

AUTUMN STORM

Marousi, November 12, 1968

MY HUSBAND WAS ARRESTED on the first day of the “revolution”—to be exact, on the first night of the revolution—and has been in detention on the island of Leros ever since. This, his third arrest in a row, was purely “preventive” in nature and, precisely for this reason, totally meaningless. He had been employed up to that time by various publications as a crossword puzzle composer and a crossword puzzle composer simply cannot be considered dangerous in any serious way. I may be the only one who calls him a composer, in jest of course. He prefers the term “constructor,” which is more consistent with his views concerning creativity, and also with his strict sense of order—an outlook he has faithfully adhered to since his childhood. He learned this trade during the long years he spent in different prisons, so he wouldn’t lose his mind, or so he says. As far as I am concerned, the fact that he chose this particular way to maintain his sanity, in light of the enormous self-discipline political prisoners need when faced with the loss of liberty, suggests something else, which he would have a hard time admitting: a creeping sense of insecurity as far back as that time. I did not know him during his two prior detentions. It was only afterwards that we met, in 1963, towards the end of September, at the opening of the wine festival in Daphní. He had just been released from jail under the Pacification Act of that year, and had already served four years of the initial sentence which, according to Statute 509, was to be life.

In spite of the martyr’s aura about him and his pale skin, I don’t believe I was ever really in love with him. Our marriage was the product of well-thought-out decisions, and our marital relations were based primarily on mutual respect. He was in his late forties and was looking for the few tangibles that he had missed out on, like the feel of a freshly ironed shirt—another thing he would never admit to. And I was a rather carefree soul, about to turn thirty-three. Ours was not a compromise borne of necessity, nor did it prevent us from reaching, at times, states bordering on enthusiasm.

I have been living alone for a little over a year and a half. I am thirty-eight years old and I work as a language and literature teacher in a private school. A few days ago, totally by chance, I ran into an old lover of mine. I just wrote “totally by chance” without being sure that I did not unconsciously seek this meeting.

I have two daughters of primary school age, and even though I am raising them rather strictly, at night, when some fear or other disturbs their sleep, they often climb into bed with me; especially the elder one, who’s five, and then the younger one—the three-and-a-half-year-old—follows suit. At such moments, the nearness of their breath and the touch of their skin makes my husbandless year and a half particularly hard to bear.

By nature, I dislike deceiving myself. I know only too well that that gentle feeling so sweetly and innocently fanning out inside my thighs will eventually awaken the deep and pressing need of my whole being for a good, impersonal, uninhibited fuck.

My reservations, therefore, about the fortuitousness of our encounter go hand and hand with the question: Why him and not some stranger whom I could just as easily have chosen myself? I must tell you that when I was a student I used this approach, with all due discretion of course, most successfully, thus heralding the approaching women’s liberation movement which, after some delay, has finally reached our country during the last ten years. I should also fill you in on a few details about my old lover. He was both excessive and unfaithful. Our relationship lasted approximately two years. By “approximately” I mean a period of three months of vacillation on my part followed by the decision, again on my part only, to break it off. It had gone too far. It was impossible to take his shallowness any more. I had come to the conclusion that his infidelities were little more than an expression of his irrational fear of responsibility. It was immaturity pure and simple. When he sensed the danger he insisted we discuss the possibility of our getting married. Of course, that was not what the whole thing was about. “Settling down” was the last thing on my mind, and I believe that his offer was clearly a defensive move, an effort to create a sense of obligation for himself and, of course, to buy himself some time.

When I told him that my parents had not divorced because of my existence and that, to put it simply, I did not wish to repeat their ex-

perience with some child that he might eventually dump on me, he didn't know what to think. He became even more confused when he realized that my decision was final. He broke down. He did not even attempt to do anything about it. Or, rather, he did the only thing that could bring any results: He threw himself on my mercy. And the knowledge that I was getting revenge made me unyielding.

We finally separated. Amicably, without any scenes or entreaties, from him I mean. On this point I want to be fair. Few things are more heart-rending than unacknowledged male despair.

