

In The Wake

It isn't immediately apparent to the newcomer that the small coastal township he stumbled into looking for work is still reeling from a tragedy. The last several miles of his journey took him along coastal headlands, rural tracks and cypress woods, before the slow descent on foot down a narrow serpentine path, alongside terraced stone walls and onto the town's rambling streets. Passing by milk-white limestone buildings, tiny harbour shops and sheltered restaurants overlooking the sea, he is struck by the vividness of the sea surface and its hundred sun spattered shades of turquoise; its ripples swaying and quivering and frothing and surging into swells as if trying to reach the swallows and seagulls suspended on mild currents above it. The deafening roar of cicadas pierces the air, interspersed with the purring of boat engines and sounds of children on the nearby beach. Overwhelmed by familiar smells, sounds and vistas, he watches motionless, lost in thought for a brief moment, then continues toward the town centre.

Worn out, he finds a seat on a patio in front of a small run-down bistro and orders food from a listless waiter who appears completely uninterested in serving him. While eating, he notices two older men at the table next to him, talking to each other in low voices and every so often glancing sneeringly in his direction. He tries to strike up a conversation but after a while their reserve makes him feel uneasy and he finishes his meal and leaves.

As he goes on, a certain reluctance in locals to speak to him becomes more apparent; some dismiss him with a quick unhelpful reply, others with a waving gesture and silent scornful gaze; no one seems to be willing to offer information. Taking no notice of the natives' apparent irritability, he walks on, absent, preoccupied, his stride unhurried and determined in its resolve. After few hours of navigating narrow cobblestoned alleyways, visiting bars and taverns and with no work prospect in sight, the stranger comes upon an abrupt, seemingly infinite staircase, no more than a crevice squeezed between ascending rows of decrepit two-storey dwellings. He starts upwards, confined by hackneyed walls, allowing for a space only slightly wider than the width of his shoulders. The stairs lead up to a small square, paved with large uneven slabs of stone worn over centuries to shiny perfection and dominated by crumbling ruins of medieval fortification walls of a cathedral whose belfry overlooks the vast blue expanse from a great height. Here, he settles down to watch the sunset.

An old woman sits on the decaying steps to his right, holding a scruffy ginger cat on her knees, its eyes almost completely shut, oozing yellowish secretion. The woman looks frail, a thin silhouette wearing loose dark coloured garments and a scarf over her head. Her face, deeply furrowed, resembles a cracked surface of parched desert soil, while her skin, tanned to leather-like quality, makes him wonder if she was a permanent fixture here, some

sort of custodian looking over the square under scorching summer sun. Somewhat repulsed by her presence yet unable to avert his gaze, the stranger is unable to see the woman's eyes hidden deep within the sockets, yet in no doubt that her attention is turned to him. After a while the old woman speaks.

'Hurts, doesn't it?'

She waits for the reply and when it doesn't come she looks away into the distance, seemingly losing interest and beginning to sing to herself in muted voice. She speaks again after a few minutes, without apparently addressing anyone in particular.

'...the pain subsides, but never forgets. Sooner or later it comes back, then it's gone again, if you're lucky. The doomed ones, they carry it around like dead weight. There aren't enough sunsets in ten lifetimes to unburden them.'

The old woman looks away again. The stranger listens indifferently, then gets up, preparing to leave. The woman turns to him once more, whispering.

'When tragedy strikes, the usher is never far behind.'

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The town is different in the dusk, dimly illuminated by the street lamps, rolling back the centuries and assuming an ancient bygone quality; its streets are largely deserted except for few silent shapes crouched on door sills in the darkness, only coming to life with an occasional glow of cigarette light. Music drones in the distance and sounds of laughter and clinking glassware carried by humid windless air reverberate through passageways and unlit cul-de-sacs. Having wondered aimlessly around town, the stranger finds a secluded bench by the marina and lies down on its mildewy wooden slats with heavy sigh. Fetid odour of iodine and decomposing fish nauseate him, he is fatigued and hungry and his feet and back are throbbing. He sits on the bench engrossed in thought and unable to sleep, listening to gentle nudging of water against the boat hulls. Then, apparently changing his mind, he gets up again and continues along the sea edge with urgency.

A long concrete pier extends far into the dark mass of water that sighs at a constant pace with each coming wavelet. The stranger stands next to it and contemplates whether to tread on it or not for a long moment, then at last sets off into the blackness. Approaching the end of the structure, a figure comes into his view, standing still and facing the sea, oblivious

to his presence. He stops several meters behind, not wishing to startle the person. The lights from the shore cast long incandescent ribbons far onto the high tide. A small vessel slowly approaches the pier, momentarily illuminating the pair standing on it; the woman in front of him follows the boat with her gaze as it glides by; for an instant he catches sight of her delicate frame, evident beneath the dark dress which covers most of her body. Realising she isn't alone, the woman turns to the intruder, startled. With her initial surprise fading, she considers him briefly in the diminishing light of the passing boat. The stranger remains silent. Once again, they stand in almost complete darkness, two apparitions facing each other. Then, almost pushing him aside, she starts for the shore in great haste.

His feet ache as he tries to keep up with her. She walks hurriedly without checking to see if she is being followed, soon reaching an old but well-kept stone tavern, situated in a plaza in an affluent part of town, clean and well-lit. The tavern appears abandoned, its upper floor windows are dark with their shutters drawn, tables and chairs removed from its terracotta-tiled patio and stacked in the corner, indicating that some time had passed since it last accepted patrons. The woman stops by the side entrance, unlocks it and disappears inside, leaving the door behind her ajar. The stranger follows.

