

Fata Morgana

Crossing



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(A life's journey)

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Part One: Oblivion

Day 269

-'What was the name of that Tahitian village where Gauguin lived?'

The answer was late so the question was in the air. Armin was pondering but suddenly he couldn't recall the answer. Though he knew what it was about. Olina was staring at her husband found it very funny for a moment that she didn't remember it though she had studied that painter and especially the Tahitian events of his life. Armin remembered it already but he was waiting. He didn't want to spoil Olina's joy saying it herself. This way it was not going to bother her that she couldn't recall it immediately. But he saw the woman's look was rambling on turning towards the leaves of the trees and her face was clouding over. Olina got angry with herself - how she could forget it. On the other hand she felt she had the word on the tip of her tongue, still she couldn't say it. Armin was afraid a few seconds later that if she couldn't recall it soon there would be bigger trouble that could hurt Olina's soul, so he quickly told it to her: „Mataiea.”

The word was said, evoking big relief, what more, joy. Olina's face was shining. She nodded while repeating it twice: Mataiea, Mataiea. Armin didn't know what this word was needed for whether it meant the end of a stream of consciousness or it was only an intermediate stop.

They were sitting on their terrace. It wasn't big as their house wasn't big either. It was just big enough for the two of them but they were calling it a „villa” with delight. They used to say when they were receiving guests, when those kind of people were driving out to the 'villa quarter' at the end of the city, who had never been there before. When the guests said how small their house was as opposed to the bigger villa in the district, then Olina and Armin remained silent and were smiling. Despite saying „there are only the two of us” because that would hurt, they had their usual answer „this is enough for us, it is just right” and started to talk about something else right away. They had been doing this for quite long.

It was a late autumn afternoon. The air was still mild, but winter seemed to be hiding under the bushes. They were touched by reminding and noting gentle breezes. Olina shivered. That was enough for Armin to get up from his comfortable armchair: „Come on darling. Let's go inside. The sun is going down.”

It was only warm enough to sit here, when the terrace was brilliantly illuminated. At the time those who built it knew this terrace was built on the Western side of the house. Olina grabbed the book she was reading. They were doing their early evening tattoo with well accustomed moves: each took their own pillows, Armin took the brown wooden tray with the cups. He went into the kitchen but when he stepped into the living room he dropped the pillow from underneath his arm into the armchair. Its place was there for the night. It would lie there until the afternoon the day after, when they would sit out on the terrace again. They would drink their ritual afternoon coffee there made by Olina. Later, around the evening Armin would wash up the two cups and the porcelain pot. They never leave a drop of coffee, sometimes the man imitates squeezing the bottom of the pot to get the last drop out of it. They were always smiling at this.

Olina was hurt by that little absent-mindedness. She used to study Gauguin's life for a long time especially poor Paul's so unfortunate Tahitian years. Now she was walking slowly towards her room. It was a small room, her desk could hardly go into it, and all the walls were covered by bookshelves. She didn't take out the big Gauguin album, only touched it. She knew all of the painter's works, knew their titles in Tahitian too. This was the reason this Mataiea thing hurt her so much, though she tried hard not to think about it any more. „I should have known this.”

Day 251

Armin was watching his wife.

Olina didn't know her husband was watching her. She saw the man turning into the house, suddenly stopped on the grey concrete in front of the garage way. They had decided so many times they would have red stones there, a kind that would be able to take a car's weight. But for some reasons this remained only a plan. One of those things they had always postponed for the later times. It wasn't a putting off but a rather warm feeling of promise that surrounded their souls. That they would have things to do in the upcoming years. They were both thirty five when they had bought the house, though they were still paying the instalments they could see the end of the half-ownership period. As eight years had passed they needed two more years and they would finally own this house. Beside the garage way they were saving the changing of the eaves in the backyard for the following year. Armin wanted to have copper eaves. he knew they were really expensive but if they had put that on it would work properly in fifty years time, while the sheet tin would give only a temporary impression and wouldn't last long. Olina had been dreaming of a pool as well, but the garden was too small, she felt sorry for the emerald lawn to be sacrificed.

