

Essay:  
The Greek in me

Author:  
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My father is George, a Greek refugee from Turkey. That requires some explanation. Until 1922, the western coastline of Turkey was occupied not only by the Turks but by several million Greeks, Turkish citizens of Greek descent to be precise, who lived lives of occasional conflict but mostly of commerce and industry. In the town where George was born, Ayasalouk, this meant a world of figs, sultanas and tobacco. His father owned some estates and enterprises of middling value: fig orchards, vineyards, the local bakery, a hostelry. The crumbling ruins of Ephesus were within sight. All far removed from the Levantine hyperactivity of Alexandria, or Beirut, where wealthy French opera stars mingled with cool German spies.

To cut a long story short, as George would say, the mainland Greeks invaded Turkey in 1919 to reclaim the Holy Grail, the city of Constantinople, but got only halfway before the Turks pushed them back into the sea. This was the world after the Great War: shuffling boundaries, staking claims, losing and winning, and the ragged millions who weren't consulted.

One of them was George Maniatis, aged two. Fate threw George into the Aegean on a fiery summer's day in September 1922, in the burning port of Smyrna; and, scooped onto a ship, he ended up in a League of Nations tent camp in Piraeus with his bewildered mother and sister and older brother. He'd lost his father, whom he would never know, to the Turks.

Between 1923 and 1937, George developed into a handsome young ox, living in the northern Greek seaport of Thessaloniki, wider family spread from one end of the globe to the other: America, Australia. His fraught life was enriched by Jewish kids who spoke Spanish, and challenged by other Jews who traded the family's remaining jewellery for coins. Weed soup, lugging coal for a hardware shop, reading Marx: interesting times.

To the north, the Nazis impressed and repelled; to the north-east, the Soviets impressed and repelled; to the west, Mussolini was a joke. When the call came from his Uncle Tony to make some cash in Australia, when the war clouds grew so thick they

were choking half of Europe, what else would a smart, ambitious and adventurous young man do?

*Like millions in my century, I left home.*

*Where I began was pretty lousy, so I believed I was going somewhere better - a refugee with nothing much to lose. That's how they seduce you, how they lure you like some houri into the Afterlife - or in my case, onto a rust bucket to cross the curve of the world. And being only 17, with energies I didn't understand, I fell for these dubious offerings. I fell. You do not suggest such impossibly hard things to yourself; a new life filled with complications. You dream only of the goal, of the shining glory. So I fell. In not having a father alive, I was a moral orphan of sorts. I left a Europe ravaged by the Depression and clouded by racism and came to the earth's farthest point. Hot and barren. I was nudged into taking Tony's offer of work in Australia; the long chain of migration had, of course, found itself another hapless link. And I had found myself a guardian, if not exactly an angel. I planned to make a "fresh start", work hard for a couple of years and save money and go home. But that was five years ago. Now I am 22 and there is no way I can go back. I'm trapped.*

**H**is passport sits in Canberra, still. We Australians are great organisers, and our obsession with keeping records now seems a colonial gift as I hold the photocopy supplied by the Department of Immigration and stare into George's probing teenage eyes, themselves staring into a brass-rimmed lens in a Greek photographic emporium in 1937. He is Apollo come down from the mountain, garbed up in European splendour, set to conquer the New World. And the journey his prewar passport describes! Bustling ports that seem far too exotic now, in these hermetic times: off he went from Thessaloniki, down to Athens and Piraeus, thence to Alexandria, Port Said, Suez, Aden, Colombo, then the long haul across the Indian Ocean, dropping off fresh migrants to Perth, Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane.

*I arrive late at night, Uncle Tony in his American Buick whisks me around the fringes of the city, lest I be seduced into Brisbane, a hole of a place but less of a hole than where he's taking me, which is a pinprick on the English-lan-guage map called Wondai. Tony has the cafe there, the Busy Bee, and he has a pile of dishes that need washing in boiling water.*

The day George reached Australia he was no longer a Maniatis, but a Maniaty. This subtle and slightly ridiculous alteration meant nothing to him, believing it was the Australian way, but was to plague me for 20 years and sits at the core of this story. It's about the Greek in me.

