

# Let The Japanese Do Kamikaze

John Bandler

In strife-torn, British-colonial 1956 Cyprus, agonizing over ethnic loyalty and his love for an English girl, a Greek boy faces his activist cousin and makes a desperate promise.



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Cyprus, September 1956. The night sky saw Chris in his favorite place, on the roof, on his back. Here, above the kitchen door, close to the chicken coop, the trees and trellised vines hid him from the neighbors and the street. The bunch of *veriko* grapes he'd picked on his way up rested on his bare chest. He pinched a grape and let its juice trickle onto his belly.

Rock'n'roll from Odysseas's record player drilled through the ceiling. The lyrics that blasted off neighboring walls and skittered along the tiles drowned the slamming of pots and pans. It had to have been the hundredth time that Little Richard had spotted Uncle John abandon "bald head Sally" and "duck back in the alley."

When Jane had opened the door of her house, her eyes had been red, moist with tears.

"I can explain everything," he'd said to her. "Truly."

But she slapped him hard, very hard. "Alistair's already explained everything."

Alistair. Her family's friend. No matter. She'd change her mind if he touched her. He was sure. "Remember how we used to hold each other and hum the Barcarolle?"

"You pathetic coward. You let Stavros go to jail for you."

Rejection. Her ultimate weapon. Teacher Harry Lawrell once said—the bugger had a word for everything—that when you're in love your location determined you. Corollary: when love dumped you, your location turned to shit.

Below, another piano had been rolled onto Little Richard's stage. The household keyboard. Odysseas was delivering a counter-rhythm—jackhammer staccato . . . .

At last, the record player turned in for the night.

The trellis groaned. The vine's branches shook. When the trellis banged against the eaves-trough, he broke off munching. Someone was scraping along the tiles towards him, someone too heavy to be Odysseas.

He jerked upright. "Are you running from the police?"

Stavros slipped alongside, easing a haversack from his shoulders. "So, you still come here before you sleep?"

"Are they after you?"

"I sneaked home. Hey, Odysseas plays good."

He held out the grapes, offered them to Stavros. "Do you have a codename?"

Stavros raised a finger to his lips, then took a grape. "Remember the nights we played hide-and-seek before you were brave enough for the roof? When I hid up here, you never found me." Stavros untied the straps of his haversack and pulled out a bundle wrapped in newspaper. "Want some of my mother's chicken?"

EOKA's Colonel George Grivas—"Dhigenis"—had ten thousand pounds on his 'terrorist' head. What would Stavros be worth? "Do you train in the mountains?"

Stavros ripped off a mouthful of chicken. "You're the family genius, dear cousin. What about 'Welcome home, *Stavro*, it's good to see you'?"

Stavros spoke as if commenting on their last round of marbles, but his words stung.

"How's Jane?" Stavros asked.

"We broke up."

"Don't you tell her she's beautiful? That you love her? Maybe she has a boyfriend who tells her he loves her. No. Better stay away. She's too complicated." Stavros put down the chicken leg and licked his fingers. "I never know what to say to her." He reached for his hip

pocket, pulled a photo from his wallet, and laid it on the tiles. “Jane took this in the Paleomylos valley,” he said and snapped on his cigarette lighter.

Jane’s shot had captured her stepmother Claire and Stavros head-on, standing. He imagined Jane, knee deep in a spring meadow, peering down into the box camera’s viewfinder—she’d have held it waist-level while the wind whipped her hair across her cheeks. His gaze skipped from the orange shimmer in the photo’s gloss to Claire’s Lana Turner sulk to Stavros’s which-of-these-honeys-should-I-sample-first leer, and his fingers tightened around the edge of a tile.

Jane had chopped off Stavros’s feet, but he’d be damned if she hadn’t centered him, with Claire pushed off to one side. If Stavros’s face could be trusted, photographer Jane might as well have had her panties around her ankles. She’d told him she’d gone ‘out Myrtou way’ to look at the flowers, that Stavros had ‘sort of’ appeared. But she never mentioned ‘sort of’ photographing Stavros. A picnic planned by Claire amongst the purple anemones? One day Jane had snapped this scene. The next she’d prattled about some trivia. What had there been to hide? Stavros, of course.

He should wrench the tile free, swipe it across Stavros’s mouth. Hell, no, not he, not Jane’s pathetic coward. Instead, his hand darted out.

Like a matador anticipating a bull, Stavros dropped the cigarette lighter and snatched the photo from his grasp. “Kill the bitch, right?” Stavros said as he tucked the photo back into his wallet and pocketed the lighter. “But watch out. That blue fire in Jane’s eyes will blister you to death.”

Jane belongs to me, you bastard! She’s mine. “Father says the British are protecting us from the Turks.” No. That’s not what he wanted to say. “I’ll fight for Cyprus.” There. He’d spat it out.

“You’re angry,” Stavros said.

He heard triumph in Stavros’s voice, but there was no more back-pedaling. Last March, he remembered, a bomb in the prayer hall had cracked the school’s piano. “I’ll bomb my school.”

“I always wished I could talk about clever things like you,” Stavros said. “Tell me. Ever figured out what lies at the end of a rainbow?”

“A time bomb under the stage.”

“One day, I want to see Stanley Matthews kick a goal.”

“Stella works for EOKA.”

“Remember how we used to lie right here and stare at the stars? You were going to be an astronomer. What’s it now? Engineer?” Stavros wrapped the remains of the chicken bones back into the newspaper and stuffed the package back into the haversack. “You spend years sporting a fancy uniform to that swank English School so you can scrub grease from your fingernails?”

Jane thought like that too. Jane. He’d better crawl back to her and grovel— “Have you met Dhigenis?”

Stavros raised his hand as if to hit him. “Family comes first.”

“What did they do to Stella?”