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He closes the heavy door behind him and climbs the set of wooden stairs in the pitch dark, feeling his way along the uneven chalky wall, until his foot reaches the landing at the top of the stairwell. A faint light seeps out from the room at the end of the hallway; he approaches it and pushes the creaking door open, making his presence known. Inside, the woman stands at the far end of the large room facing a wide marble mantelpiece, on top of it a burning candle, two framed photographs and a porcelain statuette of a fisherman; she is motionless, a lifeless effigy shrouded in flowery, heavily ornamented wallpaper, its fading amber hues giving the room a dusky and cheerless character.

He waits for her to speak.

Still facing away from him, she removes her headscarf. Long strands of shiny black hair fall on her bare neck and shoulders.

'How did you know I lived alone? Or did it not matter to you?'

'I didn't. Of course it mattered. Do you?'

'It isn't by choice. People here are superstitious, they believe that misfortune follows a person forever and that it's best to steer clear of such individuals. Not long ago, I would

have considered them foolish and irrational, but my views too have changed along with my circumstance and I have come to accept my fate. I have been on my own for two weeks now.'

She turns and greets him with a sombre but resolute expression of a woman in possession of exceptional courage and tenacity.

'And you, with whom do you share your life?'

'No one. Many. I've drifted for years not used to company, though it comes sometimes, uninvited, I usually treat it with contempt, ensuring its fleetingness.'

'What brings you here?'

'Work. I came this morning. Nothing so far.'

'You are bound to find something at this time of year.'

'I was planning on leaving tomorrow. The town has not been welcoming.'

'You have to forgive them. Recent events have not been kind to any of us, folks are affected by them.'

'And you?'

'Me as well.'

'What happened?'

Instead of answering the question, she studies his face carefully, then his hair, hands and clothes. There is rawness about her, he could see it buried deep beneath granite layers of dauntlessness, it reveals itself warily, now and again, through a flutter of her eyelashes or a trace of suppressed irritability.

Cautiously, as if attempting to gain an abused creature's trust, she comes closer and not taking her eyes off his reaches for the strap of his shoulder bag, relieving him of its weight and placing it on the chair beside him. She takes him gently by his upper arm, bringing him closer to the mantelpiece. The stranger analyses the pictures: on one, a small boy poses clutching a fishing rod. An arm rests on the boy's shoulder, its owner is missing from the frame. She points to the picture.

'When I lost him, I was very young. Sickness does not choose its victims, I cursed its randomness and voracity, I cursed this town and its inhabitants...and I cursed the man I chose...for his weakness, his lack of devotion to me, his betrayal. Over the years though, his fear does not seem that unreasonable to me anymore...I felt abandoned, disillusion got the better of me and at the time I didn't think it was possible to go on living, but I did go on. I did it for my other child, the one I carried in my womb then; it is to him that I owe my life, he saved me in every sense and has given me strength over the years. And now...'

She pauses, still holding his arm as if gauging his reaction. For a long time the stranger is unable to return the woman's gaze, fixated instead on the other photo. In it, two men, an ageing thickset grey-bearded seaman and a handsome twenty-something, stand aboard a fishing vessel, their arms around each other's shoulders, grinning affectionately at the camera.

'Two weeks ago, the sea took them both. Them and another three. The trawler overturned in stormy seas. Hypothermia got to them before the rescue team could. They were all I had left.'

Not taking his eyes off the photograph, he takes a step backward reaching behind him for a chair. Feeling its wooden back rail under his fingers, he pulls it closer letting his satchel drop on the floorboards as he sits down. She continues.

'Bereavement is a curious sensation, a kind of madness in a way, time and place smash up and you're there, in the middle of it, trying to stay afloat, keeping up appearances, but really you're drowning on the inside. It wants you to wallow in it, not hurry through the flood of disparate feelings that rarely come together in everyday life. Do you know anything

about loss?'

The stranger looks pleadingly at her solemn face, he reaches for her hand but she takes a step back toward the window, opens the shutters letting the sultry midnight air into the room. A long silence ensues. His breathing is laboured, accompanied by the soft crackling of the candle and distant street noise. He rises from his chair and comes closer.

Her hand is warm when he touches it, her hair fine as it curls around his fingers. She does not respond to his embrace. As he pulls her closer, her body is unaffected, rigid, neither resisting nor surrendering. She reaches for the headscarf and attempts to wrap it around her hair again but stops when his hand softly glides over her flushed cheek.

'Will you let me help?'

His words waver yet he persists unsteadily not waiting for a reply; he takes her hands and brings her closer to a settee in the middle of the room, sits down and wraps his arms around her waist, pressing his face against her abdomen like a man condemned begging for reprieve, defenceless, vulnerable. Tears stream down her face as she runs her fingers through his coarse hair, eyes closed, she presses him closer; his grip tightens as he

grasps a floating piece of debris in the sea of isolation, the two derelict structures united in a feverish desperate embrace.

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The mournful wail of a faraway ship horn announces early dawn. He lies still, head propped against the wall, and watches her sleep to the sounds of frolicking gulls and early morning fishermen docking their boats; she is peaceful, smooth dark locks drape her face, her naked back rises and falls with each silent breath in steady rhythm. The stranger leans over and pulls the white flannel sheet over her, then eases himself from the bed, collects his clothes and leaves the darkened room.

He contemplates the two framed images on the mantelpiece for a long moment before removing them from their brass stands and snapping open their backs one by one, carefully removing the photographs, placing them in his front shirt pocket and arranging the empty frames back in their original position. On the way down the staircase groans under his feet and he is soon greeted by an empty street, stifling humidity and morning sun trying to break through the clouds. Quickly reaching the town limits, he starts mounting the steep winding road, its cracked asphalt already radiating heat, turning around with an

outstretched waving arm at every passing car. The town lies beneath him, tranquil and undisturbed.