

Excerpt from: *De ingewijden (The Insiders)* by Hella Haasse

Original publication date: 1957

Copy used for translation published by Em. Querido's Uitgeverij, 2004

Excerpt 1, Jessica Manning: p. 31 – p. 36. Excerpt 2, Elina: p. 410 – p. 414

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Jessica Manning (p. 31 – p. 36):

The following morning, they left later than intended yet again.

Across the road, among a fruit vendor's pyramids of watermelons, was the same young man Jessica had seen in the hotel courtyard. He was wearing dirty, khaki coloured trousers, a similar-looking shirt, and tennis shoes. In his hand, he carried a small old-fashioned travel bag. The leather was worn and stained, rather misshapen, as if it had been used for carrying too many, too heavy things. While Manning was talking to the hotel owner to pay the bill, Jessica looked at the young man. She couldn't take her eyes off of him. His looks, the way he carried himself gave her an odd feeling, pleasant yet painful, and she didn't know why, but she couldn't bear the idea that in a few minutes time they would leave and she would never see him again. She didn't say what she felt, she just sat there in a state of immediate, intense emotion. His face and torso slightly turned away from her, he watched the traffic on the road. He shifted his weight to the other leg, and with one hand on his hip, slowly swung the bag in his other – not absent-mindedly, but as someone who is lost in thought. Jessica had never been so deeply aware of a man's body. She had seen statues in museums and admired them out of a sense of duty, she had secretly watched young people in swimming pools and on beaches. But this stranger in the stained, faded, thin khaki suit displayed a perfect male beauty that took her breath away.

Suddenly, he turned around and headed straight for Manning. Being closer to him now, Jessica could see his narrow, tanned face, and the severe lines of his forehead, nose, lips and chin. Even Bernard and Berenice had begun to notice him, calling him a handsome boy as if he were part of the landscape, the environment, like houses and trees and melons. In a soft but clear voice, he asked in fluent English if he could hitch a lift south. He had overheard they were heading for Athens, which is where he needed to go, and offered to serve as an interpreter and a guide. They would come across many sights, he knew the land – Thessaly, Boeotia, Attica – and was at their service. Besides, he had some knowledge of history and

antiquities, he had been a tour guide before. While he was saying all this, he looked at Manning, without smiling, almost sternly, as if finding it hard to ask for a favour. Sitting frozen in the back seat, Jessica listened open-mouthed.

‘Well...’ Manning started hesitantly (the young Greek’s action had taken him by surprise and his instinct was to refuse him), but then his wife suddenly leaned out of the car window, waving her hands and shouting, ‘No, there’s no room, we’re five already!’ If she hadn’t said anything, Manning would probably have said no, mostly out of laziness. But as often, he now felt the urge to do exactly what would annoy his wife the most. Besides, there was something in the young man’s calm gaze that looked familiar. Only later, when their new travel companion had sat himself between Jessica and the young couple in the back of the car, did Manning realise that his eyes reminded him of Dorothy Missoulaki. He was from the same country as Dorothy’s parents and they all had the same quiet, fierce sense of pride. They were friendly and modest, yet reticent and self-conscious. Suddenly, Manning felt like there was a connection between the stranger and the woman whom he still thought of with a mixture of shame, regret and desire.

Bernard and Berenice, forced to sit even more closely together than usual, said in French that Manning was pretty stupid to saddle them with a hitchhiker all day long. Mrs Manning grimly stared at the road ahead of her, Manning whistled softly. Jessica was aware of nothing but the closeness of the man beside her, feeling his muscular upper arm and thigh through the thin fabric of his clothes. He sat still, leaning forward to take up as little space as possible, his hands folded around his knees, his bag at his feet. Too shy to look at him, Jessica watched the bright white houses, trees and fields glide by, but she couldn’t concentrate. They were driving across a plain with dusty fields on either side of the road, freshly picked melons and pumpkins on the verge, children and donkeys in the shade of trees or the rickety structures of harvesting supervisors. Men sat on chairs under the trailing vines or canvas awnings of village coffee houses. Meanwhile, the young Greek told them the names of the places they drove through.

‘There are many old churches in Veroia, like Agios Christos and Agios Nikolaos. They’re full of frescoes and sculptures, if you’re interested,’ he said leaning forward, almost touching Manning’s shoulder.

‘I want something cold to drink, let’s find a café,’ Manning said to no one in particular. ‘If you want to visit those churches, be quick, because we still have a long way to go today.’

Bernard and Berenice said it was too hot to walk. Mrs Manning, as stiff as a board in the front seat, remained silent. Jessica, however, annoyed that no one had responded to their fellow-traveller's explanations since their departure from Salonica, declared, 'I'd like to see those churches!'

