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From The Second Life of Constantine Cavafy

(fiction)

Translated from the Arabic by Anton Shammas
Suddenly, he felt the bedroom air was quickly depleting.

After Alexander had left early in the morning, he locked the door and started reading, in seclusion, afraid the author of the novel might be watching him and catching him any minute. If he surprised me now, I’d die on the spot, and wouldn’t be able to finish the novel.

Cavafy decided to slide open the French window and go out to the balcony. The salty air, coming from the invisible, distant blue, seeped through him, and he was astonished to realize, without knowing why, that the small, gloomy church was still in place, and suddenly felt he was no longer at his own familiar home. He remembered a large window in the Red Cross Hospital in Athens, overlooking a row of adjacent churches, separated by stripes of green lawns, making the distant asphalt road look merely like a thin dark ribbon, which was exactly what made him feel totally lost in the capital to which he had returned as a patient this time around. As for the sea, it wasn’t there during his sojourn in Athens, as if one of them had to show up for the other to disappear.

Church bells began to chime, as if the melancholic Gothic buildings were waking up from sleep, emitting scary yawns in succession, according to a collective consciousness of sorts—a bell rings, and all the other iron mouths gape in hunger, echoing the lead, intertwined and interwoven, and he finds himself in another world.

He was down the first couple of days because of that gloomy scene of eternity, and not because of his illness, or the smells of antiseptics and disinfectants engulfing the air, or the cryptic doctors whom he couldn’t help but think of as being masked patients. A young Greek woman in her twenties began to visit him, a poet and an outspoken journalist, all the time vigorously throwing naïve questions at him. She told him, as if reprimanding: “You should have experimented with your demotic Greek to write a popular epic as a counterpart to the Odyssey.” She wrote in Katharevousa, the purest form of Modern Greek, and she strongly believed that demotic Greek had no place in poetry. Those days, there prevailed a powerful trend in insomniac Athens, advocating the return to literary Greek, in its most elevated forms, and he suddenly felt that all he had written was no longer suitable for the young generation of Greek readers, though he had never tried in earnest to publish his poetry, and he had never thought of prospective readers. His aggressive visitor made him feel doubly lost. Greece had always been a country that thought of
itself as a nation, and it owned nothing but its language, which was responsible for all the reasons of decline or progress, and that in particular used to annoy him and make him feel, despite it all, a certain gratitude toward that small unknown town in the south, which wasn’t interested in his solitude, inside of which he felt totally removed from the controversies of the Capital, where poets believed they were each defending their homeland with poems.

Concerned, he asked Periklis Anastasiadis, his old friend and the man responsible for his recognition as a poet in Greece, and for giving him one hundred pounds thirty-one years ago to make the trip to his homeland, where he showed his poems to the editors of literary journals in Athens. Anastasiadis dismissed the question: “It’s the young generation my dear—they start off rejecting everything but then they stop short even of rebelling against what our ancestors rebelled against. We have all done the same thing, and when we reached old age, we had nothing better to do than to reread the Odyssey.”

Anastasiadis’ answer somehow depressed him, and he felt personally insulted. For a minute he thought the young outspoken woman had been more merciful.

Being upset with Anastasiadis made him remember the latter’s admiration for his old poems, and how he introduced him to E. M. Forster who, in turn, introduced his poems to T. S. Eliot, T. E. Lawrence, Arnold Toynbee and others, so his poetry became familiar in Europe without a sincere desire on his part. Moreover, Anastasiadis still keeps in his possession copies of his early poems and his suggestions and critical comments on those poems which he used to send to him. This multiplied his sense of alienation, and he simultaneously felt that Alexander was totally missing, and the Cavafy who was totally missing in the delirium of his illness suspected more than once the very existence of the person named Alexander.

One desperate morning, and to avoid any new discussions of art, he found the courage to speak to the outspoken young woman about the gloomy scene that was sneaking into his room through the window. She spontaneously responded: “Maybe that’s better, perhaps the light will prove another tyranny. Who knows what new things it will expose?” . . .

