

A COLLECTOR OF AMOROUS SENTENCES
by Alexander Sekulov

translated from the Bulgarian by Inna V. O'Brian

Grace Semich paid with the rest of her days to compile the collection of tales about the man she had walked away from on a cold morning in Amsterdam. The former circus actress had spent much of her life with daggers flying at her and she knew that the love stricken always search for their lover looking ahead, and never find them in their shadow. That is why she could roam carefree through ports, cities and deserts never showing a hint of her passion.

Years ago she gave the man the one and only gift for attainable eternity - the final goodbye - and he generously scattered in the air the sorrow that came from losing her. While dreaming of her he roamed through lands, streets and winds the world over, never letting himself forget her, always speaking her name. Now she had to discover the routes of his long lonely expeditions, she had to meet captains of ships he had sailed in across continents, trace his steps in the humid dark green jungles and record carefully the stories from witnesses who were haunted by the tall hunched wizard dressed in an orange shirt with eyes filled with happy despair. She had to give him a name.

They met on the verge of two moments in time. She saw the last silver dagger of her youth fly towards her face and the fear of surviving sent a chill down her spine. He was travelling the final steep slope before stopping on the stone hill of his invulnerability. Not much time passed between the late tea of their encounter in Amsterdam and the morning of their goodbye. To be precise they were together for two days, 17 hours, 43 minutes and the fleeting seconds in which only two lives perish and a few thousand ordinary deaths take their toll. The time they spent together was enough for Grace Semich to accept that she could not offer a home to this man's soul. Commitment was fatal for him - it burst the atoms of his body, it dried up his voice, it bleached the pupils of his eyes. He could die a final unbearable impudent death from commitment. Like a dandelion, he wanted to scatter himself around the world into a myriad of silver names.

On their last night together she woke up with the feeling that a tall black guy had gently deposited a touch of death in her heart. She then got out of their warm bed in the pale dusk and walked around the room of the Rembrandt Square Hotel. In her leather bag she put all her perfumes, body lotions, brushes and combs and took one last look at the sleeping body of the man

who she knew she could only love in their dreams. She bent over him and with one slight breath blew his fate into pieces.

For years on end she could hear his sorrow call to her from the jungles of the Amazon, amidst the desert winds, in the ear of a woman passing by. He would call to her in fear, passion or pain; he would call to her until his voice turned into steam, a cloud, rain and snow so that it would cover the oncoming days, the tumbling days of the moments spent without each other. Time sheltered them in its mercy: she was always a few years behind him, but alive, and he was a few moments ahead of her, also alive.

She was in a hospital in Ontario when she first heard a tale about the travelling man. Over by the other bed a tall black woman with hypnotic eyes and purple hair was telling the story to her little boy. In that story an illusionist disappeared in his empty sleeves, lovers uncovered an antique etching and a missing woman was the only one to survive at the end of it. "That is me," Grace Semich thought to herself before drifting to sleep. The next day the black woman shared with her that this was just a one of a collection of 28 stories about the appearances and disappearances of one man throughout the world. She had personally read two of them in a book written on thin apple skin, an item that her father guarded jealously; there were rumours of other stories. "No one has ever seen all the stories together," she said pensively. Grace felt that the time she had allowed herself to not think about the tall hunched man from Amsterdam was over.

Over the next few years she patiently put together all the available facts concerning the whereabouts of the different parts of the collection. She carefully mapped out the complicated journeys of the man, his sudden appearances and expected disappearances, the purple-green visits to a house atop a hill. She discovered the names of the other women he had fallen in love with, she even found out the names of the two he could have loved, had he not closed his eyes while falling into apple trees.

