

Aspasia's brother
(excerpts)

Chapter 1

I think you'll agree with me that, when someone is ten years old, it's time for him to make the first Big Decision in his life.

Anyway, that's what I think, and this diary that I've started writing is proof.

Mind you, I can't say I'm absolutely sure about how I'm going to fill the blank pages of a notebook with a thick red cover. The other day I heard my sister Aspasia who, with all the wisdom of her 16 years, was saying to Mum: "I've finished the second volume of my diary. I'd better buy a notebook to start the third one."

That was when Mum was looking for the keys to the Sofiat. As usual, she had forgotten where she'd left them, and wasn't paying attention to what my sister said, so she answered: "Go out on the balcony and see which car Daddy took, the Golf-tutu or the Sofiat.

Aspasia was having one of her "bright" days so she wasn't cheesed off about Mum ignoring what she said (if it had been one of the "dark" days, she would have started her usual whining about how nobody ever pays any attention to her and nobody ever listens to what she says...). But it was one of her "bright" days and so she just smiled and said "Last night you were wearing your red jacket. Have you checked the pockets?"

Mum raised her head and looked at her daughter. "You may be right," she said, and went to the clothes rack in the hall, where – under my green jacket, Dad's raincoat, and Aspasia's anorak and nightgown, having first said: "What on earth is your nightgown doing on the rack?" and Aspasia having answered "I haven't a clue!" – she found her red jacket and shoved her hand in the pocket. "They're here!" she said.

Aspasia shook her head. "There's no organisation around here" she muttered, annoyed that, having started out the conversation about the third volume of her diary, she wound up talking about the lack of organisation in our house.

When Aspasia gets mad, the best thing to do is play the turtle and withdraw into one's shell.

I buried my face in my arithmetic book, but at the same moment, decided that I should start writing a diary too. Since Aspasia had already reached her third volume, it was time for me to start my first.

But what do you write in a diary? Now there's a question that's as hard to answer as it is to find the third angle of a right-angle triangle, when the one acute angle is 35 degrees.

I have to confess that both questions kept me occupied for a while, but I couldn't find the answers. The third angle, however I calculated it, when added to the other two angles, would always come out to a total of 120 degrees; so I was positive that somewhere I was making a mistake, since of course I know the rule: "The angles of a triangle always have a sum of 180 degrees". So to keep getting 120 degrees, I must have been doing something wrong.

Now about my diary, I really don't know what to write. Important people keep diaries (I once heard) or anybody who has ever been in love (like Aspasia, for instance). But I have to confess that I'm not important yet, nor have I fallen in love. I certainly like Mersini, but I never feel like hanging around with her and I never call her. Aspasia, on the other hand, gets all dressed up and made up every Saturday to meet her Dimitris and every evening the telephone receiver gets glued to her ear as she listens and then listens some more. What can they possibly find to talk about for such a long time?

Anyway, I couldn't figure it out, so I decided to invade my sister's den. Rash decision! Whenever Aspasia sees me standing in the door of her room, she usually says: "Beat it!" before I even have time to tell her what I want. "Beat it!" It bugs me every time I hear it, and so we start fighting and right away we have to put up with shouts from Dad "Stop that!" and Mum's pleading: "Please, you two, I have a headache!"

But that afternoon Dad was away, at one of his famous meetings, and Mum triumphantly holding the keys to the Sofiat was on her way to her lessons. So I decided to stand in the door of the "den" holding my arithmetic notebook in my right hand and a fresh notebook with a red cover – that I'm writing in now – in my left.

"Aspasia, could you please explain a couple of things to me?" I said as sweetly as I possibly could.

"What?" Aspasia was in a very good mood.

So I asked. And you'll see how well I understood what she told me. How could I have failed to find that the angle I was looking for was 55 degrees?

"You're in a hurry, that's why," said my sister and mussed my hair playfully. I couldn't believe how sweet she was being!

And then she told me what I could write in my diary. I could, she explained, write the story of my life and my Big Decisions.

But I have to say that the way she explained it confused me. What's my life? The life of Robinson Crusoe or Alice in Wonderland? And what Big Decisions do I have to make?

I went back to my room and was putting things into my school bag, and as I was putting my first term report card into the pocket, I understood what a Big Decision was. Of course! And I'd already made one. So I could start my diary by writing about it.

