

Mirt Komel: The Sherd

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

to Iréna

Prologue

Leaning against the countless overpainted blue on blue railing, I stare into the boundless distance where thunder and lightning accompany the menacing storm clouds touching the rough and increasingly foaming Mediterranean.

The imminent storm appearing makes me realise that wisdom, supposedly able to protect one from stupidities in life and perhaps even help achieve something good, always comes too late – like the bus arriving at the bus stop, or the proverbial Owl of Athena, flapping its wings only when it is already dark – that is, only after Fate has already completed its work.

And yet, even if I had known in advance exactly how things would turn out on our Greek trip – if I had Apollo's gift of prophecy, the existence of which I can no longer doubt after seeing his arrows at work, even if straight-thinking reason tells me quite the opposite – would I have done anything differently? Would I have changed anything?

I would like to believe I might – but know I wouldn't.

Everything unfolded precisely as it had to and who am I to change the past? Who am I to want to rewind the film reel and change the course of the story? And why would I even do that? Just because things didn't turn out the way I wanted them to? Or I should have wanted them to – if only I were capable of listening to reason instead of becoming so inveterately transfixed by the beauty overseen by Lady Aphrodite? If even the Gods are unable to change Fate, what can we, mere mortals, do before It?

Zeus, ruler of Heaven and Earth, knows that anyone who has ever tried to outwit Fate ended badly. No, I am sorry, but there is nothing else you can do but allow yourself to

freely flow along with it and raise your mast, trying to catch the Wind of Destiny in your sails. The only virtue man can hope will keep him afloat is steering as best one can towards the destination shown to you by your guiding star, hoping that Poseidon will not thrust you against the rocks, smashing you to smithereens because you may have unwittingly offended him by your actions. Or something else, because it really does not take much for Hades to invite you to his court.

We are now sailing in the exact opposite direction from just over a month ago when, as aspiring archaeology students, we set off for Greece for the warmest summer of our lives. The opposite direction, the same boat (Eleftherios), the same blue railing (repainted again), the same sea (the Mediterranean, back then mirror-flat, now rough like the maelstrom of war), and – perhaps strangest of all – that same feeling that we are leaving home.

Yes, what was previously ‘foreign’ to us – a utopia we read and dreamed about, the homeland of Homer and Hesiod, Plato’s constitution, Aristotle’s state, the land of the Chimera, Cyclopes, of Politics and Poetry, Philosophy and Philia – had, in the month we stayed in Hellas, become our new home. Returning ‘home’ had thus – at least to me – seemed like a forced exile.

Except that, neither I nor any of us were still the same.

We will never again be the same.

Part One

Chapter One

‘Parakaloúme prosarmóste ta rolóvia sas stin óra Elládos,’ a velvety female voice announced over the loudspeakers, ubiquitously spreading throughout the ship. This was followed by an Italian, French and English version with a heavy Greek accent. *‘Vi preghiamo di regolare i vostri orologi sull’ora greca,’ ‘Nous vous prions de régler vos horloges à l’heure grecque,’ ‘We kindly ask you to set your watch to Greek time.’*

The voice echoed down the narrow corridors, through the entirely empty reception area, into claustrophobic cabins, and also overcrowded bars where it was almost drowned out by the voices of tourists and loud TV screens. Apart from all this, out on deck it had to

compete with the roaring waves of the sea and the ship's engines, so it was barely audible by then.

'Huh, who still wears a watch?' said Robi, standing next to me in the queue to get coffee at the bar out on deck. He then instinctively checked his phone which had no signal, so its time setting had yet to change to 'Greek time'.

'Nobody but Godeša,' I replied, bringing a mischievous smile to both our faces, the comment referring to our old-fashioned tutor accompanying us on this trip. One of the beauties of studying archaeology is that every year ends with a field trip. The only difference is that until now we had done our fieldwork in Slovenia (plus once in the Croatian part of Istria), but this time, being in our final year, we were on our way to Greece. This final-year fieldwork is, as our older colleagues kept telling us, an excuse for a graduation trip, or the other way round, as others said, a graduation trip masked as fieldwork.

