

The Woman at the Window

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“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry” he mumbled as he was bending down to help the woman collect what was inside her handbag from the pavement. He was checking the messages on his mobile when he bumped into her. Keys, combs, coins and purse - everything was on the floor. He picked up a book and gave it to her after peering at it for a while. It was black and thin, with strange silver letters.

“Anna Akhmatova” she said noticing the puzzlement in his eyes. “Katia likes reading her” and she pointed at the hospital across. “My friend, very ill” she added.

Deep blue eyes, extremely white skin and black hair. Quite an uncommon combination, he thought.

“Will you let me treat you something? As an atonement for my inadvertence...” he said moving his head slightly up. She was taller than him.

“No, thank you. Maybe another time. Now, I’m in a hurry.” She answered with a hesitant smile and left trying to balance on her high heels.

She’s going to tumble down, thought Ares, who stayed there watching her as she was entering a pyjama shop.

Along the road opposite to the hospital, you could see pharmacies, flower shops, small restaurants and fast-food stores. The patients’ weary relatives were getting there to get all necessary things for living in the hospital or just take a small break.

Ares ordered an espresso freddo with no sugar and lot of ice and touched the glass slightly to his cheek. It was July and the heat was blistering. He checked again the messages on his mobile. “I’m missing you, I wish you were here” wrote Delia, his fiancée. She was in Cyprus, at a lawyers’ conference. She was a lawyer, just like him.

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One day before they departed, Sophia, his mother, entered the hospital. “You should go at least” Ares insisted, “Sophia will be discharged in a few days”.

Ares’ mother was over sixty years old, she was overweight and suffering from diabetes and heart disease. In the past year, she had been hospitalized twice in Evangelismos Hospital. Ten years ago, when she was still working as an English language teacher, she slumped unconscious during a course. Her vision had been impaired, but she laid the blame on the increase of her presbyopia and neglected going to the doctor. After that event, she found it hard to obey the strict diet that her illness required.

“Enough with these sweets, Sophia” Ares used to say to her, as he knew that she was still relishing them. “I can’t deprive myself of everything” was her usual answer. She had mapped Athens according to its patisseries. She loved Andrias’ profiteroles on Sevastoupoleos Street, Despina’s millefeuilles in Neo Psychico, Fresh’s crème brûlée in Kifissia, Chara’s ekmek ice-cream on Patission Street and the list was endless. She used to keep up with all new arrivals and could write reviews for patisseries as the ones that other people write for restaurants.

Ares could not remember when exactly his mother’s mania for sweets had started. In her youthful photos, she was very slim, brunette and upstanding. Her sisters used to say that she looked like Jane Russell. On the contrary, his father was a short man with scanty hair, moustache and glasses, at least twenty years older than her. He died of a heart attack when Ares was five years old. He never realized what had exactly happened before that divine creature accepted to marry him.

“Dionyses was the most tender man I had ever met” Sophia used to say and the discussion was over.

Ares finished his coffee and took Patriarchou Ioakeim Street towards Kolonaki Square. It was 1 pm. Usually, at that time of the day, he was at the courts or at his air-conditioned office on Panepistimiou Avenue. He had arranged his affairs in view of his trip to Cyprus and so, there was no reason to pass from there.

He entered the first bookshop he found in order to buy a book. When in hospital, he read “The Day of the Owl” by Leonardo Sciascia – Delia’s Christmas gift. He found the novel “To each his Own” by the same writer and asked for Akhmatova’s writings. The assistant brought him an older edition of the “Requiem” and a new one including

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two more of her works: the “Northern Elegies” and the “Poem without a Hero”. He chose a random page of the Elegies:

*And nothing like a rosy childhood...
No freckled faces, teddy bears, and toys
And kindly aunts and scary uncles, no,
or little friends among the river pebbles.*

“I will take this one too” he said to the assistant salesman and went to the cash desk holding the two books.

