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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mihail Sebastian was born in Romania in 1907 as Iosif Hechter. He worked as a lawyer and writer until anti-Semitic legislation forced him to abandon his public career. Having survived the war and the Holocaust, he was killed in a road accident in 1945 as he was crossing the street to teach his first class.

John Banville was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of fourteen previous novels including *The Sea*, which won the 2005 Man Booker Prize. He was recently awarded the Franz Kafka Prize. He lives in Dublin.

Also by Mihail Sebastian

For Two Thousand Years

Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years

The Accident

Women

Translated from the Romanian by Philip Ó Ceallaigh

MIHAIL SEBASTIAN

With an introduction by John Banville



PENGUIN BOOKS

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army truck, and killed. His masterpiece is *Journal 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*, an extraordinarily vivid record of life under occupation, which is at once horrifying and insouciantly entertaining. He is one of Romania's greatest writers, and a great European artist. For those who do not know his work, *Women* is the perfect place to start.

John Banville

Renée, Marthe, Odette

One

It's not yet eight. Stefan Valeriu can tell by the sunlight, which has crept only as far as the edge of his chaise longue. He can sense it climbing the wooden legs, feel it caressing his fingers, his hand, his naked arm, as warm as a shawl . . . More time will pass – five minutes, an hour, an eternity – and a flickering blue light with vague silver streaks will appear through his closed eyelids. Then it will be eight and perhaps time to start thinking about getting up. Just like yesterday, and the day before that. But he'll remain lying there, smiling at the thought of this sundial he constructed on the first day, using a chaise longue and a patch of terrace. He passes his hand over his sun-scorched hair, rough as hemp fiber, and accounts it no great loss in the end that he's forgotten his bottle of Hahn oil – his sole extravagance, but a precious one – in his room on the rue Lhomond in Paris. He enjoys passing his fingers through tangled hair that received no more than a cursory brushing that morning, and its roughness tells him how blond it has become.

It must be very late. Just now, he heard the sound of voices from the pathway. Somebody, a woman, shouted from down at the lake. Perhaps the Englishwoman from yesterday, the one he'd watched swimming powerfully. He had been surprised by the way she struggled with the water; she seemed to know only the breaststroke.

Stefan swings his leg over the edge of his lounge and feels

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about the grass with his naked foot for a patch of dampness. He knows that somewhere not too far to the left, toward the hedge, is a place that holds the dew until as late as lunchtime. There it is. His body, baking lazily in the heat, and the feeling of that cold vegetation.

On Monday evening, going downstairs to the guesthouse dining room – he had just arrived at the station after a long journey and had hurriedly changed his shirt – the talkative Serbian woman at the table at the back announced, for all to hear:

—*Tiens, un nouveau jeune homme!* . . .

Stefan had been doubly grateful. For the *nouveau* and for the *jeune homme*. He had felt old a week earlier, on his way out of his final medical exam, and weary. Tired after the sleepless nights, the mornings at the hospital, long afternoons in the library, and the two-hour exam in a dim hall before a deaf professor who was dressed for winter and whose collar appeared to be dirty . . . And then the name of this Alpine lake, stumbled upon on a map in a bookshop, the train ticket bought at the first travel agency he'd come across, the trip through big stores to buy a white sweater, gray flannel trousers, and a summer shirt. And then a journey that was like an escape.

Un nouveau jeune homme.

Stefan doesn't know anybody. He's been greeted in passing a few times but has not let himself be drawn out. His accent makes him coy; he is not eager to give himself away as foreign on the first day. He passes between the tables after lunch, aloof, with the trace of a frown. Perhaps he seems gruff. But it's just laziness.

Above, behind the terrace, the forest begins. There's a small clearing there with dense, long, yielding grass. He crushes it beneath the weight of his sleepy body all afternoon and the next day finds that it has sprung back completely, as though it had never been touched. He throws himself down, arms spread, legs stretched out, his head buried in the vegetation. He succumbs to what is forcing him down, though he wishes he could fight it.

