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ANDRÉ  
ACIMAN

*Room  
on the  
Sea*

FROM THE  
AUTHOR OF  
*CALL ME BY  
YOUR NAME*

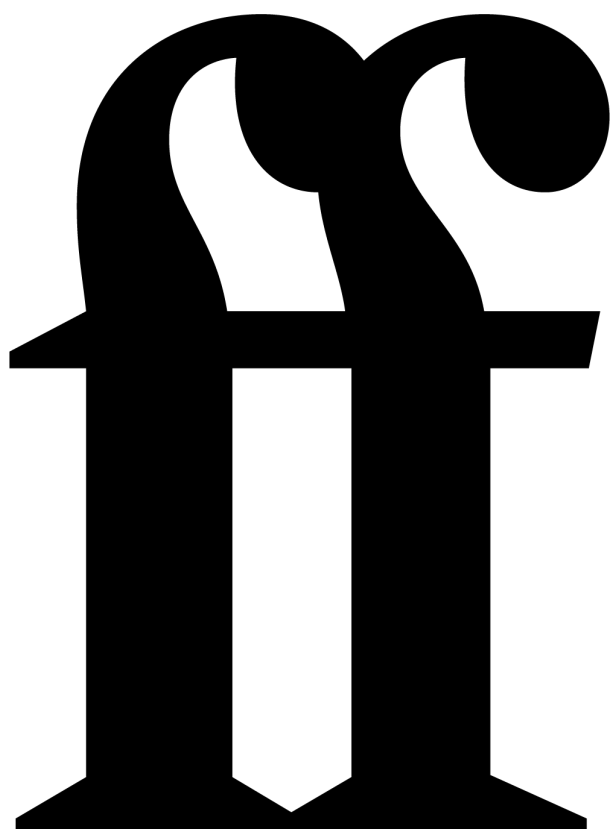


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**ANDRÉ  
ACIMAN**

***Room  
on the  
Sea***

faber

*For Rebecca Hartje, Mollye Shacklette and Hemin Shin*

# CONTENTS

Title Page

Dedication

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

About the Author

By the Same Author

Copyright

**MONDAY**

He was reading the newspaper. She was reading a novel. He looked at her once. She did not look back. She had fair hair, which was combed back, and from the way she held her book and rested it on the knee of her crossed leg, she had the hands of a pianist. He attempted to catch the title of her novel but was unable to make it out. When she turned the page, he tried once more but failed again. Moments later, he made one last try. 'It's *Wuthering Heights*,' she whispered so as not to disturb the others seated in the large hall. She appeared mildly amused by his curiosity, and to prove that her novel was no secret, turned the book cover for him to see for himself, thinking perhaps that he'd probably never heard of it. He was not sure why he needed to know what she was reading other than because he'd kept failing each time or because, without quite admitting it to himself, he was trying to make conversation. But after showing him the title of her novel she went back to reading and was seemingly more absorbed than before. 'Actually, I've read it twice,' he said. 'In school, we used to call it Weather and Heights.' She thought that was amusing and emitted a quiet, breathless laugh, more out of courtesy than because it was funny. 'It's a tired old joke,' he added, 'but it holds up if you've never heard it before.' This time she gave a perfunctory smile, did not say anything, and continued reading. He went back to his *Wall Street Journal*.

She was dressed in light linen with her shoulders exposed on that hot summer Monday but had brought a cotton sweater just in case the air conditioning made the central jury room unbearably cold. But the air conditioning wasn't working in the large hall where at least two hundred people were bunched together waiting to be selected as jurors. Eventually, at nine thirty, the jury warden picked up his microphone, welcomed everyone, and, with a touch of mirth in his voice, apologized for the cooling system, reminding those present that the heat was just as intolerable to those working in the building as it was to prospective jurors.



Everyone seemed grateful for the humour, and a muted chuckle rippled through the hall.

