

NOTHING REALLY MATTERS IN LIFE MORE THAN LOVE

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When I see so many people around me leading such stupid lives and then vanishing without a trace, an anger runs through me because I know then nothing really matters in life more than love.

ORHAN PAMUK, *Snow* (tr. Maureen Freely)

A Radiant Silence

All memories are traces of tears.

WONG KAR-WAI: 2046



At the end of the meeting held every morning by the bank's board of directors, Sara retreated to her office and slumped in a chair opposite the large tinted window. From up here she could contemplate the lower part of the city, which sloped gently down to the flat area of the port, with fewer boats than usual. Beyond that was the vast sea, a sea she avoided looking at on days like this, perhaps so as not to be swept away by the wave of nostalgia for open spaces which sometimes overwhelmed her.

At such moments, she couldn't stop the obsessions which recently crowded her mind. She knew everyone considered her professional situation excellent, no one had got so far being so young. The merit was even greater because she was a woman, she should feel proud of her achievements. But she wasn't, though this was a secret she kept to herself. Only she knew all those operations she carried out so efficiently had ceased to interest her months before, she was bored by the endless sessions analysing movements in the market or new investment plans. Her salary was high, that

was true, she could buy anything that took her fancy. Except for time, she thought bitterly, time that seemed to take wing as if the hours were a flock of migratory birds heading south. She spent many hours shut up in her crystal tower, as required to in the daytime, but also in the evening, a routine she hadn't minded until something inside her had changed and she'd realized life, real life, was flowing relentlessly by on the other side of the glass walls. It was then she remembered a children's story her father always told her, "Rapunzel", a story that both fascinated and disturbed her when she was little. The image of that unfortunate girl shut away for ever in a tower with no doors or stairs, letting the hours go by while the hair that would eventually save her grew and grew, seemed an accurate metaphor for her and the life she was leading.

She also lived alone, in a duplex facing the sea. The decoration was minimal. Books, CDs and films took up most of the space, while pictures by young painters covered the walls. Painting, music, books, films... these passions had grown with her from her teens. She sometimes liked to fantasize about how her life would have been, had she dedicated herself professionally to one of them. But family pressure, together with her own ambition, had told in the end and she'd chosen the career with the greatest social prestige. It was only here, in the intimate space she'd created, where she managed to feel comfortable, though, like Rapunzel stuck in her tower, she felt an ever stronger desire to share her life with someone who had similar tastes and

would free her from the torment of her days, someone she was quite sure she would never meet in the circles she currently moved in.

She looked down and gazed at the pavement opposite. The works were almost finished, the inauguration was set for the following Saturday. How brave daring to open a bookshop in the current climate! She hadn't been at all surprised when the fabric shop that had been there before had closed, an old shop she'd remembered as a child, whose chances of survival had been zero. When it had closed, three or four months earlier, she'd thought they would open another of the many businesses filling that central zone: an estate agent's, a shop for electrical goods, a boutique... She'd been taken aback when she saw the sign announcing the forthcoming opening of a bookshop. There wasn't one in that area, speculative greed had pushed them all out to the margins. A further consequence of the unwritten laws governing the world they lived in, where priority was given to short-term profit. It wasn't going to be easy to keep going in such a hostile environment.

The vision of the bookshop went some way to soothing Sara's unease. When it opened, she would have the perfect excuse to avoid the half hour of coffee she shared with the other directors, almost all of whom were men, when all they did was talk about the same topics as in their work meetings or, worse still, about male themes that held no interest for her. All strangers, like the inhabitants of another planet, thought Sara

from time to time. Though it might be said, as in *I Am Legend*, that disturbing book by Richard Matheson, she was the stranger, the only resident alien.

Sara didn't go there the day of the inauguration, but the following Monday she took her coffee break early and, instead of heading for the café where she normally met her colleagues from the bank, she crossed the street and entered the bookshop. She was surprised by the amount of space and the taste with which everything had been arranged. She was even more surprised to find a small cafeteria at the back of the shop, with a modest counter and four tables in an area limited by shelves which, like the radii of an imaginary circle, seemed to converge in one of the corners. It was a magnificent idea, which Sara had seen in several cities she'd visited, but no one had dared to set up in her own. It was also an ideal solution for her. She could have her morning coffee there every day and, at the same time, lose herself among all the volumes on display on the shelves and tables.

The shop seemed to have been prepared so that customers could feel safe in the knowledge that no one would disturb them. There were only two people in charge: the man who looked after the till and checked the shelves, arranging books and responding to customers' queries, and a slightly older woman who ran the cafeteria and, as Sara soon found out, also worked the computer which had all the books catalogued on it.