A squirrel has leaped from one hazel to another. How do you say squirrel in French? There's an immense silence . . . No. That's not true. That's an expression from books. There's an immense racket going on, an immense animal hubbub, crickets chirping, frantic grasshoppers, and the clink of the carapaces of beetles as they collide in midair and plummet earthward like beads of lead. In all this, the sound of Stefan Valeriu's own breathing is one more detail, one more little expression of life, no more trivial or essential than a squirrel leaping or that grasshopper perched on the toe of his boot, believing it to be a stone. It's good to be here, an animal, a creature, a nobody, sleeping and breathing on a two-meter patch of grass under a common sun.

If it felt like thinking, how would a cricket think about eternity? And if that eternity had the savor of this afternoon . . . Below, on the guesthouse terrace, chairs and shawls and white dresses can be seen. And beyond, the idyllic, clear, blue lake. A postcard.

Through the cool blue light of evening, muffled sounds come across the lake, from the town, from beyond the distant electric lights. It's Thursday, and a military band is playing in the municipal park. Almost everybody in the guesthouse has gone there, taking the 8:27 boat, to attend. Stefan Valeriu has remained. The whole valley, spread out before the terrace, is suffused with deep blue.

—Do you play chess, sir?

—Yes.

Why did he say 'yes'? It would have been so simple to say no, and then he'd be outside, free to continue his stroll upon the terrace. A hasty 'yes', and now he's in the common room, in front of a chessboard, condemned to concentrate. His opponent is a tall, bony, swarthy, middle-aged man who plays slowly and methodically.

—You didn't go to the concert.

—No.

—Me neither. My wife was dead set on it, so I let her. But me . . .

Stefan has lost a rook, but on his left flank he has constructed a focused attack on the king.

—Are you from the Midi?

—No. I'm Romanian.

—Impossible! You sound like a Frenchman. Or maybe it's

just that I'm not used to the accent here. Because I'm not from France either. I'm Tunisian.

—Tunisian?

—Yes. Well, French from Tunisia. I have plantations there. Marcel Rey's the name.

Stefan's attack has failed, and, having left himself wide open, he loses the game. In the meantime, the concertgoers are returning. Hearing the whistle of the boat from the jetty, they go out to await them. Many lively voices, exclamations, handshakes, noisy greetings.

—Oh Marcel, if you knew how lovely it was . . .

—Renée, please meet a new friend. My wife.

She is a tall, slender woman. In the dim light, only her eyes can be seen. Stefan kisses her hand. A small, cold hand, like any other.

They've been on a little excursion to Lovagny to see a castle. The three of them – Marcel Rey, his wife, and Stefan. And Nicole, the Reys' little girl. They've walked about a lot, laughed, and taken photographs. Monsieur Rey has a small movie camera and sometimes films scenes which he then sends to Paris to be developed.

—Renée, go over there with Monsieur Valeriu. Farther, into the light. That's it, laugh, talk, a bit of action.

—If we're in a movie, Madame, Stefan whispers, then make it a love story.

He says it casually. He is sufficiently offhand for it to pass as a joke, if required.

Renée smiles quizzically, and says nothing. Stefan plays with Nicole's curls. Monsieur Rey films it all.

★

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He knows their entire story. They were both born in a small town in Tunisia and are from old colonial families. He came to France only once before, in 1917, took a bullet in the shoulder after two hours in the trenches, and was back home within a week of leaving. This is the first time she has gone farther than Tunis. They married in 1920, had a child — Nicole — in 1921, bought a vineyard in 1922, a plantation the following year, and a couple more each year thereafter. Their town, Djedaida, is fifty kilometers from Tunis. It's a small European settlement, surrounded by native tribes that gather on the outskirts whenever there's a bad drought and wander the little streets looking disaffected. During those periods, the Reys sleep with a gun under their pillow. On Saturday evenings, when the plantation workers are paid, Renée stands by the telephone, in case it's necessary to call to Tunis for help.

