

We had our
map out in
front of us,
and could see
not only

the main railroad line to Athens that turned south from where we were, but also another line heading west to Veria and then north all the way into Yugoslavia. The reckless idea we discussed was taking the train as far as Veria and going on to Athens from there by bus, because the train ride would be outside the main line and therefore ought to be reasonably free

Author's note : This is an excerpt from School for Pagan Lovers, a novel set in Greek Macedonia in 1938. The male protagonist is a 17-year-old American living for the time being in Salonika, and the woman protagonist is a schoolmate of his at the local German school. She is several years older, brought up in the mixed society of the city (half Greek and half Jewish). The lovers are leaving the city to go to Athens as a way of liberating themselves from their oppressive home life.

of inquisitive and suspicious passengers, and the bus we could then pick up in Veria would supposedly be the kind that connected major towns and therefore ought to have a decent motor and four round wheels and doors that could be shut by hand. I volunteered to scout the railroad station just beyond the village while Magda picked up some provisions from the local general store.

The attendant at the station was asleep inside his booth, so I decided I wouldn't disturb him. I covered the outside and then the inside of that station looking for something that might pass for a schedule of the trains to Yugoslavia, but all I could find posted on the walls was a photograph of King George of the Hellenes and another of General Metaxas. As I was about to drift out of the station, the attendant woke up.

"There is no train to Yugoslavia today," the man said. "Why do you think I'm taking time out to rest my eyes?"

"The truth is, we don't want to go to all the way to Yugoslavia," I said. "We just want to get ourselves to Veria."

"That's another matter," the man said. "Who is we?"

"We is I and my sister," I said.

"Well, you and your sister won't find a train to Veria today," the man said. "But there's one to Edessa that stops in Veria."

"That's fine," I said. "When does it leave here for Veria?"

"That depends on when it gets here," the man said. "And about that I make no promises. Though things have gotten much better under General Metaxas, I can assure you of that."

"Well, can you give me a general idea of when it might get here?"

The man was studying me again. "A general idea?" he said. "Are you a foreigner or something?"

"I suppose you could say that," I said. "My father is Dutch."

"Dutch?" the man said. "I don't know any Dutch people to speak of. Though some pass through here once in a while I'm sure."

"So do we just come out here and sit down and wait for the train to come along sometime before it gets dark, is that it?"

"You can do that if you want to," the man said. "But I

wouldn't bother beginning to do that for an hour or two. Because that train never gets here before midday. Even when there isn't much to slow it down but a buffalo or a goat between the Salonika station and this godless place."

We were the only ones waiting for the train to Edessa that came along just after midday, and when Magda and I arrived in our dark glasses and head-cover to sit on the bench outside and read our novels, the attendant didn't bother to give us more than a glance, in fact, didn't come out from behind his desk until the train was easing into the station. It was a regular European-style train, with a separate door for every compartment, and the second class coach we ended up in still had upholstery on the seats, though the dust had gathered there over the years in a way that didn't make it inviting as a headrest unless you kept your hat on. We walked the length of the coach until we found a compartment that had only one other person in it, a gray-haired man dressed in a white linen suit and a fedora hat who looked so respectable that Magda figured he wouldn't be the kind to ask questions or look for opinions during such a short trip.

The train turned out to be a toy train when it came to speed, moseying along as though it had been sent out on a special mission to carry school children and their parents on a sightseeing tour through the northern wilderness and into the mountainous regions for a holiday. That seemed to be the mood down the line, with people of all ages but mostly the very young and the middle-aged hanging out of the compartment windows to the right and the left, taking in the slight breeze our motion made and gazing out endlessly across the fields and the swamp land as though they expected strange plants and animals to show up on the horizon. And since that was my mood too, nothing out there would have surprised me. What startled me while I was hanging out of the compartment window was hearing the man in the white suit suddenly say something to Magda behind me.

"Your schoolmate looks very pleased to be on holiday," the man said in a soft voice. "Will you be spending all of it in Edessa?"

"We won't be going as far as Edessa," Magda said. "And he

isn't my schoolmate, actually. He's my brother."

"I'm very sorry," the man said. "May he live long for you."

"That's all right," Magda said. "We're also schoolmates in a way. That is, we go to the same school. Though in different grades."

I don't know exactly why, but the two of them talking like that behind my back about what I was and wasn't suddenly got on my nerves.

"The truth is, we're not really brother and sister," I said.

"We're something more personal."

The man didn't say anything. He just bowed his head slightly.

"My little brother is very good at making jokes," Magda said. "And he has a great imagination. But sometimes he can be infuriating."

