

NOCTURNAL PILGRIMS

a wandering fairy tale by
HELENA W. CERNY

*~ To my late mother, Ilse Weltmann,
who opened for me the kingdom of fairy tales
hidden in the whispers of the forest. ~*

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A Wandering Fairy Tale
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Storyteller.
I am a storyteller.
I tell stories to stir my soul—
Some stories have never left me.
I am running through the night,
Carrying them.
I have to tell them.



THE TREES DO NOT SLEEP AT NIGHT

IN THE FOREST, the trees talk to each other all night. They tell stories. Some of us can hear them.

Once upon a time, there lived a man named Durell. He had a wife, two young boys, a lovely house, and a big office. One morning, he woke up as he always did, groggy, and reluctantly reached for his glasses. He looked out the window, where his small backyard seemed suffocated, covered by the industrial blanket of a big city. His house was still quiet. Durrell tip-toed in silent appreciation, reminding himself: *My family is my treasure; they are the invisible propellers that push me to lug myself from morning to night and to repeat it the next day. The slog of sitting in the tiny office, editing articles about lame topics, unable to write, really write. I drag myself through the waking hours until night.*

Durrell loved the darkness. All of his panics and desires found refuge in the darkness. And every morning, Durell opened the window into their small backyard and waved at the lonely oak tree. And the oak tree waved back. The tree branches swayed, reminding him of a vague image: the face

of a young woman resembling a field flower. It floated in and out of focus, but he could not catch it. He looked closely at the oak tree, and yes, indeed, it waved again, whispering, “Good morning.” Yet, he was preoccupied with the memory he couldn’t retrieve.

Summer would soon disappear; Autumn would follow as it did every year for the thirty-eight years of his life. Autumn made him melancholy, longing for an embrace, a tender caress, and soft lips touching his forehead. But at least he still had this trip. It was the end of August, as he had done for the last few years, and he took his sons on a camping trip. Even as pre-teens, they couldn’t wait to spend a few days with their reclusive father. Durell became one of the boys. He loaded his gray SUV with all the gear and items needed for camping. As he drove, he opened the roof window. His sons laughed in excitement. As if a magic wand touched his heart, he turned into the Durrell of his youth. He was talkative, curious, and engaging. The Durrell of everyday life—quiet, distant, and gloomy—had disappeared.

The forest was, for him, an endless kingdom of serenity. He could breathe freely in the woods, run with his boys, and jump over small streams of crisp mountain rivers. The forest made him alive again. Meeting the trees with the palms of his hands, he greeted them, whispering: *Hello, old faithful friends*. The trees stood tall, committed to protecting him and his sons from any evils of this world. The trees nestled him in their arms, whispering back to him in an endless stream of safety.



After the campfire was out and all three ate dinner, Durell helped his sons into their sleeping bags. The tent was spacious, but all of them snuggled with each other while they slept. The night was very dark. No stars appeared in the sky. Even the moon was barely peeking behind an enormous cloud. Darkness.

Durell woke up suddenly as if someone had shaken him out of deep sleep. He searched for his glasses, crawled out of the tent, and sat in the grass. The suffocating melancholy from the last weeks lifted. He felt at peace. His eyes slowly adapted to the blackness. He greeted the trees, and they murmured in response, swaying long branches, bending in a sharp wind that disappeared as fast as it appeared. The enormous cloud dissolved. The entire skyline was an invasion of countless stars. They arrived with grace, soundless.

Here I am, looking at the galaxy, unexplainable to my mind. The endlessness of the horizon made him somber. *I will never know all the secrets hidden behind the stars.* He remembered that as a young boy, he visited a spot that beckoned with stars. In the big city, the sky was gray. *When I age, he promised himself as he did before, I will go to places where stars will be so close to me—I’ll reach out and touch them.*

“Of course,” all the trees surrounding him said in unison, returning him to the present. “Of course, you foolish, gullible man. You won’t.”

“I know!” Durell cried out, spreading his arms in a helpless gesture. The trees giggled, but their giggle was so quiet that only Durell could hear it. “You may giggle, my ancient

friends, but you'll be watching the stars come up and leave, night after night. For Eternity."

"Is there such a thing as Eternity?" The pine trees inquired—they were especially contemplative.

Durell did not answer. His thoughts wandered around as he gazed at the trees. *I will die. My children will die, my children's children will die, and their children as well, not even knowing that someone named Durell was sitting one magical night in the forest, talking to the trees and wanting to touch the stars.* Unbearable anguish sat on his chest.

"Oh, Durrell, let go of your torment." The trees insisted with tenderness, repeating, "Let go. Let go," in a gentle melody. But Durell shook his head. He wouldn't let go. It was almost sunrise. The stars went to their resting places, and on the horizon, the reddish-orange face of the sun emerged. *Soon, the day will let me forget the distress of the night.*

Durrell looked at the trees, but they were now silent and disinterested. It was unbearable to him that it was time he and his boys returned to the city, back to their lives under the sky covered in a haze: polluted, gray smoke that smelled like dirt. *What if I never return home? I can safely send my boys... No one will miss me. My wife? We hardly see each other. We never talk. We have nothing to say to each other. I will stay. I will live the days given to me among the trees, in the woods, sheltered and cherished like the firstborn heir, the king of the forest.*

Durrell slept briefly. The trees, once engaging and coquettish, became soundless, ignoring Durrell's pleas. By Sunday, he returned with his boys as he knew he should. But upon coming home, he was crabby, almost mute.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
I live at night, like Durrell's stars.
At night, my yearnings flow into stories. . .*

*Into a fantastic trove.
In the day, I seek them. Sometimes, they hide—
But then, they shine like gemstones,
Gemstones I can grasp, flickering
From the depths of the treasure chest.*

"You have a phone message," Durrell's wife paused, unsure if he ever listened to her anymore. "Something about a yellow house."

"Yellow house?" Durrell leaned in closer to his wife, a gesture he wasn't apt to do lately.

"Yes. Yellow house. That person wants you to call a lawyer. Something about the yellow house."

"Yellow house, the yellow house," Durrell repeated, sifting through rumbling memories as he left the room. A relentless thought was pressuring him: *How come I have stored up all those precious memories of Aunt Margot, the yellow house, and the summer days of my youth? I locked them up, for I know that the days of never-ending peace and joy are gone, never to return.*

The yellow house. Durrell had thought he had forgotten about the yellow house where he had spent several summers, sunny summers, with his aunt Margot, whom he adored. He believed he had forgotten about her as well. Only in his dreams now and then did he see her face standing by the magnolia tree. That was Durrell. He lived his adult life hiding most memories—any memories: the sad ones, even the happy ones. *Memories are reminders of time past never to return. They are dead moments; they remind me of dying.*

Now, he was holding a piece of paper with a number. He walked through the quiet house all night from room to room to the kitchen and back, occasionally looking at his sleeping sons. They slept deep, soundless, as if a good fairy protected them from all their sorrows. *That was me years ago. Now, my hair is thinning, and my stomach is rounder. And my sleep is restless.*

But in the morning, there was another call, and he answered it. "Your aunt, Ms. Margot Carol," a tepid voice announced. "I am Janine, the property manager, and I am here at the direction of a lawyer."

"My aunt? Oh. How is my aunt?" Durrell wracked his brain, confused. Young Durrell, the Durrell of his childhood, knocked on his heart.

"So sorry for your loss. Your aunt, Ms. Margot, has passed on."

Durrell almost choked on his saliva. His heart wanted to burst out. "My aunt? My aunt?" He repeated as if needing time to let her words enter his consciousness. Reluctantly, he re-entered the realm of the yellow house.

"Your aunt. The yellow house. It is yours. She left it to you."

"Oh, the yellow house... yes." He remembered the house, his aunt, his friend Molnar, and the summer days as if covered in a golden veil. "Is . . . is there a magnolia tree in the backyard?" His heart was beating rapidly and loudly. He was sure Janine could hear it, too. *Margot.* He remembered the bushy pine tree in the middle of a backyard and, of course, the magnolia tree! *I am not ready to face the scent of the yellow house, the coziness of the fresh peach pie baked with Aunt Margot's love for me.* Durrell's head was spinning. As if someone unknown ordered his brain to open a treasure of memories: a much younger Durrell, awkward with glasses bigger than his round face, running around the yellow house.

"There is. The house and the yard are yours. I can connect you with the lawyer."

But Durrell was spinning. *It was the past. And I am not ready to revisit that place. No. I do not want to meet the*

young Durrell there... so full of desire to live, so eager and bursting with trust that life would turn out exactly how I wanted it to be. No. But I won't give up that house either. It is a part of who I am. It belongs to my boys and to me. There is serenity and calmness in the yellow house. He was thinking rapidly, scurrying through thoughts that could offer a solution. "Put the house up for rent, would you? And please send me an invoice for all your efforts. So appreciated. Very much so." Durrell didn't want to fly to another corner of the country to face the yellow house with the pine and magnolia trees, most certainly now overgrown. But mostly, he did not want his heart to be broken into millions of invisible fragments. How would he ever gather them?



THE YELLOW HOUSE

BRENDA LIKED TO JUMP into her little white Volkswagen and drive spontaneously. She drove with hope, wanting to live in a house with a backyard on a quiet street, not bothered by anyone. Often, she drove a distance to two seemingly peaceful towns called Cowardice and Courage. One day, when she spotted a FOR RENT sign in a yard, it called out to her. *It is an enchanting house. A sanctuary of creativity. I can write here. I can be free here.* Brenda applied to rent the cute yellow house right away.



A few days later, the property management representative met her with keys. "I am Janine. Welcome to your new home." Brenda walked in and left her suitcase and two boxes of her favorite books in the foyer. The inside of the house looked like someone—whoever lived there—had simply stepped out and would return any minute, and then would make coffee and share a pie out fresh from the oven and

converse with the visitor, Brenda. Yes, Janine reinforced; it was all furnished for her to use immediately. Brenda stood for a long time looking around, becoming acquainted with her new home. A freshly baked smell of peach pie elicited a smile on Brenda's face. Suddenly, she heard mumbling and stopped in her tracks. The walls were humming an old chorale as if she had entered a sanctuary of saints buried for centuries. It amused her. She stood in the foyer, gripping the keys, distracted.

"This old diva lady died and left everything to her nephew," Janine shrugged. "In my profession, I've seen the most bizarre scenarios. Yes, I sure have. And the nephew somewhere ... does not even care." She looked at Brenda, who was not saying too much. *This woman stands here as if she came from another world, Janine thought.* "Are you an artist? Are you looking for some peace and quiet?"

"No. I do teach literature, though," Brenda gestured to the boxes. She wanted to say more, maybe admit she wished to write or perform the poems she loved, but words felt unusually heavy, obstructing her breathing. Brenda toured the home, slowly taking things in as if in a dream. *Who would have thought this unassuming yellow house possessed such an elegant living room?* A concert piano, sleek with a gleaming dark mahogany, was in the middle of the room. *A mirror waiting to reflect my soul,* Brenda thought, enchanted. Plush armchairs, a long sofa, and pillows invited her. The hallway led to two bedrooms: a main one with a marble bathroom and a smaller guest room. The back wall was all bay windows to the backyard, showcasing a magnolia bush the size of a tree.

The music in the walls changed to the radiant, delicate tones of music unknown to Brenda.

She walked to the spotless kitchen. A table with four polished chairs shone like it had just been delivered to the department store. A fruit bowl with apples and oranges completed the table, and napkins with enormous red and purple flowered designs were ironed. A coffee machine and a toaster matched the flowers. But there was no pie.

"And here," Janine said, jerking Brenda out of the reverie, "these are the keys to the attic." Brenda looked quizzically at a narrow stairway leading to the locked entrance. *Am I actually in this yellow house, holding the keys in my palms? Is the house mine now?* Brenda wondered. *It is not mine, really.* But standing in the living room—the "music room"—Brenda knew she belonged there. *I will live here forever. Here I am at home. Here, I feel as if the walls are holding me in their song, safe like in the arms of my mother... well, during the rare times when she was sober and comforting.*

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
I tell stories of the travelers—of the night pilgrims.
I am also a wanderer, roaming the streets
Late into the darkness. But the darkness
Sits in my mind. Even daylight
Does not erase it. I welcome it.*

Brenda had grown up unhoused. Her mother had constant housing worries. They lived in her mother's car, which was tattered. At night, they broke into houses with FOR SALE signs, where they stayed as long as they went undiscovered. When the police came, social services were called, and Brenda spent weeks in foster care until her mother reported a fake address of her residence. For various sexual favors, her mother got a fraudulent certificate of employment and a residence address. She retrieved Brenda out of the clutches of those caring, bleeding-heart social workers.

Brenda missed her mother while in foster care, but she loved the clean bedding, fresh food, and escape that the school provided. She stayed in the library for days. She read and read and lived in different worlds: in small cabins, huge mansions, Victorian villas, and extravagant modern structures. She moved in and out in her imagination, decorating, designing, and sitting by the fireplaces with books. And more books. Alone, no one ever trespassed into her intimate stories. Stories lived in her mind only. She created them in the days of her very young years, running with her mother from one sheltered place to another. Books comforted and soothed her fears. They became some of her only possessions.

Her mother got a permanent job at a supermarket's cleaning crew when Brenda reached high school. Mother shoplifted a few items here and there but was not let go because of her "friendly" interaction with the store manager in the corner of the stock room. Brenda attended school regularly and excelled enough to get into college on a full scholarship.

But then her mother slipped on the spilled water while cleaning the floors in the grocery store. She injured her

back and had to have a few surgeries. She sued the store for negligence, although the manager insisted she planted the paddle and staged her injury. “What a jerk,” she told Brenda, “all those blow jobs for nothin’? No!”



Brenda was in college when she received a call. Her mother had a stroke and a heart attack and died suddenly, leaving the astonished, perplexed Brenda standing alone at the gravesite. *Tired of all these, for restful death, I cry*, she whispered, *from Shakespeare’s Sonnet LXVI . . . I am relieved, I guess.*

Soon, Brenda received a large settlement for her mother’s injury. Now, for the first time, she had money. She refused to think of herself as rich; she became more frugal. Even though she was a professor of literature, even though she was getting a paycheck every month, and even when she had lived frugally with roommates, she would check her bank balance, reassuring herself that the money was still there. No one would ever take it away from her. For the second year, she taught poetry. The curriculum focused on women poets who stood up against oppression, Russian poets like Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Akhmatova. Somehow, she understood their desire for giving love, being loved, their despair about loneliness, and—strangely—their yearning for solitude.



And so it happened that a few weeks after Brenda moved in, something came over her. Standing before her students, she glanced out of the classroom window. On a barren branch, a little bird, a bluebird, sat. *Little birdie, sing me a song*—the thought preoccupied her mind. “Little birdie.” She said in a loud voice, drifting off, “Little birdie! I also have a song!”

The students stared at her. But then, words no longer left her mouth. Not a peep, not a sound. She articulated song lyrics, moving her lips and tongue. She heard every single word in her mind, but no one else could hear it. Her students looked baffled. Brenda breathed heavily. With every breath, her silence seemed more tragic. Then she passed out, slipping off her desk seat. As if on command, the students jumped out of their seats, running to assist her, to help from their poor professor.

When the ambulance drove away with Brenda splayed on a stretcher, she was utterly mute for the earth and heaven. Yet her mind was vivid and bright. *That bluebird flew—who knows where—and took my voice with him.*

At the hospital, after a battery of tests, the medical team was at a loss. The medical personnel ordered therapy and speech therapy, and they suggested trauma counseling. Upon evaluation, the team argued that Brenda’s silence was perhaps a result of recent or older trauma, but no one knew. She refused to talk or take any treatment. Some of her students, even colleagues who wrote to her at her email address, offered help and support: “We wish for your speedy recovery.” Brenda did not reply. Her new neighbors knocked on the door a few times. Some brought fruit, even home-

baked muffins. Brenda accepted those gifts “of goodwill,” as she called them, smiling in appreciation. She closed the door loudly. She wanted no one to enter her precious solitude.

Brenda started her life at the yellow house in stillness. She felt liberated from the outside world, secluded in the white walls of the yellow house. She was freed of the burden of a spoken word. But her mind talked constantly; entire stories were born and erased, and more stories were conceived. They grew and evolved. Her mind was holding on to them.

Their litany followed her as Brenda explored the house, discovering more secretive, puzzling corners of her “home.” *But how does home really feel? She wondered. How would I know when I am truly home? Even that bluebird sitting on a naked branch outside my classroom window knew where his home was. Wherever he was flying to every autumn and returning from in the spring, he knew his home.*

She was waiting for some message that would open her soul and let her feel—simply feel.

For now, she was an intruder, rummaging from room to room in a fully furnished house. *What is the message? What is my mission in this yellow house?* She would ask herself. She would ask the house to open up to her. Slowly, she started to enter Margot’s life. The wardrobe in the master bedroom was still full of the most elegant gowns in fine white silk and black velvet, with matching high heels. All was in perfect order, clean, pressed, and polished. On top of the dresser, she discovered a wooden box with long strands of pearls. She imagined Margot wearing it around her neck as she stood by the piano and sang or played piano, maybe both. Or maybe she had an accompanist. The bed was

king-size with white pillows and fluffy blankets. It reminded her of one of the foster homes she stayed in briefly. A million years ago. On the nightstand was a framed photo of a young boy of eight or nine years of age and another, larger-sized photo of the same boy.

The yellow house seemed to stir, to come alive. Brenda could hear a full range of music from the walls, every sound from a mumbling to solemn music like ocean waves floating in and out of the bedroom walls. The walls also sometimes sang, serenading at times. Brenda listened, letting every tone settle within her. First, the tragic melodies of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 5*. Then the repertoire changed, moving smoothly from Chopin’s Nocturnes to Mahler’s *Symphony No. 9* and back to Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, and then even some Gershwin, like ‘S Wonderful! S’ Marvelous! Occasionally, a crystalline woman’s voice rang through the house, singing Schubert’s *Lieder* as clear as vocals can ring.

Brenda unpacked her clothing, noticing that her pieces looked shabby and pitiful next to the velvet gowns in the wardrobe. She left what was there intact, intrigued by the owner’s belongings. There wasn’t much room for books and papers, so she stored them on the floor. Only her computer—the only connection to the outside world—sat on the kitchen table, ruffling up the white tablecloth with multicolored flowers.



