

# **100 days of solitude**

Daphne Kapsali

## Day 1

Today, I am alone. I woke up alone this morning. All the rooms that had recently contained sleeping people, people I had to be careful not to disturb, are empty; all the doors are open and the beds are untouched. I made coffee loudly and played music. I let the front door slam, carelessly, and no one protested. I am alone.

I will be alone for the next one hundred days. By choice.

Last May, I took my life apart in order to put it back together in a way that made more sense. I've always claimed to be a writer, and that's been both my identity, and my – rather thinly woven – safety net, but I'd done no serious writing for years. I lived in London, surrounded by amazing people and doing a job I loved, but my life was like a beautiful, serene lake: deep enough and lovely to look at, but stagnant in places, and closed in. There was nowhere to go.

So I quit my job, left my flat, stored all my stuff in my friend Mel's attic, and moved to Greece, to spend the next four months writing. The plan was to stay in my mum's spare room in Athens for May and June, then our family house in Sifnos for July and August (rent-free places, with very few expenses), and then return to London in September, having established, once and for all, whether I was actually a writer, or whether I should stop clinging to that dream and move on to something else.

Four months on, I have proven conclusively, to myself and those unfortunate enough to have been around me during this journey of self-discovery, that I am indeed a writer, through and through. It has also come to my attention that I possess all the necessary personality traits to qualify as a reclusive author, many of which are shared with arseholes, and are nothing to be proud of. I have suffered through episodes that, to me, were alarmingly reminiscent of a mental breakdown but which my poet father diagnosed as "being inspired" and entailed, among other disturbing behaviours, scribbling away manically on any available piece of paper (I learned to carry a notebook with me, wherever I go), and biting the head off anyone who as much as glanced in my direction while I was writing.

These revelations are both a huge relief and a problem because, as uncomfortable and exhausting and costly as this journey has been so far, it is also, probably, the best thing I've ever done, and I just cannot go back to the life I had before.

So I'm not going back. I'm staying. I'm staying for as long as it takes, or as long as I can, or at least until the weather gets really bad; the locals that I consulted while trying to decide just how insane this plan might be all assured me that I can comfortably make it to December, provided I invest in an electric blanket. So that's just over three and a half months; roughly one hundred days. One hundred days of solitude, and writing. One hundred days here, in Sifnos, a small and relatively remote Greek island in the West Cyclades, with a permanent population of 2,000. Plus one. And for the next one hundred days, I will attempt to live here, alone, in a summer house on the very edge of a tiny village, halfway up the island's tallest mountain. I will attempt to stay warm and sane and cheerful as the days grow shorter and darker and one by one the last of the holidaymakers return to their real lives, brave as the noises outside my window grow stranger and more frightening, and determined as this ceases to be the latest crazy scheme Daphne has adopted and becomes, simply, what I'm doing. And no one but a few loyal friends pays me any

attention anymore. And I will write. Because I figure, if there's a place to be a  
reclusive author, it's here. And if there is a time, it's now.

And so it begins.

## Day 2

To begin with, a confession: Day 1 was technically Day 3, which means that today, Day 2, is actually Day 4. But I decided to put the technicalities aside and allow myself a couple of days of transition. Before you attribute any undeserved wisdom to this apparently sensible decision, however, let me tell you it was driven entirely by necessity: I have been alone since Friday night, and spent the weekend of my transition paralysed with fear.

I'll explain: it so happened that the last week of my original four months of writing coincided with my sister's wedding, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August. A wedding which took place here, in Sifnos, in a field attached to our house and hastily (but successfully) converted into a suitable venue for a wedding party of fifty. That's fifty of our closest friends and relatives, all arriving to the island in the week preceding the party, and then, inevitably, departing in the days that followed.

Which meant that, in preparation for the solitude that I, ostensibly, looked forward to, I barely spent a moment by myself for close to two weeks, and that in the last week or so, I've had to say goodbye to a shocking number of people, including my grandma, my mum, my dad, my stepdad, both my brothers, both my sisters, my sister's husband, my most favourite cousin and a host of friends, old and new. This process of ceremonious and often tearful goodbyes and assurances that we'd meet again, soon, took place over several days, in an endless seesaw of emotions, and culminated in a solitary bus ride from port to home, which had all the makings of the ultimate anticlimax.