And that's how I started. I never realised how hard it is to keep a diary. Very hard! Look how many pages I've written, and I haven't said anything. Not even what my Big Decision was or what my name is.

But my hand is tired; and when my hand gets tired, it's even harder to stick to your Big Decision. So I'm stopping. Tomorrow I'll continue. Tomorrow I'll talk about the rest.

Good night, diary. Wait a minute. Do people say goodnight to their diaries? I'd better remember to ask Aspasia. Tomorrow. I'm too tired now.

Chapter 2

In case I forget again, let's start right away with my name.

My name is Damian. Unusual name, you might say. I don't know if it's unusual or not, but it certainly is rare. I like it that way.

Anybody with a name like that stands out. I mean, it's not like being called John or Michael! Damian is my name. And I've just had my tenth birthday, but I already said that. I am in fifth grade of elementary school, which has been the hardest grade so far. Especially arithmetic, physics and geography! I'm having trouble with all three of them. Fractions and triangles and rulers and protractors... I never appreciated how nice it was all those other years when all we had were addition, subtraction, multiplication and division!

And as for physics! Kinetic energy and inertia and friction. I want you to know that I can't even remember that stuff when I learn it by heart!

Geography confuses me, too. The equator is the imaginary circle that joins the two poles. Or maybe that's a meridian... Never mind.

Luckily I don't have any problems in the language classes, or to tell the truth, just one, and that's what led me to take the Big Decision. But just one.

I read very well (must remember to write about when I took part in the evening in honour of Mrs Penelope), I don't make spelling mistakes, I have good ideas in composition, and well... yes everything is fine, except for the problem that led to the Big Decision.

Mum says I don't have a mathematical mind, nor did she. I inherited this from her, she says. But don't you usually inherit something that exists? I mean if Mum doesn't have a mathematical mind, how could I have inherited it?

The one who has it to hand down is Dad. He always thinks with mathematical precision, even though he finally became a writer, but he gave his mathematical mind entirely to Aspasia. This is the sort of injustice I just can't stand. But what to do? That's the way it is. Dad and Mrs Anna, my teacher, don't agree with Mum, though. Mrs Anna says: "Stuff and nonsense." They lecture me: "You just don't want to sit your rearend down (that's what Dad says, Mrs. Anna says 'settle down') and think for more than five minutes. In mathematics you have to think first and then reply."

What to think? I already know that the opposite sides of a parallelogram are equal. And since I already know this, what's to think about? I get confused, I have even confused you. Hey! Who are you that I'm talking to? Readers of my diary? But I'm the only person reading it. "Put my diary down!" shouts Aspasia every time I go to flip through one of her volumes. "People are not supposed to read other people's diaries," she says.

Did you notice (again I'm writing as though I have readers, but I don't care. That's how I want to do it, that's the way I write) did you notice what Aspasia said ... "people" and "other people's"? Repetitious. As you can see, Aspasia may have inherited Dad's mathematical mind, but she has none at all of our parents' literary talent. I've got it all. I write fantastic compositions – but then you know this already from the pages you've read so far.

Mrs Anna, my teacher, always has kind words to say when she returns my composition notebook. “Good for you, Damian! How well you write! Too bad...” She always pauses here, and that was what led me to make the Big Decision.

Since I can’t be bothered writing out Big Decision all the time and then two lines down Big Decision again, from now on I’ll write BD. I’ve seen many writers who use this trick in their books. It’s easier and I like it, too. It’s like a code. BD – the code for a secret promise. Made to me by myself.

I’ve done it again! I’ve written a lot and said nothing. I’d decided to introduce myself and to talk about my family, but the only thing I’ve actually said is my name. Everything else I’ve written is confused and topsy turvy. Mind you this isn’t my fault, since I didn’t inherit the mathematical mind, but at least I have to put some order in my diary.

So now you know about me. Now it’s my parents’ turn. My Dad is an author – but I’ve said this somewhere earlier. He is a university graduate in literature, but he doesn’t teach. He works for a publisher and writes all kinds of books from fairy tales for young children to novels for adults. My Dad writes everything, but his children’s books have made him famous and that’s why people are always phoning him to come and speak at schools in the afternoons. Children just love my Dad’s books. I like them too, but to be honest, he isn’t my favourite writer. There are others I like better, but I don’t want to mention any names; anyway I have read a lot of books – reading is my addiction. That’s why I have a good vocabulary, as Mrs Anna says (what other child of my age would know how to use the word addiction?)

