

MARTHA GROGAN

Ode to Pel or One Athenian Night

O*ctober 1938, Athens*

“Odessa next,” the voice at the other end of the telephone crackles. Annie does not recognise it.

“Why? What’s there?” she asks with no inhibition. She waits to be scolded for such a question.

“Odessa next. After Athens, Odessa. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.” Annie replies. In reception like this, the voice sounds ever so far away, echoing—Odessa, Odessa, Odessa.

What awaits her there?

Information, one must assume. She places the phone over the receiver, walks around the crumpled and disturbed bed and back to the desk. She strips the coarse, green blanket from the bed and wraps it around her shoulders. The room is cheap and clean; and there is some comfort lying in the wallpaper patterns lurking in every household in the world—familiarity weaving through the branches of Morris’ bamboo. It settles Annie’s heart, staring at the thin paper leaves. The phone had been ringing as soon as she set foot into her room. No time to sit down after the long day. She heaves the worn leather satchel off her shoulder and dumps the contents onto her desk; strewn with papers of half-written articles and her black, intimidating typewriter. Dozens of the yellow paper packets fall from her bag, all with rough edges. A hardback book clatters out too, and all its accompanying notes of loose paper. She splits one of the packets open to reveal a roll of microfilm. Without a projector, Annie unravels the sepia strip to inspect the contents in the light

of the window. In one minute headline she can squint to read the capital letters—P----- W---- E----- . .

Permanent World Encyclopedia.

I am dead, she thinks.

Rolling the film back into the reel, she conceals it once again in its yellow packet. She wanders to the glass door and steps onto the balcony.

The sun is low, the air is cool and Annie can feel the breeze brushing her escaping wisps of hair from her fedora. While half eavesdropping the French couple's argument above her, she takes off her hat and inspects the inside. The label reads an alien alphabet, but a pen within the rim reads 'J. H. Voronsky'.

Turning the hat in her hands, the argument and the traffic fade away as Annie turns the name of Voronsky in her mind, an image of his face swimming before her.

"I'll be dead before I even get to Odessa... I am dead."

With her thumb, Annie covers the sun from her eyes, lifts her hand and the sun rose with it—turning back time to the morning where she acquired a new hat from a Mr Jacob H. Voronsky.

Annie was, with a clumsy elegance, stuffing olives into her mouth; black, soft and dripping with oil. On the hotel terrace were a few tourists, whom Annie recognised from the train coming down; a shaggy haired and bespectacled student buried in books, a young couple, French, incessant in arguing every detail of their journey and another man, quiet, and suited with a camera hung around his neck. A quick lunch she told herself, drinking coffee (since tea anywhere outside the British Empire was deplorable) before heading to her destination. The Acropolis—poking out of the flat expanse of central Athens, a hill of dry, baked earth with a gentle green of olive trees with rolling natural curves of geographic proportion contrasts to the stark, sharp lines of the temples against the bright blue sky. Autumn dulled the effect somewhat, but nevertheless, the sun shone enough to invoke the envy of an English summer. Annie, sensitive to such extremity of light, wore a long, white cotton skirt and a long sleeved pale green blouse—her skin had to be covered, else risk severe sunburn. Her hair, white, was wrapped into a tight knot and

hidden underneath a corduroy flat cap. She despised the heat of it, but it was the only article that could protect her face and fine, sugar-spun hair from the bright, autumnal sun.

A waiter offered her another coffee; she declined in graceless Greek.

Unlike her own desk in the hotel room, she managed to keep the papers on her breakfast table somewhat organised. A notebook opened on a fresh page, her fountain pen lay in the crease of the spine (she forgot about the one in a temporary spot behind her ear) and the hardback book open in front of her. Page 63 of one of her father's encyclopedias. To be precise, the 20th book which covers every topic from the alphabetical formation of ODE to PEL—where she was studying (for the countless time) the page of the Parthenon. All this research, the articles spanning millennia of this proud portrait of Athenian architectural mastery was amounting into the small, unassuming notebook of Antigone Lightfoot's. All for the grace of the Permanent World Encyclopedia.

