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# I

## GREECE, SEPTEMBER

I first saw her in a flea market in Athens buying two mechanical dancing horses. The man who sold them to her was slipping a battery into the belly of the brown horse, a super-heavy-duty zinc AA. He showed her that to start the horse, which was the length of two large hands, she had to lift up its tail. To stop it she must pull the tail down. The brown horse had a string tied to its neck and if she held the string upwards and outwards, she could direct its movements.

Up went the tail and the horse began to dance, its four hinged legs trotting in a circle. He then showed her the white horse, with its black mane and white hooves. Did she want him

to slip an AA into its belly so it too could begin its dance? Yes, she replied in English, but her accent was from somewhere else.

I was watching her from a stall laid out with miniature plaster statues of Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, Apollo, Aphrodite. Some of these gods and goddesses had been turned into fridge magnets. Their final metamorphosis.

She was wearing a black felt trilby hat. I couldn't see much of her face because the blue clinical mask we were obliged to wear at this time was stretched over her mouth and nose. Standing with her was an elderly man, perhaps eighty years old. He did not respond to the horses with delight, as she was doing. Her body was animated, tall and lively as she pulled the strings upwards and outwards. Her companion was still, stooped and silent. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if the horses made him nervous. He watched them gloomily, even with foreboding. Perhaps he would persuade her to walk away and save her money.

*August Blue*

When I glanced at the woman's feet, I noticed her scuffed brown leather shoes with high snakeskin heels. Her right toe lightly tapped, or perhaps danced, in time with the horses, who, guided by her hand, were now trotting together.

I hoped they could hear me calling to them under the Attica sky.

She paused to adjust her hat, tipping it forwards over her eyes.

As her fingers searched for a strand of hair tucked under her hat, she looked in my direction – not directly at me, but I sensed she knew I was there. It was eleven in the morning, but the mood she transmitted to me at that moment was dark and soft, like midnight. A light shower of rain began to fall on Athens, and with it came the smell of warm ancient stones and petrol from the cars and scooters.

She bought both of the horses, and when she walked off with them wrapped in newspaper, the old man, her companion, linked his arm with hers. They disappeared into the crowd. She

seemed to be about my age, thirty-four, and like me she was wearing a tightly belted green raincoat. It was almost identical to mine, except hers had three gold buttons sewn on to the cuffs. We obviously wanted the same things. My startling thought at that moment was that she and I were the same person. She was me and I was her. Perhaps she was a little more than I was. I sensed she had known I was standing nearby and that she was taunting me.

One, two, three.

I made my way to the stall and asked the man if I could see the horses. He told me that he had just sold the last two, but he had other mechanical dancing animals, a selection of dogs, for example.

No, it was the horses I wanted. Yes, he said, but what people tend to like is how you lift up the tail of the animal to start the dance and push it down to stop. The tail is more interesting than a boring switch, he said, it's even like magic, and with this tail I could start or end the magic any

*August Blue*

time I liked. What did it matter if it was a dog and not a horse?

My piano teacher, Arthur Goldstein, had told me the piano was not the instrument, I was the instrument. He talked of my perfect pitch, my desire and ability to learn at the age of six, how all that he had taught me did not dissolve the next day. Apparently, I was a miracle. A miracle. A miracle. I had once heard him say to a journalist, No, Elsa M. Anderson is not in a trance when she plays, she is in flight.

The man asked if I wanted him to slip a super-heavy-duty zinc AAA battery into one of the dogs. He pointed to a creature that looked more like a fox, with an abundance of porcelain fur and a tail that curled over its back.

Yes, he said, the magic would start again, but this time with a curved tail. The dogs were smaller than the horses and could stand in the palm of my hand.

It seemed the horses were not the instrument,

it was the longing for magic and flight that was the instrument.

You are a beautiful lady. What do you do in life?

I told him I was a pianist.

Ah, so she was right, he said.

Who was right?

The lady who bought the horses. She told me you are famous.

When I tightened the belt of my raincoat so it cut into my waist, he made an exploding sound like a bomb.

You must drive your sweetheart mad, he said.

I reached into my pocket and took out the apple I had bought that morning from a grocery store. It was cool and taut like another skin. I held it against my burning cheek. And then I bit into it.

Look at this dog here, said the man who had sold her the horses. It's a spitz, the oldest breed in central Europe. She descends from the Stone Age. I looked at the porcelain white fur of the Stone Age spitz and shook my head. Sorry, lady,

he laughed, the last two horses have found a home. My customer saw you looking at her. He lowered his voice and gestured to me to come closer.

She told me, That woman wants the horses, but I want the horses and I got here first.

