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At the Walls of Paradise
400 Pages

ISBN 978-3-423-28187-4

Sample translation by Deborah Langton

Day One

1.

The waves broke with muffled thuds against the seawall. The silent pauses in between lasted longer those between my breaths, combining to soothe me to sleep. The trilling phone jolted me awake. 'You are to come to reception, sir,' barked the night porter down the line. 'They need your passport.'

It was oppressive; sweat coated my skin. Pale flecks of sea foam clung to the windows. There was a knock at the door. I went to open it, then sat down on the edge of the bed, my hands palms up, resting on my knees.

Two men stood in the corridor. One remained on the threshold, easily filling the doorway. The other stepped into the room and snapped on the naked bulb. 'Show us your passport.'

'I gave all my details yesterday. When I registered.'

I looked down at my naked belly, my underpants, and my legs.

'Show us your passport, please.'

I slid open the bedside cabinet drawer and gave him my passport. He turned it over and over in his hands but didn't open it. 'Where did you spend today?'

I put on my shirt and got to my feet.

'Sit down.'

I stayed standing and gave him a hard look. His face was gaunt, his nose long, lines furrowed his cheeks.'

'Where were you?'

I glanced at the man in the doorway, still no more than a silhouette. 'I wanted to get out and about. Take a look at the construction site. I needed my passport to get through all the security.' I gestured at my passport. 'Go on, then. Check it.'

He stared silently at the window that now sent back both our reflections. As he turned to face me, I noticed an unevenness about his back, suggesting something concealed under his jacket.

'Thaut wants to see you.'

'Now?'

'Thaut's an early riser,' commented the thickset man in the doorway.

I glanced at my watch. 'It's not even five.'

'He's always up and about early,' said the tall, gaunt figure standing close to me, very close. I thought I could make out an English accent.

Instinctively drawing back my shoulders, I knelt down to my suitcase to get my washbag. The creature in the doorway hesitated, then let me through to the corridor with its communal bathroom at the end.

'He wants to freshen up,' said the man inside my room. 'He wants to give a good impression. Don't you?'

Clean shaven, my wet hair combed back, fully dressed, I returned to an empty room. Outside a diffuse light hinted at the line of the horizon.

A manservant let us in. He greeted the gaunt one as Mr Neame but said nothing to the thickset one or me. We went up a flight of stairs to the upper floor, where I was led into a room clearly used as a library. Glass-fronted bookcases of dark wood covered the walls but for a single door on the short side of the room. These were custom-made units that fitted neatly into the corners and stretched right up to the ceiling, where there was a single skylight. I studied the woodwork rather than the book spines in order to convey only minimal interest and to avoid looking as if I'd been summoned. Not a nail to be seen. Neither blemish nor fissure interrupted the richness of the wooden surfaces, and every single joint was a dovetail. This was clearly the work of a master craftsman, as was the finely carved and polished table of the same hard wood. And yet I sensed something was out of place but couldn't say exactly what.

We seemed to be waiting for Thaut, but then Neame noisily cleared his throat as if to say I'd had long enough to collect myself. For the first time I noticed his penetrating grey pupils and realised he was older than he had at first appeared. That rounded shape under his old-fashioned suit jacket was visible again; no sign of his relinquishing the jacket in this warm atmosphere. He sat down on the chair at the end of the room, pointed at the one next to him and scrutinised me.

'I hope you're not one of those Marxist intellectuals.' The shadow of a smile flitted over his sharply defined profile.

'I'm with every party.' I was in flippant mood.

'Pity.' As if distracted by something in his field of vision, he momentarily waved his hand in front of his face.

The skin on his neck was dark, wrinkled.

'Forgive all the fuss,' he said, gesturing vaguely towards something behind him. His accent gave him away as the stiff upper lip type, accustomed to seeing his orders carried out. 'As you probably realise, Thaut has to be careful who he talks to. Who he...associates with.'

'Of course, Mr Neame.' My use of his name earned me a critical glance. He was clenching and unclenching the fingers of one hand as if kneading a ball, his near transparent skin stretched like parchment over his knuckles. 'So is your right hand man behind the door in case I make a run for it?'