I have always been a Maniaty, of course. My birth certificate in Brisbane (1949), my marriage certificate in Sydney (1996), my Australian passports (1968 and ongoing) and a dozen other well-flourished paper scraps testify that I was named, at birth, Anthony Emanuel Maniaty. That is still who I am officially when I am not being Tony Maniaty, the real me who takes out the garbage on Thursday nights, one more Australian with a wife and kids and mortgage who dreams the Australian Dream - large steady income, decent late-model car, beach house, living in peace - and dreams bigger dreams too, about unexpected creative explosions. *That* person is both alive and fantastic, a creation of many things. But this story is about the other me: Anthony Emanuel Maniaty, the official me at birth.

A half-Greek, two-dimensional entity; buried away in some file.

*The shed was mine. And I had my books, in English but that was all right. In fact best, the language of getting ahead! For seven hours a night, I was distant from the kitchen, away from Uncle Tony. In my shed, separated by a patch of weeds, I could read my books, delving into the Russian literary works that seemed at times far more ordinary than my own bizarre life.*

*Tony lived right above the cafe, in a warren of untidy timber-lined rooms. There was nothing hidden up there, no embarrassment, no leanings to the sad or glorious past; it was just space, almost devoid of furnishings and certainly of love. Tony didn't discourage me, but I understood his need for retreat. After those long days downstairs, the privacy of Tony's night space seemed to be all he had in this world, in his new Australian life. Maybe he was plotting his unlikely success up there. In five years I had climbed those rickety steps no more than a dozen times, and in the last year not once.*

I was named after my father's uncle, Anthony Emanuel Maniaty, who ran the cafe in country Queensland that was George's first destination in what he regarded on arrival as a dry, inhospitable antipodean hellhole; though in the spring of 1937 it carried one substantial plus, or an attractive minus: no looming threat of Nazi invasion, which the people of Greece five years later would challenge with horrific consequences. Of course, the Japanese were waiting in the wings, but George didn't regard anyone outside of Europe as a threat. *His* enemies were back there.

George's Uncle Tony had already been in Australia since the mid-1920s, linking up with brothers who'd come even earlier: two in 1910, to the warm dairy lands of south-east Queensland, running country cafes, in what now seems like almost a parody of chain migration. One struggled in Southport, cooking passable fish and chips until he got the call, went back to fight the Turks in 1919 and ended up dead in a trench, for the glory of Greece, the homeland. Others took his place on the battlefield, and in Australia.

*Tony got up early, no reason to sleep in. Pots clanged, and furniture scraped about with Tony's insistence on mopping the floors every day. The old blokes had come out to make money, to break that endless Balkan poverty cycle with assistance from migrant offspring, and then return as rich men do. They never did, of course; they planned with Athenian clarity, but what happened was always messier.*

*Peter Pappas at Nanango had turned an abandoned shop into a palace, redolent of distant Manhattan with glass and mirrors, and Vic Marinakis tried the same in Murgon, in what should have been a goldmine and looked like a jewellery store: all mirrors, cedar panels and a cheap lino floor that passed for Grecian marble.*

*To impress his peers, Vic had splurged 50 quid on customised Royal Doulton, to be shipped from England. While on order, in Vic's imagination, the crockery bearing the swirling initials VM dazzled his patrons: a ritzy scene from the latest Fred Astaire movie.*

*But always, the war: somewhere between Southampton and the Cape of Good Hope, a prowling German U-boat sent Vic's embossed plates to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. He never recovered; paying for the plates that refused to surface, in a cafe that couldn't live up to its pretensions.*

George headed off to Brisbane in 1940, tried to join up and failed, and worked the wartime cafes in that city of sex and soldiers. The Greeks ran their cafes, they ran their staff into the ground, some ran black markets, they went to garden parties at Government House to honour the brave Greeks' battle against the Nazi onslaught, they remained a swarthy clan at the periphery of what passed for Brisbane society, a clan of cooks mainly, and George hovered, neither in their world nor in ours. He said to me, years later, "I was a lost soul, you'd better believe it. I wasn't an Asia Minor Greek because I was only two when they kicked me out, not a mainland Greek because they didn't want *prosfyges* - refugees - there, I wasn't really one of the Greeks in Australia because I didn't want to be, I wasn't an Australian yet because I was a dago and the Australians didn't want us here. So I wasn't anyone. I was a stateless person."