“If family honor is violated . . .”

What—? “Dear God.”

“I don’t try to be you. You don’t try to be me.”

Of course, raped. His cousin, Stavros’s sister, had been raped. “I’ll kill someone important.”

“Idiot. You’ll be caught and wasted. You think Aristotle would have approved a life for a life? No. Let the Japanese do kamikaze. You’re Greek.”

He hammered Stavros’s shoulder and said, “Stop tormenting me, you bastard. Just tell me what to do.”

“Does a lawyer toss rocks in the street? Does a priest set a bomb under the Governor’s bed? Be slick, go into politics. Remember when Kokos shot old Papanikolaou? I knew you’d been following me. I rode slowly so you’d catch up. You didn’t. I’d just pissed away three months in prison. For what? For denting that police car. You had plenty of time to suck up to me after they let me out. But you were ashamed to be seen with me.”

“I’ll rig a bomb under Harry’s car.” Teacher Harry had suggested that a thought acted upon propelled the thinker onto the next plane. Right. He’d propel Harry to the next plane.

“You know, before you figured out how brainy you were, you used to look up to me.”

“Jane knows you went to jail for me. She knows.”

“Would you do something good if nobody would ever know? Or something bad if no one would find out? Ever thought how you’d use a spade to slice an enemy to death?”

“Odysseas works for EOKA.”

“Hold your tongue.”

“I *will* do something.”

“You want to take the oath?”

Could Stavros—? He nodded, yes.

Stavros rose to his feet. “Get up. I’ll swear you in.”

Would he swear the EOKA oath just to regain Stavros’s approval? This turn of events had to be Stavros’s retribution for his disrespect, for having to hurl that rock himself, for being imprisoned instead of him. He rose, and his heart hammered his ribs.

Stavros began. "I swear in the name of the Holy Trinity that: . . ."

And he responded, "I swear in the name of the Holy Trinity that: . . ."

". . . I shall work with all my power for the liberation of Cyprus from the British yoke sacrificing for this even my life . . ."

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When he'd finished, line by line, echoing the EOKA oath, Stavros squeezed his bandaged hand and said, "You are now a sworn-in member of EOKA. Your first assignment is to toss a grenade through the window of Jane's house."

What? Stavros had gone crazy. He licked his saliva. "But—"

Stavros clamped his arm in a vice. "No buts. I say her father's a spy. I have a grenade in my haversack. I'll show you how to arm it."

"Her father does paperwork. He's just an accountant."

"As you bring out the grenade, imagine that the English have just arrested *your* father and ripped out his fingernails like they did to that fag teacher from Limassol."

The roof tipped. He started sliding into an abyss.

"The English beat me with sticks and bashed me with rifle-butts." With one arm Stavros held him, with the other Stavros slashed him, backhand, across the face. One side, then the other, then another round. "Her father sleeps by an open window. You'll fling the grenade into his bedroom." Stavros slashed him again. "Are you paying attention to me?" Slash.

He could duck, roll off the roof—

"Where did Fivos hit you? Here?" Stavros hit him again. "Take the oath, and you'll liquidate a policeman, a spy, or a traitor. Kill, like Karaolis, in front of witnesses, and the

Governor will string you up in the execution shed, and dump you like a diseased pig into a hole in the prison yard. Your brain once impressed me. Your stupidity now terrifies me.”

Sweat stung his eyes, and his face hurt like hell. He licked his lips. Blood.

Stavros raised his hand in threat. “If a comrade taps you on the shoulder, you say no. Absolutely, no.”

On the roof this September night, amid the yowls of dogs and over the muffled squabbles from nearby houses, had his freedom-fighting cousin just implied that hanged hero, Michael Karaolis, had been stupid? Did Stavros admit to fighting amid stupid comrades?

Still in Stavros’s grip, a calm descended on him—suddenly, the world seemed like a better place. “That day you escaped from the police, I was with Claire and Jane, in Claire’s car. All three of us saw you. And Claire told Jane to keep her mouth shut. Claire’s your friend.”

For the longest while Stavros remained silent. “My house is being watched,” he said at last, “and with my bosom cousins living here, this one will be too. I have to get out of here.”

“What about my oath?”

Stavros waved his arm dismissively. “What oath? It’s easier to hate an enemy than to love a friend. Right? As an EOKA guerrilla there’s no escape. Want to be a hero? Study.”

Stavros hugged him, then sat down and lit a cigarette. “There’s a nice breeze tonight. Go, wash yourself, *Christaki*, and get me soap, a razor, and a toothbrush. I’ll take a fast shower in your garden. While you’re down, ask Odysseas if he can spare his copy of *Ivanhoe*. Be quick. And bring some money.”

He patted his bruised face. “What if I’m pushed to join?”

“Tell whoever to check with me.”

“What will you do?”

Stavros reached out and touched him. “I’ll find you, of course, and break your legs.”



Would Stavros swear anything, betray anyone, go to jail, just to delay him from joining EOKA? What was the least painful way—

Suddenly, Stavros lashed out at his shin.

He yelped.

“Now imagine what I can do with a car-jack.”

END

**Context:** Let The Japanese Do Kamikaze by John Bandler is set in Cyprus in 1956 against the guerrilla conflict involving Greek and Turkish Cypriots (as well as Greece and Turkey), and the British occupiers. The island remains divided.

The time intersects that of Lawrence Durrell's *Bitter Lemons*, and likely Durrell's writing of *The Alexandria Quartet*. In 2006, in a session on creative influences, the author John Bandler presented "Bitter Lemons and Barbed Wire" to the biennial International Lawrence Durrell Conference. In 2007, he spoke on "Durrell's Cyprus—Tainted Observations on the Colonial and Postcolonial" at the ACLALS Conference: Literature for Our Times.

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