And I'm sure, as I counted out my change for the bus fare with trembling hands, as I stared out the window at the wild landscape of the island that is to be my home for the next few months, that feeling of anticlimax was present, somewhere. As was relief, and excitement, and hope. But they were all drowned out by a massive tidal wave of a much more powerful emotion: the generalised anxiety that had been my constant companion throughout this week of goodbyes now gave way to a total and all-consuming terror. Which, at least, had the decency of being very specific, and vocalised itself in the following, eloquent phrase: *What the fuck are you doing?*

It wasn't a question I could answer. All I knew was that my teeth were numb with the fear, and if that isn't a sensation you've experienced, I hope you never do. It's not pleasant.

My resolve faltered; all my thoughts turned to the imagined comforts of Athens, of London, of anyplace but here. Of safety and stability and familiarity. Of teeth that feel normal in my mouth.

But I was saved by the Greek poet Cavafy and my Australian cousin Peter (a.k.a. Cousin), whom I'd just waved onto a ferry bound for Athens and then on to Sydney. Among several choice souvenirs that Cousin picked up during his week in Greece (which included a beach towel featuring a killer whale posing as a dolphin on a background of planets and palm trees, and bearing the legend GREECE) was a new translation of Cavafy. It included a poem entitled *The Satrapy* that I'd never read before. Cousin, who is in the process of forming some resolutions of his own, picked it out on the morning of his departure and showed me. 'This is a good one,' he said, 'for when I'm losing my resolve'.

It was: it is basically a warning against settling for the easy and the conventional and the obvious at the expense of our dreams, our "grand and noble acts"<sup>i</sup>. And with the foresight that my own resolve would be tested, frequently and in

many different ways (though I didn't expect it to be as soon as that very evening), I took a photo of it on my phone so I could read it in times of emergency.

What the fuck *am* I doing? I don't know. But I'm doing it anyway. And I'm still here, despite the fear, on Day 2 or Day 4, because I don't want the comforts of Athens and London and safety and things that are easy and known. *I long for something else, ache for other things.*

*And without them, what kind of life will I live?<sup>ii</sup>*

## Day 3

Some days will be uneventful; day 3 was one of them. My critical self – I'll call her Antagonist, an integral part of every story – asserts that such a day doesn't even deserve an entry. We argue.

'What did you do today?' she demands.  
I looked at facebook.  
I did two loads of laundry.  
I fed a cat sausages.  
I spoke to my sister.

'And what did you achieve?'  
Clean sheets.  
A happy cat.

'Is that all?'  
I planted radishes and lettuce in the garden.  
I wrote three sentences – one of them incomplete.  
I started a funding project on kickstarter.  
I made a salad with leaves I picked myself.

Antagonist is not impressed. She's mean, and she feeds on my fear and my frustration. She makes a "pff" sound, and dismisses me with a flick of her wrist.

'You might as well give up', she suggests, without even looking at me.

And I'm tempted. But then it occurs to me that if she's the Antagonist, that makes me the Protagonist, the hero of this story. And heroes become heroes by overcoming adversity, finding their way around the obstacles strewn in their path, and triumphing over the villains. And sometimes adversity takes the form of a perfectly ordinary day, in which no literary masterpieces were created, and the most heroic thing I can do is to accept that that's OK. That there will be days like this, and there'll be other days, better, worse, good and terrible, days when I will question everything, and days when I will slay the fiercest dragons and be crowned Queen of Sifnos. And each day will be worth as little or as much as the one before, and the one after.

'Hang on,' I say to Antagonist as she gets up to leave, impatient with my lack of response. 'There's more':  
I swept the leaves in the yard.  
I tidied up my wardrobe.  
I went to the beach.  
I bought tomatoes and beetroot from an organic farm.  
I made a tentative agreement with the farmer to help him with planting in exchange for vegetables.  
I did yoga at dusk to the sound of classical music.  
I went to a dinner party and met some lovely people.  
I looked at the moon.  
I read my book.  
I slept on fresh sheets.

Antagonist looks bored; she even gives an exaggerated, theatrical yawn to illustrate her point. She obviously has very little faith in my powers of observation.

'Who cares', she says.

I do. And I'm not bored. I am the hero of this story, and I don't need to slay dragons on a daily basis to prove it. And day 3 was neither a waste nor an obstacle, and I will not stumble on it. Nor will I step over it, casually, as if it meant nothing, on my way to day 4. There will be days like this. And it's OK.