The man looked up again. "Well, I wish you both a good holiday. And if you get as far as Edessa, you must stop by my summer home."

"We'll certainly do that," Magda said.

"I don't have any children of my own, but I am very fond of young people. Even after teaching in the gymnasium for thirty years."

"You teach in a gymnasium?" Magda said.

"In Salonika," the man said. "I've just finished grading my share of the entrance examinations for the university. And I suppose that yearly torture being over explains why there are so many young people on this train."

"So the entrance examinations are over," Magda said, really to herself.

"What a business," the man said. "It's really disgusting. They give you so many examinations to grade and you have to be so careful because so much depends on it."

"Well, that's that," Magda said.

"I beg your pardon?" the man said.

"Magda is planning to go to the university," I said. "I guess not this year, but maybe next year. And maybe I'll end up doing the same."

"Is that right?" the man said. He took off his glasses and

cleaned them slowly. Then he looked at Magda again as though seeing her for the first time.

"And what will you study at the university?" the man finally asked her.

"Psychology," Magda said. "Child psychology. So that I can become a teacher and maybe teach young people when to speak and when not to speak."

"Isn't that interesting," the man said. "I didn't know they taught psychology at the university. Of course my field is religion and ancient Greek."

"This will be in Athens," Magda said. "At the American college there. Where I think they are a little better about admitting women to study difficult subjects."

"I see," the man said. "Of course. Athens is a completely different world, isn't it?"

"I hope so," Magda said. "We're counting on that."

"I'm sure that the two of you will do well in Athens," the man said. "Where there's a will there's a way, as the Anglo-Saxons are fond of saying."

He said that gently, as if assigned to tell us that even though we'd failed this year's examination, there would always be another chance next year. Then he picked up his newspaper and read it for a while without reading it at all. Magda joined me at the compartment window. She didn't say anything, but her fingers came against the outside of my thigh and pinched me so hard that I cried out as though stung by a wasp or other vicious insect, and that's what I had to pretend had happened while Magda just stood there ignoring what she'd done. The man glanced over at us above his glasses, then flipped his newspaper over to scan the headlines on the back page.

The Veria station was east of the town and well below it because the train suddenly veered north at that point to follow the outer edge of the plain that ended where we got off. As we left the compartment, our fellow passenger rose up suddenly to shake hands and wish us a good journey, and I looked back to see him standing in the doorway watching us with a smile that seemed to hover somewhere between amusement and disapproval, but how you saw it of course depended on your

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frame of mind. It seemed mine was still fairly mellow. I decided to make my peace with Magda as we climbed the steep road toward the white town on the mountainside ahead.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what got into me back there on the train. I guess I just get tired of having to pretend all the time."

"Well, I get tired of it too," Magda said. "But what choice have we got?"

"I don't know," I said. "Suppose we just choose not to pretend any longer."

"How can we do that?"

"Suppose from now on we tell people that we're married." Magda took my hand. "But isn't that pretending too?"

"Well it isn't as bad as pretending we're brother and sister. Which is not only a lie but makes it sinful just to hold hands. Besides, I thought we were married in our own way."

"We are in our own way. And isn't that what matters? What you feel inside rather than what you show people on the outside?"

"But does what we show people on the outside matter so much that we have to pretend to be something we really aren't all the time?"

Magda sighed. "All right. If it will make you feel better, when we go to the hotel we'll pretend that we're married."

"Well, what about how it will make you feel?" "I don't know. At this point it all seems a little hopeless. I'm not afraid to take risks for what I believe in my heart, but I don't seem to have many choices left. I can't really have you and I can't go to the university this year or probably next year and I don't know what there is ahead for either of us."

"You can have me. You do have me. Why do you keep saying that?"

"Talking to that man just made me begin to feel lost again."

"Well stop feeling that way. I mean it."

Magda sighed again. "All right, from now on we'll pretend that we can have everything. At least for a while. And I suppose we might as well begin by pretending we're on holiday like other normal human beings at this time of year."

The hotel we chose to go to may not have been the biggest of the three in Veria but it was the closest to the town square, which was the only open space we came across among the steep curling streets of the town, except for the space around the occasional gushing fountain or springhead. The square was as grand a place as you were likely to find in a town that small, with large plane trees and planted flowers and its segment of ancient wall leading to a castle. We decided to have a drink of fresh lemonade in the square before heading over to the hotel we'd chosen. The only other people in the cafe were a middle-aged couple and their two children, city people by the look of it, and as new to the region as we were because I heard them ask the waiter what, if anything, there was of interest to see in the town of Veria. Magda didn't seem to notice them. I got the impression that she was a little nervous about how we'd decided to present ourselves at the hotel, because once we were seated she certainly took her time with that lemonade. Not that I wasn't nervous too, but in the other direction, more like what an impatient bridegroom is supposed to feel. By the time we finally got to the hotel, Magda seemed to have settled down, because she didn't hesitate to walk up to the front desk with me, though she let me do the talking. I asked the man at the desk for a double room with a double bed.

