

BETWEEN THE LINES

by Bistra Velichkova

translated from the Bulgarian by David Mossop

There was someone who made me laugh and cry at the same time. He was a writer. When we met he had two published books. I was to be his third. The foam of the waves crashed over the sand. He had a scar on his cheek. He had been in a fight over a girl when he was young. He got the full might of a knuckleduster in his mouth and his cheek was badly cut. He'd never fought over a girl since. His wife called while we were walking around the Old Town. He told her loved her as well. His daughter was ten years old and was very good at drawing. His son liked riding his bicycle and firing stones out of his sling. As we were parting at the station, he told me to read "The Warmth of the Unknown Woman": "*There is no need for words. There is no need for actions. There is no need to change directions in your life. There is no need to leave those we love, in order to love others who will leave us*"¹. The next time we met, it was in his story. It was good to meet again. To be together between the lines, before losing each other. Each in his own loneliness...

...That's what happened with that documentary film director, with his brown-skinned girlfriend and his flat in London. His mother was a doctor in Sofia and his brother a violinist in Berlin. His father... he didn't say anything about him while he was saying *€heers* "with a glass of champagne in the Officers' Club. He had curly hair and thick lips. I like the way he laughed. It was powerful and infectious. We drank Martinis and then he left. He made a film about what didn't happen and I wrote the rest. Parting at the first meeting...

...Then the mountain climber appeared. He liked "Hair" and listened to Led Zeppelin and Jimi Hendrix. When we got back from Vihren peak, he told me about his greatest love. He was still at university. She dumped him and he hit the bottle. He was better now, but... He'd been prescribed all manner of pills. That was before. He'd stopped them all now. That's why he was drinking again, and drinking a lot. He liked it. He felt best that way and really himself. He said the girl was an actress. A famous actress. She had once said to him: "*The most important thing for me at the moment is to act. I want to act. I need to act!*" On the way to his flat, he bought a bottle of red wine. We drank straight out of the bottle and our naked bodies were bathed in the red liquid. Blood brother and sister for the first and last time...

¹ "The Warmth of the Unknown Woman" is a story written by Bulgarian writer Zachary Karabashliev, from his short story collection *A Brief History of The Airplane* (2009).

...Then, I met the construction engineer at the “Barn”. He had blond hair and a red, checked shirt with a yellow pencil sticking out of his top right pocket. We're drinking tequila with lemon. He tells me he's always dreamed of being an architect. As he talks enthusiastically about his new project, his messy fringe falls over his forehead and he brushes it back with his hand. He wants to turn a derelict building filled with beggars and tramps into a museum of modern art. *“I'll leave all the trash, paper and plastic bags there, just in the way they are. I'll build a glass floor over them so they can be seen from above. The visitors walk over it, just like they're walking over trash, you get the idea?”* he tells me enthusiastically. He wants to turn prefabricated apartment blocks – *“panelki”*, into a tourist attraction. *“A family visit to a prefab”*, it will be called. And to make it really authentic, the only way to get there will be by public transport – bus number 76 or 204 – those old orange and red buses. He tells me about his mother. She's divorced from his father, but they still live together. They used to argue. And drink. He has an older sister who looked after him. Then she ran away from home. No one saw her again. He was depressed and sad. That's when he tried heroin, when he was 16. Everything became more bearable. He wouldn't come out of his room for days on end. He ran away from home. He took to thieving. He got picked up by the police. He went back home. He eventually decided that he was going to run far away from everything, from his town, his family and his past. He was trying to forget everything forever. That's why he came here, to this town, as far away as possible. He had his own life now. And he had me. The candles burned all night long. And we burned with them. A first meeting for the last time...

... *“I think, I don't like girls...”*, the blue-eyed boy with the shy smile said just before I kissed him. A doctor of philosophy. He was going to see a psychotherapist. He didn't dare to tell anyone. He collapsed into my lap. He cried for a long time. An elderly lady walked past us and smiled gently. *“Don't leave him, my girl, he loves you!”* When we parted we told each other we'd meet again. Between the lines.