As he said this, he was sipping Greek coffee and twirling his Greek worry beads and dropping earthy Greek swear words into his assault on a thankless world that didn't want him, and generally waving his thick hairy arms around and behaving, despite his King Gee boxer shorts and Woolies thongs, like a Greek. I believed in my soul that he was, had always been, Greek. And his Australian wife Phoebe, my dear mother with her hazel-green eyes, would stand at his side, accepting with a confusion of pride and awe this package of humanity that had appeared suddenly at a Brisbane City Hall dance and torn her from the cultural desert of south-east Queensland into the maelstrom of south-east Europe; though they'd never shifted from Brisbane, where they'd fallen hopelessly in

love. It happened so fast, not without considerable pain and doubt on her side; like many wartime brides, Phoebe never quite knew what she'd got herself into. But the overpowering reality: George was Greek, and as drop-dead handsome as Clark Gable would be if he were Greek, hot as hell.

*My father sits in a Brisbane tram, it's wartime and there's a soldier in a slouch hat behind him, and Dad's about 25, in a sports coat and open-necked white shirt and resting his elbow on the tram window. He's wearing his gold watch, you can see it and also that big American car overtaking the tram, right behind him.*

*But most of all his face, you can see his eyes: so dark and yet full of light, of radiant hope. He's going to retrieve his fortunes, the ones his family lost in Greece and Turkey 20 years before. He's on a tram, but when the war is over he'll be driving that big American car, and he'll be a winner too.*

We grew up: me and my older brother Jim. We grew up in and around Brisbane as half-Greek kids do, behind a series of corner shops, all older than their inhabitants and all in worse shape, cramped spaces with mice and warped timbers, flaking Dulux paint, rusting iron roofs, rust chewing hungrily into signs for Bushells Tea and Cottee's Jelly. We took shelter in our pathetic cabins, driven by Dad's exuberant migrant energy and desire to escape. Those shops were our ships, always docked yet taking us on to fresh destinations, new shops; with George our slightly crazed captain at the helm and trusty Phoebe as first mate. We felt lucky, staying afloat. In 1958, identity was not an issue. We didn't stop to think about it.

We were the Maniatys. We ran shops. Wasn't that enough?

*In the humid sub-tropics, we had one store; another, another. It was in George's blood to keep moving, and his blood was our blood. But things were different; our shops were not the hub of community anymore.*

*Dad and Mum merely filled the gaps: a loaf of bread, a tub of ice-cream, fags. As promised, a supermarket had come from America, and everything inside it was American. It's getting more like America every day, Dad says. They don't call it mixed business anymore, but retailing. It was atmosphere and mood, a sense of progress and a realisation that the postwar era was well and truly over.*

*And myself at 17, fresh out of Redcliffe High School?*

*I was observing my feet, watching them grow rapidly, and waiting for that necessary moment of pure balance between the past and future, to jump: to leave all this behind and enter something else. When the moment came, I was working as a teller in the*

*bank. I saw an advertisement in The Courier-Mail, stopped counting money and applied for the job.*

May, 1967. The universe is exploding and I'm in the box seat. For unfathomable reasons, the Australian Broadcasting Commission selects Tony Maniaty, half-Greek shopkeepers' son with a pencil-thin black tie, to be its next journalist. It's taken three grimy, sleepless decades of toil but George the refugee - the *prosfyge* - witnesses this Australian miracle: in a single biblical generation, his two boys have become professionals. Jim is accounting and I am reporting, trundling around Metropolis with a cynical camera crew and poking lenses into other lives and pretending to know everything under the boiling sun. We have escaped the gravity of being half-Greek; we're free and equal at last. The only problem is that name. Maniaty. Nobody can pronounce it properly, nobody can spell it.