While my friend found it amusing that watches were mentioned at a time when we all have smart phones that automatically adjust time settings to where you are (unless, like us, you are out at sea where there is no signal), I quietly thought about *óra Elládos, ora greca, heure grecque*, Greek time. It cannot be an ordinary calendar, Christian time, in which matters are linear – from the birth of Jesus onwards, to the end of time – where events follow one another, neatly lined up like a row of houses. Time must instead be a kind of cycle, circular time, and consequently a time in which, when time stops and takes on an air of eternity, there is no space for before or after.

I didn't go about explaining this to Robi, embarrassed to express my thought to my friend, let alone to others. It's not that, in order to survive in dumb company, you need to pretend to be dumber than you are. Even at the *Liceo Classico* high school I attended in Trieste where until recently knowledge and education were things that mattered, I often found that my 'reflections' – if that is what I can call them because, admittedly, they were more free associations than careful evaluations – fell on deaf ears. I had hoped that that might change when I went to the University in Ljubljana which, with the same naivety that made me see my high-school experience in a rather Aristotelian way, I had imagined as some kind of contemporary embodiment of Plato's Academy. Basically the way it allegedly had been, only that instead of chitons, altars, columns, fires and plane trees, I would now find shirts, concrete, glass and neon lighting.

To my disappointment, reality there also did not correspond to my ideals, things were no better than before, and I quickly realised that the rule was study when you're in the

lecture theatres and most of all 'have a good time' when you're not. Nowhere, except in very rare cases, was it desired or expected that we thought, even though everyone felt it was their calling to act like a smartass. Oh yes, of course we talked about our courses but, at least as far as I was concerned, mostly trivial banalities about how to most easily pass this or that exam

This though was not the main reason for me to be ashamed of my thoughts. It was something entirely different. Even in front of my friend – we had become friends on the course – I kept most of the things going through my head to myself. At least in as much as I managed to.

A strange thing kept happening to me, puzzling both me and everyone else.

* * *

'*Día espresso*,' Robi ordered when we finally came to the front after an Austrian family that – not without parents complicating things and children trying to make up their minds – ordered half the bar's worth of drink and snacks (this took so long that many were about to throw in the towel, but it was the only bar on the deck and one of only three on the entire ferry.)

A short, bald man in neatly pressed black trousers and a sweaty white shirt frowned at us so strangely we were unsure whether he was happy or annoyed that someone 'knows Greek', then he corrected the order by saying, '*Dýo, óhi Día*.' When he saw our confused gazes as if to say, 'that is what we said,' he added, '*Día* means God, *dýo* means two.'

None of us knew any Modern Greek. Our course included Ancient Greek (I had previously done some at the Liceo), so we tried using the occasional ancient word or phrase, improvising with all the rest. We thought we would be – if not understood, at least commended for our efforts by the descendants of our (or at least my) ancient idols. But the Greeks of today, as we were gradually forced to accept, were nothing like them (neither in physiognomy, as we noticed at first glance, nor in psychology, as we found out after our first contacts).

'Well, coffee in Greece is a kind of God too, no?' I added in English, wishing to excuse my friend's mistake and hoping to make the man smile. Fat chance. He gave me a look as if I had uttered some Aristophanic blasphemy of the worst kind. Contemptuously he snorted through his nose, silently like a stone statue entered the price into the till and produced a bill so high we could have ordered drinks for an entire symposium. We settled the price for our

cheekiness by counting out the coins, adding a small dose of doubt over whether the man had overcharged us. Then we looked at each other as if we simultaneously remembered that Godeša had warned us before the trip, 'Coffee in Greece is super expensive, and it's double the price on the ferry.'

Even before we had finished stacking the coins on the counter, our Minotaur turned away and behind his overcrowded worktop began so violently pounding freshly ground coffee into the portafilter that I thought he was going to strike us with it. To our great relief, he skilfully attached the handle onto an antiquated coffee machine that with great effort began to ooze out two frothy espressos. The heat combined with various smells wafted towards us – the coffee machine, the beer font, the switched-on toaster, the oven used for heating Greek pitta breads, the boiling oil for frying chips, the meat turning on the gyros – and alongside all this, from behind us, the smell of summer sweat, the sea air, and especially the smoke from the ship's funnel that was rolling over the entire length of the deck.

