

SYNTOPIA

He was at a party. That much wasn't hard to tell. Where else would one be able to see clearly in black-lit darkness? Another clue was the candombe drummers accompanying a fast semi-elaborate electronic beat and a crowd gathered around the band, dancing loosely to some of the lower vibrations filling the room. A holographic video wall set-up was projecting fractals and geometrical patters into the space directly above them, removing any doubt about where he might be. The cigarette smoke which had turned the air around them less than transparent made the shapes and colors of the hologram all the more hypnotizing. He moved closer to the action. He noticed that next to the edges of the crowd, where it was easier to move around people, there was a desk-turned-bar. There was nobody and nothing at the bar, apart from several oblong cocktail glasses sitting on it.

He went up to the bar and picked up one of them. It was cool to the touch, as if it had been just minutes ago full of ice which had all just finished melting into cool water. It was difficult to tell the color of the drink from all the more or less indescribable shades filling the room, so he took a sniff at the glass's contents. Was that... no, impossible. How could such a place ever afford to treat its guests to something like this *on the house*?

He glanced hastily around to see whether anyone was watching him—security perhaps, a person of authority, ready to catch him in the act, tell him it was all just a big misunderstanding. Nobody seemed interested in his presence: nobody was even looking in his direction, for that matter, apart from a long-haired, middle-aged man with an expression of mild amusement on his face, watching the hologram to his right unfurl into something

resembling a stylized galaxy. He looked back at the crowd, then turned back to the man. Suddenly he noticed that the man was holding a cup just like his. Had he been holding that before?

With renewed confidence, he turned his attention back to his drink and took a determined sip. Yes... he had been right. They really were serving Yellow Franzs in this place, or, if it wasn't a real Yellow Franz, which was very possible, it was perhaps the best fake *anything* he had ever tried. He recalled the first time he had tasted the drink. It was in Berlin, a few months after the price of bananas had first broken the 10€/kilo barrier. Yellow Franzs —2 parts banana juice, 1 part amaretto—were practically invented in that city and became famous around the world, with rising prices driving demand up pulling prices up in an endless cycle. When it was beginning to come into vogue, he and his friends had tried making some of the novelty drink on his roommate Florian's birthday, but even then they had made no more than just enough to let everybody invited to have a small taste. He couldn't remember whether he had tried it again even once after that, excluding of course artificial banana flavors in ice creams and things like that. All that said, the mere fact that he had actually had the chance to try real banana after so long was enough to induce frissons.

Suddenly, he became aware that his lower right canine tooth was coming unstuck; it gave way under a push from his tongue. All at once, thought of this consumed him and before long he had forgotten all about the Yellow Franz. He just froze, overcome by mortal terror. He was compelled by this irresistible urge to keep pushing and pulling at his tooth with his tongue. Soon it was hanging by a tiny sliver, and for a second he felt as if he was a child again. He pulled it out with his hand and looked at it shining purplish blue in the black light. There was something odd about this tooth: it didn't have a single, long, thick root, as canines do: instead, it had two long and very thin ones, protruding from either sides of its base. It reminded him of an LED.

He rushed to the bathroom, overlooking the fact that he shouldn't have known its whereabouts. He looked himself in the mirror. The long dark bushy hair and beard were both there. Like an angry gorilla, he opened his mouth at the mirror. There was no canine-shaped gap; it was as if his other teeth had morphed to reclaim the vacant space. He closed his eyes and tried to nudge his tooth back where it belonged, hoping against hope to restore the splendor of his pearly whites.

Then he opened his eyes again. It was completely dark, save for the orange lava lamp he kept turned on at night. The first thing he checked in the process of regaining consciousness was whether his tooth was in its place, which it providentially was. His consciousness left his dream body and edged its way back into waking-time habitation as one feels the texture of a smooth T-shirt on one's skin after wearing a woolen pullover over nothing else the whole day long. He was Vassilis, he was in the real world. He was lying in the sweaty sheets of his sofa bed. In the absence of any significant external clues, he would need to take a look at his Arvi, his augmented notebook at present sitting on the night table, to determine how late at night it was, but he wasn't ready just yet to abandon this transitional state. He was just happy that his tooth was in its place. Just as he was starting to fall back asleep, he sensed that terrible, all-too-familiar sound. They were back.

