First Morning

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First Morning

Abstract
When Bell wakes she is warm at last, hugging the ache of her belly to her like a hot water bottle. She has come out of a blank sleep with a sickly sweet smell- jasmine?- in her face and the conviction that the old man's grave is out there in the kitchen garden under the grass and hyacinths, flanked by the olive trees. Zoumboulia. They are what she can smell, not jasmine, hyacinths. Flowers that can sprout and grow in the space of a jar in a cupboard, needing no light, no soil, their fat whiskery bulbs fattening like fungi on nothing but dark water. They are too rich, too cloying, like bottled scent. They might as well be immortelles out there, the old man's hyacinths, squatting on their leaves with petals of tinted plastic in thick shavings, pink, blue and white, so solid. Fleshy to the touch, with the clammy coldness of underwater flowers that are animals in disguise, sponges and soft corals and sea anemones, windflowers, sea windflowers with their clutch of tentacles.

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First Morning

When Bell wakes she is warm at last, hugging the ache of her belly to her like a hot water bottle. She has come out of a blank sleep with a sickly sweet smell – jasmine? – in her face and the conviction that the old man’s grave is out there in the kitchen garden under the grass and hyacinths, flanked by the olive trees. *Zoomboúlia.* They are what she can smell, not jasmine, hyacinths. Flowers that can sprout and grow in the space of a jar in a cupboard, needing no light, no soil, their fat whiskery bulbs fattening like fungi on nothing but dark water. They are too rich, too cloying, like bottled scent. They might as well be immortelles out there, the old man’s hyacinths, squatting on their leaves with petals of tinted plastic in thick shavings, pink, blue and white, so solid. Fleshy to the touch, with the clammy coldness of underwater flowers that are animals in disguise, sponges and soft corals and sea anemones, windflowers, sea windflowers with their clutch of tentacles.

The village is too far inland for any breath of salt to come on the wind, even a south wind. How could I have hoped to make a home here, she thinks, so far from the sea? I was not alone in that. Grigori, all of the family, expected no less. They welcomed me as a bride to the house. The old man bought two kids that a neighbour had been fattening for Easter, slaughtered and roasted them at Aunt Magdalini’s, in her beehive oven, white-washed, an igloo out in her yard, filled with embers and soot, while we ate and drank there under the moon. Without saying anything too definite to my parents, who would only worry, we had all our household goods shipped over here in crates. To think that some are here to this day, white cups with a silver rim, a wedding present, and the red enamel pot, and the blue and white striped milk jug, cracked now, all going strong and set to outlast us all. Even the old teatowels are here. The black swans on them Mamma took to be a negative, never having seen any but white swans. Black swans? *Ade!* You are teasing me. No, Mamma, in a negative, I said, the beaks would have to be green not red, and her face set in an incredulous smile, Grigori’s smile, loftily amused, tinged with pity, or scorn.

Within a week of our coming Baba fell ill. He blamed the roast kid, Mamma the ouzo and tobacco, while the rest of the village said it was his excess of joy in having his son home after ten years in the foreign land. Poor Baba Yanni, the joy was too much for him: all the wise heads nodded
and sighed. Whatever the truth of it, in Easter week his ulcer perforated and for most of the summer he lay in bed, in the hospital and then here: back from the dead, agreed the wise heads. It was the ulcer, turning cancerous, that was to bury him in the end, nowhere near the kitchen garden – how could she have thought so? – unless in spirit. He is in the cemetery, to koimitíri. The sleeping place. Koimísou kalá, the words of parting, at the threshold or turning over under the covers, last thing at night. Sleep well. Here the dead have a field to sleep in, not the churchyard or anywhere near the church, but a field out on the main road in the middle of other fields, of barley, wheat, tobacco. What has the old man got growing over him, if not his hyacinths? There was a time when the hyacinth was a flower of the dead; as was the windflower. The Greeks of those days buried the dead in earthenware pots underground, along with the pots of seed corn that lay waiting to be born again. They sowed grain on the graves then, in the name of the great goddess, the womb of earth and sea, the mitra, ample Dimitra.

