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Peacocks' House
(Whitest Day)

– *Translated from Romanian into English by the Author* –

Foreword by Antoaneta Ralian

E I K O N

București, 2023

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FIRST PART:

DECEMBER

A tempo, con passione

I.

“The beginning must take your breath away. The onset, followed by the first measure. This is where it all begins and of course, this is where everything must come together in the end. This concert, *Snow, for four hands*, is a circle. A circle of time, of memory. The first part, *a tempo, con passione*, then the *adagio* and the final *allegro ma non troppo*. I do not know if André Durand gave much thought to *form*, when he composed his masterpiece. However, I am certain that he *saw* and *heard*. It the same way, you must begin by seeing and by hearing, then the idea of the whole piece will not delay to appear. Think of it as a cold rain that starts mildly, drop by drop, and then suddenly turns into a whirl of snow; for Durand, it was sure he was watching the snow against his window from his hospital bed in Trieste, a snow so young that me must have wondered if he himself had ever been this way. People believe this is the place where, at the end of the Great War, in 1918, in the echoes of the last canon fires, Durand had composed the concerto that was about to bring him fame, but unfortunately, also his unhappiness, his exile... We must not anticipate, let us remain faithful to the idea of the beginning, because it is always in the initial point that we shall find the meaning of the end. So, gentlemen, begin, and do not forget, you must leave the public breathless...”

With these words conductor Bencov began the rehearsals. His silver baton indicated every musical entrance and Anna waited for her turn to come, longing to hear, amidst the sonorous web of the

instruments, her own voice: the piano. She had paid great attention to the maestro's introduction, all ears and eyes, like a shivered cherub. In fact, this was the only way she could hear the world, with her eyes. The images would hit her retina and instantly translate into sonorous impressions that would subsequently gain their meaning. *Words*. Much of them were lost along the road that was separating her from the others. *Anna and the others*. She spoke little, just like her mother, Silvia Moga. If for the former, who had been highly educated in the art of conversation, her husband's death had turned speech into a futility, for Anna silence was a calling. She found herself in it, identified with it; she was flowing in silence, wrapping herself in it like in a blanket. Maybe that is why she liked this *Snow* so much. She tried to imagine, back in 1918, how Durand's winter must have looked like, at the threshold between war and peace, between life and death. *This music*, master Bencov told them, is the music of a world that had just died. The one who wrote this musical piece confesses that he himself is half-alive and half-dead. How on earth could have felt a young pianist whose arm had been amputated by a war which, in the end, was not his own? This is how it happens, I must confess from my own experience, at the end of every war. You do not really know whose war it is, neither what you are supposed to be doing there. You do not know what side to take anymore. Life, just like a narrow war bed, only gives you two choices: either you turn your face against the wall, waiting for death that comes anyway as it pleases, or you turn your eyes towards the door, ready to bite into life as a hungry wolf that barely made it through the hardest winter.

Anna plodded through the snow, which continued to set around heavy, blinding. Her steps submerged as she walked, at constant depths, as if the snow would have whispered to her, repeatedly, the same word. *Tempo, tempo*. She tried to make it out, but she could not. The blizzard howled too heavily and the wind blows hit the walls of the old buildings in sparkling veils, teased by the car lights, which kept on trying to make their way through the narrow little streets, market *one way only*. Just as this winter had crept all over the place, since morning. It had covered

the city in only one day, although the forecast had been generous, announcing a "lazy December". What a fantasy, to say that December was going to be lazy. Meaning, why not, that this particular December was going to resist the temptations of snow, of white, of petrification. A December to which she herself did not want to think until this morning when the frost prompted her to put on a thick woollen skirt and winter coat. *Your cap, you must not forget your cap*, Maxim had told her, her husband that is, whom she had left standing in the doorway, with a hurried kiss.

