

REIMAGINING BEN

**PANAYOTIS
CACOYANNIS**

Acknowledgments

With thanks to my editor Oliver James of Blue Pencil Agency for his many useful criticisms and brilliant suggestions, to Keith Voles for the excellent website and graphic design, as well as for another exceptional cover, to Michael Duerden for his limitless patience and technical wizardry, to Isabelle for the honesty and precision of her second opinion, and to all my American friends whose constant encouragement has helped me through difficult times.

Copyright

REIMAGINING BEN

© 2023 Panayotis Cacoyannis

All rights reserved.

Cover design by Keith Voles

For All Who Are Now Absent

I

LONG NIGHT

1

“THE EVENT”

‘You arrive, we exchange a few pleasantries, we go to the bedroom, undress, and then we spend an hour together in bed.’

‘Chatting,’ I said.

‘And just to set your mind at rest, we’ll be alone the whole time, both in bed and in the apartment. No record will be kept of “the event”, so no secret filming or audio recording.’

‘You have a very attractive voice,’ I said. ‘Very reassuring. But I was wondering, does “the event” have a purpose? It sounds like a rehearsal for something.’

I resisted asking whether “the event” constituted art for art’s sake, or was not art at all. It had the ring of therapy, I thought. I had not got the impression it was sinister, or purely self-indulgent.

‘It does have a purpose but it’s not a rehearsal,’ said the man. ‘As to what it might be, by the end of the hour you’ll be able to judge for yourself. For now, let’s just leave it at that.’

‘By the way, I’m not gay,’ I said. ‘Just in case it makes a difference.’

His laughter surprised me. Generally, I disliked people’s laughter – I almost always found it laboured and fake - but even on the telephone, and in spite of its usual metallic distortion, his was so natural and free that it caused me to laugh back.

It was a stupid thing to say; as soon as I had said it, I knew that I shouldn’t have. It would have still been stupid even if it had been entirely true. Did that one time make it untrue? I had often wondered, and just as often I had been unable to decide. Absurdly I thought of Chekhov’s gun – how my proclamation of a negative identity might later play out.

While it lasted, the laughter had distracted me, but now that it had ended I felt worse.

‘What made you think you had to say that? Was it my voice, or something I said?’

I had no ready answer, so I tried to make excuses. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘It’s just that George was very vague. He said it was important to keep an open mind.’

‘And that worried you.’

‘I wasn’t really sure what it meant,’ I said, looking absently out of the window to the left of the bed at the unmoving leaves of the plane trees; no flutter or song of a single tiny bird was heard among them, but their deathly-quiet stillness, thick with the humidity and the heat, rather than having a calming effect only served to fan my anxiety. I had dug myself into a hole, and the hole was getting deeper.

‘You wear pyjamas?’

‘Pyjamas?’ My breathing had quickened. With my hand over the speaker, I took in a big gulp of air in an effort to stifle it. Then another and another, but my lungs still felt empty. I moved away from the window and sat on the edge of the single bed. I lay back for a moment, with my feet still on the carpeted floor, but the unforgiving whiteness of the freshly painted ceiling proved as disconcerting as the stagnant blur of green. Blinking didn’t help. I gave my eyes a rub and rose once again to my feet.

‘You can bring them along if you like. If it makes you feel safer.’

‘I don’t.’ I changed ears, taking the receiver in my other hand; it felt just as clammy. ‘I don’t wear pyjamas, I mean.’

‘I don’t suppose anyone does in this heat. In any case, keeping an open mind certainly doesn’t mean sex, so you’re perfectly safe. George didn’t say?’

‘He did, yes.’ He had. I wiped my brow with my free hand, and then my hand on the side of my jeans. By now I fully expected “the event” to be cancelled.

‘Just so you don’t feel embarrassed, almost everyone finds a different way to ask the same question, which comes down to whether sex is expected. Men *and* women, although it’s mostly men who get past this initial conversation - almost *only* men, about ninety-five percent.’

‘It’s probably the bed,’ I said. ‘Whether with pyjamas or without.’

‘The men always without.’

I almost asked if sex had ever happened, with either a man or a woman, even if it hadn’t been expected or planned, but as it wasn’t my business, and I didn’t *really* want to know the answer, I was glad that I didn’t. I couldn’t help wondering why - why didn’t I want to know the answer?

‘So then, seven o’clock tomorrow?’

‘I’ll be there.’ I had moved to the other window, on the wall opposite the bed, beside the blue divan. It was smaller, overlooking a side street hardly ever used by traffic. Like on every other Saturday afternoon, kids had just arrived and were kicking a ball, being tackled for it, or monopolising it, or passing it to each other, taking turns to shoot against the wall of the brick-built garage on the opposite corner. They were still warming up, none of them yelling yet the

way they soon would. The only sounds for now were of boots and softer trainers colliding with the ball, or of the ball bouncing off the garage wall and careering back towards them across the softened asphalt. An unexpected header made a deep pounding sound. I hoped the kids knew better than to play with heavy balls.

‘You have the address? George said he would give it to you.’

‘He has,’ I said, walking away from the window. ‘We’re almost neighbours, I live not far from George and even closer to you.’

‘Good. Oh, and may I ask you one last question?’

‘Please, go ahead. You can ask me as many questions as you like.’