At least Bell is warm now. In the middle of the night the cold woke her more than once and kept her awake and shivering rubbing her feet against each other in their thick socks. Without opening her eyes she was sure for a good part of the night that she was home. Not in her own bed: in a swag under the sky, camping in the desert, like last year, in a deep frost, in Queensland. Her bladder was keeping her awake, swelling until she was a bubble of golden fluid lying under the black and white frost of the desert moonlight, a giant white-legged honey ant. It was impossible to get up and piss without disturbing the whole camp. Not until sunrise, with the ice shining in strings all around, the panes of ice crackling under the sleeping bags, could she squat at a safe distance and let it go steaming out of her with the soft hiss which where she comes from means a snake in the sand of the dunes, in the tea tree scrub, a snake or a lizard; but here there was no cover and nothing alive in sight. The piss was stained red, she remembers, a shocking red, half blood, the start of her period, days before she was due. It ran away in darkening seams of the sand which spread on every side full of shadow and honey light as far as the horizon.

Even her breasts are aching now. Holding her breath she presses her fingers into her belly to measure the watery roll and quiver of it. If she could only get out to the méros and back without disturbing the old woman! Her own grasp chills her and she shivers. The warmest part of me, she thinks, is this hoard of body heat, this piss, molten gold, so I might as well hang on to it.

Eight o'clock, and no sound in the house. Opening the door on to the grey sála she catches a mutter of prayer: candlelight runs along the edge of the kitchen door. Yawning, she shuts the door gently and lies down again. The air is hard to breathe. The window will creak if she opens it any more, and Mamma will hear. The covers are musty, and the mattress where she always slept, and where Grigori slept only last summer with
his new wife who is carrying – Bell reminds herself – a child. Unless she has given birth by now. The whole room is musty from the lack of sun. In the summer they will have flung the shutters wide open and flat to the outside walls first thing every day to let the sun in, just as Bell used to; and when she latched them for the afternoon sleep the gold heat of the afterglow would last until they woke at around five for coffee. This summer they will put the baby down and then lie down themselves, naked in the clear heat, the light.

She is asleep when the handle grates and the door is flung open. She has to roll on her back yawning to cover her shock.

‘Kaliméra. So, are you warm?’ Kyria Sophia comes and thrusts her hands in under the covers, in a rush, the way Bell has seen her do in the hay under a broody hen. At her touch a twitch of shock runs through Bell, so strong that it must have shown in her face, only Mamma can’t see it, she is almost on her knees by the bed, with her head ducked down between her arms. ‘Ah, yes. You are.’

The kitchen is dark, as it always was even in summer. The window, which has no shutters and needs none, is half the wall wide but it looks straight out on the mudbricks of the old barn, where the flounces of dried tobacco used to hang from the rafters out of the reach of the rats, like so many fox pelts in the gloom.

There is honey, and bread to toast on the lid of the sómba, but Bell has remembered the trahani porridge of the old days. Kyria Sophia switches the light on and rummages in the dresser until she finds some that she made last year or the year before, from her own eggs and flour, of course, hand-rubbed and sun-dried: only not the milk sort, these are the sour ones, made with yoghurt. These are better, Bell says, and Kyria Sophia agrees, only fried with onions and peppers, not with honey. Yes, yes! Don’t they serve yoghurt with honey all over Greece? Well, then!

So at last Bell is allowed to boil a handful of the little grits until they swell like rice and the yeasty sourness comes to life; with milk, honey, the taste of the first days, the past.

On the way to the méros Bell hangs back among the photos on the wall. A new ikon among the others on the side wall has caught her eye, a figure coffined in a dark blue shroud, a Panagia in gold leaf and lapis lazuli: a postcard of a fresco half-soaked into some old wall. At Mistra, Love from Grigori is scrawled in Greek on the back, with the new wife’s signature underneath. The Dormition of the Virgin, Bell thinks, but when she looks closely it turns out to be a Nativity, in a grotto in a mountain of golden rock, spiny, with the flared mouth of a whelk and a ragged summit like a sheaf of ripe corn. The Panagia’s eyelids are brown and swollen and her lips tight. She lies back stiffly, one hand to her cheek, as if she is carved of wood. A goat and a tawny ass drop their heads into the manger. The
Magi draw near on horseback, and in the rocks are saints and angels in robes, suns at their heads, and twisted bodies so light that they float in a gold wind.

No sooner has Zoumboulia settled herself by the sômba than Aunt Kalliopi drops in with a granddaughter and kisses Bell in welcome. ‘Here you are again. Well I remember the day you first came and the forgiven one, he nearly died of joy. You have well received her,’ she tells Kyria Sophia, who nods, intent on her crochet hook. Bell makes coffee and conversation, watching the girl as she flicks through the book that Bell has got out of her case this morning to read, and murmurs phrases aloud. Aunt Kalliopi smiles. ‘Lyka is learning English now, you see, Bella.’

