

A Loving Trip

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A Valentine's Day story

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*Happy Valentine's Day,
and γεια σας Tryfon!*

Love is such an odd concept. But it is even odder during Valentine's Day. It's the one day when lovebirds all over the world go out, party, chill out, and spend time together with one another, as if those same lovebirds don't do enough of that, anyway. There are still lots of people that are single, and whose concept of Valentines vastly differs from the norm; they could be spending more time with their family, or perhaps even searching for a destined one themselves.

But sometimes, Valentines just isn't their day, so they spend it alone. That's the case with a young Athenian woman, Iliana. Alongside her roommate, she lives in a cosy dormitory in the city of Athens.

Iliana is nearing the end of the schooling in university. She takes interest in tourism, and is making sure to secure her position somewhere after she graduates. Nevertheless, unlike some of the students on the campus, she was never focused on finding a soulmate. Love was simply not in her line of sight.

But that one day, things were getting a bit different. It turns out, Iliana had met a male friend who is also interested in tourism and is attending the same class as her. Going by the name Loukas, he's an energetic fellow who, despite being interested in tourism, does not seem to be interested in anything that he deems "irrelevant." It wasn't as if his major had Mathematics. But it could have had it. And if it had Maths, he probably wouldn't pay too much attention to it (only the basics, really).

Regardless of what Loukas liked or hated, Iliana was drawn to him due to his "ray of sunshine" aura he seeps with. His smile was especially important for her—she would kill for it. If the weather was bad, for she has the blues because of it, Loukas' smile was all she needed. Until now, though, she was treating him more as a best friend. But who wouldn't—Loukas was so carefree that even he didn't mind he was single all along.

A day before Valentine's Day, Iliana woke up with a cup of coffee,

as well as a quick glance at the calendar. It was Saturday. Her mysterious roommate had already left for a quick trip to the grocery store.

“Already that day, huh?”

Having put on some clothes, she headed out the door to get some food of her own. She hopped on her bicycle and pedalled her way to wherever the path would take her. Closest to them was Galaxias, a supermarket exclusive to Greece. There, she purchased a bottle of cold orange juice and a chocolate bar. She then arrived at a food stand to order a gyro. It took her about 10 minutes to finish it—in small bites. She continued cycling through the hustle and bustle that was Athens. The people inside their cars were stuck in a lengthy congestion. Luckily, Iliana needn’t worry—she was biking.

Downtown, where she cycled through, she saw someone familiar in the distance. Having seen a smile on their face too, she knew it could only be one person. Upon closer gaze, she figured out it was him—Loukas. She pedalled towards him.

“Fancy seeing you, Loukas,” Iliana greeted.

“Hi! Nice to see you, too.”

“You seem happy as always,” she said in a smirk.

“Well, today’s Saturday, so I’m taking a day off!”

“Aren’t you just resting today and tomorrow because of the weekends? We don’t go to school then, yanno?”

“I call it a day off still!” Loukas replied with a soft giggle afterwards.

“Well, whatever floats your boat. Where are you headed?”

“Oh, I’m just commuting for no reason!”

Iliana laughed. “Damn, you must be one busy man, then.”

“I am! Not... Eh, I just wanna feel like one!”

“Trust me, you do not want that.”

“Ehhh, do I have to rage too? Because I’m not very good at that myself!”

“And that’s a good thing. I don’t want your nerves to explode.”

“Oh! Don’t worry, I will manage my nerves well!”

“Do that by not raging. I hate to see you angry when you’re always so... jolly.”

“You’re right, I just *can’t* get angry!” He exclaimed, followed by a laugh.

“By the way,” she replied, “thank you for coming here.”

“Eh? But I didn’t really have any plans of coming to this place in particular!”

“No no, I mean, thank you for your company. I’ve told you that whenever I talk to you, I’m at ease. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome! I’m happy if you’re happy.”

“Nooo, I should be the one saying that.”

After exchanging these words, they went separate ways. Iliana found herself deep in thought.

“Is this what I think it is? This can’t be... love, can it? Nooo, I don’t really care about love! But... he... he’s so precious to me. I don’t deserve someone so positive that they’d turn death into a celebration... No, wait, that came out wrong. Thank God I didn’t say it out loud... God, imagine his face after saying that! I’m pretty sure he’d still mourn after someone. It’s in his nature, I’m sure. Ugh, do I need a nap already? Is the weather getting darker?”

