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books

In One Brief Moment All Eternity

ELIF SHAFAK



PENGUIN
VIKING

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The White Shadow

By the River Seine, France

18th April 1855

When he wakes up this morning, only two thoughts cross his mind: that he is going to kill the woman he loves, and that he is going to do it today.

He dresses himself, slowly and methodically. There is a precise order to his rituals that he must follow to the letter, even if this is no ordinary day. First, he changes into a fresh linen shirt. Next: cotton drawers, woollen stockings, leather slippers – the ones he bought in Constantinople on his grand tour of L'Orient when he contracted syphilis and melancholia, neither of which has since fully healed. He puts on a velvet *robe de chambre*, the colour of dried blood, tying it loosely at his waist. A washstand in the corner bears a porcelain pitcher and a matching basin from which he splashes water on his forehead. He arranges his hair and smooths down his moustache, but the face that stares at him in the mirror remains troubled and tired. It has been a while since he slept well. Too many nightmares. Mostly the same nightmare. About her. Always about her.

He sits at his desk, gazing out of the window where, in the distance, the river winds its silvery course. He has a fondness for the Seine – the great artery named after the ancient

goddess Sequana – captivated by its restless sweep and swell as it eats away at its banks, dissolving its own memories, forever at war with itself. Beyond the glass, the tulip tree rustles its leaves – whispering in a language he cannot comprehend but would one day like to learn. How long he remains in this state, lost in his reverie, he does not know. Someone knocks on the door, at first gently and then with more force. *Tap-tap-tap*. It must be his old maid bringing his breakfast and morning mail. Or perhaps it is his mother. They are both worried about him. They think he has been acting strangely of late, that he is not quite himself. He is aware that he should go and talk to them – a few pleasantries to set their minds at ease and reassure them that everything is as it should be. Besides, he needs food. He has not eaten anything since a bowl of beef consommé the previous afternoon and he would like to get rid of the unpleasant taste in his mouth. Still, he will not open the door. He will neither allow anyone in nor leave this room – not until the task he has set for himself is completed and he has resolved how to kill the woman who holds his heart.

A gun. A knife. A sword. An arrow. None of these will do. He considers pushing her from a lethal height. He could also shove her in front of an oncoming train or a runaway carriage, just as the wheels draw impossibly close. On second thoughts, he could set her alight by igniting the hem of her dress, or send her plunging into the depths of the River Seine, where she would meet the carcasses of sunken barges and the skeletons of drowned boatmen who have preceded her. He could just as well throw her from the scaffolding of a colossal building, like that poor mason in Paris who fell to his death whilst working on the construction of the Basilique Sainte-Clotilde. It was on the front page of every

newspaper. But, no, even as he contemplates these grim possibilities, he does not wish such tragedies to strike her. He has something else altogether in mind. Something special. Nestled in a tiny glass jar. An odourless substance. Soft and snowlike. The 'white shadow'. That is what they used to call it, the alchemists of vanished times. Too pretty a name for so deadly a poison.

Arsenic.

He will make her swallow a sample small enough to fit into the hollow of her palm. To murder a man of the same age, one would probably need more, but she is petite and not in the best of health these days, and this amount should be enough. He knows she will neither refuse it nor run away. He knows she will listen to him – certainly more than she has ever listened to her own husband.

The husband! Clumsy, incompetent and dull as ditch-water. Though well intentioned, he is completely deficient in tact and charm. A country doctor, yes, but a rather improbable one. No, Charles is not a serious rival. Never has been. She belongs to *him* – insofar as she does to anyone other than herself.