Armin didn't go into the house, he went around on the Eastern side. He was approaching in the shadow. Olina had just waved to him from the other corner of the house then went back to the garden. Her husband came to a sudden stop at the corner saw his woman from above the dark green hedge of the boxwood. Olina did not feel him being there, she thought he went into the house. She was busy working. She was planting the perennials wearing yellow gloves, light green dungarees, straw hat that she had just hung up on a pale as the sun didn't shine there. Her brownish red hair was fluttering, she let it grow every now and then and then she had it cut. She was at home in the summer, had plenty of time to sunbathe so her skin was still white coffee coloured at the beginning of October.

Armin was standing for just a minute. He was looking at the woman with whom he had been together for sixteen years. Still he was able to watch her as if he had seen her for the first time. He didn't know if it was good or bad, so he didn't mention it to Olina. He kept this to himself too, as so many other thoughts that he couldn't share with his wife as these thoughts were of her. Olina was not only part of his life but she had become his life. At least this was how he felt so many times. And it was a good feeling to know that Olina would say the same if someone had asked her. But no one asked.

Their bond had been made stronger by the old events and newer ones as well. But most of all by this house that had become the couple's shelter. And Armin felt this too whenever he came home. He loved two moments of the day. One was when he got up in the morning looked out the window and saw the sun rising.

Of course in the winter it wasn't this good, but from early spring till late fall, the sunrise woke up the same roaring tune in his soul. The other was the afternoon, even in winter, when he got home from work. He left the bank which was not of his and he got only a small amount of share and only indirectly. He did his job daily as a manager. He went in in the morning and came home in the afternoon five times a week. The best home coming was on Friday. Before he took the car into the garage he walked back slowly to the gate and closed it ceremoniously. Announcing to the world that it would be closed until Monday morning and he would have a great time at home for two days. If they had lived in the States there would have been no fence at all. But this was Europe it had occurred to him sometimes. Here the symbols were just as important as reality. Symbolic and at times not at all symbolic boundaries kept people away from each other.

Maybe the one in the afternoon meant greater joy from the two events. Because though there was a promise of a new day, the hope of good events in the morning, the afternoon didn't suggest anything bad and couldn't bring any bad events. As he was at home, in his own castle, with his Olina. He was looking at her from above the hedge for a minute. They got to know each other at the age of twenty six. Armin had been thinking about those years lately, he didn't know why. Twenty six was the age they had met, twenty seven when they had got married. What came after this he jumped over in thought. This time too.

But then Olina felt she was being watched. By the time she turned around Armin had stepped forward and went as if he had been moving all this time. „Hello darling. What are you doing?”

The woman didn't answer just pointed towards the ground. The man's look slipped over the seedlings with balls of earth, green stems and turned back to the woman's face. „Shall I make coffee?”

„That would be great. Now you make it just this once as you see I can't leave it off.”

„Fifteen minutes?” - the question was asked in the short version usually used by them.

„Twenty minutes.” - Olina replied quickly as a flash, explaining. „I need to wash my hands too.”

In half an hour they were sitting on the terrace. The brown wooden tray was on the small round table, with the two handles, with the sugar bowl, the porcelain pot that had swan shaped neck, the yellow, flowered cups with the fake golden edges on it. And the atmosphere that was just theirs, always theirs at such times.

„Any news about the job?” - Armin asked. The school of music where Olina had taught had been wound up after twenty years. There were three other institutes of the same sort in town. Olina called them all on the same day every week. Olina looked at her husband:

„Should I have called them today?”

„Yes, I think, you usually call them on Thursdays.”

„I forgot it.” - admitted Olina with a face of someone who was completely surprised about herself. The man didn't say a word. He had never said it before, so he remained silent now as well. He earned enough for the both of them living comfortably. As he had done it until now. But because he believed it would offend Olina, he remained silent. He was looking at his wife above the coffee cups then he turned his look towards the setting sun that only lighted the floor of the terrace in spots through the leaves of the trees.