When he got out, the hot air hit him. He decided to find shelter in one of the Kolonaki Square’s coffee shops. He sat in a table and he ordered a salad of artichokes, rocket and parmesan, and a cold beer. He ate with almost no appetite for a while and thereafter he took out his new acquisitions. He riffled through the Northern Elegies.

Wednesday

*There are three ages to memories
And the first – is just like yesterday.*

*And, once awake, we find we have forgotten
even the path to that solitary house
And, choked with shame and anger, we run to it,
But everything (as in a dream) is different: People
Things, walls.
And no-one recognizes us — we’re Strangers.*

Ares loved literature but it had been ages since he last bought some books. He grew up in a house, whose walls were being gradually covered by bookcases. Apart from the sweets, Sophia had a passion for literature too. She had been translating English literature for a publishing house for years. And his father had left behind a large library, mainly full of law books. Ares, in his adolescence, had tried to understand him through his books. He used to observe the dates, dedications and notes, if there were any. However, his mother was the one who guided him through his readings. Unfortunately, during the last years he had no time to read literature. He had no time in general.

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He was listening in everyday basis to family quarrels and disputes with professional patience and understanding. But he had no more patience left for his personal life. He couldn't bear watching a whole theatrical performance, a movie or a concert. He started reading a new book without having finished the previous one, and then a new one and never ended any of them. He did the same with women. He was impressed by them and he was trying to seduce them. The flirt part was his favorite. He was gallant and gentle.

"It's like standing at the door of a room that's hiding surprises and secrets" he had said once to a friend. When the room finally became bright and congenial, Ares used to plead a tight schedule, trips abroad or even mountain rafting with friends. The women, who had given in to his charm, could not realize what had gone wrong. His love stories used to last six months at the most.

"I am you and you are somebody else" used to say Delia, his fiancée. She was the first woman, with whom he stayed after the end of the semester. She was so engrossed in her work and own activities that she had no interest in putting Ares and his actions under the microscope. According to her "that's the psychologists' job". She used to spend endless hours in saunas and gyms in order to achieve her perfect look. Ares felt free with her.

He was thinking about her as he was walking to the Metro station. He liked using the Metro to move around. He used to observe people going to their jobs. Delia never got in; she had claustrophobia. They had not fixed their marriage date yet, but they had started living together. Lately, they had moved into a new loft of discreet luxury and minimalist aesthetics.

"This apartment is a great opportunity; the region is being more and more upgraded" said the real estate agent. Behind the lambent forefront of their building, there was an old hotel; one of those that rent cheap rooms to people who come from the provinces for their affairs. "It's a matter of time" he assured them, "the building is dilapidated and it will be sold soon".

He entered the apartment and immediately turned on the air conditioning. It was already 3 o'clock and he felt really tired. Last night, he stayed late at the hospital till he made sure that his mother was out of risk. She had gone through a heart attack. When he got up a few hours later, he thought it was morning. It was late afternoon.

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He came out on the balcony wondering if he would see again the woman at the opposite window. Everything had begun two days ago. He came out on the bedroom's balcony in order to water the flower pots. A woman was standing at the window of the hotel across; she was smoking and staring at him. She was dressed in a red dress with a deep décolleté. Her skin was totally white and her black hair was tied in a loose bun. He had the impression that she smiled at him and then he realized that he came out wearing only his boxers. He shrugged apologetically his shoulders and smiled back to her. Then, she untied her hair with a soft move and she shook it leisurely. Next, she slowly started to unbutton her dress. When she ended up wearing only her underwear, which was red too, she disappeared from his view for a while. When she returned, she just pulled the drapes. Her date must have arrived, Ares thought.

The same incident was repeated the previous afternoon too. That time, the woman was wearing a mauve dress and matching underwear. She did the same moves and disappeared in the same way. If he hadn't all those concerns, he would go and ask at the hotel about her.

He looked at the third floor, the second window from the left side. He stood still and waited. He would like to have a cigarette. He had stopped smoking two years ago, but there were times that he needed to do so. He liked the way this woman was holding the cigarette, the grace and delicacy of her movements. Her window's drapes remained closed and Ares got in the house to get ready for the hospital.

