

Chapter 5

Let's Dance

odysseus
the siren, fermina daza
one hundred years of solitude
practice vocabulary on sunday
love in the time of cholera
the mirror as symbol
enigma

And thus began my real education. Three days after the nightclub, when I deliberately hadn't texted him, he acquired my number by secretive means. Needless to say, to answer his text—after screaming ecstatically into my pillow—I spent three hours studying Greek mythology and Spanish literature. Then I wrote back:

“So the galley finally made port. I was worried it got shipwrecked by Sirens . . .”

He replied the next morning: “The Siren calls are tempting, but the helmsman is bound to the ship!”

At last, the Celestial Administration had answered all my romantic petitions. This would be no ordinary small talk. Nobody asking how my day went, how I'm doing today, nobody to wish me a great, productive day, and other such sleep-inducing pleasantries that kill all sexual imagination.

“Aren't you going to dock for a bit?” I wrote, giggling. “Explore the streets of Macondo?”

“Wasn't aware they had Sirens in Macondo too.”

“Am I a Siren now?”

“Natural-born one.”

“I didn't realise I was so tempti—” *delete-delete-delete!!!* “—I see,” I wrote.

“Do you? And what is it you see?”

I didn't answer him that night. I dreamt of a great black sea and I was drowning in the middle of it, searching for a ship.

“I see you like games,” I wrote the next day.

“Some games more than others.”

“What kind?”

“Oh, a variety of them. Word games, chess games, people games.”

“So you like untangling things,” I said.

“Actually, I prefer a nice, tight double-knot.”

I read this message again and again, not knowing what to say, while my mind skipped happily into forbidden territories. Then he wrote:

“It's a navigation term. :)”

I wrote back, after thinking for hours: “You're unusually well-spoken for a navigator.”

“I've had time to read.”

“So . . . you actually worked on a ship?”

“Just once—a very long time ago.”

The image of him—shirt unbuttoned, hair wild in the storm winds—turning the helm and letting it spin back as he laughed, struck me as the most masculine vision in the world. I asked him, hoping to conceal my enchantment:

“When?”

He replied the following night:

“When I crossed the channels of Aeolia! :)”

Aeolia. Aeolia. The name had a mythical ring. Quickly, I searched for it online. A floating island in *The Odyssey*, the home of Aeolus—ruler of winds. This Odyssean story seemed important to him. And how did he know I’d thought about the winds the night before? Coincidence, surely. I wrote in my to-do list: Buy *The Odyssey*. Rewatch *Troy*. Then I texted him:

“This just might be the oddest chat I’ve ever had.”

“Then you haven’t had very original chats.”

“I suspect you’ll initiate me then . . .”

“Is that what you want? An initiation?”

There was a pause. I imagined him smiling in that squinting, devastating way.

“Depends on the journey,” I wrote.

“Already a journey?”

“Symbolically speaking.”

“Good. Let’s keep it symbolic for now. :)”

I must’ve read this message twenty times, sensing its cold calibration. I decided I would answer his message tomorrow. Such sudden, enigmatic silences I felt were crucial in our conversation.

The next morning, I was drowning a slice of bread in jam, contemplating ship knots. I kept circling the jam with the knife, smiling on the inside, adding layers and layers of glossy, pink sugar. Meanwhile, my mother slaughtered carrots with the juice machine, so that the whole house sounded like an abattoir.

“Do you *insist* on getting diabetes?!” She shouted over the engine.

There are men who conquer the body. But their power is only tactile, subject to the limitations of the flesh, incapable of reaching those deeper, vulnerable layers of the spirit. And then there are others, subtler and far more artful, who trespass the flesh altogether—slipping past it with sweet, serpentine syntax—nesting their vaporous essence into the dark crypt of the mind. As the body is finite and the mind is not, the latter penetration is infinitely deeper.

I said, my smile curling in mischief: “We can’t all live off celery sticks, mother—” I took a bite of the toast “—lest we piss ourselves to death.”

“Gosh, I do hope you don’t turn into your aunt,” she said, turning the machine off.

“Dolly? What’s Dolly got to do with me,” I said, vaguely upset.

“Nothing. I mean, you’re much smarter than she ever was,” she said patting her hands on her jeans. “But—well you know—mothers worry about these things. These things get passed on in the family. She just talked so much . . . and felt so much . . . and ATE so much!”

“You mean she was a red-blooded human with normal human needs?” I said, mouth stuffed with jelly.

“Oh, spare me please. Needs. Needs are overrated. Anybody with a bag of testicles has needs. Temperance is a far more interesting quality, dear.”

“Spoken like a real stone block, mother. So—” I said, before she could counter “—spoke to dad yet?”

“About what?”

“You know what.”

“Ah—that.” She gave a well-prepared smile, nervy, table-tapping, as she did when trying to contain a rue. “Well, it’s just going to take a while is all, until he sets everything up and—”

“You can always visit him if you like.”