Day 248

Those two were there. They were not there. They were talking. They didn't exchange words, only thoughts. They could see the woman well when she went out to the garden. Who would have suspected they were there. That they existed.

„Is it her?”

„Yes.”

„You think we need her?”

„Yes and soon.”

„Time is of no significance, as we know.”

„We know.”

Olina pulled on the strikingly glaring, awkward and slightly stiff yellow rubber gloves, grabbed the spade and pushed it in the soft soil. Her face was in shadow. She didn't pay attention to anything she was working.

„Are you sure it's her?” - came the question.

„Sure it's her.” - came the answer.

Day 240

On the edge of the villa quarter there was a small department store with only a few people in it. The day had hardly started, it was around nine. Some shop assistant and a few customers were roaming between the gondolas. Olina put the goods in the trolley meditating. She was holding all the boxes, glasses and bags for

quite long, she was reading the information. Still she had the feeling that nothing reached her mind. But because this was a habit of hers, she always did this, she didn't do it differently this time either.

She had a strange feeling but she didn't know what it was. She had never met anything like that before. - in herself. At the same time it seemed as if this something moving inside was covered an opaque curtain. She took the French bean tin and she looked for a shop assistant, first only looked and then she left the gondolas. The shop assistant was a young girl, smiling and helpful. She could have seen something on the face of the one approaching as she asked:

„Can I help you, madam?“

„This bean...French bean...when?“ - and she pushed the tin in front of the woman's face with rigid and awkward moves. The girl took it, hold it to eye height but meanwhile she was looking at Olina uncomprehending.

„What would you like to know?“

„When it...when it...expires?“

„The guarantee? I'll look for it.“ - and she was lost in the sea of tiny letters on the side of the tin. A few moments passed while for Olina nothing happened. Something broke in her, she felt it clearly, that it was like that at one moment and then suddenly it changed. But she didn't know what it was. She grabbed the tin from the girl's hands, her move was a bit rude, here a bit unusual, as the shop assistant held the tin even stronger. Olina gave out a strange puffing noise, she had all the anger in it. Maybe an unbelievably compressed sentence as well that for some obvious reasons not then, not later came to this world again. She was holding the tin above her head while going back to see the girl staring at her in dismay. Olina understood it only then that the feeling that had come over her was huge anger. But she didn't know why it had been born and bursted out, and at that moment she didn't want to know it.

Day 233

It was around one o'clock in the afternoon. Armin had just got back from the lavatory and was heading to his desk. It was on the gallery of the bank glassed-in, in a room opened from both sides. The noise from here couldn't be heard down in the „arena“ as those working here called the inner, semicircular customer area, where the cashiers' desks were and where the advisors were sitting receiving the customers coming in from the streets. From here Armin could look over at the „arena“ any time. He was responsible for the supervision of the advisors. There were controversial cases every day and he had to make the summaries of the previous days too, including weekly and monthly summaries. But Armin didn't feel miserable because of this on the contrary. He had a good time in the bank, he loved this job, he liked his colleagues, even the bosses too. Armin could always adapt very well and he always found the good, the useful, and the nice in everything. Someone once called him a „Plasticine Man“ but that time he had protested against it. Though he felt he was made of some kind of easy, mouldable material. Where there was a rift, he could have been stucked in. Besides if he was shown the rift, he could have filled it with his whole existence, he would have tucked himself to it. He never ran away from tasks and work. He believed nothing could be so hard he wouldn't accept it or solve it. He looked at his own desk now. There was a small name plate imitating to be golden on a wooden base: ARMIN POLNICK. He never forgot looking at it while approaching. At these times he always thought about the occasions when the security let some clients up here every now and then directly to him, they recognized and read his name. His own name.

But now before he sat down he saw Olina. The woman was standing at the entrance. She was just standing. This hit the man. Why was she just standing? Why didn't she come in? Olina came to visit her husband every two weeks when she was around. The bank was at the most beautiful part of the town, on the edge of a big square, at the corner of one of the road leading this way. An ideal spot for everyone. Of course Olina, since she

had been unemployed came to the town rarely. The school of music was not far. It was still here, but went on without Olina. There were too many piano teachers, they said and new ones were sent out from the conservatories.