It took days before Brenda relaxed in the armchairs in the living room—a room she named the “Yellow House Concert Hall.” The Steinway piano intimidated her but tickled her with excitement in a way she had never experienced before. At first, she felt she had to purchase tickets before she could sit on those fancy seats. *I am waiting, she thought, for Margot to walk in, sit by the piano, and play and sing. Watching her breath intensely enough that her long string of pearls starts moving.* She was also intimidated and hesitant to enter the small guest room. She peeked in a few times, but she never stepped in, feeling an invisible force tugging on her. The room belonged to a child. *A child lived here, but who was it? And when?*



Some days, Brenda took long walks in the neighborhood. She walked around in her oversized blouse and a long, worn-out skirt, her hair in a ponytail. Once, a group of young people on roller skates waved at her and called her by her last name: “Ms. Reynolds! Hello!” She assumed those were her students, students from her past life, like a hundred years ago. She waved back at them and quickly disappeared into one of the side streets. Soon, she started taking walks at night only when there was no chance someone would recognize her in the darkness. The stillness of the night with no music... *It is like someone is caressing my soul,* she told herself.



Days passed. But nights dragged on. It was summer. She slept on a checkered blanket under the magnolia tree, surrounded by velvety grass. She did it to connect to the earth, attempting to find nature and peace in her new silent life. A few times, she woke up suddenly, hearing her heart beating loudly. *Something is off here. My heart is as loud as a trumpet or a drum. Is it even my own heart? Or is it that bird who stole my voice and flew away?* She would go back to sleep until the morning rays invaded her sleep, and then she walked back into her yellow house where nothing had changed—even though its person had died.

Weeks passed, and months passed. Brenda’s groceries were delivered to the door. Her disability check was deposited into her account. She did not respond to messages and letters from physicians. When social workers appeared at the door, knocking and ringing the bell, she did not answer. She recognized their faces from her younger years. *No. The door will never open for them. I don’t talk, but I think. What is to become of me? Will I die like Margot, in seclusion, who kept her house spotless for almost sixty years? Sixty years . . . once a young woman, as young as I am now. Did she throw her life away here? In this yellow house? Will I be dying here, not even knowing when I am dead?*

Then, the words of one of her beloved poems danced in her mind as lines from Anna Akhmatova:

*My night—I think of you obsessively,
My day—indifferent: let it be!!*

She then felt a strong urge to write poems. She did so in fits and starts, but by the end of the day, she flushed the crumbled paper down the toilet. Then she sat for hours, not remembering where the time went. She became restless when night walked in slowly. First, the sunset, bright and sad, endlessly sad, grieving over a lost day, a day of no return, as the light dimmed into the black of the night. That's when Brenda left to walk for hours until her legs returned her to the backyard of the yellow house, under the magnolia tree. And then she slept, hearing only her heart beating loudly. But still, she could not rest, so she roamed the house. That night, she finally entered the child's bedroom, where she found a little note written in a kid's handwriting: *Molnar is my best friend. He knows the tree language.*

*I am a storyteller.
I share the stories—stories of others.
One day, I shall tell you my story—about
afternoons unlike any other.
But for now, here is Molnar's story for you.*



MOLNAR'S STORY

ONCE UPON A TIME, but not really a long time ago, there lived a man named Molnar. He was a young man, tall and strong. Morning after morning, as he was leaving for the day of work, he was always neatly dressed and groomed. And every morning, his mother insisted: "You are the best-looking man in the entire town. You are, I am telling you."

"Oh, mother..." Molnar smiled, his dark eyes jostling with annoyance from her smothering nature. Still, his eyes glittered.

"You just have to believe it. You walk around with your head down as if your eyes examine the dirt. No one can see that gorgeous gleam of your eyes." Molnar's mother grabbed him. She hugged him tightly as if an invisible glue was bonding them forever.

"Mom, let go. I can't breathe!" And he thought: *I will suffocate here. The air I breathe in and out will evaporate into a vacuum, and I'll stop breathing.*

"No one ever gets to see your dark eyes. That little flame in them when you look up." Not knowing what to answer, Molnar smiled. He never talked too much. The simple events of his life unfolded in his mind only. In his mind, he had visited exotic places and met charismatic people and women of incredible beauty. "What's wrong with you? The girls in your office must be crazy about you, whispering and giggling in the lunchroom, wondering, 'Who will be the one asked out by that handsome man?'" Molnar laughed and left.

Every night, he returned home, tired from staring at the computer screen all day, eating dinner with his mother, and then going to bed early. He felt confined living with his mother, but the thought of venturing out into the wide world made him gasp for air. Yet the wide world frightened him —only in his tiny bedroom did he come alive. He came alive because that was his most treasured time, resting his eyes and watching his imagination unfold. Like moving pictures, he saw his life picture by picture, always in colors, never black and white. Somewhere, he read, "Because life is never black and white," and took it to his mind and heart. In the story of his moving pictures, there was a young woman. She had long blonde hair. He could not see her eyes for a long time until he decided on a green-gray color. He looked deeply into her green eyes, saying that her eyes were the window to her soul. He had read about that somewhere, too.



But one night during the week was an exception: Saturday night. He would set out into the town where he was born and grew up, where he knew every corner of every

street, its house, and trees and sidewalks. He was off to visit several bars. There, as if touched by a magic wand, he turned into a different Molnar. The people who knew him from work or saw him jogging around the town called him “The Enigma.” They would laugh at him, “Molnar, midnight strikes, and you are a different man, dude.” He knew every bar in each bar and always walked in like a triumphant warrior, like a conqueror who attained a magnificent victory. And he danced all night until the closing hours with vehemence and passion that felt like starvation. The rest of the week he thought of the women he danced with. His mind transformed them into beauties of extraordinary charms, unapproachable for Molnar. They were just in his imagination; they were fodder.

As months and years of his young life passed, the fantasy of an adventurous life was just that: a fantasy, an image of pictures existing in his mind only. Yet, the fear of wasting his life in the sameness of days, in the supposed comfort of his mother’s house, became bigger than the fear of facing the unknown. So he escaped from his fear and went into daydreams. Then slowly, a plan to leave invaded his senses. *If I don’t leave my home, my desire for never-ending love will die with my last breath. I have to let my mother smother me one last time... and then leave. And not look back. Or I will never be free enough to attract Her. Go on, Molnar, you got this.*

And so it happened that one rainy morning, Molnar got up and took out his old backpack. He put in several items of clothing: a pair of tennis shoes and soap. He drove to the bank, took out the money from his savings, and returned

home. “Mother,” he said, “I am leaving. I am walking away from home. Not from you, Mom. I am walking away from myself.”

“Don’t leave!” his mother begged, touching his face as she had since he was a young boy.

“I know, mom. I want to find a new Molnar. A different one.”

“Don’t you know you can never walk away from yourself, son? You carry yourself everywhere you go. There is no escape!”

“I know . . . I want to be a Molnar who finds a woman he can love no matter what.”

“No matter what?” Mother asked. “I don’t understand.”

“I want to love her—my future muse—because of her heart. Because of the purity of her soul. Because of the goodness in her eyes. All I am finding here is emptiness in the eyes of beautiful women.” Molnar’s mother nodded in a surprising turn of understanding his yearning. “I’ll hit the road today.” The mother’s heart ached as if a chunk of her flesh was ripped away, but she knew she could not keep him. Suffocated by her loss, she watched her son leave.



Molnar walked over seven rivers, seven mountains, and seven fields covered with flowers more vivid than any woman’s eyes he could dream of. “*Do I go straight? Do I turn left? Right?*” He walked through forests, bathed in rivers, and ate blueberries and boysenberries. In small towns or villages, he rented a room for a night or two and ate a meal in the local eatery. He avoided cities, big cities with honking cars and changing lights at intersections. Masses of people crossing those intersections made him dizzy. He took buses or trains

to unknown destinations. He smiled politely in little cafes, pubs, and family restaurants when he was approached by different men and women who started a conversation with him. Some were just being cordial to a stranger visiting their hometown; others were curious about this foreigner walking around with a backpack, so unassuming but smiling. Molnar told them his name. When they asked where he was headed, he had the same answer. "Just letting my legs take me wherever they will. So I ended up here."

"And how do you like it so far?"

He always answered: "Oh. I do. It is really, very nice here." His eyes sent out rays of goodness. Enchanting, the locals would suggest: "Why don't you stay here? With us?" Molnar knew that his journey was not yet completed. "We need nice people like you."

Molnar nodded, his smile frozen. "It is not the right place yet," he wanted to say. Instead, he was profoundly thankful for the hospitality and kindness.

*I am a storyteller. I am telling Molnar's story.
Another story of one who is looking... for love?
Alas, another fool.*

One cold winter day, Molnar arrived at a tiny village covered in snow, offering a calmness he had never experienced. Molnar stood at the edge of the town, looking at the picturesque view of a quaint Christmas village. At first, he did not believe that what he saw was real. Maybe it was a movie set for a make-believe fairy tale. Never before had he seen snow and ice, only in movies or photographs. The snow was so white that his eyes ached from the brightness of it. He slowly walked the only path leading to the village. Two signs next to each other sparked his curiosity:

COWARDICE
Population 852

COURAGE
Population 523

The signs snuggled each other, but no arrows directed the onlooker. *Cowardice? Courage? Huh? Which way do I go?* A car passed by slowly, and a group of kids excitedly pulled sleds. Molnar reached the main square of Courage. Right in the middle of the square stood a tall pine tree. A Christmas tree, plain and not yet decorated. A church, a school, and a City Hall next to each other. There was a post office and a bank in the same one-story building. A movie theater, a pizza parlor, and a somewhat taller building with big letters above the front door:

HOTEL COURAGE

Rooms available Restaurant Coffee Shop
Breakfast | Lunch | Dinner

Molnar walked into the store across from the hotel.

General Store
For All Your Daily Needs

From the money he brought with him from home, he bought a warm jacket, two sweaters, two pairs of pants, boots, socks, gloves, a checkered flannel scarf, and a beanie hat. He walked into the hotel and asked for a room. The hotel appeared to Molnar like a mansion from a time long gone. His room was simple and warm: a big fireplace, two upholstered armchairs, a small table with carved-out legs, a closet, and even a small black-and-white TV set. The bathroom was tiled with white and green patterns, big white towels, soaps, and shampoo. Everything was clean and pristine.

As if they were waiting for me as if I had arrived home. Molnar amused himself for a minute. Next, he wondered: *Is this it? Am I to stay here? Is this the end of my journey?* He changed into the new winter outfits and wished for the questions brewing inside him to still. He decided to find out more about the place called COURAGE. At the reception desk, a young clerk asked: “Will you be staying for dinner tonight, sir?” Molnar nodded.

Is it an illusion? Am I walking through the narrow streets of this tiny town? Or have I made it all up and live in my imagination? Have I lost myself somewhere in the woods, crossing rivers and climbing mountains? Has my mind dropped out, or did I leave it under a tree I once slept at? What is real? How would I even know? He walked, wanting to explore this bizarre place. He got to another square. In the middle of it stood a statue of a man and woman holding

hands and carrying a sign: COWARDICE. He did a double-take. There was a church, a school, a general store, and yes, a replica of the same square from Courage. And a hotel! Identical to the one Molnar checked in earlier that day.

Hotel: COWARDICE

Rooms available Restaurant Coffee Shop

Breakfast | Lunch | Dinner

Astonished and amused, Molnar took in his surroundings: The square, the buildings, the signs...

I am not in Wonderland, although I could be... is this real? Two towns identically divided only by a narrow path of no man's land? Where does one start and the other end?

As darkness encroached, the street lamps came on. The snowflakes swirled in a dance, falling soundlessly to the ground, already white. Molnar reached the end of town—at least it looked like an edge—because there was nothing but an enormous field as white as the sheets on the bed of his hotel room. And then he saw a house different from all the other houses. A yellow house with a black roof. All the other houses had red roofs and were painted in a blue sky creamy color, but this one was different. The yellow was so intense, like a splatter of sunlight, that Molnar had to close his eyes. When he closed his eyes even for a second, the yellow facade of the house disappeared, and he was facing a castle with golden balconies, arches, and wild vines.

Molnar walked toward it. He had to unlock the secrets of this place with peculiar names. In the depths of the darkness, the houses seemed to speak to each other. Molnar wondered: *Are they telling secrets of the households? Giggling*

about lies, deception, true love, and promises given hastily amid lovemaking? He stood in front of the yellow house. It was the only house with a dim light behind one of the windows. An unknown force was making him stay. *I want to know who the people living in this bright yellow house are. Someone will appear soon. I'll wait.* On an impulse, he wanted to enter and never leave. He imagined the inside of the yellow house. Not a house: a home. *A home*, he was repeating to himself, *a real home. A loving home.*

A white and blue car drove by, slowing down when passing Molnar. Big letters on the car's front read:

POLICE PROTECTION THE CITY OF COWARDICE

And on the back of the car:

POLICE PROTECTION THE CITY OF COURAGE

After a short while, the police car circled back, approaching slowly, this time stopping. A male police officer got out and stood in front of Molnar, smiling. "Night stroll?" Molnar nodded, looking at his name tag. Deputy Porta. "You stood here for a long while." Porta said, sneering and then checking his wristwatch. "Fifty-six minutes, close to an hour. How can we help you?" He gestured to the police car as a woman in a police uniform walked out, smiling. Molnar smiled nervously. He found the woman beguiling, and he did not know how to answer the police officer's question.

"Is something funny?" The woman asked. Her name tag read: Officer Lasira.

"I do not know. I..." Molnar was in a haze. "Lasira . . ."

"So, how can we help?" Porta asked, his voice so loud it bellowed, making Molnar come to his senses.

"Oh! ...it is fascinating. This house. All yellow... I do not get it," Molnar murmured. I want to know, to understand what this house is about. "And who are the people living here?" The officers looked at each other and burst out laughing. Molnar only now noticed how young both of them were.

"You are not allowed to stand here. It is trespassing." Lasira said, "Margot is a piano virtuoso."

"A concert performer," Officer Porta said, "You cannot bother her."

"How am I bothering her? This place, this house ... the yellow color...it is just so magical. I could stand here forever and just watch it."

"That's what she does not want," Lasira said. Molnar stared at her. Could she be his enchanting Northstar? Could she be one of the charming women he had created in his imagination back home in his tiny room?

"She had suffered enough," Officer Porta added. Molnar thought that the two of them were like a comical couple but hoped they were not indeed together.

Lasira saw Molnar's confusion. "Margot. Her husband died, and soon after, her daughter vanished. So, you know, don't bother her. Leave. Go to your hotel room. Put some wood in the fireplace," Lasira softly ordered. And with that, both Lasira and Porta got into their patrol car and drove away in the soundless, heavy snow.

Molnar returned to his hotel room. He walked up the stairs, dragging his legs. The restaurant was closed. But in

his room, he found dinner sitting on a stool by the fireplace. Grilled chicken, mashed potatoes, a bowl of applesauce, and a can of hot tea. A note said, "Dinner is served from 7-9 PM, but here ya go!" A wooden clock on the wall read 10 PM. Molnar ate his dinner, cold by now, and his haze returned. He fell asleep easily, entering a planet of dreams.

Molnar ran through a field covered by snow, but as he looked closer, he saw that the white blanket was a field of flowers. A woman was running towards him. At first, he did not know her, but as she approached, a name on her forehead read: "Lasira." A wave of blond hair touched Molnar's face. He wanted to embrace that stunning goddess, but as he reached out to her, she disappeared.

I am a storyteller.

I tell stories.

Stories that happened.

Stories I wish had happened.

I am roaming through the paradise of stories.

It was early morning when Molnar entered the hotel's lobby. He sat in one of the armchairs, sinking into its dark red velvet upholstery. The old man behind the reception counter was smiling. "Tired, young man? Oh yeah, those nightly escapades tire one out, don't they? Molnar just stared at him, lost in his thoughts. "Tired?" the old man repeated.

"No. Not tired."

"What is it then?" The old man had long white hair that was as white as snow. "Is your mind walking in a dream?"

Molnar quickly answered, "Oh. No. No. Are you the owner? I mean, this place? Is it yours?"

"It is. It was my great-great-grandfather's at first. Now it's mine. Why? Why are you asking?"

"Just so... I do not understand anything here. Am I your only guest? And why is this town Courage, yet it looks just like Cowardice? Like identical twins!"

The old man sat down next to Molnar. He sat in the other armchair identical to the one Molnar was sitting in "Do you want to know? Really? I mean. . . really know?"

"Yes. I have never been more confused than I am now. Never in my entire life!"

"Your entire life! Ha!" The old man repeated. "Your entire life! How long is your entire life?"

"Twenty-six years!" Molnar scratched his head.

"Twenty-six," the old man repeated. "And you want to hear the story? Why?"

"Well," Molnar answered slowly, "I do not know. I am a traveler. I am looking for a place to settle down, Mr.—."

"My name is Soreno. Soreno is my name. So do you want to live here? In Courage?"

Molnar stared at the floor covered by a heavy carpet with red and dark blue ornaments. *Am I being interrogated? Do I have to have all the answers?* “To answer your question, Mr. Soreno, I don’t know. I don’t know if I’ll stay for a while or for a long time. Or if I leave and never come back.”

“You are being honest, and I like that.” Mr. Soreno put his arm on Molnar’s shoulder. “Come. Sit down in one of these fancy chairs. My great-great-grandfather, my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father all sat in those chairs. Now, it is me sitting here and telling you our story.”



COWARDICE AND COURAGE: A STORIED PLACE

MANY YEARS AGO, and I mean hundreds and hundreds of years ago, there was nothing here. Nothing. Just a vast land with no beginning and no end. It was like that for thousands of years... What am I saying... probably hundreds of thousands of years? But then, one day, a group of people appeared. Or maybe just a man and a woman. Oh, do not think, my young friend, that I am talking about paradise and Adam and Eve. No. We just know—well, better to say—we assume there was a man and a woman because soon there were more people, and they built little huts to live in and planted vegetables and trees, and soon, as years went by, there was a tiny hamlet and later... a village. People in that village lived long lives into the hundreds and more. No one ever was sick; they did not know about illnesses. Whoever died died of old age.

They harvest the vegetables in the summer and store them for winter days. When snow covered the land, they did not starve. They did not freeze to death. They were clev-

er, chopping wood in the summer. Clever enough knowing that the bliss of summer days and nights won't last. But the smell of humans lured all kinds of wild animals. Some of them became their friends. Wild dogs protected them from any danger long before anyone even knew what it meant. Danger. No one understood."

