

FROM THE BREATHING HILL

by Betti Fayon

translated from the Bulgarian by Angelina Sekulova

A HEAD BLUSHED WITH SHAME

Mary is obsessively jealous of Mr. A. And how was she not to be jealous, provided that Mr. A was a man with charm. Well, he was going bald, his forehead was shiny like a copper pan, and, when looked from the rear, the hair on the top of his head resembles two chopper landing platforms, so when he bends over someone to speak – and he has to bend because he is over one metre point ninety-nine tall, the chopper platforms assume a very funny form, as if two small helicopters have just risen from there and the slightly bending gentleman, his arms outstretched around his body, has paid great efforts to ensure their balanced take-off... And the big jutting purple ears, and the extremely curious nose, almost as large as that of a clown, attribute to his entire stance – regardless of, or maybe exactly because of, his kind-natured penguin pouch – a wonderful blitheness, and you feel like clapping your hands and giving out a gasp. But he is always the first to do it, he claps his hands and seems to invite you to jump in his two-metre wide trousers – well, they are far from being so, but you feel tempted to try, or you want to pull his nose – just as if it were a real clown's... And, all in all you want to enter into his bi-i-i-i-g world – when he stretches his arms wide, as if he shows you a big balloon, and stares amazed inside it himself...

At other times, however, his masculinity is overpowering... Mary is even afraid to look at him. For instance, he wears jeans tight around his legs, which are not thin at all, but they are long and gracefully shaped. His stance is the one of a ballet dancer, and when the two legs stand, sort of elegantly, close to one another, one stepping a bit forward or a bit forward and to the side, you notice the beauty of the bulky swelling between them... Mary is burning with shame while telling this...

Once, as they embraced each other saying “Happy New Year”, Mary sensed the bend at the lower end of his backbone and the beginning of his bottom – it was terribly peculiar...

This was already too much... Her head was burning because Mary was blushing with shame all over.

Well, she was already crimson, anyway – and when he had once put under his medium long black coat a lacquered black jacket, powerfully manifested on his outstanding belly, with a very strange tailor cut, long and sharp collar and an unfastened belt, its buckle hanging

loose, Mary pictured the places where after a gay procession all lacquered bodies would go, and she wished she knew the night life of Mr. A.

„Oh, my little Mary”, he said with a devilish flicker in his blue eyes, „this is not intended for children. When I was so...”, and he rose his arm to measure a height reaching to about his waist, “I was just as... /‘curious’ he wanted to say.../” While Mary was trying to capture his look in her mind because, at this certain moment, his eyes looked as if they related a whole night like this and she could see all of Mr. A.’s metamorphoses and experience them all in a second..., as if he was giving them to her as a present, by just this one look.

Recording 1: A

I will try and tell Mr. A. about myself. Maybe I have to start by saying that I’m a very shy woman. Well, thinking about it, what’s my shyness all about? It’s probably that I don’t like my body, and isn’t it the most important? A friend, for instance, had said he didn’t like my toes. While for some time, I have started enjoying my body, with all its flaws. Most of all I love watching the way..., well, in fact I really am shy, don’t know whom I’m talking to. I have a keen sense of smell and sometimes I believe I think by scenting. There are certain people I can’t smell at all. Mr. A is one of these. It feels like his body is accommodated in separate spaces and, somehow, I fail to capture the smell of any bodily part: his legs, his hands, as if he were a dismantled doll. I find his legs most fascinating, they seem disassociated from his body, sort of robust, like woman’s. And they are like the legs of a ballet-dancer or a ballerina, who hasn’t rehearsed for a long time and her legs have begun to look long and fat, but her stance is still preserved and when she bends, her feet spread in the first or second position and the upper part of her body remains tight. She seems to have forgotten that her bottom is no longer that compact. This is the way Mr. A. bends to pick an object from the floor.

Actually, what makes him the one to whom I want to tell it all, I don’t know... The first time I saw him, we shook hands and I said something stupid, and all of a sudden his eyes seemed very, very blue, both like the sea and like a swimming pool, where you will fall; or like the sky, where you float, retaining the feeling of a fall, but a very gentle one, not like diving in water... At the same time, this blue colour is very, very dangerous and seems to block your breath and eyesight until you get lost. I have always loved water, but in the background, I had felt fear of drowning in it.

I want to tell him about myself because I feel much more of a woman since the day we've met. It's a very strange feeling. For instance, I began to like my feet and my toes. I like my arms and they no longer appear to me slender, nor do my wrists seem lean. Just as a side remark, Mr. A.'s arms look like beautiful, stout bats. His hairs are quite thin and fair, almost invisible, while his fingers are large, soft, with tender nail curves..., good... I like it so much when his body moves. And..., and in a special way, I feel that my body communicates with him, because it moves and feels like the body of a woman, although we almost never talk. This is all very strange, because Mr. A., as I have told you or haven't told you, is gay. I can't figure out what this word means for him. His friend is short and not really smooth-skinned, not shaved, but just the opposite – he is bearded and even his neck is hairy. He has a very interesting small-shaped beard under his lips, I don't know what they call it. And the look in his eyes is sort of vague. Bit poetic. This is how I would imagine Fernando Pessoa, if he wore a beard, and his... absent-minded gaze. Seeing him, you begin to think he takes drugs. Or he just pretends to be important by keeping silent and looking stern almost all the time. At the same time, you feel eager to hear him speak. But once he begins to speak, he sounds weary, as if he is bored with himself.

When he and Mr. A. stand face to face and one is giving the other a cigarette (Mr. A.'s little belly always bulges forward), his friend's hand appears in the middle of his belly, just below the chest, so that the gesture of giving is very close to his heart... I watch them from afar without being seen... Whether any difference exists in the ties between two men, two women, a man and a woman in such moments... of lighting a cigarette, I can't say, but this is a moment in their relationship, which attracts me so much...