"For how many of you?" the man said.

"What do you mean, how many?" I said. "For me and my wife here."

"Your wife?" the man said.

"That's what I said."

"You're sure you don't have a brother and a sister to go along with your wife? I've had bad experience with some of you young people from the city who like to pretend that a double bed is made for a whole family just because the bed is bigger than any you've been in."

Magda took off her dark glasses. "You don't have to worry about us," she said sweetly. "We don't have a family with us and we've seen plenty of double beds before."

The man studied her. "Don't misunderstand me, I'm just doing my job," he said to the register book. "Will you please

sign here and leave me your identity cards."

I looked at Magda. She was still smiling sweetly at the man.

"Identity cards?" I said. "We don't have identity cards.

Nobody does in our country."

The man looked up. "What country is that?"

"Denmark," I said.

"You learned to speak Greek like that in Denmark?"

"We learned in this country," I said. "We're students at the university."

"In any case," the man said. "Then let me have your passports." I looked at Magda again.

"Why would we have passports with us?" Magda said. "We don't plan to cross any borders."

"Well, I need some sort of identity verification," the man said. "I don't know what happens in Denmark, but in this country the police require it."

I took my knapsack off and went into it to find the address book I was carrying with me in case I wanted to send a postcard to somebody back in the States, and inside the flap of that I had certain documents that I didn't feel would be safe in my wallet while I was on the road—my YMCA membership card, a worn ten-dollar bill, and a certificate from Camp Cory, New York, stating that I was a qualified life-saver. I decided to give the man the life-saving certificate, because the lettering on it was tiny and it had a blue and red Camp Cory seal for a background.

The man glanced at the certificate. "What's this?" he said.

"My state scholarship certificate," I said. "It's all I have that's official."

Magda went over to sit on the chintz settee they had in the entrance lobby. I didn't dare look at her.

"Well, you'll have to write out the details I need because I don't read or write Danish," the man said. "Name, address, date of birth, nationality, how long you plan to stay, where you plan to go from here."

What I wrote out on the form he handed me were the only Danish names I felt I could be sure of, Horatio Hamlet, and I put the address as Elsinore, Denmark. When he turned the register toward me, I scribbled "Mr. and Mrs. Hamlet" as illegibly as I

could. I told the man he could put down that we would be staying just one night and then moving on to join friends in Edessa. When I reached over the counter for the life-saving certificate, the man palmed it.

"No," he said. "This stays with me. Until you've paid your bill."

"But it's the only identification I have."

"That may be," the man said. "But as long as you're in this hotel, only you and I and the police need to know who you are. And once you've paid your bill, neither I nor the police will care any longer."

The man swung around and studied the wall behind him. He picked up a key from one of the pigeon holes there and put the certificate where the key had come from. Then he made a little bow toward Magda and signalled her to follow us up the stairs. Our room turned out to have both a double bed and a single bed off to one side, and it looked out on the square. It wasn't luxurious, but there was plenty of space in there, and it had its own bathroom with an old-fashioned tub that had some rust stains at one end where the water dripped down steadily but was as large a tub as any I'd seen. The man opened the brown drapes, then the gray lace curtains, then the green shutters. He handed me the key.

"I've given you the suite we normally give priests and political dignitaries," he said. "It may not be the equal of what you're used to in Denmark, but I can promise you it's the best we have to offer in this small Macedonian town of ours."

He gave Magda another little bow and closed the door softly behind him. Magda flopped down on the double bed and lay there with her arms behind her head, smiling at me as though she had a taste of honey in her mouth. I went over to look out across the square a minute. The light had turned soft, and people had begun to come out and gather in pairs and larger groups for the late afternoon ice cream or cake before their evening stroll around the square. There was a bougainvillea vine climbing the wall under our window, and somewhere nearby there was jasmine or honeysuckle to sweeten the air every time the breeze that had come up brushed by our window.

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Across the square, where the old walls of the town cut straight through the winding streets, you could see the rounded roof of a former mosque with its minaret still beside it. I was about to call Magda over to look at that curiosity and breathe in the general feeling of contentment the town gave you at that hour when I felt her arms circle my waist from behind.