December 1919 had finally come, for some too soon, and for others, like Durand, too late. It did not matter anyway, because the war was over. What did it leave behind? Emptiness. A round emptiness, like a snowball covered with a thin layer of ice, without contents; like someone's mind from which memories had been erased, irremediably lost. At that time, the world stood still and rested on the side of Time, just as Durand seated himself crippled on his hospital bed. In fact, the entire world had become a huge hospital bed in which convalescence had to take its natural course. It is amazing how many meanings one can give to a healing period. It is, in fact, a time for making choices. Some have died; others chose to live, while the rest, neither one nor the other, lost their minds ... Why? Because they refused to remember. Bencov had continued his introduction to the concerto, with his extraordinary talent for storytelling. The discussion that followed soon turned into a riot and Bencov had a hard time putting an end to it, twisting his baton in the air, amidst musical sheets and words. *Gentlemen, ladies, what I am trying to say is that behind this white landscape, which Durand could only express in musical notes, there is a story, a life, a history which was both his own and that of the world he lived in. I want you to bear all this in mind while you decipher your musical partitions. You are, every one of you, voices, or if you will, echoes of a single voice who strives to hear once more, to regain conscience. 1919. Back then, the rationality of things was discarded as worthless paper money. The clay men of Nietzsche cried aloud, in the open markets, with their hands full of blood „God is dead“. In the echoes of these howls, of all the amputated souls and bodies, the dissonances of Durand are, in fact, an attempt to give a meaning to the End. The ending always depends*

on the meaning one gives to the beginning. Yes, the maestro was probably right, Anna thought while she looked around her, trying to find her way through the blizzard. *Snow*. December 1994.

*
* *

„The Peacocks House” was now only a few blocks away. Victoriei Boulevard looked like a box of candies, adorned with coloured window shops and exuberant commercials. Over there, right at the end of the first narrow street, one could guess the sober silhouette of the Peacocks House. *Their* house, hers and her husbands'. *Anna and Maxim Tauber*. Their family name had been engraved on a silver plate, above the mosaic with two peacocks dominating the exterior wall. This happened three years ago. It had been a snowy December, much like this one. *Now*, she told herself, as soon as I will cross the hallway, he will recognize my footsteps. He will run to open the door because he, Maxim, is home, waiting for me. He waits to recognize my footsteps. He knows everything about me. He knew me from the very beginning, since that Christmas night when we met. He was striding through the snow, behind me. At one moment he stopped, he grabbed a handful of snow and tasted it, and then he said, aloud: *Anna, I want to know everything about you, even the taste of your footsteps*. For three winters, I thought this was all, I was certain two people could not be happier. But is this everything? Is it really? She entered the little yard in front of the house. The neighbours had cleared a path through the snow. She thought of it all while trimming her coat. Her eyelids were stuck together and it was hard to guess around for the keyhole. She dropped the key in the smooth layer of snow, untouched, as if it had been waiting all day for her to come home, drop her key and thus live a fresh mark on the doorsteps. *I don't know how it happens that every time I return home, I remember leaving home, my parents' house, as if I were living two lives in two different places, Bucharest and Râmnic*. Finally, the key turned. The door was stuck... And yes, as soon as she crossed the threshold, she started to remember. She remembered *leaving*. Her departure was that from a wide plain, which resembled in her childhood days, to a huge bed,

in which winter could easily stretch out once it got tired of snowing, in all its cold and heavy splendour. „What will you do, a pianist in the countryside? Give shows to the folk in the local culture house? There are no more culture houses; they have all become night clubs.” The harsh words of her aunt Lia had forced her to take a decision, to find a life for herself, to be on her own. *A Room with a Piano*. That was all she wanted. A space she could fill with a voice and with a presence she had grown accustomed to since her childhood. Her journey was about to be a long and winding one, for which she felt totally unprepared. Her only survival kit was the musical partitions she had memorised since she was six years old. It was at that age she first heard a Beethoven sonata and the sound of the piano keys began to sound so strong it made her heart bounce. She measured every keynote with a breath. The entire world had soon become a sea of sounds.

