stretches it again to the top. This balance seems impossible to be achieved in the eyes of the young man. Behind the mirror, he has begun to resign, after many unsuccessful attempts.

The gabardine rotates up, around, and under the *man's* perfect body. As the absolute ruler, he wraps it like a mantle and brings it forward, always keeping the balance and absolute control of each movement. The young man tries some turning movements with his hands while lifting his left leg high up. The answer of the reflection is repeating turns around an imaginary axis, making the shirt swirl around his waist. He fails again.

The young man in the red tracksuit falls onto the floor. He cannot achieve perfection. He cannot reach the summit. The *man* is dancing on the tips of his toes. He flies in the air, forming a solitary angle of one hundred and eighty degrees. He supports his weight on his right hand and pushes the gabardine. The young man observes him. He is waiting for him to fail, but it never happens. The *man* gets up, grabs the gabardine in the air with one hand, and smiles sardonically.

The reflection steps back. The young man holds his head and pulls his hair. He bends down. He holds his body. His mind explodes. His body freezes. It hurts. He himself

behind the mirror retreats, walking towards the white wall. The fingers are wrapped around his neck, getting ready for the end.

With a subtle movement of the fingers, the *man* indicates to the youngster the next step. The index finger aims at the full body mirror. The *man's* eyes go up and down, pushing the target to its selection. He looks at his reflection for the last time. He himself has collapsed. He is ready to surrender. He has to catch up with him. He gets up, speeds up, and falls on the mirror, breaking it off in hundreds of microscopic pieces of glass.

He goes on the opposite side and falls onto the floor. There is no ice. There is no sense of cold or hot. He meets the absolute void. A sterile white in an invisible light. He looks around him. He is searching for his reflection, but there is nobody. He lowers his eyes on him. The red tracksuit has disappeared. His body is wrapped with the grey gabardine, with the sleeves worn inside out. The right sleeve on the left hand and the left sleeve on the right one. The laces wrap his hands behind his back and throw him face down on the floor.

He turns his head to the left. He sees a shadow on the colorless wall. In the next minute, all his prior efforts are captured. He sees himself in the red uniform. He sees the perfect opening of the legs. The rotational movement of the hands with absolute accuracy. He sees one of his legs high in ideal alignment with the trunk, perpendicular to the opening of his hands. He sees that all his efforts were successful. His eyes are brimmed with tears, hurt, become heavier, until they meet the sheer darkness.

INCREASING ENTROPY

“Enough is enough, Peter!” he slaps his palm up on the desk. “Learn at last when you need to stop. You can’t hunt ghosts for an entire life!” The commander’s voice is furious. Non-negotiable.

“If you think that doing properly my job makes me a whimsical police officer, then I have no place here.” He aims with his index finger the point which his superior had slapped up earlier.

“In every case you undertake we lose precious time. While you are searching for answers to questions that have already been answered, some other people out there are in danger. I am not willing to give you another opportunity... I know how important you are to this Force, but when a case is closed and especially from the evidence that you and your colleagues have found, then you should accept it and move on.”

Peter smiles mockingly. “Every suicide is a potentially well-planned assassination, Sir. The medical expert agreed with me!” emphasizing the doctor’s specialty, in an attempt to weaken the validity of his interlocutor’s speech.

“There are other meticulous and extravagant people like you, I won’t object to that. However, there are moments you should stop.”

The commander warns him. I stand behind Peter as a silent observer. My gaze falls on the library window with the innumerable files I bet they lack archiving. My brunette figure looks weak. Maybe it's because I'm a little over 50 kilos. Maybe it's because my attitude is defensive.

“Meticulous and extravagant... You attribute correct characteristics to people who pay attention in detail and search for any potential scenarios, even the most excessive one, to discover the truth. I am glad you recognize our work, at least subconsciously, Sir...” he is clearly ironic, acknowledging the difficult position in which he is placing himself.

His opponent sighs. He straightens his body to show his superiority over the disobedient police officer. The confidence he radiates irritates him. It always irritated him.

“Apart from searching for the truth, you need to learn to accept it as well, Peter.”

My proud criminologist raises his neck. He is not going to admit that he is wrong. “I accept only what passes through the filter of my consciousness.”