## Day 4

I woke up feeling pretty rough this morning. I'd had a bad night's sleep, and even went in search of a thermometer around 5 am; my temperature was normal, but I still felt like shit. Things weren't much improved when I got up, just before 9. I took an inventory of my symptoms – swollen glands, achy head, heavy limbs and a feeling of generalised vagueness – and decided to allow myself a full day of crappiness, a day to give into it, indulge it, on the condition that I'd be fine tomorrow. (I adopted this strategy a few years ago, and it very rarely fails; except – as I learned the hard way this summer, when I fell off a wall – in the case of muscle strain: it really does take 6-8 weeks to heal, whether it suits your plans or not.)

I made myself a cup of tea (I couldn't face coffee yet), drank it while checking my email, and dragged myself over to Eleni's – my friend and neighbour, hostess of extraordinary dinner parties, and fellow solitary dweller in the Sifnos autumn. Eleni took a break from washing up the dishes from last night's dinner, made us both coffee, wrapped a shawl around my shoulders, and we sat down in her back yard. And then she asked me what I was planning to write during the next 96 days of solitude, and a really nice thing happened: as I tried to put an array of scattered, half-formed ideas into words that made sense, I began to notice a change come over me. Antagonist was mercifully absent (I suspect she's still sulking because I dared stand up to her yesterday) and I found my voice getting a little bit louder, my gestures more and more animated (I had to throw off Eleni's shawl so as not to overheat) and, for the first time in weeks, I actually felt excited about what I'm doing. What I will be doing. What I might achieve.

Because, even when the isolation isn't physical, even when you haven't given up your life to be a recluse on a Greek island, writing is a very lonely occupation. You have no colleagues, but your office space is shared with countless horrible little demons of self-doubt, and insecurity, despondency and hopelessness. And they're not very supportive at all. It's hard enough pouring your soul into something that may just come to absolutely nothing, without feeling that no one gives a shit, one way or the other. You need accountability, and sometimes all it takes is someone to show an interest, ask a question or two, acknowledge this scary, crazy thing you're doing. And it keeps the demons quiet for a little while.

I left Eleni's house knowing that I would produce no great writing today, but with renewed hope that, on another day, I might. Any day now. I just might.

So today turned out to be a good day, after all; the crappiness has been fully and pleasantly indulged, and I haven't heard a peep from my demons. I'm pretty sure they've gone off to find Antagonist, and together they are plotting how to bring about my demise. Let them. I will be ready to fight them again tomorrow when, as agreed, I will be fine.

## Day 5

I found out today that my body is an impenetrable fortress. Not in a good way: I am, apparently, completely blocked up. This according to Polyna, a permanent resident of Sifnos and practitioner of the Bowen Technique, commonly known as BowTech.

I met Polyna at Eleni's a few nights ago; they're old friends, and Eleni thought we should meet since I'll be spending the next few months on the island. So I went over and we sat in the kitchen, and chatted over a glass of wine and a smoke. And BowTech came up, which I'd never heard of before, surprisingly, since I spent two years working in a yoga centre in London, and I thought I'd come across pretty much every variation of alternative therapy there is. Polyna, who treats all her clients completely free of charge, offered me a treatment, so I could see what it was all about.

And thus Eleni and I drove up to her house this afternoon – which was a revelation in itself. Perched, all alone, at the top of a hill, Polyna's house has uninterrupted views of practically the whole of Sifnos, the sea, and the islands beyond. We were welcomed by a cat (one of several), Polyna, and her dog Coco, and ushered to the balcony which – no doubt helped by the infinity pool at its edge – felt like it literally opened up onto the ocean. It was a perfectly still, windless day, sunny but with strange, heavy clouds drifting across the sky and casting their reflections on the sea; the sort of day that, Eleni claims, you only get to experience in September. It's one of the gifts post-holidays Sifnos bestows upon those of us who stick around past the end of the summer. In any case, the overall effect – the solitary house, the stillness, the light, the clouds, the sparkling pool and the ocean – was entirely mesmerising. And made even better by the presence of two kittens lounging in the sun.

We had espresso and then Polyna led me to a room in the back for my treatment. Before she began, Polyna explained that she would apply certain moves, in sets, to different parts of my body, and then leave the room for a few moments, to give my body the time to process them and the freedom to react as it pleases. 'Don't be alarmed,' she instructed. 'Don't censor it.'