"You're a great liar," she said. "Where did you learn to lie like that about who you are?"

"I guess I must have learned from being with you." "Is that right? And just how is anybody supposed to put their faith in you if you've learned to deceive people like that?"

"I don't know. How is anybody supposed to put their faith in you when you're the one who taught me how?"

"I didn't teach you anything," Magda said. "You remember how all this started? With the scheme you made up to get me to the beach?"

"Well, that was your fault too. For making me feel about you the way I did."

"I made you feel that way?"

"Yes. Just like you're doing now."

Magda flicked her tongue into my ear. "Then I think there's only one solution. I think both our souls need a thorough cleansing."

"I don't know how to do that," I said. "You'll have to teach me that too."

"Let me think," Magda said. "In most religions you have to cleanse the flesh before you try to get through to the soul. So maybe the first thing we do is wash ourselves thoroughly."

She let go of my waist and stepped back. Then she undid her blouse and took it off to lay it on the bed.

"Come," she said. "Take off your clothes so that we can help each other wash off our old sins before we add any more new ones."

I took off my clothes. When Magda finished undressing, she went in and ran the water in the bathtub. The water came out rusty at first, but it came out full throttle, so that it cleaned itself in a hurry, and there was enough heat left in the pipes to make it lukewarm. Magda sat on the rim of the tub while it was

filling up and turned every now and then to let one hand play with the water as it rose, but her eyes were mostly on me standing in the doorway—that is, until she seemed to become shy and took her eyes off me because she saw something in the way I was gazing at her. I don't know what it was she saw, but I know what went through my mind as she sat there with the afternoon sun from the high window slanting across the top half of her body, and this was that I couldn't ever expect to see anything more beautiful in a woman than the line of Magda's neck and shoulders when she turned against the light, and the long line her legs made when she stretched them to lean back and touch the water.

Magda turned the tap off suddenly while the tub was still only half full and sat there on the rim with her knees tight together and her legs tucked in against the tub's underbelly. I went over and knelt in front of her and kissed first one knee and then the other. She took my head in her hands and gazed at me. Then she bent to kiss my eyes. She let go of my head then and swung her legs over to sit on the rim facing the other way, with her feet slicing the water, then slipped in all the way and settled back against the slanting end of the tub.

"Come in," she said. "We can both fit easily."

I climbed in facing her, but she took hold of my legs and turned me around.

"This way, silly man. Otherwise you'll have your back against the faucets instead of against me."

I eased in that way and settled back against her. She wound her arms around me and put her chin on my shoulder to lean forward and pick up the soap from the tray in front of me. Then she leaned back again and used the soap on my shoulders and as much of my back as she could get to easily, and when she had rinsed me off, she brought the soap around front and went over my chest and belly and as far as she could reach underwater. I turned my head to brush my lips against her cheek just to show her that I liked what she was doing, but that made her draw back up.

"Not yet," she said. "We still have me to do."

She put the soap back in the soap dish, then put her hands

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on my shoulders to raise herself and ease over me leap-frog fashion so that she could lower herself into the water again and settle back against me with her head bent forward, waiting for me to work on her back.

"You have to pick up the soap yourself," she said. "I told you that it's bad luck for me to hand it to you."

So I leaned forward to pick up the soap from the dish, then settled back to soap her shoulders and her back, and when I'd rinsed them off and moved my hand around front to run the soap over her breasts, she help my hand and had me go over them twice, then let go of the hand so that I could soap under her arms and as far as I needed to in order to soap all of her in front. Her head was bent back against mine when my other hand came around front to rinse her off, and she didn't seem to mind now when I turned my head to put my lips against her neck and then her ear.

"What do we do now?" I said into her ear.

"Now you put the soap back in the dish and then we let the water run out and then we do anything we want to do."

I put the soap back in the dish and she leaned forward and pulled out the plug under the faucets. I held her there, one hand on the ridge of her shoulder and the other on her neck under the hair, where the down was still damp from my washing. As I caressed her neck she turned her head to bite gently into my hand, but she stayed where she was even after the water had run out and after I'd taken my hand off her shoulder and picked up the soap again so that I could go below in back where the water had been, and soap that intimate place as well, and when I stopped soaping her there but kept the soap beside me and eased her back against me, she knew just what I wanted and arched her back slightly as though to help, then let out a little sigh of the kind that has only pleasure in it.