Her desk was covered with leads to islands and tribes that only he knew of; she was pedantic when researching the hidden labyrinths that he had casually walked outside ordinary time, ensuring not to leave a trace on their walls. Filling in gaps from dictionaries, she coined much needed words to describe journeys in which you did not need to discover anything. At times she felt that she could almost touch him, as if she were following him down a narrow path and virtually smelling the scent of his skin, the skin on his right shoulder that glistened like the sliver of the moon on the morning of their goodbye in Amsterdam. She was certain that

emptiness was the only gift a woman in love could give to a man, yet in moments like that her confidence was feeble and the smell of disaster flooded her nostrils. Some nights his silhouette melted in the distance, the information on him became extremely confusing, as though he had never been. Often she had to rule out erroneous data, unlikely rumours; she had to match the names of ports to the ships and examine endless passenger lists name by name.

That is precisely how she discovered the name of the wife of the prison warden. There was a picture of the man coming out of his cabin at the port in Brandeis. On the left, just under the plate with the number for the adjacent cabin, you could make out a woman with an aquiline nose and reddish hair. In her eyes it was easy to read that she was resigned to having suddenly fallen in love. It took Grace Semich one and a half years to find where this woman lived, so she could buy the tale of the complacent yellow cat from her.

When she found out that the man had got off the ship on the Island of Love Stories with just a silver key in his pocket and disappeared without a trace, she knew it was time to pack and leave in search of the various parts of the collection that had been scattered all over the world. She informed her husband of her long absence that she was giving him as a gift; she filled a notebook with soup recipes for her daughter in London and to her son, who lived in Brittany, she sent a wooden trunk with multiple dividers made at the turn of the century. Then she headed for the Mekong River Delta - the farthest point where she might find some early parts of the collection.

She did not know yet that she would have to cross several deserts, to sail through drifting ice off Valparaiso or that she would get lost amidst unknown tribes along the River Niger and the Amazon. During the years of patiently collecting she would come to know the shamanic techniques of the people of Kogi and Mapuche, she would learn to be as quiet as blessed tobacco smoke and to decipher Bedouin spells tattooed on the dark shoulders of winds. It was difficult because some of the owners of the tales carefully guarded their identities; others were clueless about what was sitting on the high shelves of their bookcases, while the Bedouins from the northern desert in Libya had exchanged the written material to get new glass for the wind resistant lanterns. She had to spend three days sipping the green tea of forgetfulness with the chief of a tribe so she could reconstruct the lost part of the tale from his story. In the morning, her eyes bloodshot and head spinning, she was able to write down what she had heard on the murky green sediment on the bottom of the teapot with the tall blue spout. In order to transport the parts

written on burning paper, she had to put in a special order for a case with a million tiny holes so that the air could keep the fire of the tales alive without melting the red clay interior of the case. In some cases the writing would come to an end suddenly, while the sentences or the pages would be completed in strange signs, images and pictures. Between the pages of some stories were hidden topographic details for maps of unknown lands. At an auction in Lisbon Grace Semich bought a small leather travel-book. According to persistent scientific rumours the man created it during two possible trips to the Lake of the Seven Rings in Kenya and the Cave of the Skeletons in East Timor. After that for years to come she would have to deflect the fierce attempts of William Geoffrey Maria-Berg to contest her legal right to this item.

It took hundreds of hours with a magnifying glass in hand before she could tell apart with certainty the original tales of the collection from the fakes erupting in different corners of the world. On one of her trips to Bucharest the engraver of dreams graciously taught her how to discern the barely recognisable beak of a red bird in the lower left corner of each tale. It was impossible to forge the light refracting in the beak and it was invisible to the accidental opportunists who claimed to be collectors. The engraver of dreams studied the woman carefully with the unblinking eyes of an owl before he revealed to her the secret key to the collection. “You have a name for the ending, although the ending does not really have a name,” he told her, before he left her to drown in the despair of her journey.