Meanwhile, the man put down his *Journal*, removed his striped blue worsted wool jacket and laid it, neatly folded in two, on the seat between them. He thought of loosening his necktie and unbuttoning the top of his shirt but decided not to. Before making his passing remark on Weather and Heights, he had started to undo his thick gold cufflinks, shaped like a marine chain, which now dangled at his wrists. His shoes were shimmering black brogues, the kind her husband never wore. His black socks did not droop; her husband's did. Jonathan never cared if his socks bunched up around his ankles, but this dapper man most likely wore garters around his calves. She could read him like a book: Wall Street, Park Avenue, Ivy League – arrogant, self-satisfied, clearly prejudiced, and knows it too.

They stayed glued to their reading until his name was called out: Wadsworth. Of course, she thought. He was ordered to take the elevator to Court Part 73. 'Enjoy your reading,' he said, picking up his jacket and cuffing his sleeves again with the visible ease of someone who, unlike Jonathan, never needed help with cufflinks. 'Emily Brontë beats the *Journal* hands down,' he added.

'I couldn't agree more,' she replied.

Definitely lefty, he thought, an opinionated and dismissive Upper West Side liberal who deplored his sort.

He left the main waiting hall and made his way to the courtroom. He seated himself on one of the benches and waited to be called. The lawyers were discussing matters among themselves. Meanwhile, the door behind him opened and he turned around to notice that another group of jurors was being ushered in. She was among them. He noticed that her hair was not dirty blonde as he had first thought when they were seated in the central jury room but an attractive, shiny grey. She caught his glance and rushed to his spot, finding an empty seat right behind him. Leaning forward, she asked: 'Do you have a way out of this?'

‘I think I do,’ he replied.

‘Please tell me what it is. I can’t afford to be here. Any advice?’

He stood up, grabbed his newspaper, and sat next to her. ‘Two things,’ he said, lowering his voice. ‘What exasperates lawyers most when they *voir dire* you is being answered with a straight yes or no, not a single syllable more. They’ll figure you’re either a lawyer or have some experience with the bench and suspect you’ll see right through their legal shenanigans. I’m wearing a lawyer’s suit – they know why, and they know I know why. Basically, they’ll know I’m a lawyer and they don’t want a lawyer controlling the jury room during deliberations. As for you, don’t volunteer anything. Just a simple yes or no.

‘Now, since this is criminal court they’ll ask if you’ve ever been the victim of a crime. They might give you a chance to elaborate on one such incident. In the past, I told them the truth: I’ve had no experience with crime, but I’ll add that my mother was mugged at gunpoint while she stood at the cash desk in a supermarket. This will most probably please the prosecution. But then I’ll remind the judge that the police did not pay attention to a word she said when they arrived at the scene. Because she spoke with a foreign accent, the officers proved so hostile to her that she lost all respect for them and refused to file a report. “Can you be impartial?” the judge will ask. “Honestly, Your Honour, I don’t know, but I’ll try my best.” It worked twice in the recent past. Both the defence and prosecution felt uncertain about me and didn’t want me as a juror.’

As it turned out, when his turn came, he did as he had told her he would and was summarily dismissed and sent back to the central jury room. He took out his copy of the *Wall Street Journal* and picked up where he had left off before being called to the courtroom. When, after more than an hour, he saw that she wasn’t coming back, he figured she must have fumbled her reply to one or both lawyers, and had, as a result, been empanelled.

But no. Fifteen minutes after he’d given up, the elevator bell rang and she appeared in the main hall. She looked around, spotted him, and

walked straight up to him.

‘It worked!’ She was beaming like a child.

‘Don’t tell anyone I told you.’

‘Of course I won’t.’

‘It’s a well-kept secret. You know,’ he added, removing his jacket from the empty seat next to him to make room for her, ‘I once told someone about a hotel in Naples where I always stayed because of an important client I had there. The hotel was not particularly pretty but one room was heavenly. “Ask for Room 68B and none other,” I said. Well, ever since that day, the rumour must have spread like wildfire among people in my line because I could no longer book that same room. I eventually found a better hotel with a better view of the city – of the shoreline and Mount Vesuvius. But now mum’s the word.’

‘I won’t breathe a word,’ she said. ‘In my business, we know how to keep secrets.’

‘What’s your business?’ he asked, feeling he could already guess.

‘Basically a headshrinker,’ she replied with a slight giggle and a touch of meekness verging on an apology for her profession. The word *headshrinker* fell like an old punchline to a joke that’s been retold too many times to need an intro. Then, with a touch of boldness that almost surprised him: ‘What’s the name of the hotel?’