So I lay there, first on my front and then, briefly, on my back, as Polyna went in and out of the room, accompanied by Coco (who, apparently, often assists on these sessions by showing Polyna where on the client's body she needs to work). And with every move I expected something a little alarming to happen, hoped for it, even, but it never came. Certain moves felt as if they were spreading out to the wider area of the point they were applied, but my body had very little to say, and certainly nothing that might require censoring. With the last move applied to my head, Polyna told me to take my time getting up, and left the room for the final time. Coco stayed; I could hear her breathing somewhere in the vicinity of my feet.

When I stood up to leave the room, Coco lifted her head and gave me a look of concern, and then escorted me to the balcony, where I rejoined Polyna and Eleni.

'How do you feel?' Polyna asked.

'Very relaxed,' I admitted. No small feat, considering I'd spent the day in utter agitation, as a result of an earlier run-in with kickstarter. 'A bit lightheaded.'

Polyna nodded. 'You are very tense.'

'Yes.'

'In all my time as a therapist,' she said contemplatively, 'I've never come across a body that did nothing at all.'

'And that's me?'

‘That’s you. You just wouldn’t let me in.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ I said, though actually, at the same time, I was. ‘It’s been a difficult summer.’ And it was: the last few months have been extremely challenging, in many different ways, and I’ve often told people I’d put up a fence around me, to protect myself.

‘A fence?’ Polyna laughed. ‘That’s no fence; it’s prison bars!’

So there you have it: I am uniquely damaged, imprisoned by my own body, and need help. But, luckily, help is at hand, in the form of Polyna, who offered (*insisted*, in fact) to give me weekly sessions for at least the next two months.

‘We’ll bring those bars down,’ she promised. ‘We need to. Especially if you want to be writing.’

I want to. That’s what I’m here for.

## Day 6

My biggest fear is running out of books.

OK, I lie: my biggest fear is not being able to write. Not being able to write well. Going back to working 70 hours a week, 49 weeks a year so that I can have three weeks in the sunshine, and calling that my life. Then: the loneliness and the cold. I'm also really scared of cockroaches, but I've seen none so far, and I have bug spray.

But the thought of running out of books terrifies me. There is very little loneliness left over – not enough to send you running for the next ferry back to Athens – when you have books to read. And I came here armed with enough books to see me through the summer (and, thanks to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which took me a whole month to get through, I still have two left) but I hadn't planned on staying past the first week of September, and the books are running out. Just like my summer clothes are beginning to feel flimsy and inadequate. And as soon as the decision to stay was made, the fear arrived.

There are two bookstores in Sifnos; only one of them sells English books, and it will close on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. Amazon, presumably, will deliver, but my address would look something like:

Daphne Kapsali

Eleimonas (just past the church, on the left, next to Mrs. Souli) (grey gate, with a knocker in the shape of a bird)

Katavati, Sifnos, Cyclades, Greece

And I don't really like my chances. Once the books run out, that's it. Nothingness. Doom.

I am considering a Kindle, against my principles. I have resisted getting one so far, despite its obvious benefits, because I love books. Having them, holding them, stacking them up next to my bed. Flicking through them, folding the pages down to mark my spot. Their feel; their smell. But beggars truly can't be choosers. I have 94 days to get through, and principles won't do it. I have no books, but I have wifi. Bring it, amazon (address as above); I'm begging.

But in the meantime, the fear has been temporarily assuaged, thanks to a wonderful exchange scheme run by the bookstore in town. Bring in three second hand books, get one for free. So I ransacked the shelves and lugged twenty of them down into town; Eleni brought three. And then, by some miracle of literary providence, the bookstore lady received our offerings, counted them, and told us we could choose eleven (11) books in return.

'Really?' I said, before I could stop myself. 'That sounds like too much.' Knowing full well that, according to the 3:1 ratio, we were only entitled to seven.

The lady, however, shook her head. 'Eleven,' she repeated, looking bored.

Eleni and I scampered round the corner to the second hand shelves.

'But,' I said.

'Shut up,' she hissed.

And I complied.

So I've just returned home with ten brand new, second hand books, which I lugged all around town for two hours as we browsed the shops for bargains (they're all about to close for winter) and then all the way back up the hill. And which are totally worth the pain in my shoulder.

Also, we got chocolates for free. There were only two left of the kind we wanted (candied slices of orange dipped in chocolate), and the man let us have them free of charge. And I met another kitten; we had a lovely chat. I said 'Hello, who are you, then?' and it said 'Mew!', several times.