Rhymes with ratty, I say. Or take your pick: tatty, batty.

I step onto the tarmac, and Greece hits me. High summer in the Aegean, 1968. I discover Greek cousins, Greek wine and food, Greek chaos, Greece. The genetic sledgehammer that nobody warns you about: a deeply hidden virus is buckling my knees on the tarmac. I still haven't cleared customs. I still haven't faced the mystery of my half-Greekness, yet I know in that split second of intense, dry heat all there is to know of Greece, all that I will ever feel about Greece, all that my father's Greekness means to me. His curse becomes my spirit. And I am 19, Hermes with a suitcase, god of travellers and merchants.

A military coup has turned Greece into a police state with tavernas, plate throwing and ancient ruins. The glory that was Greece is everywhere, and nowhere to be seen: democracy is dead, a farce parading as law and order. The goons are back, 25 years after they dangled a swastika flag off the Parthenon. This time they're Greek goons. My cousin rushes in: "Have you heard the news? The Russians have invaded Czechoslovakia!" Goons are taking over Europe again. Seated in a cafe, sipping my ouzo as history unfolds, I'm in no hurry to return to distant Australia.

The language is instantly mine. I can't speak it, but I feel every vibration coming off every Greek mouth, capturing every moment that George has spoken in Greek since I was born. Everything is stored in my fertile brain, everything Greek is mine. I have come to take possession of my ancient bones. The only problem, other than my crushing lack of Greek, is that name. Maniaty. Who changed that? Why does it have a "y" at the end?

Somebody changed it. In Australia, in 1910. It's too late now.

“Why are you called Maniaty, and not Maniatis?” Sixteen years later, I am sitting in the chaotically disorganised bureau of an Athenian academic, a philosophy professor with a nose for mysteries. The air is at least four centuries old, and has a certain density; the window is so grubby that we might be anywhere from Moscow to Lagos. Blurs of traffic roll by, but muffled noises give it away: the yoghurt seller calls for customers in Greek as thick as the product he sells, and the chestnut man mocks everything poetic and precise about his mother tongue.

“I now have the answer.” Blown off course by intense research, I was doodling one night and it rose from the paper, with an awful clarity. I’d been looking in all the wrong places: an attempt by my Greek-Australian ancestors to disguise their Greekness, or a belief that good Anglo names should end in a “y” and not “is”: hence Maniaty and not Maniatis? Some rationale for what otherwise was the work of a heartless prankster, who might as easily have switched the surname Blue to Bluey?

The professor shifts in his seat. “And what is the answer?”

“The answer, my friend, is a mistake. As you know, the Greek letter “s” takes two quite different forms. In the middle of a word, we use sigma in its rounded form, like this:  $\sigma$  And at the end of a word, sigma has a rather long tail, like this:  $\varsigma$  Bear in mind that we are talking about handwriting, in an era before either typewriters or computers. Notice if we write down the name Maniatis in Greek, we get this: **Μανιατις** You can see how easy it might have been for an Australian immigration official in 1910 to look at that mess and shift it back into an Anglicised version, joining the final “i” and “s” to create a “y”. Hence we end up with Maniaty.”

The professor sits there, quite stunned. “You’ve got it, that’s it!”

I am stunned too. I’ve cracked the mystery. And I am liberated, and vindicated: Greekness has called, I’ve responded. I am stirred to further action, to the source: across the Aegean, to the country and coastline where all this began.

Uncle Tony had the only surviving photo of the Ayasalouk house. He showed it to me, his great nephew, in Australia in the 1960s. The glimpse was hardly worth it: a fragment of window, wooden latticework, and stone surrounds, say three metres by five metres. Behind this, unseen, was presumably the vast Maniatis estate, source of several generations of effort and prosperity. This was where Tony was born, the house in Turkey where my father was born, and where a Maniatis of my own generation would have been born. I’d gone as far back in time and place as history allowed.