Uuuh, I dreamt of Mr. A. many times. One night I dreamt that he was lying on a bed, resting and listening to some music, whereas I stand on the floor against him and also listen to the music. And, at a certain point, I step forward, put my hand under his chest, where he and his friend touch while lighting a cigarette, I repose one hand over the other. And nothing more. We just listen to music.

I began telling you that I liked my body and sometimes I play music and dance on my own, but in fact, since quite recently, for as long as I've known Mr. A., I can even feel that this is very strange, because I have had a sensation of my body, on very rare occasions: of the bend between my breasts and the pelvis, along the sideline of my body. I can feel my waist, as if it has become slenderer, and... when I put on a low-neck blouse, for some time now, I can see that my breasts thrust forward, whereas I used to dislike my ribs at the collarbone, but

now they seem charming exactly for being bony. For instance, I find my neck beautiful and long and I like to look at myself in the mirror...

This is how I want to start telling my story to Mr. A. However, I don't know whether I can tell him anything important... It's quite peculiar, but when I was at school, I was in love with a boy. He was blue-eyed, but there was a tinge of gray in his eyes, as if they were wolf's. And his beard... was a yellowish tin rust and he smiled somewhat spitefully, he was much more scary to me. But I was in love with him, and I used to imagine how I held his hands at the classroom door, and by this sole motion of stretching my hands for him to touch I felt I could express the absolute power of the affection I had for him, and it was quite strong at the time. Since I've known Mr. A., I think he would be the one to understand my particular desire to touch, as a way to discharge my feelings in their full intensity.

Also, when I look at Mr. A., his eyes brighten. It's the same with me and I shine with some frolicsome admiration, which he shares. However, I can't figure out what words befit this frolicsome admiration and whether it goes by such name. The very fact that I don't know what he says inside himself when he sees me, calls forth a feeling of amazement with the meeting and whets my eagerness for another one. I can remember once, he was departing and was very happy. I turned to look at him, and he turned too, so we started waving goodbye at the very same instant; it was like some children waving excitedly to each other from the train, though the train had started and all windows were shut, but they keep waving inside as they did outside, though they realised it was only a game...

I have been at Mr. A.'s house once and, honestly, I sometimes pass by his house, because it looks like a strange museum from my childhood. Well, the time I was a schoolgirl, let's put it. For instance, the doors in the house are very low, while Mr. A. is so tall. Against Mr. A.'s height, this house seems awkwardly... artificial. There is one place in the large room, where I crave to be. I dream to stand in this place if I happen to enter the house again. It is a kind of sculpture standing in a niche, and it looks like a Christmas tree amassed from numerous objects, which one could have collected as relics from childhood and adolescence. You couldn't know whether it was a man or a woman, but I can remember some doll's parts also. When I stood in front of the sculpture and looked at the wall, I saw that a part of the brick was removed and replaced with something like a colourful cube, plastered with cardboard. So I stood between this little cube and the sculpture and seemed to suddenly become aware of some deeply buried wish, which I had forgotten, deserted, betrayed, through all these years...

I want to stay and talk to him for a very long time, but it will not happen, most likely... There is one point at which we tend to get estranged and it's when I see his polished shoes... It could be my imagination or it's because I don't like to polish my shoes at all and I get very embarrassed when I buy a pair of black shoes; I probably bought a pair once, but I never put them on, they smelled so much like... bureaucracy.

I wish I had known Mr. A. as a student.

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Before your name seemed to be scented with creamed milk, hot bread and strawberry jam. Now, it is a field of parched sunflowers, so many faces wishing to be Mary...

Masturbation?

Is it worth telling?

I don't know who was Count Dracula, but isn't it him that I imagine in the narrow space or someone playing his role? My body trembles with anticipation and starts twisting, as if in defence. This is how it all starts. I say "it", because I am not alone at this moment. All of a sudden, the MAN WHOSE BODY BREATHES LIKE THE HILL comes. There is a deep sadness in the "eroticism" of this moment. You feel imprisoned in the deepest well and assaulted. In an instant you forget that this is your desire and, yes, the invented Count of Desire drifts away from your imagination, as an alien, but at the same time, the BREATHING HILL appears with all the shortcomings you love in him. His face is flushed, his nose long, almost like a clown's, his bald forehead and big jutting ears, his look seems to dive in your body with a single jump, his thighs are so graceful, a little feminine, but extremely deft in the clasp, his hand is your hand, in your fingers... You are pressed and pierced by your own desire, you feel sorry for having brought it all forth, you commit violence to the image of him... There you are, hardly breathing, but your mind will not rest, you want to finish the shameful scene, the man's body bulges, almost pushes you, his persistent look is also somewhat sadly ashamed.

How would he feel if he could read this?

In fact, I love an invented man.

Recording 9: A

It is late at night and the window curtain is all in patterns. These are partly the patterns of the outer bars and the floral designs on the curtain, which have mixed into one another to

form pale yellow twines. It is dark inside the room and I can imagine how this would transform into a wonderful and longed for letter to Mr. A. – a patterned curtain, and through it, I can see the world outside, depicted in its penumbra and interplay of shades.

How to begin a letter to Mr. A., which I have dreamt to write...? I could never change the way I address him and I will start as usual: „Dear Mr. A...”,

I always wanted to tell him what dream I had the night before. All of a sudden I imagined I was in one of my dreams and in the dream I was telling about my letters to Mr. A.

I felt elated, as if I was incorporated under some letter in the dream. I myself was transforming into a letter and was about to become entangled in the windings of the curtain and become unreal. The next moment, I believed I'd rather be a pencil or an eraser in Mr. A.'s drawer. I perceived myself as minor and inferior in meaning, like an item, which will be put away, placed, tidied up, fancied, touched and... needed, in some way or another. Instantly, I imagined how objects must feel in the hands of Mr. A., his pencil sharpener or his pen, how the mouse feels being constantly handled. I thought it would be funny if I was his mouse, but it struck me that this would not become me. As I remember, in fairy tales, a mouse once saved an enchanted princess and the royal family...; then my eyes stared at the cabinet in the far end of the room, right next to the curtain, and the objects on the second and third shelf, and the whole cabinet seemed like some female head, that of a very stern-looking and sullen office assistant...