Her rivals followed her the whole time. One was a collector who liked to write chronicles with his eyes closed and lived in a small town in the Balkans with a river and seven hills; the other was Yosif Yosifidis, a jeweller from Thessaloniki, who was the only one capable of casting the breath of a sleeping woman in silver. Often the three of them would spread leads for dead-end labyrinths. They fabricated and circulated fake discoveries about the collection, bargained hard with owners, bid up the prices of the collection shamelessly, vilified others and were gleeful when they got news about the umpteen failures of the competition.

When Grace Semich was positive that she had gathered nearly the full collection, she honourably offered to buy the missing parts from the two men. The man from the Balkans, an extremely mysterious guy, whose face was not familiar to anyone and who only owned the tale about the freckles, flatly refused to talk to her. Grace even doubted his existence since all her attempts to connect with him were in vain. The jeweller agreed to sell only when the price of the four stories engraved on burning paper became outrageous. He still managed to spoil her success

when he mentioned that he was in possession of a whole different collection of tales that no one dared authenticate. Grace asked to see it, her heart turning into waste, but the Greek shook his head for a long time in an extremely respectful refusal.

She sent the discovered parts of the collection to her son with detailed, careful instructions how to place them in the separate divisions of the wooden trunk. She was reconciled to the idea that one of the slots would remain empty. As soon as she was certain that she had compiled all the stories about the man, she left her husband for good and moved in with her son in Brittany.

Now she sits in front of the trunk filled with tales. Her face is transparent. In it clouds drift, a tempest rages, mint raindrops shower and a poplar tree, with starlings perched on it, leans against the shoulder of the air. The noise of wheels comes from the distance. Around the bend the postman's sack appears like a rising sun. It bobs on his back. Bicycle tires glide on the red sand before they come to a full stop. Grace cautiously takes the package and thanks the postman. The tires glide again; silence sets in. Grace goes up to her room and deposits the package inside the empty slot of the trunk. The return address on it is the small Balkan town with the river and the seven hills. Grace does not open the package. She knows who the sender is. The time of separation is over.

His name is Nasko H.

Nasko H. and the Boat in the Air

Nasko H. was waiting for the wind trader to cross the dark green honey of the night in Valparaiso, when the harbour bell rang out a warning of disaster at sea. Amidst the wet impulses of premonitions and the drifting icy frights, the survivors' boat came to the shore carrying a soaked ship's boy, a freezing stoker from the engine room and a woman with smoky skin. Nasko H., the court artist, found in her eyes the recognisable enticing fear of love which makes you build boats of your dreams.

The next morning the shipwrecked men boarded the first departing ship while the surviving woman rented a room at The Old Silk Factory boarding house. Suddenly, Madam Aurelia Chaves de Nunes, the landlady, found that the number of guests wanting to try her fantastic breakfasts of homemade bread, fresh butter and lemon marmalade had inconceivably increased. Having so many cares and tasks to attend to, Madam Nunes failed to notice that all her new visitors were men. They stood waiting, with suppressed solemnity and rehearsed sympathy for the surviving woman to come down for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

A few months later in the middle of September, the body of the first dead man appeared. There was a satin cushion carefully placed under his head and his arms were crossed in prayer. Ten more bodies followed. The process of identifying the bodies was so strenuous that Nasko H. couldn't visit Madam Nunes as regularly as he used to.

Only after a witness mentioned the silhouette of a woman appearing on different balconies around the town hours before the bodies of the deceased men were found below, did Nasko H. realise that he hadn't stopped thinking about the woman with the smoky skin at The Old Silk Factory boarding house. He asked Madam de Nunes to arrange a meeting with the survivor, but all he received was an elegant and slightly bewildering answer: "Madam asked me to tell you that the bunks in the boat you are building should be no more than eleven.

"It took Nasko H. a few years to finish the boat of his dreams. He stretched the mast, then filled the hull with putty and painted it. Afterwards he drew the ropes and the equipment tight. Finally, he sat down, lit a cigar and resumed waiting for the wind trader.