I'm happy, and the future is bright: I have books, and the ability to talk to cats. There'll be no loneliness left over at all.

## Day 7

My strategy for perpetual good health has let me down. It appears that, despite my insistence that I am well, I have a cold. Try as I might, there's no denying the aching head, the coughing, the sneezing, and the snot coming out of my nose.

I was determined, nonetheless, to go to the beach, as it was my last chance to see Emmy, one of the friends Eleni introduced me to this week; I've only met her twice, and we've exchanged a few words, but she's lovely, and she's leaving tomorrow, and I wanted to say goodbye. So when Eleni came to pick me up this afternoon, I put on my bravest face and my hat, and followed her meekly to her car. Halfway there, I had a coughing fit.

'Oh,' Eleni said, 'you really are ill.'

'No,' I said, because I've trained myself not to use negative words, lest the universe is listening, 'not *ill*. I'm just a *different kind of healthy*.'

I can't tell you whether the look she gave me was one of amusement or pity, but she was certainly not convinced. 'We'll just have to install you in the shade,' she said. I sneezed into my hands, blew my nose, and shuffled on behind her.

I made it as far as the car park, and stopped.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I'm ill. I'm going home.' Eleni conceded that this was probably a good idea. I asked her to say goodbye to Emmy from me, and off I went, shuffling all the way back home. Where I took some leftover soup out of the fridge, poured it into a pot, and stuck it in the gas cooker to reheat.

Before I go any further with this tale, I need to share some technical details about my front door:

- 1) It is brand new (only just replaced in August) and cost 700 euro.
- 2) It has no handle on the outside. If it's shut, it can only be opened with the key.
- 3) If the key is on the inside of the door, it cannot be unlocked from the outside.
- 4) It has a tendency to slam shut, even when there is no wind.

So there I was, back in the comfort of my home, with my soup heating up on the cooker, and moments away from a nice, soothing lunch, and my bed. And then I was seized by an urge to add some fresh rosemary to the soup, so I opened the door, as you do, and stepped out and over to the rosemary bush, to pick a sprig or two.

And I heard the click. It didn't even have the decency to be a slam. Just: *click*. Such a gentle, polite little sound, with such devastating connotations. My mind instantaneously tallied up all the facts – door shut / key on inside / all windows closed / gas fire on – and produced the following output:

FUCK FUCK FIRE FUCK BREAK DOWN DOOR SEVEN HUNDRED EURO FIRE  
FUCK

I performed some sort of comedy, headless chicken routine, whereby I did a few circuits of the yard, entirely without purpose or logic, and then ran up to the front door and threw myself against it, shoulder first, like I've seen in films. Once, twice, three times. The door rattled, but remained intact. I stared at it, dumbly, rubbed my shoulder, kicked my flip-flops off, and sprinted to Vangelia's, the nearest house I knew to be occupied. I rushed into her kitchen, surprising the entire family as they were having their Sunday lunch, screaming incoherently about doors, fire and men.

'What?' Vangelia said, standing up.

'I'm locked out!' I managed. 'The fire is on!'

‘But I don’t have your key!’ Vangelia cried, desperately. ‘You didn’t give me your key!’

‘No key! I need a man to break down the door!’

Vangelia glanced at her son, Simos, a bulky man in his early forties and my unlikely hero of the day, and gave a nod.

‘Go,’ she commanded. And so poor Simos was forced to abandon his lunch and dispatched to save the crazy city dweller from her own silly self.

He didn’t break down the door. Obviously. Being a man possessed of his senses (mine had evidently fled the scene), he assessed the situation calmly and arrived at a somewhat less hysterical conclusion.

‘We’ll just have to break a window,’ he announced, cheerfully. ‘And then you can climb in.’

And, armed like a Sifnos superhero with a long stick and the rug I use as a doormat (saving me, again, from my own silly self: my instinct, to use a rock, would have only led to a mangled hand), he smashed a windowpane, cleared the glass, turned the handle, and let me back in.

What a relief it was, to see the inside of the door again! Simos stood outside, beaming, and waved all my thanks and apologies away.

‘Not a problem,’ he said. ‘These things happen. And if it happens again, you know what to do!’ And with that, he took his leave of me and went back to his mother’s lunch.

But I can’t afford to smash a window every time a recipe calls for rosemary. I’m ringing the carpenter first thing tomorrow, to come and replace the glass and fit a handle on the outside of the door.