As soon as Annie even thought the words in her head, the hairs of her neck stood on end, and a vibration in the very base of her skull. The man with the camera was looking at her. She was positive of it, although the periphery of her vision was never the best source of information. With childlike suspicion of telepathy, Annie collected her papers, stuffed them into her satchel, and set off to the Acropolis.

Walking over the smooth marbled courtyards of inner Athens, below the temples, one could almost delude oneself into thinking they are strolling through Paris; the coolness of the pavements, and the balconies with curling baskets of flowers. With no particular urgency, Annie walked from her hotel, taking a long stroll to the museum where she intended to see sculptures from her textbooks from years ago. And out of the corner of her eye, lingered the man with the camera. He had to be a tourist. It was mere paranoia keeping him in Annie's vision. She had seen the French couple around as well, just a coincidence of being a tourist. And yet...

She climbed the smooth steps of the museum, almost swaying at the top, her hat keeping heat around her swimming head like a burning halo.

"Excuse me, Madam, are you alright?" she heard the voice, and a

hand brushed against her elbow to catch her.

“Yes, no, I’m fine. This silly old thing.” She ripped the flatcap off her head (the pen behind her ear clattered to the floor) and flapped the hat to her blushing face. She looks up to find the origin of the voice. A man, about her age, wearing a fedora, with wide brown eyes. His nose looked as if it were broken years ago, his smile easy and convincing.

“Well, if you’re scared of sunburn, we can swap, if you like.” He plucked the hat off his head, revealing his brown hair in loose curls framing his face. Annie hands him her flatcap, while the man places the fedora on her head. “You have beautiful hair,” he said, the moment she released the locks from its band. Falling about her shoulders, she swiftly curled her white hair into a long plait.

“Do you think so? It’s quite deceptive, most people assume I’m an elderly grey lady. You couldn’t tell I’m a student.” Annie smiled with awkward politeness, this man was rather persistent to be kind.

“Student of what? If I may ask,” he said, putting the flatcap on his own head. “Rather a good fit actually.”

“Classics,” Annie said. They walked together, slow, into the atrium of the grand museum.

Placing a hand on his chest, he said, “Languages. As many as I can manage, before you ask which one. My apologies, I should introduce myself properly.” He stretched out his hand, “Jacob Voronsky. Are you sure you’re alright? Should I get you some water or something?”

“Antigone Lightfoot. Annie, and no, honestly, I’m fine now.” She looked around the cool, white interior of the museum, wondering where to wander first. “Since we’re inside, I don’t suppose I need this anyway.”

“Oh no, please, keep it, if you like. Can’t have you on my conscience wandering around in this heat. I suppose you’ve been up the Acropolis already?”

“Actually, I was going to look in here first. Perhaps the Parthenon after.” Annie studied this Mr Voronsky, assessing his friendliness and convenience. “I don’t suppose you would like to join me?” she asked, “I’m writing an article and would love to interview the guides yet my Greek is, erm, well...”

“Non-existent?”

“That sounds about right.” They laughed and headed into the first exhibit.

“I must say, Antigone is a rather interesting name.”

“Yes, subject of a tragedy, no less. She was the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta. She disobeyed her uncle in order to give her brother a true burial and consequently, she was locked in a cave to die. Her uncle changed his mind but when they opened the cave, she had hung herself with her own robes rather than starve to death.”

“Hanged herself. Pictures are hung, people are hanged. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude, it was just something my mother used to say. Grammar was a ruthless mistress in my house.”

Annie was about to reply when she glanced up and saw—
“Artemision Zeus,” she whispered.

In the vaulted arches of marble, gods of stone and metal stand on pedestals, unworshipped and lingering in palpable forms in fantastic shapes. One statue stood in front of them, taller than two metres, a bronze depiction of king of the gods—his feet wide apart, his arms outstretched, in the shape of a star, preparing himself to launch an absent lightning bolt from his curled fist.