"But," Molnar interrupted. "I mean. I mean...no disrespect. What you're telling me, Mr. Soreno, is like a fairy tale. What are the facts? You know, Mr. Soreno, I am a computer guy— technology, science. You know?"

"Oh, computer guy," Mr. Soreno smiled. "We could use you here. We have a few computers in the COURAGE, and I gather they have some at the COWARDICE as well, but we just don't know how to..."

Molnar stood up. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Soreno. I was curious...I just want to know what this place is about. It's bizarre."

"No!" Mr. Soreno replied with a stern reprimand. "You are not curious. What you are is impatient. Rushing. Running. Where to? Where from? Curious? Seeking knowledge? Oh no. You have a long way to go, my friend."

Molnar stayed quiet for a long while. So did the old man. "I traveled a long way, and now I am here," Molnar said, not looking at the old man.

"Is this the end of your travels?"

How do I answer this man's question? What is it I really want? "I do not know yet. But I want to hear more of your story."

"It is not a story; no, a story is a made-up compilation of events in someone's fantasy. What I am telling you is history. But you are rebelling. Why is that?" And with those words, Soreno opened the heavy wooden door of the hotel's

entrance. Big snowflakes twirling in the wind made the sound of a pipe coming from far away. Mr. Soreno said to Molnar." Do not forget: it is Christmas!"

Molnar walked up the stairs to his room. The fireplace was already lit. Molnar slept. He slept for long hours, and again, the bells from the church woke him up with their bombastic sound. It was now late afternoon. The sun was fading as he went outside. In the middle of the square stood a tall Christmas tree decorated with hundreds of tiny ornaments and glittering lights. A man in a dark overcoat with a dog next to him sang Christmas carols, playing the guitar. Molnar wondered, looking at the dog, if he was one of the descendants of the wild dogs...

Then he remembered Mr. Soreno's words: "It is Christmas." He walked until he reached the yellow house at the other end of the COURAGE, where he entered the town of COWARDICE. The yellow house was decorated. White, red, and green lights stretched around the window seals. It looked like a castle—a solemn, impenetrable castle. Suddenly, he stood in the middle of a square identical to the one he had walked through this morning.

The beautiful tall Christmas tree glistened with hundreds of tiny ornaments and lights. A choir in dark overcoats sang Christmas carols, accompanied by Santas wearing red and white hats playing guitars. *Now I have completely lost my mind. I have no clue where I am and why I am where I am, and it does not make sense. My thoughts are tangled in a tiny ball. If I toss it to this dog, he may jump and bite like the ancient dogs of our ancestors did.*

The clear voices of the choir reverberated around the square, rounding back in echoes. People rushed around the

square, entering the enormous general store, exiting and carrying packages, not paying any attention to the magnificent singing. It got dark quickly—and then, as if on command—the square became empty. Molnar lingered around before he entered the hotel. Hotel COWARDICE. The heavy armchairs covered in velvet seemed cleaner and shinier than this morning. Behind the reception counter stood an elderly man, smiling at Molnar: “Merry Christmas, young man.”

“Mr. Soreno. Merry Christmas. You look different. Oh, I know! You shaved your beard!”

A smile left the man’s face. “You are very mistaken, young man.” Molnar looked around. “Perplexed, young man? Are you? Well, you should be.”

“Why, Mr. Soreno, why?” A wave of icy fear embraced Molnar. He couldn’t move. He was frozen.

“My name is Mr. Oneros. I have never worn a beard. Only people in COURAGE do. Not here. Not in COWARDICE.”

Molnar opened his mouth. He wanted to respond, but no sound came out. He was moving his lips, but no words stood in the air. He felt as if all the blood from his body, from his head down to his feet and little toes, left his body. Like from a very far away, like an echo, Mr. Oneros’s voice carried words Molnar understood.

“Mr. Oneros, Mr. Oneros. Understood? Now, you need to turn around and return to where you came from. Clear?” He was smiling now while Molnar’s face turned from white to some unknown color. “You have not lost your mind, no. You just lost your way. It’s easy to get all confused. Go back, you hear me? We may look alike, but we are not alike. You see only the surface. Do you understand? Now go.”

*I am a storyteller. I seek and hold the stories.
I walk in the darkness looking for the one ...
All of us are nocturnal pilgrims, rummaging.
Even when the sun comes out...*

Molnar walked out. The sky was filled with tiny stars; it looked like a summer field with millions of flowers. It was the night before Christmas. Knowing the way back to Courage, his legs just took him to the square. Only the Christmas tree, noble and silent, like this night, stood still. Again, like the time before, as if on an invisible command, people and couples, families with children, and Elders filled the square. The bells were ringing at midnight. It was not ordinary midnight. Molnar knew it. Midnight mass. Molnar stood erect next to the Christmas tree, listening to the songs carried from the church into the square, filling the nightly air, and he felt elevated.

After some time, the church door opened, and people, “the locals,” as Molnar called them, walked out. But first, a tall woman in a long black velvet dress, strings of pearls around her neck, several strings almost hitting the ground covered by snow. From nowhere, a carriage with two white stallions pulled up. The woman sat in the back, waving to everyone clapping in her honor. “To the yellow house, please.”

“Miss Margot!” someone shouted, “Beautiful! Breathtaking! Your voice!”

“All the angels came down from heaven, Miss Margot, from heaven and sang through you!”

Another voice cried out. The carriage moved through the square, passing the Christmas tree that appeared to Molnar to be bowing to Margot. Someone grabbed his arm. “It is Christmas!” It was Mr. Soreno. It was the real Mr. Soreno, his gray beard trimmed. “Holy night!” Molnar nodded. Again, his words stuck somewhere in the pipes of his throat. “And you are invited to have dinner with the Soreno family!” With those words, Mr. Soreno pushed Molnar into the long

hallway of the hotel. “That way, you’ll meet my entire family!”

They entered a ballroom with crystal chandeliers, thick carpets, and lush oil paintings, and in the middle of the room, a Christmas tree decorated with crystals matching the two large chandeliers. Gifts were wrapped under the tree, and the lights were so bright that Molnar had to flex his head downward. He could hear the soft Christmas music coming through the purple wallpaper. A woman with long gray hair, dressed in a white gown, stretched her arm to Molnar. Mr. Soreno introduced, “My wife, Sebastiana.”

“You must be Molnar, right? Am I right?” As Molnar nodded, he heard laughter—layers of laughter. He looked at his boots and heavy jacket while others dressed in tuxedos, suits, and long gowns and felt out of place. The elegance, the glamor—that was not his world. He wanted to leave. “Stay,” Sebastiana said. “Stay. Meet the family.” With that, she waved at a young woman quickly approaching them.

“I know him! Of course, I do! You don’t remember?” Again, for the hundredth time, Molnar’s mind was floating aloft on a cloud that carried him far. “You don’t remember, do you?” She looked like someone he had met before. But where? She was dressed in a green velvet gown. She moved her head, and fire exploded. It was her red hair. Only her eyes, gray and dark blue and maybe greenish, smiled. She whispered as if this was their little secret. “Police . . . you remember? Yellow house?”

“Yes.” He recognized her, but she made him incoherent. “You! You are . . .” Lasira was waiting.

“Lasira,” she said. “Take off your boots. They are too heavy. We’ll dance.”

“Lasira,” Molnar repeated. They danced, drank, and ate,

and Molnar spoke to the uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, and nephews. When the time came to open gifts, there was a bottle of the finest wine wrapped in paper that was as soft as silk for him.

Morning came, and Christmas night was over. Christmas Day started with the bells inviting everyone to enter the “House of God” and rejoice in the birth of the Savior. By then, Lasira and Molnar slept in Molnar’s room in the hotel owned by Lasira’s parents. Their bodies intertwined, their breath in unison. The bottle of Christmas wine stood empty by the fireplace.

“Your eyes are chandeliers,” he whispered to her. “Chandeliers that change colors, like your eyes, which are dark blue, gray, and green. When your pleasure is at its highest peak, your skin glistens, covered by a thin blanket of sweat, it feels like the finest velvet—or the silkiest fruit from paradise.”

“Oh? Are you a poet?”

“No,” Molnar answered. But with you... now I may become one.”

“Now? How come?” Lasira wasn’t sure what he meant, but his mysterious manners and dark, dazzling eyes hooked her.

“My mind explodes in a bliss never known before. It is like fireworks of the most extraordinary

shapes and colors... it is when yours and my body are glued to each other, and I do not know. I do not want to know where you start, where I start, or where we end because we are at one— there is no I and no you. We disappear. We are an entity now. The two of us.” From that night and day, they spent most of the nights together, even early mornings, when Lasira-the-police-officer would complete

her nightly shift. She would run into Molnar’s hotel room and change into her day clothes in bright pink and purple. Waiting for Lasira was Molnar’s most joyous time of the day or night. The anticipation of climbing with her step by step to the mountain of unbearable pleasure—*that* anticipation was the path to happiness by itself.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
Molnar's story is far from over. He thinks he has reached
The highest peak: Happiness! He truly believed
such a destination exists. So gullible...*

Days passed, and the snow turned into dark, dirty slabs of melt and mud. Mr. Soreno knocked one early morning, entering Molnar's room. "It is time, my boy," he said without any greeting. "It's time."

"For what?" Molnar asked, slightly irritated.

"To make a decision. Do you want to stay here? In COURAGE? If yes, your stay has to be approved by the Elders Committee. Once you are approved, you can't leave. Never. Ever. If not, it is time to leave."

Molnar's eyes got big, but his voice was hollow. Only his breath hung over the room. In a panic, he walked around, pacing. The thought of leaving was so foreign to him as if he had heard an unknown language. He could never take another breath without having Lasira by his side. After a while, he looked at Mr. Soreno.

"You have not even finished the story—about Cowardice and Courage. You promised." He wanted to say something else: *Of course, I will stay. I want to stay. There is no other place I want to live—only here. Here I am at home. Here is my happiness, my love.* But he stayed silent.

"All right," Mr. Soreno said. "One night. Tonight, you'll hear the story. And by the morning, you have to decide: you'll stay or you'll go



THE BIRTH AND BLOOM OF THE TWO TOWNS

THEY LIVED PEACEFUL LIVES, serene and tranquil. Their village was growing and was now called “The Village.” The word about the peaceful people of The Village reached a very wealthy but cruel man called Retsnom. This man decided he wanted to see with his own eyes what that was all about. That great place where no one ever fights or argues, no one ever gets hungry, and everyone has a roof to sleep under.

Now, Retsnom had arrived, and because he was so powerful, he could do whatever came to his mind, and the only person he had to think about was him. He built a castle for himself and his entourage, as well as his horses. He declared it the Yellow Castle. The castle had twelve rooms, twelve ballrooms, and twelve stables. The castle was colored yellow and gold—gaudy. Enough so that in our great old *Chronicle Book: Archives of Two Towns*, it says the villagers named the Yellow Monster. Retsnom ordered the people to deliver food for him and his servants daily. And the villagers did. They baked fresh bread and harvested vegetables, killing animals to be roasted and eaten. Soon, hunger entered the villages.

Old people were dying quickly, mother’s milk was not coming in, and children were endlessly crying. And the men got angry and enraged. But because they did not know what anger was, at first, they got confused. All they had known was serenity.

Elders of The Village met and talked an entire night and day and another night and morning. This was also written as such in the *Chronicle*:

Six out of thirteen Elders will approach the castle where Retsnom and his underlings reside. They will present our case of deepest disturbance due to hunger and starvation. They will respectfully ask to recognize that the citizens of The Village do not continue to deliver daily food to the Yellow Castle.

Six of the most esteemed Elders were chosen, and the following day, they walked to the castle and asked to be let in. All we knew was that the heavy metal door of the castle opened, and the Elders entered. And no one saw them alive again.” Mr. Soreno stopped when tears rolled down his cheeks. He was sobbing. “You see, Molnar, even after hundreds and hundreds of years, I am crying for the blood of my ancestors. Because their blood is mine and the blood of my children and their children.”

Molnar lowered his eyes. For the first time after many months, he felt a sharp twitch in his soul. He wanted to hold this man in his arms and let him cry on his chest. He just sat silently. And he waited.

“Here comes the most heart-wrenching part of our history. Once I tell you this part, I can breathe again. Yes, now comes the horrific, monstrous part. That is what I will tell

you now—that injured us deeply, and we are still not healed,” Mr. Soreno continued, his tears glistening. “That night, the entirety of The Village waited. The Elders sat at their sacred round oak table. They sat in silence.

Outside on the square, the villagers gathered. They danced, sang, and held hands. “This will be the end of our tyranny, the end of our exploitation. We will live again with an abundance of food and with our stomachs full. Our hearts won’t be restless. Peace and contentment will enter, and we will breathe freely again.” Or so they thought. So they hoped. They couldn’t have been more mistaken. The sun went down. Darkness moved in, dragging its feet. And then, close to midnight at the eleventh hour of the day, and twelve minutes before the day was over, the gates of the cursed, rotten castle opened, and a crowd of Retsnom’s soldiers walked out, carrying fires that lit up the entire square and the scattered huts the impoverished villagers called their homes.

Behind the fire carriers, six soldiers carried very long sticks. They carried them high. On the very top of the staves, six heads were slain, covered in blood, one after the other, six heads of the Elders, just their heads, heads with no bodies. Six heads of the Elders went to speak up, to stand up to the oppressor. Those six heads of the mighty Elders were parading through the square. A mortal silence entailed. But within seconds—as written in the old writings of the *Chronicle*—words we saved for hundreds of years . . . wails of horror ensued, hollowings in rage erupted. A handful of men and women attacked the carriers of death. Later on, they were called the Courageous. They were beaten down by more and more soldiers marching and hitting everyone

in their path. Another handful of villagers bent their heads, sobbing, and got on their knees, begging for forgiveness for mercy. Many years later, they were called Cowards. Their children were labeled so, and their children’s children and their children had to live in the exile called Cowardice.

Mr. Soreno paused. “What would you do, my young friend? Would you kneel? Would you fight?” Molnar, lost in the story and startled by the question, did not answer. “Your silence is an answer, Molnar. That is not good. Not at all. Not good!”

“But...” Molnar wanted to explain.

“Too late. It’s too late now. You are hesitating. You have to know where you are standing.”

Molnar raised his voice slightly, “I do know. I know. My mind is clear.” He stood up. “And... and you? How about you? He took a step closer to Mr. Soreno. “What would you do? Today? If that happened today?”

“Sit down. Sit down and listen!” Mr. Soreno commanded. “Well... the bells rang twelve times: clear, long sounds ... and then: stillness. And what happened next? The soldiers piled the heads of Elders into a big pile and set it on fire. Lamenting and screams of never-ending sorrow, tears, and sobs were louder than the obscenities coming from soldiers’ mouths. The sky was illuminated for a short time. There was black smoke and the smell of burning skin; That’s all that was left. And those kneeling and begging for forgiveness, for mercy. Promising devotion to the tyrant. Years passed. It is unclear from the *Chronicle* how long it took. The Village was reduced almost to rubble. The Courageous ones stood in defiance, determined to fight to avenge the dead. Even those Cowardly ones who begged and kneeled had nothing

left, nothing to eat, nothing to live for decades. According to the *Chronicle*, another fire illuminated the sky on the twelfth day of July. Apparently, it was an early morning hour, perhaps at dawn. But it happened. The Yellow Castle was engulfed in flames. Desperate howling for help was heard through the morning hours but suddenly quiet. Nothing. It took days before some of the Courageous, together with some Cowards, approached the burned castle.

“This is where your beloved yellow house is now. Dead bodies are buried underneath. It is a cemetery. Is that so fascinating to you?” Mr. Soreno asked with a smile that was more of a grin. Molnar stayed silent. And Mr. Soreno waited.

“I will stay here, here in Courage. I just want to stay here, live here,” Molnar answered. Mr. Soreno burst out laughing, and he laughed for a long time. Molnar stood up. Mr. Soreno was hardly breathing; the laughter took all his breaths.

“Sit, sit. Wait. We are not done yet. Fights between the Courageous and the Cowards have been going on for centuries. It was pure hatred. They spat at each other when they encountered each other. They were forbidden to marry each other. No marriage between Courage villagers and Cowardice villagers! You see, marriage is a duty. A commitment to carry on our family and tradition. Not for outsiders. The division continued; they cursed at each other forever. Both sides claimed that the “yellow” territory—despite the rubbles and ashes— was theirs. Both sides claimed they started the fire and freed everyone from the oppression of a cruel ruler, Retsnom. Eventually, a peace agreement was signed. Yes. And now we have two places living peacefully next to each other, mind you! And the yellow house belongs to

both—right in the middle between both villages.”

“What a peculiar story. And are you saying that his body—the body of this oppressor—was never found?” Molnar asked.

“Never!”

“And what happened to the Yellow Castle?”

“Nothing. Grass and weeds grew all over it until one day, a developer came, of course, someone from the outside world, knowing nothing about us... she bought the property and built a house on it. A yellow house with a huge garden. And it stood there vacant. I remember as a little kid. We were told not to run around there, not even to go close. Like there was some impending danger or something horrific was about to happen. Then, one day, a beautiful woman moved in.”

“Oh. It is almost morning,” Molnar drifted off, tired. “I can see the sky lighting up with sunrise. I am honored to hear your story.”

Mr. Soreno shook his head. “Story is something you make up. What I said is real.”

“I want to stay and live here,” Molnar answered.

“And why is that?” Molnar’s eyes got bigger, dazzling to convince the old man. “Come back once you know. But no later than midnight.” The old man let Molnar go.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
I travel through time —where stories are unveiled.
Looking for my love... for the one who knows, for
the one who whispers.
Running, running through the night.*

Molnar walked out. He was thinking: *I walked for a long time to get here. To this place, so foreign to me and yet so comforting. I walked for a long time to find a woman I love.* At that, Molnar remembered his mother and the house they lived in, the car they drove, and the bars he danced at every weekend. And he also remembered the last time he saw his mother, and he felt a pang of shame. He stepped to the offices of the city hall, and he found the post office.

"I have to make a phone call," he told the man sitting behind a desk sorting out envelopes.

"You have to make a phone call," the man repeated back to him.

"To my mother."

The man nodded, "Go to cabin number one." Molnar looked around. There was only one cabin with a "1" on its door. He dialed his mother's phone number and waited.

