

PEONIES AND FORGET-ME-NOTS

by Georgi Gospodinov

translated from the Bulgarian by Alexis Levitin, Magdalena Levi

They had met only a few hours before. He was in his very early thirties; she was in her very late twenties. He had to give her a package to deliver to a friend of his across the ocean. She was only a mediator. It was a five-minute job, but two of the three hours left to her flight had passed, and they still couldn't find any good reason to part. Now, 60 minutes to flight time, they were standing in the corner of the café in the departure lounge, having their third coffee without saying a word. They had exhausted all the subjects that could keep a conversation going between two people who didn't know each other. And the silence was becoming unseemly. The small table in front of them was piled with empty plastic cups that had acquired most unexpected shapes after long hours of fumbling with them. The coffee stirrers had long been broken into the smallest possible pieces, the empty sugar bags turned into cornets and tiny little boats.

It occurred to him that he could turn this table into a ready-made object, an installation, so to speak, that he could name "An Apologia of Embarrassment" (plastic coffee cups, stirrers, empty sugar bags, a white table). Then he found it stupid, so he decided to keep silent. "What one leaves unsaid turns into broken stirrers and smashed cups," she said all of a sudden. He thought that he would never meet another woman like this one, who would be capable of reading his thoughts, with whom he would want to spend the rest of his life in this café. He was startled to have used a phrase like "the rest of his life," even though silently.

"Let's talk," she said, as if they hadn't talked non-stop for two hours. The remaining hour was too little time to be wasted in beating around the bush and making boats. But since he wouldn't start talking, she said simply: "We have to accept it that sometimes people just walk past each other."

"The whole irony of it is that they realise it the moment they meet," he said. "Maybe we have met before. We have lived in the same city for so long. It's not possible that we haven't passed each other at some traffic lights."

"I would've noticed you," he said.

"Do you love her?" she asked.

"Do you love him?" he asked.

He quickly admitted that it made no difference and that it wasn't anybody's fault.

Later he couldn't even remember who was the one who had come up with the life-saving (or so he thought then) idea to invent shared memories, to make up a whole life together before and after their meeting. A pathetic attempt to take revenge on merciless chance that had brought them together, only to separate them. They had 50 minutes at their disposal.

“Do you remember,” he started, “the school days, when we were living on the same street? Every week I would secretly drop a tinfoil ring made of Lacta Caramel's wrapping paper into your mailbox.”

“Oh,” she said, “so you were the one with the rings. My father was always the first to find them and suspected that some crazy admirer from the neighbourhood was sending wedding rings to my mother. It now turns out that those were for me.”

“Yes, they were for you,” he said.

“Do you remember,” she started, “the last year at the university, when we went off, just the two of us, to that monastery? It was the first time we were travelling alone. There weren't any rooms available at the hotel, so they put us up in one of the monks' cells for the night. It was very cold, and the bed was so stiff. I was a little scared. I crossed myself secretly after each time we did it. Five times I crossed myself during the night.”

“Six,” he said. “I was scared, too. Do you remember what happened later, how you came to live with me? Your mother said that she would disown you through The Official Gazette, because she didn't want illegitimate grandchildren.”

“I remember,” she said. “Anyway, I couldn't have children.”

At that point she fell silent. He took her hand for the first time since they had met. Very gently, comfortingly.

“It's OK,” he said. “And I broke my leg once, remember? I was already 48, working like crazy, and that month I spent at home seemed to me like real paradise. You took a leave too, you even said that you'd break your arm if they didn't let you do it. And we never poked our noses out of the apartment.”

“And the next year, when they found that I had that tumor... You had read somewhere that laughter could be used as a healing therapy against cancer, and the next two weeks you were telling me jokes non-stop, so that I would laugh. I still don't know how you collected them all. You were so frightened and nice. I think that was when your hair turned white. And every day you would bring me peonies and forget-me-nots.”

“Thank God you're better now. What would I do without you?”

At that moment a voice invited all the passengers flying to New York to advance to the departure terminal. The silence lasted no more than a minute. Then she straightened up and said that she had to go. He took her suitcase and they both left the café. Before going through the passport check-in, she turned and gave him a very long kiss. As if for the last time, he thought, although there had never been a time before.

Half an hour later he turned and walked out. He felt terribly old; he had trouble moving his legs. He deliberately closed his eyes as he walked through the mirrored-glass door, so as not to see his hair suddenly turned white and those stooped shoulders of an old man. With every further step he realised more and more clearly that he could never go back home to his unachievably young wife. And he could never tell her what he had been doing those last fifty years, while he was away.