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The Young Bride

Written by Alesandro Baricco

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Alessandro Baricco

THE YOUNG BRIDE

Translated from the Italian
by Ann Goldstein

Europa
editions

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To Samuele, Sebastiano, and Barbara. Thank you.

There are thirty-six stone steps to climb, and the old man climbs slowly, cautiously, almost as if he were collecting them, one by one, to drive them up to the second floor: he the shepherd, they meek animals. Modesto is his name. He has served in this house for fifty-nine years, and is therefore its priest.

Reaching the top step he stops before the wide hall that stretches without surprises before his gaze: to the right are the closed rooms of the Masters, five; to the left seven windows, dimmed by shutters of lacquered wood.

It's just dawn.

The old man stops because he has a tally to update. He records the mornings that he has inaugurated in this house, always in the same way. So he adds a number that vanishes into the thousands. The count is dizzying, but he isn't disturbed by it: officiating forever at the same morning rite seems to him consistent with his job, respectful of his inclinations, and typical of his fate.

After running the palms of his hands over the ironed fabric of his pants—along the sides, at the thigh—he moves his head forward slightly and sets his feet in motion again. He ignores the doors of the Masters, but, reaching the first window, on the left, he stops to open the shutters. He does this with fluid and precise gestures. He repeats them at every window, seven times. Only then does he turn, to assess the shafts of dawn light entering through the glass: he knows its every possible nuance

and from its character can tell what sort of day it will be; he can deduce from it, sometimes, faded promises. Since they will rely on him—all of them—the judgment he forms is important.

Hazy sun, light breeze, he decides. So it will be.

Then he goes back along the corridor, this time devoting himself to the side he ignored before. He opens the doors of the Masters, one after another, and announces the start of the day with a phrase that he repeats aloud five times, altering neither timbre nor inflection.

Good morning. Hazy sun, light breeze.

Then he disappears.

He no longer exists, until he reappears, unchanged, in the breakfasts room.

The tradition of that solemn awakening, which later becomes joyful and drawn out, derives from long-ago events whose details we prefer not to speak of for now. It concerns the entire household. Never before dawn: this is imperative. The Masters wait for the light and for Modesto's dance at the seven windows. Only then do they consider the condemnation to bed, the blindness of sleep, and the risk of dreams to be over. They are dead: the old man's voice returns them to life.

Then they swarm out of the rooms, without putting on clothes, not even pausing for the relief of some water on the eyes, on the hands. With the odors of sleep in hair and teeth, we meet in the halls, on the stairs, in the doorways of the rooms, embracing like exiles returning from some distant land, incredulous at having survived the spell that night seems to us. Dispersed by the obligation to sleep, we re-establish ourselves as a family, and on the ground floor we flow into the big breakfasts room like an underground river coming into the light, carrying a premonition of the sea. Most of the time we are laughing.

The table for breakfasts—a term that no one ever thought of using in the singular, for only a plural can conjure the richness,

the abundance, and the unreasonable duration—is indeed a well-laid sea. A pagan sense of thanksgiving is evident—the escape from the catastrophe of sleep. Modesto, with two servants, watches over everything, gliding imperceptibly. On a normal day, neither Lent nor a holiday, the ordinary offerings include white and dark toast, curls of butter on a silver plate, honey, chestnut spread, and a jam made with nine fruits, eight varieties of pastry culminating in an inimitable croissant, four different flavors of cake, a bowl of whipped cream, fruit in season always cut with mathematical precision, a display of rare exotic fruits, newly laid eggs cooked three different ways, fresh cheeses plus an English Stilton, thin slices of prosciutto from the farm, cubes of mortadella, beef broth, fruit braised in red wine, cornmeal cookies, anise digestive tablets, marzipan cherries, hazelnut ice cream, a pitcher of hot chocolate, Swiss pralines, licorice, peanuts, milk, coffee.

Tea is detested, chamomile only for the sick.