*Nothing had changed; the house was destined to go nowhere, locked as it had always been between three crumbling supports of a Roman aqueduct. It consisted of a double*

front, two stories high and painted blue, not turquoise but a very peaceful blue. On the street was a storeroom, once for horses and carts. There was a staircase, and on the first floor were two alcoves in lattice. That's the part they'd embellished most, the Middle Eastern touch of lattice. A grapevine crawled up to one of the alcoves, lace curtains were drawn at both windows. Somewhere inside, my father was born. Tightly compressed between the ancient stones! Among these ancestral ruins, George might have stayed and built another family, a Levantine identity, a different life. Instead he'd been bundled out of that doorway, into the night.

I was researching a novel, to be called simply *Smyrna*, which would bring George's journey closer to mine and help me understand what he'd been through, and what I might need to move forward. This was back when I believed that writing could help me sort myself out: literature as therapy. George couldn't live forever, but I was an immortal 35.

The arc of my interest in Greece gains height, but the quest and arc don't always correspond. A well-known Australian writer berates me at a literary festival: "You make so much of this Greekness in you, it's just a sliver down one side of your body." She's right, of course. And hopelessly wrong. Inside my bones I feel more Greek than human. And I believe this sensation can be captured and sealed, bureaucratically.

In cloudy Brisbane, I park the car underground and help Dad up the concrete ramp. He's not getting any younger, and he's not getting any lighter. He's still that bloody ox that ran away from home, that sailed across the Indian Ocean on some Italian rust bucket. We've got an appointment with the Greek consulate.

"What is your village?"

"What do you mean, village?"

The official repeats: "You have to be registered in a village."

"I grew up in Thessaloniki, a million people. There's no village."

In Greek. "Nai, but first you'll have to prove you're Greek."

"What do you mean, I have to prove I'm Greek? I am a bloody Greek," he

says in his finest bloody Greek. So where is the paperwork to prove you're Greek? "I was a refugee, son. Do you know about the *prosfyges*?"

"Oh yes," he says, perhaps not for the first time. *A real nightmare.*

An hour later we emerge with considerably more paper than when we entered. I don't know it yet, but this will become the standard routine for another eight years. I am trying to claim my birthright. My father is Greek, so I am Greek, and because I am Greek, I am



seeking a Greek passport.

With Greece, everything is at once carefree, and impossible.

I'm filming television current affairs in Europe. The Berlin Wall has fallen, the Soviets are history, it's 1992. Haven't I done all this before? The tape is the loop of history. Hungary has seen off the Turks, the Nazis, the Russians. I make my way south to Athens. I'm filming two women who run two Communist parties; very Greek. I'm also trying to get my Greek passport, still. That other loop keeps producing papers. *Haven't I done all this before?*

My needs have shifted, critically. Now I want the passport because I'm living in Paris and working in France, and want to continue being one of the new Europeans, and that means having a European passport, and because Greece is now part of Europe, that translates to a Greek passport. This is the pure, clear reduction of what I am trying to do. Get my passport. Be, if not a Greek, then a European. Australia is slipping away.

Kostas runs the film production company but immediately wants to drop everything and help in my quest for a passport. "You need to register your birth in a Greek village. That's all, really."

I sigh. "But I wasn't born in a Greek village, I was born in Brisbane."

"Doesn't matter. You need to register in your father's village."

"My father was born in Turkey, in 1919. There's no village."

He shrugs. "Doesn't matter. We can register you in my village."

"It's that easy?" But of course I know it cannot be.

"I know the mayor personally. He will help us."

I could see it coming: "And we'll have to pay him?"

"What do you think we are, thieves? We have to pay him a visit."

For some reason, the mayor of the village is never available. Perhaps there is no mayor. Perhaps no village. Perhaps the village is a metaphor, a secret code word, or something I'm not getting?

