



The Death of Paris

by

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George found a postcard in the hotel shop. It was of Schliemann's Trench. He addressed it to Henry and drew an arrow pointing down to the bottom of the picture. A scribbled message said, "Meet you under the fig tree at noon."

He gave the card to the desk clerk.

"Please give this to my friend if he arrives."

Henry was already two days late. Why was George worried about him arriving today?

He headed out to the dusty road to wait for a bus to Çanakkale. That was the easy bit. Bus stations don't use labels, so it took him several minutes to find the bus from Çanakkale to Troy. There was no sign of a departure, because there was no sign of it filling. He always forgot that buses in Turkey depart when full, not according to a timetable. He sat in the sweltering ageing Transit praying for enough custom to arrive. Then, when thirteen of the fifteen seats were taken, it occurred to him to buy the other two. He went from one foot to another in desperate anxiety as the driver refused to understand his simple request.

"Drive to Troy!" he shouted as if volume improved comprehension and thrust a bundle of notes into the driver's hand, who smelt a rat and angrily thrust the notes back at George. He was bathed in sweat and beginning to lose control. He looked for a taxi. There were always empty taxis in Çanakkale, buzzing round hooting pedestrians, desperate for a fare, but now, at eleven o'clock, when he had a rendezvous in Troy, the most important meeting of his life, there was not a taxi to be seen and the bus driver was standing imposingly across the door of his bus, letting other passengers on but skilfully barring the door to George.

There was only one seat left on the bus now. It had been George's, but he'd got off to talk to the driver. He tried to force his way past the driver who became aggressive. What had he done wrong? He looked pleadingly through the windows.

"Does anyone here speak a little English?"

A man at the back of the bus pulled a window back.

"Can I help?"

“I hope so. I’m in a hurry to get to Troy and he won't let me on the bus. I don't understand why.”

The Turk spoke to the driver and then returned to George.

“He was worried that you offered so much money. He'll lose his license if he over charges.”

“I only wanted to purchase the last seats so we could leave earlier,” George wailed.

The Turk translated again and this time, begrudgingly, the driver moved aside to let George back on the bus. As he started the noisy engine a squadron of empty taxis went past. George moaned. He didn't dare ask to get out again.

The bus chugged slowly up the steep hill out of Çanakkale, past the turning off to the hotel. George was sure he could make out a heavy motorbike in the courtyard. His heart sank. Henry was there. Why had he left the message? He'd waited often enough for Henry. If only he'd kept his widow to himself, for himself. But really! He was becoming paranoid. How could he be certain it was Henry's bike? From the distance, it could have been anyone's. And even if it was Henry's, he would need time to change and eat. The main thing was that he, George would get to the fig tree first.

The bus reached the top of the hill, rounded the sharp curves and then picked up speed down the long straight road onto the plain beside the Dardanelles. The speed calmed George's racing pulse. Now they were getting there. The kilometres were flashing under the wheels of the old Transit and he could relax. If only he hadn't told Henry. He could have phoned him from Troy and that way have been sure of regulating things to his own advantage. What a state he'd be in by the time he got to the olive tree - bathed in sweat, dust sticking to his pale suit. What would she think? Would she be there? The idea it was all just a silly flirt didn't seem possible. No! That would be too cruel; the most cruel blow fate could deal him, or so he thought.

George sprang to his feet bashing his head heavily on the steel roof panel. He ignored the amazed faces that turned to investigate the noise. A motorbike roared past them, seeming to leave them standing and there was Henry, in an immaculate white shirt and jeans, blonde hair gently ruffled by the air currents swirling behind the massive fairing, disappearing into the distance like Apollo. How apt had been her description, even though she'd never met him. Her words came back to him. “Don't give up your prize.”

What had she meant? Was she his prize? Or was his prize his wife and family or had she meant Henry? Don't give them up? For that, it was too late. Lucy hadn't coped with his friendship with Henry. He was bad company. He had explained that to the beautiful, tearful widow under the fig tree, by Schliemann's trench. She had laughed through her bereavement tears.