‘Its name is Albergo Segreto, i.e., the Secret Hotel.’

She pondered the answer. ‘Oh!’ she finally exclaimed. ‘So, you’re not going to tell me?’ There was an affected, slighted pout to her voice. He liked how she pretended to reproach him without meaning to.

‘I’ll tell you, but not before you explain what you told the judge.’

As it turned out, she hadn’t made up a story for the judge. Her daughter, walking with her four-year-old son, had been robbed in plain sight on Columbus Avenue. She had right away called 911 and when the police came they asked her to describe the perpetrator. She had been so flustered and so frightened for her child that she hadn’t focused on the criminal and was unable to describe him to the police. They told her to

come to the precinct to file a report. 'But by then the mugger will have disappeared,' she'd objected. 'Lady,' said one of the two officers with a cheeky, all-knowing smile on his face, obviously enjoying what he was about to tell her, 'your mugger disappeared long, long ago.' *Your mugger* stuck in her craw. Like his mother, she refused to file a report. She was more furious with the officers than with the mugger.

By then it was nearing twelve thirty and the jury was allowed an hour and a half for lunch. They had to be back by two sharp, said the warden on the PA system.

So they rushed out. He said he knew of a Chinese restaurant close by that served very fast and quite decent food. She loved the idea. Oh, she exclaimed, almost taking a step back, did he mind if she tagged along? Absolutely not. Was he really a lawyer? Yes, how could she tell? 'The look,' she replied, grazing his lapel with her palm and almost laughing at the wool suit on such a hot day. He'd retired the year before but hadn't quite gotten used to life as a former partner. He still had an office on Pearl Street, though he'd grown to like working from home.

Did he like what he did?

'Yes. Mostly. Sometimes. Frankly, seldom,' he said, laughing for the first time at his disclosure. She liked how he laughed. He was not the stuffy investment banker type that she'd imagined. Knew how to make fun of himself – not too much, but just enough to pass her tentative sense-of-humour test, which she applied when judging patients and people in general.

How about her, he asked, did she like being a shrink?

'*Mostly. Sometimes. Frankly, seldom,*' she said, echoing his very words, perhaps also meaning to pull his leg. Then, fearing she'd gone overboard, 'Honestly, I do like being a shrink.' But her defence was underscored by a persistent, indecisive note. With an unstated *maybe* in her voice, she added that she sometimes nursed second thoughts about her career, especially at this late stage of the game. She had even thought of possibly retiring. 'But then what would I do with myself all day?' Besides, she'd



never own up to any of this to anyone, and certainly not to a stranger. 'But then why am I telling you all this?'

'Most likely because I am a stranger, and you're free to say anything you please.'

She said he didn't strike her as the combative lawyer type.

'That's because I have always avoided litigation. I never go to court, I have others do that. I turn out to be right in my assessment of most cases, yet there is always a part of me that fears being wrong. Retirement was the very best thing I did as a lawyer. Think about it.'

Both liked that neither wished to sound too self-satisfied with their careers. They also tried their best not to pry into each other's lives. It gave their walk together a light, laid-back, casual cast, which they enjoyed.

'Oh, and by the way, my name is Catherine.'

He couldn't resist. 'Call me Heathcliff.'

They laughed as they entered one of the crowded Chinese restaurants less than ten minutes away from the courthouse.

Lunch was fast and fun. Neither knew quite what the other liked. Did she mind cilantro? he asked. No, but her husband did. 'He hates the taste.'

'That's so strange, my wife hates cilantro too. I read somewhere that there are people who cannot stand cilantro because it reminds them of Ivory Soap. We never order Chinese food.'

'Neither do we.'

'Strange world, isn't it?'

'Strange, indeed, and yet here we are about to.'

Both laughed again, though each wondered if either had caught the reason for their laughter. It might have been an unintended, tacit dig at the lives they lived, but it could just as easily have been the sheer coincidence of having spouses with identical tastebuds.

The soup was wonderful, the fried dumplings the best she'd had in years, and the prawn and the chicken-cashew plates, both of which they felt relaxed enough to share, were beyond delicious. Yesterday's chicken

and last night's soup, but who cares! he said. She agreed. The unidentified left-over, a culinary secret all its own, she added.