‘Are you, Lyka?’
‘Yes, I am learning English.’
‘Good! Do you like it?’
‘Yes, I like it very much. What book is this?’
‘Tracks. It is by a woman.’ Lyka looks blank and Bell goes on in Greek:
‘Who walked across the desert alone with four camels and a dog.’
‘An Australian? No! – you have no camels in Australia!’
‘We have now. Afghans went there with their camels and let them loose a long time ago. They run wild in the desert. But she bought hers.’
‘English, English!’ Aunt Kalliopi pleads.
‘Have you gone into the desert, Aunt Bella?’
‘Yes, last year, but on a truck, not a camel. And not alone.’
‘Are there petrol wells like in Iraq and in Kuwait?’
‘No, and that is a great blessing,’ Bell says. ‘Our wells only have water.’
Lyka is frowning with the effort. ‘Do they have sweet water?’
‘Some have sweet water and some have salt.’
‘What is this word treks?’
‘Tracks? Ichni.’ Although ichni is more like traces. Struggling in the blankness of her memory, Bell comes up with monopatía. Paths, is that it? And there are other meanings, out of reach. ‘And monopátia,’ she goes on carefully in English. ‘It means many things.’
Lyka rewards her with a sunny smile. ‘I love best the books of Enid Blyton.’
‘Do you, Lyka? I used to love the books of Enid Blyton!’
‘The Five?’ Lyka shrugs, abandoning English.
‘The Five, yes. And the Seven –’
‘The Secret Seven! We are in a gang like that, some girlfriends and I –’
‘Lyka,’ says Aunt Kalliopi.
‘– and we go to deserted houses and look for adventures!’
‘Lyka, speak English!’
Lyka shrugs. ‘Ghosts and secrets, you know.’
‘And have you found any?’
‘Never! Not once!’
Aunt Kalliopi asks after Yanni and Bell brings out her packet of photos. They pass from hand to hand, Zoumbou and Kalliopi exclaiming at each one. Ach, what a handsome boy! Look, Lyka, don’t you think he’s handsome? What do you say? Look how she’s laughing! She’s blushing! He looks so stern in this one. He has the sun in his eyes. He is a piece of gold, that boy, I always said so. Any time now he will come looking for a bride.

When they are gone Bell washes the cups, delighted. ‘That Lyka, Mamma! Isn’t she a darling?’

Kyria Sophia has sat scowling over her lace the whole time. ‘Why? What’s so special about her?’ she says now; and after a pause, ‘What would she want to do that for?’

‘What?’
‘Her. The one who rides the camels.’
‘Well, to see the desert. To be there.’
‘To see the desert!’

The desert is wonderful, Mamma. I want to go back when I can. She went alone to see if she was brave enough, and clever enough. As a test, you understand. No woman had ever done it.’
‘And how old is she?’
‘Oh — twenty-something. I think she saw it as a sort of — Pilgrimage: but she has forgotten the Greek, and the only word that comes to mind is the Turkish hadj.

‘Well?’
‘A sort of — hadj? The desert was a holy land.’
‘You have a shrine in your desert worthy of a hadj?’
‘The desert itself. The land.’
‘It sounds like blasphemy to me.’

The desert, the word, i érimos, is feminine, Bell thinks. And the land? I xirá, i stería. Yes, and the earth: i gi.

‘From the deserts prophets come,’ she says.
‘Not any more they don’t. Is she married? No? What’s wrong with her, then?’

They go back to the warmth, and Zoumboulia asleep in her black hood.

The desert is the floodwaters, brimful, sheets in yellow and white water until they shrink into a salt lake and into a gulf, leaving a mat of grass and a few trees, alive and dead, like the thaw in Europe, but further north than this. There you find little piles of bones like cold campfires; lashes and coils of tyre rubber by the road, and mashes of pink with ruffs of fur, like fig mash, with a frosting of mould; a car body like the hide of a red cow; a cattle station curtained in corrugated iron, the tank stand broken, and the fences and sheds, and the heap of brown bottles glittering like water. This is the inland sea, the imaginary sea, the glass and air of mirage, a sea of stone and sand for millions of years, and ancient rivers that still run in caves under stone and sand.
A well in the desert, a bore, is a gush of light in skeins out on the plain, and a dark line of shrubs that twists down from there, green pools, for a short way until the sand sucks it dry. Steam drifts loose with a whiff of sulphur, and as you come near you catch sight of a dark standing pipe at the core of a spout of water falling in white frills with a dome, the throb of a glass heart. The rocks are green with slime, and the water slips as smooth as a glove over your hand, blood-warm.