They were so close, the two of them. Inseparable, if truth be told. Winter or summer, for the past five years, they have barely been apart. Even on the day she got married to Charles, as she took a bite of her elaborate wedding cake – with a chocolate Cupid on the top – he was there, right by her side. Later, when she pricked her finger on her bridal bouquet, it was he who felt the sting. When she started to squander borrowed money, abandoning all restraint and piling up debt on dresses and curtains and fine carpets, it was he who followed her into shops and boutiques without a word of complaint. When she sneaked out at night to

meet her lovers in rented rooms or back gardens, it was he who lost sleep with worry. He is the one who decked her in pale satins, powdered her bare shoulders and tucked flowers in her hair before sending her off to sumptuous dinners and costume balls to flirt with strangers. And when she returned home at an indecently late hour, it was he who untied the ribbons of her hat, unlaced her corset and undid her hooks, pin by pin.

She had her flaws and he always knew that. Impatient and impulsive, she was prone to making lamentable mistakes. He has accepted her for who she is, not for who he wants her to be. But now, he must be the one ending her life. He must destroy the only woman he has ever loved with heart, mind and soul. His chest tightens and his breathing comes in laboured rasps as the regret for what he is about to do seizes him. He whispers her name out loud. Two syllables touching and retreating from each other, like the wings of a moth too close to the flame. Like the swoop of her lashes as she blinks her eyes, a brown so dark and luminous as to appear black.

Em-ma

How much emotion he has compressed into so short a name. How many dreams, dares and disappointments he has packed into her brief existence, given that she is still young. Even in her petulant moods, her sulky spells of boredom, she was winsome and lively, almost irrepressible: the way she stared at the horizon, longing to be where life is glamorous and laughter is easy; the blush that rose to her cheeks at the slightest hint of a compliment; the dewdrops spangling her skirts as she strolled along the riverbank; the swish of her gown while she arranged a vase of roses; the cascade of her hair down a body hungry to love and to be loved . . .

He hopes that, even after she is long dead, some small part of her will linger on. The thought of her departing this world without leaving a trace is more than he could bear. Will anyone in the future – say, a hundred years from now or perhaps even more – remember that there once was a beautiful and charming but scandalously tainted woman called Emma? If so, will they recall her name solely to despise her transgressions and condemn her poor character? He does not wish people to look down on her from their lofty pedestals. Judging others is easy; it is much harder to try to understand them. If only he could make his readers see that there is an Emma inside each and every one of us, secretly unsatisfied with what we have and searching for something else, something better, though what that might be often lies beyond our grasp. However clever we think ourselves, all of us are half wise, half foolish some of the time, and some of us are half wise, half foolish all of the time.

His shoulders convulse as he tries to suppress a sob – and fails. Whoever is waiting behind the door must have heard the sound, for the tapping stops. Oddly, so too does the scratching of the tulip tree's foliage against the window. A stifling silence descends, a slow ebbing away of life. On his desk the manuscript beckons him to return to the story he has been working on these many days and nights. Every piece of furniture in this room waits for him to finish the current chapter and seal the fate of Madame Bovary.

He picks up his quill, dips it into the inkwell and writes:

Emma seized the blue jar . . . pulled out the cork . . . white powder . . . she began eating it . . .

No sooner has he composed these words than a cramp wrenches his intestines into knots. A sharp pain lances

through him, tearing at his insides, as though he has swallowed alive a bird of prey, and now the creature is clawing its way out. Beads of sweat gather across his forehead, but still he forces himself to continue:

. . . an acrid taste in her mouth . . . Emma was overcome by a wave of nausea . . .

He feels sick suddenly. Bile rises at the back of his throat, making him retch. Gasping, he bends forward and vomits all over himself.

‘Gustave, *chéri*!’ His mother’s voice rises from the other side of the door. ‘Darling, are you unwell?’

He flinches. The last thing he wants is to worry Maman, fretful as she is by nature, but he cannot possibly tell her the reason behind his distress. How to explain to her – or to anyone else – without being regarded as stark mad, that his body is reacting to the arsenic he has administered to his beloved heroine? Who would believe that he has been stricken by excruciating stomach pains because he has poisoned a woman who exists solely in his imagination?

‘Are you all right? Do you suffer from fever?’ his mother persists as she pushes and jostles the door handle, probing its resistance. The iron latch groans but remains firm, keeping her out. ‘I must see you. Let me in, now!’