Did he cook? All the time, in the past. Did she? Seldom. Her husband was picky and didn't like her in the kitchen when he was preparing dinner. So she learned not to meddle, though she did like cooking. Did they cook together? she asked. His wife complained he got too many pots and dishes dirty, given the few items he ended up preparing, especially now that there were only the two of them left, with their sons being married and living elsewhere.

Life, he said with a light chuckle.

Life indeed, she echoed.

When they left the restaurant, they had a good half-hour before heading back to the central jury room.

'Coffee?' he suggested.

'Absolutely.'

The walk took three minutes. Da Pirro bar-café-enoteca, which he said all young lawyers in his firm raved about, was crowded. They had to wait in line, heard the people before them order all manner of convoluted coffees and, when their turn came, paying took more time than having their coffee poured.

'I feel that we're on a strange countdown,' she said.

'I know. We have fifteen minutes left, minus the five for being screened through the metal detector and then heading upstairs in the crawling elevators.'

He said he liked a hot coffee on a hot day – go figure! She said she hated chunks of ice in hers.

'Can we at least disagree on something?' he asked, knowing she'd appreciate the humour.

'I'm sure we'll find something if we meet again,' she joked, then, fearing he might take her comment the wrong way, she added something to suggest that jury duty might last longer than either of them wished. He couldn't agree more, he said.

‘There was a time when lawyers were immediately dismissed. Now they are still dismissed but they have to serve time first, like everyone else. Honestly, though, this was truly enjoyable.’

She agreed with him, and as they walked out into the glaring noonday sun holding their to-go cups, she turned to him and said, ‘This has been a happy day for me.’

He nodded to show that he’d heard and registered what she’d just said. They stood waiting for the crosswalk light to change, and, sensing that an awkward silence was about to settle between them, she added: ‘Sometimes a random moment occurs, and then you realize that it came with a small halo.’

This time he looked at her and nodded once more. It allowed her to say, ‘Well, I just wanted to say the bold, unadorned something before it gets all clumsy and foiled and then goes into hiding. So thank you,’ she said.

‘My pleasure,’ he replied, which is what he told so many after dispensing legal advice. But then, sensing that *my pleasure* was a touch too vacuous after what she’d just said to him and could easily pass for a bland *you’re welcome*: ‘If it felt special it’s probably because none of it was planned. You helped put the halo too.’

‘Take the credit!’ she reproached with a soft laugh. ‘I would have bought a bagel with cream cheese and sat like a widow on one of those park benches, kicking the pigeons away.’

‘With any luck, we might do this again tomorrow.’

‘With any luck.’

\*

They were separated within five minutes of returning. She was sent to Court Part 81, he to 66.

As he picked up his jacket and draped it across his arm, he couldn’t help blurting out, ‘We may never see each other again.’

‘I know.’

It occurred to both, without knowing why, that something dismayed them in the separation. They hadn't expected to feel this way, which is why neither had time to conceal it.

'Life,' he said once more, shrugging his shoulders philosophically. He wasn't sure she'd heard him. It didn't matter.

But on his way up in the elevator he suddenly remembered that Heathcliff wasn't his name, Heathcliff was a joke, just a silly, stupid, stupid joke. What an idiot!

A lovely man, she thought. Then she regretted not telling him that. She liked how he had opened up to her about his job and then, in passing, told her that his wife complained he got too many dishes dirty in the kitchen. *Still, I bet they're the kind who drink wine together while cooking at night. We don't.*

As he was being questioned by the defence attorney, he fumbled his answers, even argued with the lawyer on the appropriateness of the question he was asked, was chided by the presiding judge but summarily released by the defence. Without intending it, he had acted the part of a crazy person. They don't mind fools in the jury box, but no crazies, he thought.

When he was back in the main hall, he saw that others were seated in his and her seats and that she was gone. *Teaches me to use a nickname.* He knew it was pointless to try to find her. This time she'd probably managed to get herself empanelled. He went back to scanning his paper. He hadn't touched it since they'd spoken.

