

Sonata and fugue

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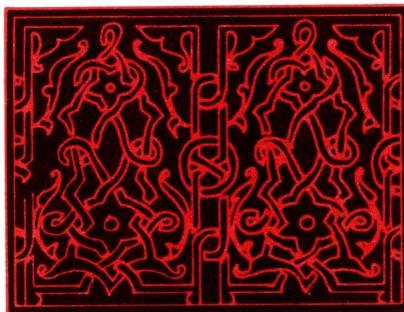
I It's the best thing that could have happened to us, Federico told me when they assigned him to the Mexican embassy in Brussels. Some time in the First World will smooth out the rough edges.

Our differences only moved to a new climate, although now I'm able to study restoration. In Mexico I had to help make ends meet. The meticulousness of this work allows for abstraction and erases the tedium of superficial flirtations at receptions and meetings with the wives of functionaries from other embassies. I never manage to fit into those sad groups of women who live through their husbands' diplomatic exile, worn out by the problems their children have in adapting, the difficulty of communicating with the help, and the language, which few of them bother to study.

One day I forget the tea organized by the ambassador's wife. Federico's annoyance is of such magnitude, his insults so wounding and his fear that I will leave him so acute, that we decide to separate for several days. Alone, each of us will regain their serenity and the proper perspective of our love, which is stifling at times. Maybe with a rest this sensation of emptiness, which is beginning to overpower me, will diminish. My daily life belongs to unknown people and the shell of my fragility is beginning to crack.

II

I feel like a note detached from the scale. It is impossible to know whether what I am seeing through the window is the scenery of a rainy afternoon, or if I am on a bridge, and my eyes, which are on the brink of overflowing,



bring me this impression of a fragmented landscape. What is holding up my ankles?

When I regain my balance I see that I am holding a post card from Brussels, showing the alleyways of the Rempart des Béguines, which we walked through so many times; then I throw it in the wastebasket.

I came to Istanbul to lose myself in anonymity. My long, black hair, dark eyes and dark skin will let me pass unnoticed, despite my blue jeans, down jacket and thick-soled shoes.

I don't want an American-style hotel, with its smell of air recycled through ducts and its distant employees, where, moreover, I would run the risk of meeting people I know.

I am in the Pera Palas. Agatha Christie stayed here to get the ambience for one of her novels. Greta Garbo was a frequent guest. Pierre Loti might have stayed in this very room. When I run into their ghosts I will ask them why the channel of love always passes through torrents of adversity.

It's delightful to walk barefoot through these silken carpets, filled with flowers and colorful birds; the bathroom looks like it's made of slices from the blue mosque shown in the guidebook, and the soap smells of patchouli.

It is November, cold and foggy. With map in hand, I walk to the mosque of Suleiman the Magnificent. I am surprised to find it virtually hidden in a motley residential neighborhood. From far off one sees only the minarets and some of the cupolas. Nobody is there but a little boy who watches over the shoes left in the entranceway. Inside, it is intensely cold. I stay to one side, sitting cross-legged, afraid of venturing into areas forbidden to women. From this corner I can admire all the splendor of the mosque.

III

My eyes were fixed on the dome when I felt a presence at my side. A tall man, dressed in a black tunic and a burgundy turban, held out his hand to me.

—Come, I will show you my city —he said in an authoritarian voice.

I felt no fear. When I looked into his eyes I saw they were very green. He is handsome, I thought. I took his hand and let him lead me. We climbed into a kind of carriage drawn by a horse and adorned with multicolored carpets.

—What is your name?

—Isabel.

—I am Abdul, he said smiling, and began to tell me the history of the Turkish capital.

I cannot recall the paths we took through the city, but I know Istanbul as if I had seen it a thousand times in a travel documentary. I know the names and locations of each of its museums, mosques, bazaars, palaces, parks. I smell the aromas of the spice market, the fish stalls, the perfume shops; I feel the swaying of the boat that took us across the Bosphorus as we

contemplated the Golden Horn while twilight fell.

Night was drawing near when the carriage stopped in front of the Topkapi Palace. Abdul led me to the flank of one of the walls, to a little door far from the main entrance. It must be a direct entry to the seraglio, I said to myself.