As day 7 comes to a close, and I sit here surrounded by balled-up tissues (a sign of my alternative health), I’m trying to draw some sort of positive message from this story, but I’m not sure there is one. Perhaps I could say that sometimes heroes can be found in the most unlikely places. Or that there is always a better way than throwing yourself against a locked door. Or I could just give this up as a bad day and a lesson learned, which is less about doors and more about solitude being challenging in ways that I hadn’t expected or prepared for.

One thing’s for certain, however: spontaneous cravings for rosemary are not to be trusted. If you ever feel such a thing taking hold of you, do not heed its call. It’s the devil’s work.

## Day 8

I was chatting to Susanne on skype, sitting at my desk. Antagonist was sprawled out on the sofa, examining her nails in a manner meant to indicate that she was bored, and a little pissed off. She doesn't like it when I talk to other people.

'You do know you're writing every day, don't you?' Susanne said.

'No I'm not!' I replied, categorically. A little defensively, even.

'Of course you are! You're writing your blog!'

'Oh,' I said, *'that. That's not writing.'*

Susanne gave me a look that was half confusion and half admonishment. 'It is!' she insisted. 'And it's wonderful!'

'Thank you,' I said, in a small voice, as Antagonist emitted a snort of derision. I told her to behave herself, in my sternest tone. Because *Susanne* is wonderful; having friends as supportive as this is wonderful. And Antagonist may get away with bullying me sometimes, but she's not allowed to mess with my friends.

The thing is, for all of her faults, I don't think it's fair to blame Antagonist for everything, and this paradoxical defensiveness is certainly not her doing. (I will resist the temptation of inventing yet another character; I've already been accused of schizophrenic tendencies once this week). It's all me, and perhaps I'm a bit of a snob, and I don't consider my blog *real* writing. I don't think of it as *literature*. I have this grand idea of the literary works that I will produce, and my blog posts just don't fit in.

I started this blog mostly as a measure of self-discipline, as a way to make myself publicly accountable, but I hadn't really expected that there would actually be a public to be accountable to. I'm surprised, every day, by how many people read my posts. I'm surprised by the comments, the honest, personal responses to the things I write. The expressions of support. It is incredibly gratifying, and moving, and valuable. Every day, there are moments when I question what I'm doing, and every day there is something – a comment, an email, a phonecall – that renews my faith in it and gives me the courage to carry on. People have told me they look forward to reading my posts every day. People have said that they can see their own struggles in the things I write about, and that it helps them, and even gives them hope. They have urged me to keep going, to keep writing. And I never expected any of this, but it's happening, nonetheless, and it *is* wonderful.

But is it *writing*? Is it *literature*? The Oxford dictionary defines literature as "Written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit". Which doesn't really help. *Written works*: sure. But *superior or lasting artistic merit* is very hard to call. And *considered* by whom? A blog, on the other hand, according to Merriam-Webster, is "a Web site on which someone writes about personal opinions, activities, and experiences": nothing particularly offensive about that. Except that, by the very nature of the internet and the blog concept itself, *everyone* can be a blogger. Not everyone can be a writer. Maybe I am a snob, but I will not apologise for this opinion. Not everyone can be an electrician, or a politician, or an economist; each one requires a particular set of skills and not everyone has them. And writing is no exception. It takes a lot more than putting words down on a page to make you a writer.

And therein lies the paradox: Because I actually do have those skills. And even though I'm ready to dismiss my blog posts as *not writing*, I never just put words down on a page. I've been told, frequently, that I'm not a blogger: my posts for *This Reluctant Yogi*<sup>iii</sup>, my yoga blog, have been criticised for being too long, too complex,

too literary for the attention span of the average blog reader. And it's criticism that I accept readily: I've chosen the blog format for its immediacy and ease of use, but I'm not really *blogging*, as such. I put my entire self into everything I write, for both *Yogi* and *100 days*, exactly as I do when I'm writing a short story; I agonise over my choice of words, I edit and edit again. Each post takes me hours to write, and then I often dream about it at night, revising sentences in my sleep. I'll never attract the thousands of visitors that I, presumably, could, if my posts were shorter, snappier, a bit more reader-friendly. And I'm OK with that. Because I am a writer and though I'm not entirely free of vanity, it's not *hits* that I'm after, but *readers*. People who will read my work all the way through and won't mind that it's long, and who'll find something in it that touches them, directly.