I usually end my letters to Mr. A. by saying: “Regards, Mary”. The word “regards” and the word “Mary”, written beneath, had always seemed to match perfectly...; in fact, this is the letter ending, which is most harmless, unimportant, void of any implicit meaning, sense, feelings or attitude. While in fact I would like to end my letter by some very sincere expression of what I feel at the moment, like: „How much I long to meet you between the third and the first floor” or “I can walk outside the building to the corner where you park your car. We can make fifteen steps together”, or “Would you mind if we climb down the stairs from the third to the first floor at twelve thirty together?” or “I take my morning coffee at twenty-five past ten, in front of the machine. How about meeting at ten twenty-six?” or, or, or...

THE BREATHING HILL

This hill resembles his cheek, it is like the small dimple on his cheek, and the distance to the hill is just inviting me to stretch my arm and huddle in the hollow of his palm, where

my hand would fail to distinguish between his touch and the air, given so gentle a tip... A whole hillocky body, seemingly his body, spreading recumbent for me to examine. How strange that his body has the curves of a woman, and this swelling on his shoulder, which I just discovered... But is it a swelling on the shoulder or his thigh, or is it the swelling under the pants, exposed shyly to the eye...

These days I don't feel embarrassed to watch men's swelling under their pants and I can even describe their character by the way they conceal it or show it: this little, somewhat lonely valley-hill-valley shape, which is both adjoined to the body and separated from it... And with him it's just a hidden locality, which doesn't want to exist, I can't say why, but it is like in a pregnant woman: something is hidden there as it has not yet been born, you imagine it's like coming out in the world, not like an ordinary act of desire... They told me that we will go there, on a short trip to one of the hills, actually, where one hill lowers and gives way to the other, in the dip..., and I thought I would go out on a tour, like a little ant through the mysteries of your pepper-and-salt woolen pants, in winter... This what a tour looks like to me, I can see your body wherever I go; even now, standing in the small room at the foot of the mountain, while someone is distilling brandy outside and the vapours rise to the third floor, I still tend to think that it is all a sign of your body, and the reasons for all that happens are known, but revealed to me only. And if I had lived on a huge whale, after having run into it for being absent-minded, it would be my fate, and the whale might stir any moment, then this is YOUR body, for the fire had only awoken it, and all of a sudden, the Giant, in one natural, careless motion, would overturn the whole visible nature, and in the blink of an eye, if he only wished to, my tiny wooden vessel, which now gives out a streak of smoke, would sink in the vertigo of his navel.

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Today I borrowed "Dr. Caligari" from the library. Watching it grew into 'looking backwards', I seemed to hear the thud of steps from the open door behind. I didn't turn around, but let the feeling overtake me, as if someone was about to give me a pat on the shoulder and begin to speak. The steps walked and walked – over the walls, on the sofa, I could see them with the back of my neck – along the patterns of the carpet, like playing spots of light. The steps of the woman. I know it's her, not only because of her floating blue presence, which penetrates me deeper and deeper, but for some other reason, unknown to me. I have hardly ever wanted to talk to a woman for a reason so important to me, which multiply transcends my sympathy for her. She's still behind my back, but I can see on her dress, guess

rather, of designs of small flowers with yellow stamens and green drops, the wrinkles under her eyes quiver, each word changes them and the flicker of her eyes conveys trust and desire to share; this fills me with immense impatience, which I deliberately exaggerate, because I long to see, to acknowledge my ridiculous, pathological condition, to laugh, to turn around...

It must have been the tension of her presence in the house. The presence of a woman makes me perceive my small flat as a shoebox where a little girl has arranged her world of dolls and things. The blue colour of her dress is reflected in the faded dye of my curtains as a nuance or as a focal blur, it doubles them, creeps like a veil of cigarette smoke, the yellow stamens of the blossoms twinkle on my soiled green upholstery, the beige wallpapers absorb the colour of her hands, her skin...

It is most fascinating to look at the elderly women, who stand at their windows and watch the world before dusk. There is a very old lady in the flat at the end, before the L-shaped curve of the building, I don't know what sort of chair she uses, but she seems to be seated in it with great comfort, backed up and upright with a kind of grandeur, if you could say this for a very old woman. Her white fluffy hair makes the whole window lighter. She has a beautiful long nose. It is just today that the clouds are dark violet and lead gray, with streaks, and the pale yellow light of the sunset gleams between two of them. Is the old one watching the sunset? I hardly believe she could be watching anything in particular. And still her eyes look incredibly vigilant and focused. Maybe her grandchild is playing in the yard underneath. Or she is expecting...

MY FRIEND ALICE

Mary's friend is petite, fair-haired and blue-eyed, and Mary sometimes regarded her as translucent. As she walked the streets beside her, she often thought of herself as suddenly being taken afloat by an air draught, drifting with the wind and the dust over the Sofia boulevards, just following the direction for the moment.

Alice had a cat, or a big and jealous tomcat rather, with whom they lived like brother and sister, only if you could cast a glance over them, when together, huddling and ready for a snapshot, his paw resting on her shoulder, her head bended next to his. For Mary, the tomcat looked huge next to Alice.

She also enjoyed taking pictures of herself with a camera. She took several shots a day, as if she was hiding and then trying to find herself, assigning the latter job to the camera. The camera stood on high stilts in the room and wore a dustproof hat on its top. Quite

obediently, every day, it told Alice stories of herself, and I loved to picture her in my mind, standing before it as if before a monster ready to gulp her down, while she surrendered herself to being eaten at least once a day. Then I loved to continue fantasising what little Alice could be doing in the insides of the monster, because she never developed her films, but just changed them with new ones.