The Greek saying "one equals none" was certainly true about a great many things, but Vassilis had often thought that whoever had come up with that particular phrase couldn't have been thinking of mosquitoes. He knew it would be impossible to go back to sleep against the background of that terrible buzzing, so he abandoned all hope for that night; not even winter offered any protection nowadays.

Reaching for his Arvi notebook, he put on his spectric glasses as usual. The digital notebook's pages were really infrared e-ink paper screens, indistinguishable from any old paper page to the spectric-less eye. He turned to one of them and checked the time. It was

almost sunrise. Hah, at least the little bloodsuckers wouldn't be robbing him off *too* much sleep. Just before looking away from his pad, he saw out of the corner of his eye that he had received a message from Pavlina. There was a scribble on part of the e-page that would disappear when he removed the spectric glasses. It was in the trademark Bordeaux ink Pavlina had bought a few weeks before. It read:

“All out of hopper. Bring me some in the morning? Will have vreeting, if I'm not answering misscall me.”

Oh, money! Vassilis smiled reluctantly, perhaps because of the night's lasting hug. He removed the arvipen from the pleasantly weak magnetic grip that was holding it stuck on the Arvi and wrote “OK gm” under Pavlina's note in pencil ink and returned the Arvi and its pen to the night stand.

Rising to his feet, he shuffled through his tiny home, whose chief characteristic was to feel “vaguely familiar” to each and every visitor. He went through to the kitchen and quite absent-mindedly started preparing Greek coffee and his early breakfast of goat yogurt, cornflakes, lentil sprouts and pitless dates. His thoughts didn't stray far from his dream as he shoveled this mixture out of a white ceramic bowl and munched on it abstractedly. The part about the LED tooth hadn't been the weird part; teeth falling out of mouths was a fairly common dream theme for many people, after all. What he kept returning to was the Yellow Franz. He was fairly certain he had never tried a Yellow Franz, nor had he ever been to Berlin, notwithstanding the long hours he'd spent many years ago trying and failing to learn German. Amaretto and bananas... it might as well have been unenhanced soy, quinoa or truffles.

As he donned his work coat, he reminisced on childhood memories of bananas soaked in orange juice in grandma-made fruit salads. Even his once-favorite non-alcoholic

banana/sour cherry juice, which he had forgotten he ever liked, came rushing back. He chuckled with restrained nostalgia, took his cup of Greek coffee and went outside.

It was cool, but not as cool as it should have been. Wasn't this supposed to be the coldest part of the night, when daylight is more than visible over the horizon, but one can normally still make out the stars? "Supposed", "*normally*"... What was "normal", anyway? Would you call this sky normal? There it was again, that thin layer of cirrostratus that blocked out the dimmer stars, which in turn made discerning constellations somewhat harder, especially now that the sun was coming out. But even if these clouds hadn't been a product of geodrones, something which he had no way of knowing, could any clouds ever count as normal? It wasn't as if any other part of the weather was acting *normal*. Of course, if nothing counted *as* normal, by definition everything should.

He dropped his gaze from the sky before losing more time in these chronically abstract thoughts, especially about *the weather!* He had years ago decided that he did not need weather forecasts to dictate how he would live his day-to-day life, especially when he himself had once had the job of telling other people how to plan their day around the weather; he had sunk so low as to keep urging Athenians for weeks on end, year after year, not to wear a coat in January, as if that was... there was that word again, *normal*.