Which, unexpectedly, is exactly what's happening. And perhaps wonderful Susanne is right, after all, and I can slowly, reluctantly, bring myself round to concede that what I'm doing *is* writing, and it's just as real and meaningful as those works of superior artistic merit that I will surely produce in the next 92 days, and beyond. I am writing every day, and people are reading, and if this crazy adventure of mine comes to nothing more than that, it will be enough.

In keeping with the tradition for long posts: day 8 isn't over yet. Because today was also the day my kickstarter project for *100 days* went live, and I cannot close this post without mentioning it. Susanne was with me, via skype, when I did it this morning; my hand literally shook when I clicked on the button to launch. I was incredibly nervous. But, once again, I was amazed by the support I got. There are five backers already, and my project was featured as a staff pick on kickstarter's "new and noteworthy" section. And so another countdown has begun: 28 more days to reach my funding target. If they are anything like today, there's no telling what might happen.

## Day 9

You know that phrase *things that go bump in the night*? In post-holiday Sifnos, *things that go bump in the night* are mostly donkeys. One donkey in particular: my new neighbour. He moved into the field adjacent to my house a few days ago, presumably to help clear (i.e. eat through) the dry grasses in preparation for sowing. Or maybe, it occurs to me now, this is where he actually lives during the year, and he's just back from his summer holidays, on another part of the island. Either scenario is just as plausible. In any case, the donkey spends his days happily chewing on grass, taking his exercise by running madly up and down the length of the field, and staring contemplatively into the distance. But it's what he gets up to at night that's interesting. You'd think he'd just go to sleep, but no: his preferred nocturnal activity seems to be bumping into things. Large, heavy things, judging by the thuds that reverberate through my walls as I lie, sleepless and sneezing, in my bed. Perhaps he suffers from insomnia, as I have for the last few nights. But mine is caused by my horrible, lingering cold, which has me twisting and turning and blowing my nose every thirty seconds; I can't think of what might be keeping a donkey up at night.

Donkey psychology aside, and following up on the unexpected challenges of living alone on a small island, I can now confirm that, yes, being ill is definitely one of them. I've always maintained that part of the reason people get married is to have someone fetch things for them when they're ill, and I could really do with a husband right now. Having to go out and get your own cough syrup and the ingredients for a cure-all chicken soup is hard enough in London, where there's bound to be a shop just round the corner, and a chemist not too far away. Not so in Sifnos. Here, getting to the chemist involves a rather substantial downhill trek, and an uphill return journey that the best of us struggle with at the best of times. And given my current affliction, and that I'm still a bit shaky on my left leg as a result of a fall in early August, I think it's safe to say I'm not the best of anything right now. But trek I must.

I won't be having chicken soup, however. I can't afford chicken soup. My budget for today is allocated to cough medicine, painkillers and fly spray and might just stretch, if I'm lucky, to a packet of Cup-a-Soup, if such a thing can be found in town. I'm also acutely aware that I'll still have to pay the carpenter for the new door handle and the broken window. I've toyed with the idea of offering him a massage in exchange for his work (the man needs it, with those heavy tools he lugs about all day) but I fear he might take it the wrong way; even the mention of "tools" sounds a little bit dodgy in this context.

On the topic of massage: Polyna is coming over to receive one on Thursday, and to give me another session of BowTech. Eleni spoke to her this morning, and she has pronounced my continued illness (a.k.a. alternative health) a good thing: it's the toxins leaving my body as a result of my treatment last week. Which I don't doubt; the symptoms started the day after my first session, and that's no coincidence. Bars or no bars, I've been holding on to a lot of shit that I didn't quite know what to do with, and all treatments of this sort have the potential of shifting things, often leading to some acute after-effects. I've seen it happen with massage, and it *is* a good thing. As well as necessary. I just wish my body would hurry up and get it over with already, because the endless coughing and spluttering and sneezing is driving me insane. And costing me a lot in toilet tissue; I went through an entire roll last night, and it ain't cheap. Also, my nose is sore.

I have been challenged enough for a day or two, please. I am ready for this wonderful, detoxifying illness to be over; I am ready for health of the conventional kind. I am ready for a good night's sleep, free of snot and donkey noises, and for getting up in the morning with a clear head. I am ready for the front door to be my friend again; I still glare at it suspiciously every time I pass it, and it gives me palpitations whenever I hear it shut, even though I'm holding the key in my hand. I am ready to pick herbs without fear. I am a little traumatised. But it's lucky, at least, that I decided yesterday that these posts count as writing because, with all the above factors at play, they're all the writing I've managed in the last three days.