Mum is a writer too, only she writes for big people. Maybe this is why she sometimes gets uptight and distracted and is always complaining about her head aching. Looks to me like writing books for adults is a big headache. I don’t know, I haven’t yet read any of those yet. But Mum’s books – she’s written two so far – seem to be particularly good, because you hear people who’ve read them saying to her “How wonderful it was! What innovations you’ve made!” I don’t really understand what they mean, but when Mum hears about innovations in her books, she’s all smiles. She also does translations and gives private lessons in English.

Which is why we have two cars. One that Dad uses to go to his meetings, and the other that Mum takes to her lessons.

One last thing. I’d better explain why we call one of our cars Golf-tutu and the other Sofiat. But my hand is starting to get tired of writing, and when I get tired it’s harder to stick to my BD

So that’s all for today. I wrote about my family. About me, Dad and Mum. I’ve already said lots about my sister. And maybe I should also say that she’s in the second year of senior secondary school and then stop. So much for my BD. I’m stopping. And anyway, “Tomorrow is another day” as my grandfather used to say and now my Dad says it.

Chapter 7

I didn't go to school today. When I woke up this morning, Mum said to me: "I hope you've fixed your school bag."

I answered "Yes!" but even though I opened my mouth and moved my lips, the "yes" could not be heard. Mum looked at me in surprise.

"What's the matter with you?"

The matter with me was that I'd lost my voice.

"Of course. With the ice-cold water you insist on drinking in the middle of winter...!" complained Mum as she heated some milk for me, and I went back and lay down on my bed.

Luckily for me, my throat wasn't sore nor was I running a temperature. I'd just lost my voice. It might have been because of the cold water I like to drink summer and winter. Maybe... But I don't believe it. This is probably something else I inherited from Mum, because she likes to drink cold water all year around as well. And she loses her voice sometimes even when she doesn't.

"What a sickly family you are!" Dad teases her, who is unhappy because he never gets sick.

"I never even get a crummy cold, so that I can crawl back into bed and have somebody look after me!" he moans.

So I didn't go to school today. I drank a cup of warm milk, got some books and toys together on the bed and passed the time by playing until just before noon, when Mum asked me for the thousandth time: "How are you doing?" my reply (for the thousandth time) was "Fine!", but this time it wasn't just a movement of the lips, but a sound as well. My thousandth "fine" was a croak, but clearly heard.

Which meant that tomorrow I'd be going to school and this afternoon I'd better call George to find out what they did in class today and get the homework for tomorrow. But I'll have quite a lot of time till then, and because I don't feel like playing any more, I'm writing in my diary.

I promised to write about my first BD. And that's what I'm going to do.

As I wrote a few days ago, when I took what I now call my first BD I didn't even know it was a BD But now I consider it a BD.

A few years ago, I couldn't speak properly. I couldn't pronounce s's clearly or r's or th's. But I didn't care. When most adults heard me, they'd say: "He's so cute when he speaks!" and, if sometimes my classmates didn't understand what I said, I'd just say it again, without it bothering me. Then I could hear them all saying: "He'll learn. When he gets a little older, he'll speak more clearly."

"But he's in second grade now!" sighed Dad. Dad always worries.

This went on until the day Dad and Aspasia and I were playing a board game. It was a game with some cards. On each card there were colours, numbers and materials. So we were playing, and then I said something.

"What did you say?" asked Dad when he couldn't understand what I said.

"Thtwaw!" I repeated and showed him a card.

"Thtwaw? What's thtwaw?" Dad asked again.

"Thtwaw," I said again.

“What’s he saying?” Dad turned to Aspasia, but she couldn’t answer. She was laughing too hard.

“Thtwaw!” I said.

“Thtwaw?” asked Dad and he’d never have understood if Aspasia hadn’t stopped laughing long enough to explain to him.

“He means ‘straw’!”

That was a big shock to Dad.

“You can’t say the word ‘straw’?” he asked.

“Thtwaw!” I said.

Dad’s eyes rolled.

“Say shock!”

I said that well: “Shhhhhhock!” Anyway, not bad.

To make a long story short, we forgot about the game and got into words. Say this, say that, and it came out that I couldn’t speak worth a hill of beans.

That evening Dad and Mum picked up the phone and started calling various experts, friends of friends, etc.

And then they decided that I needed elocution lessons.