Nasko H. and the Cupboard With the Lemon Tree

Nasko H. found the lemon tree at the bottom of the wooden cupboard which he had bought at Pushkin and Plushkin trade office soon after he began working as artist of the court of Valparaiso. On a September morning in 1973 only one shiny golden-yellow fruit glistened on the dark green top of the tree whose roots had sprouted through the bottom of the cupboard.

Nasko H. was unaware that just one hour, 23 minutes and 14 seconds before, a vegetable seller had found the first of the 11 dead men whose bodies were to appear under the balconies of public buildings during the following days. The case became a crime mystery and the new artist could hardly manage to sketch the puzzling testimonies of the witnesses, all describing the brief appearance and disappearance of a smoky woman on the balconies under which the dead bodies were later found. Police precautions were enforced, the commandant's curfew hour was strictly observed and yet the astringent breath of impossible love was drifting above the city.

During the restless nights Nasko H. could hear the leaves of the tree in the cupboard unwinding and he could see in his dream the root fibres crawling and squeezing through the passages made by the woodworms. Thick lemon silence settled over the town where men wanted to fall anonymously asleep so that they could wake up alive and women didn't fall asleep until they had mentioned all the names of the whores in Valparaiso. The aroma of the silence

thickened the air day by day, making the inhabitants move around more and more sluggishly as if they were swimming slowly and with dignity in home-made jam.

At the end of September they found the last body and then a rumour spread that the vanishing woman had stopped appearing. Several days later the air became comfortable to live in again.

Then Nasko H. stood up in front of the cupboard and abruptly opened its doors. Eleven yellow rough-skinned balls with a smell that was already fading away, bound for unattainable decay, shone in the dark green space in front of him.

Nasko H. and the Last Satin Cushion

The landlady of The Old Silk Factory boarding house gave Nasko H. 11 tiny, silver, satin cushions for other people's dreams. While she was handing him the parcel, which was carefully wrapped in green paper, Madam Aurelia Chaves de Nunes was content to mutter that the parcel had belonged to the only woman to survive a liner's shipwreck at the end of August. The same lady had unexpectedly left that morning, just a little while before the new court artist at Valparaiso was intending to question her about the mysterious appearance of 11 dead men under the balconies of various public buildings. Inside the parcel there was a note from the boarding house and on it the delicate handwriting of a flustered woman said: "Eleven is not an even number."

Many times afterwards, when Nasko H. wanted to penetrate the dreams of a friend, enemy or a woman dear to his heart at the time, he would put his head on one of the tiny cushions. The following morning the satin would emit static electricity, heat itself in the motionless air and then burn in pale-blue flames, leaving the bedcover, the bed and the walls around untouched. Nasko H. would gather the blue-white ash in a teaspoon and would scatter it out of the window.

When he met the girl with the poppies at the port of Oransio, Nasko H. had already learned how to decipher the missing words in love sentences and had been able to take a breath at the dots. In the haste of their desire they both fell asleep with exhaustion.

The dawn breaks.

The girl with the poppies is sleeping on her left side and the last satin cushion is beneath her head. She smiles. She can see in her dream Nasko H. sleeping on his right elbow and, alarmingly, not dreaming himself.

Nasko H. and the Little Saints of Valparaiso

For more than 34 years the 11 bodies of the dead men had been lying in the morgue freezers of the town of Valparaiso and the case known as The Little Saints had remained one of the most mysterious unsolved crimes. The first body was found by the authorities under the balcony of the Splendour Hotel in the dock neighbourhood in the early morning of Monday 16th September 1973. The man was lying on his right side with his knees bent against his body and his arms folded on his chest. At first, the vegetable seller named Miguel Ruan de la Vasquez thought he was a sleeping drunk, but then he notified the police. The first inspection, where Nasko H., the recently employed artist at Valparaiso Police Department was appointed to make drawings, ascertained that the man's head had been carefully placed over a hand-painted satin cushion. The copies of this drawing which later appeared in the press revealed a composition of four men lifting their heads upwards in expectation.