I'm going to close this entry early. Eleni is hosting her final dinner party tonight; she's leaving next week – and then the hardcore solitude will begin. So I must attempt to make myself relatively presentable (i.e. not quite on death's door, but merely on the bus on the way there), and go over to give her a hand. Though my assistance may have to be in the form of moral support: I seriously cannot be trusted not to sneeze in the food.

## Day 10

I have a problem: I'm really inspired to write. I can think of nothing else. I sleep late, very little, and very lightly; sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, with a half-formed thought trying to turn itself into a sentence (though, admittedly, this is often helped along by mosquitoes and/or coughing fits). I get up early in the morning, eager to start typing and deleting words on my screen. My computer is never off, and I'm never far from it. Today, I skipped lunch and anyone who's met me has probably just gasped with shock: I never miss a meal. This is entirely unprecedented.

You're baffled. You're scanning that first paragraph again, looking for the problem. *Inspired to write*, you read. Surely that's a good thing? Isn't that what you're there to do? You're thinking *she's lost it; the poor girl has lost her mind*. A little earlier than anticipated, perhaps, but it was inevitable.

I haven't: my mind is exactly where I've always kept it. But I'm just as baffled as you. Because there's something happening right now that I never saw coming, and it snuck up on me and it's knocked me down. And that's all I want to write about. Not my novel; not the half-written short story that sits in my "Writing" folder and taunts me with its unfinishedness. This.

I set out to do a thing for myself, a small thing, barely a blip on the radar of what people get up to every day. It was a big thing for me, maybe even monumental, but I didn't expect it to matter to anyone else. I threw a pebble in the lake that was my life, and stood back to wait for the little *plop!* and the sinking feeling, but the thing spread out, in concentric circles, with me bang at the centre. *What?* It's commonplace, to be at the centre of our own lives, and our actions often ripple out to those closest to us, but this thing is touching people I've never met before. It's taken on a life of its own and there I am, still at its centre, blinking stupidly.

But I'm not stupid. I know this isn't about me. I'm just a character in a story, the protagonist of this one, perhaps, but it's the story itself that people are responding to. I seem to have inadvertently touched upon something universal, our need to believe in dreams, and to believe that our dreams will come true. It's the Hero's Quest, the backbone of every story ever told. The details may vary, but the quest is always, fundamentally, the same.

And though I'm obviously into the story – I'm living it – it's people's responses that I find truly inspiring. Because in the ten days since I started this project, and in the two days since I launched the kickstarter campaign, I've been shown more support and kindness and generosity than I thought was in store in the world. People have literally gone out of their way to help me, stepped out of their own stories to join me in mine. Every day, they walk me a bit further down the path, saying nice things to me all the way. And more than that, more important, is that in starting along this path in the first place, in setting out to do this thing for myself, I seem to have made the path visible to other people. And in following my story, as I tell it, they are starting to make out a part of themselves, their own part in it. They may not be smashing windows to get past their locked doors yet, but they're considering the possibility. This is what's happening, and it's incredible.

I set out to do a thing by myself. I thought it was a lonely thing, but I have never felt less lonely in my life. There is no shortage of adjectives I could use: *Astonished*. *Astounded*. *Amazed*. *Stunned*. And then: *Grateful*. *Gratified*. *Moved*. *Humbled*. But I struggle to put the words together to express how I feel: *lost for words* is another one. And yet I try. This is all I want to write about.

So that's what I'll do, until I get the words right, or until the words run out. This story is everyone's story. And in writing my part in it, I've already achieved what I set out to do.

And on a metaphorical as well as a literal note: smashing a window to get past a locked door will only cost you 10 euro. Throw in another 5, and you have a brand new handle, so you can open and close that door, oh so casually, whenever you feel like it. It's a small price to pay, for getting what you want.

## Notes & Quotes

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i “The Satrapy”, C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton University Press (1992)

→ [www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=197&cat=1](http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?id=197&cat=1)

ii Paraphrased from “The Satrapy”, as above.

iii This Reluctant Yogi: everyday adventures in the yoga world

→ [thisreluctantyogi.blogspot.co.uk](http://thisreluctantyogi.blogspot.co.uk)