“Yes, I know I can visit him. But I have three children, what do you suppose I do with them?”

“You can take two of them with you,” I said, smiling impishly, picturing the empty house, a kingdom of silence where I could read and dream of him unbothered, and, once I’d tempted him into my web, violate this preppy little paradise, over and over again, every glossy horizontal, every tablecloth and crispy linen, until we fell to the ground, drained, dead. I smiled again.

“Very funny,” she said, placing a glass of carrot juice before me. “How did the presentation go?”

The presentation went as follows: My project was a penthouse for a spy couple. I had worked on it with an unspeakable love. Both of them were undercover—she, a professor of Medieval Studies, he, a famous Italian restaurateur. They had met in Venice. Their mission was to infiltrate the Romanian Prime Minister’s clique and, in the wake of a coup, restore the monarchy. In every corner I had integrated guns, secret compartments, even a command area in the kitchen island. The pantry functioned as a screen for a stock of grenades, gases, AK-47s, and other such utensils. The walnut panels in the living room concealed an entire archive of documents. Even in their closets I had built a secret office. Everywhere: green marble, wavy wood, Versailles parquet, Corbusiers and spotlights, and a sleek, cherrywood library with antique books. The place was a fusion of history with modernism.

He told me: You get an A+ for taste and imagination, a C for technique.

I said: Why?

He said: Well, you have spectacular ideas, but you could refine your drawing.

I said: The Sistine Chapel wasn’t built from drawings.

He said: No? Then what was it built from?

I said: From the mind.

He said: And there it would have stayed, if there hadn’t been an illustration!

I said: Correct. But illustration is just a means of communication. The true value of architecture is in the idea. Solutions are born in the mind.

He said: So, if Dostoevsky had great ideas for books, but couldn’t write—

I said: There’s no comparison. Writing is purer.

He scoffed, asked me to explain.

“It undergoes less processing. Technique in writing is one with thought. You write what you think. Language is the only instrument. The architect thinks in concepts, in abstract shapes which he then converts to drawings, which later some workers transform into cement, bricks, flooring. But imagination—imagination is his crown. Outside of that, he’s just an—an engineer.”

His eyes widened. “So—so the idea reigns supreme! The concept! Ha! So you’re a Platonist!”

“All artists are.”

He failed me.

With a flick of the wrist, I said to my mother: “Oh, it went delightful. I really think I made an impression on him,” and swallowing a mouthful of carrot juice, I rose from the table, stifling a barf. “Really must go now. Seminar soon. Thanks for breakfast. Love you too!”

There was a long distention of horns, sirens, and train sounds. Then the bookshop bell chimed.

“Good afternoon,” I said to the cashier. “Would you happen to have *The Odyssey*?”

“Romanian or English?” He didn’t look at me.

“Eng—no, Romanian.”

“Poem version or prose version?”

“There’s two? Hmm—which is better?”

“There’s no such thing as better, miss,” he said with uninhibited disdain. “Depends on your familiarity with Greek mythology. Are you a beginner or intermediate?” I paused and thought. ‘What knowledge do you have of Ancient Greece, miss?’

“Well—let’s see—I’ve seen Troy at least ten times. Some bedtime stories? Oh, and I was born in Athens.”

“R-ight, beginner then. A moment, please.”

He returned carrying a blue book, its title printed in small, elegant lettering above gold-filigreed waves.

“Thank you,” I said. “By any chance, would you happen to have an old one?”

“Old one? This is a library, young lady, not a museum.”

“Right, right, of course, sorry.” I paid, thanked him, and left for University.

As I walked down Rossetti, the city shifted under a hesitant sun, glimmering in gold then fading back to ash, with tiny, modern coffee shops sprinkled through Brancovian houses and communist buildings, some cloaked in protective mesh and peeled from flaking stucco, and eyes of green and black squinting skeptically at me, as people do in Bucharest, until all of it softened to dark as I walked into the study hall.

It was a vast, melancholic room. Rhythmic sounds of paper filled the air, with dark bookshelves lining green walls that absorbed rather than reflected light. Arched bows in the ceiling lent the room the air of a converted sanatorium. It looked like a place where brain experiments had been held. I took a seat at one of the tables and opened *The Odyssey*.

Obviously, there was no question of reading sequentially. I needed to get an idea of the thing fast. I flew through the pages, scribbling main ideas at the end of each chapter. How devious and smart he was. I pursued him dizzily among the Lotus-eaters, then Cyclops and Polyphemus, as valiant as ever on the stormy waters. And now he had made it to Aeolia and was holding the bag of winds. Then we were running from gigantic cannibals as they hurled their spears at us, and smashed our ships with boulders, and spiked sailors like fish. Now we were back again at sea. I took a deep breath. The navigator . . . the navigator. Clearly, he identified with Odysseus. And he *was* Odysseus. I could see it now—that same charming sprightliness, always slipping just out of reach. And there was in him that same mixture of strategy and superstition so present in the navigator’s world. I flipped through a few more pages. Circe’s Island. Oh, sly sexy sorceress. How she’d turned all those poor men to swine, their hands trotters now, their

voices snorts in the mud, and my beloved, oh no, my darling she'd took in her dumb cave and fornicated with him for a year!

