

Purgatory

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*e canterò di quel secondo regno
dove l'umano spirito si purga
e di salire al ciel diventa degno.*

And of that second kingdom will I sing
Wherein the human spirit doth purge itself,
And to ascend to heaven becometh worthy.ⁱ

Dante

1

The day it all started, I was with a group of other arts students, in a café near the Cardinal-Lemoine metro. Suddenly, with no idea why, I felt a wave of melancholy rise up inside me, such that I found myself incapable of following the discussion of my colleagues, and indifferent to their presence. Giving some excuse, I paid my bill and left.

I walked down rue des Boulangers, then followed rue Geoffrey-Saint-Hilaire to the Jardin des Plantes, and climbed over the fence. It was one of those first days of spring, loyal to the mythical image of this season, with a cloudless blue sky and pleasant temperature. I walked up through the labyrinth and wandered along the great boulevards until that strange state into which I had fallen appeared to dissipate, then I returned home.

Upon entering my bedroom, I discovered on my desk a letter that my mother had found in the letterbox that morning. The envelope stirred my curiosity, for the address was written by hand, which meant it was not from an institution but a person, who had not, however, identified themselves on the back of the envelope, and the stamp bore words in a language I did not know. I opened it, and found a sheet of paper with a handwritten text in beautiful, regular script.

Dear Simon,

You do not know me, but I live in Riga, in Latvia. The strange tie that binds us is too complicated to explain, but you may think of me as a distant relative. As you see, I can more or less speak French, having studied it at school.

I know that soon you will be on university break. I would be very pleased if you would agree to spend it with me and my mother here in Riga. We live in a relatively large house on the island of Ķīpsala, where we could host you without any problems, and where we are looking forward to seeing you.

I hope I will soon have the pleasure of getting to know you.

Best wishes,

Māra

At the bottom of the sheet of paper was written only a postal address, with no indication of any surname. I found this invitation extremely strange, starting with the fact that there was no email address or telephone number, such that I had only enough time to send a letter either refusing the invitation, or announcing the date of my arrival, without any means of finding out more about this mysterious person. And yet, something was compelling me to accept.

So as not to worry my parents, I informed them simply of my project to go to Riga for the spring break. They saw no problem with this, and did not even ask why I had chosen this rather unusual destination, nor whom I was travelling with. I was grateful for their discretion.

There came to me a vague memory of foreign ancestry, which I thought was Russian, on my mother's side. But when I asked her about it, I discovered that my grandmother had been Latvian, born

in Riga. She had taken refuge in Sweden during the German invasion of 1941, then came to France at the end of the war.

I guessed that this ancestor was the source of the 'strange tie' of kinship to which my correspondent had referred. I asked my mother if she still had any family in Latvia. If she did, she said she had no knowledge of it, and admitted she did not even know her grandmother's maiden name.

I replied to the letter, announcing the date of my arrival. A direct flight enabled me to reach Riga in two hours. Since no one was waiting for me at the airport, and I had no phone number, I decided to take a taxi.

The driver did not speak even a few words of English, but I showed him the address written on a piece of paper, and he indicated with a nod and a smile that it meant something to him. We set off, and headed along a motorway towards the city. After having passed through the newer suburbs built on the left bank of the Daugava, the taxi drove onto a large modern bridge, but before we reached the historical area of the city that I could see on the other side, we took an exit and drove down to the island of Kīpsala.

The taxi drove slowly along the waterfront of this strange stretch of earth facing the Old Town while the driver searched for the address. Suddenly he stopped, without cutting the engine, and, having looked at the number of the house in front of us, he asked me, in a Latvian accompanied by gestures, to show him the paper again. I took it out of my pocket and gave it to him.

After consulting it and checking the number we had reached, he gave me back the paper, and with an expression betraying a certain anxiety, reversed a few metres to stop in front of a wooden house on which I saw the number we were looking for. The driver, who was looking increasingly distressed, communicated to me that this was where I had asked to be driven. I paid him what was indicated on the meter, and got out with the small weekend bag I had kept in the taxi with me.

