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Opening Extract from...

In a Strange Room

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ONE

THE FOLLOWER

It happens like this. He sets out in the afternoon on the track that has been shown to him and soon he leaves the little town behind. In an hour or so he is among low hills covered by olive trees and grey stones, from which there is a view out over a plain that gradually descends to the sea. He is intensely happy, which is possible for him when he is walking and alone.

As the road rises and falls there are moments when he can see far ahead and other moments when he can see nothing at all. He keeps looking out for other people, but the huge landscape seems to be completely deserted. The only sign of human beings is the occasional house, tiny and distant, and the fact of the road itself.

Then at some point, as he comes to the crest of a hill, he becomes aware of another figure far away. It could be male or female, it could be any age, it could be travelling in either direction, towards him or away. He watches until the road dips out of sight, and when he comes to the top of the next rise the figure is clearer, coming towards him. Now they are watching each other, while pretending they are not.

When they draw even they stop. The figure is a man about his own age, dressed entirely in black. Black pants and shirt, black boots. Even his rucksack is black. What the first man is wearing I don't know, I forget.

They nod hello, they smile.

Where have you come from.

Mycenae. He points back over his shoulder. And you.

The man in black also points, vaguely, into the distance behind him. And where are you going to. He has an accent the first man cannot place, Scandinavian maybe, or German.

To the ruins.

I thought the ruins were that way.

Yes. Not those ruins, I've seen them.

There are other ruins.

Yes.

How far.

I think ten kilometres. That's what I was told.

He nods. He has a sullen sort of beauty, with long silky hair that falls around his shoulders. He is smiling, though there is nothing to smile at. And where do you come from.

South Africa. And you.

I am from Germany. Where are you staying in Mycenae.

At the youth hostel.

There are a lot of people.

I'm the only one there. Are you staying.

He shakes his head, the long tresses lift and float. I am taking the train tonight. To Athens.

They have conducted this conversation with a curious formality, the width of the road between them, and yet there is something in the way they relate that is not quite intimate, but familiar. As if they have met somewhere before, long ago. But they have not.

Enjoy the ruins, the German man smiles. The South African says that he will. Then they part again with a nod and draw slowly away from each other on the narrow white road, looking back now and then, until they are two tiny and separate points again, rising and falling with the undulations of the land.

He gets to the ruins in the middle of the afternoon. I can't even remember now what they are, the remains of some big but obscure building, there was a fence that had to be climbed, there was a fear of dogs but no dogs appeared, he stumbles around among rocks and pillars and ledges, he tries to imagine how it was but history resists imagining. He sits on the edge of a raised stone floor and stares out unseeingly into the hills around him and now he is thinking of things that happened in the past. Looking back at him through time, I remember him remembering, and I am more present in the scene than he was. But memory has its own distances, in part he is me entirely, in part he is a stranger I am watching.

By the time he comes to himself again, the sun is already low in the sky, the shadows of the mountains are stretched out across the plain. He walks back slowly in the blue coolness. The stars are seeding themselves in bright beds overhead, the earth is huge and old and black. It's long past suppertime when he arrives at the edge of the little village and goes up the deserted main street, the shops and restaurants shuttered and barred, all the windows unlit, through the

open front door of the hostel, up the stairs, through passages, past rooms filled with row after row of unoccupied bunk beds, all dark and cold, nobody visiting at this time of year, to the last and highest room, in the middle of the roof, a white cube fixed to a plane. He is very tired now, and hungry, and wants to sleep.

But inside the room the German is waiting. He is sitting on one of the beds, his hands between his knees, smiling.

Hello.

He goes in and closes the door behind him. What are you doing here.

I missed the train tonight. There is another one in the morning. I decided to wait until then. I asked him to put me in your room.

I see that.

You don't mind.

I'm just surprised, I wasn't expecting, no, I don't mind.

He doesn't mind, but he is also uneasy. He knows that the other man has delayed his journey not because of the train but because of him, because of the conversation they had in the road.

He sits down on his own bed. They smile at each other again.

How long are you here for.

I'm also going in the morning.

Are you going to Athens.

No. The other way. To Sparta.

So you've seen Mycenae already.

I've been here two days.

Ah.

There is a silence now in which neither of them moves.

I might stay another day. I'm not in a rush. I like this place.

The German considers. I thought I might also. I haven't seen Mycenae.

You should see it.

So you are staying.

Yes.