I felt she had stolen something from me, something that I would miss in my life. I walked away from the stall of dancing animals, bereft, towards a wagon piled with pistachio nuts. Lying on the ground next to the wagon was the black felt trilby hat the woman had been wearing. She had tucked a small sprig of a delicate, pale pink flower into its grey ribbon. I had seen these same flowers on the slopes of the hills of the Acropolis on a walk earlier that morning. Perhaps they would have been growing there when real horses pulled carriages loaded with marble to build the Parthenon.

I picked the hat up and looked for her and the old man but couldn't see them anywhere. Her male companion was about the same age as my teacher, Arthur Goldstein.



*Deborah Levy*

At that moment I decided to keep the trilby hat. The horses were hers and not mine. It seemed like a fair exchange. I put it on right there in the market, tipping it forwards over my eyes, as she had done. Another thing. When she walked away with the horses, she had turned around briefly to look at a cat sleeping on a low wall near to where I was standing.

I had taken to making lists every day.

Pianos owned

Bösendorfer grand

Steinway

I had stopped there and did not mention the more humble childhood piano.

After a while I checked my ferry ticket to the island of Poros and saw I had two hours to kill before I had to make my way to the port of Piraeus.

Max and Bella were sipping small cups of sweet Greek coffee on the rooftop of Café Avissinia, overlooking the Acropolis. They were both distinguished violinists. They thought that if it came to it, they might spend winter in Athens and buy warm jumpers. Bella would also look for a couple of jumpsuits, which were useful for playing cello, her second instrument. They admired my hat and asked me where I had bought it. I told them about the horses and the woman with the old man.

Doesn't sound like you tried very hard to return her hat. Why do you want the horses so much?

Max and Bella looked at me knowingly, but what did they know?

They knew I was a child prodigy and they knew how my foster-parents gifted me, age six, to Arthur Goldstein, who adopted me so I could become a resident pupil at his music school. I had been moved from a humble house near Ipswich in Suffolk to a grander house in Richmond, London. They knew about my audition and then scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, they knew about the international prizes and Carnegie Hall, the recordings of recital work and piano concertos under the baton of the greatest conductors, most recently, and fatally, in the Golden Hall in Vienna. They knew about my acclaimed interpretations of Bach, Mozart, Chopin, Liszt, Ravel, Schumann, and they knew I had lost my nerve and was making mistakes. They knew I was now thirty-four. No lovers. No children. There was not a homely cup of coffee perched on my piano, teaspoon tucked into the saucer, a dog in the background, a river view outside my window or a companion making pancakes behind the scenes. And they knew about the concert I had messed up three weeks ago while playing Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2

and how I had walked off the stage in Vienna. I had played it many times before that particular concert. They knew I was heading for the Greek island of Poros to teach a thirteen-year-old boy. Just three piano lessons had been scheduled. We had agreed I would be paid by the hour in cash. Perhaps they thought I needed cheering up. Max and Bella announced they had a surprise for me. They had booked a trip on a boat with their friend Vass, a fisherman, who would take me diving for sea urchins before my first lesson.

Bella looked happy. Being in love with Max obviously made her think she could say anything she liked because she was wrapped in love. Look, Elsa, we know it's as much about Arthur as anything else. I mean what an arse he is, Arthur. We get it that you were his inspiration, his child muse, even his salvation, frankly. No one could live up to that. Elsa, he is a short man. With complexes.

She drew out the word *c-o-m-p-l-e-x-e-s*.

Who doesn't have a few of those?

Well, for a start he wears a nine-foot cravat in case no one notices him.

Yes, I said, that's one of the reasons why I love him.

Arthur had written to me after that fatal concert. *I felt you were not there when you walked on stage. Where were you, Elsa?*

Far away.

I had lost where we were under the baton of M. The orchestra went one way, the piano went another way. My fingers refused to bend for Rachmaninov and I began to play something else. Arthur had taught me at six years old to 'detach my mind from commonplace things', but it seemed that commonplace things had walked into my mind that night.

Max asked me if it was true that Arthur was now living in Sardinia. I told him it was true. He owned a small house in a town famous for its melons, sixty-four kilometres from Cagliari. He had been holidaying there for years, but now he had made it his home.

They wanted to know why.

He thinks love is more possible in the south.

Does Arthur have a lover?

I don't know.

They had meant it as a joke because he was now eighty. I never knew anything about his romantic life. I had not once seen Arthur with a partner, though I suspected he had his own arrangements. He was fifty-two when he adopted me, so maybe the most inflamed parts of his libido had been tamed.

Also, Bella said, as if she had made a list of mysteries to be solved and I was one of them, we don't know why you are teaching random children with no talent. You know, Elsa, every conservatoire in the world would employ you as an eminent professor. Get real.