“What does elocution mean?” I asked fearfully because I really did not feel like having to learn anything more.

They explained that twice a week I would spend some time with a lady who would teach me to pronounce all the letters correctly.

“You mean there won’t be any homework?” I asked just to be sure.

“It’ll be like a game, dear,” Mum assured me.

So a few days later, Dad took me to Mrs Elocution’s office.

It was a little tiny room, full of books, mainly children’s books. I was very nervous. Until I realised what kind of lesson it would be, I was a bundle of nerves.

Dad sat in a deep armchair having first, out of the corner of his eye, checked to see if there were any of his books in the bookcase. He saw three of them and calmed down. Then he opened the magazine he’d brought with him and became absorbed – supposedly – in the book. I say “supposedly” because he never took his eyes off me and didn’t miss a word of what Mrs Elocution was saying.

This lady then put a paper in front of me on which were written all the consonants.

She pointed to the “b” and said “Read!” and I said “bee”.

“Good boy!” Mrs Elocution was pleased, and showed me the “c”

“Sea” I read and she showed me the “d”. And so it went on until we came to “s”.

“Eth,” I read.

“Ess!” she repeated.

“Eth!” I read again and Dad turned the page in his magazine.

“No! No!” shouted Mrs Elocution. “Look at my mouth!” she told me. “Ess Ess” she repeated and started to explain where I had to put my tongue if I wanted to say “s” correctly.

It wasn’t hard. It was just that I’d never thought of doing it.

“Ess!” I said.

“Good boy!” said Mrs Elocution.

The first lesson passed like that. As did three or four more.

Whatever Mrs Elocution told me, I learned (irrespective of whether I kept forgetting to put my tongue in the proper position). All except for the “th”.

“Th” said Mrs E.

“Ff!” said I.

“Th” said the woman.

“Ff” said I.

“Thirsty!” shouted the woman.

“Firsty!” screamed I.

“Next time we’ll try some more,” she said at the end of that lesson.

But I had something else in mind. On the days and times I was taking elocution lessons, there was this program on television that I liked a lot, but I used to miss it because this was before we bought a VCR which now allows us to record it and watch it another time. And while I didn’t mind missing it two or three or even four times, I was not prepared to miss any more.

So when we got home that afternoon, I said to my parents: “Since I am never going to learn to say ... firsty, I don’t want to go back to Mrs Elocution.”

“Oh, no you don’t!” said Dad.

That was when I brought out what Dad would call the heavy artillery. I said: “I don’t want to! If the kids in my class learn that I’m taking lessons to learn to talk properly, they’ll make fun of me...”

To be perfectly honest, I didn’t really believe that. How could it be shameful to want to learn to speak properly. But I said it to make them see the thing from another viewpoint.

And it did. It worked.

Dad looked at Mum. Mum looked at Dad.

“Well, we’ll see!” they said and went into Dad’s office and closed the door.

When my parents close the door to Dad’s office, they are always making important decisions.

So it was then. They closed the door, and when they came out they said to me: “Okay! You can stop the elocution lessons, if you want. Anyway, now you know where you have to put your tongue in order to speak correctly. It’s just a matter of practice now, until it becomes a habit. If you keep trying, you’ll get used to it.”

They were right. But I don’t know how fast I would have got used to it if, just a few days later, Mrs Penelope hadn’t suggested I read a few pages from one of her books which was about to be presented at a public meeting. But first I’d better explain who Mrs Penelope is and all that, but it’s late now. Mum is calling me to eat my soup so I’d better stop.

If I feel like it, and I’m not tired, I’ll continue later. Otherwise, next time. Nobody’s rushing me. Heck, it’s my diary... not some math test where I have to solve three problems in half an hour.

Whenever I feel like it. After all, that’s why diaries are fun!

Do you keep a diary?

Chapter 16

There are just three pages left in this notebook. I'll get another one to start the second volume of my diary, but before I go to the second volume, I want to be sure to record in this first notebook all the exciting things that have taken place in the last few days. I'll have to write very small to fit it all in. I hope I manage to keep it clean as well. It has to be clean. Because other people are going to read this notebook. That's right! You heard me!

But let me tell you about the events in the order in which they happened. You remember Mrs Penelope. She's the writer and friend of Mum and Dad's who gave me some pages from a book of hers to read at a presentation. I told you about that. Remember now? That's when the television was present and I got to be famous!