The commander puts his hands deep in the front pockets of his trousers and stretches back on the heels of his shoes. "Let's hope that next time the filter of your consciousness won't appear in the form of blinders in your eyes. I don't want anything else from you. Magda, don't do the same. You may go," he concludes with another warning, and we leave his office without accepting it.

He usually treats every case with strict self-control and impartiality, however, if something comes in confrontation with his instinct, he makes us look for evidence that nearly always does not exist. Those are the moments when his ego collides with me, the commander, the - easy target - Andrew, with the Directorate of Criminological Investigations, with anyone unlucky found in front of him...

He enters the office, letting the door bang behind him. His fist finds its place on the full of moisture wall. He averts his glance from the bright light which enters generously into our square office and meets my eyes.

"What are you waiting for? To admit that you were right? Yes, OK, this time I was wrong..." he states and opens the collection with the towers of selfishness. One of those self-destructs in front of me.

He walks around the office. He seeks support on the grey wall, which is the new - unique - optical field for him. I do not approach him. I know that in such moments he needs to stay alone, to find time to regain his sovereignty. This childish, as I call it, way of reacting

makes me fall in love with him even more each and every moment. I love this irritating man who always wants to be right, who constantly seeks to be the centre of attention and admiration, who seeks perfection and truth. He is the man who needs to exercise control over everyone and everything and most of the times he succeeds.

“I should learn to accept the truth...” I hear his laughter without looking at him. This spastic, nervous laughter that covers a series of outbursts of anger from his interior. “I can’t stand him, Magda...” he puffs and blows, and I look at my watch, timing the duration of his monologue. “Of course, I also exceeded the limits this time...”

I open my eyes wide at the hearing of this acceptance. I keep being in the same ecstatic posture until he turns towards me and I hurry to arm my gaze with elements of understanding, support, and confirmation...

I am mocking him.

“Don’t look at me like that, Magda! You know very well that I’m not crazy and I don’t hunt ghosts as the other dared to support.”

The caustic attitude to power is one of the first signs that show that his temporary collapse is nearing completion. It is the best time to support my opinion. Every time the same ritual. “My love, you aren’t crazy... You are extravagant.”

He smiles. I smile. He smiles again.

Clearly, he wants to terrify me.

“Magda...”

“When we know ourselves, we can face everything. You were the one who taught me that, weren’t you?” I return an erotic but simultaneously ironic smile, preparing one more quarrel of ours.

His eyes sparkle momentarily. He admires me. I impressed him.

“The awareness of our psychic world is strengthened only if we avoid its notification. Let’s suppose that I am extravagant. If I can convince you of the contrary, I will have recognized my weakness, after I will have launched its decentralization and I will have turned it into a dynamic feature of enforcement,” he raises his eyebrow, believing that he just threw me against the wall.

I look up to the ceiling. “This reasoning course itself expresses the highest reflection of an exaggeration, Peter...” I mock him again, remaining in a fairly high level of self-awareness.

“Can you prove it, Mrs. Iliopoulou?”

His soft voice distracts me. “Neither can you prove your own theory.” I play dangerously.

“I just did it.” His dark eyes are enjoying our word game. In particular, they are enjoying the power they are having over me. “The theory is the last step of the scientific method for the orthodoxy of a case, Magda...” he says with a mild manner.

I look at him while frowning, scolding my proud self for this defeat. My mind is seeking ways for revenge when a hesitant, official knocking on the door interrupts my unsuccessful reasoning.

“Antonella told me to bring you these...” Andrew walks behind my desk and leaves some pages in front of Peter.

“And what are you? Her maid?” he answers back and in such a way it is clear to whom he will break out his nerves this time. Once again.

My dear friend and colleague seems to be thinking about the question before answering to him. “She was just talking on the telephone and... We were talking about the case and I thought...”

“And what are the cases of the homicide department to be discussed in the corridors, Andrew? Please come to your senses...” He rolls up the sleeves of his shirt and sits on the chair. He shuffles his hair to achieve a more unkempt hairstyle or to burst out the irritation that still survives within him.

Andrew retreats, walking towards the door, leaving uncommented Peter’s shots. “I will be in my office, Magda...” he whispers to me hesitantly.

Why does he inform me every time?

I smile at him and release the hands that were tied under my chest. I approach my phenomenally calm husband to read the content of the pages.