The hallway was black dark; probably the light bulb had cracked in the frozen air. She had to reach the first floor and the narrow winding ladder had no banister. She began climbing while toppling the humid brick wall, as a blind man. Winter in the city is horrible, she uttered with disgust. It is dirty, mutilated. It creeps between the straggly old blocks of flats, winding its way through muddy little streets, yearning to stretch its huge white body, as a child trapped in a dolls' house. She kept climbing the stairs, groping in the moist darkness while sketching in her mind the vague contours of another life, the life of things secretly breathing under the almighty snow. From beneath the oblivion, too. She had walked through the snow, struggled with it for all her life. It is true, a life of only thirty-five, but which now, looking back at it, seemed huge. In this way she had learned to dream, she had begun to hear the music, in the snow. She would walk for hours in her parent's garden covered in what seemed to be an eternal icy crust and the black trunks of the acacia trees, narrow and high, would cast their shadows upon the untouched whiteness, recreating an immense keyboard. She walked and listened to Beethoven's sonatas. An old record found in her father's things, Vasile Moga. He loved music but did not make a life from it. Moga had kept the piano he had inherited from his

grandmother Elisabeth, which had carried it *on her back*, as she did with his grandfather Cosma, all the way from Bessarabia. The Pickup had a blunt head. The sounds would come out of the wooden box with the specific echo of faraway things, as if they were frozen drops of water, murmuring upwards in the streams of her body. This happened a long time ago, in a place she never wanted to leave. An immensity of endless beauty: the childhood she left behind. During college, she had lived in the peripheral blocks of flats, in rooms that seemed to grow smaller and narrower, smelling of chlorine and dumping. She was always quick enough to choose the bed by the window, even though many were broken and the wind blew right in, freezing cold. The window, in every room she had stayed in, was her *way out*. The simple fact of being able to look outside whenever she wanted, as far as her sight could reach, what seemed to be a shapeless landscape that agglutinated cars, buildings, people, commercials for things peoples would never use. At present, the only places composing her personal geography were the music academy where she had been studying for some time now and the old building from Calea Victoriei in which she lived with her husband, Maxim. For three years, now.

The Peacocks House had kept, along the years, its exterior sobriety. The architect's unique fantasy had been to adorn the facade with a Murano mosaic: two peacocks, with eyes of fire and emerald tails. Whoever took the time to gaze into their eyes understood that those birds were guardians and most of all witnesses of that house and its most unusual destiny. At the first floor, because it was the only thing that Maxim recuperated from his father's house, general Maximilian Tauber, the life of Anna and Maxim lulled in a quiet rhythm, protected by the intrusiveness and the noises of the street by the thuja treetops. The living room, Maxim's favourite place, would open on an interior yard, with grass and some apple trees where he would often work in spring, but Anna liked the garden now, in winter. A winter so deep, as if it were coming from far away, bearing all winters in its womb. As for Maxim, he was quite different from her. Despite his sober physical aspect, his cold and calculated look, filtered through eyeglasses in a

black frame, Maxim was a solar being. He had outbursts of tenderness, which the strong light animated in his eyes, like those of a child. He did not mind working outside in the cold, the only light he needed was the raw spring sun light and that familiar warmth, secret and perfumed, of Anna's hand wrists.

But now... it was still winter and Maxim was going to be worried because she was not home yet. Nine o'clock. Anna hurried to open the door, heavy with melted snow. It locked back behind her, like a predicament. She rang the doorbell and began to hear the familiar footsteps approaching. She could recognize her husband's walk from a thousand. It takes a long time to get to know your husband's footsteps, she thought, the walking is one of the most anonymous things in a person. It is very likely, and she acknowledged it as she whisked of the snow from her boots, that the waiting inside of her recognised him. She always *waited* for him and this gave his footsteps a certain *tempo*, and she always enjoyed sitting still, waiting for him to open the door, tasting that stork-like suspended time. In a minute now he will open the door wide open, they will look at each other for a few moments, those moments so precious and so easily lost because, as they were tired, it was hard to find something to say, even to feel. Maxim had his way in opening a door, almost like a ritual, like a musical partition she had come to memorize. She prepared herself for that moment, imagining it in her mind, unfolding it like a white page on which no other that he, Maxim, could write.

— Anna... come in quickly, you are covered in snow.

— I have tried to trim my coat outside...