Olina said something to the security guard. that was noticeably standing next to her helplessly then with hesitant move pointed toward the small bench next to the entrance. By then Armin had been walking down the stairs. He went through the clients sitting and waiting patiently in the comfortable armchairs. There were enough cashiers' desks and advisors, the clients coming in unexpectedly had to wait only three-four minutes before it was their turn.

„Hello darling!“ - Armin was smiling. The security guard hearing this, who has some kind of information service tasks as well at the wide photocell doors stepped back carefully. Olina didn't answer. She looked at her husband acknowledged his presence with a slight smile and greeted him. But she didn't stand up. She was sitting as if... Her husband said:

„Are you very tired?“

He could have said it without a question tone. Olina nodded and she was sitting still. Armin asked three more questions but he didn't get any answers. This whole thing started to become embarrassing but only for him. No one was paying attention to them. The guard went away from them, others couldn't hear them. If anyone had been watching this scene would have thought they were talking. But Olina didn't talk, not yet. She opened her mouth later, softly and hesitating:

„I don't know... why I came here. I was walking in the town and suddenly I was here.“

„You don't say so...“ - Armin started it merrily but he clipped the sentence when he saw the woman's eyes. The woman looked around in the bank first but as if she didn't really see it. Most of all there was no interest in her eyes. Armin realized he had been looking at his wife as a stranger, even if it was only for a few seconds. But the moment passed and he hoped it would never come back.

„I have had lunch already, so I can't go out now. But if you wanted lunch...“

Olina could have understood this as „you're disturbing me, you're keeping me up, so go away“. But she didn't. She was sitting for another minute then she smiled at her husband gratefully.

„Armin, I just had some rest. I was walking a lot and suddenly I felt I was really tired. I was just in front of the bank...“ - she made a face that Armin didn't understand. The whole thing might have lasted for a second, the man could have thought it hadn't happened. Some kind of a force convulsed his wife's face, then released and her features were just like they had been before.

„Bye darling, see you at home.“ - he followed her to the door, the two glass sheets opened before them. But only Olina stepped out. Armin was withdrawing slowly to get out of the sight of the photocell doors. Olina didn't reach the sidewalk when the glass sheets were moving towards each other in silence, they met and united again. They became doors.

Day 228

It was Thursday and Ivo had known it for a long time that something would happen on this day. It was true. He had expected this two Thursdays before already and last week as well. But he couldn't be sure now either. There were moments when he felt some kind of fruit was maturing each day. And this had been going on for at

least a year.

It was Thursday, day of Ester. For the last one and a half year Thursdays had been Ester's day. At least this was how Ivo knew it and felt it. He had got used to it, if it was Thursday then it was Ester, if it was Ester, it was Thursday.

Human name and day name melted. They had been one for quite a while. There had been no problem with it for a long time though Ivo didn't know, there could be a problem with it. That Thursday was ester, Ester was Thursday. It could have been Ester's surname as well, it crossed his mind now. It was the end of October, the sun was shining outside. It's yellow light made their air and town happier. It was Thursday morning that they could both make free. Ester's institute was at the other end of the town. Her husband was working there too so it was difficult for her to get away. But she had to get a commission: she went to another institute once a week in the city centre. She took reports there and back. During the last one and a half year Ester shortened the time she spent in the modern building in downtown, from the one hour at the beginning - to eight-ten minutes now. Of course when she got back to the research centre at the edge of town around lunch time, everyone was convinced she had to stay in town that long. And she really did, but because of their meeting with Ivo in his flat. The doctor didn't go in that day either. He managed to have Thursday mornings as „free time“ that he used naturally for research assuring his boss and others as well. He needed a few hours to organize his notes and thoughts to check the latest articles on the internet and if something came up he needed time for that too. The colleagues in the labs knew he, Ivo sorted out shopping on Thursday mornings as he was a lonely man. Though he didn't say anything like this to them only let them think this.

