

THE SECRET OF ANOTHER DESERT

There is a voice that doesn't use words.

Rumi

The sun was scorching hot the gold-filled sand of the steaming land. Bedouins were driving cattle across the boundless whiteness of the desert, wiping their sweaty foreheads with coarse linen kerchiefs. It was infernally hot. Chalk rocks, works of sand-bearing winds, could easily be seen. The shadows of the oases they'd passed through had completely disappeared from the silver sand. The thirsty cattle gaping and breathing the burning air...

"Master", said a man wearing red robes and a grey keffiyeh, "we have to rest. The cattle are going to die of thirst".

Yusuf Rashid glanced at the cattle lying on the sand and the goats barely moving on the loose soil of the desert. He felt pity for them.

"You're right, Barsadan. Let's have a rest. We've travelled a path longer than I'd ever think of".

"Why the rush, Master?"

"I don't know, Barsadan. I feel like I've returned to life all of a sudden. Something's pushing me forward, as if to be trapped by the destiny itself. Let's put up a tent and rest here before the day breaks. Give the poor cattle some water".

The bewitching rays of the moon, peeping from the other side of the realm of clouds, spread blue over the white sand. Bedouins made a fire not far away from the cattle. Abu, a swarthy man, sat down, embraced a stringed instrument and recited a poem of the Abbasian epoch:

"Don't imitate Bedouins
In their amusements
Or in their lifestyle:
Their days are scanty.
Let those drink milk,
Who've never been in clover".

"Milk", uttered Yusuf. "Let's drink wine instead of milk. Bedouins always have wine at hand".

The men nodded in approval, making their instruments emit plaintive sounds anew.

It was unusual for the Bedouin to be so anxious. He didn't sleep a wink that night, watching the stellar sky of the dessert and feeling his mind overgrown with hundreds of thoughts like moss. *A strange thing is a man's life, once born we pilgrim from a desert to another, from one person to the second and never know where the longed-for shelter may really be... Are we going to take any shelter some day? I wish we'd many lives: It's impossible to answer too many questions that gripe our souls in a life-time so short.*

Then the sky flooded with light shades, the horizon brightened and the dawn broke the night-born silence. They dismantled the tents, loaded the camels and stallions and continued their way through the world of white sand.

The Orient is a deposit treasure: millions of breathtaking stories and antique tiaras. It has its own rules, strange and obscure for Europeans, but so profound for the seekers of wisdom.

The ancient civilizations of the world, fallen into ruin, have been inviting the daughters and the sons of the modern age from afar: *Come, perceive...*

Late in the afternoon she returned home, mumbling up all ten floors and casting discontented looks at the broken elevator. Finally she opened the door, left the bag and the shoes in the hallway, gaspingly entered the sitting room and looked out of the window. The luminary floating down to the horizon was so beautiful.

“My sweet home”, she had a sweltered sigh, reposed herself on the sofa and steeped into slumber. The cool breeze wafted into the window and shifted her to the tired world of dreams but the peace was disturbed by the names mentioned on TV by a husky voice:

“Today, café Entree on Leselidze Street hosted the presentation of a book by an emerging author Tamta Jandieri”.

“Is it so difficult to speak smoothly?” she said, sluggishly getting up to find twenty new messages on her cell phone. “Too many people thinking about me after the presentation... never noticed me before... Well, his is a part of being human... When you’re nothing you mean nothing...” Her own words made her laugh. Then she looked through the messages and chose the one Maya had sent her.

“Congratulations, dear! I’ve already bought your book but failed to come to the presentation. They didn’t excuse. Phone me, when you’ve time. I’ll be waiting for you at the café in the evening. XXX”.

The tepid shower turned out to be pleasant. She took an ice-cream container out of the freezer and thought that the taste of cold sour cherries went well with the torrid heat of summer.

Two hours later when the twilight had already absorbed the sun rays, she put on a blue chiffon dress, grabbed her bag and went out. The recent achievement had filled her heart with joy, but she also had a few unpleasant memories. *Their reaction was natural too.*

Maya was waiting for her at Marco Polo. She’d already ordered two cappuccinos.

“I cannot understand what has made you decide to go to Cairo”, said Maya.

“There’s nothing strange about the decision. Have you ever heard of a country more interesting than any of the Oriental ones?”

“About many... You’re going to see nothing but veiled people and dust in Egypt. Besides, it’s too sultry there. You’d better go to Italy, Cyprus or Paris... would at least rest in a modern European situation... get acquainted with interesting people, men of the world...”

“It’s too late. I’ve already bought tickets. I’m going to fly to Istanbul first and then to Cairo. I’ve been dreaming about Egypt since I was a little girl. Oh, those pyramids and strange things... There is no other city in the world where too many contrasts exist side by side. The best place for inspiration, I believe...”

“You never did as I told you. For how long will the trip last?”

“Seven days”.

“Don’t forget to buy a yashmak”, laughed Maya and sipped her coffee.