To surrender now is unthinkable: Greekness is never admitting defeat.

Since I am in Greece and my father is Greek, I am now Greek? No, it has nothing to do with my father. I am a Greek because I am Greek. I have taken possession of my own identity. None of this has to do with George now, it's beyond genes and ancestry. I feel Greek and I need to convert that emotion into an official document that confirms what I

feel is not ephemeral, nor the product of too many nights in smoky *bouzouki* clubs with a balloon for a head and a heart that's lost its blood and turned to pure white marble. I need to formalise my Greekness, if only to relax a little and enjoy it.

I'm looking for a slice of acceptance, beyond street-level Athens. I want something higher; bureaucratic approval from someone on the ninth floor of some government department for a blood transfusion of sorts. I'm happy to swap Australian blood for Greek blood. Maybe a brain transplant while we're at it, a potion that makes me wave my hands about, tablets for getting excited over small things.

The turmoil of George's early life is behind him; he's fled the scene of the crime. I'm slowly becoming a Greek and George is becoming an Australian. It's taken us 40 years to get this far. We're like that DNA spiral, entwining and swapping our identities as we progress: to what? I've moved beyond emotions into a quest for mechanical resolution: I want a Greek body, a Greek name.

**M**y lawyer is Greek, Australian born. He has a Greek passport and is enmeshed in the Greek community. I am a Greek outsider, struggling after 40 years to prove my Greek identity. My lawyer can help. He is plugged into the Greek diaspora. *He* will make the necessary connections.

The plump consular officer in Sydney assigned to my case has a literary bent, so having written two novels seems a major plus. I should realise that literature has long lost its power to deceive or impress, but my desperation is dressed in smiles. She really likes my books, even if they are written in English. *English is the language of getting ahead*. Maybe it will get me beyond where I'm stuck right now, in 1994, in bureaucratic limbo.

"What we need to establish is your father's village."

"My father doesn't have a village. He was a refugee. He was born in 1919, under the Turks. Do you want the name of the Turkish town where he was

born? I've been there myself, I found the house ..."

"It must be a Greek village. In Greece proper. You understand?"

"But he wasn't born there. How could he register there?"

She shrugs. "These things can be arranged." *Literature's loss*.

No, this isn't about Greek bureaucratic inefficiency. It's about my own inefficiency as a human being, as someone unable to decide who I should be. Of course the Greek bureaucracy is inefficient, all bureaucracies are, but they didn't ask to be guardians of a lost century of suffering. I have to stop believing that I can achieve anything in this process other than the obvious and hopefully unchallengeable fact: I am an Australian.

That could be a step backwards, I tell myself. What am I doing?

Or it could be my salvation from Greece.

*A refugee from Greece, George had set to work, not washing dishes, of course, but trying to build and shape an identity. After 40 years, he still didn't know what that identity was. And now, emerging into the Athenian traffic, his grown son was standing on that same difficult bridge, waiting for the lights to change.*

*He was becoming a refugee by default; his main allegiance was still neither here nor there, but stuck in the uneasy relation between the two sides.*

One day I was destined to wake up and realise how insane my quest for Greek identity was. Eight years before, I'd started the process, now the file was thicker than a hawser and deeper than the abyss, and I was no closer to holding a Greek passport in my hand. The actual paperwork, covered in a dozen red seals, ran to 56 pages and stretched sideways into Greek ministries and the Greek Orthodox Church, and filled two large folders, and I could no longer separate the official photocopies from the photocopies of the official photocopies. There were no originals, which was of course the whole problem. And in a crusty land of a thousand villages, I still couldn't find my phantom village. My quest was growing more erratic.

Sometimes you have to declare, if not total defeat, then cease-fire.

Just as the sun went down on the British Empire, so the sun would set eventually on my international quest for identity. I had done my time in the newsrooms of London, I had lived on the boulevards of Paris, I had walked every backstreet in Athens. And on a balmy night under a fullish moon, in a taverna of no consequence, I retired to restock my energies and maybe get drunk. And with several waiters hovering and less than a single beer in my belly, in that outdoor dining room, somewhere deep in the 1990s, I had a very small epiphany.