"Mom," he said when a female voice answered. "Mom, it is me, your son!"

"My son?" his mother's voice sounded thin, barely audible.

"Mom, I found a woman I love. And I found a place where everyone is good. Would you believe it? I will marry her, Mom? I will live with her here. Her name is Lasira."

"Lasira," Molnar's mother repeated back with a lilt.

"I will bring you here, Mom. I promise! We will dance together at my wedding. I will come and get you. We will travel for a long time and get here in time for the wedding. We'll travel on the train first. It will take a day and a night and another day and night, and we will take a big bus for days, and then we will walk for a while, and then we'll get to the wedding. To *my* wedding, Mom."

Just before midnight, the church bells rang, and Molnar entered his hotel. The plush entrance and the staircase, weighted with a thick carpet, felt like home. Mr. Soreno stood by the reception desk.

"I called my mother," Molnar said. "I told her I wanted to live here. I want to live here because people are good here—kind and honest."

"Good." Mr. Soreno answered, "Anything else?" Molnar hesitated, but he did not let his hesitation stop him.

"I also love a woman here."

"We don't use those words like 'love.' We don't use that word. It has no meaning."

"It does not?" Confused, Molnar asked: "Have you ever had any feelings? For your family? For your daughter? Don't you love them?"

Mr. Soreno shook his head and looked at Molnar with pity in his eyes. "I sense your bewilderment, my young friend. What you call 'love' is my devotion, obedience, and duty to my people. That's all it is."

And then he said firmly. "I will present your case to the Elders."

That night, holding Lasira in his arms, Molnar was overcome with fear. *What if none of it is real? The Cowards and the Courageous and the yellow house and Lasira and love and happiness, hollow words, just a combination of letters with no substance. Is he for real? He could have stayed in the city with loud noises and bars on weekends and computers, and all of that is not for real either, because there was only a vague memory of the previous years and he was trembling, in a deadly panic that he does not exist because he has no memories. That nothing exists, and nobody exists, not even Lasira.*



Only in the early morning hours, as Lasira had to leave for her police duty, did Molnar ask: "Will you marry me? I want to marry you."

Lasira focused her eyes on Molnar. "Why?" she asked, getting ready for her shift.

"Why?" Molnar contoured his face, confused by her question. "I am happy when I am with you. I love you."

"I do not understand that word."

"That does not matter!" Molnar cried out. "Forget the lack of meaning of it! You made love to me for weeks and months, and you do not love me? What are you saying?" Cold sweat covered his body. He shivered in panic. *Am I about to lose my mind? Will it fly away, disappear in the endlessness of heaven, and never return? What is to become of me? A wild traveler seeking eternal love?*

"I do not understand you," Lasira repeated quietly. "You are using words I do not know."

"Nevermind. Never mind the words. I want to get married to you. Will you marry me?"

"Marry you?" Lasira repeated his question. "No. . . Don't you know?"

Molnar's throat closed up. His breath was shallow. "Know what?"

"I am already getting married next month, yes, the first Sunday of next month. It was arranged years ago. Will you come? Please do." And with that, she walked out. She left him in an abyss of endless torment. His love is gone. He had, after all, walked across deep forests, entered villages and towns, climbed steep mountains, and crossed tranquil rivers.

He had found his love. His Lasira. Now, he lost his love, his Lasira. Lasira is gone. And Molnar was left with a fathomless heartache.



By evening, a paper marked in big letters was plastered on his door: *You are Summoned to City Hall*. IMMEDIATELY. Molnar walked there afraid, entering the City Hall to stand before the ensemble of the Elders. They sat at a round table, rigid and severe. *I was betrayed. I was lied to. I was robbed.* But Molnar stood erect like that Christmas tree on the town's square, and he stood still despite his rage. One of the Elders stood up, and then, all the thirteen men stood up. "The authority of Elders of the town of Courage decided on this fifth day of May to grant Mr. Molnar citizenship in this town as of today, May 5th of this year: You are obligated to work to earn your living. You are obligated to follow the rules of living in the town of Courage. You must keep your residency in this town. You are not permitted to leave this town without written permission except to enter the town of Cowardice. You are permitted to get married and father children. You have no other choice but to accept these conditions."

"No! No!" Molnar yelled out. He collapsed. The story of his love ended. Forever.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
The story is not over yet.
Not for Molnar: The nocturnal wanderer.
Yes, he became a Nocturnal Pilgrim,
even during the daytime.
Even during his hours of labor. He could not escape.*

The Elders assigned Molnar a litany of tasks. He was to sweep the square and the small streets surrounding it. He planted flowers in the park and tended the trees and bushes. He shoveled the snow in the winter and watered the town in the summer heat. He did so every day. He did so silently, so mute and deaf in his heartbreak. The Elders gave Molnar a place to live in—a small house on the outskirts of the town. When his work was done, day after day, he walked deep into the endless, forgiving woods, and he walked nights when sleep had abandoned him.



Months passed, and they passed as fast as a breath moved. One can't recapture a breath that was once let out. One can't rewind life once it is over. And for Molnar, his life was once solely about finding love and being loved. And now?

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
And now, my heart is holding a bundle of sorrow.
If I had tears, I would let them cry for Molnar's
wounded soul.
For my own wounded heart.*

Walking through the forests had become Molnar's sanctuary. Even when the snow was up to his knees, he walked, breathing heavily, but he walked. In the summer, when the sun was merciless during the day, he walked at night for the trees exhaled the oppressing heat, and the air was standing still. He walked, letting his sweat soak into his shirt. In the fall, when rain was bombarding the branches and washing off Molnar's body, he was thinking: *It is not Lasira who lied to me by letting me love her, it was not Lasira who made me believe that we are "at-one," it was not her who played a cruel game with me. Whenever the skin of my lips touched her lips, whenever I heard her quiet laugh, I believed I was in love and happy. It is me, Molnar, who entered the make-believe game. It is me, Molnar, who committed the crime of falsehood. I betrayed myself. I will repent now.*

From the day Molnar became the caretaker of Courage and Cowardice, he talked less and less. People got used to his elusive figure, always neatly dressed while sweeping leaves, watering on hot days, and cleaning up snow in winter. He hardly looked up into people's faces.



The day Lasira got married, the church bells rang majestically, and the music carried them with its fullness of tone. On that occasion, he hid in the forest all day and all night. In the morning, he decided to go on living—a decision he regretted many times. In the small town of Courage, even in Cowardice, chance would situate them to glance at each other: Lasira and Molnar. Whenever that happened, an

electrical current shook his body, leaving him trembling for hours. As years passed, Lasira stopped riding the police car. She became a mother of three children. Molnar watched them playing in the big park near the square, and he imagined being their father. That fantasy left him in high spirits... at least while daydreaming. He still walked by the yellow house, eagerly looking into the windows as if salvation awaited. Salvation from what?



One early summer evening, Molnar met a miracle face-to-face. As Molnar stood in front of the yellow house, he remembered the story Mr. Soreno once told him—about the origins of the yellow house! Once upon a time, a castle burned down, burying the tyrant and his soldiers in the rubble and ashes. The yellow house's door opened, and Margot, dressed in a long white gown, walked out. She walked toward Molnar, who forgot to breathe and stood like a statue so heavy he couldn't move. "You are the town's gardener." Not waiting for an answer, she reached out to grab Molnar's arm. "I have a task for you," she said, pointing to her backyard. Interested?"

Molnar nodded. A phantom stood close to him. She was still stunning as he remembered her singing so long ago at the Christmas mass. But old age already painted wrinkles on her forehead, and the fire of her eyes had fizzled out. In a daze, Molnar followed her as she led him through the house corridor into a spacious living room with an enormous piano and out to the backyard. She walked like a ballerina, ethereal, as if she did not walk. She danced while her long silk gown floated around her body like the wings of an an-

gel. "Here." She pointed to a specific place in the middle of the grass, covered with a patch of earth. "Here, I would like you to plant a magnolia tree. The most extraordinary tree with breathtaking blossoms. Can you do that?" Molnar was almost speechless. "When?" When! Margot insisted with urgency.

Here I am, Molnar thought. I am finally in the backyard of the yellow house, so different from all the other houses in this town—a house I was always so drawn to—the mystical place I created in my mind. And now it is just a common green lawn? A room with a piano? And Margot? Magically beautiful still. "How soon do you need it?" he asked.

Margot laughed a very short laugh. "Very soon. If not tonight, then tomorrow morning."

Molnar came back the next day. He planted a magnolia tree, and when Margot asked how to pay him, he said: "I do not need any money. I get a meal every day at the Hotel Courage. And I live on the edge of a forest in a little house that shelters me." He surprised himself. He spoke more than he did for years. He talked to the trees, after all. Not to people.

"There must be something I could repay you with."

"Yes," Molnar said. "You could. You could let me listen to your voice. Your singing is angelic."

"That seductive?"

"And more. . . as if all the angels and goddesses gave you the gift of heavenly music."

"You are a poet, Mr. Molnar! Who would have known!" Molnar smiled. What made him say all those words suddenly, unprepared? It was her presence, not her beauty, not her grace. Something supernatural, untouchable, even eerie. "So be it," Margot said, "you'll be a guest at my next concert here."



One evening, Margot arrived at Molnar's door, asking him to attend a concert of Schubert's *Lieder* the next night at her yellow house.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories of others.
My own story will be told.
One day, maybe. For now, the nocturnal beckons.*

That night, Molnar was not a town gardener and janitor. He was a guest at a concert at Margot's house, sitting in one of her cushioned chairs and looking through the window at the magnolia tree he had planted, now in full bloom. Margot, accompanying herself at the piano, sang Schubert's "Ave Maria." Molnar's eyes were filled with tears, and he was astonished; he let them sit on his face, allowing them to dry.

A young boy, maybe age seven, sat next to him. "Did you plant the magnolia tree?" He pointed to the backyard. "My aunt told me you did."

"Who is your aunt?" Molnar asked.

"Her," the boy pointed to Margot.

"Yes. I planted that magnolia tree. We can go and greet it." They walked out and stood by the tree when Molnar said: "Did you know that magnolia trees are ancient? Millions of years old, so charming and fragrant. They are even edible." Molnar approached the magnolia and whispered, "Good evening and good night, my beauty. I brought someone with me tonight." He turned to the little boy. "What's your name? I will introduce you."

"Durell," the little boy said. His face turned slightly red.

"This is Durell. Meet Durrell. He'll be talking to you every night." The magnolia branches moved slightly in the still night air. "You see, Durrell," Molnar pointed to the tree, "it can hear you."

"You talk to the trees? Really?" Durrell jumped up in excitement.

"I do," Molnar said, "I walk into the forest night after night."

"Take me with you, please! Would you? I want to talk to the trees." He clapped his hands in anticipation. He laughed, which put a big smile on Molnar's face.

"Talking to them is easy, but hearing what they have to say to you . . . well, that is another level."

Margot walked toward them in her dark purple gown, smiling. Her eyes were icy. "It's time to come in, honey," she cooed to Durrell.

"I want to talk to the magnolia, please. Just another five minutes. May I?"

"It has nothing to say, Durrell," she answered quickly. And turning to Molnar, she said, "So that was your payment, Mr. Molnar. Our business is completed." Molnar understood. *You are done here. We have nothing uncommon. You delivered, and I paid for your services.* He left the yellow house with "Ave Maria" still ringing in his ears and in his soul. Turning around, he saw Durrell's arm raised and waving at him. A few days later, he found Margot and Durrell on the steps outside his home.

"He wants to learn... the tree language," Margot said, pointing to Durrell. He won't stop begging me, so I brought him to you."



Molnar and Durrell kept walking into the deep forest for the rest of the summer. It was every afternoon and early morning, and a few times, they just slept under the trees and watched the sunrise. It was again a new world for Molnar. In his fantasy, Durrell became his son, a lost boy abandoned by his parents. Molnar held his hand, and Durrell quietly walked the long path between trees.

"You have to listen," Molnar was telling him." You do not need to speak. Just listen to what the trees have to say... Can you hear it? Just listen."

Little Durrell shook his head. "No, I can't hear a thing, Mr. Molnar."

"You won't hear a thing, Durrell, if you listen passively. You may have bad eyesight, but your hearing is perfect."

"How else would one listen?" Durrell looked up at him. Molnar smiled his famous smile.

"Listen with your heart and with your soul. Here, remove your glasses, close your eyes, and cover your ears. Now?"

"I hear a murmur." Durrell tightened the cup of his palms.

"Good. Now, what do you hear in the murmur?"

"Maybe some words... maybe." They spent long hours in the woods. And so they did the following summer and some summers after that. By then, Durrell had grown up and was taller than Molnar. The summer Durrell turned thirteen, he did not arrive at his aunt Margot's yellow house.



Molnar waited for his young friend for days. Finally, one afternoon, after cleaning up the town's tiny streets, he knocked on the yellow house door. When Margot stood by the door, Molnar asked: "I came to see if Durrell is here."

"No," Margot said. "He is not. And he is not coming." Molnar did not question it. He slowly walked away, slouching now, and touched the trees as they confirmed they had lost Durrell. Another loss.

Like an avalanche, memories of his past consumed him: young Molnar's years at home and traveling to find—*What*

was it he was looking for? He remembered the snowy day when he first came to Courage and stayed in the hotel where he discovered Cowardice and the yellow house. Once in a while, a sharp pinch—resembling a strong heartbeat—ran throughout his body. He asked himself: *Is it my heart or my soul?* It seemed to him they were at one. He had a fleeting thought, unable to capture it. It was about a woman he loved. *Did I? Was I once in love? Or was it just an unfulfilled wish?* He remembered his life in a city, his mother's eyes, and his journey to Courage. He wanted to understand why his life passed so quickly. One night, Molnar walked into the forest and never returned. A search group was sent to look for him for a while, but they returned without him. He was never found.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
Poor soul, that Molnar.
Bruised-soul Molnar. Lost-soul Molnar.
Let him enter the forest for the final time.
The yellow house is still standing.
And Durrell, who I would come to know.
But first, more on Brenda, the visitor...*



MORE OF THE YELLOW HOUSE STORY

MONTHS AND MONTHS passed as Brenda lived her mute life in the house. Only the music seeping from the walls and the mysterious magnolia tree had any life. Yet her calmness deepened with each day of silence, like ocean waves warming themselves with wisdom. Brenda thought of how her mother once took her to a small town by the sea. While her mother left her for hours, Brenda sat and watched the waves until her eyes closed, and she slept, dreaming she was flying in the air on the wings of a creature that was caressing her face, loving her.

Now she was recalling the dream clearly and vividly, so vividly as if she was sitting on the wings close to heaven, in never-ending peace. As she felt this “heavenly bliss,” as she called it, she also dismissed it as cliché, a cheap phrase not worth her mind—the mind of a poet. *Do I need to venture outside?* she wondered. She imagined the little streets, some shops, and maybe even a park she would pass driving around such a long time ago. She longed for what the out-

side world was like. When she caught a glance of herself in one of the mirrors, she was startled by how skinny she had become and how wrinkled her face appeared. She started to wear Margot’s gowns, hanging them on her gaunt body, and her hair, by now long with grayish streaks, was put up in a bun. She resembled Margot—not knowing it—more and more. She understood her. Brenda just became her. In Brenda’s mind, her thoughts were identical to those of Margot.

The house furniture, the paintings she had come to get lost in, and even the grand piano went untouched for months. Yet no dust ever set on it—so polished and shiny it stayed. Once in a while, a sinister breeze surrounded her for seconds, perhaps from the fireplace flue.

She started following the daily habits of dear Margot. She ordered groceries and began baking daily, particularly peach pie. Why peach pie? How would she know it was Margot’s favorite? Every afternoon, she had coffee with a peach pie. At that time, the walls of the yellow house performed the most brilliant pieces of music ever written: Brahms’s “Hungarian Dance,” Debussy’s “The Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun,” and “Liebeslieder” by Schubert. It was an orchestra of perfectly unified instruments creating the most exquisite music.



One early cold spring morning, Brenda made a fire and fed the birds who always gathered on the magnolia tree. Suddenly, a song came to her mind, a melancholy melody: “*Ein kleiner Vogel kommt geflogen.*” Its notes filled her throat. The power of the notes jumped in her mind and took

over her body. She could never read music, and she had no understanding of notes at all, but now she did. Notes jumping in front of her eyes formed a song. So powerful was the sound Brenda felt her lips forced apart, and the lovely chords took over the room, the sound full and emanating from Brenda's entire being.

Brenda retreated to the fireplace, hoping the warmth would calm the song down. But the sound was so powerful that the walls were moving, and the flames lessened as if intimidated by the waves of melody. Her voice overpowered the ringing of the town's church's bells, or so she thought. And the line, "Kommt geflogen ins Himmel"—which meant "A little bird flying to heaven"—resonated in the air as if the best opera divas trained her voice and as if German was her native language. Somehow, she did not astonish herself. Why would she? Because Margot. Margot, she had become. Margot, she was.

Brenda opened all the windows. A cold wind brought in flakes of snow melting into water, but Brenda did not mind. As if an inner fire protected her from all the outside dangers. That night, dressed in a black velvet gown with a string of pearls around her neck, she sat by the grand piano and played long after midnight into the morning hours. Her fingers moved quickly and confidently on the keyboard, playing music she had never heard before—but she knew it—the Italian Capriccio by Tchaikovsky. The notes were jumping out, her voice creating arias from operas Brenda had never heard. But Margot had.

Brenda slowly ceased to be. Her hair bun was now released, long down to her waste. When she combed it up and put some lipstick she found in the bathroom's draw-

er, she resembled a diva. In her mind, that is how an opera diva looks, moves, and thinks. That is who Margot used to be, but now Margot is her. Margot: yes, she knew her every move, every thought, although disturbing at times, but nevertheless. Margot possessed her body. Her organs were in synchrony like Symphony No. 5 by Beethoven; she played some parts repeatedly. She played because the sound was running in her ears, and she couldn't chase it away. Another day meant another show in another gown: red or white or dark purple, or perhaps the black one again. This time, Brenda could play Beethoven's "Für Elise," finishing the last note and then starting from the beginning again.

Day brought the classics, but at night, as she attempted sleep, the sounds tangled in her, begging to become an entirely new piece. Brenda jumped out of bed and played the composition forming in her head—a cacophony at first. She would not stop playing its demands until she bore the soul out of the pieces into a more melodious creation. Brenda—now the composer.