Yes. Then I am staying also. For a day.

It feels as if they've agreed to something more than this practical arrangement, but what exactly isn't clear. It is late and cold and the little room is raw and ugly in the fluorescent light. In a short while the South African gets into his sleeping bag. He is shy and though he would normally undress he doesn't do so tonight. He takes off his shoes and his watch and his two copper bracelets and gets in and lies on his back. He can see the metal slats of the bunk above him and disconnected images from the day come back to him, the ruins, the road, the gnarled shapes of the olive trees.

The German also readies himself for bed. He lays out his sleeping bag on the bunk he's sitting on. Of course his sleeping bag is black.

He unlaces his boots and takes them off, setting them side by side on the floor. Perhaps he too would normally undress but he doesn't tonight, there is no way to know what he would normally do. He doesn't wear a watch. In his black socks he goes to the door to switch off the light, then goes softly back to his bed and climbs in. He takes a few moments to settle.

The South African says something.

I can't hear you.

What is your name.

Reiner. And you.

I'm Damon.

Damon. Good night.

Good night, Reiner.

Good night.

When he wakes up the next day the other bed is empty and the hissing of water comes from the shower next door. He gets up and goes outside, onto the roof. The air is freezing and brilliant and clear. He crosses to the edge and sits down on the parapet, with all the other roofs in the town below him, the main street running from west to east, the tiny shapes of horses in a field. He is very far away from home.

Reiner comes out onto the roof, drying his long hair with a towel. He is wearing the same black pants from yesterday, but no shirt, his

body is brown and hard, perfectly proportioned. He knows that he is beautiful and somehow this makes him ugly. He stands in the sun, drying himself, and then also crosses over to sit on the parapet. The towel is slung around his neck, his skin is full of goose-bumps from the cold, beads of water shine like metal in the coarse hair on his chest.

What do you want to do today.

What about these ruins.

They go to the ruins. He has already seen them, he spent several hours there yesterday, but now he looks at the thick walls and foundations and fortifications and tall tombs through the eyes of Reiner, whose expression doesn't change as he walks around from one level to the next at the same unvarying pace, his long body perfectly upright. He sits on a rock to wait and Reiner comes to crouch down nearby. Tell me about this place, he says.

I don't know much about the facts, I'm mostly interested in the mythology.

Tell me that then.

He tells what he remembers, how the lonely woman waited for her husband to return from the long war at Troy, incubating revenge out of grief over her murdered daughter, nothing fuels revenge as grief does, a lesson history teaches over and over, joining her rage with that of her lover who has his own griefs to avenge, till the day that Agamemnon comes back, bringing with him his captive concubine, the prophetess, who sees what the future holds but can do nothing to prevent it. He walks in over the bright tapestries that his wife has spread before him, dragging ten years of siege behind him in his wake, Cassandra follows, both of them are slaughtered inside. He is struck down in his bath, for some reason this single

image is the one that stays most vivid and real, the huge man felled by axes, spouting blood, collapsing naked into the scarlet water, why is violence always so easy to imagine but tenderness stays locked in words for me. Already in the ending of this story the next cycle of grief and revenge is inevitable, that is to say the following story must begin. And is this true, Reiner says. What do you mean by that. I mean did it happen. No, no, this is the myth, but myth always has some fact in it. And what is the fact here. I don't know, this place exists, for a long time people thought it didn't, that's a fact to start with. I'm not much interested in myths, Reiner says, let's climb up there.

He means the mountain behind the ruins.

Up there.

Yes.

Why.

Because, he says. He is smiling again, there is a peculiar glint in his eye, some kind of challenge has been issued that it would be failure to refuse.

They start to climb. On the lower slope there is a ploughed field they walk carefully around, then the mountain goes up steeply, they pick their way through undergrowth and pull themselves through branches. The higher they go the more jumbled and dangerous the rocks become. After an hour or so they have come out on a lower shoulder of the mountain with its tall peak looming overhead, but he doesn't want to go further than this. Here, he says. Here, Reiner says, looking up, have you had enough. Yes. There is a moment before the answer comes, okay, and when they settle themselves on a rock the German has a strange sardonic look on his face.

Now the ruins are far below and the two or three other people in them are as tiny as toys. The sun is already high and despite the time of year the day is warm. Reiner takes his shirt off and bares again that flat belly with its gun-powder trail of dark hair leading down, down. What are you doing in Greece, he says.