‘Just the one will do for now, thank you. And here it goes: When you’re alone, do you talk to yourself? I don’t mean things like saying “Oh shit!” or “Jesus Christ!”. I mean talking to yourself the way you might talk to another person.’

‘I see,’ I said. From the window I had moved to the corner of ceramic-tiled counters that served as a “bijou kitchen”, with inadequate laminate units and a sink and washer-drier on one side, and a gas hob with a fridge below it on the other. I filled a glass with water from the tap and sat uncomfortably on the single stool. I wasn’t really thirsty, but my aimless wanderings had given me time to ponder the question, and to answer it truthfully.

‘I do swear quite a lot when I’m alone, but I do also talk to myself in the way you describe, the same way I would talk to another person. Sometimes I even have conversations, as if the other person is also saying something or answering back.’

‘The imaginary person you’re having a discussion with.’

‘A discussion, exactly. Or maybe just a chat.’

‘Sometimes heated?’

‘Or friendly and completely inconsequential.’ I left the untouched glass of water on the counter and returned to the first window. Nothing had changed and yet everything had changed. The tableau had remained of an absolute stillness, but to that still life of greenery there now was the musical backdrop of playground bawls and plop-thump-thuds pouring in through the other open window, and this merging of contrasts somehow epitomised the unfathomable possibilities of life, of which our conversation was part.

‘So, very much like something that might actually happen.’

‘And is happening right now,’ I said.

We laughed together this time.

‘George...’ He hesitated for a moment. ‘He swears a lot. At least he did while he was here.’

‘He does swear a lot, he swears all the time,’ I said. Via the “bijou kitchen” and my abandoned glass of water, which I now drank in one gulp, I hesitated at the frosted-glass door to the bathroom cupboard (quite beyond euphemism even for the agents’ brochure) before making my way back to the bed. ‘But I’m not sure if he swears as much, or at all, when he’s alone. Did he say he did? Did he say if he talks to himself?’ It was the first time I had thought about it, and propped against my several pillows I was trying to remember if I’d ever caught him doing it.

‘We shouldn’t really be discussing George. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have mentioned his swearing.’

‘It was hardly news to me,’ I said. ‘And since you brought him up, may I ask how he came to be involved in “the event”? It’s just that I’m surprised he agreed to take part.’

‘George said the same about you. That he’d be very surprised if you agreed to take part.’

I would not repeat a question he had chosen not to answer. But I couldn’t resist another: ‘I’m curious, did he tell you what he does for a living?’

‘Oh, I already knew. But for now, that’s enough about George. Until seven tomorrow?’

I said yes, and without more pleasantries, which I sensed was deliberate on both our parts, we said goodbye and hung up.

I was thirsty again – the heat, as though suspended while I was immersed in conversation, had caught up with me now with a vengeance - and I drank some more water. I was conscious I was meeting George soon, but uncharacteristically – as a rule, I hated being late - no sense of urgency impelled me to hurry. My head was swimming with the man (anonymous until “the event”). Running through our conversation while pacing in my room, he had a curious way of speaking, I thought - veering from formal-polite to humorous-casual, never dull, precise in an almost bureaucratic way but in spite of that always engaging, even seductive. And it did have something to do with his voice, as well as what he said, which he must have said a hundred times before, in the same voice, using the same fluctuating language to answer the same questions, making the same arrangements with ninety-five men, none of whom had worn pyjamas.

It also had something to do with me, but I wasn’t sure exactly what, and that uncertainty had an electrifying effect: it was tantalising, at once a promise and a dangerous mirage.

The bed had intrigued me. I couldn’t help wondering about its significance. It must be central to “the event”, indispensable although it had contributed to near enough the total exclusion of half the population. It also intrigued me that I had agreed to participate, and even more so that George had. Unbelievably tomorrow I would strip down to my boxer shorts and

spend an hour in bed with a man – a man George himself had already spent an hour in bed with. If it hadn't been George who had suggested it, I would have probably dismissed the idea from the outset. But already I was straying from my brief by overthinking it.

Thinking abstractly about another bed had unconsciously returned me to mine. The only art in the room hung above the wooden headboard, appropriately an abstract composition in oil that reminded me of clouds. I enjoyed looking up at it while lying in the bed. It had a calming effect.

After looking at it now while standing up, I raised my arms to take a thorough sniff of my armpits: left, right, left, right. There was certainly a strong whiff of something – the scent of my deodorant (lavender cool) had blended with that of my detergent (Alpine mist) and with my sweat (tangy twist), to give out an aroma of lemony patchouli and mothballs. I decided that it wasn't too unpleasant. There was no time to wash, and changing my Ziggy Stardust T-shirt without showering first would be pointless.

Abandoning the clouds, I picked up my keys and shut the door behind me.

At street level the hubbub of hollering no longer held me under its spell. Disconnected from the panorama it had formed part of while a fascinating voice buzzed in my ear, it had quickly become a cacophony. The sun, still intense, bore down on me heavily, adding to a sense of anti-climax. I walked through littered streets of nondescript terraced exorbitance (local prices had shot through the roof), past new developments and run-down estates, along the posh part of the high street and the altogether different hubbub of rarefied hipster haunts, cutting-edge art galleries and trendy small-plate eateries, then more briskly along its stretch of dereliction and untended ill health - consecutive exclusion zones that belonged to different worlds. I turned left then sharply right, crossed the old churchyard, past graves and wild rose trees, and turned right again. After five hundred yards I was there.