I just imagined that the click of the button was the beginning of her trip and I often beheld her imploringly to make her tell me what she had been thinking of at the moment of the snapshot and how she had felt later. This was because I presumed that she would either find it difficult to tell me about the rest or that she was forbidden to do so.

By whom?

I don't know. By the one who gave permission to Lewis Carroll.

When she started crying, Alice could cry as much as ordinary people did for a whole month, no, for a whole year. She had a flair for it. It was hard for one to find out why she was crying, but weren't there too many things for which you could cry, Mary kept reminding herself. And she always showed understanding for her friend. Sometimes, however, Mary thought that Alice had gone too far crying and offered her to go to the movies.

They usually went to see some old film at the Odeon, such as Mamma Roma or a similar one. Afterwards, all people seemed to Mary as having stepped out of the screen, which is they looked somewhat as Italians, and in general Mary perceived neo-realism as something very contemporary.

All people, but Alice.

Provided she hadn't disappeared (because Mary imagined that Alice would disappear any moment, carried away by some spectator, who took their popcorns, coat and bag from the seat, collecting her by mistake), after the movie, Mary always thought it was not Alice, her friend, who walked next to her and smiled, but it was rather the girl-living-in-the-camera, who seemed to know all films by heart, even without having seen them.

Yes, all people around looked as participants in the film, but Alice.

„Well, I'm going there to rescue Alice from the Photo-Zoom”, Mary said, as she headed for her friend's place, not being sure, however, about the scale of zoom-in or zoom-out at which the In-Camera-Alice could be at the moment, and whether she had made it back at all.

Recording 2 :A

My mother's story

I find it a bit difficult and somehow funny to talk about my mother. I've tried many times. Now that I was wondering how to start, I said to myself: '*I find it difficult because my mother is...*' (dots), and I thought of writing: *a witty chatterbox...* There is something about the ending of this word that I particularly dislike, but it sounds joyful and I want to begin with it. It is imprecise. And belongs to the times of my mother.

In fact, my mother is a very sumptuous woman with large breasts. She loved to wear necklaces, to have her clothes tailored by trendy seamstresses, and she used to wear gloves. I can remember her at a wedding celebration, with elbow-high gloves. I used to rummage in her drawers as a child and I had found all sorts of gloves. Even transparent ones. My mother used to wear shoes with pointed tips and lace at the front, to expose the toes, and pinnacle heels. She loves to wear lipstick, take some of it from her lips and apply it on the cheekbones. Near the nose she has a natural beauty-spot, and on the back of her neck she has another one. When she went to the hairdresser's, they always managed to scrape or cut her and the first thing she would show was her beauty-spot. This is why I always had a funny feeling while waiting for my mother at the hairdresser's. It was also fun to watch her measures taken. Once she took me to a woman, who took her measurements for a brassiere and had it made out of black silk. Once we visited a seamstress, who covered your body with newspapers, then folded and coiled them, and tailored your garment right on your body. She was the wife of a composer from Varna. It was so funny because he was not a widely known composer, but my mother was just fascinated at the thought that her clothes were tailored by a composer's wife.

Anyway, I began by saying that my mother was a witty chatterbox. There is something unpleasant about the word itself, something purely zoological. And still I use it as a reference to my mother. This is probably because she loved to receive guests, to arrange long tables, whereas I couldn't put up with these parties as a child – until late at night my room reverberated with voices, laughter, sometimes with arrogant jokes, which I perceived as indecent or... strange. They used to sing songs, they called themselves "The Dewy Bunch" and sang popular tunes. Well, these times have gone. While the moments before the table was laid were the most exciting for me: when she made Russian salad and spread it in a large plate for me to decorate with flowers made of chopped pickles, carrots and peppers. Or I used to place thin strips of yellow cheese in the sliced sausages and we roasted them in the oven. All

these preparations had their names and titles. My mother flushed with enthusiasm about them and her cheekbones needed none of her lip colour, she was so beautiful...

I loved the time when my mother would stand in front of the mirror and start wondering which dress to wear. Then she would try a necklace for it. While my father never hesitated because he had only one suit for the occasion, a motley one. His eyes were dappled and the suit matched him perfectly, as it had green, brown, beige, amber... When the sleeves were worn out at the elbows, she found the same fabric and tailored another suit for him. A second edition. And when it also wore out, they shortened the sleeves a bit, to conceal the flaw.

In fact, the moments, when my mother and father prepared themselves for accepting guests, were the most beautiful at home. Likewise was the moment of opening the large, squeaking wardrobe, my mother was standing to the right, and my father – to the left. My father's ties were on the inside of his door, hanging on some thread – one could count up ten to fifteen designs of ties, at least.

My mother's dresses: I can still remember some of them, especially the buttons. She had a yellow jumper, that's how she called it, and it had been brought by a cousin of hers in West Germany. Its buttons had little mirrors in them. Concave. If you look in the mirror you could see yourself smiling, and I used to pull faces... at the mirror.

This is what my mother was like.

Now, that I remembered that mirror, I can think of a picture of my mother at the Ohrid Lake. Once they travelled there with my father, my mother was wearing glasses and a scarf around her head, sitting on a hill in a beautiful dress, with the Ohrid Lake underneath, gleaming with the sunset rays. My father had taken that photograph.

Whenever I enter our house, from the hallway to the living room, I start imagining various people walking around, even now that the house is empty, and my father is no longer here, it takes only several seconds to see the open door between the living room and the bedroom – a sliding, transparent door, and the big table, and many people coming in and out the rooms of the house, talking and laughing, my father telling funny jokes and my mother carrying large trays with Russian salad and sandwiches...

Probably my mother has another side of her character, which made her always want to be like this and made me remember her like this... She might have entertained a very strong passion to be loved and fancied by many people at the same time, and to be valued for some

qualities, which she could not express fully within the family. It was probably my father, who was always busy in his office (he was a dentist and had a private office) and might have failed to make my mother feel sufficiently appreciated, desired, and rewarded as a housewife...