He would have had enough of predicting the weather even if it hadn't become a completely unreliable science: the need to predict something that was bound to happen whether one liked it or not, came from a place of fear, from resistance. He knew that resistance was something he did not want in his life. Let it rain (doubtful), let it snow (nigh impossible), let the scorch-storms hit; he welcomed all, embraced all--- and was prepared for anything, at least anything that would feature in a weather forecast. Honestly, they could go take a seat right next to astrological readings, where they belonged. He started walking towards the cricket barn, wetting his shoes in the dew.

Chow time, Jiminy.

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Vasilis had worked as a cricket farmer for the past few years, making cricket meal protein mainly for entomo-vegetarian restaurants in Athens and Patras--- at least the ones which had made the conscious decision, however reluctantly, to acknowledge from an ethics and sustainability point of view the distinction between producing insects on the one hand insects and on the other poultry or mammalian meat, and which had started actively to support entomophagy (the consumption of insect protein) as part of the answer to the global food and agro-ecological crisis.

The ethics vs. utilitarianism debate had been more or less settled (“live and let live”—and they hadn’t meant the animals), until one day it was revived when the Union Commission adopted the UN FAO/UNEP joint proposal for banning the raising of biologically divergent (i.e. not cloned) and unenhanced (i.e. non-genetically modified) animals. The cloned, GM animals, the organizations argued, would be the cause of fewer emissions; they would have the ability to produce endogenous antibiotics against certain super-resistant bacteria and feature various other cost-cutting and efficiency-maximizing patented genetic alterations, most of which have remained undisclosed as trade secrets.

Many vegetarians and LoCo (low consumption) NGOs and groups around the world reacted to this news by, albeit reluctantly, conceding that eating insect protein was a much better response in every way to the problems the Commission was claiming to be solving with FAO and UNEP’s proposal. A market that had previously hardly been there at all saw the light of day within just a couple of years, and Vassilis thought he could take advantage of having a unoccupied barn on his land to earn a little extra from something in which he was both a big believer and already more or less an expert.

Not that Vassilis really needed the income: he had learned to make do on just his UBI, his unconditional basic income. It really didn't amount to much, but he had managed to reduce the greater part of his monthly costs by growing food, catching water and producing power on his own land. Most of the rest of his UBI went on the Eurodebt tax and his Internet access fee, but he still had enough left every month to go out in New Damascus for a beer or special hookah every now and then and pay for his subscription to his autocar. He was saving money on the side to buy insurance for a manual car, but it cost a lot more than the vehicles themselves, so the day he'd be able to drive his own pick-up truck still seemed a way off. There's only so much work you could get done with the autocar---unless you wanted to buy an autonomous unit, but a single robotic vehicle in his possession was already quite enough, thank you very much.

By the time he had finished breaking the fast of his closetfuls of crickets with his leftover home-grown cabbage, broccoli and carrots, had collected the previous day's entire batch of fresh, clean hopper and had picked a handful of cooked insects to give the pair of magpies that visited him every morning, Koulis and Sassá—which was which, he couldn't tell, the sun was already shining down on high through the still wispy clouds. He went on to the second step of his morning ritual: feeding the illegal dozen or so goats he had been keeping in a locked shed close to his house at the constant risk of confiscation and destruction by Union police for being divergent and thus illicit emitters. If they found him out, up to half his UBI could be at risk—so much for “unconditional”. Vassilis could never decide whether or not that “destruction” really just meant “slaughter”. “Meat is destruction—it's the law!” Would such a slogan catch on on Mandala and other alternative social hubs? Even if it did, it would most probably only be talked about for a short time, but it would still be definitely worth a shot. Wouldn't it?

The goat story was something that had been bothering him now much less than it used to, before he had first experienced +ΤΟΠΙΑ (“Syntopia”---syn means “plus” or “together” in Greek). Syntopia was a series of musies made by Nefeleonas, an international studio originally founded by young Greek expat game designers. Musies, multisensory interactive experiences, emerged as a medium when virtual reality hit the mainstream the previous decade, when the true, profound effects this new technology could have on the human mind were first beginning to become apparent. Musies brought together ideas from not only video games and movies, but often included live performances, art installations, virtual experiences such as being in orbit above the Earth (for the purpose of inducing an artificial but perfectly valid Overview Effect on beholders), and everything in between, often with an emphasis on participatory networks—how to create and share real experiences with other people.