'What if we get some biscuits as well?' I suggested when I noticed some Caprice Papadopoulou crispy wafer rolls in the display case.

'Are you nuts? He's already robbed us with the bill. Just imagine...'

'*Oríste*,' he was interrupted by the attendant, serving our coffees at the far end of the counter so we would move out of the way. We shifted to the left where the paper cups of hot drinks awaited, and from where we could watch our kind attendant already serving the next guest, some Italian, waving about with his hands, speaking slowly and clearly in syllables, as if that would make his Italian more understandable, 'A-ve-te

mi-ca bri-osh con nu-te-lla?'

Buona fortuna, old man.

* * *

Deck passengers mostly stayed in the shady areas, like fish beneath stones, only a few – mostly young people – lay on the deckchairs under the free international sun. Sun or shade, everyone was wearing sunglasses, reflecting each other in their lenses.

All the fixed tables and movable chairs were occupied with both passengers and baggage, any shady parts in between by tents, beach half domes, blow-up mattresses, hammocks. You could see all kinds, a true '*trireme Europe*', from individuals and couples that kept to themselves, to gregarious groups and antisocial families of every race and creed.

Rowdiest were the groups of boisterous Italian, French and Slovene students on graduation trips, but even they were not as loud as the lorry drivers who had taken over the central archipelago of tables.

We had no choice but to sit in the sun and, with no plastic chairs or deckchairs available we perched on the wooden edge of a small deck pool, still covered with a safety net. Sitting on the wooden edge that was like a long camp bench were a number of people: a pair with a dog that has otherwise been kept in the ferry's kennel where it had suffered terribly in the heat; a sister with a brother wearing his swimming trunks and inflatable armbands, waiting impatiently for the pool to open, as if he had never seen one before; two girls, lazily sunbathing and chatting, and next to them a topless young man flexing his biceps.

The sun was blazing and there was little wind apart from the air movement created by the ferry, and together with a mixture of sounds: the sea, machines and the bar – the rolling Adriatic, the hum of the ship's engines, yelling playful children, the cacophony of excited teenagers, loud adults discussing – created a travelling, reassuring, summer atmosphere. Trapped on a ferry that was slowly sailing towards its destination, though it seemed as if it was not moving at all. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to see, no bus to catch. Though reassuring, all this was also somewhat restrictive, so a few hours after we set sail, despite the general excitement, I was gripped by a kind of sweet anxiety I could not explain.

From his satchel Robi produced a baseball cap with a visor and prescription sunglasses. I glanced at him with envy as he put them on. It was my own fault I was suffering without a hat or sunglasses, only my hideous bronze-framed ordinary pair. Straight away he then also placed a stylish cigarette case on his leg, transferring a few cigarettes into it from a packet with an odd picture of a baby grimacing as its mother blows smoke straight into its face. 'What kind of mother would deliberately puff smoke straight at her kid's face?'

He got the hint and offered me one. He often would, knowing I liked to smoke even though I never bought cigarettes myself. Basically, I was a non-smoker without principles. Inspired by the Greek theme of our trip, I thanked him, *'Ei men ploúsios, ótan théli, ei de pénis, ótan échi.*'*

'Give me your riches, when you want, or your penis, if you have one?'

* Ει μεν πλούσιος, όταν θέλη, ει δε πένης, όταν έχη

‘Almost: If a rich man, when you will; if a poor man, when you can.’

‘I know, I know. I was only joking. Diogenes, the son of a gun. But I should tell you, my dear man – do allow me the metonymy – that you do not seem to me like someone who would be at risk of ending up living in poverty.’

I leaned over towards him, grabbing the tip of the cigarette with one hand, the neat zippo with the other, lighting it clumsily. Leaning to and fro, I sensed my backside was ungluing and gluing back to the salt and soot caked wooden surface.