“Apostolos Maniatis. Thirty-two years old lawyer, with an office in Zografou, married with two children, ages twelve and two years old. His wife is unemployed, and they were both born on the island of Zakynthos. Clean criminal record.”

Before I see the pages, the information comes as recorded from Antonella’s mouth, who enters the office

dragging her feet. Our new colleague belongs to the category: *I say a lot, I do a little*.

“So?” says Peter raising indifferently his left eyebrow, as he brings the pages close to his face. He seems ready to throw them ostentatiously behind his head.

She sips a generous dose of coffee from her plastic, as if she needs to get energy to speak. “This morning he was found dead in his office by the woman who was cleaning. The medical examiner concluded that it is a suicide that came from a bullet on his head. Investigations are still going on, but to forestall you, no signs of space violation were found, nor traces of a struggle, so the case will be closed,” she states and colors her voice with a reservation, exciting Peter’s interest.

He returns the pages on the desk. He files them with obvious nervousness. *The remnants of the debate with the commander*. “And now we await you to tell us the “but” of the case...” he smiles at her exploratory.

“But I spoke with someone, who although is considered an unreliable source, told me that last night he saw Aris Nomikos, Orpheus Nomikos’s son, to be knocking insistently on the door of the block of flats, where Maniatis’s office was and calling his name. Of course, the time he mentions was at least two hours after the time of the lawyer’s death, so...”

“Unreliable source on a level of illumination or of simple misunderstanding?” he interrupts her.

“For the rest, his opinion doesn’t count, Peter...” she whirls around her eyes as a sign of lack of understanding

the indifference of our colleagues, while in essence she is the first to despise any second thought on a case.

I sigh. “So that each of us doesn’t imagine whatever they want, can you tell us exactly what he told you and who?”

Am I the only logical person in this Department?

She finishes her coffee and throws the plastic in the bin under her desk. I think that even this movement she does seems exhausting. “It is about a man around sixty to sixty-five, who runs the mini-market that is placed opposite the specific block of flats. It wasn’t easy for me to speak to him. His breath smelled of alcohol so intensively that it was impossible for me to approach him.”

“Is this the reason that nobody believes him? Because he was drunk?” I pass in the tone of my voice my explicit objection.

“Not only this, Magda... If you see him... He really seems to have no contact with the environment.”

“And how does he run the store?”

“Maybe his sister manages everything, but she wasn’t at the store last night.”

“Did Maniatis have a firearms license?”

“No. He probably hadn’t declared it.” The claim escapes from Antonella’s lips, who after three months of being in our team hasn’t understood that she should not use the word “probably” to present an argument. *At least not in front of Peter.*

He imposes silence on her, averting his gaze. “Enough!” He raises his hand to reject any additional commentary from both of us and browses the pages.

I stand above him, staring silently. The pictures show a dark-complexioned man sitting in a leather chair with a high back. His right hand is lying on the side of the chair's arm, while the other is resting on his knee. The knot of his striped tie is slightly loose, and his eyes are closed. The blood has flowed from the right temple up to his neck and has stopped at the collar of his shirt. In another photograph, the gun is thrown at the edge of the desk.

"Yes, it is clearly a suicide..." he claims clearing his throat. His lips open and close. I am sure he wants to say more and ask even more. I wonder why he is not doing it.

"This is what I also said..." Antonella breathes out boringly and brings her laptop closer. She gently blows her face from the lower to the upper lip, instantly lifting her fringes. I believe that they bother her as she keeps continuously opening and closing her eyes, but she doesn't admit it not to show that she has regretted her new haircut. Her selfishness moves on levels close to my husband's egopathy, who now gets in the field of my observation.

I have been scrutinizing him for a few moments. He is filing some pages away, which were left desolate on the edge of his desk. His movements are spasmodic and involuntary. He changes positions to the envelopes, bringing the blue envelope on the top, putting the blacks in the middle and leaving the red envelope at the base. He crooks his lips and moves the red above the blue.

Where is the storm of questions about the place the lawyer was found? For his history? For the interrogation

of his possible secretary? How come does he not want to interrogate this drunk man? Where is the anger over the previous disapproval by the commander hidden?

How good of an actor is Mr. Deligiannis?