The phone rang. A message from Georgina. Am I coming to class? No, I wasn't bloody coming to class. I was sampling the salt of empires, grooming the mind, becoming a civilized creature, a woman of a higher order who could walk into a room and tilt its axis by discourse. She could wield a t-square if she wanted to. I wanted to wield a bow.

Outside, the last sun shone a blade through a window, illuminating dust specks that by now looked like letters to me. Then the clock struck six with a bang, as lamps replaced daylight, and footsteps shuffled through corridors, and coats were being buttoned. I packed my things and went. I was on the train, twenty minutes later, when he wrote me:

"Silence is allowed only as a means of temptation."

Oh, the wild urge to let joy erupt so loudly from the body that the air itself could throb and spiral. And it wasn't so much his message that exalted me, but the knowledge that my carefully construed cool had begun to work—a silver needle threading, teasing, dancing on the hem of his desire, ready to unpick. I wrote back, smirking:

"I think I'm starting to enjoy these silences."

"Only because they're dense with thoughts."

"And however would you know my thoughts?"

"Simple. I just look into the mirror. :)"

I wanted to shriek and pirouette around the train bars. I wrote:

"I don't believe we've earned that familiarity."

"You needn't earn what is already there."

Possessed by a lunatic confidence, I started typing: "Awfully bold remarks for a Tuesday night in Bucharest."

"So you insist on being Fermina today . . ."

"Fermina?" The name floated on the brink of memory, refusing to set. I quickly searched the internet, then wrote back: "You don't mean Fermina Daza, do you?" I had read a part of *Love in The Time of Cholera* as a teenager but understood close to nothing and remembered just as much.

"Yes, I do mean her . . ." He sounded impressed.

"Whatever does Fermina Daza have to do with me?"

"More than you could possibly imagine. For now, I'll admit only this: you share her same quiet sovereignty. Pride is a diadem, worn properly. Keep it. Polish it."

My God, what interminable curriculum would I have to study for this man? I couldn't just ask questions. Excessive curiosity is a type of servitude—repulsive in a person. I got off the train a few stops ahead.

"So, just a week ago I was a Siren, now I'm Fermina. I have to say, I see little similarity between a topless monster and a lady."

"That's because you aren't looking deep enough."

Because I'm not looking deep enough . . . Oh, how such words winked at me like magic sphinxes, daring me to follow them down into the crypts of Egypt.

"Why don't you call me by my name?" I wrote.

"Because everybody calls you by your name."

"Yes. But not every convention needs breaking."

"Good answer. But surely you think me above feigning unconventionality."

"I do."

"Too early for that."

I laughed. “You know what I meant,” I said, as wedding bells jingled in my ears and white wings flapped our cheeks and happy puppies frolicked before us. Then I wrote:

“Have you seen *Meet Joe Black*?”

Then he started typing for a long time. Itching with anticipation, I refreshed the screen at intervals. I even crazily stopped walking at one point, hoping it would finally release the message. Then a long, tense silence, like a bow stretched to fly. By the time I began reading, the message was so long, and I was so wired with excitement that I couldn’t bear to simply read it. Placing my hand on top of it, I slowly moved it downward, savoring the unveiling of each line, like peeling a forbidden fruit, determined to draw out the flavor. The message read as follows:

“I don’t call you by your name . . . because in this little dance we’ve started, names are irrelevant, labels of the world’s invention. To say your name would be to itemize you, flatten all your contradictions. Tell me, do I strike you as a bureaucrat? Do I? If I do, I’ll have to change my haircut. :) It’s not about names, my dear, or who we are, or who the world thinks we are. It’s a voyage inward, a game of reflections, I do hope you like masquerades—the donning of a good disguise, the shedding of a costume for another, that slow, trembling unmasking, when, for a breathless second, the true self blinks back between the masks.” A pause. A pause I felt as if the world inhaled and held its breath. Then he said: “Wait . . . listen . . . I think I hear something. It seems, why it seems to be a chorus. Do you want to know what it’s saying? It’s saying: *It is time . . . to break the chains of life . . . if you follow you will see . . . what’s beyond reality . . .* :)”

During this time, quick feet, scruffy coats, a violin, the flare of a cigarette all slid past me in some parallel ether. Even the pavement seemed to slide. I was being ferried through fumes, colours, laughter, light. Ferried to some gauzy, blue emptiness where there was nobody but him and I, and Venetian balls, and a hall of mirrors. By the time I’d reached my destination, I was breathless and my heart was pounding. I stepped inside and said with a new kind of determination:

“Good evening. Do you have *Love in The Time of Cholera*? Great. And I’ll take *A Hundred Years of Solitude* too. Wait—you keep vinyl records, don’t you? Do you have Enigma?”