I tried to get real in a way that would please Bella, so I said, Yes, I am teaching to pay the rent and buy a kebab until the pandemic settles. It wasn't true, my savings would tide me over, but I wanted to pull the tail down on everything I was feeling at this moment. Arthur was my teacher, but he was also a sort of father. The only father I had, and I loved him without measure. When I was young, he always sat by my side when I played. Your fingers are asleep, he'd

shout, what is the point of teaching a sleeper? At the same time my fingers were lively. Trembling. I didn't know how to be to please him.

I had no desire to scare my own students.

Bella leaned across the table and kissed my cheek. We had known each other for a long time. Her ex-husband, Rajesh, had been a pupil at Arthur's summer school for a month. He and I had met when we were twelve, and had remained close friends ever since. In fact, I had introduced Bella to Rajesh when they were both twenty. They had married three years later, which no one at the time had understood. Now they had recently separated and she had hooked up with Max in Athens. I felt this long history, and her concern, in her kiss. To touch my cheek with her lips was quite a dangerous thing to do. I had lost track of where we were in the various waves of the virus. The big lockdowns were over, but everyone was still afraid.

Elsa, Bella said, please forget about the Rach and smile again.

*August Blue*

Sergei Rachmaninov never smiled. His powerful left hand, his stern face, the sadness that lifted as he wrote Piano Concerto No. 2. Maybe he would smile at the way we always called him Rach, as if he were a friend dropping by to borrow a phone charger. I had listened to his big musical thoughts from the age of fifteen. For a while, Arthur and I had worked together on nothing but Rach and Tchaikovsky, because, as he had shown me, Rachmaninov was in love with Tchaikovsky, yet was much more structurally innovative. Although we lived in different centuries, both Rach and I were popular soloists at a young age, giving concerts at various conservatoires.

I gestured to the waiter, a small wave of my fingers, perhaps in the manner of a diva. Let's move on, I suggested to my friends, let me invite you to a glass of ouzo. I have to get to the port of Piraeus. The waiter did the honours and we raised our glasses not quite knowing what to say next. Someone had painted the words *Death Drugs Life Beauty* in black paint under an archway of city jasmine that seemed to be having a second autumn flowering.



I put on the hat and heard myself in communion with the woman who had bought the horses. I am going to find you, I said to her in my head. In exchange for your hat, you will give me the horses.

Bella turned her head away to disguise whatever expression she had just exchanged with Max.

I just don't get it, she said. That concert you walked out of. I mean, Rach had giant hands. He could span twelve piano keys from the tip of his little finger to the tip of his thumb.

Never bothered me before, I replied, but what I was thinking about were the pink acrylic nails worn by the model on the cover of the in-flight shopping magazine on my way to Athens. Her pale hand had looked like a corpse to me, every freckle and line airbrushed out. She held between her limp fingers the stem of a cocktail glass which was half full of a pink liquid to match her nails. Some sort of liqueur. Apparently, this drink made emotions. That's what it said, emotions were made with this liqueur. At the same time I was playing in

my head a melancholy mazurka by Frédéric Chopin, Op. 17, No. 4. Bella tapped me on the shoulder. If you see Rajesh when you return to London, tell him he owes me six months of our mortgage.

Now it was Max's turn. Hey, Elsa, I don't know what happened, but everyone wants you to play again. It's like you've cancelled yourself. I adjusted the hat, tipping it forwards. A chorus of birds started to sing me out of the building when I began to walk down the steps of the rooftop to the exit.

Bella was calling out to me. I had left my phone on the table. The ringtone was Birdsong. As I walked back to get it, a species of bird trilled and warbled. It sang every time I received a text message. Arthur in Sardinia was asking me on WhatsApp to visit him. My fingers tapped the words: *But I work.*

*Be careful of your hands,* he texted back.

I suppose that, like the liqueur in the magazine, my hands made emotions. And then he wrote in capital letters with his ancient right hand, the hand that would grab my wrist as a

child and lift it off the keys when he wanted me to use the pedals.

*WHAT ABOUT THE BLUE?*

A week before the Rachmaninov concert I had decided to dye my hair blue. Arthur tried to dissuade me. After all, my long brown hair, always plaited and coiled around my head, was my signature look. Elsa M. Anderson, the piano virtuoso who in some ways resembled a prima ballerina. In my teens I experimented with two plaited bunches, pinning them into spheres on either side of my head. Arthur thought this style lacked gravitas, but I kept it for a while. My dear, he said, if you are hell-bent on wrecking your lovely hair, you must go to my own salon in Kensington.

Blue was a separation from my DNA. We both knew that I wanted to sever the possibility that I resembled my unknown parents. Arthur was bewildered that I had no desire to search for them. Or to make contact with my foster-parents. From the age of ten he had told me I could look at ‘the documents’ any time I liked.