“Let’s not waste more time.” The medical examiner’s report ends up to his fingers. “Maniatis has committed suicide. The case closes here,” he states and places the pages aside.

16 hours ago...

He sits at the desk and pushes the chair forward, knitting his legs at its base. He is trembling but looks focused. He is making a great effort for this. His optical field is enormous, as is his room, since he has placed his desk in the corner, behind the door. It is the only place where he feels secure. Away from the light. Away from the windows. Away from reality.

His eyes are focused on the documents he has in front of him, however, his sight is blurred. He is not reading them. He is not even looking at them, but they *must* be on the desk. He knows what is written on them. He can imagine. Plans, visions, words he has heard so many times in his life. He grew up with them. He does not need to read them. *He knows them.*

“Aris...” His father enters the room and immediately looks behind the door. He knew that he would be there. From the day he returned from America he is always there.

“Yes, father...” he opens and closes several times his eyes to restore his sight. His thin legs, as if they are made of jelly, stand upright as if he has to give some military report.

Orpheus Nomikos approaches his son and examines even the smallest detail on him. “You are stressed. Again,” he comments, and an electric wave runs through the whole body of the young politician. He makes the collar of his shirt. “Maybe you want to talk to me about something?”

His question is coarse with no trace of interest. For Aris, it is not even a question. It is a threat. “I am fine father, really,” he answers quite persuasively and with his one hand he straightens the untamable short curls of his hair. He has to show him that he is perfect, that he has paid attention to even the slightest detail on him, that there is nothing that could get as an obstacle for his plans. He wants to persuade him that this time he will make him proud.

His evaluator does not seem to be convinced. His thin lips, which are so thin one can hardly distinguish the upper and lower lip, are aligned in a single line. He looks at his son without speaking. He seems to feel sorry for him. He seems to hate him.

“In ten minutes, be downstairs.” His voice was barely heard. Aris might not even have heard it. The door closes and the ordeal is completed.

He is left alone in the room again. He sits down on the chair and nervously straightens his hair. He would prefer

to have no curls. They annoy him by constantly flying, and he needs to fix them. He thinks it would be a good idea to have a change of hairstyle by cutting all of his hair, but something like this would not be likeable to his father. Something like this would not be likeable to society.

A young prominent politician with a shaved head!

He sees the laughter of his followers.

Why did he change his hairstyle? Could it be his father's order?

He hears the comments of passers-by.

Is this Aris Nomikos? I didn't recognize him! Did he get a haircut to catch the eyes?

He feels his father's icy look cut him like an iceberg, as he passes by him in this hairstyle.

No.

He must tolerate his curls.

“Orpheus we are finally meeting after so many years...”

Their guest comes into the living room under the guidance of Aimilios. Aris is also there, waiting to greet him. He observes their fervent embrace and feels his stomach making a perfect knot. It should be perfect as well.

“I'm glad to see you again, Nick...” a less warm response from his father.

“Aris, how much you have grown up! You were still going to high school when I left for London.”

The young politician smiles mechanically and embarrassingly, responding to the indifferent embrace of his father's old friend. He is obliged to be present at this

meeting. He does not want to. But he *must*. Because his father says so.

They proceed to the living room and Aimilios is walking right behind them, bringing three columnar glasses and a bottle of wine. He serves their guest first and then stops short in front of Aris. He knows that he does not drink alcohol at all, but he is imposed to accompany them. The glasses fill and the toast cuts in half Aris's engraved smile, who now is the leader of the Democratic Truth party.

"To your victory!" Nick Iatrou wishes, while trying to sit more comfortably on the corner couch.

In reality, their guest hopes in the leveling catastrophe of the Nomikos's family, since several years ago his pre-election contest with Orpheus resulted in a triumphant victory for the latter and for a humiliating defeat for him, which forced him to go abroad. Nevertheless, now they are here again, wearing their masks, exchanging wishes and smiles.

Iatrou takes a sip of wine and continues with one more. He is trying to kill time in the void so that time passes, and this meeting gets to an end. "Aris, you are the future. The new blood of the party. Your father has placed all his hopes on you. Do not disappoint him."

His words swirl like fiery flames around Aris's head. They burn with rage his brain but leave intact the point of consciousness. To hurt more. To suffer. He clenches his teeth so as not to scream. The fire around him whips him.

