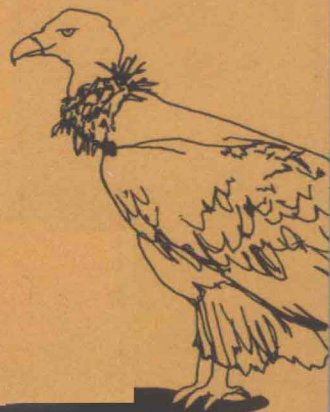
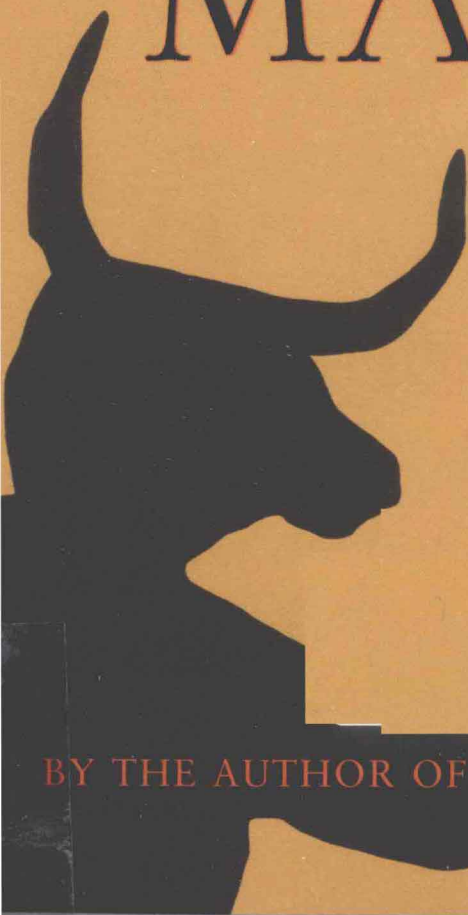


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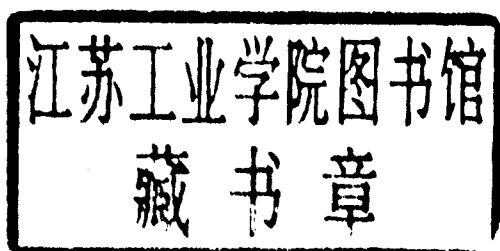
THE  
MAZE

BY THE AUTHOR OF *LITTLE INFAMIES*



# THE MAZE

PANOS KARNEZIS



Jonathan Cape  
London

Published by Jonathan Cape 2004

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First published in Great Britain in 2004 by  
Jonathan Cape  
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited  
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,  
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited  
18 Poland Road, Glenfield,  
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House South Africa (Pty) Limited  
Endulini, 5A Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009  
[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library

ISBN 0-224-06976-4

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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Polmont, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

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In the shadow of a man who walks in the sun,  
there are more enigmas than in all religions, past,  
present and future.

Giorgio de Chirico

## **Historical Note**

In 1919, in the aftermath of World War I, a Greek expeditionary force landed in Ottoman Asia Minor with the apparent intent of protecting the local Greek population from the hostility of the Turkish majority. The true aim of the expedition, however, was the permanent annexation to Greece of the Mediterranean Ottoman regions where a substantial Greek minority lived. The Greek occupation lasted until the summer of 1922 when the military tide turned in the Turks' favour. After a massive offensive that quickly turned into a rout, the Greek army was forced to retreat to the coast in disorder and evacuate Asia Minor.



## PROLOGUE

In the peace of the dawn the tolling of the bells ought to have sounded all the more strange and out of place. Instead, the dull rhythmic knocks of their gigantic clappers – their ropes pulled by a feeble yet stubborn hand – accompanied the calmness of the morning like the beating of an elderly heart. The sound travelled over the tiled roofs and across the abandoned town, where dismembered artillery guns lay among iron bedsteads, oak tables and broken wardrobes.

A rush of wind sent a cloud of red dust towards a window where the shreds of its velvet curtains were flapping. The dust entered the vast salon, carrying with it sand from the desert, shrivelled rosebuds and brittle pieces of parched paper, all of which added to the unbelievable squalor of the once majestic room.

Of the aforementioned glory there still remained enough evidence: a gutted crimson sofa, the fringed corner of a torn carpet, a chessboard table whose mahogany top had been scraped spitefully by a knife. Against a wall was set a hacked-about armchair, its carved gold legs now nowhere to be seen. On the wooden parquet, next to a heap of compost and desiccated flowers, lay the skin of a snow leopard with no head, tail or paws. At the other end of the room, what seemed like the prow of a small boat was in fact the

front of an enormous bathtub, in whose hull someone had expressed his absolute contempt by an irreverent act of defecation.

A sudden dash of miniature feet over the floorboards violated the silence: a rat navigated the delightful wasteland of the imperial room, stopping briefly to sniff the stale air. Across the blinding shafts of sunlight it went, then through a crack in the French window, until it came out to the veranda, where it was treated to a view of exceptional beauty – or ugliness if one were not a rat: the gardens that opened out before its eyes would have suffered less had they received a visitation of locusts. A meticulous stomping had crushed the beds of flowers and aromatic herbs without mercy, while a tall lilac bush had been stormed like a rampart. The trunk of a cherry tree had endured the attacks of an axe, only to die later of its wounds; with its leaves dried up and fallen off, it stood in the middle of the garden like a pleading hand. When the sun came out, a bevy of crows nesting on its branches took flight.