The detailed forensic report didn't find any sign of physical abuse or traces of poisoning. Despite being rather strange, the case did not have a thorough investigation until the following Monday when Pepe Alonso Sanches-i-Iguaran, the paper man, found the second body under the stone balcony of the Public Library. The body was again lying in the same position with a cushion under its head. The only difference was that the men on the satin painting were only three - one man less.

During the next nine weeks more and more bodies were found by the police under the balconies of different private and public buildings in Valparaiso, and the town was seized with fear and rumour. That was when the artist at the police department resigned. Before leaving, he was thoroughly questioned by the senior magistrate, Alejandro S., who wanted to determine all the minor or missing details concerning the scenes of crime. The record of this questioning provided further information: the presence of a dusky smoky woman with eyes of rain appearing on a balcony near the building where the body of another dead man was lying. The examining magistrate demanded that the detailed sketches of the unfamiliar woman be published in the Valparaiso press so that she could be found. Shortly after this, the artist was released from his office and sailed away in an unknown direction with the result that the incidence of dead men's bodies surprisingly ceased.

In the following months the police department was overwhelmed with information sent by the inhabitants about the appearance of the wanted woman on different balconies all over the

town, but irrefutable proof about that has still to be found. The dead men's praying hands and the rumours of the unknown woman gave the case the undeserved name The Little Saints.

An international investigation eventually managed to identify the first dead body. The dead man turned out to be the Jew George Zacharias - an itinerant musician who disappeared from the hotel he was staying at in Paris on 16th September 1973. His fingerprints turned out to be identical to those of all the dead bodies. Since then the 11 dead bodies of George Zacharias have been lying in the chilly eternity of Valparaiso and the case has never been solved.

The Saints and the Men of Black Pepper

The whores in Valparaiso opened their colourful umbrellas like paper fireworks bursting into the sky at 11 o'clock sharp on Sunday, when the siren of the ship carrying anxious men had finally burst into the air and silence could hide nothing. Their languid bodies, their fans, their pursed lips, their dresses, their crossed hands and their heavy eyes entwined in the clusters of the balconies hanging over the street at the harbour, were slowly writing in the eyes of the passengers, letters of an alphabet which could finally help them learn to forget their names. Even Nasko H., the temporarily employed court artist, stopped drawing the portraits of the people who were sought in the morgue as the features of their faces suddenly broke into awkward smiles. The housewives who had been to the butcher's feverishly put in their large baskets joints of beef, smoked ribs, tongues, spleens and kidneys, soaked in slime and carefully wrapped in brown paper. The passengers unloaded the light of their desire all over the pit and the squares of Valparaiso were deserted.

A little while before midnight the rambling men sank behind the tightly closed doors, windows and curtains, where some of them spoke in Spanish out of the blue, others acquired the gift of foreseeing the future and still others approached the forgotten way of the tears.

The next morning, the figure of a lying man circled with black pepper could be found at the threshold of each house that was considered to be noble. The men stepped over the bodies of their duplicates carefully and with the lightness of unexpectedly dawned country thinkers hurried to the harbour. The ship was hidden beyond the horizon at the time when the southerly spring wind hit.

The air darkened with the black pepper which flew up and it looked as if black snow had appeared out of nowhere. Rivers of pungent and stifling smell ran down the steep streets.

On Monday, just before the morning service at the church, the wind subsided.

Now the streets are filled with black pepper. People gather it in buckets, dust-pans, cast-iron kettles and aluminium dishes. They collect it in sacks and bundles, and put it in dry basements and airy attics. They do this with concentration and in silence and haste. Not a single word is uttered.

At about 11 o'clock the shutters of the shops start banging open as if pushing away the memories and the premonitions.

A little while before 2 o'clock the aroma of home-roast meat, abundantly sprinkled with the black pepper ground in the tireless grinders of the women, wafts in the air over Valparaiso.