In particular, Syntopia was a kind of interactive documentary series of musies that allowed watchers/players (with musies it’s common to use the terms interchangeably) to have their worldviews procedurally challenged through specific immersive and interactive experiences, such as living in Ancient Athens with one player being a free man, another a woman and another a slave; hunting for treasure in the form of gold circuitry in digital graveyards in Nigeria; going through a slaughterhouse production line as a cow; experiencing disasters first-hand such as 9/11, the Nepal earthquake, the sinking of the Kursk, fleeing Syria as a refugee (these ones came with heavy health and safety warnings but they were particularly effective at raising awareness and building empathy with survivors) or virtually building a cob house with natural materials together with remotely located friends or not-yet-friends. The “VR cob house workshop” ended up being Syntopia’s most successful musie and proved ground-breaking in the public consciousness, thus Nefeleonas built upon the idea and slowly set up a network of independent virtual ecovillages where people could experiment

with materials, join seminars, build their own homes, keep a vegetable garden, breed their own plant varieties, plan activities and more.

Vassilis didn't get as involved in Syntopia as many of the people in his extended network, because he preferred keeping it real and practical insofar as he was able, but each Syntopia experience he had been exposed to had been a small revelation for him, and at the end of the day, the whole thing had acted as a shake-up for his life: it had helped him decide that fighting on a small scale for what was right and good—for real, tangible ideals—was worth it, even if it meant having to fight against the forces that were claiming to stand for the “big picture”.

Of course, he wasn't alone. More people than ever before were being creative with their life choices, feeling inclined to trick the system in order to somehow change it from within, and mostly succeeding. The problem was that everybody still contributed to or depended on the system in some significant way or another, which as a whole kept it all safe, alive and kicking. But defining the system itself? That was the toughest part: wasn't Syntopia, too, a product, a paid service which run on private or public infrastructure? If that wasn't systemic, what was?

Syntopia; musies; people wearing goggles; Pavlina; hopper for Pavlina; Syntopia: that had been his train of thought at that exact moment. He went back inside, changed clothes, picked up his Arvi and headed for the car. He would have used his bicycle of course but he didn't want to ride with broken lights if he could avoid it; he was close enough to losing his bicycle license as it was.

What had become of this world, where humans were not only inherently considered prone to human error, but the mere fact, instead of being... well, nothing more than a logical certainty, had reached the point where it was considered a safety risk?

He approached the car, which duly reacted to his unique biometric identity by opening its front door for him once he was within 2 meters of it. He climbed inside and shut the door behind him slightly too hard—he never minded some physical feedback. The car seemed to ignore the noise and greeted him with a quick and reassuring beep-beep, similar to the ones produced by air-conditioners.

“Good morning pal, where to?” asked the car in the mock voice of an ‘80s Athenian taxi driver.

“Pavlina’s place”, said Vassilis.

The car quietly started moving.

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Vasilis’ house was situated on the top of a hilly olive grove that comprised most of his land. His family’s trees were once in equal parts their pride and joy, a yearly chore, and a dependable source of true wealth for generations; so dependable it had been taken completely for granted, and understandably so: people didn’t usually take note of even such basic things as their power supply, clean water or a comfortable temperature, unless it was the lack thereof.

His one and a half hectares of olive trees hadn’t borne more than a couple of kilos of fruit in more than three years, and the last time he had actually bothered to pick them was at least twice as long as that. Olive trees need at least 10 weeks of temperatures under 10-16°C, depending on the variety, in order to blossom, and recent winter temperatures in Southern Greece, as Vassilis had noted all too well, hadn’t been exactly shivery. However, unlike in Corinthia, as well as the Peloponnese in general and the Aegean region, there were still cooler days and nights each year to be enjoyed in the areas farther up north, e.g. the traditionally

agricultural plains of Thessaly and Macedonia (or even mountains in the afflicted regions). However, those parts hadn't been the largest olive producers in the country and thus had relatively few pre-existing olive trees.