I remember once how my mother showed me her first boyfriend: an aged sea captain, who was walking around the seaside park. He was much older than her, but she didn't marry him then. All of a sudden I thought how mother would have felt in the company of seamen, on a boat, at a big party. Well, it could be something like this she actually missed. Or was it the words that everyone would utter, while she descended..., holding the captain under the arm, down the stairs, to the big room?

For several times now, she had tried to retell me about her life as a girl, as an adult woman, and I can remember that these were always moments when she had been courted or had received compliments, which she had remembered for a long time thereafter, and lived with them. These were the most usual or occasional compliments by professional or collegiate skirt-chasers, or stuff arising from the situation she had been in, but she told me about them as if they were something exceptional in her life, which turned them in some sort of medals or trophies for my mother to show and then put away, just as she used to put her necklaces in a large box and take them out, to wear them again one day.

And she never got tired to tell me different stories. Even now, after she had turned seventy-eight and my father is no longer alive, an admirer from her university years seemed to have reappeared and started to complement her. She invited him at home, but warned him that it would not be convenient if he stayed too long, then... she told him this, and he told her that, and he wanted to come and see her again, but she found a way to send him out and explained that she lived with her son, who was very jealous, etc.

My mother seems to have been a very lonely woman and the word I used for her at the beginning must be deleted or made mention of just to be refuted, because no woman would want to boast of herself before all other people if she were satisfied with what she gave to her folks at home. And now I want to start a different conversation with my mother, if and when she admitted it, but I know that I wouldn't have the guts to do it. I am always scared of what she may say about my father and about her possible incapability to disclose herself to him.

Actually, I missed the most important thing. My mother's name is Magdalena. I have always associated this name with a Rembrandt painting, which used to hang in grandma's room and depicted a crying and repenting Magdalena, with scattered hair and eyes so lucid,

you could see the tears in them. This beautiful picture was in the room of my grandmother, whose name was Veselina. Somehow, the small room painted in pale pink with silver strips, with the statuettes on the cupboard brought from some friends of hers and the ascetic square table with four chairs was in sharp contrast with the large flat, where my mother held the receptions for her friends. This was a place where my mother would come back and tell things, which she would have never perhaps told me. She told grandma. And my grandmother Veselina, who was a very wise woman, was certainly good at keeping a secret.

Now this small room seems to be the place where my mother had lived, while outside she lived a different life, some outer life, meant for the big house, which belonged to my father. Could this be true and what kind of dreams my mother had had for all that time? Did she give all those parties just to be in a constant motion and give away her... charm, so to say, in order to make up for that aspect of her name, which she could never evade. Her desire to belong to many people at one time.

In fact, this chapter should not have been entitled 'My mother's story', but merely MAGDALENA.

LOVE LETTERS

My career as a writer of love letters began quite some time ago. I wish I had preserved copies of some of these, but, thinking twice, you would hardly like to read such sentimental writings. And, excuse me, copies of love letters, sounds like the ultimate lie (and, Frederick, don't lie that you remember or that you've kept copies of your letters to Alice)

The latest one was funny, though.

Usually Mr. A. walks along the corridors, where I most often meet him by chance. Let me introduce you: Mr. A. is big, nice, middle-aged gentlemen, almost always in a hurry (he goes under the summer nickname of 'The Breathing Hill'). Let's say there is a meeting. Poor Mr. A., he really attends at least 3 meetings per day. Here I would like to digress a bit and describe how Mr. A. walks. Just very briefly: his hands resemble a pair of oars and they serve him to scull the air. His belly juts out front and his shirtsleeves are usually rolled up. A ship's captain, who started his career as a ship's boy though, wiping the deck with a brush.

All my God, Mary hasn't seen Mr. A. for several days already. Can you imagine how she suffers. That they before yesterday, while working on something on her computer, she cut small pieces of paper, just like that, from the reverse side of used sheets. She wrote the beginnings of several letters, all rather what she had missed the chance to say to Mr. A for

these several days. It's not that Mary and Mr. A. not on speaking terms. But rather, as she sees him she ducks her head, but still there are certain things, which she would like to say to him.

On the first piece of paper and Mary wrote:

Good morning, Mr. A.,

On the second one:

Good afternoon, Mr. A.,

The third one said only:

Yes

The fourth read:

No

And the fifth, in order to have something more specific:

Why do you like to have Krassi T. so much?

/Not that you need to know it, but Krassi T. is a conceptual artist, whom Mr. A. likes very much. So this question made the remainder sound more or less justified./

Mary has been carrying the pieces of paper in the right pocket of her jeans and then in the left, for at least three days. They began creasing a bit, and she didn't know why she was carrying them and how she would give them to Mr. A. Even if it was before New Year and if those were not small sheets of paper but rather greeting cards, it would not be very appropriate to give them on the stairs or along the hallway... But Mary knew that she needed to give out these pieces of paper, and even, if she had a chance, she would make these five pieces of paper into flying confetti and when Mr. A. passed... As you see, Mary was not very inventive and her love letters were made up of no more than five sentences. This is why she wanted to apply the effect of Walter Benjamin on, you name it, of the art in the era of..., I forgot what reproducibility.

Today, she had something to pay to the accountant on the third floor.

The accountant was in love with the steward, who was taking some money from her that that moment in order to buy some... stewardship things. They were both too busy talking and did not even look at Mary. Mary thought that today was the high time to give the pieces of paper. It was Friday, she has been carrying them in her pocket for a whole week. As she realised that no one saw her anyway, she thrust her hand in her pocket and pulled the papers

out so as to be ready if... But she was a bit nervous in this and the papers spilled on the floor. She just bent to collect them when she heard the voice of Mr. A. from the hallway. She felt so embarrassed but it didn't have too many options. The sheets were in her hand, and Mr. A was approaching in big strides the turn of the corridor, where nobody could see what Mary would give him. She dashed and approached him from behind, touching him on the shoulder of his jacket. He turned, looking bewildered and serious. Then Mary handed him the first paper saying 'good morning'. On his big palm, the paper seemed even more insignificant, not to say that it was about 11 hours already. While he gazed, reading it, she handed him the next one, he pushed the first one mechanically along his big palm with his thumb and took the 'good afternoon' sheet, reading it and producing something like an 'A-ha' with his mouth. Then again, with the fingers of the same hand he pushed off on his palm the second sheet and took the one saying 'yes'. At this point Mary hesitated, she took it back wondering which one she should give – the one with the 'yes' or the one with the 'no'. She held them next to one another hesitating about a second, but then she handed one of them and the second one immediately afterwards. Then, shuffling the papers altogether through his palm, Mr. A. finally took the fifth one and began reading...