'His first name is Saul.' He turned in my direction, a look of amusement on his face, as if he doubted my

intelligence. 'And you are free to go at any time. Wherever you want.'

The sound of metal being dragged across a tiled floor came from downstairs, as if from an echo chamber. 'And you realise that I'm wondering why you've brought me here.'

'Because Thaut wants to ask you a few questions.'

'What can he possibly want to know from me?'

Neame's laugh was expressionless. Our difference in age, with me the lad to his grandfather, heightened the tension between us. 'We already know everything that there is to know from you.' He looked at the door between the glass-fronted cabinets, obviously leading to Thaut's office. 'It could be Thaut won't actually have time for you today.'

I chewed my lip and stared up at the ceiling. 'How does he know about me?'

Neame coughed before replying. 'I am always given the details of all tourists who apply for a permit to visit the site and the island. Your paperwork referred to your involvement with the Moundville tombstone. I remembered reading one of your articles about it. And was...yes, struck by its conclusions.'

'Thank you.' I decided to treat this remark as praise. 'Does that mean I'll be permitted to travel out to the island soon? Surely you know - '

He interrupted, making clear who had the final say. 'We'll see.'

A visit to the island was the only reason I was here. That was why I had put up with the whole prolonged journey. I wanted to see the excavations there at all costs, most of all to feel in my hands the newly discovered clay tablets.

He grimaced at what seemed like a twinge of pain across his shoulders, but he made light of it, giving a momentary shake of the head. 'At the moment it's all about finding Ti-', but he stopped to correct himself, 'Evita. She's missing. Hasn't been seen for days. And Thaut's worried.' The sudden urgency in his voice made me feel I'd been let in on something private here, and I hesitated. 'So what do you want of me?'

This strange turn in the conversation meant I had to marshal my thoughts. 'I don't understand what my article about a prehistoric burial place, or my professional interest in excavations on Dilmun, have to do with that.'

Neame gave a rather theatrical sigh. 'Let's call it a twist of fate that you arrived here two days ago, and this makes you... a bystander. You've already demonstrated that you know how to see beneath the surface. I need refer to nothing more than your critical observations and interpretation concerning the Moundville tombstone. I've pointed out to Thaut that you're clearly someone who does a thorough job. There's an air of the detective about you that would suit us very well. All the more so here, I have to say, where our priority is to find the right man.' After this uncharacteristically long utterance, he drew a long, husky breath, leaving me unsure whether he had more to say.

‘You’re assuming there’s something suspicious about Evita’s apparent disappearance?’

‘Would you assume that if you were in my position?’ He raised his right shoulder as a bird might its wing and drew it against his neck. If he was surprised that I didn’t want to know more about her, then he didn’t show it. He correctly assumed that her existence was not entirely unknown to me. In the various news stories about Thaut and his construction project, there was often an Evita in the photographs, although all that came to mind now was the image of a random young woman.

As if dispelling other thoughts, Neame suddenly smiled and added, ‘The last time I saw her was Thursday, at a reception for the United Nations envoy. She passed herself off as my granddaughter, just for fun, but it came across as very odd. She sometimes has these’ – he paused, searching for the right word – ‘whims. But I’m sure you’ll want to tell me what you already know about Evita Thaut.’ He looked down at his fingers, still flexing involuntarily.

‘It’s you that came to me,’ I retorted, puzzled by the twists and turns in this conversation that seemed constantly to imply that what he already knew about me made me complicit. ‘So you want me, a total stranger, to find Evita Thaut?’ In spite of my cautious nature, I had no wish to hide how absurd this request, and the few hours leading up to it, seemed to be.

‘That’s precisely why.’ The old man turned to me without reacting to my provocative tone. His teeth were grey and his breath smelled lightly of lavender. ‘Thaut doesn’t want any search made public. And he can rely on your discretion. After all, you’re dependent on Thaut’s goodwill, aren’t you?’

He’d read my thoughts. This was exactly what I’d have expected in return for my efforts. Angered, I got to my feet.