'I beg your pardon, by the way,' the young Greek said suddenly gesturing apologetically, 'I forgot to introduce myself. Niko Stephandidakis.'

'We're the Mannings,' Jessica replied promptly, 'except my sister and her husband, of course, Mr and Mrs Levallier.'

As he turned to face her, she noticed a scar in his neck, long and pale compared to the rest of his skin.

'I noticed your number plate is French, but you all speak English.'

'My parents are from the US, my sister and I live in Paris.'

He cocked his head, eyes closed and chin jutting out, as if to say: ah, that explains it. Mrs Manning unfolded a map.

'There's no way you can visit any churches if you want to make it to Delphi today.'

'Delphi's too far, it'll take too long,' Niko Stephandidakis said, bending over and reaching his arm over her shoulder to show her the route. 'There are mountains along the way and the road is very...' Unable to think of the word, he gestured with his hand. 'But you can be in Delphi tomorrow.'

Mrs Manning moved aside to avoid touching the stranger's arm. 'Well, we won't have time to visit what's-its-name.'

'I don't care, as long as I can have a drink, I'm dying of thirst,' Manning said.

In Verroia, Niko Stephandidakis bought bottles of beer and sparkling water for them, which they drank in the car so they wouldn't waste time getting out and ordering. Besides, Mrs Manning was of the opinion that the cafes they had passed were rather unattractive. Niko also produced two melons, one of which he offered to Mrs Manning, the other to Jessica. 'Here you are. From me to you.'

Surprised, Mrs Manning said coolly, 'I didn't ask for anything.'

They drove into the mountains, the landscape below them bathed in bright light, the grey rocky mountain ridges speckled with green, the yellow meadows and ochre fields further along the valley bristly and dry. With the sun beating down on the rocks and parched bushes, the bare mountain tops stood out sharply against the sky. Sometimes, they came across a cool spot under tall trees where spring water splashed from a tube in the rock. It smelled of damp earth and greenery there. Usually, there were three, four huts in the shade,

often with an eatery for travellers. Above the basin frothing with bubbling, ice cold water, there was usually a small wooden cabinet with an icon of the patron saint of that particular road or place, and a collection box below. Trucks and busses were parked under the trees, people sat eating and drinking at the *estiatoria*, children and chickens ran across the road when approached, donkeys and horses of travelling farmers watered, women came to collect water, and drivers washed. Beyond those oases, a dazzling radiance reflected by rocks and roads rose up from the yellow-grey depths of the gorges.

Elina (p. 410 – p. 414):

Quartz's money meant she could travel through Greece. Making her way slowly, in small stages without a particular plan, she went wherever her fancy took her, staying where she was comfortable. Much to her surprise, she felt born again, as if ever since that full-moon night shortly after her arrival in Athens when she had climbed the Acropolis, she had been absorbed into a different existence, an earthly Elysium. The irony was that she had tried to avoid this incredibly romantic setting, this apotheosis of touristic pleasure. But when she stood in the middle, by the hole in the floor where the altar might have been, surrounded by the pillars of the Parthenon in the unworldly radiance of the temple, she couldn't hold back her tears. She wept as she had never been able to before, her body wracked with sobs that seemed to be wrenched from deep within her. During that cleansing bout of weeping, she felt the need to expel the old Elin, the Elin she had been. She was seized by bottomless grief and sadness for all those wasted, bitter years, for the pride and blindness that had sentenced her to such a long and difficult process of maturing. She would have liked to raise her hands in the ancient gesture of the supplicant: she, a speechless, unreligious creature devoid of hope, a creature from another era without symbols of wisdom or balance.

She was a wanderer again, but this time a different kind of wanderer. Her goal was no longer to find excitement, to satisfy her hungry self – now she looked at people and objects and landscapes with new eyes, full of rapture and wonder.

When, during her tour of the islands in the Aegean Sea, she visited Crete, she knew she wanted to stay there, somewhere on the slopes of the Ida, where, for the rest of her life, she would see the sun rise and set over the fields and olive groves of the Mesara plain, the mountain ranges and sparkling stretch of sea in the south-west.

