

**LEON**  
**by Elena Alexieva**

translated from the Bulgarian by Elena Alexieva

I very much wanted to start by saying: "This is a story about..." But it felt too dangerous, like a magic formula after which something violent has to ensue. Besides, I can hardly afford that, especially after what I intend to relate here. I didn't witness what happened myself. Maybe it hasn't even happened yet.

Maybe I am skipping many hours, days and months to announce one possible version that only the future can reject or confirm. But this doesn't mean it never happened or can't happen. I believe the irreversible has taken place long ago. Hence, whether it'll remain just a hypothesis or happen in reality, is unimportant. Equally insignificant is, as I already said, that I haven't and will never witness it. I was allowed to have a glimpse of what was happening only for a few short days.

Later I had months to ponder over it. I don't believe in fatefulness. I don't want to. But even less do I believe in fortuity. There are encounters that don't come by chance. They are not simply moments toward which time unavoidably runs: they are time itself. Time is made of such tiny knots around which everything else accumulates, with which everything else begins.

The person I want to tell you about will bear the name of Leon. I won't call him by his true name, not because I want to let him pass unrecognised, but because, if I do this, language will destroy him immediately. I needn't point out that I have to keep him alive till the end of this story. And when the end comes, his true name won't mean anything anymore.

And so, I met Leon at a film festival where the two of us had to work as interpreters. This was in another city, and by that time it felt as if in another country as well. He surprised me from the very first moment: he didn't look the way I had imagined him - as far as one can imagine a stranger. In fact, I took the trouble to imagine him right because he was a stranger. Leon was a young man, walked with his shoulders slightly bent and his face spoke nothing to me. He could just as well have been someone else. Anyone. But the moment I saw him approaching along the street, hurrying to the van that was going to drive us to the hotel, this possibility vanished into nothingness. Later, amidst our endless conversations, the question of this kept somehow slipping away from me, or may be I hadn't yet reached it: "Why did you do this? Why didn't you simply

walk by?" I'm sure he would have put forward some irrational impetus and would have played with it like a cheat gambling with his fake dice. The truth is Leon had simply taken this road and was unable, or probably unwilling to stray. It was the road that brought him here.

It's hardly unfair to say that Leon wasn't a good interpreter. The microphone filled him with anxiety which he was obviously helpless to overcome. Many other things also filled him with anxiety: sometimes I could see his palms going wet. He hadn't yet mastered his distress - what many are tempted to term 'internal conflict' - and it tortured his speech, making him stumble as if faced with invisible hurdles he wanted to leap over. Apart from his work however, outside the dark and smoke-filled cabin, Leon was loquacious, even convincing. In fact, his loquaciousness knew no bounds. At some point it was intoxicating for his listener; then next it became tedious and depressing. I experienced such states every day, tens of times, and, I won't conceal this, absolutely by my own volition. Why would I pass through this? Well, because he was telling stories. All kinds of stories, collected from here and there, appearing in disorder or connected by association, serious as hell and superficial as hell, simple, sophisticated, ruminated and detailed - that is, every conceivable kind of story. Apart from being so dizzyingly numerous, these stories had something else in common too: they weren't his. Not even one of them, not even the shortest and simplest story belonged to him.

They were all stories from books and films from long ago, released to wander around the world. Leon had read much and seen many films.

Actually, he was in the movies. Or at least so he said. What makes me think so? I'll make this clear a bit further on.

Regretfully, Leon wasn't a true storyteller, although the illusion he was creating was striking. He seemed to believe in what he was telling. Passing through him, stories were never the same any more. The fact that it was him telling them, and not somebody else, meant a lot. Some of them he would even turn into versions of his own life. Those by the way, were the poorest of all. Still, Leon was not a true storyteller. He was narrating not out of love for narration, but, I think, to free himself of everything that had piled up in the years of reading, and open more room in his amazing memory for stories. Therefore they were coming out of him in pain and sometimes rage. There were moments when he was like a demon. But a demon powerless and confused,

unable to find a place for himself - a demon possessed by chaos. Leon was almost driven insane by the desire to be someone else, or better, several others.

He said he was a good actor. But to me he looked more like an imitator. I realise the risk of loading this narration with too much reflection on a stranger, but I will nevertheless mention a few more things I consider important. Leon was a real library, his shelves stuffed with books, that is, stories, but I somehow couldn't get rid of the feeling that if I threw these books out of the library windows, only the empty shelves will remain. Maybe to these I'll have to add the photos of Marlon Brando and De Niro, as well as those of a dozen others. Eventually, a negligible amount of music. If I try to imagine myself between the walls of this empty library, I would feel like in an abandoned warehouse, paint peeling off the walls in big sad leaves, the floor indifferently resounding with my steps. Nobody there.

In our all-night conversations he claimed he had known happiness and had deliberately given it up as it would interfere with the great, daring plans he had for himself. He also said that if one was looking for happiness he would certainly find it. In fact, in his confusion Leon often talked such nonsense behind which not only his thriving youth showed, but also the incommensurate desires of a traveller scared to death, just learning to walk.