— Never mind, you are frozen enough as it is. Don't worry, its only snow, it will melt down...

Maxim took her coat and hung it in the rack. He helped her take off her boots.

— Heavy. These boots are too heavy for you; I told you we should have chosen something lighter.

— I know, you are right, I thought they would be more resistant.

— I had forgotten you wanted things to last forever. Honestly, these boots will outlive us both...

— Maxim, will you stop laughing at me... *Maxim Tauber. Simply put, just Maxim. He is my husband, for three years. Everyone calls him Max. I believe I am the only one who calls him by his entire name: Maxim. Maybe also, because there is a distance of a few more letters between us, or maybe just because I like things to be complete. I met him at a Christmas party, at our friends' house. I knew he would be there. His name sounded familiar to me from the literary reviews, but I could not associate them a face. You must come, my best friend had asked me, I want you to meet someone very interesting, his name is Maxim, I invited him especially for you. He teaches literature at the University. He reads about imaginary women all day long, maybe it will do him good for once to talk to real women, flesh and bones... Someone, called Maxim, was going to be there especially for me. First, I could not be attracted to someone bearing that name, too cold, to mathematic. Saying Maxim is like saying minimum the other way around, and anyway, everyone will call him Max, simply and unceremoniously, no doubt about it. Shortening names is such a barbarism. I will never call him that... Then it bothered me terribly to know that somebody had been invited specially to meet me. It is like someone would bake a cake for you and then force you to it, just for the sake of its special destination. This is what people usually do, especially women, planning for things which absorb them completely, and then making a fuss if you resist accepting them. It must be a female weakness, women must give, they seek to offer something; a part of them, a bit of their soul, as if trying to prolong infinitely their state of mind in the bodies and souls of other women, especially when they themselves are in love. Because Lena, my friend, was madly in love or at least that is what she claimed. That night, she was just on the verge of announcing her engagement and therefore she probably felt the need to compensate this sort of official ending of her love turmoil with a new beginning, even though she probably gave little chances to Maxim and me. And Lord, I did not even have a decent pair of shoes to wear, I tried to find one, in the suitcase where I had crammed things I only wore once or twice in a year.*

— How was your day, Maxim asked her while trying to warm up her hands red with cold.

— Excruciating...

— Like any beginning.

— I need to sit down; I can't even hold on to my feet.

Maxim took her arm while he tried to peer into her thoughts, through the thick black curtains of her hair evading from the severe velvet knot she had tied it with at the back of her neck. *Anna, my wife. Anna Tauber or, simply, just Anna. This is how she was introduced to me at a Christmas party. It happened three years ago. An eternity. She was so beautiful, just like a morning about to unfold, lazy and crude, as a cold reflection of the winter outside. A month later we were married. But I do not wish to anticipate. Whenever we attempt to recompose in our minds the portrait of the woman we love, we overlook so many details, as though we put to little threads in the weaving of her being, which then begins slowly to be torn apart, under the weight of silences piled one on top of the other. Anna. It only takes a second to say her name. In my mind, from that second begin to unfold, one after another, the details of her body, because every time I say her name, I start seeing her the way she was when I met her. I don't hesitate to say "her body", because this is what men notice at first glance. There is nothing trivial in it, merely a state of fact, it is as if one were saying that when walking in the grass during the first morning hours one feels the dew in his feet. So did I, at four o'clock in the morning, just when the party was lingering towards its end, and the cold blew inside the room through left open because of too much cigarette smoke, at that particular hour, neither fullness of night nor certainty of day, I noticed Anna's body. A body she either tried to hide out of shyness, or maybe she simply wanted to cover herself because of the cold. Her bodily presence, announced by a series of repeated gestures, suspended ones, sometimes unfinished and raw, and which, as I observed her closely, soon became familiar to me. Even today, if I cross in the street a woman feeling the last button of her shirt between her fingers, checking it if it was properly done, I know it is Anna's gesture. It is the prolongation of my wife in the body of an unknown woman in the crowd. This is how Anna became known to me. I tried to give an accurate description of her gestures, just to make sure I would remember them over the years, as they first were. Some of them were made to cover up small imperfections that would bring out her fragility, her hesitation, her shyness. She was tired. Ella*