Iliana almost hit a pedestrian who, thankfully, shouted at her so she could focus on what was in front of her.

“Sorry!” She apologised after barely avoiding them.

She continued cycling back to her dorm. Once there, she unlocked the doors and walked inside, and was greeted by her roommate.

“What’s up, Iliana? You look like you’ve almost hit someone.”

“How do you even know what happened?”

“Because it happened right here in the neighbourhood.”

“Oh yeah, I lost track of space, too.”

“Seems like it.”

“Are you just gonna bully me like that?”

Iliana sat down next to her roommate on the couch. She placed her head on her hands.

“Come on, I was just joking,” the roommate said. “Besides, are you feeling okay? Nobody to hang out with during Valentines?”

“I guess not. Not that I care, anyway. You aren’t gonna force me to find a boyfriend... or girlfriend, are you?”

“Sis, why would I force someone to find love? That never works out.”

“Exactly... So I’m spending this Valentines with you, most likely.”

“Oh, but I already have a bf.”

“Since when?”

“We started dating a week ago.”

“You didn’t tell me that before!”

“I didn’t?”

Iliana sighed. “I’m done for. I just don’t know that many people. Don’t even know whether the few people that I know are single or not. Well, all except one...”

“Tell me, tell me! Maybe you have a chance with him! Or her.”

“Alright, here goes. You see...”

Iliana started talking about Loukas, the guy in her class. She said what makes him Loukas—his optimism, his cheerfulness, and most importantly, his smile. Besides those three characteristics, she also said how they always manage to find something to talk about, both on-topic and off-topic and that barely happens with everyone else.

“...Yanno,” she continued, “I said I don’t care about love that much but... It’s always been confusing to me. What constitutes as ‘love,’ exactly? Do I just say that I have feelings for someone and that’s that?”

“Sis, it’s more than just words. Love is about actions, too. No, that does not default to just buying stuff. A relationship where all you do is buy may be good for the Greek economy, but good ol’ *your* economy might not be the best by the end of the month.”

“I mean, that makes sense. Don’t spend too much money.”

“Seriously. I’ve heard horror stories from couples... Ex-couples, I mean. There are other, less-costly actions like playful kisses, hugs, hand-holding... Wait, keep that one for when you’re married. It’s too sexual to do it openly.”

“...How is hand-holding sexual, anyway?”

“You wouldn’t get it. It involves a lot of sexy moves. If you’re really gonna hold hands, use protection.”

“What is this woman on?” Iliana said in a sigh. “Well, whatever. Issue is—”

“You want to confess to Loukas, right? You’ve been hiding your feelings for a while, and Valentines is the perfect time to reveal them.”

“But, I’ve never even been in a relationship! I’m not sure if we’ll work out well.”

“Each relationship has its pros and cons, but as long as pros outweigh the cons, you’re good to go. Also, how can you go wrong with someone like him?”

“Some people told me he’s too robotic with his optimism. But I doubt it. I think he’s far more natural than any of my other friends.”

“So what’s stopping you from getting with him?”

Nothing but silence from both of them.

“Exactly,” the roommate replied. “I won’t force you to do anything, but—”

“I’ve made up my mind,” Iliana interrupted. “Today may be the only day to get him a little something. But there’s one issue...”

“And that is?”

“...I have no idea where he lives.”

“Just ask him, then.”

“But that would spoil the surprise!”

“True, but you can still ask him if you could visit his place tomorrow. Make your presents a surprise, but not your appearance.”

“Can I call him now?”

“Up to you. I’m not your mum...”

Iliana took out her phone from her pocket and dialled Loukas’ phone number. After just one ring, Loukas picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey Loukas. Iliana here.”

“Heey! Thanks for the call! What’s up? Anything I need to take care of?”

“Oh, you’re fine. I just wanted to ask if you’ll be home tomorrow.”

“Sure will!”

“Oh thank goodness... Say, can I visit you tomorrow? I’ve never been to your place before, even though you’ve been at mine. Yanno?”

“Oh, sure! I’d love to have you at mine! Come whenever you want, I won’t be commuting anywhere besides the nearby convenience store.”

“Aww, sweet. Then, I’ll surprise you with my arrival. I hope you like surprises.”

“Mhm! Aight, talk to you tomorrow!”

“See you,” Iliana ended the call.

“So where is he at?” The roommate asked.

“He lives in...”

Iliana paused.

“Oh. I called just to ask him that. And I didn’t even ask where he was.”

