

From A To X

John Berger

From A to X is a novel in letters, a correspondence between A'ida and her lover, Xavier, who has been put in prison as a member of the resistance. But this is a one-sided correspondence, because we only have A'ida's touching letters, and Xavier's brief notes on the back of some of them. These were recovered from some rudimentary files left in the old prison from which Xavier has recently been relocated to a new high security unit outside the town.

Mi Golondrino,

Two winters ago I think it was, I mentioned a man to you, a diabetic who came one night to the pharmacy in urgent need of sugar. Did I tell you? He was beside himself, but as chance would have it, I happened to be there. I gave him what he needed and he left. He spoke with an accent and I didn't ask him where he was from and he didn't give me his name. Because I talk to you so often in my head, I sometimes get muddled about what I've put or haven't put into my letters. In a city without prisons – has there ever been one? – who would ever guess one can put so much into letters?

I reread your letters many times. Not at night. Rereading them then tends to be dangerous for the night. I read them in the morning after coffee and before work. I go outside so I can see the sky and the horizons. Often I go up onto the roof. At other times I go outside, cross the road and sit on the fallen tree, where the ants are. Yes, still. I take your letter out of its soiled envelope and I read. And as I read the days between clatter past like the freight wagons of a train! And what do I mean by the days between? Between this time and the last time I read the same letter. And between the day you wrote it and the day they took you. And between the day one of the herders posted it and the day I'm sitting on the roof reading it. And between this day when we have to remember everything and the day when we'll be able to forget because we have all. These, my love, are the days between, and the closest railway to here is two hundred kilometres away.

This morning I was in your Suse buying a new pack of cards. I was crossing the

market where the orange stalls are, and a man steps from behind me and says:

I owe you a word of thanks.

Thanks? Why?

Two years ago in Sucrat you saved my life.

How come?

A shot of sugar.

You mean sugar or an amphetamine?

Late one night.

It was then I remembered him and his weighed-down shoulders and his curious accent and his anger, his anger that had signalled how low his sugar-count probably was. He was the man I think I told you about who came that night to the pharmacy.

I'm living in the next street, behind the barber's, he says, please be my guest so I can offer you a coffee. It's two years I've been waiting.

I don't have much time.

I work as a cleaner in the market and I have to begin in an hour, so a quick coffee.

If you wish.

We went down a narrow passageway beside the barber's.

There, he says, nodding to the men having their hair cut and being shaved – more truths come out there than in most prayers!

You've been working in the market for long?

Five years, ever since I took the decision to follow my vocation.

Vocation?

By way of reply, he unlocks a front door, which opens outward and extends his arm in a gesture of invitation for me to enter.

It's bare, but I beg you make yourself at home. Italian coffee or Turkish?

Whichever is easiest

It's simply a question of how I grind it.

He disappeared into a kind of closet which gave on to a corner of the room, and plugged in a coffee grinder. An aroma of coffee as astringent as resin, filled the room.

The room was small. It must have been a small shop. Perhaps a haberdasher's. There was a tight, neat roll of bedding on the floor against one wall, a large table before a window, and two stools. Nothing else. No curtains, no rugs, no pictures, no overhead lighting. A reading lamp on the table.

Your coffee smells good.

You can judge, my honourable guest, when you've tasted it.

May I ask about your vocation?

My vocation, he replied standing in the doorway of the closet, was to be a poet.

Was?

It was settled long before I knew it. It took me thirty years to figure it out. Before that I sold carpets. It's still my vocation, needless to say, if you wish you can look on my table.

On the long table in front of the window, a dozen sheets of paper, the same size, and carefully aligned – like stepping stones – were laid out from left to right. Each one was covered with a small neat handwriting, frequently corrected or crossed-out. Beside certain passages a large question mark had been pencilled in; occasionally beside a passage there was a tick.

The regular left margin of each page and the differing lengths of the short lines showed it was being written as poetry. Several other sheets covered with the same close writing waited on the windowsill. I couldn't read a single word. It looked like Turkish. I asked him.

Yes and no. I write in the language of the Taurus mountains, this is my mother tongue. She's alone all day and wants to hear stories in the evening.

He gave me a special look as if he was checking to make sure that I recognised how things were not as they seemed to be. Certain beggars do the same after being given alms: their look says – thank me for having chosen you!

I went over to see what he was doing in the closet. The coffee in the copper pot had risen twice and he was adding the last spoonful of cold water. Wherever there was a space on a horizontal surface in the closet – near the gas-ring, beside the basin, under the mirror – there were single sheets of paper covered with the same meticulous handwriting. He watched me noticing this.

I move around when I'm working, particularly in the early morning before the sun's up. If it doesn't come to me by the big table, I take a stool and sit by the front door or I wander out here to eat some bread or brush my teeth.

I move around from valley to valley, from Mount Ararat to the Heights of Goksul or to the Passes of Cilicie.

Again he gave me the beggar look.

Then he handed me my cup of coffee. I sipped. It was the best I'd tasted for a long while. I installed myself on one of the stools near the table.

Is it one long poem?

Maybe no poet writes more than one and it takes a lifetime. He thinks

he's writing different short poems but really they're all part of the same long one.

What's it about?

It's in praise of life and its abundance. When I'm sweeping in the market, I listen, I never stop listening and often the words I hear are so well chosen, I remember them. A question of keeping your ears open — diabetics, as you must know, run a higher risk than most of becoming both deaf and blind.

You could translate a line or two for me? I ask.

The coffee pleases you?

It's remarkable.

You can still taste it between your eyes forty minutes after you've drunk it — provided everything else is calm. Yesterday we had a rocket from one of their Apaches.

A few lines?

I wanted to offer you a coffee and show you my secret because I think you saved my life.

A few lines?

I'll read you some lines then without translating. You'll hear the secret and it'll still be a secret.

The sound of his voice in the room changed, and it was as if we were sitting under a tree. I let the words pass without asking anything of them. Then he said:

We tend to think secrets are small, no? like precious jewels or sharp stones or knives that can be hidden and kept secret because they're small. But there are also secrets which are huge, and it is because of their immensity that they remain hidden except to those who have tried to put their arms around them. These secrets are promises.

He gave me another beggar look

I drank the last dregs of the delicious coffee, I thanked him, and as I was leaving, he pronounced his name for the first time: Hasan.

Writing this to you late tonight I think of your letters which I reread early in the mornings when the days between clatter past like freight wagons, and I think of my letters that you read in your cell, and I smile at their immense secret which is ours, yours and mine.

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