

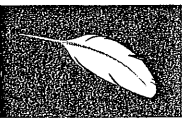
ZACHARY KARABASHLIEV

1870 Gray

A NOVEL

Translated by Angela Rodel

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Elizabeth Kostova
BODONI
CREATIVE WRITING

Text set in Bodoni, a serif typeface first designed by Giambattista Bodoni (1740–1813) in 1798.

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shes's

been gone nine mornings.

The blinds in the bedroom are shut tight, but the day still finds a way in, and with a roar—the garbage truck. That means it's Wednesday. That means it's 8:15. Is there a noisier noise than the noise of a garbage truck at 8:15?

I crawl out of bed, stagger to the living room, and flop down on the couch. The cool leather doesn't help me fall back to sleep, the garbage truck rumbles closer. I get up, push aside one of the blinds, a bright ray burns my face. I focus my powers and attempt to dismember the roaring green monster with a gaze. The effort only succeeds in waking me up completely.

I look at the flowers in the vase on the coffee table. Dead freesias in murky water—she left them behind.

I open a kitchen drawer and pull a Toblerone out of the stash of candy. I pick yesterday's white shirt up off the floor and plug in the iron. I iron with one hand, while breaking off triangles and gobbling them down with the other. I put on the shirt and a blue tie, make instant coffee, slosh some on my sleeve while I

fumble for the car keys, throw on a gray suit coat, and slam the door behind me.

Another scorching Southern California day. I gun the Corolla. I make a right onto Jefferson and get on the highway. Five lanes of cars in one direction and five lanes in the other. Exhaust pipes roar, engines rattle, fenders gleam—as if preparing for battle.

At work, I think about her. I can't stop talking to Stella in my head—it won't stop simply because one of us is not here. Can I stop? I try.

OK—from this moment on, I will not think about her. I will *not* think about her. I *will* not think about her. I will not think about her. I will not. I will do yoga, I will open my chakras, I will repeat *OM* until I clear my mind, I will eat rice with my hands, I will grow a beard, I will do headstands. O-m-m-m-m. O-o-m-m-my God, I'm tired of thinking about her. O-o-o-m-m-m-m-my God, I'm tired of thinking about her. O-o-o-o-m-m-m-m-my God, I'm so tired of thinking about her.

At the morning meeting, Scott, the manager, announces the latest structural changes in the department and talks about the new clinical trial. There's a box of doughnuts on the table. There is orange juice and steaming coffee. “. . . to monitor the progress of this clinical investigation. . . .” Why is the AC so cold in here? “. . . and this new drug. . . .” O-m-m-m. “. . . since it is a Phase One. . . .” Why is the coffee sour? “. . . what you should monitor at each site and how much attention should be given to each activity. . . .” What is he talking about? “. . . strict adherence to the procedures by the treating physicians. . . .” Who are these people? Scott hands out personal agendas for the upcoming quarter to everyone, his eyes filled with that perkiness, that perkiness. . . . He shakes our hands energetically—the way only short people do—but hangs on to mine a bit longer. Where am I?

Everyone heads to their cubicles while Scott gestures for me to follow him into his dark gray office down the hall. Office

minimalism—a desk, a computer, a personal coffee maker, and a water cooler under a poster of a long boat (kayak? canoe?) powered by a squad of rowers. Below the photograph, a sign reads

TEAMWORK.

Scott is speaking to me in a concerned voice. He is looking at me with *that* look. I don't hear what he's saying; I just nod and want to puke. *That* look. I don't remember how the rest of the day goes. Horribly, I imagine.

On the way back from work, during rush hour at the traffic light on 11th and Broadway, the stream of cars slows down. Somewhere up ahead, I see fluorescent reflective vests holding stop signs and redirecting traffic. I notice the white corpse of a semi sprawled on its side in the middle of the road. It's hot. I try to change lanes at the last second and cleverly take Cedar Street, but don't make it—the schmuck on my right won't let me in. Fine, I'll sit in traffic like everyone else then. I look to my right: a guy around fifty, with crow's feet and a dry California tan, is picking his nose and watching a small plane in the sky trailing a giant red banner. I also look up to see what is written in the sky behind the plane and catch myself picking my nose, too. I look at the plane overhead, I look at the man. His left elbow—resting on the rolled-down window; his right index finger—up his nose; his hair—gray. That's how I'm going to look in about twenty years.

A honk from behind jolts me and I press the clutch to shift to first. It suddenly sinks. I press harder, I push and pull the stick to shift into gear, but it won't move. I watch the gray-haired man pull away. The light is still green, but it won't be this green forever. I start shoving the stick harder (damn—yellow), I hear the honking grow more impatient behind me. An intolerably hot day (it's red now) and longer than any other (scarlet red). I feel the rage of those accountants, lawyers, software engineers, waiters, and real estate agents focusing on my tiny tan car. Had there been