At this sticky point in my narrative, I need to honestly admit, that neither of us were at risk of living in poverty. Robi came from the Resman family, an old Ljubljana family, lawyers on his father’s side, doctors on his mother’s. His parents were hoping he would choose to continue either of their family traditions; rebelliously he chose something else, according to his parents’ words ‘something useless’, to his ‘something inspiring’ – he liked ‘old things, the past, and working outdoors,’ and allegedly this was why he chose archaeology. As a joke I once commented that despite the rebellious stance he was so proud of, he could still maintain a kind of link to his parents’ professions, for archaeology through all its Latin and Greek is, after all, connected to both law and medicine where both languages play a key role.

Well, in any case, his stance was still braver than mine.

Hugo, the last descendant of the Belarmin family from Trieste, I didn’t rebel at all, merely fulfilled the expectations of my parents. The simple reason for this was that I did not even have any aspirations of my own. My father sells and services coffee machines, my mother works as an accountant in a theatre. My parents wanted their only son to pursue a respectable career in the humanities, even if it was not exactly well-paid, since, as a family, we have always somehow managed to get our hands on enough money, and it was the next generation’s turn to also gain some prestige. This was how I ended up studying archaeology – I had been good at languages at the Liceo, especially Ancient Greek, and my parents suggested I should do something more than just being ‘stuck with my books,’ which I had been until then and did not understand what was wrong with that. In short, a series of coincidences, false premises and considerations based on these led us jointly to a field that should satisfy all parties involved in the process: archaeology. For the record, we should add, that I would myself have probably been satisfied with studying plain philology and that I did not need to include archaeology, but, despite everything, my parents were and still remain, proletarian pragmatists (this is not, as I know from my own experience, erased in a single generation of middle-class living). Talking to the careers advisor, being presented with

brochures for various courses, their perception was that a philologist only has two options – either to teach philology or translate classical texts – whereas an archaeologist gains many more practical skills, giving him many more career opportunities as a result. I am not sure what exactly they meant by this – apparently it included restoration work.

The parents felt they had done their part in securing their son's future, the son didn't dare tell them the truth, that he was basically just buying himself time, student years of being left alone, prolonging the state of consciously ignoring everything that allegedly awaited him when he, if he, completes his studies.

* * *

Before we had a chance draw on our cigarettes a couple of times and take three sips of coffee, despite Robi's dark brown T-shirt with *Indiana Jones* sprawled over it in that supercool retro red and yellow font and my boring plain black T-shirt absorbing the full force of sun, we heard someone behind us. 'So have you two swots found out that the Ancient and Modern Greek word for coffee is not the same?'

It was our classmate Aleksander. We all called him Sandi, occasionally also 'Filip' when we wanted to tease him. In archaeology, Sandi's fascination was the 'indigenous Slovene'. In theory that included everything, including the prehistory of present-day Slovenia; He saw his 'Mecca' in the cave at Loza pri Orehku where stone tools over two-hundred and fifty thousand years old were found (The title of one of his essays was 'Slovenes as *homo faber*'), his 'Vatican' in the Ljubljana City Museum where they keep a bronze-age wheel from the Ljubljana Marshes (a wheel he is convinced was the 'first in the world'), his 'Bible' in the *History of Slovenia* written by the patriotic triumvirate Simoniti- Štih-Vodopivec. Basically in this 'material prehistory of Slovene Lands' he tried by all means to find archaeological, empirical evidence for the 'indigenouness of the Slovene nation' - an impossible anachronism of course.

Whatever the case, he was now standing there in his Bermuda shorts and a white T-shirt, blocking out the sun, self-assured, his muscled hands on his hips, hiding behind his aviators, his white teeth showing, waiting for a catch in the trap he had set up as skilfully as his imaginary Slovene prehistoric hunters.

'And what was it called in Antiquity?' Robi was too hasty.

'There was no coffee in Antiquity,' Sandi grinned at his own cleverness.