What was worse was that the new enhanced olive varieties that had just come out wouldn't be bearing fruit for at least another ten years and, most importantly, it hadn't been just Greece that had been affected: low yields in the entire Mediterranean, once the source of 95% of the world's olive oil, meant that the product had gone from being a staple oil in Mediterranean culture to something of a luxury---still not as rare as bananas but something that could certainly not be enjoyed every day by the majority of the population.

This development had sent waves of culture shock across the region, equaling or perhaps even surpassing (and that was saying a lot) those that had emerged as a result of the social changes brought about by the Amsterdam Declaration (or Union Declaration), the mass migrations into the Union from the desolate Middle East and the prolonged crisis that had stabilized in the United South but had never really reversed its course. One thing had strangely stayed the same, however, and that was the belief that, when talking numbers, "growth" really meant stability and "stability" meant stagnation. The general assumption had remained throughout the whole ordeal that growth was always just around the corner. In fact, many people still believed, either because they could never know any better or lacked imagination, in that old-fashioned promise of infinite growth, that bizarre, incredibly unviable, *deranged* product of "human error" some holistic neurologists had started to include under the definitions of "thought". Wait... was that the other way around?

Vassilis startled himself with that question and promptly forgot all about it by becoming conscious of his own absence of mind. The autocar seemed to have noticed, because at that precise moment it asked:

“Feeling like a Tzatzikirama mix? You’ve been listening to them a lot lately, haven’t you? I personally can’t stand them, but you’re the boss.”

“*Someone’s* been paying attention. Go ahead,” replied Vassilis.

Mastropoulos’, the best electric santur player in the Union, started playing “Peristasiaka” (“Occasionally”) from somewhere in the sand-colored cabin, just as he had at the Integration Fest in Volos in ’22. Unfortunately, the hard disk where he used to keep the sound recordings from that night had failed recently, so he had to settle for the studio-recorded version. Still it was awesome.

The autocar had already driven down the 5km drive to the Tusangro cannabis fields that had popped up after the first couple of consecutive years the olive trees had failed to reproduce, and which they had replaced. Cannabis and Mastropoulos; *like cheese pie and chocolate milk*. “Organic” cannabis fields like the ones bordering the road he was travelling on had become a global fad project and many big agro corporations had made the switch from conventional monocultures to organic ones for PR and legal reasons. Its fibers a replacement for destructive cotton; its seeds high in protein and its flowers’ effects on the mind much less controversial than they had once been—what had the people in the past *been thinking?*

The move had been an extraordinary success in every way: it had reassured many consumers that Tusangro was ethical; it had enabled the company to continue making internal investments in GM livestock that were paying off in more ways than one, and it had also allowed them to claim that they were participating in the International Soil Carbon Regeneration program (abbreviation styled ISCO₂Re, pronounced officially “is core”, not that anybody was taking it seriously), which aimed to bind and return released carbon dioxide to the soil through planned large-scale agriculture. Vassilis seriously doubted that—

“We’re here”, announced the autocar/Athenian cabbie, startling him out of yet another unusual string of automatic thoughts. Driverless cars had curiously made it even more

difficult for users to pay attention to their surroundings while travelling, it seemed. He was still getting used to it, frankly. He grabbed the plastic container he'd put the hopper in and climbed out of the car.

Pavlina lived in Corinthia's New Damascus (there were another 31 in Greece alone), about 15 minutes from Corinth by car and really close to the ruins of the ancient port of Kechries. It was a once-abandoned village among many that had been allocated to Syrian refugees and a few dispossessed Greeks. Pavlina had been one of those Greeks who had benefited from this development, even though Vassilis often thought that there were others out there much more in need of a home such as that than she was. He hadn't told her this but he knew that she knew that he knew.

