

The Woman the Book Read

by Sarah Hall.

Ara. The name was unusual; he wouldn't have recognised her otherwise. If she'd walked past him in the street, even if she'd been sitting opposite him in the café and he'd had time to study her, he probably wouldn't have guessed. He was at his usual table, taking coffee, reading, watching the gulets dock in the harbour and unload passengers. It was still hot, his sleeves were rolled, but the town dogs were no longer collapsed in the shade – they were up and wandering. End of season, everything had slowed, and there was a sense of recovery, exhalation almost. He didn't care for summers now; each year the town's capacity felt breached. Loud music on the beach platforms, expensive drinks. The proposed airport had been halted, but more people kept arriving regardless.

He was waiting for Eymen, as usual. They were supposed to discuss profits, tax, new ideas for the company, cider import, stonecrop export. Every Wednesday, the same. Eymen would arrive late, sweating, breathless, and would tease him for drinking espresso. You're the late one, old wolf. When are you going to arrive home? If he'd been fiddling with his notebook and pencil he would put them away before they were seen and commented on.

Someone close to the Great Han shouted her name across the square, and his head snapped up instinctively. It took a moment to register. He hadn't heard it spoken in – how long? The name was called again. The accent was unmistakably English. Twenty metres away was a woman in a fedora and a lime-coloured dress – the caller.

The square was less crowded than the previous week. Small groups were congregated by the ice cream stall. The almond seller was talking to an elderly couple in matching linens. The rich young things from the city had gone. The sun was low; the woman in the green dress had her hand cocked, shielding her eyes. She was facing west, towards the lion's tomb. There were two women in her line of sight – one small in stature with bleached hair, another Chinese. By the water's edge Cemile teyze was bent over the dock, mooring *The Domina* after the day's last tour.

Again, the call came, floating across space, like the invitation of a ghost. Ara! Something released in his chest. A sense of her. That familiar feeling: uncomplicated, tender. He'd loved her name; it sounded stateless, when such ideas had seemed possible. *The bringer of rain*: her mother's idea. He knew Catherine had been bullied by the father's family, pressured to change it, even after the birth certificate; he'd admired her stubborn refusal. Whenever he'd thought of Ara, and he so often had – her hand in his, her skin immeasurably soft – he'd imagined she would be doing extraordinary things. She would have flown so far, her time with him forgotten. But if she were here, wouldn't it be because of him? Or was it simply coincidence? The town was popular now, the country stable, and the British especially were building villas all over the peninsula and up into the hills.

The caller was balanced on her toes, waving and gesturing. Come here. He put his hands on the table, next to his coffee cup, and strained upwards to see who was being summoned. A woman was walking round the low wall of the fountain. She'd been drinking from the tap, perhaps, bent to the waterspout, hidden from view. Now she was walking across the square towards the han. Tall – and fair, yes – but the sun was obscuring her face. Her hair was bound back. How strange, his heart's agitation, as if a piece of him already knew.

She arrived out of the late-afternoon light, and he could see she was the right age and had a wide, clear face. She was wearing sunglasses, large and fashionably angled. He couldn't see her eyes. She was scanning the vicinity. If she cast her gaze further left, she would see him. Or she would see a man sitting at a café table. He was not unchanged. Nor was he unlike his younger self. Stomach, OK, a little rounder. Hair still good, thick and dark, attractive to women, he knew. The pallor from ten years in her country had disappeared. Bones, of course, were an indication. His were distinctive, slightly leonine, and would probably not begin to sink for another decade. She was beautiful, he could see that – more so, a woman now. The white dress sailed from her body as if she were a rigged ship. Rose-gold skin – so easily burned. When they'd been here before, she'd kept to the shade, struggled at midday. They had retreated back to the hotel often.

Where have you been, he heard the friend ask. Laughter. An apology. Her voice was too low to make out the words. They conversed for a moment. Which one, the friend said. Hurry up, I really want to swim. They both turned and looked at the towels hung and stacked on tables outside the emporium. So many colours – not the best quality, but eye-catching. Her hand brushed over the sky, lavender, turquoise cottons. Should he go over and say hello? How would she feel about that? The last time he'd seen her, at the train station, the tears, the fight – he didn't want to think of it.

A shadow fell across the table, and someone loomed in front. Crumpled trousers, a dark patch along the shirt above the belt. Drinking coffee, I see, foreigner. Who is president of this country? Eymen was fishing in his pockets for some item, elbows flapping, thoroughly obscuring the view. Ah, still so hot, can you believe it. Must be thirty at least, old wolf! Where is the car key? I thought I put it. He leaned to the side to see round his partner, but Eymen was ample, planetary almost. Please get your ass out of the way, Arab. He put his hand on the solid hip, shoved Eymen to the side. Hey! What?

She was gone, inside the han, or away into the square. He still hadn't seen her properly. Eymen was sitting down now, scraping the feet of his chair noisily, complaining about the heat again, he couldn't find parking, why was traffic so bad, there should be a congestion charge for people north of Izmir. Have you ordered my tea yet? He did not reply and Eymen held up his hand for the waiter. He looked towards the marina, the steep street that led to Derya beach. The fountain again. Nothing. She had vanished, like a figment. What's the matter with you today, wolf? And what's this? Eymen picked up the notebook from the table, flapped it. Don't tell me, the master plan? Very carefully, very calmly, as if defusing a bomb or handling a snake, he reached over and removed the pad from his partner's hand. It's my letter of resignation, Arab. He slipped the notebook into his shirt pocket.