"It's never too late. A woman can forgive anything, if the sacrifice in her name is big enough."

George hadn't understood a thing. Her words rang in his ears, but were drowned by the fear that Henry would be there, under the fig tree before him, and Henry was a hero. At any rate, a much better catch than George. And this rotten old bus would weave through every village either side of the main road before it reached Troy. He could see it all. Henry would see her beauty framed by the tree. He would sit opposite her. She would tell him she had a rendezvous. He would laugh his charming laugh and move over to sit beside her. She would forget George, the way Helen forgot old Menelaus for the beautiful Paris. Paris abducted Helen, he told himself and that was what Henry would do to his Helen. No force needed. Someone as beautiful and skilled as Henry or Paris could always wreak chaos wherever he went. Ten years the siege of Troy lasted. George told himself that his army would be no match for Henry's, not if he waited ten times ten years beneath the walls of his city.

And finally those very walls hove into old Menelaus's view, but not before the bus had spent an agonizing fifteen minutes waiting in a village while the driver discussed if he really had room that trip for a tub of bricks. The bricks once on board meant that every curve was a challenge. There was the wait at most stops while the men on the bus rearranged themselves so that a new woman passenger didn't have to sit next to a man. Could things get slower?

George paid his entrance to the Troy excavations and despite the protests of the other tourists, went the wrong way round the circuit. Taking the wrong route would take him straight to the trench. Within minutes he would observe the bench beneath the fig tree from the other side of the Ramp and be able to hear and see them without being close enough to risk discovery. He'd considered the option of rounding the corner by the trench and bursting upon them? No! Henry would laugh and humiliate him in front of her. Sometimes a little deceit is necessary for self-preservation. So he half ran, half walked past the Little Theatre and up the hillock to where he

could overlook the Ramp. There at the top of the mound was a scrawny olive tree, which had yesterday robbed him of his last view of her. How he prayed she had stood him up today, had merely been flirting with him yesterday. It was not to be! She was constant and had arrived on time. As George gently pushed an olive branch of a neighbouring tree aside, he saw them in animated conversation. Henry was talking. He couldn't hear him but there, her mellifluous laughter floated across the Ramp to George's tortured ears. "Don't give up your prize," she'd said. She was testing her Menelaus. Was he man enough to summon an army and cross the Hellespont for her? George's Hellespont was a thin Grecian Ramp not ten metres across and yet he sat there behind his olive tree, too awe struck at the treachery before his eyes to do anything, and there! It happened! That imperceptible movement and of Henry's skilled hand falling naturally from her cheek to her breasts thrusting beneath the black widow's blouse, and she let him turn her face to hers and kiss her perfect lips with such a perfect kiss, lips barely touching but so full of sensuousness. George recognised the kiss of the practiced rake. The kiss that had snared him and destroyed his marriage.

Henry's hand was at her knee, pulling her long black dress into folds that his swift hand might find its way beneath it. Here she protested. She would scorn him, but she dashed Georges hope of a return to fidelity when she stood up, laughed, threw her fine black hair over her shoulder and pulled Henry playfully through a rickety wire fence and down a slope out of all sight from the tourist's path, into a little copse of fig trees in a hollow. George waited bewildered for a few minutes and then gingerly, with tears welling in his eyes, crossed the stones that had lay there four thousand years and reflected on how ephemeral human constancy is. Once beneath the fig tree by the bench he listened and was sure he could hear the gasps of their lust among the rustling leaves - or was it just the wind in the dry foliage?

"How could she? I told her he is full of filth from debauched living. She is risking her life with that beast," he whispered back into the leaves, and then turned to retrace his steps. He found a bush opposite the Little Theatre and vomited behind it, tears streaming down his face all the while. Then he stumbled blindly on toward the wooden horse and half sat, half collapsed beneath its shady haunches.