Mary ran for the accountant's room as if nothing had happened. Mr. A went along his direction over the corridor, the opposite way. All of it really happened in the turn of the corridor. When she turned lightly at the last moment, she noticed how he put his hand in his pocket, that of the jacket or the trousers, she was not sure.

Afterwards, Mary wondered for a whole day what a man like Mr. A could do with five small pieces of paper in his pocket.

...

Over the last months, I gazed at the lights against my window for longer than usual. The woman there, lean and small, her hair twined in tapers, was constantly darting between the rooms, with anxious movements and sometimes I could hear her cries. Her husband was silent though, as he stood up on the balcony at night, he kept his head low, stroking his creased bald spot with one hand while his eyes were staring down at the triangular space between the buildings, which was thickly overgrown with grass. Almost the same every night, since the summer began. I called him the Firefly

...

I have never taken interest in my neighbours, nor in anyone residing in our building or the one opposite. I was completely unconcerned with their daily lives. If I met them during the day, on my way to work or on the trolley, I wouldn't recognise them. By the Firefly's balcony, which was painted in diligent white, I could guess that he used scarce funds to make it look clean and fresh. Until late at night, the blue light of a TV screen flashed behind the balcony, lining out the interior.

After one o'clock at night, when his wife would have gone to bed, the Firefly left the TV-set on as the only light in the flat and propped on his windowed balcony. His eyes drifted over the grass, I thought that he drank in the evenings and this made him lower his head so guiltily, or he listened to the grass-hoppers, the fields were nearby.

„Full moon! Full moon!” What were these children doing in the dark around the buildings, what game they played in the full moon that made them shout so loudly under the two trees, which had grown by themselves at the corner of the six-floor L-shaped block?

“Tony-yyy! Come on home!” the father appears on the balcony and stands almost indiscernible in the dark, the child shouts back, asking for five more minutes...

Those two on the opposite side almost never draw their blinds up, I can see that even the most fluent motions of couples are made behind half pulled binds. Grandmothers often stay behind transparent curtains, only a son or a daughter visiting would sometimes get angry and pull the thick ones over the weekend. The blinds of those two attract me because they are made of wood or something similar and look pale brown, whereas inside, near the sofa, which is behind the tall French windows, there is some palm-shaped plant, which shreds their silhouettes in strips, their motions become fragmented, leopard-like. The opening of the blinds allows me to just see the motions around the sofa. For most of the dark hours a lamp sheds its light on them, not the TV, and on the table, which I can imagine in front of the sofa, there must be some drinks, because the man puts his arm forward or sits up every ten or fifteen minutes, whereas the woman holds something or just stretches across.

Their movements are very slow, as if some third body plunges itself between the two, so tight and fleeting the motion on the sofa seems. The most beautiful part of the scene is the warm light of the lamp.

Recording 22:C

Mary was looking outside the window. Through the small frame one could see the high pine-trees across, as their needles, their branches were drawing pictures, which she could invent... All of a sudden, as she kept imagining some person who never appeared, but seemed to stand beneath the window all the time, and as she never stopped thinking of Mr. A., of a vision of his big nose rather, and that if he were outside, she would spot his nose anyway or he would not be able to hide it, peeping from somewhere, because Mr. A was ubiquitous, and she suddenly saw him as a very strange drawing of a head: a hu-uuge man, his head up in the sky, between the pine-trees, but he had bent so low and fallen into contemplation, that one could only see the upper part of his large forehead and his bald skin, with some hair overgrowing the crown and reaching the branches of the pine-trees.

Then Mary wished to go to this place and find out what had made her imagine this picture, right there, between the high pine-trees, and break the spell. Then she loved it to watch how the scene changed with the fall of the evening, as it was late afternoon. Suddenly she seemed to discern some brick wall there, just where the forehead would end and the hair thickened, and on the wall there was a cat with its back to her, tail wagging and its ears were visible as it stared at the sky, which, for some unknown reason looked like a sea this time.

Recording 5 :A

Mr. A., the Seaman

Have I already mentioned that wherever I may be, I can imagine that I live onboard a ship, and... here I am, inside a wood with tall and big pine-trees, in a small shed. It is not difficult at all to depict the large trees as some poles for measuring the depth, whereas I am both on the surface and the on the bottom of a large water basin. The sky and the air around look so transparent, but they are actually something through which I can swim, like in water. I grow more and more fond of the blue colour and today I passed by a swimming pool where they sold blue towels. I bought one large and one small towel, and the day before yesterday I bought a blue plastic ring with a small flower drawing on it. The flower is on the surface of the water basin, which is the ring itself, but it is also on the bottom, I can see its reflection if I look through the ring from below.

There were lots of seamen in my family and I always wanted to be a sailor, and, all in all, this had been a mythical profession across the generations. Now I can remember that when Mr. A. came to work with us for the first time, he mentioned that he perceived himself

as a ship captain. Right away I thought that he was born in a seaport town and his father used to wear a seaman's shirt as a child, as my father did. I don't know if he had a brother, but my brother was a sailor for a very long time, whereas my father, who probably envied all his sailing friends, decided to board on a ship for a certain period, provided dental treatment to the entire crew and could even see the coast of America. He brought back some funny souvenirs: fruit trays bearing the scribbled names of the cities he visited with the embossed places of interest. In fact, the noteworthy fact about seaport cities is that if you visit a local family, you will necessarily see such funny objects, which had been brought as gifts by related seamen. It could be funny gondolas, made into table lamps. My brother had brought a large snail with a lamp inside and a small pulling pin on the side, which turned the light on.