Spring came, and the magnolia tree blossomed its miracles of light purple. She sat by the tree and sang lullabies. Soft, caressing words flew into the air, swirled in a tiny ball, and landed on the magnolia branches. She still would not talk. But she had words for those songs now coming from within her.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
 The yellow house alone holds endless stories.
 Brenda's is one of them...
 And mine?
 Am I a story as well?*



But one day, Brenda's favorite poems relaunched their lines into her mind as if trying to hold onto her old self. Marina Tsvetaeva ran through her mind:

*I am happy living simply.
 I am happy living simply;
 Like a clock or a calendar
 Wordly pilgrim, thin,
 Wise—as any creature...*

She remembered the words of this poet, a woman whose verses had made her weep when she was Brenda.

*On the day I hide, the quiet Moon above—
 I have no might
 I rush on this lunar night.*

But Brenda brushed away the poetry inside her. Soon. . . soon she was transformed. She believed she was Margot's reincarnation. Therefore, everything resembling some woman named Brenda was a pure illusion of her mind. She walked around as if the house were always hers. She forgot that she was merely a visitor, a renter who could be kicked out at any moment. That Brenda—the one who had broken into unoccupied houses, spending nights on the floors curled up with mother who reeked of cigarettes and beer—that Brenda was gone.

It was now Margot who walked from the living room to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the bedroom, the guest

room, and the tiny bathrooms. She was sure she had lived here all her life. She was born into this house, and she grew up here. The clarity of these thoughts was convincing. Not even for a split second did she doubt it.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
I feel sad for the woman in the yellow house.
Where does she belong? Nowhere?
Is she a lost pilgrim? Am I?*



One early morning, Brenda gathered her courage like a diva entering the stage. She walked up the steps to the attic and opened the door. It was a small space, vacant, smelling of rotting wood, and carrying eternal silence. In one of the corners stood a box filled with papers. Brenda took the box down to the living room. It was much lighter than it looked. She started to read. Pages of neatly handwritten notes. She read all day and all night.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
The stories roam; they do not end so easily.
Brenda's story continues ...
As does mine. So does yours,
And now, you, my reader,
Are a part of this spiral.*



THE REAL STORY OF MARGOT'S LIFE

Dearest Durrell,

I have never felt too close to anyone. . . until you came into my life. I am not a good writer, Durrell, and it is difficult, treacherous even, to describe what was going on with me, but I'll do my best: I am writing this as I am living out the last days of my life. Soon, there will be Margot no more. But before I take my last breath, I want you to know:

I will never forget when you first looked at me. Your big eyes were curious about this world, and your smile was as if to speak: "I am a sweet soul. I fell in love with you. I wanted you to love me the same way. And you did. I know you did. That is why I want you to know who I am, my sweet Durrell. I want you to know me and still love me. As you are reading this, you are al-

ready a grown man, serious and quiet... and so inquisitive! As a little boy, you loved rummaging through the house. You loved the attic. That space fascinated you. You would say: "The attic is hiding some secrets, Auntie Margot!"

And now, my Durrell, you found it, the secret! Yes. There is that box holding my life. And I am giving it to you. This house will be yours, Durrell, when I have lived until my fated age of 89, and after that, it is yours. I hope that you find these words so you can understand me. Never mind what people in this idiotic town are saying. The Cowards! And the Courageous! Laughable, don't you think so? They say the yellow house is built on dead bodies. That the ground underneath is skulls and bones of the dead. I do not know. When I first came here to this God-forsaken place, Richmond, my late husband— who you never met—bought this land. The locals were avoiding it. It was cursed! Haha! Cursed! Ignorant village people believe in the story of a castle and a tyrant who resided there in olden times. The castle burned down with him and all his soldiers, so they say. I do not believe it, but never mind what I believe.

I always lived the way I wanted to. I have always had thoughts of my own. A lot of thoughts. Only thoughts matter. Remember that. They have substance. I hope you have grown up and learned how to escape feelings. They are useless; they are meaningless. Idiotic people who lack any original thinking talk about "emotions." How do you capture an emotion? Aha— how? I have to admit in my younger years, I experienced some of

those... I will describe it to you, my dear Durrell, my nephew. Really, the only being who meant something to me is you, you, Durrell.

You were an exceptional child. I do not know who you are today. Oh, my! How long since I last saw you? You just turned thirteen years old. It must be at least thirty years or more. All I had with you were six unforgettable summers! Eighteen months altogether. Eighteen months out of a lifetime. Six summers until my cousin, your mother, would not let you visit anymore. You, of course, do not know; how could you? You lived within me all the remaining years. The yellow house is nothing without you. You do not know who I really am. No one knows, and no one needs to know. That is the way I have wanted it all my life. But now, as I am dead, you may know. It is—and I do not know why—comforting that you'll read it one day, one day soon.

My dear dearest Durrell. I came to this place on earth as a young woman. Had I known I would spend the rest of my life here, that I would die here... if I would have known ... I would have galloped like a wild horse not for hours, not for days or months --- for years until I was far enough from here! But that has not happened. I'll tell you briefly: I was born in a place by the ocean and palm trees. A lot of sun, sure, but I hated it as a little girl, so my skin stayed pale but extremely gorgeous, dew-like. I was beautiful with long reddish hair and green-gray eyes. People couldn't stop looking at me.

And I loved it. I was taking in all the admiring looks. I wanted to be worshiped. "Why is everyone

always looking at me?" I asked my mother.

"Because you are my daughter," she said. "People want to know if you are so beautiful because of me. They are looking at me." She said, smiling. I knew she was lying. She hated my thick hair and my tall figure. She was petite and chubby—almost ugly. She hated everything about me. Especially my voice and my piano playing. I started at a very young age and was soon well-known in the city as a rising star. I performed during all the holidays, and I traveled to other cities. At sixteen years old, I looked like twenty, and men were all over me. The flowers and lavish gifts they brought to my dressing room!

It makes me nauseous, still today after ... how many years? I am eighty-eight now. I will live till eighty-nine. This much I know. I have planned my death to the last detail. I know how to regulate my body—my grandmother taught me. I know how to wash my body in lemon ice, use cucumber peels on my skin, and put invisible poison in someone's tea. Yes! She showed me a special grass that, when boiled in water, becomes the most potent poison. You have to put a few drops in the teacup for thirty days. On day thirty-one, the person is dead.

But first, I want you to know who I am. Because no one, not one person in the entire world, knows me. Only you will, my dearest child, my love. All those men...kissing my hand, throwing compliments, salivating into my décolleté. All they wanted was to get in bed with me. And me? What was there for me to do? Just smile and be coy and modest. I couldn't tell

them how much I despised them, how their sweat and cologne made me vomit. Once, after I sang arias from Carmen, this man in a tuxedo holding a bouquet of red roses. I only remember, and very clearly, I remember the droplets of sweat on his forehead. He tried to kiss me. Imagine! As I felt his lips on mine and his sweat dripping onto my cheeks, I do not know how my strength increased, but I pushed him away with such force that he landed on the floor. But what almost paralyzed me with terror from that touch of his skin on mine? The sensation was horrifying, and I vomited. I vomited over and over again, even when there was nothing to vomit anymore. My skin remembered the touch, and it made me shiver and sick.

After all, I was well known. My pictures were in magazines. Articles were written about my angelic voice and my sensual appearance. In one article, the idiot wrote about my “raw sexuality”! Haha! What does that mean? That had nothing to do with me. That was purely his fantasy. I hated all of them. But I couldn’t stop singing. And I loved the applause, the standing ovations and the yelling: “Brava! Brava!” I knew how to play my part! Oh! It came naturally to me. I didn’t even have to rehearse it. I smiled, and I thanked them profoundly for the attention and admiration I was receiving. I was giving interviews and inventing stories about myself. I was always “a serious artist.” I presented myself as such: Someone who completely lives for her art, for music, for operas, for arias. “I devoted my life to music,” I said in one of the interviews.

“What about your love life?” was always one of the interviewer’s questions.

“That is my love life,” I replied with a smile. I could smile by moving my mouth slightly and bringing shiny light into my eyes. I just knew it. The result was an enchanting, seductive vibe I emitted. I would whisper: “That is exactly my love life. The art. The music.” There was always some mystery around me. I admit I created it.

I drank champagne after the performances, but never too much. I knew when to stop. Yeah. Sometimes, I had to listen to some blubbery nonsense drunk “gentlemen” let out of their mouths. Always the same, predictable, almost humorous. It started with my artistic abilities, angelic voice, and my interpretation of songs. Yes, with more drinking, their monologues continued about my hair, so thick and proud “like a mane of an untamed white horse,” of course, my eyes were “hiding explosive passion.” And, by the next champagne glass, it was always about my “majestic chest.” I can’t tell you, my dearest Durrell, how often I heard it. Couldn’t they come up with something more original? They had no idea how much disdain I carried for them. Their flowers, their notes, their sheepish looks. I played my role very well. I was good at that. The diva! Diva living in seclusion! Diva is devoted to her art only!

I hated any human touch. I said that before, but anyone touching my skin was revolting. Just a thought could bring me into a state of hysteria. I took care of myself very diligently. My skin was flawless, and my hair was always shiny. I walked like a ballerina. I ad-

mit, perhaps with some embarrassment, that I looked at myself every night, especially during concert tours and in luxury hotel rooms with long mirrors. I examined my face, teeth, hair, arms, and fingers with long nails and my body. And I loved what I saw. Oh yes, yes. They say that Narcissus fell in love with his reflection. I was not “in love” . . . not with myself—not with anyone else. Being “in love” is below me. It is for peasants, for dumb, simple minds. Not for me. I was better than that. I purely enjoyed what I saw as a masterful painting. “Crazy-in-love” men knocked on my hotel suite. I called security, and they were gone in minutes. Poor idiots. Only once have I made a mistake. And that’s all it takes. Yes, Durrell. Once. Continue reading, please.

Oh, how much I enjoyed you, my great nephew. I have been waiting to hear from you for years! Yet your mother, my cousin, forbade you from contacting me. She has hated me since we were little. And do you know why? Because I was a beauty and she wasn’t. Simple, right? You have to know the truth, Durrell. As you are reading this, you are a mature man. You understand I hope, envy, and jealousy. She hated me, but she needed me. I will get to it later. Have I said I made a mistake? One wrong step, one bad event . . . and in seconds, my life changed. As long as I live, I will regret it. My life could have turned out entirely differently. It’s too late now. Too late. That fateful night! I suppose I should warn you. This is an awful story.

One evening after my performance, I sat with my admirers, bored as usual, and drank champagne, but unexpectedly, I got dizzy. Now, I can drink like a dozen

horses, and I don’t get drunk. Always alert and aware of my surroundings. But not on that evening, not after I had sung *Madama Butterfly*. I had more than just a few sips. I drank, made some charming comments, and drank some more.

“I am just very exhausted,” I said with my signature smile, slightly moving my lips. Richmond, the piano virtuoso, jumped up and offered to walk me to my room. And I agreed! I did! Where was my mind? You probably know what happened. Don’t you? Of course, I had no inkling. Was I naive? No! Was I gullible? No! I wanted to lure him to my room and kick him out after he looked at me with his dog-like eyes and tongue hanging out, hungry and thirsty. I had enough of those begging animals . . . men! And he will get it! Suddenly, a wave of tiredness, like a warm ocean wave, embraced me. I felt Richmond’s hands on my body and him, his sex in my vagina, and I woke up from my dizzy spell. Has he snuck something into my champagne? I thought: I am having sexual intercourse now! I was more astonished than anything else. I felt nothing. I did not protest. I waited for this “exercise” to be over. I was thinking, “How unpleasant. Boring!”

I apologize, my dear Durell. You are old enough to hear all of this now. Maybe I am telling you too much. Telling you about that ugliness that people call all kinds of names. Lovemaking, sex, intercourse, fucking, screwing. The disgust I felt turned into hatred and later into a rage—into a murderous rage. But I do not want to rush my story. Yes, I have to slow down so I can describe to you step by step.

I want you to know what you meant to me. You gave me a reason to get up in the morning after I stared at the ceiling all night. Or sneaking out in the middle of the night and walking the streets of this hole in the wall, this Courage or damned Cowardice, walking in the darkness, hoping the darkness will never end, hiding in it and waiting for the sun to come up and the day will bring some relief from my rage. When I first met you, you were seven, a little boy with big eyes and a round face. Silent. Serious. And I felt something I had never felt before. I was stunned. I was confused. *What is this?* I was asking myself. *Probably what people call “love.”*

A few weeks after that night in the hotel room with Richmond, I discovered I was pregnant! Me. The Diva. The star! Richmond and I got married. I had to. I couldn't have a child—what with no husband? What a fiasco that would be! Plus, Richmond worshiped me. Yes. I couldn't stand to look at him. I told him he was less than dirt under my feet. He just smiled. He thought I had mood swings due to my pregnancy. I never let him touch me again. He begged. He even cried in his stupidity and drunken stupors. I laughed an ugly, mean laugh in his face.

But I have to say, I liked being pregnant. That may surprise you, my dearest Durrell; it surprised me. And I also felt like that was a little victory over Richmond. I had something he couldn't touch. It was only mine, attached to me, within my body, that little “something” moving inside me. I couldn't picture it. My imagination did not go so far. I couldn't believe that another

creature, another human being, was residing inside me. I do not know how to explain it better. Standing on the stage, I could sing and fake my deepest emotions. I could wail, beg, grieve, have a faux sadness or joy or desire; I could force the audience to shed tears. So powerful— an empress of the world! And the dumbly clapping audience? My underlings. I could manipulate them the way I wanted.

And I wanted it! And I did it! So, having that “thing” inside was mine and mine and again mine. My possession! Oh, I did like breathing in unison with her. As she grew in me, I became bigger. And I loved it. Yes, I actually felt a quiet joy. But in my foolishness, I did not think. Nine months, that's all I had. And almost nine months after that catastrophic night in the hotel room, I gave birth. A girl named Arletta was born.

Oh, Durrell, you are a man. You'll never give birth. You'll never carry “that thing” inside you. So you can't know. But I, I lived through it. I gave birth. And here she was: a girl. A female who will soon step “into my shoes,” grabbing all the compliments and adoration. Margot, the star, was off stage.

And my life as I knew it was over. Done. I could have been dead as well. I looked at that creature. The creature a nurse put in my arms. What on earth am I to do with it? It? A foreign object. A deception. Utter abandonment. Yet it used to be mine and mine only. I carried it under my heart. It was mine! And now IT got out. “IT” —the thing everyone called my “daughter”? Finally, she was born, and I could be left alone.

Richmond, that little bald man, was obsessed with Arletta. She became his everything.

Yet, the moment I saw you, my dearest Durrell, I felt peace. Your sweet expression, so innocent and kind, yet awkward and endearing, never encroached on my space.

Now, I am not a good writer, Durrell. I can't describe what is happening to me, but I'll do my best. In a way, Durrell, I liked it. I was left alone. I did not have to be a wife, and I did not want to be a mother. I was pretty annoyed by Arletta. Neighbors stopped by, but they soon disappeared since I was not a very friendly hostess. They thought Arletta was the most beautiful; yes, they used the word, beautiful child. Long, blonde, curly hair and green eyes. I say she looked more like me than her father, but I did not want to be bothered with her. Whenever colleagues from opera houses and musicians from Richmond's orchestras visited, they were immediately taken in by Arletta's "gracious" movements, as they called it. Yes, she was a dancer; she had my propensity toward talent. Richmond took Arletta to ballet classes starting when she was three. The mothers would swarm him, asking: "Richmond, when are you coming back? With Margot? And when is her next performance—and, will you be her accompanist?"

They couldn't understand why we buried ourselves in this lovely God-forsaken piece of earth. . . in that "simple yellow house." Journalists and critics knocked on our doors, seeking interviews. They took pictures of that "lovely artistic family" living in seclusion, por-

traying me as a devoted, loving mother who gave up her fantastic career for the sake of motherhood! Ha. I am laughing! Laughing! I did not give a damn about motherhood. I am an artist, not a mother. I lived for the opera! Not for motherhood.

When Arletta would run to me yelling, "Mommy! Mommy! Play with me!" I sent her to her room to play by herself. When she wanted to dance or sing with me, I told her I was busy and not to bother me. She got it pretty quickly. She started to avoid me. She ignored me as she got closer to Richmond. The two of them were glued to each other. Soon, Richmond took over the household. He cooked, he cleaned, and he played with Arletta. He did all the gardening. He did the laundry. Arletta loved to play "dress up." She got into my makeup and put lipstick on. She tried my elegant gowns, which were huge on her, and stood in front of the mirror admiring her own reflection. Yes. That was Arletta.

I want you to get a picture of my life. Of my curse. Richmond was my curse. He entered my body. No. He invaded my body and took my soul—the criminal he was. From that moment in my hotel room, my life, as I knew it, was over. Because I was cursed. Everyone who enters this house is cursed. Only the purest soul can break the curse. And that is you, my Durrell. That is why I want you to stay here. . . live here, breathe your purity into these walls. Cleansing out the misery, the decay, the ugliness.

And me? I was free to leave. I could have packed my suitcase and stood on the stage in the most prominent

opera house. But I couldn't leave the house. I could step out as far as the backyard. That was it. I did not enter the world outside the yellow house for years and years. I do not recall how I spent my days...I do not know whether I lived or whether I died. For years, I think.

But then you showed up. You brought me back to life, my little Durrell. Yes, you did. A lot has happened since the day your mother sent me a letter asking me if she could bring you to my house for the summer. For three months! I felt like I had to help. Now, I am skipping from one point to another, and so much is running through my mind. But I want you to understand my life better so you know why I left you the house!

Richmond and Arletta were like a couple. He started to play in nightclubs since we had no money— and he had no family money! At that time, there were two nightclubs nearby: The Hairy Dog in Cowardice and the White Cat in Courage. Arletta cried like a little monster—I called her that whenever he left. She sat on the floor of her bedroom, which years later became yours, and waited for him well into the morning. I did not care. But more often, Richmond did not show up at all. Sometimes for days. She was almost thirteen and looked like seventeen. She started to disappear. As soon as it got dark, she was gone. But then it was like I got my life back. I would dress up in a gown and put pearls around my neck. I would sit by the grand piano and sing and sing. It was my private concert. I sang “Ave Maria,” which was always an audience favorite.