The two girls with him, also from our class, smiled awkwardly, caring little for his ‘just a joke,’ he added immediately, trying to de-electrify the situation.

Julija Bizjak, his girlfriend, blonde just like him, tall, and just like him from Lower Carniola, just like him enthusiastic about ‘Slovene prehistory’ – though, it should be said, with a greater amount of *cum grano salus*, as one would say in modern Latin – and, in all honesty, at the human level much cleverer than he, receptive to the world around her and sympathetic to fellow human beings. We all wondered what she saw in this guy. Whatever. What is the quote from Plato’s *Lysis*? You know, *Λέγον ὅς ἄρα παντός δέοι το ὁμοίων τὸ ὁμοίον φίλον εἶναι, ἀλλὰ αὐτὸ το ἐναντίον εἰ τούτου: τὸ γὰρ ἐναντιότατον τὸ ἐναντιότατον εἶναι μάλιστα φίλον*.^{*} They say that similars always befriend the similar but the opposite is true, the greatest opposites befriend the greatest opposite.

‘Philosophising in Greek again, Hugo?’

Oops, I must have inadvertently said it out aloud.

‘Nah, nothing...’ I closed in on myself like a tortoise retracting into its shell before a much stronger enemy. There was nothing Achillean about me.

Standing next to her was Rebeka Torkar, a redhead from Tolmin. Like Sandi and Julija, she too was interested in ‘Ancient Slovenes’ though was much less nationalistic and more of a locally patriotic inclination. She was more or less obsessed with the pre-Christian culture of the Soča Valley, so she too had her ‘Mecca’ (the area on the right bank of the river Soča), her ‘Vatican’ (the Tolmin Museum) and her ‘Bible’ (Pavel Medvešček’s *From the Invisible Side of the Sky*).

Well, with Beka I still felt embarrassed about something that had happened ages ago. I don’t know what I was thinking when I decided to go to the Archaeologists’ Fresher Party. I drank like a Scythian and instead of ending the evening up on a high somewhere or at least in the cold embrace of a toilet bowl, I ended up in hers. I woke up in bed with her, lying naked beside me, without knowing what I should do, so I did what I have been doing all my life. Grabbed my clothes and fled. Out of embarrassment I have never since socialised with classmates outside the University, never been to any parties, and generally preferred to keep

^{*} λέγων ὡς ἄρα παντός δέοι τὸ ὅμοιον τῷ ὁμοίῳ φίλον εἶναι, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸ τὸ ἐναντίον εἶη τούτου τὸ γὰρ ἐναντιώτατον τῷ ἐναντιωτάτῳ εἶναι μάλιστα φίλον.

to myself (I probably would have anyway, so I just used the incident as a convenient excuse to justify my innate anti-social stance).

Medea, the third girl in our small archaeological group was fortunately not with them, because then I would just sink through the deck or, even better, throw myself overboard.

* * *

Instead, I had to join the company after Julija, immediately picking up on the awkwardness of the situation, diverted our attention. 'The sun here is scorching, what if we all go over there under that roof?' A family that had just finished their breakfast from neatly packed plastic containers had just left, leaving a right mess behind, but at least some space for us in the shade under the metal overhang of the deck bar.

We occupied the four available chairs and Beka politely took one from the lorry drivers' table next to us. They devoured her with their eyes and even brazenly invited her – in Greek, Bulgarian and Albanian, if I correctly caught their acapella simultaneous chirp – to come and join them, following the movement of the chair she was taking, her tight T-shirt and shorts drawing their attention as if they were checking their lorries being unloaded, bringing such joy to their faces as if they watching a football game.

'Their eyes are about to fall out of their heads,' Robi laughed, clearly amused by the whole thing.

'My god, they're so sleazy, these fatsos,' Sandi added angrily and it seemed to me he glanced at Julija as if to say, 'I'm not like that. She didn't react to him but looked at Beka seriously and said, 'I think they are dangerous.'

In her own style, Beka shrugged her shoulders and with an inscrutable smile on her face said, 'I just find them funny.'