She narrates all this quietly, matter-of-factly. She's a little bit tired and Stefan Valeriu has to ask three questions to receive one answer.

—Can you hand me my shawl from over there? I'm cold.

He throws it over the chaise longue and, in arranging it over her, his hand happens to linger on her knee. She starts with fright and shouts, senselessly, 'Nicole, Nicole!'

In the evening, Stefan replies to some letters from Paris. 'I haven't met anybody. Just a family of Tunisians, him a good chess player, her a virtuous wife. I don't think they're happy together.'

He's taken a boat from the guesthouse's jetty, rowed to where the lake opens out and the view of the steep valley in the

mountains looks symmetrical, dropped anchor, and flopped down on the bottom of the boat, with the oars dangling in the wavelets. Lazy and without a care, floating in the vast emptiness. He closes his eyes. He is engulfed by sunlight.

Earlier, in the common room, he again saw the young couple who recently arrived at the guesthouse and have taken the room situated on its own, across from the main building. A honeymoon, probably. She's impressive. She had entered shyly, her eyes and the hint of negligence in her attire suggesting to Stefan that she'd spent a torrid night. The aroma she left behind seemed to fill the entire building. An aroma redolent of a sensual nest with warm pillows, and a sleepy female body you find yourself making love to in the gentle morning light.

—It's intolerable! It's contagious! There should be a law against it! says Stefan aloud, to himself. In reply, a wavelet slaps the boat, a distant swimmer shouts something, and in the town the clock of the church of Saint-François-de-Sales strikes ten.

There is an intriguing couple over in a quiet corner of the terrace. He has only noticed them today, but perhaps they have been around for some time. She is not yet old and there is something glorious about her beauty. She's perhaps thirty-five. Perhaps older. Tall, calm, with strong features, and a smile that isn't a smile, but is the general repose of her face. The man she's with is just a boy. He looks hardly twenty. He's sitting on the grass by her chair and speaking quickly, animatedly, with jerky gestures. She half-listens to him, and slowly passes her fingers through her hair.

Her lover? Husband? A gigolo? A bit of each, Stefan thinks, surprised by a surge of jealousy, perhaps of humiliation, that he, a vigorous young creature of twenty-four, rested and alone, is waiting for something to appear around the corner. But it does not come.

—Do you want to sing a song, Nicole?

—Yes.

It's very late. Everybody has gone to bed. Stefan Valeriu is left waiting alone on the terrace.

—Young man, sleep is better than the stars, Monsieur Vincent, a fat, jolly man from Marseille, called out to him earlier.

He didn't reply. After dinner, the woman and her young companion had gone down to the lake. They still haven't

returned. For a while, Stefan observed their stroll down the jetty: her pale shawl, stirring in the breeze, and his white sweater were easily visible. Now nothing can be made out, but the night is vast and they will have to return.

A powerful shudder. A boat has collided with Stefan Valeriu's. He sits up, surprised.

—Who's that?

—Me.

It's the young companion. He laughs awkwardly, as though pleased to meet Stefan, while apologizing for the accident.

—I was rowing facing the wrong way and didn't notice you there. It's my first trip on the lake. How's the water?

—Fine.

—Do you swim?

—I do.

—Mind if I drop anchor here myself?

—Go ahead.

Stefan has lain down again at the bottom of the boat, set on being unsociable. The youth lies in his boat, dangling his feet in the lake, splashing bright beads of water in the sunlight.

Stefan Valeriu whistles.

—'Bolero'?

—Yes.

He goes quiet again. The youth whistles the tune that Stefan began. Up on the distant guesthouse terrace, a white dress moves like a flag in the breeze.

—*Hallo, hallo!*

The youth waves enthusiastically. He receives a more measured wave in return.