Success. Glory. Win. Confirmation.

The words pass in front of him to remind him of his mission.

You have to succeed. You have to make your father proud.

His gaze is focused on his interlocutor, but he cannot react. He thinks that he will have probably sweated again, several seconds will have passed again without him speaking and he will have become the target of observation and negative commentary once again.

“Aris!” His father’s voice wholly explodes his mind. *One more time he failed.* “How did this happen?” he asks him reassuringly pulling his wrists and only then does the surrendered in his thoughts politician realize that the glass has broken in his hands. “Go and treat the wound. Probably the glass was cracked.”

Aris looks at him with agitation and amazement. He wonders how his father always has an excuse ready for everything. He wonders why he does not show the slightest interest, although he sees he is not well. Maybe he prefers this attitude. He trembles at the idea of criticism. He knows that it will be severe.

“Forgive me...” he lowers his head and stands up, approaching Iatrou. “I am glad to have seen you again, I will...” he hesitates to continue. *I will do whatever it takes to win the elections.* This is what he *has to* say. “...forgive me for tonight...” he smiles and with his left hand straightens a tuft of his hair. He brings his palms forward and realizes that they are bleeding. He blinks and walks up the stairs.

He closes the door and hides in his shelter. He returns to his office and feels secure. He feels a pressure on his head that he believes for a moment is due to the suffocating atmosphere of his room consisting only of a cold silence, which makes his ears buzz.

He observes his hands. His brain rehabilitates and conveys to him a feeling of pain. He enters the indoor bathroom and pours plenty of water in his palms and then on his face. He meets his reflection. He faces a failed man, a man that everyone mocks, while simultaneously they feel sorry for him. His father is standing behind him, shaking his head with frustration. Aris turns towards him to meet the luxurious cabin of the bathroom.

Hallucinations or illusions? He is trying to recognize this feeling which he has been carrying since a child and that is about to devour him. He always wanted to give a name to that *vague* fear which did not let him calm down. The mobile phone vibrates on the desk and he checks the time on his left hand's watch. The screen flashes and reveals to him the name of his *decisive* fear.

"Apostolos..." he attempts to show stability and calmness, although he is sure he will fail one more time.

"At eleven you must be at the place we said. You know you are involved, don't make a mistake by bringing the police. Neither your father can save you from this."

"I will come alone, I swear to you." He holds the phone firmly in his ear and his cheek cools from a tear descending to his chin. "I will come alone..." he repeats, and his interlocutor hastily ends the call.

He feels the pulses in the back of his head thundering. He is incapable of resisting and defending himself. He is disposed of doing everything, as long as no one learns the truth.

He casually ties his left wrist with a bandage and just before ten, he escapes to the underground parking, managing not to be noticed by Aimilios. He walks from the elevator to his car, looking only ahead. He knows how many steps he needs to reach it. Exactly seventy-eight. He only looks at his target. Any interference in this short distance can destroy him. He should not hear any sound. Nothing that could be an obstacle between him and his car.

He checks the suitcase with the money in the boot of his car, constantly looking around him and takes his place at the steering wheel. His first move is to make sure there is no one in the back seat. He checks the empty interior again and again. His hand trembles, as he puts the key in the ignition. He looks behind again. An invisible threat holds his hand captive. Shadows jump suddenly in front of him and then, as if they want to play with him, hide in the darkness. He ignites the engine and disappears from the parking with such a speed that his heart jumps in his chest.

Acceleration comes out ahead. He recognizes that tonight is just the beginning. That night he was bound to live in the shadow of his shadow. He is hiding behind the figure of a successful economist, who is preparing to conquer the political scene. He knows that Maniatis will continue blackmailing him, and he will constantly

succumb to his threats. Fear gives its place to wrath. In the last three years, he has realized that in life it is a mistake to be weak, but he cannot balance logic with panic and show his strength.

But even the weakest personality, even the most frightened and terrified mind, may change. As long as the appropriate words are found. As long as the right time comes. The moment the “calm” attacks the “wild” and the beings without opinion neutralize even the most imposing rhetors. The moment when everything takes its place, and the chaos finds a rudimentary balance in the complex universe. The moment the entropy subsides.

But this moment does not belong to this night.