The Silence of Snow

Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Such were the lines Max usually whispered in the few hours before dawn that always were the worst one.

After the night shifts, he usually dozed the whole day, plunging and emerging from the deep sleep, moaning when the dreams came, breathing like a dying fish, carelessly thrown onto the granite rocks surrounding the lake on the edge of their estate. The last time Max went fishing was a decade ago, the year before the revolution, with his uncle, visiting the family from the frontlines. Uncle Boris was killed next March when the wet snow in the trenches slithered under the feet, and the warm western wind carried the putrid smell of the decomposing bodies scattered over the no man's land.

Sometimes Max thought of himself in the middle of it, although he had never seen a real battlefield. He just spent a few futile hours in the hastily thrown together unit, mainly made of the former students and even schoolboys, attempting to stop the impending wave of the Red cavalry. Their murderous tsunami was spreading from the north into the barren steppes of the wintry Crimea. Max was seventeen at that time and twenty-seven now.

For the last ten years, stuck in the underbelly of Istanbul, he wandered amidst seedy basement shops selling counterfeit perfumes and illegally produced cigarettes. He was drowning in the market crowd, listening to the trams, ringing below on the street, smoking when he had a spare minute, and drinking when he could afford to do so.

The pension was sound asleep. An hour was too late for the night revelers and too early for the market sellers and port dockers.

Getting out of the unkempt bed, Max did not even need to fumble over the chair where he kept his watch, a cigarette case, and some or another Russian book. Flicking a lighter, he sucked in the habitual bitterness of the first-morning cigarette.

The room was strangely lucid. The dawn had not yet risen over the city. Opening the tiny window, Max was startled by the icy breath of the night wind. The molten lead of the wintry Golden Horn barely moved under the whirlwind of snow.

In a couple of hours, the dilapidated houses would come alive. The first yellow tram, festooned with hawkers, market sellers, and the lowlifes loitering around the narrow streets, would slowly but persistently make its way from the upper station of Tunel along the Istiklal Avenue. Max seldom used the tram or the funicular descending to the port warehouses on the shores of the Golden Horn.

On the rare occasions when he needed to cross the Horn, he went to the other shore on foot. Max traversed the wooden bridge crowded with pedestrians, trucks, pushcarts, and the ubiquitous black taxi motors, reminding him of the beetles, busily coming alive in the first months of spring.

Max’s spaniel had always tried to hunt them, barking in disappointment when the insects slopped away from under his paw. The dog, brought by his late father from Britain the year before the war, was left on the family estate when Max with his mother and sister fled the capital to join his father, fighting with the White Guard. All of them were now dead.

His father, killed on the Don river, would have said it is useless to cry over the spilled milk. Max agreed with him but still sometimes wondered about the spaniel’s fate. He imagined the dog roaming freely in their vast park. He always saw it happening in his favorite hour when the sunset bathed the trees and the meadows in the copper light. The tea was served at the terrace, and the spaniel, having ran home well before Max, always managed to climb the stairs and lie under the wicker chair well before Max would appear at the tea table.

This pre-dawn hour was the one he loathed deeply. His violin, a mass-produced article, bought ten years ago in one of the junk stores nearby, also hated the loneliness of this early hour. The instrument that usually occupied a place on the wall would come alive, producing some strange howling noises, reminding Max of the cries of a wounded animal or a sick child. His little sister dying from typhus in the smelly bowels of an ancient ship that carried them from Crimea to Istanbul had been screaming for days until her tiny body, shrouded in the piece of cloth, sunk to the bottom of the Black Sea.

His mother slit her wrists two weeks after they disembarked on the crowded pier in the middle of the night. Under the relentless eastern wind and sharp blizzard, they carried one battered suitcase containing a meager fistful of gold coins, enough to secure a tiny dilapidated cell of a room not far from the pension where Max was wasting his life nowadays.

The rest of the money they spent on food. The insistence of the mother also produced the infamous violin. She hoped Max would continue to perform and compose as he did before their life was torn and broken and before nothing was left for either of them or the country they could not imagine ever depart. Still shocked and silenced, he did not argue, hoping for the return of the sounds within him but a fortnight later, finding his mother in the rust-covered bathtub, drizzled with the dark pomegranate of her blood, he understood that the music inside him was dead.

Max did not count as music the sounds he produced every other day on the beaten and abused piano, hiding in the corner of the dubious nightclub on one of the narrow side streets off Istiklal Avenue. The patrons did not care for the quality of the music accompanying their dancing with resident girls, populating the lowly pensions all around this side of the Golden Horn. Sometimes Max found himself in the creaky bed of one or the other prostitute, perfectly aware that both were merely trying to drown their sorrows in the oblivion of the quick and soulless sex, accompanied by the cheap wine.

Still perched on the windowsill, Max listened to the sounds around him. The violin hummed something sorrowful. The silent air was filling with the distant weeping of the approaching wind. He shivered in his threadbare nightshirt and old pajama pants, stained with the bloody red of the spilled wine and the faint remains of the vomit. Max has never been good at laundry. In his first years in Istanbul, struggling to make the end meet, he worked a night shift in the basement of the luxury hotel in Pera, where the rows of boiling cauldrons tried to whitewash the greater and lesser sins of the guests, soundly sleeping somewhere above.

The violin still would not shut up. Max started to hate the thing, hanging in his room as a constant reminder of his failures. Leafing through the American and French newspapers in the lobbies of the decent hotels, he sometimes saw the names of his fellow students, the Conservatory class of 1916. A couple of them were performing in Europe, and one has emerged as a Hollywood composer. Max did not want to write to anyone asking for help.

He hated begging, which he has also tried, although consoling himself that he was at least doing something and not simply pestering the pedestrians. He was always a quick learner and could play any tune after hearing it just once. Standing on the corner of Istiklal Avenue, under the rain or the scorching sun, Max played the potpourri of the local and Western tunes, sometimes mixing them with the old Russian songs he hated to play since he did not want the bystanders to see him crying.

His unshaven cheeks were wet now as well. Wiping his face with a shirtsleeve, Max wearily got up. He briefly contemplated returning to a chilly bed but instead took his overcoat from the hook in the wall. Max decided not to change his night outfit into something more decent. He was not likely to meet anyone on the still empty streets under the dawn, barely reddening over the Bosporus. Max just shoved his feet into the broken street boots.

The violin barely fitted into the torn and crudely mended pocket of his overcoat. The woolen scarf bit his bare neck.

Slamming the door, he went downstairs, where the copper pot of Turkish tea was already simmering on the stove. The reception desk was empty save for the sack of still-warm flatbreads delivered from the nearby bakery.

The cold wind on the street slapped his face, and Max shivered. The white veil of snow enveloped the tiled roofs. The leaden stretch of the Golden Horn began just at the end of the steep side street. The leaking boots turned into the shackles on his feet, but he stubbornly went forward as if hearing the song of the water.

The storm raged somewhere in the open sea, but the Horn was standing still. Stopping at the edge of the water, Max extended his arm. The violin flew into the air. The instrument became a dark dot on the expanse of mute water, quickly sinking into oblivion, going down.