Sara sat down at one of the tables and ordered a cup of coffee and some toast. She felt extraordinarily peaceful that morning, observing everything going on around her. There weren't many customers, six or seven people wandering down the aisles, perhaps because it was a Monday. Sara walked down the aisles as well, feeling excited by what she discovered. It was obvious the shop had been designed to cover needs others didn't see to. All the bestsellers were on the tables, those even the smallest bookshop couldn't go without, but she also found minority collections that were missing in others. She was drawn most of all to the section devoted to poetry, a large shelf that took up most of the far wall, covered in titles and authors she viewed with emotion. She'd always liked poetry, even though it was a facet of her life she'd never shared during her time at university, and certainly not in any of the jobs she'd had. "Rapunzel, in her loneliness, tried to pass away the time with sweet songs." This is what poetry was for her, the song that helped her to feel alive, a vice or secret passion that kept her from falling into despair.

That day, she left the shop with two books, an edition of the letters Kafka wrote to Milena Jesenská, a volume she thought was out of print, and *Moment*, a recent work by Wislawa Szymborska, the Polish writer who'd impressed her greatly when she'd read *View with a Grain of Sand*, one of the few books she always kept close at hand since it possessed the virtue, whatever page she opened to, of filling her with the joy of life, such was its

sense of optimism. She'd have liked to take a few more, there were many titles she was interested in, but her rational side had quickly imposed itself: if she was going to visit that shop every day, the normal thing would be to buy a single book each time and so prolong the pleasure of making a selection.

The first few days, out of curiosity or perhaps just to please her, some colleagues from the bank went with her. But they soon grew tired of the novelty and returned to the huddle of the group. For Sara, her trips to the bookshop turned into a happy routine. She was on familiar terms with the man at the till by now, and the woman in the cafeteria always prepared her coffee and toast as soon as she saw her come in. Almost every day, she spent most of her time immersed in the poetry section, busy selecting the title she would buy that morning. Back in her office, she would always find the time to forget her work and, sitting opposite the window, be carried along by the words, so full of life, which, even just for a few moments, made her forget the tall tower she also felt trapped in.

One morning, on heading for the poetry section as normal after drinking her coffee, Sara noticed something strange. Sticking out between two books in a way that made it difficult to miss was a small, blue piece of card. She took it, intrigued. The card was long and, on one of its sides, had a few handwritten verses:

*Your body can
fill my life,
as your laughter can
smash the opaque wall
of sadness.*

*A single word from you breaks
blind solitude into a thousand pieces.*

She was overcome with emotion on reading these verses, rarely had she felt so much intensity in so few words, distilled in them as they say matter is in the nucleus of some stars. She read them over and over again, shaken to the core, while shooting glances this way and that to see if anyone had noticed her embarrassment. But nobody seemed to be paying attention to her or to the card trembling in her hands.

When she turned it over, she saw the title of a book and the name of its author were written on the other side. Without a doubt, this had to be the volume the verses had been taken from. She quickly searched on the shelf for the section corresponding to the letter V and soon found the book she was looking for: *Point Zero* by José Ángel Valente. She urgently flicked through it until finding the page indicated in brackets at the end of the verses. There was the whole poem, “Be Thou My Limit”, more powerful and stirring than the first verses promised, a delicate combination of passion and beauty that grew in intensity until it burst in the stunning final verses, which, once read, could never be forgotten.

Sara clutched the book to her chest, perhaps to muffle the sudden loud thumping of her heart. Before leaving, she checked the shelf to see if there were any other pieces of card; it may have been a new selling technique, a very effective one at that. But no, there were no more cards on this shelf or any of the others she perused on her way to the till. She paid for the book without hearing the kind words the man addressed to her and left the shop with the impression that, while her surroundings hadn't changed, there was something different in the air that enabled her to see everything with new eyes.

Back in her office, she opened the book and examined the card more carefully. There were the verses that had moved her so much, written in fine handwriting, the letters drawn with all the delicacy of a Chinese ideogram. Sara's surprise was boundless when, on looking closer, she found her name in one of the corners on the back, written with pencil in tiny letters, so tiny she hadn't noticed them at first glance. This card had been addressed to her, someone had placed it there for her to find!