It was Thursday, the sun was shining, the October breeze was a bit chilly but by noon lukewarm air would spread over the city. Ivo was hoping this too. He put a superficial order in his flat, just a bit. He prepared the wide bed in the bedroom. They had bought this with Gloria ages ago. Sometimes the man realized that what he thought of as an old story had happened three years earlier. But Gloria was lot less than a memory in the man's head. It was like how warm last summer had been, or how the golden gate of sunlight had been shining into his eyes on the beach, when he was playing bare foot with the warm sand. Gloria was no longer around. Though it was a bit frustrating that she was existing somewhere. She didn't give any signs of life but why would she? When a couple got divorced it was better if they had no connection any more. They didn't have children so it made it easier.

He really didn't think of Gloria too often and wasn't happy with the memory flashes when they happened. But he was expecting Ester now. The bedroom was tidy. He put a clean towel in the bathroom, a big and fluffy one as she liked that. He took the framed photo of themselves from the drawer. It had been taken in Venice, they had been standing under the Campanile, in front of the cathedral and there had been pigeons sitting on their open arms. Ester had been laughing and Ivo too. The man was looking at the photo now sceptically. He knew he was laughing a lot less lately. So to say too rarely...

He just looked at his watch when the doorbell rang. Ester used to have a short ring, she hardly touched the button. It was an impulse starting off and riding at full speed from the button to the machine but there was no continuation. Discretion was of big value, the woman used to say. She had been going to the man's flat for one and a half year, as they couldn't meet at her place. She was living with her husband, who was ten years older, sluggish and didn't care about anything. Not even his wife really.

Ivo had met Ester not long after his divorce. They had bumped into each other literally at the end of an escalator in a department store. One of them had just got up the other one had wanted to go down. Ester had crossed in front of him to get to the escalator going downwards. Ivo had been looking around to see if he had got to the right floor and they had run into each other, stepped on the other's foot and got entangled. The first moment was of rising anger, their eyes had been flashing with anger. Then it had disappeared in a moment as they had something in the other's eyes that driven anger away to give its place to something else instead. It soon had turned out during that week at their second meeting they both had been missing someone. But since then they had been missing no one.

Ivo opened the door. Ester hurried in immediately as she always did, to shorten the time, even if only with half a second to have anyone see her face in the corridor. Even though it was a big city, way too big she could

run into anyone, who knew her and her husband too.

Ivo closed the door with routine moves. No one could come in while Ester was there. The usual choreography was that the woman dropped her bag, in the winter her coat as well and threw herself in the man's arms. The literal term „to throw herself“ had become usual during the first year. But the drive had declined in the last few months. Ester came out of the bathroom hiding what ever to be hid she had, behind a really small towel. But the man grabbed the towel from her hand in two seconds and threw it away to fall on the bed unconsciously.

It was like that at other times, even the previous Thursday, but something had changed. Seeing the woman's steps and her face when she turned to him, Ivo knew this was the day, the hour, the minute. It was her, Ester had come, but there was strange lights in her eyes. She wasn't smiling. Ivo was sure about the situation. Self compliment crossed his mind: „Well, I sensed it in advance, I knew it would be like this...” But it was a fake compliment as he had thought about this three weeks earlier and later as well. It was just a consolation, a poor one so to say.

„I have come to talk only.” – the woman said putting her hand in front of herself as defense. As if she was assaulted to have her clothes torn to sweep her off her feet. But it was nothing like that. Those times had passed in spring. All kinds of times had passed. Ivo pointed to the living room and followed the woman. They sat down face to face with the coffee table in between them. Ivo sighed:

„You want to break up. I have felt it for weeks.”

„You're right. Look, Ivo, I can't do this any longer. You're like a machine.”

„What do you mean?”

„A machine. A human machine. A machine human. Either this or that. You have no feelings. You do your job at the research center and have three hours free once a week, one and a half for me, if I'm lucky. And then that was it. I get dressed and leave to wait for the next Thursday morning.”