Propelled by the wind, uprooted amaranth shrubs tumbled down the dusty streets. Past an open conduit filled with dried excrement lay a maze of narrow alleyways – no one was to be found in those poorer houses either. In the square, the Town Hall had long since been set on fire and its roof had caved in. The crows flapped calmly towards the outskirts of the town. Some distance beyond the last houses, in the middle of the country road, lay the carcasses of dead water buffalo still yoked to wagons.

Old animals that had died of exhaustion, they were part of a caravan full of indiscriminate loot. In the

back of the carriages, covered in sand, were pieces of furniture, a silent grandfather clock, a heavy Victrola. The crows ignored these; screeching, they landed instead on the dead animals whose flesh was in a stage of advanced putrefaction: the desperate exodus must have taken place several weeks earlier.

The sun climbed further and the wind passed through the wheels of the abandoned carriages. A pair of crows fought over a piece of rotten meat. The tolling of the church bells stopped. A beautiful spring day was beginning. Slowly, the desert erased a little more of the town from the eternal Anatolian landscape.



PART I

The Desert



## CHAPTER I

Brigadier Nestor rubbed his eyes and sat up in his cot. His eyes were faint and colourless like paper water-marks, as if his eternal habit of rubbing them with the hard knuckles of his forefingers had slowly eroded their sheen. He yawned and unlocked the trunk with the keys that hung from his neck. The armoured trunk was packed with pressed and neatly folded clothes, some of which he had not yet worn on this tour of duty: a parade uniform with its medals and ribbons, a black one for evening functions with satin lapels and gold epaulets, a short riding tunic with coloured lanyards. He rummaged impatiently through the trunk; under his patent-leather boots with the silver spurs he found the bundle with everything his wife had sent him since the beginning of the war: Christmas and Easter cards, newspaper clippings, a postcard of a spa by the sea, a child's crayon drawing. He pulled off the rubber band that held the letters together and let them drop to the corrugated floor.

It was hot and dark in the back of the lorry. A thick canvas stretched over the roof and the sides, letting no light in or heat out. Brigadier Nestor felt nauseous and his throat was dry, but he craved neither a drink nor fresh air. He stood up and struggled to keep his balance while the moving lorry rocked from side to

side. Stepping over his once precious correspondence, he leaned over the stove, lifted the lid of the steaming kettle with a pair of tongs, and removed the glass hypodermic syringe. He drew from a little vial, rolled up his sleeve, fastened the rubber band tight above his elbow, and finally injected the morphia.

The lorry continued its journey, moving in and out of the potholes in the dirt track; blasts of hot sand exploded on the tarpaulin like enemy potshots. The exhaust backfired and the smell of petrol entered Brigadier Nestor's nostrils, causing an unwelcome awakening of his senses. The sun cast the shadow of the vehicle on the saltpetre; it resembled a crawling scarab. There were dunes of soft, gold sand all round, and on the side of the track were the bleached bones of birds and camels. Feeling the morphia in his blood, the brigadier rolled his eyes and smiled like a child. Soon the drug had erased both his tiredness and his thirst. The suspension creaked and a tin cup rolled across the floor. The wind carried over the padre's voice.

*' . . . When the poor and the needy seek water and there is none, and their tongue faileth for thirst, I the Lord will hear them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them.'*

For a moment the brigadier forgot the horror and felt as if adrift in a tranquil sea, the sea that was their destination – albeit not the ultimate one; that was the motherland. But if they reached the coast – anywhere along the coast – they would have a good chance of salvation. His eyes watered from the petrol fumes. Only now did he register the explosions of the battered exhaust and his intoxicated reason misinterpreted them. Were they being fired at? he wondered, but with



little alarm, as if an ambush were not a threat but a mere inconvenience. While the lorry was driving round a bend on the road, a little light came through the crack of the hatch and the dust in the carriage sparkled. Outside, the vultures circled the walking soldiers and croaked impatiently.

*'I will open rivers in high places, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water.'*

The brigade had been on the move since dawn. What time was it? Brigadier Nestor only knew it was daytime, it was hot and they were still in the desert. How long ago had they entered this maze? Had he been sober he could have answered, but his memory had now been swallowed by the quicksand of the morphia. On the horizon whirlwinds of dust shot upwards. The old officer coughed; his eyes grew heavy and he dropped back on his cot.

*'I will plant in the wilderness the cedar, the shittah tree, and the myrtle, and the oil tree; I will set in the desert the fir tree, and the pine, and the box tree together.'*

The reciting voice became distant and the brigadier sank slowly into a dreamless sleep.

In August the waiting had been over. That morning the sun had risen red and ominous to inaugurate the fateful day. Under the sun the line of the horizon had appeared gradually, like a line made of sympathetic ink, and soon the rest of the Anatolian steppe was revealed, an endless plateau interrupted by a few hills, shrubs of myrtle and ancient ruins. Then it began. The artillery barrage, thundering like an untimely storm,