It's understandable, then, how a meal considered by most people a quick start to the day is in this house a complex and interminable process. The usual practice keeps them at the table for hours, crossing over into the zone of lunch (which in fact in this house no one ever gets around to), as in an Italian imitation of the more stylish "brunch." Only every so often, a few at a time, they get up, to then reappear at the table partly dressed, or washed—bladders emptied. But these details are scarcely noticed. Because, it should be said, the visitors of the day—relatives, acquaintances, postulants, suppliers, possible authorities, men and women of the church—are arriving at the big table: each with his subject to discuss. It's the habit of the Family to receive them there, during the torrential flow of breakfast, with a sort of ostentatious informality that no one, not even they, would be able to distinguish from the height of arrogance, that is, to receive visitors while wearing pajamas. But the freshness of the butter and the mythical perfection of

the tarts induce cordiality. The champagne is always on ice, and poured generously, which is itself sufficient motivation for many.

Thus it is not unusual to see dozens of people at the same time around the breakfasts table, although the family itself is just five, or rather four, now that the Son is on the Island.

The Father, the Mother, the Daughter, the Uncle.

The Son temporarily abroad, on the Island.

Finally, around three in the afternoon, they withdraw to their rooms and, half an hour later, emerge splendidly elegant and fresh, as all acknowledge. We devote the middle hours of the afternoon to business—the factory, the farms, the house. At dusk, solitary work—we meditate, invent, pray—or courtesy visits. Dinner is late and frugal, taken without ceremony, eaten in bits and pieces: it dwells under the wing of night, so we tend to hurry it, like a pointless prelude. Then, without saying good night, we go to the uncertainty of sleep, each of us exorcising it in our own way.

For a hundred and thirteen years, it should be said, all of us have died at night, in our family.

That explains everything.

The particular subject, that morning, was the usefulness of sea bathing, about which the Monsignor, shoveling whipped cream into his mouth, harbored some reservations. He sensed an obvious moral unknown, without daring, however, to define it precisely.

The Father, a good-natured and, if necessary, fierce man, was helping him bring the matter into focus.

"Kindly remind me, Monsignor, where, exactly, it's mentioned in the Gospel."

As a counterweight to the response, which was evasive, the front doorbell rang, rousing little attention, since it was obviously yet another visit.

Modesto took care of it. He opened the door and found before him the young Bride.

She wasn't expected that day, or maybe she was, but they had forgotten about it.

I'm the young Bride, I said.

You, Modesto noted. Then he looked around, astonished, because it didn't make sense that I had arrived alone, and yet there was no one, as far as the eye could see.

They left me at the end of the street, I said. I wanted to count my steps in peace. And I placed the suitcase on the ground.

I was eighteen years old, which was what had been agreed on.

I really would have no hesitation about being naked on the beach—the Mother was saying, meanwhile—since I've always had a certain preference for the mountains (many of her syllogisms were in fact inscrutable). I could cite at least ten people, she continued, whom I've seen naked, and I'm not talking about children or old people who were dying, for whom I have a special, deep sympathy, even though . . .

She broke off when the young Bride entered the room, not so much because the young Bride had entered the room but because she was introduced by an alarming cough from Modesto. Maybe I haven't said that in fifty-nine years of service the old man had refined a laryngeal communication system that everyone in the family had learned to decipher as if it were cuneiform. There was no need for the violence of words, for a cough—or, rarely, two, in the most articulated variants—accompanied his gestures like a suffix that clarified their meaning. At table, for example, he did not serve a single dish without adding a qualification from the epiglottis that encapsulated his own very personal judgment. In the specific situation, he introduced the young Bride with a just noticeable, distant hiss. It indicated, everyone knew, a very high level of vigilance, and that is the reason that the Mother broke off, something that

she didn't usually do, since announcing a guest, under normal circumstances, was no different from the filling of her glass with water—she would then calmly drink it. She broke off, therefore, turning toward the new arrival. She registered her youth and, with the automatic politeness of her class, said

Darling!

She hadn't the least idea who it was.

Then a chink must have opened in her habitually muddled mind, because she asked

What month is today?

Someone answered May, probably the Pharmacist, whom champagne rendered unusually precise.

Then the Mother repeated Darling!, but conscious, this time, of what she was saying.

It's incredible how quickly May arrived this year, she was thinking.

The young Bride made a slight bow.