Me. Just travelling around. Just looking.

Looking at what.

I don't know.

How long have you been travelling for.

A few months.

Where have you been.

I started in England. France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, now I'm back in Greece. I don't know where I'm going from here.

There is a silence while the German studies him and he looks away, down into the valley, out across the plain to the distant blue mountains, there is a question behind these questions that he doesn't want to answer.

And you.

I have come here to think.

To think.

Yes, I have a problem at home. I wanted to come and walk for a few weeks and think.

Reiner says this and then closes his eyes. He will not speak either, but in him silence is power. Unlike me, unlike me. I also take my shirt off, to bask in the warm sun. Then, he doesn't know why, he doesn't stop, he takes his shoes and socks off, his pants, he is in his underpants on the rock, the air is not warm any more. Both of them understand that he is in some way offering himself, thin and pale and edible on the grey stone. He also closes his eyes.

When he opens them again Reiner is busy putting on his shirt. His expression remains unchanged, he gives nothing away. It's lunchtime, he says, I want to go down.

The next memory that comes is of evening and somehow it's an inversion of that morning, he is sitting on the parapet again while the last light is fading from the sky, Reiner is in the shower again, the noise of the water carries. Then it stops. A little later he comes out, shirtless again, the towel around his neck, and crosses to sit beside him on the low wall. There is silence for a while and then, as if answering a question that has just been put to him, Reiner says softly that he has come here to think about a woman.

The sun has gone now, the first stars are showing through.

A woman.

Yes. There is this woman in Berlin. She wants to marry me. I don't want to get married, but she won't see me any more if I don't marry her.

This is your problem.

Yes.

And have you decided.

Not yet. But I don't think I will get married.

The town is built on a slope that continues gently downward for a kilometre or two and then flattens into the plain that runs on to the sea. Where the plain begins is the railway line that brought him here and that will take him away tomorrow and on which, at this moment, a train is distantly passing, its carriages lit from inside by a yellow glow. He watches the train pass. I'm also here because of someone else, he says. But I'm not trying to decide, just to forget.

I thought so.

This person is not a woman.

Reiner makes a gesture on the air, as if he is throwing something away. A man or a woman, he says, it makes no difference to me.

This seems to mean one thing, but may mean another. Later that night in the little room, when they are preparing for bed, he strips down to his underpants, as he did earlier in the day on the rock, then rolls quickly into his sleeping bag. It is very cold tonight. Reiner takes a long time to get ready, folding up his shirt and socks and putting them into his bag. Then he takes off his pants. He does this with a certain sense of ceremony, standing in the centre of the room, folding the pants. Then in his underwear, which isn't black, he crosses to the other bed, the one in which I am lying, and sits down on the edge. Would you like some, he says, holding out an apple, I found this in my bag. The two of them pass it between them, solemnly biting and chewing, the one lying propped up on an elbow, the other sitting with his knees drawn up, all it will take is a tiny movement from one of them, a hand extended, or the edge of the sleeping bag lifted, would you like to get in, but neither makes the move, one is too scared and the other too proud, then the

apple is finished, the moment is past, Reiner gets up, rubbing his shoulders, it's cold in here, he goes back to his own bed.

The light is still on. After a moment he gets up to put it off. Then he crosses the dark room to the other bed and sits down next to Reiner. He doesn't have an apple to offer and both of them wait in silence, breathing, for the gesture that neither of them will make, then he gets up and goes back to his own bed. He finds that he is trembling.

In the morning they are formal and correct with each other again. They pack their bags. Would you like my address, Reiner says, maybe you will come to Germany one day. He writes it into the little book himself, the tight letters precisely inscribed, then asks, could I have your address too. I don't have an address, I don't have a place, but I'll give you the name of a friend, this he writes down for the other man, then the exchange is complete. They walk together along the main street out of town, down the long slope to the railway station. Their trains are leaving minutes apart, going in different directions. The railway station is a single room and a concrete platform at the edge of the endless green plain, they are the only passengers waiting, a single official behind a dirty window sells them tickets and then comes out himself when the first train appears, to blow his whistle. The South African gets on and goes to the window. Goodbye, he says, I'm glad I met you.

Me too.

Listen.

Yes.

Why do you always wear black.

The German smiles. Because I like it, he says.

The train starts to move.

I will see you again, Reiner says and raises a hand, and then he is disappearing slowly into distance, the solid landscape turning liquid as it pours.