Arletta came back in the early morning hours, dirty and smelling of alcohol, tobacco, and sex. I didn't care. Then, soon enough, she was gone for days. I had to file a “missing person report.” A few times that police-woman Lasira brought her back. She gave me a look of compassion. “Poor Margot.” I wanted to laugh! I wanted to tell her: “Why the hell would you try to bring her back? What for?”

Instead, I thanked her. One early morning, Richmond showed up with her. He screamed at me while Arletta, disheveled and groggy, laughed. And Richmond grabbed me, yanked me off my seat by the grand piano, and yelled: “What the fuck! What kind of a mother are you? Letting her fuck in the alleys! She is a whore! Your daughter is a whore!” I was trembling. Black and red clouds were floating in front of me. But before I could even react, Arletta jumped up and started to hit Richmond on his face, head, and in his stomach. And she cried, and he cried, doing nothing. Finally, he grabbed her arm, shouting: “Stop! Stop!”

Arletta suddenly very calmly said: “You are fucking that other woman. I know it. I've seen you. You can't leave me here with her! No! No!”

Richmond was quiet. “Say something,” Arletta said in tears. They both acted as if I was not even there. As if I was air, he left that morning saying to Arletta: “Don't worry, I'll be back for you. I'll take you with me.” Arletta then stayed in her room for days.

When she finally came out, she looked me in the eyes and said: “It's all because of you because you are a piece of ice. Shard of ice. Dad and I call you ‘Ice

Queen.’ Why do you think he had to fuck other women?” And she laughed. “Have you ever tried it with a knife of ice? No fun!”

I sneered as Arletta retreated, waiting for her father’s return. Her father, the savior.

Weeks passed, and Richmond did not show up for Arletta. But Lasira, the policewoman, came and told us with a serious face that Richmond was found frozen to death in the snow near one of the bars. They had been looking for him for days. He probably got very drunk. Arletta had no reaction. But from that night on, she was gone every single night and came back tired, carrying a pouch with money. It was on a Sunday morning, and we both stood by the steps leading to the attic when Arletta turned to me: “You take my money, and you don’t even ask what I do to get it?”

“No,” I said.

“I fuck. I fuck anyone who pays.” Her face was so close to mine, as if she wanted to spit all the poison into my eyes. I hit her. I hit her with all my strength. Strength I didn’t even know I had. She fell on the stairs. She hit her temple hard. A small streak of blood appeared. Yes, she was dead. She was dead, Durrell.

Are you sad reading this, Durrell? Are you crying? As a little boy, you cried quickly. You cried when the big wolf wanted to eat Little Red Riding Hood. Or when the stepsisters were mean to Cinderella. I used to wipe your tears, telling you: “This is not for real; it is just a fairy tale. Just a story someone made up.” And that calmed you down. You sat on my lap and hugged

me. Yet, in those moments, all the angels flew down from heaven to embrace me—and I let them!

Do not be sad, Durrell. I was not. I looked at Arletta’s face, and I have to admit, she was serene and lovely. I felt free. I was liberated. Facing the death of someone is painful emotionally. I learned about it by singing my areas of the heroines of operas like *La Traviata* or *La Bohème*. Dying creatures. I learned perfectly how to pretend.

Anyway, at night, I rolled her out in a massive blanket into a hole I dug. It was easy. She abandoned me long ago—out of my womb, she was gone. She abandoned me in the cruelest way, leaving my uterus vacant, barren, and freezing. She left behind an abyss of nothingness. I never forgave her. She was supposed to stay inside and keep me filled up and cozy. But no. She had to jump out of my womb, leaving me destitute and discarded. Let her sleep forever under the magnolia tree. Once she was truly gone for good, my life could begin. For the first time in weeks, I opened the front door of the yellow house and stepped out. I laughed loudly and did not even care if I looked like a mad woman. I was breathing in and breathing out.

It was not long before I realized that I had to survive. I started to sing at some holidays and different occasions in the City Hall. I was teaching piano lessons to nobodies—to kids with no talent! That policewoman, Lasira, stopped by once in a while. “I feel so bad about your daughter.”

“She ran away,” I said with a convincing, darkened expression. I wanted to stop her from nosing around.

Not long after her last visit, Lasira got married, and she never came over.

Oh, now I am on my own, as I always wanted to be. Sometimes, I heard voices in the house walls, but I ignored them. Are you following me, Durrell? I hope I am clear enough in my writing. I know you wanted to be a writer . . . when you were little, you would exclaim, “Aunt Margot, I will be a writer. Not now, but when I grow up!”

I laughed at you. “What will you write about?”

“I don’t know yet, but I like to make up stories!” You exclaimed with such innocence.

“Oh? You do? What kind of stories?” You were so endearing to me. You knew what I needed to hear.

“Maybe I’ll write about all the superheroes. Or maybe about your beautiful voice, Aunt Margot.. I know! I will write about this house. I will name my story, *The Yellow House*.”

“Why, my dear Durrell?” I asked, stroking your hair.

“Because this house is like . . .” You searched for the right words: “Like magic. A magical yellow house.” And the house is now yours. All that “magic,” as you said, you, little Durrell, all that magic is now yours.

But later, when that person, that gardener, Mr. Molnar, took you to the forest, you shifted focus: “Aunt Margot, I will write about the woods. About the trees.”

“What about them?” I questioned you.

“Like they talk, really, they do; you just have to listen to them. Mr. Molnar knows all about it. He is teaching me. I’ll be a Tree Whisperer!” And you were so serious

and excited. I sure cherished your joy. You jumped up and down in that abundance of energy.

We spent almost every afternoon picnicking under the magnolia tree in the backyard. Do you remember? You helped me to make lemonade, and I baked muffins with fruit and peach pies, and you enjoyed it! So much! At least once a week, we walked to the square, ate pizza, and went to the movies. Honestly, I do not remember any of them. Instead of looking at the screen, I was watching you. Your big, greenish eyes expanded behind those glasses of yours. The expression on your face! Whatever was happening in the movie was reflected in your expression—you *lived* the story. And I lived it with you. I was deeply connected; the bond was unbreakable between us. In those moments, I knew—it was the mother and child bond.

When summer was over, your mother came to pick you up. You were sad. I was depressed. You walked around the house, saying “goodbye” to every part of it: the walls, the chairs, the books, and your bed. You even went outside to hug the magnolia tree. Of course, you did not know about Arletta.

I also killed Richmond, that poor caricature of a man. Arletta’s father, my husband— a laughable figure. They say he got drunk, slipped on the icy road, and froze to death in the snow. Well, maybe. But no one knows—only you know—that I put poison in his wine bottles. My grandma’s recipes. Maybe it did not kill him, but it helped. At least, I want to think so. I want to believe so. I hated Richmond. He touched me with his constantly sweaty palms, and I was trapped. That

tiny life within me trapped me! I had no other choice. I could not rebel against my fate. The times were different. Once married and pregnant, my career was over. Arletta is buried under the magnolia tree. Yes, she is. Now you know. I killed her.

So a few years later, when your mother, my cousin, wrote to me, I was not thrilled. I have rarely been in touch with my family. They constantly gossiped about me, jealous and envious of my beauty and success on stage. My fame! They hated me for that. So having a little kid, my cousin's son, in my yellow house for a full three months!! I was so used to solitude, to live my life for myself with my routine and no disruption. I know, I know. She meant well, you may think. She had to work every day. You lived in that huge dirt pile— that steaming, stinky city . . . in a tiny apartment with only a window air conditioner, leaving you alone all day. . . I said *Yes, bring him*. So she did. Those were the happiest months of my life. For six summers, you were mine. You slept like an angel in the room that used to be Arletta's. But I had changed everything: a new bunk bed, bookcases, desk, and closet. You stood in the kitchen watching me making cupcakes and said: "Superman, Spiderman, Batman. Will you remember them, Aunt Margot?"

"Yes," I said. "I will." And I did. You were telling me all kinds of stories about those "superheroes." You acted it out. You jumped up and down and gestured, imitating what you have seen in books and movies, and you changed your voice for each superhero. I sat and marveled over your talents. I clapped. You were

encouraged and, in response, ran to me and hugged me. I felt your little heart beating in my chest. At those moments, I finally knew how happiness felt. At night time, before you fell asleep, you wanted me to tell you stories. I made them up. Every June through August, I was a new person. For the rest of the year, I waited for you. I prepared for you.

Don't you know that years and years ago, when I lived in a big city and performed in opera houses, we had months and months of rehearsals: not just with the orchestra and the singers, but the costumes, the props, and the set. *Everything* had to be coordinated, and each part had to be perfect so that the whole piece worked out for that opening night and after. So it was the same for me waiting for you. After you would leave, I stripped your room, scrubbed the floors, and repainted the walls. I bought new sets of linen for your bed. I checked your room every single day for any signs of minimal dust. I went to the market and bought fruits and homemade jam.

When you finally returned, you would sit on the floor, listen to my piano playing, and eat the jam with a tiny spoon—right from the jar. "It is a delicacy, Aunt Margot," you said with conviction, like an expert. A "foodie," as they say now? My joy was having the house in perfect shape. I became a housekeeper in command of my territory. The kitchen always smelled of good food. A bowl of fresh fruit was on the table with an ironed tablecloth. Flowers in every room, even the bathrooms. I waited for you and waited. Everything had to be prepared just in case you'd walk in, surprise

me, hoping. But after six summers, when you turned thirteen, your mother decided no more vacation time with Aunt Margot. It was over. Then I knew grief. I suffered. During those winter months, I longed to hear your voice. I called every week.

When you turned thirteen, your mother started policing me. “Margot, leave him alone. He is a teenager now. Stop babying him.”

I was stunned. “You are not serious. This is a very mean thing to say!” I raised my voice. “Why would you do this to Durrell? Why would you deprive him of a fun time we had together?”

“Because you are using him for your needs. It feels as if you think he belongs to you.” I was furious. At that moment, I wanted to hit her. I have to admit. It was nonsense. She completely misunderstood. She also said, “I felt so bad for you. Losing your only child. A runaway kid who disappeared, and you’ll probably never see her again. I thought you’d enjoy having Durrell with you. But I did not think you would engulf him, make him yours!” Oh! How wrong she was! I did not make you mine. You became mine. We were “one.” Where you started, I ended. We merged into one. Like two rivers floating alone . . . but at some point, they meet. They become one.

I will die at age 89. That is my decision. This house, the “yellow house,” and everything in it will be yours. They will say I died of old age, but you should know. I shall instead inflict death on myself. I will drink my tea for thirty days. And on day thirty-one... Well, never mind. No one will suspect any foul play. I will

die peacefully as an old, once-famous woman who was very talented and revered.

Now, I will tell you your favorite fairy tale. The one you loved so much. I always had to retell it over and over again and again and again. So here it is for the last time.



THE SUN AND THE MOON AND A WHITE LILY: A STORY

MANY YEARS AGO, in a land far, far away lived a little boy with his mother. The boy's name was Augusto. He was a smart boy and also a very hard-working one. His mother was often ill, so Augusto worked in the fields, planting vegetables: potatoes, carrots, onions, and tomatoes. At harvest time, he went to the town and sold vegetables at the street market. Whatever was left over, he brought home, and his mother made a big soup so they had food for the days to come.

"You are a good son, Augusto," his mother told him daily. "You are taking care of me, and you are so diligent. If not for you, we would starve." Augusto smiled. He hugged his mother and walked out to the field. He did not want her to look into his big blue eyes. He did not want her to see his tears. The tears of sadness because he noticed how—day by day—his mother was getting weaker and skinnier.

She could hardly get up to cook the soup. So Augusto learned how to chop the vegetables and add oregano, dill, and parsley, and the soup became very tasty. His mother praised him all the time: "How handy and smart is my son! My Augusto!"

"Oh, don't say so, mother. Everything I know I learned from you!"

The mother nodded. "One day, you'll know how to take care of yourself." Augusto did not answer. He knew what she was thinking: *Soon, I'll die, and you'll be alone. You have to know how to live.* Augusto said nothing to her. He did not want to make her even sadder.

That was how he learned to talk to the Sun early in the morning when he and the Sun were waking up. The Sun always smiled at him when he said: "Good morning, my friend. Good morning, Sun. I worry about my mother. I worry she has no strength anymore."

"Yes," the Sun answered, shaking her head. "But she has joy in her heart having a loving son." The Sun accompanied Augusto all day long as he was working the fields. After she went to sleep, her brother, Moon, shined into the window of Augusto's tiny room. Some nights, Augusto sat on the porch of their shack; looking at the Moon, he said: "Help me to go to sleep, Moon. Help me to close my eyes and give me the most amazing dreams of places far, far away... Take away my worries because I will be free of them in my sleep."

So that's how the Sun and the Moon became Augusto's friends. One morning, the Sun did not come out. She sent a dark cloud to rain on the field of Augusto's vegetables. He put as many as possible into a basket and walked, taking long steps to the town's square to sell them. The shack he

lived in with his mother was quiet. Mother was asleep. Augusto, not minding the rain, walked to the town. He was so lucky that morning! He sold all the vegetables: potatoes, parsley, carrots, and tomatoes. He jumped with joy. As he walked by the baker's stand, a delicious scent of freshly baked pastry reached his nostrils.

"Today is my auspicious day," Augusto told the baker, "I have sold all my vegetables. Your pastries are just calling my name!"

"Just pick whatever you like. I'll give you a good price!" The baker was so kind. Augusto picked one big piece filled with juicy apples. On the way home, he imagined his mother's face, the pleasure in her eyes as she bit into the soft pastry. The house was still silent when he walked in.

"Mother!" He called, stepping in. "Mother! I have a big surprise for you!" But there was no answer. Suddenly, as if a cold wind swept through the tiny shack, frightened, he approached his mother. She looked calm and beautiful like he remembered her when he was a little boy: when she was young and when they laughed a lot when they walked through the forest or when she sang him lullabies. Augusto touched her hand and knew his mother was not alive anymore.

The Moon appeared above the roof of Augusto's home. His face was sad, as sad as Augusto's heart. "Where is my mother now?" Augusto asked. "Where did she go?" But his friend Moon did not answer. As he sat on the porch with deep sorrow, he fell asleep. He dreamt his mother was alive, telling him not to be sad.

"How can I not be sad? I will never see you again, my mother."

"No, my dear son," the mother answered.

"You are mistaken. You may never see me, but I will always be with you. It is a secret. Only you and I know. Let your sorrow flow into your tears and cleanse the sadness of your soul. And I'll be there. You just have to find me."

When he woke up, the Sun was bright and heavy. As heavy as Augusto's heart. *What am I to do with myself?* He never imagined life without his mother. He understood death but believed it would not come to their little shack and take his mother away. This was his home. Here he was born, and here is where he grew up.

That's what he knew. He felt safe walking to the town, meeting the same people, and seeing old friends from school. He had no desire to live anywhere else. He was content in the room with a stove and two beds, a table with two chairs, a closet with a pair of summer pants, and another pair of winter pants. His mother sewed them for him as she did for the townspeople. But now, as she had been ill for weeks and months, no one was coming to ask for her work anymore. And no one will. She is gone, although she looks as if she is asleep.

Augusto lifted his mother's body and placed her on a bed of grass by their shack. He did not want to bury her. He couldn't bring himself to say "goodbye" to her face; it was so kind and so loving. He sat next to her. Big tears rolled down his cheeks. The Sun lowered her rays quietly, walking into the sunset. The sky got dark after a while, the Moon came up, and even his face was sad. Augusto's tears caressed his mother's pale face over and over again.

Suddenly, in the place of his mother's body stood a tall, white lily flower. In a panic, Augusto jumped, running

around, looking for his mother's body. But she was gone, and White Lily, a noble beauty, stood proudly. "I will stay here, Augusto. I will protect your home. But you have to leave to see the world."

"Who are you?" Augusto yelled out, shocked.

"I am a White Lily."

"And where is my mother? What have you done with her?"

"I am your mother's heart," Lily said. "Can you hear it? Just listen." And indeed, Augusto heard a faint beat of his mother's heart. His soul filled with joy. Tears dropped from his eyes, but they were not tears of sorrow this time. "Each of your tears," Lily said, "will become another beautiful lily."

"There are thousands of tears in my heart and thousands more in my soul."

"Yes," Lily answered, "All of them will keep you company in your travels while I, the White Lily, will stay here to guard your house and your mother's eternal sleep."

Augusto looked up at the Moon and nodded. In the early morning hours, just as the Sun was greeting Augusto for another day, he prepared a little bag with another pair of pants, a blanket, and a pillow his mother had sewn for him when he was little. He said "goodbye" to the White Lily. And he waved to the Sun and Moon as he knew they would accompany him on his journey. They would never abandon him.

As if my heart dropped to the ground and there was a deep hole instead, Augusto thought. I want to put it next to my mother's heart, to the White Lily. I'll be with my mother forever. What do I need the big wide world for? I'll stay here, quietly, smiling at the White Lily.

As if the White Lily had read his mind, she said, "Do not hesitate, Augusto. Do not delay. You have a long way to go.

You'll meet amazing people and see places of endless beauty."

"And then...what? What am I to do with all that? What is it for?" White Lily bent her white head and whispered, "You'll find out." Augusto looked at his home and the field surrounding it. He looked at White Lily. It seemed she smiled the way his mother used to.

He then left and walked and walked for days. He drank clear, fresh water from the rivers. He ate boysenberries and blueberries he picked in the woods. When he sat down, his mind was returning to memories: when he was a little boy, running off to school, hugging his mother, waving to his friend, the Sun, joyous because a new day was starting. Big tears were dripping onto the grass beneath his foot. Each time one of the tears evaporated, a white lily grew in its place. And they whispered, making their tiny miracles known.

"We are sisters, all of us. And the big White Lily is our mother. She is yours as well," the lilies said quietly.

"Thank you," Augusto replied. "You are too nice. My mother is resting in the grass by my home. And the White Lily is taking care of her." And that memory made him cry even more. It was like an ocean wave—his memories clobbered him. Now, as he was far away in places he had never known existed, he remembered every little snippet of his life at home. He walked through meadows covered by flowers of all colors, almost blinded by their beauty. He climbed mountains so high that he was reaching the sky. He swam in waters that carried him like his mother's arms. And all that time, his mind was home, in the little shack where he lived with his mother. To his friend, the Moon, he said:

"You are my companion, dear Moon. I walk and walk. I fell into a deep sleep. I wake up and walk again. I am rush-

ing, taking long, hurried steps. Where to? I wonder. I am rummaging through forests and mountains, through rivers and fields. I walk through towns and villages, all of which look the same. Where am I destined to go?" The Moon just nodded and said nothing. Again, big tears rolled down Augusto's face, and more little white lilies bloomed. "I walk, I run, I sit, I sleep, and I am thinking of my life before. My memories. I remember every little crumb on the wooden floor of our home. And it makes me want to go back."