At the steaming barbecue, through dangling blackened saucepans, I glimpsed a young cook grilling *souvolakia* and thought of George, of one photo we had of him basting a pig on a rotisserie, and those country cafes spread across Australia a century ago, ready to refuel the passing throng; not only Greek cafes but Chinese cafes. Yes: the Greeks and Chinese were partners in outback Australia, refugees and on the run from whatever evils lurked in Greece and China. Why was I thinking this? Because the cook at the spit in Athens wasn't Greek, but clearly Chinese. What was he doing in this city of gods? I saw in a flash how migration, hard work and acceptance were just raw components in the endless chain of survival.

The Greeks had gone to Australia, the Italians had sailed to America, the Chinese had

gone everywhere; the Balts and the Lebanese, the Vietnamese, a whole leaking raft of humanity had shifted to the extremities of the world. Backs bent, motives attacked, their poor hearts tangled in red tape, but mostly they stayed. What madness made them head off to these other lands?

“You don’t leave a country because you love it,” George had said, “You leave because you have to or because you hate it, and unless you’re a fool, you make a decision to stick it out. You meet someone and you marry, you have kids and make a decent life for yourself. People who talk all day about the Old Country get up my bloody nose. It’s got nothing to do with the Old Country or the New World.” He’d paused. “You stop where you find love. That’s all.”

I sank my beer. I needed to get back, to my wife and kids.

*Other lives might have seen greater turmoil, but I knew Uncle Tony’s was quietly doomed: having come so far, so long ago, his now seemed to have stopped, here. Yes, he’d sought me to work in the cafe kitchen. But I wasn’t blind to this. Why else would a man without a child, without children of his own, import his nephew halfway across the planet if not to place himself somewhere on that great chain of being? To say, really, I belong to the human race?*

*That was the truth behind Tony Maniaty. But who, faced with a conflict as big as the world has ever seen, utters a thing so pure, and worthy enough of the gods? To say we share not only culture and blood but - love. In the distant, dying trenches, maybe; but in a greasy cafe a hundred miles from anywhere, to admit such a thing called for more than either of us could say - a declaration of our mutual interest, which in me would amount to self-betrayal, and in my uncle to a complete loss of pride.*

*We were Greeks, which made it impossible; centuries of darker emotions had seen to that. Greeks knew the price of being Greek. Yet they were human, which meant it was not impossible either.*

Two weeks ago, I received a call on my mobile. A colleague, pushing a four-wheel-drive Toyota across the Kimberley; headed for an indigenous arts festival. “Do you know the ABC is playing *Smyrna* on Radio National? Alex Dimitriades is reading it every day.” She’s churning up Outback dust and listening to the words I wrote about George and displacement 15 years ago. On the ABC, where I started work 37 years before. They sound like, and are, words from another century.

*I’m writing secretly, in my head: “Now I must finish my lunch and coffee and gather more bits and pieces for my nest of words.” But I am not a writer, he told himself. I am a reporter. I deal in undeniable facts. And high overhead, I look up and see a jet*

*streaking miles above the city of learning. A golden dome was built here by the gods, a library of truths. And now the twin white jet trails appear to be splitting the dome above Athens in half.*

And she's hearing this broadcast off a satellite and telling me by mobile phone, while embracing a culture that makes the Ancient Greeks look like newcomers. None of this seems out of place. It's 2004. Even Greece has joined the digitally-enhanced world. I look outside, see my boys chasing each other around the yard. Their mother has Latvian blood on her mother's side and Irish-Australian on her father's. We've given them Greek names. One looks Balkan, with brown eyes and olive skin. The other is pure Baltic, blue eyes and blond. I've done a George, of course, marrying out to the edge.

"Thanks," I say. "I'll listen in."