Well, the other day Dad was talking to Mrs Penelope. I don't know how the subject came up about the fairy tale I wrote once (the one about the Christmas tree), anyway Mrs Penelope asked to see it and, after she read it, was all keen. "But this should be published!" she said, and Dad agreed. "We thought so too," he said.

So they took my fairy tale and went to see their publisher.

"Read this fairy tale," they told him and when he read it, he said: "Who wrote this? Must be a very good writer! Do you know him?"

Dad was all puffed up with pride like a bagpipe and replied:

"My son!"

The publisher was astonished. "He's so young and writes so well!"

Then Mrs Penelope had an idea.

"Hasn't he written anything else?" she asked Dad.

Dad scratched his head and then said: "I think he's keeping a cookbook...er...I mean a diary!"

Mrs Penelope suggested he ask if I'd let them read it.

When I heard about this, I hesitated. After all, you aren't supposed to read other people's diaries, are you? But then Aspasia reminded me about the diary of Anne Frank. So I gave Dad my red notebook to read.

Two hours later, he called Mum to come to his office and for another couple of hours, behind the closed door of Dad's office, you could hear various comments such as: "Ha, ha, ha!" and "It's wonderful!" and "Brilliant!" and "Listen to this!"

Then Mum came out of the office and hugged me.

"You're amazing!" she said, and Aspasia opened the door to her room, so she wouldn't miss a single word.

Meanwhile, Dad called Mrs Penelope and started reading the diary to her. Aspasia sighed and moaned because she was waiting for her Dimitris to call, but she didn't dare protest when Dad was on the phone. I hope you understand that my future was at stake during those hours!

As soon as the telephone reading stopped and Mrs Penelope had hung up (and before Aspasia had time to make her calls), the phone rang again and this time it was our friend the publisher, and guess who he wanted to speak to? Me! That's right, me! He said he'd heard that I wrote a fantastic – that was his word – text and that he would like to publish it, providing of course I agreed.

I said: "Thank you, I'll think about it!" which was when Aspasia made a very ugly face at me!

But what does Aspasia know about the concerns of authors? The only ones who understood me were Mum and Dad, since both of them are authors.

Anyway, the next day I went with Mum, Dad and Mrs Penelope to the publisher's office. They treated me to a Coke and chocolate cookies and as I was drinking and eating, the publisher leafed through my diary, laughing all the time and saying: "Marvellous".

"Well?" he asked me, "who do you want to do the illustrations?" I told him I'd have to think about it and he said there was time. Besides, he added, it would be good if I wrote the last pages.

That's what I'm doing now. And as soon as I finish, I'll send it to the publisher so they can start editing the manuscript (Dad and Mum's phrase).

Ah, yes, and meanwhile my grandparents heard the news and were delighted and immediately made appointments with their ophthalmologist to get new glasses so they could read more easily. Now every morning and every evening, Grandad calls and asks: "Has it come out yet?" I answer: "Not yet! it needs more time." and he says "Okay, I'll call again tomorrow!" I mean, this is serious anxiety.

So, what can I say? I was thinking about where all this started. From a Big Decision I made. How could I have imagined that finally I'd become a writer!

"That's the way it is!" says Mum. "From one big decision you end up with a big success!"

And she's right. But I was right too, when I started writing this diary, I wrote as though I had readers.

"Intuition!" says Dad.

And now you who've read it know all about everybody and everything. Everything I wrote was the truth. After all, you shouldn't read lies in a book!

So I'm happy. The only thing that upsets me somewhat is that Aspasia is cheesed off. She sat down and read the manuscript and then said to me: "It's very good, but what kind of an idea will your readers have of me! You've made me look like a monster!"

That's just Aspasia being silly and asking for complements. You've probably figured out how much I love her and admire her. And to prove it, I asked her to choose the title for my book. She agreed! But she still hasn't told me and I'm somewhat concerned about what title she'll give it. You know "a book is sold by its title" as Mum says. Let's hope Aspasia doesn't give the book a horrible title to get revenge for what I've written about her. Anyway, for better or worse, I thought of getting on her good side so I promised that I'd dedicate the book to her as well.

So on this last line of the last page, I just have enough room to write "To Aspasia".

PS (on a separate sheet of paper). What a shame my diary couldn't be published in my nice handwriting that I've had for some time now. In that way you could be proud of me twice, both as a writer and as someone who knows how to stick to his BDs.