Neame looked up at me, a wry expression on his face, a mocking smile playing on his lips as if everything led to this opportunity for him to sigh yet again. ‘You act more foolish than you really are,’ he said with a dismissive gesture. Affecting disappointment, he added, ‘It’s only a tiny favour, after all. A little trouble, I’m sure, but hardly a great effort.’

I’d had enough of his manipulative style. ‘I’m sure that your friend Saul knows full well how to deal with the matter.’ But I didn’t leave. I went on standing there, indecisive.

‘Saul, Saul is a man of a different calibre.’ He was careful in his choice of words. ‘He lacks....let’s say he lacks your astuteness.’

This predictable appeal to my vanity almost had me laughing in his face. But I didn’t because I sensed a small victory, the only one to be hoped for in the present circumstances, and saw in his eyes that he knew exactly what I was thinking.

‘Yes,’ he confirmed, as if incidental. ‘Your intelligence speaks for itself.’ Then he looked straight ahead. ‘You’re going to need it.’ He was kneading his fingers again and eased out his shoulders. ‘Evita seems to have left us something.’

I gazed up at the ceiling. After a while, he cleared his throat noisily. ‘There’s no news from her. No note. No

remark that suggested she'd had something planned. Everything's in place in her room. As it should be.'

More out of frustration than interest, I fired off a direct question. 'Don't you even know whether she's left the house?'

Neame raised his eyebrows and looked at me with condescension. 'Of course she's left the house. We've looked for her. Saul has searched everywhere.' With his bony index finger, he pointed at the table. 'But she left something behind for us.'

As the reflection of the skylight gleamed on the highly polished table's surface, I noticed there for the first time a portable lectern with an apple on its base. Until that moment I had seen the room as nothing more than the backdrop to our conversation, rather like a still life painting.

Neame picked up the apple between two fingers and held it out as if offering it to me. I was about to accept when I saw the bite.

'Is that supposed to be a symbol?' I asked him in disbelief.

Neame pressed it into my hand, wanted to say something but gave a dry cough instead. The bite mark had gone brown but was edged with red, shining and oily.

'We're both thinking the same, am I right?' His tone did not invite disagreement.

'Well,' I conceded, 'if you're thinking of the obvious ...'

'Don't forget the less transparent.'

'Couldn't it also be –'

He cut across me, his voice suddenly husky, and his words indistinct. 'There's no other woman in the house. All the staff are male, that's how Thaut wants things. And nobody here uses lipstick – except Ti, sometimes. But, more than anything – ' Now he interrupted himself to take out his laundered handkerchief and wipe a thread of spittle hanging from his lower lip, something which the self-deprecation of old age made embarrassing for him. Once he'd put his handkerchief away again, he carried on. 'There are no apples here. It's not the right time of year.'

I let the non sequitur pass me by, feeling as if I was caught up in a story as unreal as anything beyond my experience. Neame noticed my growing sense of unease, got up from his armchair and called Saul into the room. Questions flooded into my mind and to my lips, but Neame brusquely waved them away. 'You already know what's necessary. Saul will be at your side in support of your efforts.' Neame glanced at Saul, who acknowledged this with a nod.

'And Thaut? Am I still to – '

'Thaut will summon you in due course.' And with this, the audience was brought to a close.

The moment I'd gone through the door, I turned round again. 'Can I see Evita's room?' This seemed an appropriate way of showing willing, and I also hoped it would create the opportunity for a meeting with Thaut. Neame didn't bother replying. He gave my companion a nod.

The central part of the house was very open in its design. On the ground floor someone in an apron was now mopping the marble as if we'd brought in muck on our shoes. We walked alongside a balustrade towards a door opposite the library.

The room was stark, with barely any more furniture than in my frugal hotel room, although admittedly what there was certainly looked of superior quality and was of the same dark hard wood as the library. The bed had been made, its covers tidily arranged, no clothing lay around, everything had been cleared away as if by a servant, nothing suggested anyone was missing. But I shrank from opening any cupboards and drawers and just turned a full circle to get a look round the whole room. It was noticeable that there were no pictures on the walls apart from a non-descript mountain landscape.