After a few moments' confusion, Sara tried to disentangle the threads of this mystery. It had to be someone who knew her, who was familiar with her habits, her movements in the bookshop. Who could it be? Other people, like her, visited the shop almost daily, people with whom she felt a certain complicity, though they'd never exchanged a word. Could it be the man who regularly sat at a table next to hers? She'd noticed him

more than once, he was very handsome, impossible not to admire his silver hair and grey-blue eyes so full of life, in which Sara detected a hint of sadness. Of course it could also be the young man who always sat on a stool at the counter. He dressed informally and, for reading, used small rimless glasses which made him highly attractive in Sara's eyes. She'd caught him looking at her on occasion, they'd even exchanged a fleeting smile. There were other men who came into the shop at the same time, but these two were the only regulars. In the absence of further proof, Sara concluded, or rather wished, it was one of these strangers who had sent her the card.

The following morning, on entering the bookshop, Sara headed straight for the shelf at the back. Since the previous day, a new joy had been struggling to blossom inside her despite the fact she knew it was a ridiculous sensation sustained only by a few weak threads. But as soon as she reached the books, she forgot all her misgivings and her eyes were drawn like a magnet to the far right, where there was a new card, this time pale pink in colour. It also had a few verses, written in the same painstaking handwriting as the last time:

*If only you would touch my heart,
if only you would put your lips to my heart,
your delicate mouth, your teeth,
if you would place your tongue like a red arrow
where my crumbling heart is beating...*

Although she thought she'd heard or read them before, these simple verses similarly aroused Sara's feelings; whoever selected them knew her tastes very well. The book's title and author were written on the other side, though the first thing she glanced at were the tiny, faint letters of her name, which again appeared in one of the corners. Holding the card, she turned towards the small cafeteria. Her eyes met those of the young man, who immediately blushed and looked away, no doubt because she had caught him staring. Meanwhile, the man with the grey-blue eyes continued reading the newspaper, oblivious to what was going on around him.

She searched in confusion for the book, and soon found it: Pablo Neruda's *Selected Poems*. She went straight to the page indicated on the card, though she was already sure the whole poem would be much more forceful and emotional than the verses at the start. She was right, it was. Sara's legs shook as she succumbed to the wealth of images that seemed intended to sweep through her heart like a gale. How could she have lived so many years without knowing this poem? And no doubt, inside the book, there would be other poems just as memorable, as there had been in the first book. A feast, a flood of words and emotions that would help melt the frozen windows of her claustrophobic tower.

She took the book and headed for the till. Halfway there, she stopped dead in her tracks. Next to one of the tables with new publications, she'd spotted a col-

league from the bank, possibly the only one who still hankered after something other than the accumulation of wealth as his only objective. What if he was the one who had been sending her these messages? He may have felt obliged to hide his sensitivity in a job that dismissed such values. Feeling optimistic, Sara went over and addressed him:

“Hey, what a surprise! What are you doing here?”

“Browsing, the same as you, I suppose.”

“I’m planning to take this, what do you think?”

Sara’s question was charged with hope, it was the perfect excuse for him to reveal himself, if her suspicions were correct. But his answer could not have been more discouraging:

“What is it, poetry? To tell you the truth, I never liked poetry very much, I could never understand it. I prefer novels, so long as they’re not too demanding.”

Sara quickly took her leave, trying to hide her sense of disappointment, and went over to the till. She paid for the book and left the shop, hoping to explore the treasure she held in her hands, though she was unable to do this until late in the evening, since work at the bank got absurdly complicated and she had to stay much longer than expected.

At home, next to the large window overlooking the dark sea, she discovered it was another extraordinary book. How had she managed to survive till then without reading poems that seemed to have been written with her in mind? Whose was the hand guiding her to these delicious texts? Why were they doing this? It

could only be because someone had fallen in love with her and was letting her know in the most original, inspiring way possible. How long would she have to wait for her anonymous admirer to understand his messages had already achieved their target?

Over the following days, Sara carried on visiting the bookshop with a secret emotion she found difficult to keep in check. She wasn't quite sure what, but she was expecting something to happen: a new card, a different gaze, someone coming up to her with some excuse. One morning, her heart jumped into her throat when she noticed the man with the grey-blue eyes had three red roses lying delicately wrapped on the table beside him. Unable to contain her emotion, Sara raced past the cafeteria and headed for the shelf at the back. There was a new card waiting for her, a pale green card with some more wonderful verses:

*But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

She read them through several times before turning the card over to find the book's title and author, and also her own name written in pencil so lightly it was almost invisible. *The Wind among the Reeds* by William Butler Yeats! She remembered having read some poems by this author which she liked a lot, she'd had to study

him on one of the courses she took in Dublin to improve her English. She searched for the page indicated on the card and read the whole poem, which ended with the verses her unknown admirer had copied. She was so flustered she could scarcely breathe, this was the most beautiful declaration of love she'd ever read. And somehow, despite the years that had gone by since Yeats wrote these words, she knew they were also addressed to her.