He entered the tiny old front gate of the old village house and walked up the 5 marble steps to the porch. There were fragrant lemon and tangerine trees on both sides. No matter that it was January. He felt bad for loving the smell. He knocked on the door. No reply. He mis-called her as she had told him to do if she wouldn't open for him. He heard a ringtone blaring from the other side of the door, a loud "tsk, just a second guys" and the shuffling of feet. The door opened, and there was Pavlina standing there, looking at him with an expression of both "I'm happy to see you" and "you just cut me off from something extremely important". She was immaculately dressed in a bordeaux velvet suit, complete with tie. She looked like the kind of person you had to look twice at to determine the sex of (the short hair and tall stature didn't help) and at least twice again to start guessing their age.

"Come on in. I have a vreeting with Syntopia 6 right now, but it won't take too long," she said turning around and going back to her Virtualoso.

Vassilis followed her into the house, which was as messy as her clothing was neat. Pavlina always dressed smart when working through VR: it translated into real confidence for her.

“What’s the vreeting about?”

“I’m teaching a couple of kids how to identify edible mushrooms. They’re good, these guys!”

They entered the VR room, the only room Pavlina cared to keep clean, which frankly wasn’t so hard, because it was almost devoid of furniture. There was just a small sofa, in which Vassilis sat. The rest was just empty, painted white. Pavlina put on the goggles and looked at the people around her only she could see.

“...oh, you’d rather have a break anyway? OK, that’s fine. A friend’s come to hand me some hop. Yeah, see you in 10 minutes.”

She took off the Virtualoso and turned to Vassilis expectantly. Vassilis’ look reminded her that the contents of the container wouldn’t come for free, and her expression accordingly changed, ever so slightly.

“If they hadn’t asked for a break would you have just kept doing the vreeting with me just sitting here?”

“Pardon me?” Pavlina raised an eyebrow.

“What’s the last time you *actually* went out for mushrooms?” asked Vassilis.

“Oh, not this again!” Pavlina rolled her eyes.

“While we’re at it, have you repaired your PVs?” asked Vassilis with a chuckle, in order to not sound too confronting. “I noticed coming in that the tools I brought you last time are exactly where I’d left them.”

“What makes you notice that? The fact that we’re friends doesn’t mean you can just come in here and criticize me like that, you know!” she said, picking up on the chuckle but still keen on sounding just a bit offended.

“I’m just concerned about you, that’s all. You’re on there all the time. It’s very useful and incredibly fun, I know, and I do have a weakness for it too. Plus it’s great that

you're in that community. The thing is, though, that while you're teaching people how to hunt for mushrooms, your very real PVs are just sitting there, not taking advantage of this *beautiful* weather," he grimaced. "If virtual hopper filled real bellies, would you have even sent me the message yesterday?"

Pavlina stared at him for a couple of seconds, then sat down next to him.

"I know," she said looking at her hands, as if had been very difficult to admit it even to herself. "And I know it sounds childish, but sometimes I feel as if life in there is more real than life out here."

Vassilis rubbed her back in sympathy. "You can't taste your mushrooms in there yet, can you? At the end of the day, that's what all this is really about, isn't it?" She looked at him and smiled pensively. "Remember, you can always come over and help me with my—"

His Arvi played a short bleet: he had a message from Nikos, his friend from high school who was in the New Damascus police force. His message, typed instead of handwritten (a sign of soft encryption) read: "Hey, did you remember to lock the door?"

"They know," he told Pavlina in as calm a voice as possible to avoid piquing the curiosity of the surrounding mobile devices. "About the crickets I mean." He gestured a pair of horns.

Pavlina softly bit her knuckles.

"I have to go. I really don't want to... destroy them, but..." said Vassilis.

"You don't have to," said Pavlina. "Unlocking that door is all you need to do."

THE END