

IL-MUŻA

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Għandu biss tnejn u għoxrin sena, Peter Summit kien iħobb jikteb. Hekk kif ilesti jistudja, minflok joħroġ ma' shabu, kien jinqafel f'kamartu joghxa jħarbex novelli u stejjer qosra. Imma ħass li seta' jikteb aħjar, xtaq jitfa' ruhu. Ried lil xi hadd li jurih fejn seta' jmur aħjar. Jaħseb fuq hekk xorta baqa' jistinka u jikteb. Wara snin jikteb in-novelli, fl-aħħar kellu l-ewwel ġabra ta' stejjer tal-biża' lesta.

Waqt li kien bilwieqfa fil-kju biex l-awtur favorit tiegħu jiffirmalu l-aħħar ktieb li ħareġ, kien qiegħed iżomm kopja f'idejh, li ma riedux jieqfu jirtieġħdu. Kien mument li ilu jistennieh snin.

Bilqiegħda mal-mejda kien hemm Anthony Magro, l-awtur favorit tiegħu li minħabba fih beda jikteb. Magro ma kienx biss awtur tal-generu tal-biża', iżda kien ukoll kirurgu famuż, u kien ta' sikwit isiefer biex jagħti lekċers fl-ikbar universitajiet madwar id-dinja. Din il-ħajja doppja kienet tgħaġġeb lil Peter: raġel li jsalva l-ħajja matul il-jum u li jbeżża' lill-qarrejja bil-lejl. F'għajnejn Peter, kien qisu figura tas-supereroj.

Meta wasal quddiemu, it-tbissima ta' Magro ffurmat bil-mod. Kien hemm xi ħaġa fil-mod kif ħares lejha, qisu ra fih aktar milli Peter ried jurih.

'Prosit, ili nsegwik ħafna snin issa,' qallu ż-żagħżuġh, waqt li mess il-qoxra tal-ktieb b'subgħajh, u fl-istess hin stqarr: 'Nixtieq parir. Jien nikteb ukoll imma nħoss li għadni fjakk. Kif nista' nkun aħjar? Minn fejn iġġib il-muża tiegħek?'

Għajnejn Magro ċkienu, f'dija ta' interess. 'Ah. L-ispirazzjoni? Sabiha, imma hija mistoqsija sensittiva u personali.' Kienet risposta li ma kienet tagħti xejn, iżda li fl-istess hin fethet b'wieb il-kurżità ta' ġewwa fih.

Għaddilu karta żgħira mitwija fi tnejn. 'Ibghatli l-kitba tiegħek bil-kurrier kmieni għada filgħodu. Se nkun barra minn Malta għal-lekċers din il-ġimgħa u nāħseb naqrah fl-ajruplan, u filgħaxija, wara li nkun lest mil-lekċers.' Qallu dan b'vuċi tant kalma li Peter kważi nesa jjeħu n-nifs.

Dak il-lejl Peter ma raqadx. B'moħħu b'sentimenti mħallta, bejn eċitament u biża', beda jaħseb. 'U jekk jgħidli li m'għandix talent? U jekk jgħidli li kien aħjar ➤

ninsa kollox?' Imma fl-ahħar bagħathom xorta waħda u f'dak l-att sempliċi, qisu fetaħ tieqa għal xi haġa akbar, u hassu li strah bħal xi hadd li mar għamel qrara twila.

Gimġha u nofs wara, ċempillu Magro. 'Qrajtu kollu!' qallu b'vuċi ta' min qisu rebah il-lotterija. 'Għandek potenzjal. Ejja d-dar tiegħi, nixtieq niddiskutihom kif jixraq.' Bl-entużjażmu Peter ma kienx jaf x'laqtu u hekk bejniethom waqa' bħal skiet li t-tnejn hassew.

Peter wasal id-dar tal-kirurgu ftit wara nżul ix-xemx tal-ġurnata miftiehma. Il-post kellu riħa ħafifa ta' diżinfettant, riħa kemxejn sterili, qisek fi sptar tal-moħħ, imma fl-istess ħin, qisha kienet qed tistiednek tidħol ġewwa. Magro laqgħu fi studju mimli kotba u offrilu te.

L-ahħar haġa li kien jiftakar Peter kienet li qabbad it-tazza ma' xofftejh, it-togħma kienet f'tit helwa għal gostih u wara l-baħħ.

Meta qam, l-arja kienet kiesha u qawwiya. Id-dawl abjad kien jiddi fuqu. Minkejja li pprova jiċċaqtaq, sab idejh u saqajh marbutin b'ċineg tal-ġild ma' mejda tal-operazzjonijiet.

Il-metall ta' taħtu kien kiesaħ daqs il-borra. L-ġhodda tal-kirurġija tleqq fuq mejda biswit, bħal klieb tal-azzar bil-ġuħ.

Sema' xi passi jersqu lejha. Anthony Magro ħareġ mid-dellijiet liebes il-liba ta' waqt l-operazzjonijiet.

'Staqsajt, minn fejn ingħib il-muża?' qallu b'vuċi kalma, kważi dgħajfa. Din id-darba, it-ton tiegħu ma kellu xejn uman.

Peter ipprova jgħajjat, imma l-mistura kienet għadha ttarrxu u thawdu. Leħnu ħareġ bħal fwar.