She took the book and returned to the cafeteria. The man with the grey-blue eyes looked up from the newspaper he was reading and for a moment their eyes met. But it was only for a few seconds, since he immediately focused on a point behind her, smiled openly and rose to greet a woman in a red dress, with long, straight hair, who had just come into the shop. Sara stepped back and leaned against the counter. From there she watched as the two of them sat down at the table, the joy of each other's company lighting up their faces. They kissed each other very tenderly, their hands flying out to each other like birds eager to be reunited. Then he handed her the flowers and they didn't move, whispering to each other, oblivious to anything that didn't directly concern them, as if an invisible bubble had cut them off from the real world. At that moment, Sara wished she could disappear, become invisible; her suffering and discomfort were plain to see. She paid for the book with lowered head, unable even to look at the man at the till, and walked out. She decided not to go back to the bank, all she needed right now was to

return home, she would call from there to say she felt suddenly indisposed.

Back in the safety of her flat, she read Yeats' poem over and over again, until she knew it by memory. She felt these words could also be hers, she too had spread her dreams under the feet of this stranger who seemed to know her so well. Suddenly a terrible thought crossed her mind. What if all this was nothing more than a joke, a cruel trick devised by her colleagues at the bank? They may have been annoyed when she stopped going out with them, perhaps they'd used someone she didn't know to leave her messages and make fun of her discomfort. Was this a subtle way to marginalize her?

She was absent from the bank for two days, claiming to be unwell. When she returned on the third day, she again went to have coffee with the other directors, as she'd always done. They were delighted to see her, no one could have said they weren't pleased to regain her company. Sara spent the whole time that day studying their faces, searching for a sign that her suspicions might be correct. A look, an ambiguous sentence... But she found nothing out of place, only the absurd suspicions her imagination created.

And so it carried on. She didn't return to the bookshop, she felt unable to do so, as if it were one of those forbidden places we try in vain to banish from our memories. At night, when she came back tired from work, she would seek refuge in the books of poems she'd collected during that brief period, especially

those that had come to her through the cards. They were the secret haven she hurried to each night, a haven of words to dispel the sadness that sometimes grows in us and threatens to drown us.

At seven o'clock Pablo locked the door of the bookshop and lowered the shutter that protected the windows. Sara hadn't come to the shop that day either, she hadn't appeared in almost two weeks. The first few days he'd thought she might be unwell, but one morning he'd seen her come out of the bank and head to a nearby café with the other directors. Her absence during this time had enabled him to understand she wouldn't come back, never again would he have her so close as when she approached the till to pay for her books. Sara almost always paid by credit card, which gave him the excuse one day to stroke the skin of her hand with his fingertips as he returned the card to her, a gesture that seemed casual and filled him with sensations as intense as they were difficult to forget. He'd fallen for her the first time she'd entered the bookshop, he'd never experienced anything similar, there was so much tenderness disguised under her confident outward appearance. And then, when he'd seen the books she bought, he'd understood this was the woman he'd always dreamed of.

On arriving home, he gazed sorrowfully at the cards he'd prepared for the coming days. They were scattered all over the table, like love letters addressed to no one,



pieces of paper that had once been full of wonder and were now weighed down with sadness. He decided to burn them, he didn't need to wait to be sure that Sara wasn't coming back. He found a metal tray, on which he placed the cards. He then lit a match and set fire to them. He stood there, without moving, as he read some of the verses twisting in the flames, vainly attempting to escape being burned; the same verses he'd patiently selected from some of his favourite books, searching for words he could make his own:



The only card he kept back was one he'd planned to give Sara the day he summoned enough strength to slip it into the book she was buying; that way, when she discovered it, she would know he was the only one who could have hidden the cards. It contained a few lines from a wonderful novel, a few lines he found as intense as the best of poetry, which perfectly described the emo-

tion he'd felt on seeing Sara for the first time. This Sara who may never enter the bookshop again, but who, against all hope, would remain for ever in his heart:

And then Grace Tebbetts walked into the room. About five minutes into her visit, she removed the jacket and draped it over the back of her chair, and when I saw her arms, those long, smooth, infinitely feminine arms of hers, I knew there would be no rest for me until I was able to touch them, until I had earned the right to put my hands on her body and run them over her bare skin.

Grace's eyes were blue. They were complex eyes, eyes that changed colour according to the intensity and timbre of the light that fell on them at a given moment, and the first time I saw her that day in Betty's office, it occurred to me that I had never met a woman who exuded such composure. As I sat with her that first day, looking into her eyes and studying the contours of her lean, angular body, that was what I fell in love with: the sense of calm that enveloped her, the radiant silence burning within.

PAUL AUSTER: *Oracle Night*.