“Oh, he’s beautiful,” Annie murmured, and quickly reached into her satchel. She had her notebook and a whole host of instruments—a pencil, protractor and compass. Without thinking, she began to sketch the bronze, stepping back for different perspectives, lining up his arms with her pencil. Her tongue stuck out in concentration. Jacob scratched his neck, looking, ready to shrug at her if anyone were to witness this strange artist. No one came.

“I’ve really wanted to see him; he was found in the sea a few years ago, but a diver died so they stopped looking for others. Imagine, how many treasures are buried from superstitions...”

Annie looked up, apologetically smiled at her new found companion. He assured her it was fine, even though he was still nervous of witnesses to their association.

“Man cannot remake himself without suffering, for he is both the marble and the sculptor.”

“That’s a beautiful sentiment. Maybe more poignant if this was a marble statue.”

“Maybe. I cannot claim it—Alexis Carrell. An amazing man,

incredible mind, I recommend his work.”

Her notebooks spilling with quick sketches and measurements of the entire museum, they left hours later. Built to withstand the stress of shoulders from lingering student philosophers, the columns of the agora had no fluting, smooth slabs. As generations had done before them, Annie and Jacob lent against them, talking the evening away, reviewing discussions with curators, analysing the histories of art and the possibility of dinner together. Discovering a small restaurant near the ancient marketplace, they had sat outside, watching the metro weaving through the simple stone foundations of civilization. The wine was sweet (Annie can still feel the taste of it on her lips), the sun was cooling and the dust was settling to the evening orange lighting of the world. Dinner was cheap and fresh—why did food always taste better when eaten outside? Annie told of summer dinners outside at her uncle’s house, some insignificant aristocrat, sitting on blankets around the estate—hiding with her sister and cousins and eating plums from the orchard.

“I never really had a place to call home,” Jacob explained, ripping a piece of bread in half. “The place we stayed longest was Krakow, in Poland. My mother was Spanish, my father was French. We travelled everywhere. Anyway, not far off the main square, which is enormous and had this strange empty feeling, my father owned a restaurant. Tiny place, in a basement. We didn’t have many customers, a few loyal patrons. I was serving them coffee from when I was eight years old. My Polish is still rusty, but I can you offer you coffee or tell you to piss off and not come back.”

“I am sure it still comes in very useful.” Annie took another sip of wine. In the absence of the train, the world went quiet, all but a couple of sparrows fluttered past their table.

“Do you believe in all this war nonsense?” he asked, as if the entire evening was leading up to this question.

“My father remembers the old war, he doesn’t believe there was ever any real peace since then anyway. I guess so.”

“Define peace. Let’s look in this little book of yours.” Jacob picked up the encyclopedia, flicking near to the end. “One lovely diagram of a pea plant, one biography of a Mr George Peabody and, aha, Peace is a river in Canada. See? Peace is of no consequence, apparently.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is, in its own way.” He took a sip of his wine. “Define truth.”

“Not in my jurisdiction, I only know about things from Ode to Pel.”

“Who is this Pel? A romance perhaps or an epic poem, an ode, to the beautiful hero of Pel...” He leant back in his chair, painting himself as mock philosopher.

Annie smiled, driving the conversation back. “I believe there is the possibility of war. I hope and believe in peace more so.”

“How would you go about making peace then?” he asked, leaning forward once again as he rolled two cigarettes on the table.

“I like to think, in a small way, I am. As a writer. If everyone has the same information, you can approximate the truth of things. If everyone had an encyclopedia like this, or a better version of it, everyone would be intellectually equal. Disinformation and propaganda would be rendered obsolete. Knowledge equals power. If everyone now has the same knowledge, they all have the same power; everyone is equally powerful and...”

Jacob proffered the cigarette; she took it. As he lighted it, he finished her sentence.

“Everyone is equally powerless. So you’re saying, through information, powerlessness equates to peace. Consider then, if I were to create knowledge, I create truth. Don’t I create power?” He took a long drag of his own cigarette, relishing the smoke through his lungs. Smoke from both of them curled into the orange evening air.