(If Federico only saw me now, I thought, and right away forgot about him; it wasn't the right time for uncomfortable memories.)

We were received by a group of women, who laughed and chattered amongst themselves in an incomprehensible language, but I understood their malicious looks of complicity. Drawing me away from Abdul, they led me through a series of tiny rooms, furnished with little tables, braziers, vases and cushions.

We reached an area surrounded by walls covered in mosaics of blue and white flowers, like those of the mosque. They began to remove my clothes. Many hands undressed my docility, throwing each article of clothing into a corner, amidst laughter and grimaces of disgust.

I felt as if my skin were coming off when they made me get into a bathtub filled with almost-boiling water. They wouldn't let me get out, and when I thought I was about to faint, in the midst of clouds of steam that came I knew not from where, they began to lash my body with streams of icy water. I was about to lose consciousness from the pain of this water-lashing when they submerged me once again, this time in a milky liquid, perfumed and warm; dozing from fatigue, I felt those unknown hands washing and brushing my hair.

I soon understood the wisdom of this ancient ritual, each of whose facets I would learn to enjoy. My muscles came back to life with the vigorous massage as they rubbed my skin with a ointment of geraniums, jasmine, roses and sandalwood,

which took away my body hair and penetrated the epidermis, softening and beautifying it.

Facing a mirror of burnished silver, I saw the reflection of a different woman, with shining hair and a completely hairless body, like that of a girl, with slightly protuberant breasts. The new line of my eyebrows made my eyes look larger; my face had been transformed by the powders they used as makeup for my eyelashes, cheeks and lips.

They dressed me in loose pants of light, almost transparent silk, fastened at the ankles and waist by bands embroidered with gold and precious stones; a muslin blouse with matching cuffs and a short jacket made of the same material. My hair, loose and reaching to my knees, was covered by a white veil, held in place by a round cap made of the same material as the jacket and blouse. I did not recognize the image I saw in the mirror; it was like seeing another woman, who followed my movements and copied my smile. Each night the clothing would be more luxurious and the person in the mirror would be further from the old Isabel.

The day's fatigue had disappeared. They took me by the hand through rooms and passageways. I was left alone facing an entrance covered by a flowered carpet.

Abdul drew aside the carpet and led me into the room, lit by the fire of a brazier which gave off changing shadows and the aroma of Oriental oils. We lay down on soft damask cushions made in primary colors and with the texture of flower petals. From a little table laden with plates he chose tidbits which he fed me little by little; I swallowed them hungrily. We drank something warm which tasted of fruit.

Enveloped in the slightly threatening shadows, I had a sense of well-being and felt no fear. Immersed in the green of his gaze, I was aware

only of his hands and his lips. As he covered me with his body, his hair fell across my eyelashes and the softness of his voice rose, together with my panting breath, up to the dome of ocher-colored glass, only to return and cover us with the chords of a sonata.

Each night I learned a new poem, I sang unknown melodies and knew the intoxication of tenderness.

The note detached from a scale became part of an arpeggio and would remain part, forever, of the harmony and counterpoint of Abdul's sonata.

IV

I was awakened by the ringing of the telephone and a voice reminding Madame Federico Corvalán that the flight she had booked returns to Brussels today. The taxi would be coming to pick me up in an hour.

Nothing has changed in the room at the Pera Palas. The suitcase is still packed, and on top of it lie the blue jeans, the jacket, the thick-soled shoes. The only thing different is the carpet. The flowers and birds are no longer made of silk; they are real.

I walk barefoot, taking care not to bother the birds.

When I come out of the bathroom and brush my hair, I smell its fragrance. I pick some flowers from the carpet and weave them into my braids.

Above, the magnificent atmosphere. Below, the grey of Belgian skies.

Federico receives me with reproaches. He was never able to reach me by phone, I didn't tell him I was canceling my reservation at the Hilton and going to the Pera Palas. I forget what I answered; I see only his look of surprise when he sees my nakedness. He raises his voice, yelling harshly as he asks, why did you remove all the hair on your body?; you smell so strange; and why the hell is your hair filled with dried flowers? ❧