Looking back on her nearly twenty-year stay in the mountain village, old Elina knew exactly what the turning point in her life had been: the moment when she realised that, despite the semblance of being settled in, of being a villager among the villagers, a human among humans, she still lived like a painter among objects. And that, despite all the friendliness, willingness and helpfulness, despite the fact that she was involved in Emmanuel Stephandidakis' battle for respect (proof that the community treated her as their own), she felt no less lonely than she had before. For the first time, and under the influence of the other Elin who was gradually taking shape, a woman who worked in the fields, helped harvest the olives and grapes, babysat the children, tended the sick and knitted socks to earn a living, she saw her past attempts to flee, her instinctive defence against all those who were prepared to lose themselves over her out of love or admiration, for what they really were. She realised that throughout her life, she had shunned responsibility for those who were dependent on her out of fear of having to consider this one truth: that since the isolation of her childhood days at Breskel, she had wanted nothing so much as power, power to prove her worth, power to free herself of insecurity. She had systematically avoided this aspect of herself without knowing why. Living for her work and feeling lonely, she had been just as distant from her loved-ones as her estate-based parents had been to her. She had never considered anything truly important, except her canvases – looking at things and painting them was the only possible relationship she could imagine between herself and her surroundings. Due to her insecurity and lack of passion, any other relationship was doomed to fail.

When she had figured this out for herself, she'd taken a long look at all the paintings and drawings she'd made since her arrival in the village. Those she wasn't content with had filled her with a hauntingly painful desire to paint them anew, to start afresh and try to grasp the secret of light, colour and expression. Those she was happy with – mysteriously luminous, powerful, characterised by strong lines – gave her a burning sense of joy, an incomparable sensation for which she had failed Rina, Christiaan, her parents, Quartz, Simon, and everyone she had known. A sensation that would make her fail them again. Realising this and being afraid of herself, she moved all paintings and sketchbooks to the windowless space next to her room. She forced herself not only to forget this work, but to suppress any tendency to make new sketches, to look at landscapes and children with a painter's eyes (reducing living reality to a composition, a palette of colours). She focused on her daily chores with grim persistence but suffered for it, as if one of her organs, one of her limbs had been removed. I am not myself anymore, so should I become someone else? she sometimes muttered to herself.

Once, sitting on her doorstep, spinning wool and absorbed in yet another painful dialogue with herself, she saw Niko Stephandidakis come over the top of the hill with his goat on a rope. On a sudden whim, she called out to the boy and, when he was standing in front of her, gazing at her with dark, lively, questioning eyes, she had told him to take everything from the side room and burn it. Later, she wondered if she had gone mad. She could have screamed, beaten her head against the wall, but the worst thing was that at the same time, she was aware of the fact that she didn't want to undo it.

During the disastrous night when Stavros Mavrochidis had been tortured, the commander of the German army patrol had a fire built in an open space among the trees by the road side. From time to time, the soldiers came to bask in its warmth and light, their faces hard yet restless. They did so mostly, perhaps, to find some respite from what was going on underneath the plane tree. For the man with the yellow hair (earlier that day, Elina had been struck by the contradiction between him standing motionlessly and his restless gaze), though, the flames had a different meaning altogether, which didn't elude her despite all the misery of Stavros and the village. She used to have a friend who was the medical director of a Swiss sanatorium for the mentally ill, and she remembered a visit to that institution. One of the images that had been etched in her mind was when gardeners were burning a pile of dry leaves in the garden and she and her friend the doctor, who was giving her a tour, passed the day care pavilion for male patients. One of them, a young man, had been clinging to the bars of a window that looked out over the garden, spittle dribbling from his mouth, beads of sweat pearling on his forehead, and his eyes full of manic fear and desire aroused by the fire in the distance. She had seen the same expression in the eyes of the commander. More astonishing than his mad obsession, though, was the fact that the other members of the patrol did not, or did not want to, see that.

Once the officer and other wounded had been taken away the next day, he (the new authority, amazingly) had walked around uneasily, biting his nails and clawing at the collar of his tunic. It had frightened her and she hardly dared think that it couldn't be a coincidence that a disturbed man had been left in charge of reprisals. She remembered the rumours about what had happened in other villages in recent months: half the villagers of one village had been killed because some boys playing had lit a fire near a procession of German army vehicles, and, on another occasion, when German soldiers had seen a fire on a hillside that had been extinguished before they reached it, a whole village had been destroyed, its male inhabitants shot because they were suspected of signalling to Allied pilots.

Elina had gone to see him in the sweltering heat of the afternoon, while the boys and men were being guarded on the road, their hands in their necks, the women and children waiting desperately at home. She knew she couldn't hesitate, couldn't show fear or uncertainty. Determined, she walked through the suddenly alien village, pretending not to hear the angry shouts of a few soldiers eating melon in the shade. All of a sudden, she was an old woman who, uncomprehending the situation, was heading blindly for her goal. That is what she wanted the people seeing her shuffle along to think. He had tried to shoo her away, but she hadn't moved. Instead, she'd surprised him by ordering rather than begging him – in German, to boot – 'The boy who was stabbed with a bayonet yesterday needs a tetanus injection.'