George rested there in a trance for an hour or more. He couldn't recall afterwards what he had thought about in that time. He fancied he half slept, half dreamt about his wife, and the

manifold injuries he had dealt his children. He might have stayed there in the dust, into the twilight and witnessed the blood red sunset over the sea, but something arrested his attention and finally drew him back into consciousness, back into reality, back to now. It was the sound he most feared, the sound of Henry's voice and her laughter.

“My God,” he whispered. “They could have left quietly.”

He looked across the narrow dirt square and saw them purchase a post card and take it in turns to write something on it. Henry became angry after she had finished writing and tried to take the card from her, but she laughed and ran away from him. Only when at a safe distance did she take a stamp from her purse and push the card wistfully into a solitary post box in the middle of the square. She returned to Henry, kissed him, took his arm and led him to his huge bike. She looked at it for a moment as if she were suddenly in another world, or admiring a work of art, or maybe a utilitarian object to decide if it was fit for purpose. Henry didn't interrupt. He probably thought she was admiring the magnificent machine. He would!

Then she sat herself side-saddle on the pillion seat. Henry pulled himself dexterously over the bulbous golden tank and nestled his calves astride the massive cylinders. With a flick of the wrist, the powerful motor roared through the revs and then settled to quietly throbbing. He eased it from its stand and swirled through the dust and onto the tarmac road.

George leapt from his resting place and as a man possessed, sprinted to the road where a taxi was turning.

“Follow the bike!” he shouted and held his arms out and made motor noises and turned an imaginary throttle.

The driver nodded his consent, banged a lever on the meter and as soon as George was in the passenger seat, sped off after the bike.

George was surprised at Henry's moderate driving. The taxi was soon behind the bike. Up close George could see Henry had poor control of the bike. Unused to having a side-saddle passenger, he was slowing for every bend. The beauty of the two stunned George. He had no right to demand her affection. She was his woman.

She wrapped her arm around Henry's waist and their blonde and black hair became as one in the swirling eddies around them. She leant close to his ear, to tell him to accelerate, George concluded, for now he urged the powerful machine into action. The taxi driver whistled through his teeth and started slowing down for an approaching bend. He started shouting something, for

the bike was still speeding away from them, accelerating into the azure sky, and as it approached the bend at the brow of the hill, Henry leant so gently, so imperceptibly to take the bike smoothly and gracefully through the curve. But she sat there like a marble statue of a Goddess, her body not relenting one millimetre to get back into harmony with the bike's movements. The heavy frame started whipping in protest and George could see how Henry was now trying to lean the bike with force into the curve. The taxi driver cried out and braked sharply. She had let go of Henry and was standing up, putting all her weight to oppose Henry's. The opposing forces, which should have held the bike through the curve, were no longer balanced. For a moment, she hovered above the bike, her hair swept in the full force of the airstream, a goddess levitating above her chariot.

George had to relive for the young police officer, how the bike started to weave across the road, struck a curb stone and leapt into the air throwing her violently to one side, and how there was a cloud of dust as the heavy machine landed in a harvested corn field.

As the taxi drew up next to where she lay on the narrow pavement, the dust was settling to show Henry's broken body under the heavy machine. There was a strong smell, George remembered, of burning flesh from beneath the hot cylinders and exhaust pipe.

George recalled too how he had stood helplessly between the two motionless corpses, but denied knowing either of them. The police didn't believe him. He now wanted was to get out of Turkey as quickly as possible and it was bad enough just being a witness. If he owned up to knowing them, he would have to furnish an explanation of their behaviour. He assumed the taxi driver had told the police, his fare had wanted him to follow the couple on the bike, but George convinced them it had been a communication breakdown. Nevertheless, the police officer leading the investigation insisted George stay in the area for the next few days.