"And if you would ...what would you do?" He heard White Lily's gentle voice. Was it really hers?

Yes. What would I do? He asked himself.

Summer passed, and winter started, and another summer and winter started again. Augusto's pants had holes in them, and he was cold. So it happened that he walked through a tiny village surrounded by mountains covered by snow. He was shivering as the icy wind brought in huge flakes of snow. He sought shelter under an enormous oak tree, now devoid of its leaves. Ice picks hanging from the branches, glittering in the dark. Suddenly, he saw a dim light in the distance. He was drawn to it and began running, running fast, although he was cold, hungry, and exhausted. When he reached the cottage with the flickering light, he collapsed. And so a maiden named Maniram and her father, the Wise Man Isew, found him by the door.

When he came to, he could see nothing. He cried out, "Am I in heaven?" It was Isew that Augusto saw when he opened his eyes. "Where am I?"

"I am being called Isew-the-Wise Man," Isew said, stretching his arm to point to a young woman. "Here is my

daughter, Manimar. We found you on the threshold of our home. Welcome, stranger. Welcome, traveler."

Augusto felt bewildered. *Where am I?* In the room's darkness, only one candle gave a faint light. At first, half asleep, he thought he was at home, in his shad where he had lived with his mother all his young life. But as he became more awake, he saw faces unknown to him. "I am... I am Augusto," he said. Isew smiled. His long white beard almost touched the floor, covered by a beautiful carpet.

"I know," he said slowly. "I was waiting for you." His piercing eyes irradiated kindness.

"I... do not understand!" Augusto proclaimed, confused.

"You don't have to!" As the Wise Man spoke, his daughter, Manimar, handed Augusto a cup with the most delicious broth. Although hungry, he did not take a sip. He looked at Maniram, whose eyes were looking down as if an angel had come down to earth and entered this dark room to hand him a cup—one filled with pleasure. He had never before felt such an overpowering sensation of beauty. The beauty was so overwhelming that he forgot to breathe. Manimar kept looking down, and then she disappeared in the room's darkness.

He slept all night, his body covered by a thick blanket. His pants were on the chair beside his bed, mended, washed, and ironed. Manimar was sitting by the fireplace, sewing. And so it happened that Augusto stayed with the Wise Man and his daughter Manimar in a spacious, quiet house. It was peaceful and calm, like the house of his childhood. In the early morning hours, as soon as the Sun rose, the Wise Man and Augusto walked out into the fields. They worked hard tending to corn, potatoes, green peas, and wheat. At noon

time, they sat under a giant oak tree and rested. The Moon usually peeked at them when they returned to the house. Manimar waited for them, having the table set for dinner. She served them hearty meals and wine they harvested themselves.

The Wise Man usually disappeared after dinner, returning well after midnight. Augusto sat outside, living with his memories, shedding tears that grew into lilies. He wished he could talk to Manimar and tell her about his life, about him as a child, about his mother, and his home. He wanted to be comforted by her, to feel a soft touch of her palm on his forehead, the way his mother used to cuddle him.

As soon as he could, he asked the White Lily, "What am I to do, White Lily? I am so far from home. So far from you. I feel lost. How did I get here?" But the White Lily only shook her head and stayed quiet. His friends, the Sun and the Moon, still watched over him in silent wisdom. Augusto felt alone. So alone.



Then, one hot day, as he and Isew the Wise Man sat under the oak tree, Augusto gathered his courage and asked, "Wise Man, what am I to do with the days to come? With the days of my life?"

The Wise Man answered: "Ask me again when you are ready to hear my answer!"

Augusto stayed awake all night. The house was quiet and calm as always. The Wise Man left and returned in the early morning hours. Manimar was up, cooking breakfast, her eyes hardly visible, her body wrapped up in glamorous embroidered clothing. Almost a year passed, and Augusto

never exchanged a word with her. *I will have to leave*, he thought to himself. *But before I leave, I must find out what the secret is hidden in this house. Where is the Wise Man disappearing night by night? And his daughter? I never heard her voice. She never talks. She never sings. She is hiding her face. Is she disfigured? Is she really so embarrassed about her appearance?* Day by day and month by month, Augusto worked the fields diligently.

One evening, just before the Wise Man was ready to leave the house, Augusto stood up. He stood up on the threshold of the door and asked: "Wise Man, I know I am ready to have my question answered. Teach me. Show me the right way to live!"

The Wise Man could not hide his surprise. "I will. But I am warning you. The lessons to learn are harsh; they will demand a lot of stamina from you. There is a penalty to be paid if you fail."

"Isew, what is the penalty?"

"To be lost and alone for the rest of your life.

That is all I can tell you."

"If there is a penalty for failing, there must be a reward for winning!" Augusto said.

"You see. You want to know where the journey ends before you even find the path."

"Take me with you, Wise Man. I am begging you. I will be your obedient pupil."

The Wise Man hesitated for a while: "Very well. I will give you a chance tonight." As he spoke those words, the Moon appeared so close, almost to Augusto's reach. And the Moon smiled. At least, that was what Augusto saw.

Augusto and the Wise Man took a lantern, although the Moon shone on them with all his might.

They entered a dark forest and walked for a long while. The Wise Man walked silently, never turning back to see if Augusto was keeping up with him. "White Lily, years of my sorrow, what is this all about? Where am I? And why am I here?" But there was no answer. Even the Moon was numb.

Finally, they reached the end of the forest. A village of a handful of houses, tiny houses, expansive fields, and meadows spread ahead of them. Augusto stood and stood and did not move. That village, the fields, and the scent of white lilies brought back a memory: little Augusto sitting on the floor, watching his mother sew garments. A wind running through the field danced by the window, the Moon peeking in. "That was home. How will I ever find a home again?"

The Wise Man assured him: "You will find your home."

"How will I know?" Augusto asked, "How will I know where the right place is?"

"Do you ever listen to your heart?" the Wise Man asked. He looked into Augusto's eyes: "Do you?"

Augusto laughed, and his eyes got bigger. He felt his heart pounding rapidly as if it was ready to jump out of his body and run far away. He laughed so as not to let his confusion win. "My heart? Oh, no. My heart is not talking."

"Oh, yes, it is. You are not hearing it." The Wise Man placed his hand gently over Augusto's heart.

Augusto thought his heart would sit in his throat and fly out the moment he answered. Thousands of images crossed his mind. His head was spinning. The scent of earth and his childhood was twirling around him. His mother was near him... he felt it; Augusto said heavily: "Why not?"

"I'll tell you why. I will tell you this once, and I will never repeat it." The Wise Man spoke slowly, looking into Augusto's eye as if he wanted to enter his soul.

"I am listening," Augusto said. "I am listening because I am curious." Tiny domes of sweat popped up all over his body.

"Curiosity is good," the Wise Man said, and he continued:

"Your heart is filled with memories. And what the heart feels, the mind thinks. All you think of is the past and what you are missing now. Remember: do not lose the past; remember the days of your young years, your mother, the shack you grew up in... but in your mind, you are still there. And not here. The here and now is running away from you."

Augusto was stunned. A tiny drop of sweat covered his eyelids. "How do you know what I am thinking?" Augusto asked.

"I do not know what you are thinking," the Wise Man answered, "but I listen to your unspoken words. You live in your memories." He took a deep breath. "Let go."

"How do I do that?" Augusto asked. *Will the Wise Man impel me to give up my treasure? Memories of my young life?*

"Come, follow me."

Augusto did as he was told. It was still night. Millions of stars, like precious pearls, covered the dark sky. The Moon watched over them like a loving father tending to his kids. Both men stopped in front of a small house with a red roof. A garden of flowers was sending out the loveliest scent.

"Knock on the door," the Wise Man told Augusto. "Knock on the door and say these words: 'My heart and my soul are listening to you. I am here to embrace yours. Just let me in.'"

Augusto looked at the Wise Man with distrust. "And then...what?"

The Wise Man understood. "Trust me," he replied. Reluctantly, Augusto knocked on the heavy wooden door. There was no answer. He tried again and again until the door opened, and Augusto faced a young woman. A man's voice yelled. "Who is there?"

Augusto said: "My heart and my soul are listening to you. I am here to embrace yours. Just let me in." The man appeared behind the young woman. Without saying a word, he slammed the door into Augusto's face. And now? Augusto growled.

"We'll go to another house, and we'll do the same." The next house was smaller. Dried weeds surrounded the entrance. The door was open, but Augusto knocked. And knocked. The voice, a weak voice from within, cried out: "It's open!" Augusto walked in, and what he saw . . . was a memory: A mother sitting by a bed, a little boy, his eyes closed, breathing heavily. *It is like my mother and me*, he thought. He repeated the saying the Wise Man the wise man taught him: *My heart and soul are listening to you. I am here to embrace you. Just let me in.*

The woman looked at him and said, "I am in despair. My child has not opened his eyes for a whole night, a day, and another night. He won't take a sip of water. He won't take a bite of bread. He does not answer my voice."

"What is your boy's name?" Augusto asked.

"Yral."

Augusto reached for the woman's hand. "Put your palm on your son's forehead," he said gently, "and whisper the most loving words you can muster." The woman did as told. Nothing happened. Her son, the little boy Yral, did not open his eyes; he did not look at her as she had hoped.

"Do it over and over again. Think of everything you have ever wanted him to know and everything you ever wanted to say to him."

The woman grabbed Augusto's arm: "Stay, please stay."

"I will be back tomorrow night," Augusto said. In the meantime, just do what I told you." The Moon retreated to its chambers, and the Sun was lazily moving up the horizon. The night was gone.

The Wise Man stood on the porch. "You knew how to help this little boy. How come?"

Augusto thought for a while. "Wise Man," he said, "when I saw the mother sitting with her son, a memory of my mother and me came to me. Somehow, I knew how to heal him... I listened with my heart."

"You learned another lesson, Augusto. Use your past for a good cause.. And you did."

"Is that what you do, Wise Man, night after night?"

"I walk and walk and knock and knock on random doors. Every house has some joy and some sorrow. Some houses want to let go of their suffering. Others hold on to it."

"It makes me happy to do this, Wise Man." Augusto sat down in the middle of a meadow. He shed a tear. A tear of excitement. And a White Lily appeared next to him. She turned her face, and Augusto saw her face, smiling. When Augusto and the Wise Man returned the following night, the woman greeted them with a basket of fresh bread. Next to her stood her son, smiling.

"I'll be forever grateful to you," the woman said. "My little boy came back to me. Here he is."

"All your son needed was to know that you love him. He needed to hear your words and save them in the corner of

his heart. Now, he can breathe freely. Now he can laugh and be alive.”

From now on, night after night, the Wise Man and Augusto knocked on the doors of the village’s houses. They were chased away many times, but they were welcomed many times. Augusto got used to sleepless nights and working hours of the day. He felt as if his entire being was filled with power, like an engine running on its own. Time passed, and another winter came. Now, Augusto lived in the house of the Wise Man and his daughter for more than a year.

The Wise Man told him: “It is about time for you to take over the nocturnal duties. I am getting old and tired. But before that can happen, there are some more tasks you have to accomplish.”

“And what is that?” Augusto asked.

“You are already listening to the little voices guarding your heart. You know what your mission in life is, do you?”

Augusto was hesitant. He never really gathered those words for himself. “To listen to others.” The Wise Man continued, “That is an art. But you have to practice. You have to polish it. It never ends. Start here. Within yourself.”

Augusto remembered the Wise Man’s words when he worked in the fields, when he knocked on doors of unknown families, when he slept, and when he lay awake. “What was the meaning of the Wise Man’s words?” He turned to the Moon and Sun and the White Lily, but neither one gave him an answer. *This house is an enigma, a riddle, a puzzle of scattered pieces I do not know how to capture. Who is the Wise Man? Who is his daughter, who has never spoken yet and seems to know so much?* One night, as they walked through the woods in complete darkness, Augusto said:

“The Moon is in hiding tonight, Wise Man. He is hiding the same way you are hiding from me. Tomorrow, the Moon will come out again; he always does. But you don’t. You and your daughter live in your solitude!”

“I have been cursed,” the Wise Man said, “This is all I can tell you. The rest is up to you to figure it out.”

Augusto got angry. Starting in his stomach, it growled and traveled to his brain, stopping to over-pump his heart. With each mini step, the anger grew mightier, turning into a rage. “I have had enough of your talk! Enough of the little bites you are throwing at me. Never giving me an answer, always leaving me wanting more, and having to work for it!”

The Wise Man smiled. For a while, he did not answer. “Anger is good for you, Augusto. It empowers you. It can also destroy you. Now it’s up to you what you will choose.”

Augusto shouted. “This is your curse! That’s it! You never give a straight answer. You avoid it. You are running away from it. You are testing me, you say, but it is your escape!”

At night, when both of them sat on the forest’s edge, the Wise Man said: “I will tell you my story. So listen carefully to it.”



THE STORY OF LOVE, LOSS, AND LOVE AGAIN

WHEN I WAS YOUNG, I lived with my family in a small town. Forests surrounded the town... There was a hill with a modest castle, but still, it was a castle. It is where I grew up with my parents and brothers and sisters and servants. My father was a ruler of that town. Everyone worshiped him. He was a kind man. I had a happy childhood. My mother loved to dance, and often, we had musicians and singers visiting and playing for our guests and us. With my father and brothers, I went hunting. By the end of the day, we brought in our catches and had them prepared by the cooks in our kitchen. I never worried about anything. I was looking forward to life as I knew I was the eldest to inherit the castle. I will be a just ruler with a wife and children. But everything turned out differently.

When I was about the age of marriage, my parents found a bride for me, the daughter of a nobleman, Xanera. She was pretty and had a kind smile. The day of the big wedding

was approaching. Our castle was decorated, and we hosted dinners and balls every night. The musicians played, and we danced and danced until morning hours. My bride, Xanera, was following me constantly. The moment I spoke to another young woman, just being courteous, she stood by me and watched and watched. She whispered with hissing undertones, "Don't you ever smile at another woman? I am your woman!" Her dark eyes darkened as if to launch a storm of deadly bullets. Suddenly, she looked like a monster—or was it just my illusion? I wasn't sure. Finally, the day before the wedding, her entire family arrived.

This time, they came with her younger brothers and younger sister, Aneleh. The sky opened the moment I looked at Aneleh, and I flew on a cloud of frantic, tantalizing excitement. Never before—and never since—have I seen the purity of beauty. Her soul was written on her angelic face. Was I smitten? Yes. But more so. I knew she was the one I wanted to be with as long as I walked this earth. I went to my parents' chambers. I knelt before them. I told them about my true love. I asked for forgiveness. It was not easy. I asked Aneleh to marry me.

She quietly said she wanted to marry me since she first looked me in the eyes. "But my sister," Aneleh said, covering her face with a big piece of embroidered clothing. "My sister." She trembled. Xanera accepted it without a word, plotting inside.



With a big smile, her parents gave me Aneleh. The wedding took three days and nights. We were ecstatic. By the end of the third night, Xanera walked into our quarters and

asked to be seen. She stood before us. Daggers dipped in deadly poison were shouting out of her eyes. Aneleh was holding my hand. Her face turned white as if all her blood had run out. "I am cursing you for the rest of your life," Xanera spit out. "You will have no life." And she laughed loudly. I will never forget that laugh... as if a tornado or sharp stones were released from a dark cloud. "You." She pointed to Aneleh, "You will die giving birth to your child. Your child will be cursed as well. It will have no voice! That will be its fate. That curse could be broken for that child. But I won't tell you how, and you!" She turned to me, spitting threats. "You will live in poverty—fumbling through the rest of your days in despair!"

"Get out! Vicious sister! Get out and never come back!" Anelah even yelled back, shocked.

The Wise Man took a long, deep breath and turned to Augusto. "And so it happened, my curse was created. My curse of infinite despair! But I never let her destroy us or our spirit, our devotion to each other.

Aneleh cried for days, but as days passed, we forgot... or wanted to forget. Suddenly, one day, our castle caught on fire. We knew very well that the sister had started the fire. Both my parents died. My siblings left, sunken in depression. Aneleh and I were poor, living just one day to another. That is when we moved in here and became farmers. Imagine, Augusto. A princess and a prince who grew up surrounded by servants, maids, and chefs—were demolished by this. But we were so happy. "We have each other," Aneleh used to say. "That's what matters." Still, sometime in the darkness of the night, she would scream! I consoled her. She

claimed her evil sister was standing in the corner, staring at her. Every time, I would hold her.

To our surprise, within no time at all, she was with child! We were immersed in parental happiness... but Aneleh could not forget her sister's curse. She was afraid to go to sleep; she walked through the house to ensure no cruel devil was hiding in the walls. Finally, the blessed baby day came! I brought two women from the village to help Aneleh with childbirth. I heard a baby cry a few hours later; I rushed into the room, singing, *I am a father! I am a father!* Manimar looked like the most precious, valuable piece of art. She was resting in her arms—a baby girl as lovely as her mother. The village women left, telling me to let the new mother and baby rest. I sat on the porch and dozed off. It was getting dark. And... though it felt that I slept only a few minutes, I must have slept for hours. Startled by a dream, I jumped up and ran to see my wife and my newborn. My wife slept. At least she looked like it. But no, no. Life had evaporated from her—she was dead. My sweet baby daughter rested on her mother's chest and slept without a peep! In utter despair, I wailed, collapsing to my knees. I had no tears; my pain was so excruciating, and I had no strength to let my tears ease the sorrow deeper as an abyss. At that very moment, I heard a voice. I knew that voice! It was her, the vulture—her sister, Xanera.

"Your lovely wife will never ever wake up again. And your innocent baby will never speak. You will never hear her voice. She will be hiding her face." She laughed loudly, an ugly laugh that bounced off my bones. Unless some fool will break her curse!"