Shortly before he leaves, unable to resist, he got again out on the balcony. The woman was standing at the same window as if she was waiting for him. This time, she was wearing a black lace dress with an abysmal décolleté and a long pearl necklace around her neck. Nobody dresses like that anymore, Ares thought; he was a keen observer of the women's clothing tricks. The woman repeated the same ritual without stopping to stare at him. When she left wearing only her underwear, which also reminded him of another age – garters and black stockings-, she disappeared. She returned after a while to close the drapes. Tomorrow I'm going to ask, Ares thought, what the hell is going on? He had never imagined that women of such unrivaled beauty could frequent this ramshackle hotel.

At the hospital, his mother was sleeping calmly. "I'm going downstairs for a while to buy a coffee" he said to Tamara, the private nurse. At the canteen, he stood behind a tall woman with long black hair who was trying to buy a toast with cheese only, no ham.

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“There are no more cheese toasts” the saleswoman explained “I’ll take the ham out for you”. He recognized the Akhmatova’s book owner. “This time you will let me treat you something” Ares said. She turned and looked at him smiling. “I will take an orange juice, thanks” she said and followed him to the adjacent room where the tables were. Her name was Anya and she came from Ukraine. Her friend and roommate, Katia, was being hospitalized at the fifth floor. “She is strong and the doctors are optimist” she said.

“Nice colour” Ares said pointing at Anya’s orange blouse and her matching sandals. The large handbag, that she was holding, was orange too.

“I like the colours” said Anya. When she arrived in Greece four years ago, she stopped at Larissa Station and took the Subway to Katia’s home. It was November and almost all passengers were wearing black, brown and blue. Her heart faltered. In Ukraine, they used to wear colourful cloths as the winter was long and heavy.

Ares was staring at her hands whose long fingers were nervously playing with the straw of her orange juice.

“Do you like oranges as well?” he asked becoming naturally more familiar to her.

She liked oranges and tangerines too. She was coming from a country full of passion fruits and she was always dreaming of the Mediterranean countries, which were full of sun and sea, orange and olive trees. She could also go to Italy, but her best friend was in Athens.

“There are a lot of things that happen randomly” she said to him. She was speaking Greek correctly without a trace of accent and Ares asked her how she had got to learn it so well. Her first job was to take care of three children in Glyfada. Their grandmother was a teacher; she brought her some books and taught her. She learned greek very quickly.

Ares wanted to learn more about Akhmatova. She had been born near Katia’s and Anya’s hometown. Anya preferred the “Northern Elegies”, even if the “Requiem” was considered to be her greatest work.

“Read something for me” Ares asked her. Then, Anya took the book out of her big handbag. It was a bilingual edition. She had found it on offer in a bookshop on Asklipiou Street. “It was the cheapest one and it’s also good for my Greek” she said.

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“Read first in Russian” Ares asked. He stayed listening to her voice reading in a language full of *li*, *ni* and *zi* sounds. It sounded like the taffeta dresses which rattle slightly in empty rooms. This is happening just because I am here, he thought. At the hospital, time goes by more slowly. Impossibly slowly. And the mind plays games.

Afterwards, Anya read the lyrics in Greek.

*And then from a future century
Let a man unknown to me
Gaze with his saucy eyes.
And hand me, shade in flight,
An armful of lilacs, still wet,
Just as the passing storm roars.*

They both stayed there looking at each other. Their look was exploratory and dark. Then, Anya stood suddenly up.

“I have to return to Katia’s room” she said. Ares stood up too and they headed for the elevator. The moment had passed, they were both back to reality. He placed his card in her hand.

“Call me whenever you want. If you need something” he said to her.

His mother was still sleeping. They gave her a tranquillizer. He sat next to her and held lightly her hand. He felt the need to touch her in order to make sure that she was still there. She was connected to countless tubes and breathing with difficulty. “There is no need for you to stay here” said the nurse to him after an hour. “I will let you know if there’s a need”.