If she'd been empanelled, he'd have lunch alone on the morrow. He didn't mind having lunch alone. Lunch alone had never upset him – so long as those sitting in front of him didn't slurp their soup or champ their food too loudly. Ours was, he thought, a tiny, fleeting episode in a Chinese restaurant near the courts. No, not an episode, just a nice, little, fleeting moment – he didn't know how else to describe it. A moment. Then he remembered and smiled. A small halo, she'd called it.



He was still reading the headlines in his paper when he heard, 'A penny for them.' He didn't recognize the voice behind him. A friend, or an old colleague, a friend of a friend, maybe a neighbour, who was also on jury duty?

He turned around to see.

'How quickly we forget,' she said, noticing the deft and hasty cover-up to what had been a vacant look clouding his features.

He realized that he had unintentionally played a little trick on himself. He had refused to believe that the person speaking to him was the very one he had wished to see again. He was thrilled and he told her so.

'I almost bashed my head against the elevator door for giving you a stupid name.'

'How silly did you think I was? I knew Heathcliff wasn't yours. Your name is Paul Wadsworth. You responded to it when they called you out this morning.'

He, on the other hand, had never caught her full name. Catherine Shukoff, she said.

She took the seat next to him. Neither was going to read. There were many things they wanted to say but they were so surprised to find each other that they couldn't think of one. Or maybe they had already exhausted everything at lunch and all that remained were meagre residuals that wouldn't have lasted more than a minute or two. What made further reflections irrelevant was the sudden announcement on the PA system, apologizing for the intense heat both outside and inside the courthouse. 'Meaning?' cried out one of the outspoken people in the hall. 'Meaning,' replied the person on the PA system, not without a snicker in his voice, 'meaning that you are released for the day, but must be back tomorrow morning at nine thirty sharp,' adding, 'I know how disappointed you must all be.'

There was buoyant laughter in the hall. Within seconds everyone cleared the hall just like pupils who've been released from school on the announcement of summer break.

‘I’ll bring coffee for the two of us,’ he said.

‘And I’ll bring the croissants.’

‘Better idea – let’s meet at Pirro’s tomorrow, before the court opens. They won’t allow us to bring coffee inside the court.’

‘Done.’

He was going to walk to his office, she was taking the Eighth Avenue line to the Upper Shrink Side. She thought it was funny the way they rushed out of the hall the moment they heard the announcer say that he was sure they were all utterly disappointed. He emitted something like a laugh.

Then they said goodbye.

They weren’t thinking.

A stroll around SoHo would have been a nice idea, she thought.

A napoleon at Caffè Reggio, before hopping uptown, why not? He didn’t really need to go to the office.

*I wasn’t thinking.*

I wasn’t either, she’d have replied.

**TUESDAY**

They hadn't discussed what time they were to meet the next morning. So as not to miss each other, they both arrived an hour earlier than they were due at the courthouse, dressed very lightly this time: she was wearing a T-shirt with a linen scarf and wide, light-yellow linen trousers; he khakis, a light-blue button-down shirt and a pair of loafers. His jade green socks didn't bunch, she noticed.

Meeting fifteen minutes before jury selection would have meant arriving at the main hall just in the nick of time, especially given the crowd lining up before the metal detectors and then massing by the elevators. Half an hour earlier might have meant waiting in line at the coffee place. An hour early meant finding a table, eating a leisurely croissant each and ordering, who knows, a second espresso to go, to be drunk on the way to the courts.

That they both arrived too early at Pirro's told them what they were reluctant to admit to themselves while getting dressed that morning.

'If they empanel me, I might not be allowed to lunch. We'll have to arrange for coffee afterwards.'

'What if they sequester you?'

'We'll cross that bridge ...' She didn't finish.

'Or jump off it.'

Both knew instinctively that yesterday's humour had come back, and they relished how it settled between them with the coffee and croissants. Without explaining why, she took out her phone and they exchanged numbers. It was a spontaneous gesture, and the two of them were sufficiently canny not to read too much into it.

'I don't want to sound gloomy again, but it feels as if our time is being squeezed through an eye-dropper.'

He agreed. It was good to know that the other felt no differently.

He thought they'd text each other as things developed.

Yes, as things developed, she echoed with a touch of humour.