They had forgotten, that was all. It was what had been agreed to, but so long ago that a precise memory of it was lost. One mustn't deduce from that that they had changed their mind: it would have been, in any case, too much work. Once a decision was made in that house, it never changed, for obvious reasons of economy of emotions. Simply, the time had passed with a velocity that they hadn't needed to register, and now the young Bride was there, probably to do what had long ago been agreed to, with the official approval of all: marry the Son.

It was annoying to admit that, strictly speaking, the Son wasn't there.

Yet it didn't seem urgent to linger on that detail, and so what they readily offered was a happy chorus of greeting, veined variously with surprise, relief, and gratitude: the last for the way life proceeded, seemingly heedless of human distractions.

Since I've now begun to tell this story (this, in spite of the distressing series of troubles that have hit me, which would have counseled against such an undertaking), I can't avoid clarifying the geometry of the facts, just as I'm remembering it, little by little, noting, for example, that the Son and the young Bride had met when she was fifteen and he eighteen, and had gradually recognized in each other a magnificent corrective to the hesitations of the heart and to the boredom of youth. At the moment it's premature to explain by what singular course, but it's important to know that they quickly reached the happy conclusion that they wanted to get married. To their respective families the thing seemed incomprehensible, for reasons that I will perhaps be able to explain if the vise of this sadness will loosen its grip: but the unusual personality of the Son, which sooner or later I'll have the strength to describe, and the pure determination of the young Bride, which I'd like to find the clearheadedness to communicate, advised a certain prudence. It was agreed that it was better to put up with it, and they moved on to untying some technical knots, first among them the imperfect alignment of their respective social positions. It should be remembered that the young Bride was the only daughter of a rich animal breeder who had five sons, while the Son belonged to a family that for three generations had been reaping profits from the production and sale of wools and fabrics of a particular quality. There was money on both sides: but undoubtedly it was money of different types, one produced by looms and ancient elegance, the other by manure and atavistic hard work. This fact led to an open space of placid indecision that was crossed when, on impulse, the Father communicated solemnly that the marriage between agrarian wealth and industrial finance represented the natural development of the entrepreneurialism of the North, tracing a distinct path of transformation for the entire country. From this he deduced the need to overcome social hierarchies that by now belonged to the

past. Given that he formalized the thing in those exact terms, lubricating the sequence with a couple of big, deliberately placed curses, the reasoning seemed convincing to everyone, in its irreproachable mixture of rationality and genuine instinct. We decided to wait just until the young Bride became a little less young: we had to avoid possible comparisons between such a carefully considered marriage and certain peasant unions, hurried and vaguely animallike. Waiting, besides being undoubtedly convenient, seemed to us the seal of a superior moral attitude. The local clergy did not hesitate to confirm, oblivious of the curses.

So they would be married.

Since I'm here, and because tonight I feel a kind of illogical carelessness, brought on, perhaps, by the mournful light in this room they've lent me, I'd like to add something about what happened shortly after the announcement of the engagement, on the initiative, surprisingly, of the young Bride's father. He was a taciturn man, perhaps good in his way, but also irascible, or unpredictable, as if too close proximity to work animals had transmitted a sort of harmless impetuosity. One day he said tersely that he had decided to attempt an ultimate coup in his affairs by emigrating to Argentina, to conquer lands and markets whose every detail he had studied on shitty, fog-bound winter evenings. The people who knew him, vaguely bewildered, decided that such a decision must have something to do with the prolonged coldness of the marriage bed, along with, perhaps, a certain illusion of belated youth, and probably a childish intimation of infinite horizons. He crossed the ocean with three sons, of necessity, and the young Bride, for consolation. He left his wife and the other sons to watch over the land, promising that they would join him, if things went as they should, which in effect he then did, after a year, even selling all his property in his homeland and betting his entire patrimony on the gambling table of the pampas. Before leaving, though,

he made a visit to the Father of the Son and affirmed on his honor that the young Bride would appear when she turned eighteen, to fulfill the promise of marriage. The two men shook hands in what was, in those parts, a sacred gesture.

As for the betrothed pair, they said goodbye in apparent tranquility and secret dismay: they had, I must say, good reasons for both.