I rang the bell and the door was opened by a beautiful young girl a few years younger than me and dressed in a rather outdated fashion. She introduced herself as Māra, and welcomed me with a smile, all the while maintaining a certain reserve. She did indeed speak French, as her letter had led me to believe.

She gave me a key that would allow me to come and go as I pleased, then showed me around the house. On the ground floor, the dining room and the kitchen, which we did not enter, were on one side, and on the other I glimpsed a living room, cosy-looking but a little old-fashioned, with windows and a glass door looking out onto a large garden. We climbed the stairs to the first floor.

This was where the bedrooms of Māra and her mother were, as well as the bathroom. A narrower staircase took us to the attic, where I was to sleep. Here I found a rather spartan room, containing only a single bed, a narrow wardrobe, and a small table and chair, but the window gave a spectacular view over the Daugava and Vecrīga, the Old Town opposite.

Once I had set down my things, I headed back downstairs. Māra introduced me to her mother, a woman of some forty years who, like her daughter, was hardly dressed in the latest fashions. She spoke only Latvian and Russian, so any communication between us had to pass through Māra, but she was not overly chatty in any case. Despite it being only late afternoon, she announced that we would have dinner soon, then retired to the kitchen.

Finding myself alone with the young girl, I asked her if there was anyone else in her family. She simply replied that they were not there. Then she offered to show me the garden.

It was beautiful weather, warmer even than in Paris. I noticed for the first time the particularity of the Riga light, cold and transparent, of a great intensity, testifying somehow to the presence of the river and the Baltic Sea, some kilometres distant. The grass in the garden was very green, and two trees grew there: one very old pine with twisted, knotted branches, and a pear tree, already showing a few small leaves.

Māra showed me the bare flowerbeds running along the walls of the garden, and told me how once they had grown all different kinds of flowers there, such that the garden was radiant from March through to October. As she said this, her voice contained a certain melancholy, and I asked her why there were no flowers now. But the only response she gave me was a sad smile.

We went back into the house, and soon afterwards sat down to eat. It was still light outside, and I was not hungry, all the more so since Paris was an hour behind. But, out of politeness, I said nothing. The mother served us, then returned to the kitchen. I asked Māra why she did not eat with us, but the young girl simply shrugged, with the same sad smile that served as a response to a great many of my

questions. I believed, this first night, that the mother was avoiding us out of shyness, because we were speaking French, but, in fact, throughout my whole stay, I never saw her eat,

We had barely finished eating when Māra told me she had homework to do. I followed her to the first floor, where she shut herself in her room, then continued up to my own. I looked out the window at the city opposite, where the lights were starting to appear beneath the darkening sky, then sat down at the little table, turned on the lamp, and tried to read.

But I was unable to concentrate, and suddenly I felt very uneasy. I asked myself what I was doing there, in this city, in this room. I turned off the lamp, left the room and went down to the floor below.

I approached Māra's door and knocked very softly. Her voice told me to enter, and I found her sitting at her desk, with the light from the lamp illuminating an open book. When she turned on her chair, she appeared neither surprised nor annoyed by my presence.

She told me to sit down, gesturing at the bed, so I shut the door and did as she asked. I glanced around me, but could not make much out in the gloom. When I asked Māra what she was reading, she said it was a history book.

She wanted to know if I was comfortable in my room, and I said yes, but that I would have preferred to go out to explore the city. The implied complaint provoked no reaction, and so I asked, in a tone that I wished neutral, how she had obtained my postal address, and why she had invited me here. She replied simply and very sweetly that she had asked me out of sympathy.

This enigmatic response in no way satisfied me, but then Māra glanced at her book, as if to signal to me that she had to get back to it. Setting aside her clothing and hairstyle, I found her even prettier than the first time I had seen her that afternoon, and in the half-light of the bedroom I even felt something close to desire. But it was evident she was waiting for me to leave, and so there was nothing I could do but rise and wish her good luck with her work.

Back in my bedroom, I stood at the window without turning on the lamp. The Old Town opposite looked now like a forest of light, above which a few ancient towers could be discerned. The whole thing was rather reassuring. But I was separated from it by the great black stretch of the Daugava waters, this figure of a mystery I simply could not pin down.

ⁱ Longfellow's translation.