For a while we chatted idly, then moved on to making various comments on our fellow passengers dotted around the tables next to us. Sitting right next to us was an older couple, probably Brits, silently playing rummy; on the next table along a middle aged couple each reading their book, also in silence; the same with a girl who was clearly travelling alone, enjoying the company of her book and cigarettes; at one of the larger tables an assembly of families were busy discussing politics in loud Bavarian German having sat their kids at the next table, each immersed in their own phone or tablet; next to them, a beautiful woman

was sleeping peacefully in the deckchair, a child in her lap making her look like some saint in a renaissance painting.

One after the other we too began to produce our phones but there was no signal and none of us had the money for the ferry's internet service, and wi-fi was also chargeable. For a while we continued to look around, then slowly each found their own book. It was fun observing how the book-reading virus spread through our group. Robi had Anton Sovrè's, *Greek History*, which he had previously enthusiastically studied in detail for his first year Ancient History exam, but found the idea of reading it again wonderful, this time without obligation, merely for fun, and on the way to Greece! He did rather cautiously pull it from his bag, as if embarrassed that he would be the first to be anti-social and distance himself from the others.

I followed his example, finding my *Homeric Hymns*, which I had only taken with me because I had read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* so many times since my days at the Liceo, that I would not dream of taking them with me on this trip. Initially we held our books on our knees, as if that would mean nobody would notice we were reading, then, when there was no reaction, we set about reading them in a more studious manner, pencil in hand.

But as soon as we grabbed the pencils, Sandi commented on our meticulous underlining of passages, 'You two swots are unbelievable! Here we are, on a boat to Greece, having fun, and you two come out with course books!'

'We have other books with us...' I tried to say but he immediately interrupted me. 'I don't doubt that. You are probably also hauling along *Pre-Socratics* and the *Coursebook on Practical Archaeology*. What can I say, beach reading *par excellence*!'

'In fact, I do have Sovrè's *Pre-Socratics* with me.'

'Well, as I said! Hugo and Robi – *Duet Sovrèt*!'

Satisfied with his own joke, which for a change I even appreciated myself, he looked towards Julija and Beka who merely smiled faintly and then each took up their own reading material; Julija had brought *Circe*, Beka opened *Gods Behaving Badly*. Eventually, with nothing else to do, Sandi also put his *Ilium* on the table (I knew all these novels because 'nothing Greek is foreign,' not even the pop culture flotsam of Ancient Greece, and yes, I admit, as a teenager I watched films like *Troy*, *Alexander*, *300*, and *Immortals* at least a hundred times).

Though Robi and I took a more scholarly approach to our reading, I had to admit that our choices in reading material, despite the diversity in genre and taste, were surprisingly well coordinated.

What is more, it seemed to me that with our choice of books as a travelling group of archaeology students, we for the first time truly managed to synchronise with 'Greek time,' so for a moment I was very happy that we basically all had a very similar idea of what this trip of ours to the Promised Land should look like.

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Everything gradually sank into the background – the hum of the ship's engine, the noise from the bar, chatting, children yelling, the wind, the heat – everything around me disappeared when I became absorbed in the rhythm of the Homeric hexameter in Ancient Greek and with the help of the English translation on the opposite page translated it into Slovene:

With the Muses I begin, and Apollo and Zeus,
for it is through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo
that men are singers upon the earth and lyre-players;
as through Zeus they are kings.
Happy is the one by the Muses loved:
speech flows sweet from his lips.
Hail, children of Zeus! Honour my song!
And I will remember you and sing another song.*

This unfortunately did not last long.