“How? Tell me how?” I begged. I lost my pride. But she disappeared. So my daughter and I lived with great sadness and survived by the grace of the village women who came every day and looked after her. I taught her to read and write. I told her stories about the world. She was obedient, beautiful, and quiet. Always quiet. *What am I to do with my life now*, I asked myself. And then, during one of those nights when sleep escaped me, I found my answer in the darkness. *I will be helping others. I will listen to them and take in their misery. But I won't keep it. I will return it to them with kindness and honesty, and they will find their paths.*

Augusto listened, his eyes filled with tears. Once again, where his tears soaked the earth, a White Lily grew and whispered to Augusto: “Take me. Take me in the palms of your hands and gift me to Manimar.” Augusto sat for a long while. Now, he understood the nightly journeys. His own compassion for the mother of a sick boy that first night? He just knew what the best medicine for the little boy was. Augusto was once that little boy and was given all the tenderness in the world. In that way, he was a rich little boy. His wealth was endless: he was loved. His tears were not the tears of grief. The tears were of gratitude. He was given so much love he has an abundance to give to others. That night, Augusto did not walk into the woods to the village to knock on the doors of those who suffered. He took a White Lily and bowed to the Wise Man's daughter. “I have never seen your face. Your eyes are always looking down. Your mouth never utters a word. Your soul is hidden somewhere... I can't reach it. Take this White Lily as a gesture of my affection for you.”

Manimar looked up. Her eyes shined like the Sun and Moon and all the stars of the sky together.

Her lips opened, and the most pleasing words were spoken in a voice that sounded like all the violins of the world rushed together to play a melody of love. The curse was broken.

Manimar and Augusto wed. The entire village came and danced and sang all night long. When the Moon retreated, and the Sun was fully peeking out, the Wise Man embraced newlyweds. He then walked into the woods, and he was never seen again. Years later, Augusto, his wife Manimar, and their children rode on a carriage to visit Augusto's birthplace. They rode days and nights and finally arrived, passing the land Augusto knew so well growing up. But the little shack, his home, was nowhere to be seen. Only weeds and grass surrounded by the most breathtaking scent of a field of white lilies. The lilies turned their gentle faces toward them. Augusto embraced his family—his wife and his children were blooming. They lived long lives; they may still be alive today.



That is, my dearest Durrell, the story—and the story within a story—that you always wanted to hear night after night. It is a long story, and you listened patiently with your eyes hanging onto my words. Finally, your eyes would close, and I would kiss your forehead. My heart was overflowing with joy. But time, sadly, does not stay still. The following summer, you suddenly grew taller. You became a young man, no longer interested in the “Goodnight Story,” pizza outings with your aunt, or walks in the forest. You locked your bedroom at night. You stayed up long after midnight, playing games on your phone. You slept until noon. You were bored. Your mind was somewhere else. I knew it. That summer was the last time I saw you. Your mother retracted our agreement, saying you had other activities. And that was it. I got holiday cards every year from you, but that stopped as soon as your mother passed on. I cherished my love for you in a tender place in my soul. It may astonish you. Yes, I have that tiny place, but only for you. After all, let’s call me what I am: A killer. A murderer.

I boiled the tea my grandma told me about. I will drink it for thirty days. In the morning, after thirty days are gone, I will die. I will die peacefully. The yellow house is yours.

I am yours,

Aunt Margot

Brenda dropped the letter. Knowing someone’s darkest secrets made her shudder. All her internal parts spun in a wild roller coaster. The walls of the house no longer produced lovely, sweet music for the invisible ballerinas in their white tutus. Instead, harsh laments, a cacophony of souls wailed about, sharing their tortured hearts as notes. Was it *Arletta’s voice she had heard? Had it been Richmond’s piano scales?*

The morning sun knocked on the window, its lace curtains swaying like stage curtains about to close the show. Something caught her eye. There was the bluebird on a magnolia tree that was covered in fragrant blossoms of springtime. It started singing a song, returning Brenda’s voice to Brenda. As the hours gathered, the hot summer sun warmed up Brenda’s heart, mind, and body.



By noon, Brenda no longer knew how to sing, play the grand piano, or read sheet music. Margot’s words no longer belonged to her. Margot’s life faded and became foreign to Brenda. Like the bluebird who sheds old feathers and grows new ones before he starts his migrating journey, Brenda lost a layer of sick, dead skin. She mentally pulled off the remnants like pungent, stained clothing.



By the evening, the skin stripped itself of its layers, her face lost wrinkles, and her hair got darker again. *I will no longer stay in a place of eternal decay. I won’t live in a cemetery.* She went to the backyard where Molnar planted the

magnolia tree, where he was admired by the young Durrell, and where Arletta rested her tormented heart. She said goodbye. *I no longer belong to this house. Looking for a home, a place to shelter my mind and scars, I found injuries way more profound than mine.*

She must walk away, liberated from the curse of the yellow house: the power was broken.

Brenda began breathing in a way only a free person can: with a smile in her eyes. Now, she wanted to live. Now, she wanted to live like a poet: to sing songs about goodness. *The illusion of an affectionate home, safe and trusting, where only kindness rules, was just that: a deceiving illusion. No, I do not belong here. No, I am not to live in deadly silence. Like that magnolia tree where little Arletta sleeps underneath... No! I have words now. Splinters of a dream? Or should I say a nightmare? I gave up my words and voice because I did not think I needed them anymore. I believed I needed nothing else, only the walls of a home. I gave up my voice.*

Now, that little bird can sing inside of me. A song will force open my lips. Words of a poem will be uttered. And I will live! "I am happy living simply, like a clock or a calendar..." Ah! My beloved poet Marina Tsvetayeva returned to me, to Brenda— I am back!



Late that night, Brenda threw Margot's letter into the dimmed flames of the fireplace. She loaded her car with books and a few of her belongings. After never venturing from the house and town for what seemed like eons, she was a caged bird escaping. *Little birdie returned my song, she crooned. Little birdie returned my voice.*

I am a storyteller. I wail with stories.

The new Brenda is born. I capture it.

Running through the darkness.

Brenda cheers herself on: "I will talk now. I will live now.

Courageous in the darkness of the night, brave in the sunshine of the day."



Brenda left the yellow house, the sanctuary, the place of that overwhelming enchantment? *I believed the yellow house was mine. My home—like the arms of my mother that never held me. I was wrong.* Brenda drove for hours. She drove for days. The rest of her life, days of months and months of years, were spread in front of her like a colorless blanket. If she stepped on the blank palette, she would make herself known and disturb the pale space of nothingness. She'll be stepping into life looking for colors again. *I'll be part of the band of the living. Up to now, I belonged to myself only. For thirty years of my life, I never bonded with anyone. I was that odd creature no one ever noticed, no one ever missed me, and no one ever touched me. I never desired anyone, and no one ever desired me.*



Brenda stopped in small towns only, sleeping in inexpensive hotels and eating simple meals. Plagued by how she lived a life—an imaginary life—Margot's. She never lived the one she was to own. *This is my new life. Finally, Brenda has to be born and grow up.* So she traveled from place to place, staying a week, a few months, or even years. She baked peach pies selling them at country fairs or village markets. She would disappear with no goodbyes and then pop up somewhere else. She wrote poetry and recited it at community halls of little towns and villages. Brenda loved sharing her poems with her audience:

*Little birdie on the tree,
Sing a song of sorrow.
Sing a song of joy.
Little birdie returning my voice to me,
Sing a song of open cage
Sing a song of endlessness.*

Brenda was her own force that held all parts of herself together. *Otherwise, I would fragment into pieces of nothingness, melt into the ground, and evaporate into the air.* That much she knew. She was now Brenda, the real Brenda. I liberated myself. I belong now. I belong to this life. On her nightly walks, rays of the brightest rainbow colors danced around her body, popping out of the darkness and embracing her with the most gracious steps as if a ballerina. She was that little birdie, free. Flying. Rain or shine, snow or storm, she walked, whispering poetry to the trees and flowers, toward the silent windows of sleeping families.



She may still be alive, walking with the other nocturnals. Day and night. Night and day.

*I am a storyteller. I tell stories.
Finally, this is my story.
I carry my own story. We all do.
Listen. Run with me.*



THE STORYTELLER'S STORY

IT WAS LIKE ANY other summer afternoon. It was an afternoon like any other, yet it was different from all the other summer afternoons so far. Life felt so generous, giving to and embracing me with quiet promises of intoxication that will forever warm my blood. On the narrow paths between a field of soon-to-be-harvested grain and the meadow of wildflowers, my life changed forever.

My story began. But my story never ended. I want to tell you—and I will *never* find the right words to narrate precisely what took place that summer afternoon on the narrow path. If I were a singer, I would sing a song of ancient Sirens. If I were an artist, I would find the most enchanting shades of colors to reveal my story. So here it is. But I am a storyteller. I shall keep telling you my story.

I keep it in the chambers of my heart, decorated with colorful bows. Years erased nothing; they only added a longing for repetition and nostalgia, knowing there is no repetition except in my memory. Now I know that longing can hurt: a deep hurt on the bottom of the beating heart. With each beat, the pain—in a sneaky way—makes my body tremble.

My breath gets shallow, and my legs give in. I sit in the darkness of the night on the edge of the path, surrounded by dandelions, bluebells, daisies, and wild poppy seeds. It was a summer afternoon like any other afternoon of that summer and summers before and after, but my life changed forever.



I was eighteen years old that summer. The air stood still, and it was heavy, so heavy. So oppressive I could hardly breathe. And the stillness. Like the entire world was taking an early afternoon nap, dreaming about incredible waterfalls and bushes surrounding it in a magical forest where only good fairies live. And maybe secret lovers. The only faint sound was that of crickets, invisible. Still, butterflies surrounded my face for less than a second, awakening something inside my heart.

I already knew that one day, I'd be telling stories. I had so many of them dancing in my mind. That particular afternoon, as I was bogged down by navigating the stories of my mind, still like a child's mind, that mind of mine. Sleep started seeping into me, but a man's voice spoke, and something else stepped into my body.

"You shouldn't be sleeping under the noon sun." I jumped up. Was he real? I looked, and all I saw were green eyes, smiling with a full soul behind them. *How? How can eyes be smiling?* I wondered, entranced.

He laughed. "Am I scaring you? I am. I am."

"No. You are not scaring me!" I answered quickly. Yet he shined straight into me. A beam of greenish light shot out, emanating a floral sensation as if wrapping me in the sweetest vine. I was intoxicated. The sky and the earth were spin-

ning, my body moving as if an ocean wave came over me and carried me away but brought me back all the same.

The man laughed again, saying, "Don't sit in the midday sun. "You could get your brain fried."

"What is it to you? Excuse me!" I watched him, studying his features. I thought he was a god of the divine masculine coming down to earth from Mount Olympus. "And just who are you?" In shock, I spat words at him.

"I am a visitor," he said. I am visiting your town." That green light of his eyes kept sending their rays.

"Why?" I raised my eyebrow. I shook as if an earthquake had rattled me.

He smiled. "You certainly want to know a lot."

"You started talking to me." *Where had I found the courage to tease him?*

"I did. At first, I thought you were one of the most beautiful flowers. From farther away, you looked like one!"

The earth shattered before me. *I am a flower, indeed!* I confirmed it to myself. "And now? Am I still a flower?" I blinked, not wanting to lose our gaze.

"You are more beautiful than all the flowers together in a bouquet. More beautiful than the entire field of all the flowers." And then, he got on his knees, coming closer to me. He kissed me. More quakes. How many times in the years after this have I cursed that "earth-shaking" moment of all moments? I was in love. My entire world turned upside down that early summer afternoon.

I slowly walked the path between the field of wheat and the field of flowers, the flowers of heavenly colors. I sat at the same spot as I did that early afternoon at the beginning of summer...and waited. And he came at the same

hour every day with the same green eyes mesmerizing me. “What is your name?” I asked him, needing the reality of nomenclature.

“I will let you guess,” he answered, sweeping my hair aside. I was laughing and hugging him as we walked down the narrow path between the fields, the fields holding our love. We walked to the forest and sat by the cool water floating from the mountains. We sat on the pillow of moss. We kissed and touched each other’s bodies.

“How can I guess?” I asked, “Out of the thousands of names in this world?” He just looked at me. “And how about you? Don’t you want to know my name?”

“Of course, I want to,” he answered. I leaned back into the moss, deeper into our mutual mystery. He whispered, offering endless romantic notions until I was convinced. *I am the most extravagant young woman, so sensual and seductive ... he cannot stay away from me.* All those long, warm summer nights, I could never sleep, thinking of him, wondering about his name, making up names, yet never saying anything to him. I called him my love, my lover, my prince, my knight, my cavalier, my gentleman caller, my lover, my love, my lust, and passion. Somehow, there was so much unspoken. He never told me why he was visiting my little town, who he was, or what he did. “How old are you?” I asked him.

“Twenty-five or maybe thirty or maybe twenty or even forty.... you decide!” He gave me nothing. I only knew what I imagined. I had his entire life story written in my mind. When I put my head on his chest, I was breathing in his bodily scent: sweat mixed with a mild soap, spice with vanilla scent, and I pictured him bathing early in the morning, having the soap running all over his body, and I wanted to

become that soap. He always wore a white shirt. Whenever the nearby church clock rang four o’clock, he lightly kissed my forehead and left.

He never said, “I’ll see you tomorrow. Or I promise I shall be back.” Yet he always appeared at the same time and the same place. “Tell me your name,” he asked. His greenish eyes had magical power. I would do anything for him.

“My name? Oh, I am . . . Storyteller.” As I told him, I created my “name” — what felt like my true identity.

“You are a storyteller?” He repeated after me, surprised.

“I tell stories. Yes. I am *the* storyteller.” I insisted.

He became quiet. I knew he was intrigued. “One day,” he said, “you will have to tell our story.”

It was as if he had stabbed me with a sharp sword—my knight, my cavalier. I told him, “Yes. Even though every story has a beginning and end, I do not want our story to end.” His silence caused my heart to bleed. Never in my nocturnal imagination did I think I would *never* see him again. That was the most absurd idea, more absurd than any of the stories my mind had created. The idea of never seeing him again was like death. Even at eighteen, I knew that stories have a beginning and end—the same as life. But not our love. We had a contract, an agreement, the silent promise we gave each other. I did not know why he came every day at the same time and returned the next day at the same hour. I was convinced that he only lived between noon and four o’clock because those were the hours I was alive with him.



Weeks later, I told him, “You changed your scent. It is now herbal, like the forest, like the trees we are surrounded by. You smell like a tree. And I love it.”

He looked bewildered. “You love it?” I nodded. He sunk into a softer tone, almost indescribable. “I love trees. And the woods. The eternal stillness.” I started stammering in my mind, suddenly terrified that I had said something wrong, something that unpleasantly struck him. I panicked that he would leave and never come back. But then he said, “Why don’t we take a night stroll in the woods? Tonight?”

“Yes... yes. Tonight.” My eyes became as big as the expanse of the sky. I climbed out of my bedroom window while the rest of the house slept. At close to midnight, the most romantic yet most witching hour, I saw him walking the path between fields; by now, it was already “our paths.” All of it was ours: the wheat to be harvested soon, the sunflowers, the mystery of the forest, the stream of ice water hitting on big rocks. None of it felt real on that summer night, yet it was. I was living this tale of unrequited desire. We always kissed, touched, cuddled, and held onto each other’s bodies.

That night, we walked into the shallow water, holding hands. That night, in the silver reflection of the moon in the water, I said: “We never make love. . . all the way.” There was no answer, and he looked down, focused on the river’s bottom. “Why is that?” I asked. “And what is it that we are doing?”

“What do you think we have here?” He questioned in return.

“This is love. Don’t you know? That’s what it is.” I insisted, drawing him in.

He hugged me tightly. “Tell me one thing about yourself that no one knows?”

“I tell stories,” I said. “I told you already. That is all I am. A storyteller. And you?” I looked into his eyes, questioning. The moon began retreating behind him.

“Oh!” His eyes widened. “I want to write. Ever since I was little, I’ve wanted to write! But I also talk to trees, and I can hear them talking back to me.”

“So, you are a Tree Whisperer,” I laughed. A new day was stirring, but it was a suspicious dawn—like an ice-cold hurricane swept over the forest.

“And you are the Storyteller!” We both laughed at ourselves. We knew something no one else did. And we knew what love, that word “love” everyone is so haphazardly tossing around, was! We knew what love was! We lived it. “Oh, I wish I had the language and sounds of new words to tell our love story! But I would have to create unheard verses and sing melodies so exquisite since our tale is one never told before.”

Yet, my lover did not respond with any romantic drip of words. “Tree Whisperer!” I cheered and held him, fearing what would happen if I let go. If I lost him, I would never find him again. A deadly fear hugged my body, and my limbs froze. I forgot how to breathe.

As the sun lazily moved upward in the sky, shining among the clouds, my Tree Whisperer left as usual, with no parting words or looking back. He walked away through our path between the fields, through the path of our first rendezvous. He never returned. Youth is a time of illusion. Everything will repeat itself—therefore, there is no end.

Even life itself is endless. I sat at our spot at noon every day for the rest of the summer. That autumn, when the fields became barren, and the wind was merciless, I ran there. I ran there and waited where the path between fields was covered with a perfect cushion of snow. At Halloween, I disguised myself as a pine tree, hoping it would lure him back to me. I waited for him in wintertime, disguised as a snowman. I waited for him in spring, dressed as a stream of a mountain river. I waited for him during summertime, appearing as a field of flowers in the midday sun.

I became a nocturnal pilgrim.

*I travel from story to story.
 I walk quietly. I run at times. I gather stories.
 Stories . . . my true lovers. We clutch each other.
 I give solace to Molnar.
 I hold Brenda's hand.
 I give forgiveness to Margot.
 I let Augusto become a serious man.
 I talk to the Tree Whisperer—
 I wait for him.
 In my stories, wrestling with my heart,
 While whispering not to me but to trees.
 Now I am wandering, losing breath.
 My stories rest with me.
 Stories, my solace.
 I am a nocturnal pilgrim.
 Searching. Same as you.*

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About the Author

Helena Cerny is a retired licensed psychotherapist living in Los Angeles. Born in the Czech Republic she studied at the Academy of Dramatic Arts with a focus on dramaturgy. After immigrating to the United States, she became co-artistic director of the Orpheum Theater in Los Angeles, providing play analysis and directing stage productions. As a licensed therapist, Helena Cerny focused her practice on clients struggling with creativity. Several of her one-act plays were produced at the Festival of One-Act Plays and at the Whitefire Theater in Los Angeles. She has written a number of short stories with speculative fairy tale elements. Helena loves walking in the forest, a pastime that often appears in her work.