Magro rranġa d-dawl biex jara għajnejn Peter jiddu, għajnejn mimlija biża', eżatt kif xtaqhom hu.

'L-istorja li jmiss,' kompla jgħid b'ton ħafif, waqt li qabad xafra kirurġika, 'se tkun dwar student żagħżuġ b'talent, li jkun qed jfittex parir u li wara jinstab imqatta' biċċiet u b'partijiet minnu mikulin mill-ħamiam f'ġnien pubbliku.'

Resaq itkar qribu, b'tbissima li ma kinitx ta' bniedem f'sensih. 'U din,' qallu f'widnejh, 'hija kif insib l-ispirazzjoni tiegħi!'

Daħka belha, kważi miġnuna, irbommat fil-kamra ta' taħt l-art u hekk kif għal Peter kollox sar dlam, fehem li kien sar parti minn storja tal-biża' li però kitibha ħaddieħor, u mhux hu! **T**

THE MUSE

Translator: René Monseigneur

At just twenty-two years old, Peter Summit loved to write. After he finished studying for the day, he would shut himself away in his room to scribble novels and short stories instead of hanging out with friends. Yet he felt he could be a better author, one who poured his soul into his writing. He longed for someone to guide him and help him improve. Despite his insecurities, he kept striving, and after years spent working on novels, he finally completed his first collection of horror stories.

Whilst standing in line, waiting for his favourite author to sign the newly released book, he clutched a copy in his trembling hands. It was a moment he had been looking forward to for years.

Sitting at the table was Anthony Magro, his favourite author, who had inspired him to start writing. Magro was not only a horror fiction author but also a renowned



Pierre Sammut meets renowned horror writer Anton Grasso for the first time during THINK Magazine's 'An Evening with Anton Grasso' at the UM Library. Photo courtesy of Annette Apap



Left: Pierre Sammut reveals a rare first edition copy of Anton Grasso's 'Wirdien' ('Cockroaches') published in 1976. Right: Anton Grasso signs Sammut's copy of his first publication, 'Iljieli bla Qamar' ('Moonless Nights') – the first modern collection of horror stories in Maltese.
Photos by Kristov Scicluna

surgeon, frequently travelling to deliver lectures at leading universities around the world. This double life fascinated Peter: a man who saves lives by day and terrifies readers by night. In Peter's eyes, he was something of a superhero.

When he reached him, a smile formed on Magro's lips. There was something in the way he looked at him, as though he saw more in him than Peter wanted to reveal.

'Congratulations, I've been following your work for many years,' the young man told him. His fingers brushed over the book's cover before he quickly added, 'I'd like some advice. I write too, but I still feel something is lacking. How can I improve? What inspires you?'

Magro's eyes glinted with interest. 'Ah. Inspiration? A good question, but one with a sensitive and personal answer.' It was a reply that gave nothing away, and yet piqued Peter's curiosity.

He slipped him a small piece of paper, folded in half. 'Send me a sample of your writing by courier early tomorrow morning. I'll be giving lectures abroad this week, and I plan to read it on the plane and in the evening, after I finish lecturing.' He said this in such a calm voice that Peter almost forgot to breathe.

That night, Peter did not sleep. Excitement and fear occupied his thoughts. 'What if he tells me I have no talent? What if he tells me I would be better off forgetting it all?' But in the end, he sent it anyway, and through that simple act, it was as if he had opened a window onto something greater. He felt a deep sense of relief, just as one would after a long confession.

A week and a half later, Magro called him. 'I've read everything!' he told him in a jubilant voice, as if he'd won the lottery. 'You show promise. Come to my house, I'd like to discuss your work at length.' Overwhelmed with enthusiasm, Peter was lost for words. And just like that, a silence fell between them, a silence that both of them felt.

Peter arrived at the surgeon's house shortly after sunset on the agreed day. The place smelled faintly of disinfectant. It was somewhat sterile, akin to the smell one finds in a mental hospital, yet at the same time, an inviting one. Magro greeted him in his study, which was brimming with books, and offered him tea.

The last thing Peter recalled was bringing the cup to his lips. The taste was too sweet for his liking, and then, everything went black.

He woke up to frigid air. Pure white light flooded over him. Despite his efforts to move, he found that his hands and feet were bound with leather straps to an operating table. The metal beneath him was like snow against his back. Surgical instruments gleamed on a table nearby, like starving steel hounds.

He heard footsteps approaching. Anthony Magro emerged from the shadows. He was wearing his surgical scrubs.

'You asked after my muse,' he said in a calm, almost imperceptible voice. This time, his tone held little trace of humanity.

Peter tried to scream, but the drugs were still numbing and confusing him. His voice came out in a hiss, like steam.

Magro angled the light so that he could see Peter's eyes, glowing and drowning in fear, exactly as he wanted them to.

'The next story,' he continued in a soft tone, picking up a surgical scalpel, 'will be about a young, talented student who sought out advice, and was later found dismembered, with parts of his body eaten by pigeons in a public garden.'

He drew closer, wearing a demented smile. 'And this,' he whispered in his ear, 'is how I find my inspiration!'

An impish, almost insane laugh echoed through the underground room, and as darkness closed in around him, Peter realised that he had become part of a horror story, only this time, it was written by someone else! **T**