A soundproof interconnecting door covered in brass-studded, padded leather led to a second room where a white roller blind was pulled down low. On the linoleum flooring was a turntable next to a work bench littered with the usual paraphernalia of a potter, including untidy lumps of worked clay, cracked and dried. On a bureau lay a five day old newspaper and a small pile of Life magazines. I leafed through them and saw various things marked with pencil but couldn't see why.

In the wall here was the next interconnecting door which, like the one in the library, presumably gave access to the front of the house. It was closed and my companion showed no signs of opening it, so I did an about-turn and, under his watchful eye, picked the three topmost magazines off the pile. Only when I was on the stairs did I realise there'd been not a mirror to be seen in the whole place.

I took a deep breath once I was outside, went to the car and left the magazines inside it. Surrounding the house was a park with bushes, low shrubs and just one tree that was of no great height. I hunted around for a way through but in vain. Any greenery was surprisingly dense, the grass was luxuriant and yet there was no means of irrigation to be seen. Nor were there any ornamental plants.

I had on my best suit and found myself thinking twice about pushing my way through any gap in the prickly undergrowth. The shadows were still broad as it was nowhere near noon, and the scent of chamomile wafted up from the ground. The landscape looked artificial and yet had run wild. It was full of hollows that surely meant gaps for me to sneak through in order to get any further. The only fallow earth lay round the single, small-leaved tree as if it had sucked in all the water. A gazelle was rubbing itself against the rough bark and looked at me wide-eyed before bounding off. I followed it into the brush and soon found myself standing in front of the wall that enclosed the whole estate. The lime wash had blistered at ground level and cast off dirty grey flakes. Even with my arm fully outstretched, I still reached only half its height. There was no chance of getting over that unaided. I followed its gentle curve in both directions but each time met only impenetrably thorny black bushes. As there was clearly no path through here, I turned back the way I'd come.

My companion, Saul, was waiting for me by the tree. I took a good look at him as I approached. Here was a broad, clean shaven face, thick dark hair, rather narrow eyes, a strangely pointed mouth and the stocky build that was typical of the native people. His facial expression was hard to read, leaving me undecided whether

to address him and, if so, how.

He spoke first, enunciating one word at a time. 'Before the house was built, this was desert. Only this tree grew here.'

Barely higher than the wall, the tree was gnarled, its knotted trunk covered in red-brown bark. In the dust beneath it lay a burst pomegranate being marched on by a column of ants. 'The plants were brought in from the mountains.' I thought I sensed the pride of ownership here, but he moved on to something else. 'Once we found Evita – – his accent turned the 't' into a 'd' - under the tree,' he stated. 'She's –.' He searched for the right word. 'toksmaniulo. A la luno.'

A sleepwalker. It was as if the absurdity of the entire morning was captured by this word. With Saul behind me still, I set off to go back, snagged the cloth of my suit trousers on a bush and cursed.

...]

On our way, Saul initiated more about Evita. His talkativeness suggested he was well-disposed towards me. 'Neame was home late and Thaut's daughter was not around. Nor the next morning. She wasn't in her room, so I went to look for her. I found her dress over a bush. And then her, at the tree. She was naked, had only a soft belt round her. Her back was stung to pieces, her arms and legs the same.'

Then he added. 'It was a full moon.'

I studied Saul sideways on. He had a short neck, giving the impression his head sat directly on his shoulders, while his sharp nose extended well beyond his narrow lips creating the look of a bird's bill.

'She was just lying there?'

'Face down. On her stomach.'

'Was she ill?'

'She was cold,' he replied in his staccato style, his hirsute hands gripping the steering wheel.

'I carried her into the house. She stayed in bed a long time.'

'So she's sonàmbulo?'

He looked at me blankly. I tried to explain. 'Does she often wake at night and walk in her sleep? And then doesn't remember anything afterwards?'

'I don't know. I just found her there. Once.'

I tried to get more out of him, but Saul's replies now remained monosyllabic and bland.

But one thing stayed with me; Evita had some odd habits.



'When you talk with her, it's often only later that you understand what she means.'

I found myself frowning, didn't like to try and tempt anything more out of him and simply shared his silence, while starring ahead into the harsh light over the monotonous landscape.