It took him a few seconds to realize that this particular young woman had actually recited to him from his poetry, and he became jubilant like a toddler, though when he looked at the side of her face no trace of excitement was to be found.
At that moment of jubilation, he decided to rewrite that poem which was being recalled in that desolate morning, like a window of hope, in honor of this young woman in rags. Thirty-five years have passed since he wrote “The Windows.” When he wrote it he was still living in the family house on Shereef Street, and his mother was still alive. He was thirty-four, carrying a press card of The Telegraph newspaper, and working as a stockbroker. He maintained both jobs in an equilibrium he now didn’t understand. The poem came to him through the windows of the family house on that elegant and dreary street, which he was certain at the time it wouldn’t change in a hundred years. Those years he still had hope, the hope which this young woman has now, that if he opened a window he’d see whatever he wants.

Cold November air gently caressed his face, and the faint fluttering of his hair made him feel calm and unruffled, made him feel the light numbness that lets his old body lose its stiffness, but once his body succumbed to the sensation, he lost his caution and didn’t remember that his hand was still holding the batch of papers, and suddenly it unclasped, as if emptying its wrinkles, and he was hit by the horror of the papers of Alexander Singopoulos streaming toward the street.

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Stunned, he ran to gather the papers that had covered the street, his frail body moved by panic in abrupt jumps, collecting whatever he could grasp with his hands, quite certain that he wouldn’t be able to catch every single sheet of paper.

The feeble thread that had kept the sheets together evaporated into thin air before they hit the ground, scattered and disgraced.

It’s simply possible that some sheets had vanished between the horrifying moment of watching them floating in the air and his terrified run, crossing the living room then jumping down the stairs until he reached the street. (A child may have bent down and picked up a sheet, or maybe he snapped it while it was still gliding in the air like a mysterious creature; a loiterer may have decided to entertain his idle walk with reading a surprise gift capable of killing some moments.) But rescue arrived before he died of grief and fear and fatigue—a half-naked woman suddenly appeared from nowhere, her enormous breasts swinging and swaying in alarm, not bothered by the flimsy house gown stuck between her buttocks. When did she issue the order for all these other younger versions of herself to show up from nowhere? He wasn’t sure. A flock of
half-naked women, with the same alarmed breasts, the same bodies that no longer feared scandal, whose nakedness wasn’t bothered by daylight, no longer hoping for absolution. Everything had come to an end, years before they suddenly came out from the secret apartment, before they crossed the threshold, before they cheerfully joined each other to rescue a novel about which they knew nothing. They immediately set out to gather the sheets, scattered all over the street, and before he grasped what was happening, before he could watch the lugubrious scene, devotional and sincere as it was, young screams and fitful giggles and all—the woman approached him with the pile of sheets in her hands.

He tried to thank her, and to ask her why she did what she did, but he realized again that he had no voice, so he greeted her and her companions timidly, nodding repeatedly, as if to compensate for his voiceless tongue. They all exchanged smiles with him, with seductive gestures, and when he reached into the pocket of his robe, hoping to find some paper money, the woman, guessing what he was up to, preemptively and firmly grabbed his fumbling hand with hers: “We are neighbors, and floor you walk is our ceiling!”

An old poetess, and life was her only book. An Egyptian, a real madam, with the kind of English that’s fit for quick bargains, whose words weren’t all expected to be exactly correct. For whoever wanted her all was clear enough, as the words were bridge enough.

He couldn’t refuse her invitation to enter her apartment, her mysterious brothel and the kingdom of her unrestrained nudity had, unknowingly, inspired him. But he was embarrassed because he had lost his voice. As soon as he entered the dimly lit apartment, he picked up a lone paper off a desk, and gestured with his hand for a pen, and wrote on it in English: “I beg your pardon, my lady, but I’m suffering from a temporary problem with my vocal cords.” He wasn’t sure of the Egyptian woman’s ability to understand what he had written. Maybe she couldn’t read and write, but she smiled understandingly, and started talking again the way Egyptians speak English: “I know . . . Don’t worry. We missed you very much in months before, Mr. Cavafy!”

She was speaking warmly as if they were intimate neighbors. She knows! How come she does? Who told her? And he noticed that the girls scattered into their rooms with the same speed with which they had gathered the scattered sheets. Two men entered the place during the half hour in which he was sitting across from her kohl-laden eyes. She
left him alone in both cases, and whisked the two men aside, talking to
them in whispers that couldn’t conceal the bargaining, then each disap-
peared into a room. Here’s home for everyone.

When he stood up to excuse himself, he noticed a steady look in
the woman’s eyes, examining his face. She saw him to the entrance, and
while she was closing the door of her paradise behind him, she hissed
out a conspiratorial sentence: “You need any help—don’t hesitate to
knock my door. Feel at home!”