She picked up her phone again and tried calling him again, only to be greeted with the voice message:

“Unfortunately, you are out of credit to make this call. Please recharge.”

“Of course I run out of credit now... Can I have your phone perhaps?”

“Sorry, I also happen to run out of credit.”

“The convenience... It’s too much!”

The two spent some time on the balcony, in complete silence, trying to figure out how to reach Loukas. It is when it hit them—more specifically, the roommate.

“Alright, I’m gonna trick him into giving me his address.”

“That’s unlawful!” Iliana critiqued. *“That might make him doubt everyone around him...”*

“Shouldn’t he already be doubting others? I mean you can’t trust anyone, right?”

“True, but he’s the kind of person who would tell his darkest secret to a stranger.”

“That’s... even more unlawful than what I had in mind.”

“That was only a hypothesis—”

“Hey, do you see that?” The roommate interrupted, having noted something. “Looks like Loukas is heading down this street.”

“Where? Lemme see!”

Iliana looked out the balcony and saw that she was right—Loukas was, in fact, walking down the street.

“I should call him from here!” Iliana exclaimed.

“Wait, leave this to me. Imma go out too.”

“You’re not gonna...”

“Oh, yes I will. I’m gonna figure out where he lives.”

“Are you sure he’s even going home? For all I know, he could be visiting someone else. Oops, she’s gone already... *I just hope the police isn’t involved with this girl’s crap...*”

While Iliana was looking for activities of her own, the mysterious roommate had already left the premises and was well on her way to find out Loukas’ address. What she didn’t quite get was that the trip would last a while. Athens wasn’t super large—at least its urban area wasn’t. Loukas, however, lived in its suburbs. His energy allowed him to travel from his house to his university on foot, taking him about 2 hours. He only went by tram if the weather did not allow for strolling.

The mysterious roommate could only walk for so long, but she eventually reached the location—Glyfada.

“Loukas must be rich or something... Otherwise he wouldn’t live at the Riviera.”

Having written his street address down, she turned back and walked until the closest tram station, after which she felt her legs turning into jelly. After arriving at the appropriate station, she left the tram and returned to her dorm.

“Damn, you really *did* stalk him on foot,” Iliana greeted her. “Are your legs jelly yet?”

“I’m more jelly of his investment for a flat in Glyfada...”

“Glyfada? That’s, like, coastal Athens we’re talking about, right?”

“Yup, and here’s his address,” the roommate replied as she took out her phone and showed it to her.

“That’s definitely the Athens Riviera... I’m kinda jealous, too. Now

I see why he's happy all the time. *Of course that's not the reason...*"

After establishing his home address, the two decided to go to a mall and get him a small gift of affection. From the to-do list, Iliana wanted to buy: a flower bouquet, a chocolate bar, a comfy sweater (she knew his size, so the mysterious roommate didn't have to steal a piece of his clothing, too) and a medium-size teddy bear. When it comes to the sweater, she bought him a red one with occasional blue stripes. Everything else she just bought without paying too much attention to detail. After all, Loukas wasn't picky.

Before leaving, the mysterious roommate suggested to work on her looks, so they went to a clothing store to pick up some clothes for Iliana. They went with a pink shirt and a purple bow-tie. Since she already had jeans that go alongside the shirt well, they didn't purchase anything else and just went with the shirt.

"Looking stylish," the roommate complimented her, "this is the kind of look Loukas would kill for."

By the time they left the mall, it was only three in the afternoon. Having nothing better to do, the two girls decided to leave those presents at their place and go out for a drink and grub. Nothing significant happened then.

Valentine's Day. Sadly, Athens was struck by some rather bad weather, including cold air and light rain. Being Iliana, she sat out the window, sighing at the weather.

"Come on, today's the day," the roommate said. "You gotta cheer up."

"I know, but I told him I was gonna surprise him with my appearance time, and here I am, not knowing what can cheer me up more than his smile. Even on camera."

"Watch cute cat videos or something. They always work."

"Hm, I suppose I'll try those."

"You'll cheer up once you arrive at his place, I promise. For now, just try coming to your senses before your departure. Speaking of which..."

The roommate had already put on her jacket.

“Oh, on your way to see your boyfriend?”

“Yup. Imma take the metro. Anyway, good luck out there. You can do it!”