“Don’t worry. I’ll buy you one too. Put it on and flirt with Giorgi”.

“And the flight is scheduled for...”

“Tomorrow evening”.

“No time left”.

“Yes. I can hardly wait for tomorrow morning. It’s a strange feeling. You know my foresights, don’t you? You’ll see, this trip will change my life, my views... Who knows... Maybe I’ll write the best novel of the year”.

“I hope you’re right. I hope you’ll return full of strength and ideas. Don’t forget to send me pictures. Will you have access to internet?”

“Maya, do you think Cairo is on the Northern Pole? It’s the most beautiful and modern city among the capitals of the Orient. Lots of holidaymakers and visitors arrive there each year. In the local dialect it’s called Mashar and Al-Qāhirah, its official name, means the city of vanquish”.

“You seem to know a good deal about it”.

“When you’re interested in something, you’ll always try to learn more”, answered Tamta, looked out of the window to see the passersby on the sidewalk. Leaving a few drops of coffee in her cup and looking at the time she went on: “Stand up. Let’s walk to the Liberty Square and then I’ll go home”.

It was pleasant to stroll in the narrow streets of the city full of foreign holidaymakers and feel the freshness of the evening. Loving couples ambled hand-in-hand up and down the streets, unaware that there was an entire world around them. Love always makes us forget the reality and puts us behind the bars of illusion.

“You’re quite alone. Aren’t you going to change anything?” inquired her cousin.

“I’m not alone. I have my own self and the people I love”.

“You know what I’m talking about”.

“Oh, come on Maya. This is not something I’d eagerly talk about. It’s too easy to begin relationships, but it’s difficult to build them”.

“Haven’t you heard anything about Luka”.

“Nothing”.

“I cannot understand why you decided to break with him. I think you’d better write something, forgive him. It’s human to err. Luka is a man of today, dignified. Women chase after such men. You’d better forgive that single mistake. We must understand our men and make them better.

“Maya”, Tamta was upset, “I’m not going to wait for a man, to catch hold of someone who yearns for something different. He’s made it quite clear that he isn’t interested in me anymore. To understand him? To make him better? Oh dear, people never change their tunes, especially, men. I’m not going to be a teacher or a nanny. You know I hate all the miserable attempts and methods worked out to make men stay by your side. Let bygones be bygones and clear the way for the coming... Luka was a part of my past life but we’re unable to turn back time. He isn’t the only one in the universe”.

“But you liked him...”

“I’ll like someone else. We mustn’t make ourselves cheap”.

“I hope you won’t regret”.

“Never”.

The moon was moving slowly to the center of the vault of heaven, first silvery and then dressing in the mantle of gold in the darkness. It was almost twelve when she came home. From above Tbilisi resembled a tiny snowflake blossoming on a palm. Cars squirmed like ants along the highway and the steam of the hot asphalt blended with the air. Silence dominating the whole apartment sounded strange.

A tepid shower and that pleasant coolness again... Then she called her mother. They were going to return from Batumi in ten days.

She went to the kitchen and took a bottle of water out of the fridge stuffed with bottles. Its Excellency Water! Then she took a small violet suitcase out of the wardrobe and put some clothes in it together with a cosmetics bag and then a large notebook and LANDSCAPE PAINTED WITH TEA by Milorad Pavic. She loved the book. It was different, lifelike and absorbing. She put her camera in a special bag and left it on the table. She watched the luggage and the passport with that satisfied expression on her face.

It was July 31. The full moon domed the capital, shyly sending its coquetting bluish rays to the windows below. Thrilled with expectation, she couldn't sleep. Thinking over and over again... rustles of the expectant soul... The longer you wait, the later the day breaks, taking you aback when you're all tired of thinking.

She was restless, buried her face in the cushion and then lay on her back again watching into the ceiling. Then she took a few sheets of paper and a pen, stepped out onto the balcony and made herself comfortable at a small table. She could see two tumble-down houses against the background of the lighted windows and street lamps sparkling like fireflies in the distance. She began to write:

My waiting heart has wizened and drained like a fatigued dervish. Thoughts prowling about like stray souls...

She crossed out what she'd just written and, obviously not in the writing mood, approached the bookshelf to take a collection of poems by Rumi.

A few hours later the daylight she'd been waiting for crept into the window. She called the hotel once again to make sure they'd meet her at the airport.

The Orient was ready to receive the wonder seeker with its arms outstretched.

At 18:00 p.m. Maya drove Tamta to the airport. It was overcrowded. The registration procedure for the flight to Istanbul had already begun.

They hugged one another and Tamta went to the ramp, smiling but with her heart pounding.

Some of us make fatal decisions with a smile. If we knew what the future holds for us, we'd never be able to get a wink of sleep. However, something we try to escape often approaches us itself. Sometimes we pilgrim through deserts like dervishes and find oases, sometimes we walk on the beach and burn our feet on the white-hot sand. No matter what, our life is something wonderful and full of troubles, a true deposit treasure for hunters and a tenement of vanity for pessimists and sluggards.