“You can’t create truth,” Annie said.

“You know, in Latin, there is no way to say ‘I am dead.’ A grammatically impossible sentence. Yet in English, ‘Horatio, I am dead. Thou livest. Report me and my cause aright to the unsatisfied.’ You English, your Shakespeare gets away with it. He created a truth, that is a correct statement. Yet how? How can you say I am dead? Creating truths is easy.”

“Creating truth is another word for lying,” Annie said, raising her eyebrows in dissatisfaction.

“Define truth.”

“I told you. That is not my responsibility to define.”

“And Parthenon is? You’re writing this new, what would you call it, this world encyclopedia?” he smiled, a sly and smug grin. With this urgent thought, Annie froze.

He knew.

When Annie was younger, she asked her mother how you know you are in love; she had replied a good conversation is all one can ask for. Jacob was handsome and a subject of many curious conversations—and at the same time, he was creepy, condescending and in all probability wanted to kill her. She always knew her mother had to be wrong about something. Back in her room, back in the present. Entering her room from her balcony, the anger of the French subsiding to a quiet, distant moan, Annie opens the wardrobe, throwing her tumble of clothes onto the bed. She had revealed too much; and the man with the camera haunts her mind. To Odessa now. It was a shame; she had always wanted to see Olympia, for Praxiteles’ Hermes—one of the best sculptures in the world. They said he could turn marble into flesh. But no, she thinks as she packs her desk away into her satchel, clicking the lid onto her typewriter.

Odessa. After Athens. Odessa.

With the stolen hat firm upon her head, she straps her satchel around her shoulder, picks up the typewriter and her other bag of clothes. Taking one last look at the bamboo wallpaper, the same that covers her attic room of childhood back in England, she leaves. She will go to the docks, try and catch any boat, regardless of the dread premonition of her end.

Walking through the heavy night, the black sea gentle and lapping up to the dock wall, Annie watches her dim reflection in the dark water.

“I ruined it. I ruined everything. I am dead,” she tells the reflection, who agrees. Perhaps, if she closes her eyes and prays to the right god, she could turn into a flower, as Narcissus did at the waterside. But no, it could only end in tragedy for someone like Antigone.

She feels a shadow drop upon her, and knows she has made her final mistakes.

“You said it yourself,” Jacob says behind her, loading bullets into a gun. Click. “It is not your responsibility to define truth.” Click.

“That is up to the powerful in this world.” Click. “People like me.”

“I never wrote anything of importance, nothing significant. I write about nothing, about temples and art and nothing, nothing of any importance to anyone.” Annie could not prevent the tears falling from her cheeks, nor could she disguise the catch in her voice. For distraction, she watches the clouds rolling closer to the shore.

“This is not about every individual article. It is about the premise of your truth, of your contribution to peace. We don’t want it. I don’t want a world of powerless people, running about the place, being clever. It just won’t do.”

Accepting her fate, Annie feels some slight at the fact the man with camera had nothing to do with any of this. She smiles at the little irony, since she would smile no more.

“Shoot me, but the truth will get out. It always does. This encyclopedia will get written one way or another. Peace will prevail in—” BANG.

Three weeks later...

Jacob H. Voronsky is sure something is not quite right. Sitting outside a cafe in the fashionable part of Odessa, at a table with spindled legs, drinking from a fine and delicate china cup. He runs a hand through his hair, as if to catch the nagging thought, make it palpable, to pluck it from his mind. Then he remembers. He stops. The cup slips from his fingers, shattering to the cobblestones.

“My hat. My hat had my name in it.”

He leaps from his seat, sending the chair and table flying. He runs, swinging his coat onto his shoulders.

“MY FUCKING HAT!” he screams at a random passerby, perplexed by both the exclamation and its disguise in English. In mere seconds, Jacob disappears into the city, running into an alleyway, shadowed by the tall spires of a chapel.