had told me it had been so hard to make her come, because a pianist cannot afford losing nights! And that weariness would sift, like through a thick sieve, her beauty. Come to think of it, I cannot say that Anna was beautiful; it is not the proper word for it. She was different from other women, from all the women I had met and imagined before, and it is that particular difference that bears, for each one of us, the meaning of beauty. Something echoed inside of me, just like when dislocating a piece of rock an avalanche of solid matter follows and you lie there helpless, a mere witness to the overwhelming force, making it impossible to move, to breathe. True, the courses in literary theory I taught at the University during the last years had made me immune to real passions. Meaning that, being saturated with scholarly reflections on love, I began to consider reality as vulgar or fade and, as a boomerang effect, I was disappointed by the real presence of women who, since they were made up of blood and nerves, had moods, attitudes, ambitions, high heels and baroque ear rings. Nevertheless, they were real. Too real. I had been used to speak to my students of all kinds of heroines which only live in the tight boxes of their typologies. But Anna was a real woman, not a fictional character in a novel. When I turned around for another drink, I noticed she did not disappear like fictional characters do, once you put your book back on the shelf. No, she remained there, tall and slim, holding on to her cup of tea. She is the kind of woman that never drinks coffee, not because she resented it, but simply because she couldn't, her heart was beating fast enough without caffeine. She clanged on so hard to that China tea cup, fortunately it was not a glass, otherwise she could have broken it in her grip. I could never hurt her, I told myself then. I swore it to myself, like a medieval hero, as I walked towards her. It was nearly morning now, and she was tired, drowsy from the cold. She was waiting for the clock to strike five, because at that time the subway opened its gates. Only then would she put on her coat, a bit old, and she would walk as fast as she could through the unstained snow towards the first subway station. „I will lose her there”, I thought terrified, because I had already begun to imagine her swimming through a crowd of people that, most certainly, had nothing in common with her, except, maybe, for the common loneliness. „I still have an hour until then”, I kept on saying to myself, I must find a pretext to speak to her. I had been around her most of the evening, having a glass of champagne,

but never alone with her. She knew me from afar, heard about me probably. What can be the importance of someone you only know from sight, although sometimes seeing in everything?

— Why do you look at me this way?

— What do you mean *this way*?

— I don't know... as if you were trying to ask me something...

— Maybe I did at first, the moment you stepped into the room, now I can't remember what it was ... It must have been without importance... I will just go and make us some tea. Fortunately, Anna is a woman who allows to be seen. She lets you look at her, no matter how insolent it may seem, being unable to suspect anyone of vulgarity. This is one of her ingenuities, undoubtedly the one which pictures her best. Maybe it is the main reason why, the moment I noticed her amongst our little partying crowd, I dared to go on contemplating her, as if she were a painting or a page from a manuscript whose calligraphy was difficult to decipher. She was tall, but her proportions did not defy her frailness, her hesitant stance towards people and things. We were all crammed in a small room with a low ceiling, in a block of flats built in the seventies. The couples were dancing and Anna was trying to find her way between their entangled bodies, saying I am sorry at every benign collision. I crossed the room in her direction, just as I used to rift, in my childhood days, the fields of green wheat that came up to my bruised knees. I detached the China cup from her fingers, with a little effort, as that tiny object seemed to hold her in a balance. I asked her if she wanted to dance. Yes, she would, probably because I would not let go of her. She put the China cup aside and griped my shoulder instead. She did it with the same tenacity with which she had held on to the tea cup before. We were dancing. Finally, we were dancing. My thought became so loud in my mind, I could hear it and it was only then that I realised I had been waiting for her, I had missed her. Anna was the perfect sum of small and repeated gestures, of sober colours – that night she was wearing a grey dress – of natural silences one could be cradled in and lulled to sleep. But she could also become silent in the fiercest way. I was about to understand, with time, that her silences were the natural prolongation of the counterpoint she had been practising since her first piano lessons. Anna had learned silence just as she had learned to master the