All of a sudden some lively Greek pop song accompanied by the bouzouki began blasting from the ship's loudspeakers. Clearly it was the introduction to the entertainment

*Μουσάων ἄρχωμαι Ἀπόλλωνός τε Διός τε· ἐκ γὰρ Μουσάων καὶ ἐκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος ἄνδρες ἀοιδοὶ ἕασιν ἐπὶ χθονὶ καὶ κιθαρισταί, ἐκ δὲ Διὸς βασιλῆες· ὃ δ' Ὀλβιος, ὃν τινα Μοῦσαι φίλωνται· γλυκερὴ οἱ ἀπὸ στόματος ῥέει αὐδὴ. χαίρετε, τέκνα Διός, καὶ ἐμὴν τιμήσατ' ἀοιδὴν· αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν ὑμέων τε καὶ ἄλλης μνήσομ' ἀοιδῆς.

part of the day on the boat, a monotonous refrain that, if I understood correctly talked about my eyes and your eyes, '*Mátia mouuu, mátia souuu!*'

The saint from the renaissance painting woke up annoyed, seizing her crying child as if someone was about to take it away from her, the older couple finished their game and put away the playing cards, the reading girl beyond them put her book on the table, leaned backwards and crossed her arms on her chest in protest.

Everyone else, far from being bothered by it – and, in all honesty, it was the majority – pricked their ears like dogs when they scent other dogs. The 'Greek muzak' had the effect upon them of church bells ringing, calling the faithful to Mass, only that instead of the priest in the pulpit handing out spiritual food to those hungry for religion, here we have the guy behind the bar, serving drinks to thirsty punters.

Bottles and beer glasses had been cooling behind the glass door in the refrigerator all morning, tempting the first fanatical phalanx of lorry drivers to descend upon the alcoholic altar; they were closely followed by a man from the Bavarian group who bought beer for himself and all the women in his company, soon after came the graduates, beaming with enthusiasm that at this time in the day they could entirely legit' order a beer at a bar.

It was only noon.

Ugh, I thought to myself, another twenty-four hours.

'This won't be over that soon,' Robi added words to my thought.

* * *

For a while we persisted with our heads in our books but everything was becoming louder, especially the lorry drivers right next to us who, catching snippets of their conversation were now having a 'geopolitical' debate about the Americans and the Russians, 'Putin, that old fox...'

We had little choice but to put down our books and begin chatting again. It was inevitable, if not before, when the pool opened. The safety net was moved out of the way and what was just a little more than a large bathtub was filled with water so a hoard of yelling children could barge towards it, splashing water all over the place, including onto a group of teenagers whose hormones surged when the girls in their group stripped to their swimwear.

At least compared to them we felt grown up, though in the eyes of older people we were probably also just slightly older teenagers, what the Americans call young adults and Ancient Greeks called *epheboi*, who in the period of growing up – I had just read about this this morning in v Vidal-Naquet's *Black Hunter* that I also brought with me – have to prove themselves before their elders in practice and in words before they could become fully-fledged *politai*, citizens of their city state.

'What if we too get a couple of beers and play a game of cards?' Sandi suggested.

'Could do, though I would prefer to try backgammon,' said Robi, noticing two Greek men doing so, having borrowed a set from the bar when they got their beers.

'Is that not what they call *tavli* in Greek? Though I think the rules are the same, so it might be fun,' I added.

'What if we at least had something to eat before?' Julija cautiously suggested.

Beka nodded, a very obviously hungry expression on her face.

At that moment Arne Petek appeared from somewhere. He was from Maribor but always made a point of looking offended if he was called a 'Styrian' because he was immensely proud that his grandparents were from the neighbouring region of Prekmurje. 'My God, are we going to get a party going here or are we going to fall asleep standing like some pensioners?'

'That's my man!' Sandi seemed glad to see him, stood up and in the same breath asked everyone at the table what they wanted to drink. The girls also asked what everyone would like to eat. A few minutes of deliberating and considering our options, we eventually all decided on the winning combination: *gyros & bira*. In pairs we went up to the bar to get our food and drinks and – from ordering to serving, settling the bill and returning to our table – it all took so long that by then the beer was warm and the gyros was cold. Initially causing some grumbling, we ended up creating a kind of 'Greek toast' of our own, one we then used on our entire trip in numerous variations:

To Greece, land of heroes, hot blood,

warm beer and cold gyros!

'As an exercise, you could translate this toast of yours into Greek,' we suddenly heard the voice of the graduate teaching assistant accompanying us on our trip...