He walked down the stairs from the sixth to the fifth floor to check if Anya was there. Room 506, she had said. She noticed her getting ready to leave.

“Would you like to go for a walk?” he asked her. Anya nodded positively and followed him.

The night was warm. They entered the car heading to Sounion. He said to her that when he was young, they used to have a cottage in Lagonisi. Sophia sold it after his father’s death in order to make it through. He liked the fact that Anya was silently enjoying the trip. He felt as if they had been knowing each other for years; just like the couples that live harmoniously and don’t need words to communicate with each

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other. It was exactly then that he started realizing why he didn't want Delia next to him. He knew that Sophia's condition was serious but he hid it from her. He let her leave for Cyprus in order to stay alone with his mother. He couldn't bear Delia's spotless appearance. Even if the world crashed around her, she would fix her makeup. She had always been like that.

"The problem is mine. And I am about to marry her" he thought and a quiver ran through him. He looked at the unknown girl next to him; her flashy clothes and her high heels – too high to be aesthetically accepted by his entourage. Simple and innocent. Anya had taken the clasp off her hair that was now freely waving.

They parked the car at the road next to the sea and got off to walk. It was his favorite beach. Gnarled and deserted. She finally took off the court shoes and became some centimeters shorter. She stretched out her hand to him as they were going down the path to the sea. He kept holding it as they were walking barefoot along the sandy beach. The sea was being lightened by the moon and Ares suggested they swim. They took off their clothes and fell into the water. Anya drew away with some fast swim strokes.

"Wait!" he shouted and got next to her.

He folded her in his arms and she raised her legs around his waist. She gave him a deep kiss and led him inside her. All the anxiety and fear that had made his body tied up in knots, faded away into the unknown woman's soft and warm body. He was sailing in a very peaceful sea to go back home.

Ares is aroused by a noise. The house is dark and he's afraid. He's always frightened when he comes to the cottage and changes room. He isn't able to orientate in the space. In Athens, his bedroom is next to his parents'. Here there are two more intermediate rooms. The noise comes from the outside. He opens the door leading to the garden. He walks barefoot on the wet grass. The whispers are coming from his mother's bedroom. A man's voice is narrating something. Some snickers are heard. He sees his mother standing at the window, bathed by the moonlight. She's wearing a black night-dress with thin straps. She unties her bun and lets her black hair lay freely at her back. She lets the night-dress fall down and her white skin body approaches the bed. A bit later, he hears a noise from doors opening and closing and a cry of agony and fear. Ares runs terrified towards his bedroom. He stumbles and falls. He is so fearful that he starts crying. He's still crying when he gets to his bed, he's soaking his pillow during the whole night.

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In the morning some strange sounds are heard around the house. The door opens and his mother's younger sister enters. She tells him that she will take him for a long ramble to the sea and then, they will go at her home which is a bit further down. His mother was ill and had to go to the doctor. They speak to him about his father's death a week later. His heart was weak and he went to the sky. He will take care for him from there. Ares does not really understand what this means. He used to see his father very little. All he cares about is his mother. She is there, she is well and he's running into her hug to make sure he won't lose her.

Ares is aroused by a noise. It's his mobile. He had difficulty to find it into the pile of clothes next to him. "Your mother passed away a few minutes ago" says the private nurse, "you should come immediately". A woman is sleeping on the sand, naked, muffled in his shirt. He doesn't awake her, not yet; he wants to let his tears fall freely, without anyone watching him.

Delia turns the key into the keyhole having Ares close beside her. They are returning from his mother's funeral. It's late afternoon. He is so tired that his body does not obey him. He stumbles to the bathroom door. As soon as he gets in the bedroom, he looks around him and goes out on the balcony. He notices a gap that puzzles him.

"Delia, come here to see" he shouts at her, "they have pulled down the opposite hotel".

"Darling, it has been two months since the hotel was pulled down" she says to him looking at him in wonder. "They demolished it in order to build a new building of minimalist aesthetics just like ours".