With a wave, she left. After watching some cat videos, Iliana felt slightly better and was ready to get going. She took her presents, keys and the raincoat, locked the doors and walked downstairs to pick up her bicycle. With her bike next to her, she pushed it alongside the road before hopping on it and pedalling into the distance. The rain wasn't heavy, but it was still risky for a ride—the roads were wet. She picked up a lot of speed which was needed in order to reach Glyfada, which was 2 hours away on foot, and which was only slightly halved if one went by a bike.

The road had it all—puddles, the fact it was slippery, bumps, and of course, moving cars. And no pavement. Iliana was making sure she avoided everything on her way. The last 15 minutes of her ride were uneventful, though.

“I just hope this'll all be worth it...”

One sharp turn later, she was at Loukas' flat. Having locked her bicycle, she quickly found shelter from the rain, which has gotten heavier. Now in his flat, she found his room and knocked on its door. A faint “*coming*” was heard from the other side before the door was opened by Loukas himself.

His slight frown turned into a smile after seeing Iliana.

“Hello, hello! I'm glad to have you here—”

“Hey, what was the frown for?”

Silence ensued.

“F-frown?” He asked. “Am I to smile for the rest of my life?”

Iliana faintly gasped.

“What's wrong? Did anyone hurt you? *Whoever hurt Loukas will get it...*”

“No, I just... ran outta energy, ya see. So I'm recharging!”

“Well... it's Sunday today, take it easy. Although, don't be afraid to tell me if anything's troubling you. You've given me your shoulder before, so it's only fair to return the favour.”

“Right... Well, come on in!”

Iliana entered his flat and looked around it. It was clean and had no traces of dust on anything she walked next to. That was contrary to her dorm, which, while cosy, clearly didn't get quite enough care.

"Not only do I envy the location of your flat," she said, "but also your dedication to keeping your place clean."

"Well, it was rather expensive," Loukas replied, "but I saved up the money for it since I didn't want to live in that slum of a flat!"

"As long as *this* isn't a slum..."

The two sat down at his couch.

"Hey, you want me to bring you a drink?" Loukas asked.

"Sure. Do you have any non-carbonated beverages?"

"I don't have carbonated drinks, either," he said in a laugh.

"So just water? That's fine, I don't drink juice so much anyway."

Loukas stood up and went into his kitchen, then returned with two glasses of water. Having set them on the table, he sat back down.

"By the way, Iliana," he added, "that outfit of yours is happening! It suits you very well!"

"You think so? I was hoping you would like it."

"Is there any reason why you decided to put it on? There has to be!"

"Eh, I just wanted to look nice, I suppose."

"Oh, I get ya!"

Iliana was looking out the window from the distance, noticing the rain hasn't stopped yet.

"Ah boy... This sucks. I might not give the presents in time... Plus, he doesn't have his usual smile on... Something must be happening. I feel like he needs a hug... Should I hug him...? I really want to! Wait... is this an indirect way of showing him my love? I mean my roommate told me it is. Hm... Well, it's a start, isn't it?"

"Yo, you good?" Loukas asked.

Iliana delayed for a bit before her move. She turned her head towards him, looking at his rather frowny face.

"Oh no, am I concerning him? Aww, he's so precious that I can't even think of a word so meaningful to describe it. Okay, I've made up my mind. C'mere, you."

Iliana wrapped her arms around Loukas and gently embraced him. They both sat in complete silence. Suddenly, Iliana felt shivers coming from him. In fact, they were more sobs than shivers.

“Loukas...?”

“No... I’m fine. Heh.”

“You’re not. Stop pretending. I know when your happiness is genuine.”

“Oh... Hm...”

“Come on, lemme hear you ramble. There’s gotta be something that’s making you not the Loukas I’m used to.”

Nodding gently, Loukas looked at her as he was going to spill the beans.

“Valentine’s Day is just an ordinary day for me. I see couples all the time and I’m really happy for them...”

“You don’t have to be happy for *them*, though. Who cares? I certainly don’t.”

“Well...”

“Your happiness is far more important. So please, don’t worry.”

“...Can you keep holding me?”

“Yes, I can! Anything to get you back to normal.”

They spent a few minutes just hugging one another when suddenly, Iliana realised why she came in the first place. And it wasn’t just because she wanted to spend time with him, or visit his place for the first time, but to bring him the presents, as well as finally let him know how she feels.

“Hey, you feeling better?” She asked.

“Yes yes! I’m glad you came to visit me.”

“You can always invite me to your place, or ask me out, yanno?”

Once she got up, she walked to where her bag was, and brought it into the living room. Loukas’ eyes shone.