At any rate, that first meeting of ours was followed by a second one. This time it was arranged. I had not seen him since 1954. He had not changed much nor had he put on weight or developed the spread around the middle which disfigures men over forty.

We sat at the Aigli cafe, in the Zappeion Park. The place was quiet and out of the way. He had picked it. It's funny though. I had shared so many things with him, so many nights, and yet I felt nervous and even a little bit awkward. As though I was with some stranger. I think he was just as uncomfortable as I was. He told me he was still single. I did not ask him why, and I tried to change the subject. He kept right on though. I knew how persistent he could be and was beginning to suspect where our conversation was leading. Just as I knew exactly what he was trying to conceal beneath that tone of irony he so often had in his voice. He said that the only woman he ever wanted to marry had left him. And that was me.

Was it me he was mocking or himself? It doesn't really matter, but pain should not be made light of. I told him to stop. I became angry and did not want our conversation to continue in that vein. There was a danger of being caught in the trap of nostalgia. For my part, I knew very well what I was after and I told him what it was in no uncertain terms. In essence, I proposed that we start going out again with no strings attached—free of obligations. He looked at me silently, seeming not to comprehend. Then he asked me if I was sure I wasn't trying to turn back the hands of the clock. His question surprised me. I thought for a moment that he no longer cared for me as a woman. The next moment I felt deeply hurt. Even more deeply than during the years of his infidelities. But he had meant something else. Fourteen years were too long a time to squeeze into a mere parody of our story. The hands of the

clock could not be turned back for the simple reason that they had never moved forward. They had stopped at a specific point and the only thing that could be done was for them to start moving again right where they had left off.

He was certainly not paranoid, and it is equally certain that my five years of married life were a complete blank to him. I too, of course, would need to blot them out. I stopped and stared at him in amazement. No, he had not changed one bit. He was impetuous as always and, even if we had still been together, he would have been just as unfaithful as he was then.

For a moment I felt a vertiginous pull at the thought of a new beginning. Time expands when you're living intensely, but it always ends up as small, compressed cores of memory.

We had spent our only vacation together on one of the islands in the Cyclades. We both enjoyed making love in the open air. I still do. In those days the parched Aegean Islands were not overrun by summer hordes. We had left the imprint of our lovemaking all over the island and I still carry within me those windy, sun-blasted places. But that is all it was. It is not the fact that I have a husband in prison that is holding me back, nor is it my two daughters. I am not puritanical, and I don't think I'm lacking in courage. But a love affair has a fixed duration, and this is one thing, whereas the memories that we carry around with us are quite another. I recognize my loneliness and I know what I need in order to cope with it effectively. Instead, I meet someone who is ready to offer me what I had refused once before. I hope I am not deceiving myself here. Because there is something else I should tell you—one of those thoughts I have every so often which are so shattering to my sense of certainty: If all I needed was a good fuck why didn't I, in fact, seek it with some stranger? Was it fear that my college day tactics would prove ineffective at thirty-eight? But suppose I did not just want a good fuck? We have so many ways to delude ourselves. So why didn't I respond to his proposition? Why was I put off? Was it because his long-accumulated passion now seemed nothing more than the sick and prolonged reaction of his wounded ego? Or was it the realization, at some deeper level, that such things must be put in their proper perspective? This thought, which is in itself an admission of the extent of my resignation, is absolutely chilling.

There could also be room here for another interpretation. That his enduring passion flatters me beyond words. A reunion according to the dictates of this passion would afford it, if only temporarily, a modicum of relief. My hardheartedness—which this time is working to my disadvantage—lies in my wishing that his passion will be there forever.

Dear Madam: As you can see, I avoid mentioning your name which, in any event, is nothing more than a mask. I have often wished that I was one of your numerous naive women readers, whose letters to your column I read with such great interest. If that were the case, I would ask for your advice, shielding myself, of course, behind an appropriate pen name, such as *Autumn Storm*. I can easily imagine the liberating power of simple feelings. Unfortunately, though, the age of innocence is behind me. Still, here I am writing to you. My reason? To me you are—or you could become—the audience I need for a story which could otherwise not be made public. I am taking advantage, therefore, of this possibility.

With warmest regards,

Autumn Storm, at last.

1982