Well, now I can remember that I spoke to you about Mr. A.'s blue eyes, which seem to me like a lucid blue swimming pool. Yesterday, for a long time, I examined my own eyes in the mirror and I thought that if I had observed someone's eyes that long, they may have observed my eyes as well. And I wondered what they could have seen because my eyes are green, with some blue-gray lining around, and speckled with dark brown dots, as little coloured stones you can see on the bottom of a transparent, but not deep swimming pool, or even in the sea. His will not be the Black sea, because I know very well that its water is not at all that green. I think the Mediterranean has this colour.

Slightly emerald green. In this case, Mr. A.'s eyes would be of the Nordic sea, in a part which... I don't know, maybe distant from the Gulf Stream, though when a warm torrent flows nearby it dyes the cold gray water in a warm, mineral-blue nuance.

It was only once that I saw Mr. A. in a short-sleeved t-shirt and his arms were bare at elbow height. They really had something stout and strong about them, like masts, judging by their large grasp. I could only hold them in both of my hands. The t-shirt was black, but I immediately imagined it in sailor's striped white and blue pattern. The way he moved along the hallway, waving his arms, in his t-shirt which was a bit too short for him, but anyway creased and topping above his rounded captain's belly... It was a perfect match for the gait and the careless attitude of an angry sea captain, just coming out of his cabin.

It just strikes me now that I have never seen Mr. A. smoking a cigarette. And I tried to picture him backed up on the bridge of a steamboat, with his sturdy elbows, drawing the cigarette nearer to his moustache and staring dreamily at the sea. I don't know why I imagine that the steamboat is in the deeper sea, on the roadstead, waiting to enter the port (as sailors express themselves). So, there he stands on the bridge, looking at some city on the hill, my

city for instance, in an afternoon hour, when the sea is very calm. I simply cannot imagine him smoking a pipe, but it is just as hard to believe that he would wear a uniform and a cap. However, it really becomes him to be a ship captain and I am struggling to bring the two notions to a compromise. In fact, I found this very easy. The ship, of course, was an invented one, therefore, the captain could have imaginary clothes on. However, some articles in his wear really match a captain's layout, his pants with a crease are so strange for me, for instance, as well as his shoes (I mentioned them earlier), which are mostly black, so well polished and... clean. Sometimes, his black suit is so elegant and resembles some kind of uniform, and just now that I think of it, I remember that he wears blue or white shirts in blue stripes or chequers. They become him very much, especially the blue shirt. It is very easy for me the stretch his image to that of a captain a bit, by just making him take off his jacket and wear the blue shirt only.

Of course, I would die to know if, since I imagined him to be a native of a seaport town, his father or mother, or any of his kin have ever been sailors or ship captains. I saw his mother and his father once standing near him at some celebration, and I strongly admired the stance, the suit and the face expression of his mother. She wore a short haircut and stood upright, almost as a military serviceman, in a garment that few women would prefer, somewhat manly and strict..., with a style. I don't remember his father. I decided that this was the kind of mother to treat her son very demandingly, and I always imagined her framed in some window or a door. She either opens or closes the window or the door, she never bends too low over the pane, but she never steps out of the door also. A woman like this could be a ship captain's wife. She could wait and even the way I imagined her shows that she had learned to wait, but would never betray her sadness or show uncertainty that the one she waited for might fail to return. Unconsciously, I found myself comparing my mother, who would make a lovely ship captain's wife, with Mr. A.'s mother, whom I inevitably imagined on the land, watching out the sea from some house. While my mother would always stand on the deck. This very difference between our mothers shows me to the difference between myself and Mr. A., since we were perceiving ourselves as seamen. While I had always felt as being onboard a small vessel, but a deserted one, almost sunk to the bottom or sailing in an unknown direction, Mr. A.'s ship was a big one, with several levels, where he strode hastily along the corridors; I can even see him propping on the walls of the narrow passages, reeling and making big steps with his long legs or speaking over the captain's phone and giving out orders..., then I come to realise the big difference between being a sailor and a ship's captain.

Actually, I have always imagined myself as a sailor. And, who knows why, some sailor like Sinbad. I was a sailor who had reached an undiscovered location and to whom strange things would happen, but he would always find a way out. And, therefore my urge to retell all those stories, uuh, as if they were troubles. And, on the other hand, Mr. A., who would never let his ship sink and always keeps it brightly lit. Maybe this is what made me see him smoking a cigarette on the roadstead – ships on the roadstead are brightly lit even during the day... Aaah, now I remember that the lamp in Mr. A.'s office is often on even in broad daylight. Two lamps on high stands are positioned at the sides of his desk, and upon entering the room, it looks like a traffic-control cabin, although its ceiling is low, while Mr. A. is seated before his computer, but seems to be staring at some space beyond the screen. And in this way, using the non-existent tools on the screen, he is able to monitor all entries and exits of the seaport and consider future departures.

Of course, I want to see whether ship captains get drunk and whether Mr. Captain A. would ever get drunk, speak in a high voice and roar with laughter. I'm so sure about the roar. When Mr. A. laughs I imagine a deep well, where the voice start gurgling deep in the bowels and strives hard to escape from the opening of the well, so the laughter wriggles inside for a long time before being released, and reverberates numerous times... replicating itself.

Of course, when he is seated at a table, a long one at the celebrations in the captain's room or elsewhere, I often picture him giving a long speech. He would turn left and right, smile, nod encouragingly or reproachfully to the far ends of the table, which sways slightly under the lamps garlanding the long sides; and it all fits him so much.