“Hey hey, what’s over there?!” He asked, enthusiastically all of a sudden.

“Take it easy, I’ll show you.”

Iliana took out the first present—the sweater.

“You can put this on right now, if you want. I hope it’s the right size

and that you haven't gained weight or anything."

She then turned away so that Loukas could take off his shirt and put on the sweater. He was also wearing dark blue trousers, and the sweater complimented it perfectly.

"Wow! I like this sweater!" He said. "It's my size and very comfy. Plus, very simple! You know I strive for simplicity."

"Well, I didn't know about the latter but hey, glad you like it."

"Thank youuu!" Loukas thanked with a smile.

"Now that's the smile of genuine happiness that I like seeing so much. Oh but I'm not done yet!"

She then took out a chocolate bar.

"Woah! Choco!!!"

"Hey, calm down. I got more where that came from."

This was followed by the teddy bear.

"Awww this is so cute!!!" Loukas exclaimed with another smile.

"Not as cute as you, though~ Oh boy... It's time. With the bouquet in my hands, I'm going in. Alright Loukas, time for you to hear me out once again..."

Iliana grabbed the last gift, the bouquet.

"This one's also for you. I don't care if bouquets are to be given to girls. But first, I want you to listen to my little speech."

"Alright! Iliana's speech!" Loukas exclaimed while clapping his hands and looking at her in the eyes.

"Woah, his stare means business! Alright girl, don't get intimidated, it just means he's all ears..."

She breathed in and out a couple of times before saying anything.

"Σε... σε αγαπώ!" She exclaimed.

She said no more. Not that she had anything else to say, but somehow, it felt odd she was expressing love, other than parental, for the first time in 20 years.

"Wait... there's more! Θεε να γίνεις ο Βαλεντίνος μου;"²

1 Σε αγαπώ (*Se agapó*) = I love you. *Agapi* refers to unconditional love. Or lover, I guess.

2 Θεε να γίνεις ο Βαλεντίνος μου; (*Thes na yínis o Valentínos mu?*) = Will you be my Valentine? You could probably guess this one. Also, if you're wondering why there's a semicolon instead of a question mark, it's because in Greek, the semicolon IS the

Now she said no more. Having asked that, she felt it might have been too much. She could only blame herself for not reading any interesting romance novels or watched any films.

Loukas had his eyes wide open. Iliana? Confessing to him? To him, it was something he could only dream about. But here they are. He even shed a few tears at the words she uttered. However, he wasn't sad anymore. His smile was as wide as the horizon.

“Yes! Yes!! Κι εγώ σ' αγαπώ!!³”

Loukas stood up from his couch and ran into Iliana's arms, still in tears.

“How long did it take for you to figure that out, silly?” Iliana asked in glee. “Were you really gonna spend another 20 years being single?”

“You can say that again! We both didn't care so much about finding one another! It's a happy day!”

“You mean... happi-er?”

Loukas giggled.

“Yeah, you got it!”

“Hm, now what?” Iliana asked, confused.

“Are you okay with a kiss? We don't have to if you're not up for it yet!”

Iliana smiled.

“Damn, you're really gonna leave me hanging? C'mon, silly, just kiss me already.”

In a flash, they joined lips.

“So this is what I've been missing... A French kiss from a guy, huh. I was expecting something quite intense, but Loukas is so... gentle. Does he just know more about love than I do?”

The kiss left Iliana on cloud nine. And so did Loukas.

“So you wanna brag about having a boyfriend?!” Loukas said jokingly.

“Ahaa, you never fail to make me laugh! But damn, I definitely want to brag about it. It's not in my nature, though...”

question mark. Yes, I found that odd too the first time I read about it.

3 Κι εγώ σ' αγαπώ (*Ki egó s' agapó*) = I love you too
S' agapó is slightly shortened here.

“Ehh, I was just joking! We could at least hold hands! If you want, that is.”

“With protection...?”

Loukas laughed.

“Sure! It’s kinda late to be buying gloves today, but let’s get them tomorrow!”

“That was a joke from my side, too. My roommate likes to make outlandish statements.”

“Oh! We could hold hands in front of her!”

“Woah, that’d be hilarious... Let’s do it. Right now.”

Iliana took out her phone and took a picture of them with an emphasis on their held hands, which she then captioned with “y’all mind if I... do unprotected hand-holding with my new boyfriend?” and sent it to her roommate.

The mysterious roommate’s response was... priceless. Almost as priceless as Loukas’ smile.

END

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