Once the landowners had set sail, the Father spent some days in a silence unusual for him, neglecting routines and habits that he considered inviolable. Some of his most unforgettable decisions were born of similar personal suspensions, and so the whole Family was resigned to important news when, finally, the Father made a brief but very clear announcement. He said that each of us has his Argentina, and that for them, leaders in the textile sector, Argentina was called England. In fact he had for a while been looking across the Channel at certain factories that were optimizing production in a surprising way: head-spinning profits could be read between the lines. We have to go and see, said the Father, and possibly imitate. Then he turned to the Son.

You'll go, now that you're settled, he said, cheating a little on the terms of the matter.

So the Son had left, even quite happily, on a mission to study the secrets of the English and bring back the best of them, for the future prosperity of the Family. No one expected that he would return within a few weeks, and then no one realized that he wouldn't return even within a few months. But they were like that: they ignored the passing of the days, because they aimed at living only a single, perfect day, infinitely repeated: so time for them was a phenomenon with variable margins that echoed in their lives like a foreign language.

Every morning, from England, the Son sent us a telegram, always with the same text: *All is well*. He was referring, obviously to the trap that was night. At home it was the only news

we truly wanted to know: for the rest, it would have been a struggle for us to doubt that during that prolonged absence the Son could do anything but his duty, laced at most with some mild, enviable diversion. Evidently the English factories were numerous and merited close analysis. We stopped expecting him, since he would return.

But the young Bride returned first.

Let us get a look at you, said the Mother, radiant, once the table had reassembled.

They all looked at her.

They picked up a nuance they wouldn't have known how to express.

The Uncle expressed it, waking from a sleep that he had been in for a while, lying in a chair—a champagne glass, full to the brim, in his hand.

You must have done a lot of dancing, signorina, over there. I'm glad of it.

Then he took a sip of champagne and fell asleep again.

The Uncle was a welcome, and irreplaceable, figure in the family. A mysterious syndrome, whose only known sufferer he was, kept him in a constant sleep from which he emerged for very brief intervals, for the sole purpose of participating in the conversation with a precision that we were all now used to considering obvious but that was, clearly, illogical. Something in him was able to register, even in sleep, any event and every word. Indeed, the fact that he came from elsewhere often seemed to give him such lucidity, or such a singular view of things, that his wakings and relevant utterances were endowed with an almost oracular, prophetic resonance. This reassured us greatly, because we knew we could count at any moment on the reserves of a mind so rested that it could completely untangle any knot that appeared in domestic discussion or daily life. In addition, we rather liked the astonishment of strangers

encountering those singular feats, a detail that made our house even more attractive. Returning to their families, the guests often took with them the legendary memory of that man who could, while sleeping, be halted even in complex movements, of which holding a champagne glass full to the brim was but a pale example. He could shave in his sleep, and on occasion he had been seen to play the piano as he slept, although he took slightly slowed-down tempos. There were even those who claimed to have seen him play tennis in a deep sleep: it seems that he woke only at the change of sides. I refer to him out of necessity to the story, but also because today I seemed to glimpse a coherence in everything that is happening to me, and so for a few hours it's been easy to hear sounds that otherwise, in the grip of confusion, I would find inaudible: for example, often, the clattering of life on the marble table of time, like dropped pearls. The need of the living to be funny—that in particular.

Ah, yes, you must have danced a lot, the Mother affirmed, I couldn't have said it better, and besides I've never loved fruit pies (many of her syllogisms were in fact inscrutable).

The tango? asked the notary Bertini, agitated. For him, uttering the word "tango" was in itself sexual.

The tango? Argentina? In that climate? asked the Mother, though it wasn't clear whom she was addressing.

I can assure you that the tango is clearly Argentine in origin, the notary insisted.

Then the voice of the young Bride was heard.

I lived in the pampas for three years. Our neighbor was two days away by horseback. A priest brought us the Eucharist once a month. Once a year we'd set out for Buenos Aires, with the idea of attending the première of the Opera Season. But we never arrived in time. It was always much farther than we thought.

Definitely not very practical, the Mother observed. How did your father think he would find you a husband like that?