

LOVE LETTERS

Excerpt from THE BREATHING HILL

Betti Fayon

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.

Mary takes a dream for a walk

Last night Mary dreamt of Mr. A. You could think that the dreaming of Mr. A. has become Mary's profession. You would be wrong, though. Dreams, like all things natural, never ask when to come, most often you have to wish for them and then to forget that you have wished. This was at least what Mary had read in a book for addressing orders to the Universe, which she was recommended by a cousin of hers.

Cousins are the most suitable people to recommend such things, as they are neither a brother, nor a sister, nor father, nor mother, but something like all of these taken together, something like a toothbrush and a hairbrush combined in one. Not that anything like this exists... This was only a way for Mary to say that they could recommend you just anything...

And so the dream was so beautiful that Mary decided to go to a restaurant on her own – she ordered trout, white wine, a pancake with bilberry jam as dessert, and she tipped the waiter afterwards. She was not tipping him really, as this one was getting things a bit overdone. And Mary knew that nothing real comes on order.

I will not retell her dream. I will just mention that it was a happy one. Leaving aside the fact that Mr. A had come as a guest in Mary's house, where Mary's mother lived, he was sitting opposite to her and speaking of something, and probably quite on purpose, or at least it seemed so to Mary, he was sitting on her feet and she was standing behind his back, and couldn't move, ... irrespective of which she felt speechlessly happy.

Can you understand what this dream meant?

Dreams are not to be understood. The most you can make of a dream is to take it out for a walk. As you see, this dream needed badly to be taken for a walk.

Thomas, who is doubtful

Do you know Thomas? No?

Well, this is Mary's other friend. He stands and watches the world. Doubtfully. When they ask him:

'What are you doing, Thomas?', he says,

'Haven't you read the lucidity theory in Sartre's essay on Baudelaire?

And you're supposed to read Sartre.

Mary seemed to have little idea of lucidity. It seemed to her that this was Lucifer when he was a child or when children are still small. Well, I have messed it, sort of, but it was something like „Thomas doubting that he may have grown up, while actually he hasn't.”

Anyway. The important point is that Mary feels worried about him and constantly asks him:

Well, Thomas, how is doubt going today?

Thomas replies: “Not that I want to be like this, but today there is a very small probability. Could you hug me please!”

Mary asks, as whether he believes he would feel better if she hugs him, then she asks him whether he would believe in her hug, and...

Meanwhile, Thomas hugs her happily, saying that he feels better even while imagining Mary hugging him.

Well doesn't it mean that you believe that when your girlfriend hugs you,... or what does friendship mean, or, say, you could love someone, and when that person hugs you...

No, no, definitely not! Thomas refuses to stop doubting, crosses his legs, very attentively and seriously pulls out a thin booklet from the inner pocket of his jacket – he loves keeping such booklets in the inner pocket of his jacket – and starts reading someone whom Mary has not yet read.

Mary has to visit a bookstore hastily. She keeps browsing the shelves for Thomas's book, but never finds it. The books are always so thin or out of stock. When she complains to Thomas that the booklet was so thin that she had to be searching for an hour until it would come off from the back of some thicker volume, and how was it possible that such thin booklets would make him doubt so much, he objects very ironically:

„I'm sorry that it is so thin, probably it has to be thicker in order to get you convinced...”

Now comes Mary's turn start poring over the book. She feels like getting up, pulling the booklet off his hands and tell him as frankly as possible:

„Please, be a bit more lucid with your friends!”, but she has not yet learned what it means to be lucid. Well, what if she was that kind without knowing it...

Therefore, she bends down and pretends to be reading as a camouflage. „Camouflage” is yet another word that she has learned from him, and meanwhile she realised that you tend to “camouflage” so that nobody sees how “depry” you felt /it comes from depression, but it comes more naturally to Thomas when he says it/.

Yes, obviously, today promises to be a very doubtful day.

A whole day of kisses

At this point, Mary needs to confess something before you. One day, quite some time ago, she spent a whole day kissing with her friend Thomas.

And it was not a kissing competition, but it was all quite voluntary. And as I know that you haven't been kissing for a whole day /how nasty I am!/, I will tell you how it happened and what it's like.

At the beginning, one does not intend at all to spend the whole day kissing. One dallies around as it is the last day of one's stay in a foreign city, which had lasted for about three months. It suddenly comes to mind that this, being your last day here, you could call your friend here, whose name is Thomas and who was full of doubt even at that time.

Thomas admits that he is very happy, you meet near the bridge over the river. /It is good if the city where you would be kissing for a whole day is seated on a river./ At some point you start crossing the bridge, which is so long that its end never comes. /This is also very important./

And what happens? Several elements are of significance now:

The river down there is large, deep and dark as fate.

The end of the bridge is well out of sight.

Last day.

And you have next to you a fair, bearded, poetry-writing new friend of yours, who made you buy out the stock of the bookstore as he pulls out not from the inner pocket of his jacket, but rather straight from his heart, small butterfly booklets, and as he traces their hesitant attempts to fly one direction or another and seems to be trying to draw them back by calling their names, you have already pictured continents... The river also babbles there, as if it comes from the lower world and the bridge seems to Mary like a huge zipper, which opens noisily with every step of theirs – to Mary those steps look like giant strides, fatally taking them to the other end of..... the Zipper, which in this case was a huge garden by the river. The trees there looked like candelabra and the paths were so narrow that they had to stop kissing when they walked past other people.

Sometimes they stopped because they were very thirsty and Thomas gurgled a sip of fanta down Mary's mouth, while she rolled the cherry of her ice-cream.....

.....

Yeaahh, it was already dusk and the waiters started looking at them kind of strange, as Mary and Thomas were Marytom and then Thomasmar, and as we all know, it is difficult to serve coffee to people whose minds are so blurred.

Then it got pitch dark, Thomas and Mary got on a bus and before that a funny machine spit out a small ticket and Mary suddenly realised that she was going to miss the train.

The next morning, she looked at herself on the train: her cheeks and lips were burning and her chin was very red. In the course of the day it formed a crust. And on the next day she was home and her mother asked her:

„Where did you rub your chin sore?“

Mary put up a whole story how the bridges in some cities are zippers, which sometimes get stuck, they trip you and, there you are, changed for the rest of your life. And, Wittgenstein was not right in saying that the boundaries of our language..., well, how had he put it, ... it was related to the boundaries of the world, because the zip-pers had to be taken in mind. There are some compressed data there, say, a day of kisses compressed... they could get decompressed, you didn't even have to speak, they just... But her mother wanted to hear no more of Mary's inventions.

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.

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.

Translation: Angelina Sekulova