Observer Review: Be My Knife By David Grossman Essay, Research Paper

Love letters straight from the heart of IsraelBe My Knife

David Grossman

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David Grossman has always been compelled by the distances between people. In his journalism about his native Israel, a special brand of reporting and philosophy and storytelling, he has sought to build little local connections of humanity where the most intractable divisions of politics, ethnicity and hatred existed. One of his non-fiction books, a collection of interviews with Palestinians, was called Sleeping on a Wire; he is one of the few tightrope walkers of the current conflict, forever feeling for poise and balance as he steps out across divides into thin blue air. His novels have played out this need for connection on a domestic scale: they have interrogated the limits of intimacy separating mother and son, or husband and wife, or between lovers. Here, he returns to this obsessive, fundamental desire to communicate, and invents for it a new extreme. Yair is married, in many respects happily, and he has a son, but at a school reunion he glimpses from a distance a woman, Miriam, with whom he feels an instant overwhelming bond. When he gets home, so affected is he by this vision of her that he vows to begin a nocturnal correspondence, one in which he will reveal to her everything about his troubled 2am soul, and live for once in total honesty. To his surprise and delight, Miriam shares this desire for truth, and writes back in the same liberating spirit. Yair is a dealer in rare books, cripplingly awkward and frustrated in society and ‘corked up in the jar of marriage’. By adopting Miriam as his confessor and muse he begins to explore the person he always felt himself to be before some ‘terrible mistake in the mischievous lottery of life… planted me in a body and face my soul has been rejecting for years’. That person is full of desire and regret, ‘a constant manquake, a walking seismic disturbance’, protective of the innocence attacked by a father who beat him, shamed by his occasional adultery, and yearning above all to meet the one person with whom he believes he might be fully himself.

His letters, which make up the first two-thirds of the book, are thus recurrent, elliptical fantasies of nakedness, ‘one you can hardly stand in front of without shock and a quick escape into clothes’. He has developed a sight test for every woman he likes in order to find a true soulmate: ‘I thought we would look into each other’s eyes, and slowly bring our eyes closer and closer, and even closer, until my eye touched hers… the eyelids, the eye itself, the pupils and moistures… [to allow] the vaguest most ancient picture of our two souls to float into our bodies.’ He wants to get under Miriam’s skin, to peel off not her clothes but her flesh, but most of all he needs her to know his own bare bones, to understand the ’skinny boy, slightly hunched over, a shy flatterer’ that he was, who ‘passionately wants to give of himself and surrender… if only he believed that he could and that if he did, someone would be there to receive him.’ In some ways, Yair’s desire is a metaphor for the process of reading itself. By presenting his letter as a rolling narrative, by letting us hear Miriam for a long time only at one remove, through the filter of Yair’s obsession, Grossman enacts the difficulties of ever really knowing a life outside ourselves, when our selves are always getting in the way. In this dramatisation of loneliness, the author feels his way toward some hard-won and often beautiful descriptions of the impossibilities of love, but Yair’s striptease of the soul does not always engage: it is hard to feel sympathy for a character when he already has so much for himself. At one point he suggests that, in the words of a Chinese sage: ‘I don’t have the time to write a short letter, so I will write a long one,’ but there are times that you wish he had not taken this wisdom so much to heart. When Miriam’s side of the story is revealed, it comes as both a relief and an anticlimax: she brings to the correspondence a more natural tone, is less self-serving about her fears, but ultimately Yair’s brand of earnest truth-telling proves infectious. Having established this twin nakedness, however, Grossman saves the best of his novel to last. All the letter writing is suddenly exposed by the realities of a telephone conversation in which the two voices in this fiction test themselves against each other, and threaten both to tear apart and become one. But by then, perhaps, you might already be thinking that soulmates are always too close for comfort.