By the time we woke from our late afternoon nap, it was dark in our room, and when I went over to the window to have a look outside, the square seemed almost deserted, with very few strollers still working the two sides of the evening promenade to show off who they were or make eye contact with somebody they wanted to get to know better and only a few scattered

groups sitting outside the sweet shops and the cafes along the periphery of the square. I was hungry by then, but it took a while to get Magda out of bed so that we could go out and find some place still open that served decent food. She told me that since we'd decided to pretend we were on vacation like everybody else, there was no need to hurry to do anything any longer, even to feed ourselves, and all she really wanted was for me to come back and lie with her a while in that grand double bed so that we could enjoy the luxury of it as long as possible. So I went back to bed and just lay there holding her close and not talking. Magda finally said that since the only thing I seemed to have on my mind at that point was eating, she thought it might be nice for us to play a new game she'd just invented, which was to pretend that we could go someplace and order anything we wanted of the meals we remembered as the best we'd ever had.

The first thing that little game did for me was to make me excruciatingly hungry, and the second thing it did was make me secretly jealous, because the ideal menu I came up with was a simple boring one based on Christmas meals my German grandmother used to turn out in upstate New York, with various kinds of poultry and potatoes and pies, while Magda came up with a menu so exotic and French that she couldn't settle for just naming the fish and meat and vegetables she had in mind but had to describe everything that went into the sauces those things floated in, and the cheeses that followed, and a couple of deserts too complicated to be real. The more she went on the clearer it became to me that she must have learned about all this luscious food in somebody's company, and this made me wonder what other more personal things she may have learned from whoever that somebody was. I finally had to ask her where the hell she'd gotten to know so much about French cooking in Salonika, Greece, for God's sake, where there wasn't a single restaurant that served food like that as far as I knew, though of course somebody could have cooked it up for her in his own home. Magda must have realized that her little game had worked to put me in the wrong frame of mind, because she suddenly admitted that she hadn't actually eaten everything

she'd described but had gotten it out of studying a French cook book that her aunt had given her to cheer her up after the first time she'd run away.

"That's cheating," I said. "I could have made things up out of a book too. If my mother happened to have one around the house instead of learning all she had to know from her mother."

"You're just jealous," Magda said. "I can tell. Otherwise why would you force me to admit that I'd never been to a restaurant or anywhere else where they serve that sort of food?"

"Because it's one thing to make up an imaginary meal out of things you've actually eaten and another to make it up out of a book."

"What difference does it make if it's imaginary?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'd say the one is honest pretending and the other not so honest pretending once we've set up the rules of the game. But I'm not in a mood to argue."

"That's a foolish distinction. Very Anglo-Saxon. Because it's still only a game meant to entertain one either way, and the better one make sthings up, the better it entertains one."

"O. K. It's only a game, and you win because you can make things up better than I can. So how about going out now for something to eat. Please?"

"I think you were just jealous because you thought I'd eaten all those things with somebody else. And maybe I had. Some of the things. Only it wasn't with the man you think it was."

"What man was it with?"

"My father. When I was fourteen years old. He took me on a trip to Belgrade for a birthday present and we had a wonderful meal in a kind of French restaurant there. Only I don't remember exactly what we ate."

"Your father took you on a trip?" "Yes. That was when he was still an ordinary human being who loved me because I was his pretty little daughter and not this rebellious whore I've grown up to be."

"Is that what he calls you?"

"He called me that once and maybe now he'd call me something worse."

"Well, if that's what he thinks of you, what would he think

of me if he knew about us being together like this?"

"I don't know. If he could forgive you for not being Jewish, he'd probably think you a fool for having anything to do with his one-time daughter. And about that he might be right."

I took my arm out from under her and sat up to look at her.

"Do you really think that?"

"Sometimes. I guess sometimes when I'm most happy, like right now, I can't help wondering what I've done to deserve it. And that makes me wonder if it's real, and what will happen if it turns out not to be."

"Of course it's real," I said. "And why shouldn't you and I deserve to be happy?"

"Because the truth is that I've lost one year of school because I was reckless, and now I've lost another not only because I wouldn't do what my family wanted me to do but because I fell in love with my own student the first chance I had to become a teacher. So maybe I'm incorrigible."

"You're no such thing. In fact, what you are is the only person I've ever known who is really free."

Magda sat up beside me. "Am I? Well, it's nice to know that you think I am, because you're the person who matters now. But the one thing I learned from the last time I was in love is that you're only free when you're enough in command of yourself to choose what you can do and not do. And even then you have to hope that fate or luck or whatever you want to call it is on your side." "Well, we're both free to choose what we want to do," I said. "And we're both lucky besides. Otherwise we wouldn't have made it this far."