They were endlessly boring days interspersed with bouts of self pity, whenever he fell to grieving for a woman he'd never known, trying to come to terms with her inexplicable infidelity, but then Henry had always had this effect on people. What he couldn't rationalise was her apparent suicide, which was also tantamount to Henry's murder. George's was a double grief that had robbed him of his hopes for the future with her, his self-declared prize, and his support from the past, Henry, his souvenir of an ill-spent life.

On the third day the police arrived at the hotel to return his passport.

“You are free to leave. We have completed our investigations,” the terse but polite young policewoman told him.

“Could you throw any light on the accident?” George had tried to ask in a matter of fact way, but his voice trembled and he was sure he had betrayed his every emotion. He regretted the question. Had he revealed his involvement with the dead couple? It didn’t matter.

“The case is closed.” Her answer was very matter of fact. “But she was local and her husband died at the same place in a motor bike accident a few months ago. He collided with a stationary bus. Probably just coincidence.”

That was that. Matter shut. Coincidence. It wasn't for the police to supply answers as to why had she gone into the fig grove to fornicate with Henry and why had she taken him with her to eternity so shortly afterwards? His mind flashed back to the moments before she got on the bike, the way she had studied it, perhaps not as a piece of art, but as the chariot, which would carry her from this world. Were her actions premeditated? They were questions to which he could never expect an answer. Perhaps her grief for her husband had been so intense that she had lost her reason that afternoon and thought the bike the obvious hearse to help her join him? Too easy and not likely! A grieving widow she was! Nuts she definitely was not! And coincidence it wasn't either. Hadn't she lured Henry to his death like the Sirens used to? Didn't the Sirens commit suicide after Odysseus had thwarted them? Was she a witch, a she-devil playing a ghoulish game of myths with an innocent victim? Henry was anything but innocent! That left retribution as the only answer to the riddle. If George hadn't been so late for his assignation, she would have been his prize. As it was, she gave herself to Henry, the first lover to claim her, and then killed him as his payment. That too, had a precedent in myth.

Would she have taken George's life if he had arrived first? He had assumed it to be love at first sight. They had got on so well. Her bereavement, his failed marriage, had been discussed and analysed as though they were old friends. She had not mentioned how her husband died. That had surprised him, but he hadn't wanted to pry. He had told far more of his life than he'd intended. They had parted with a hand squeeze. She had promised to return the following day and they would talk about the future. The future, after two hours; what had he been thinking? This was the stuff of horny teenagers. She was just a promiscuous woman picking up men. How he had been sucked in so easily? How lucky was he to escape her machinations?

The more George thought about the bizarre happenings of that afternoon, the more he became convinced that he was going as mad as she apparently had been. He began to feel sick with grief and then anger at her evil plot. She had ensnared them both.

Out! Away from this land of Gods and Goddesses, plots and counter plots. He had to get away before his own reason was drawn down into her game of myths; a game which had ended with such awful consequences. George left instructions at the desk that he would leave early the next morning, but some hand of fate or bottle of wine caused him to oversleep and as he finally went to pay his bill, there in the incoming post tray laid a card of the Trojan Horse. The address and the first sentence were unmistakably in Henry's hand.

“Gone South for a few days to enjoy a mutual friend. Don't be cross. Back soon. Love and cuddles Henry.”

Henry's glibness bordered on mockery. It was perhaps a blessed relief to have that chapter closed.

The next lines were in a hand he didn't know. He assumed it to be hers. It was written in Turkish, in tiny writing, so that it fitted on the card. He called over the English-speaking lobby clerk.

“Can you tell me what it says?”

The clerk hesitated and read the card several times. He looked at George quizzically and betrayed obvious unease. Finally he spoke, but only to be evasive.

“It seems to refer to a poem. It's very difficult to understand.”

“Please,” George implored, “just do your best.”

This had to be the solution. The clerk read slowly as a huge tip crossed the counter.

“It's good you didn't come. I'll use Henry for my journey. We will be free; you of him and me of my grief! Release your wife from hers! Tell her my story and she will forgive you. My sacrifice will placate her. This is your prize. Don't give it up!”

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