And the road was that famous road to nowhere along which every step melts away in the haze of doubt. He thought he would manage to escape from what he called "happiness". In the mean time, he was hiding among books. Leon talked of solitude and used other big words with unclear meaning. He would utter them feverishly, lacing the utterance with the pained glare in his eyes. He had not yet realised that solitude is like heart-burn: the pain is violent at first; then you don't feel anything, you're even fine. Because you are already dead.

As already mentioned, Leon and I spent almost all of our time together. He needed a good and patient listener who knew and read less than himself, to whom Leon would transfer part of his burden and at the same time, fascinate and dumbfound him with his tricks. That listener, of course, was me. I would listen to stories, narratives and plots of distress all day and all night, with my morning coffee and evening drink, in between films, cigarettes, phone calls...I listened. Sometimes I would even fall asleep with exhaustion, but I would still go on listening. Stories have always been my weak spot: I am not a good narrator, I can't even memorise them. I had

never seen so many stories together, except in books. That's why I decided to submit myself, and wait to see what happened next.

I remember one early evening when the two of us were drinking Turkish coffee on the sidewalk in front of a small sweet-shop. We were just about to start again the cruel and somewhat senseless game we'd been playing lately. The aim was to make your opponent defend himself by attacking him in every possible way, a kind of word-fight.

It was Leon's idea and I took it without any stipulation, like all of his strangeness and pretences so far. But the game can be subject of a separate story and for this reason I only mention it here. So, right before we started playing he was telling me again about his past: how he was born in Argentina; how his parents were put to death in a stadium, together with other communists; how his adopters took him on board a huge ship which burned down mysteriously in the Port of Istanbul - a ship on whose deck Leon, still very young then, loved playing with matches... How the grown-up Leon, student in a glamorous other country, was making his living as a gigolo and, being beautiful as an angel, was attracting irresistibly both women and men... At that point, having found myself on the very line between tolerance and tedium, I raised my eyes and looked at Leon, sitting opposite, infatuated with his own talk, vain, aggressive, fascinatingly stupid and beginning to grow fat. I had to admit he was indeed beautiful as an angel.

I think I mentioned something about movies. Yes, he wanted to make movies. Yes, now he was only the humble student of his professors but later, oh, later... They've filmed him for a TV program. He would say, half-joking, half-serious: "I'm a star." That was it: fame was mercilessly crawling toward him; he was standing in its way and couldn't do anything about it. He said he couldn't sleep. No wonder: at night there was a draught in the library, ghosts wandered, in the darkness the pages of the books looked black. Leon was suffering and was shooting a film about his own suffering.

Together with all the big things that tormented him he was thinking of death. His own death, of course. He was looking for someone to kill him, drawing exotic plots, collecting ideas. Leon raised the issue again one bright and lazy afternoon when we were having pizza sitting on the low fence of a public garden. He repeated that he had to be killed, he had to, it was necessary. Then he asked me if I wanted to do the job. I was never quite convinced whether he meant it or not. In

fact, it doesn't matter at all. I pondered over this for a while: at that place, at that point there were quite a lot of things we had in common. When I realised that, I said "Yes." He made me repeat it, promise him... I repeated and promised. This is how we got here.

Let me explain now: the way in which I described Leon, as well as the promise I gave him, doesn't mean at all that my decisions were made because I was unable to stand him. On the contrary - I liked him, I was even biased. Maybe because he reminded me of myself in a period of my life that was already past. To some extent I knew where he was and what there was ahead of him. I gave my word to kill him.

Meanwhile, the festival was over. I never saw Leon again.

But no, I'm lying, of course. I had several glimpses of him, on the streets or in the cinemas of this city which is too small and narrow for the two of us. But such encounters were indeed fortuitous and unintentional: neither he, nor I wanted them. We wouldn't look at each other or talk. I had my own ways to keep track of him.

Actually, I wasn't doing anything specific to this end. I read books. I watched films. At every step I came across his stories and names. I could see the few things he had taken with him and those he had left. Sometimes these collisions filled me with pain, sometimes with rage. I kept finding those he was trying to imitate. I strained to unravel the traces of these imitations; I fought the sadness of their clumsiness, creeping in from all sides. Day after day I kept throwing the books with stories out of the library windows, contemplating the empty shelves. I was aware that soon the moment would come when even the last page will vanish. I hadn't forgotten my promise.

Leon, I know that you keep reading. You try to hide between the books. In the morning, when you look at yourself in the mirror, you see your huge human body and it is impossible to place it between the covers. But this doesn't stop you; it never has. You keep reading.

Leon, forgive me for giving you this stupid name. It really doesn't matter what I call you. If you've reached this point then you know you don't need a name anymore - neither this one, nor your own. At this very moment you are reading the last lines of your last book. Are its pages soaked with poison? Has someone else taken care of you long ago? You don't need this story. It doesn't mean anything anymore.

Here, I take it. I open the window. It's easier than I expected.