After two episodes I stop listening. Instead, I pick up a pristine, slightly yellowing copy of the novel, written by Tony Maniaty, not the person I've since become, and read it for the first time in 15 years.

*The beauty of this place isn't really mine, he thought. Whatever's shaped me so far can be traced to another land, and not Greece. Rough and stony too; but the windy exhilaration of Greece was replaced there by a silence. You could even hear it, standing and watching a thousand sheep in a clay pan. And every hundred miles or so in Australia was a deserted outpost, rocks gathered into walls, decayed by time, and falling down again in rough pyramids. Strange piles of rocks you came across, like totems. It was a horrific and engaging landscape that could quickly kill you. People were drowned or burned alive, despite heroic attempts to save them; they went out walking and never came back. Floods and fires: sheep were roasted on the spot.*

*When things got rough in Australia, it was like something out of Dante's hell. All roads led nowhere, only further and further out, under a paper-thin sky.*

I receive a parcel in the mail. A copy of *Smryna*, but not quite the one I wrote. It's a Greek translation. I flip through the crisp pages, seeing in the text the occasional word I know, but the rest is meaningless. It's all in here, of course, George's story and my efforts to untangle it, but locked inside that language I still can't read or understand. For a moment I laugh.

What if it becomes a bestseller in Greece? They'll fly me over to speak to the media. So I'll be Tony Maniaty - not Andonis Maniatis - speaking to the Greeks, in English, which someone will translate back into Greek, about a novel I wrote about Greece, in English, which someone has translated into Greek, which I can't read because it's not in the English I wrote it in.

*All the time my head is like this. Bound, unbound. Learning.*

Now I'm back in Brisbane, visiting George and Phoebe. For a man with a broken past, George has managed to assemble quite a present: he's nearly 85, still has his wits, drives his old car, reads a book a day, toils in his garden, still watches everything on television. Phoebe, frail now, is still observing his every move, wise to his Greekness yet as mystified about George as she was 60 years ago; sharing his longevity.

"Hey, Tony," he calls, "see how well Greece is doing in the Olympics?"

"I haven't been watching, Dad. Too busy. Tell me, they doing all right?"

He beams. "Best thing for bloody Greece that ever happened!"

I sip my wine, watching pumped-up colour. More winners, more medals. What if they decided to show only the last placegetters? That would really interest me. Maybe I'm tired. Maybe cynicism has finally got me. Maybe I'm sick of Greece. Maybe Greece is sick of me. Maybe it's finally over.

With or without a village, George is a Greek at heart. No lack of official papers can dent that Greekness. George hasn't changed one iota.

What's changed is the Greek in me. ■

Greek to Me. The Comma Queen on the pleasures of a different alphabet. By Mary Norris. January 7, 2019. Save this story for later. For the ancient Greeks, letters were sacred, offered as gifts to the gods. Illustration by Tamara Shopsin. Save this story for later. For these reasons, Woolf writes, reading Greek in translation is "useless." Woolf did not know Greek the way bees do not know pollen. I never did get around to Latin, and came to Greek only when I was in my thirties. Compared with Woolf, I was an overgrown child with a set of wooden alphabet blocks. Fortunately, I like blocks, and I love the alphabet. The English alphabet is descended, via the Latin, from the Greek alphabet, which, according to Herodotus, was adapted from the Phoenician alphabet in the time of Cadmus. That's Greek to me or It's (all) Greek to me is an idiom in English, expressing that something is not understandable. The idiom is typically used with respect to the foreign nature, complexity or imprecision of verbal or written expression or diagram, often containing excessive use of jargon, dialect, mathematics, science, symbols, or diagrams. The metaphor makes reference to Greek (either ancient or modern), as an archetypal foreign form of communication both written and spoken. It's All Greek To Me! - teach primary children songs about HISTORY - ANCIENT GREECE. Greek to me - Shakespeare Speaks. It's All Greek to Me: "The Phrase". OPA! It's All Greek to Me! It's Not Greek to Me - 10 Lessons in Greek. Transcription. Contents.