„I'm waiting...I was waiting for it too.” – said the man softly, correcting himself, proving he knew that was it. But Ester didn't hear him. She just showered everything that had been bothering her for weeks on him and kept talking. She told him how happy she had been one and a half year earlier that they had met, how different Ivo had been back then from her husband. How good it had been to go to Venice even if it had been only for once. She had been preparing for it for weeks to make her husband believe her former classmates had organised a trip without taking family members. Her eyes were gleaming again. Meanwhile it crossed Ivo's mind to do some divorced husband trick to sit next to Ester or what was even better to go on his knees and promise... But what could he promise? He knew it well: the woman was right. He didn't give anything extra to Ester's life.

And the woman was just talking about that.

„You couldn't come with me anywhere because what if my husband gets to know about it. It was quite a comfortable pretext many times now you can admit it. You are self-contained, your wife left you for a reason. You are obsessed with your job, you have to admit it, you have success in that. Only in that. You have no idea how to take care of another person, a woman. It is a great wonder that we could come to this close to each other. I have had lot of work in this too and you almost nothing. Frankly, what you needed me for could have got it from anyone else, anytime whenever it is comfortable for you. It's a great thing that you were willing to reorganize half day. Different from usual schedule. If it depended on you, you would just come home on Thursday mornings we got to the bed, jumped out of it and you didn't hear from me for a week, didn't even see me and you can run back to your institute, to your test-tubes... But what am I saying? You are in your lab in your head! This happened every Thursday for one and a half year. This orderliness is killing me!”

„And I cannot imagine my life without it.” – the man said it suddenly. This was an honest sentence, with

what he dig himself deeper. But Ester appreciated it. Meanwhile the man realized he hadn't taken a look at the woman for quite a while. Nowadays when he closed his eyes on a Friday or Monday and tried to imagine what Ester looked like, he didn't succeed. Now he was watching her thoroughly as if he wanted to remember her. But he didn't.

Ester was thirty seven had a nice face. Still that face was way too sharp. Her voice was slightly higher than usual female voice that sometimes got on the man's nerves. Her body showed signs of getting closer to forty. Her dark hair, the wrinkles around her eyes, were not from laughing. Her skin was still elastic, but there was cellulitis on her thighs, Ivo had seen it from pretty close in certain positions. Sometimes Ester laughed too loudly it could be disturbing in company. But except for the Venetian trip where there had been only the two of them., they hadn't been anywhere together.

Ester was sitting with straight and rigid back, sometimes this was the way to push her breasts out but this time it was not the case. Her look was cold, her word was rough, what she said hurt.

„Look Ivo, this can't go on like this. Doesn't make any sense. What did you think? How long is it going to work like this? That I will come here every Thursday for ever and ever? Fifty more Thursdays, two hundred or thousand? If you had encouraged me.. If you had loved me, not only in bed... I would have divorced to be with you.“

That sentence didn't surprise him. Ivo had been scared of that during the last months. This was the reason he had held himself back. He didn't want to say more or do more than what he really felt - and that really was little. A lot less than what she would have been settled for.

So the man was sitting in silence. His whole body showed agreement. He didn't defy her, he wasn't desperate and Ester knew he had prepared himself for the split. What was worse: it was obvious he didn't want to do anything against it. She was offended by this. If she had a little hope at all that things would happen differently now it perished without a trace. She stood up holding to her bag only: „I'm not suitable for this Ivo.“ She would have added „look for someone else“ but that would have been useless. If the man had been surprised by all this, he might have thought of the continuation, of the woman. He might have promised to go with her anywhere to spend more time with her. But it would be fake. Deep down in Ivo's soul this had been good enough like that. He couldn't and didn't want to give more of himself neither to Ester, nor anyone else.

So he was just sitting bowing his head. There was a moment when Ester was standing and the man didn't move. He stood up just after that. Slowly, because he felt he could not hurry this time. Some ancient trick suggested him to pretend as if he was really sad, to show, he was devastated by the split. He finally stood up and followed the woman to the door with his head bowed. Maybe they both thought at the same time to say goodbye with a kiss but it would have been an absurd idea. Because what if during the kiss their old reflexes woke up some old, now quite vestigial feelings and the possibility of a calm end would disappear in a moment. Should they feel distress longer?