‘All is fine, Maman, I assure you.’ He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. His garments are sullied and smell sour. He must change and wash again.

‘But I thought I heard –’

‘Do not concern yourself, Maman,’ he says as convincingly as he can manage. ‘I implore you, grant me solitude. I do not wish to be disturbed.’

To his surprise, his mother does not object. Her footfall echoes down the hall, fading away, step by resentful step.

The ensuing quiet is pierced by a series of sweet sounds. Evenly paced, whistled notes. A willow warbler has perched on his windowsill, a mighty determination emanating from its delicate frame. As if this was the encouragement he needed, he seizes the quill he had dropped and dips it back into the inkwell. The paper in front of him is full of crossings-out and corrections. Into this mess, in his crabbed handwriting, he adds the following words:

Emma began to laugh a terrible horrible, frenzied, despairing laugh . . . She fell back upon the bed mattress . . . She was no more.

This is it. This is all he can manage to write this morning. Every day for the past five years he has been working on the story of Madame Bovary. During this time, she has trespassed into his mind, encroached on his dreams, dominated his heart, threatened his sanity. He has tried to hide from everyone the compulsive effect this fictional woman has had on him, lest they concluded he was succumbing to madness. His infatuation with Emma was a rich seam of emotions from which he quarried the brightest bliss and the darkest pain. His longing for her was a pit into which he kept falling, over and again. He knows that, in as much as he has shaped her life, so has she fully shaped his.

In all the novels he has read ever since he was a boy, the female characters were either entirely virtuous and angelic or entirely wicked and demonic. Whereas he wanted to create an ordinary human being, a mere mortal. An everyday heroine who, however feckless and lacking in foresight,

is ultimately a mixture of good and bad, hopeful and sad, lowly and sublime, just like everyone else in this world. And now, she is gone. He has killed her and what has been done cannot be undone.

Gustave Flaubert pushes the chair away from his desk and rises to his feet. His balance falters as he trips over a hookah coiled on the floor like a moulting snake – the tobacco pipe a souvenir of his days in Egypt as a young man. Young enough to believe that he would one day return to the banks of the River Nile, to a place called Esna, to a mud-brick house with coriander growing in pots on the windowsills and kittens sleeping in a basket in the courtyard. A house where the veil between earth and sky, like a sheet of the finest Egyptian cotton, had been torn away, revealing poverty, exile, persecution, and kindness and beauty, all existing side by side.

Forcing the sentimental memory back into the recesses of his mind, he walks to the opposite side of the room. His breathing shallow and weak, he sinks into his bed. He is finally finishing his book, this all-consuming novel that he has painstakingly built, and yet he feels neither pride nor relief, and not a trace of triumph, but only a sense of sorrow. So close to grief. As if he has lost a loved one whom he knows he will never see again. Drawing his knees to his chest, he starts to cry.

He has been crafting stories for long enough to understand that every joy, heartbreak, agonizing defeat and aching desire that his protagonists go through, an author must experience simultaneously. The good, the bad and the in-between. Nothing human can ever be alien to literature. Alone in a room, day after day, he laughs and weeps, feels, excited, irritated, enraged or depressed, breaks into pieces and mends again, all for the sake of words. Writing is a kind

of madness – inventive and exhilarating, and occasionally even rewarding, but madness nonetheless.

Irrational as it may be, the narrative journey has its own alchemy. It dissolves dualities: blending reality and fantasy, past and present, humour and sadness, hope and despair, the near and the far, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the familiar and the foreign, the self and the other, the Orient and the Occident . . . Somehow, somewhere along the way, the distinction between ‘creator’ and ‘created’ also begins to blur. Neither is the fictional character as passive as one might assume, nor is the novelist always in full control of the text. He knows this all too well. But what he did not expect, and never could have anticipated, is that today when he makes his unhappy heroine swallow arsenic, he also does harm to himself.

In killing Emma, a part of him dies.