This beautiful scene of the celebration and the speaker, standing before the sailors and their jolly girlfriends, with numerous small lights flickering on the table, sounds like a nice ending to the story of Sinbad the Sailor and Mr. A., the Captain.

...

Mary would never say anything about her husband. And why would that be? Probably because...

But once she wrote a poem about him. Here it is:

This man's hands are indescribable, they move as if

They shovel the air between the leaves and twigs

And the space vibrates between the fingers

Fanned in ever changing spreads, as if
They mount invisible lamplights (when
They touch my breasts, I can feel the surf)
One of the thumbs seems very sad – once
It was hit and now it stands upright (like an outcast, a student
Or an illegal worker, who had read too many books
To find himself equal company)
Because of this thumb, the index finger often lights
The cigarette, expressing with a lightning his
Strangely different view, while the others do nothing
I have doubts that this man is to blame for the letters
To the President of France or the Prince of Luxemburg,
Or to the fat French actor who played Asterix, but
Thinking of it only, makes the hands turn into blades,
Scooping up the air and chasing
Every tiny insect, probably because
It is degrading for a French aristocrat to be annoyed
By the wing of a fly or (for the sake of the thumb!) the man's
Hands tame the air and banish all frivolity
But they are most handsome
When rested on the table with a bottle of Merlot
Sculptured like a newly learned
And diligently rehearsed French word,
With the stress in the middle or on the ending syllable
The thumb is just the margin of the page
Which frames the writing down

Or it would flee.

FEARS

You may wonder what could make a woman like Mary feel fear, if she was able tell all those things so daringly. But, believe it or not, she also has fears. However, they are much vaguer than you can imagine.

For instance, today she bought a bracelet of wooden and bone beads. She liked the colour of the beads, but afterwards, when she put it, she felt frightened at the thought of wearing something made of bones without knowing whose bones they were. This is one example of fear. She could remember a fairy tale about the One to whom fear was unknown, and he made bowls in the castle from the bones of the dead, and then rounded them on the lathe... But he knew to whom the bones belonged – to those miserable apparitions from the castle... While Mary had no idea...

You might think that Mary was afraid of her husband. Let me settle this for you: she no longer fears him. But she used to. And she didn't know why. She may have believed that if you had any thoughts in your head, like the ones she had, then her husband (it is a popular saying that married people can read their thoughts), so, then her husband could read her thoughts, while she would usually keep silent as he spoke, therefore, she had many undisclosed thoughts. Almost all of them.

Can you remember how the thoughts of Gianni Rodari's Lemonade Joe could be read on his forehead? I seem to be mixing the two tales... But wouldn't it be nice to be able to read thoughts as if through a bottle of lemonade? Sunny, cold, lemonade thoughts, ALL FOR YOU! Mary was generous with her lemonade thoughts, but one day she realised that if her husband could read them, he would stop talking about the current subject and start replying.

This never happened, though.

This is why Mary was confused at the beginning, not knowing what she had to turn her lemonade thoughts into.

And this is what happened: Mary was afraid of street dogs. Oh, how she was afraid! When she saw such a dog, she would stop and stare at it, as if trying to send it away. But the dog wouldn't understand and would get scared too, and begin to bark. But right at the time when Mary wondered what to do with her lemonade thoughts, she read some smart advice in a book: *'Now write it down as a recipe for a roasted potato dish.'* /She couldn't figure out

what dish it was as she was not at all good at cooking, but she soon read about it in the Women's Paper: nominated potato dishes. She liked the recipes so much that she bought some earthenware pans... / Hopefully, I am not digressing...

So, the writer advised that if you were afraid of something, you should start provoking it, verbally. For instance, if you see a dog, say in your mind: '*Come on, bite me. Ok, bite me, and let's see what happens...*', etc. Or if you were afraid of closed spaces, such as a lift, you must enter and start saying to yourself how much you yearn to be afraid, so much that you would faint in this very instant... The therapy had a name, but for convenience Mary had called it: 'Let's see what happens'.

While passing by street dogs, she would repeat in her mind how much she wanted to be bitten. As this never happened, however, after several repetitions, she felt that her fear had waned. To be on the safe side though, she always spoke to herself when she saw a dog.

When she saw that IT WORKED (!), she decided to try it with her husband, when he entered his room. She began by repeating something similar to what she said to the dog... Please, bear with her, initially she didn't believe in the potential results... At the beginning, she couldn't think of any words to trigger what she was afraid of, so unclear was her fear of her husband...

Yes, when he would rush in his room and slam the door, hasty, determined... Well, he is actually a wonderful, vigorous, sometimes restless, quick-tempered, but always a strong man, one you can rely on, etc. But Mary trembled with uncertain fear. Well, now she was armed with the words: '*OK, come on and start yelling at me, scream at me, tell me how displeased you are, how outrageous, how...*' whatever came to mind. She repeated it and was victorious.

So, it's a simple recipe.

You see.

Recently, Mary's courage to challenge her fears improved so much that she stopped fearing death.

Now that she no longer believes in her lemonade thoughts, she drinks unthinkable amounts of coke. I told her to stop, as this may generate I-don't-know-what kind of thoughts. And I will no longer be her friend. But she answered that there would be recipes for this, too. And laughs.

Recording 4 :A

About the anarchist's house

In fact, I have to speak about the anarchist's house only at dusk, but I started in the early afternoon. Probably, I first saw it in late afternoon..., well, the mountain slopes around Velingrad were misty. There were some lead, thick clouds and the small hillock where the anarchist's house stood resembled a surrealistic film, within the surrounding pine-trees, not very high, thinly lined, almost circular around the bare field stretched to the small pinnacle tower on top of the house, painted in fawn and very old. I found it very intriguing that the anarchist's house is on the little hill against the so called "castle" in Velingrad. A while ago, thinking about it, I said to myself that the height where it stands would usually have been used for the cannons in old movies. So I figured out it was a gunshot away from the castle... Some old stairs, the remains of an old wooden gazebo, and then you have to climb the hillock to see the house...