The two women emerged from the arch of the han, carrying thin plastic bags along with their totes. It had been a quick transaction, no browsing, and probably carried out in English. He felt a little pinch of sadness. Had she forgotten? They began to walk in the direction of the beach platforms. She had her back to him and the sun flooded her hair, making it seem colourless, then copper, blonde, ash. Like tweed, he remembered Catherine once describing it. He heard the sound of a brush passing through the length of it, once, twice, an exquisite, gentle, tearing sound. How quickly the past could be restored.

He stood abruptly. I have to go. He put some coins down on the table. What? I just arrived. I've got the figures. But already he was walking away. He heard Eymen swearing. Are you coming back? He held up his hand: maybe. Ah, so secretive! Is your new boss a woman?

They were at the edge of the square. He tucked his shirt in as he walked. The feeling was incredibly strong, physical almost. Wanting to see her. No, it was that other feeling, her leaving, pain like a seizure in the chest muscle. He could have said something – Eymen knew about her, of course. But he didn't want any questions, the difficult ones that would surely come, and the uncomfortable silence. They were walking

quickly, obviously keen to have their swim before evening. Was it the first? Had they arrived only today? He remembered so well that moment of anticipation, of revelation, when he had been a visitor too. Meeting the sea, having journeyed the length of the country, or further.

The sun was moving behind the peninsula, firing the trees. Shadows were already pitching over the surface of the water. He remembered her excitement when she'd first seen the water's colour here, borrowing light and the sky's blues, so different from the dull zinc of the North Sea. Like a kingfisher, she'd said, and later, back in England, she'd found a picture to show him in a book. It looked right, a creature of extraordinary blue flame. Ten years, and he never saw one, though he looked for them by the rivers.

He followed them past Ruhi Bey, Mavi, the military station. He nodded to Eren in the kiosk but didn't stop to chat, and Eren held up his hands in mock offence. The women talked as they walked, brushing shoulders occasionally – they seemed like fine travelling companions. He followed at a distance that didn't seem intentional or disrespectful, but still he felt ashamed at the stealth. He could easily have caught up, said her name, presented himself. It's you, my goodness, hello! Enough time had passed, everything forgiven, surely. But he held back, padding after her.

That same sensation, of wanting to hold her. She'd been a restless soul, would often shrug him off. *Küçük ku*. He'd loved teaching her words, little phrases. Sentences were harder, she didn't understand the order of syntax, but then neither had he at first, in reverse. Spiced carrot juice, yoghurt dishes; he'd been irrationally pleased every time she tried them, as if they were connecting. Most of all she'd loved sunflower seeds, the ordinary brand, setting aside the ones with shells too difficult to open. That year with her, he'd gone so many times to the little trade shop, made a show of pulling the packets from his bag.

The women paused, took their bearings, and turned towards Derya. Down the long steps, past the citrus trees, heavy with old fruit. He saw her glance up at the branches. When they'd come together – the three of them, almost a family – it had been late spring and the lemon flowers were blossoming, their zest climbing high, white and sweet. Only half the restaurants had been open, and the sound of hammering had echoed round the town as hotels and boats were repaired. Paradise, half my happiness, he had described it.

He'd been coming since university and wanted to show the place off. Every year, hitchhiking the length of the country, camping, cheap hostels, then hotels; he'd come even when flights from England were expensive and it was hard to get away from work. Wondering who owned the big shuttered houses behind the harbour, with regal-looking pomegranates and vines in their gardens. He'd said even then he would retire here. After the accident, after Ara had left, everything had felt lesser, or greater. The rain. The politics. Regret. Abandonment seemed like a doorway that became a corridor of doorways, easy to pass through. It hadn't taken long to make the decision to sell the business and return.

The women stopped at the parrot's cage, talked to the bird, tried to get it to speak. It was Aslan Bey's pet, the same one they'd seen so many years before. An African grey. It would outlive them all, probably. Their shoes clopped softly on the white stone path as they continued down. In Derya the sunbeds were mostly empty, umbrellas either retracted or flapping gently in the breeze. The music had moved to a mellower set. One or two last bathers were going into the cubicles to get dressed, people were sipping beer at the bar and smoking. They chose a section on the lowest wooden platform, overlooking the breaking waves, laid their towels out on the loungers. He stood one level up, near a pillar, where he could watch discreetly. The

women spoke to the attendant, who did not charge them this late in the day. The attendant lingered, moved one of the parasols a fraction, fussed over the position of their loungers, was flirting, perhaps, then took their order, glancing at him on the way to the bar. He would order a beer if asked.

He leaned on the wooden support and watched them. They were sitting, looking out to sea. She'd taken a book from her tote. It was large, a hardback. She slipped the fastening from her hair and shook it out. For a moment it spilled everywhere, a shining mess. Then she retied it. He remembered one of the many fights he'd heard about. Her father had wanted it cut off, for some stupid reason. He'd tried not to dislike the man; he'd shaken his hand the few times they'd met, and they hardly ever saw him – he worked in a hospital in another town. He had dismissed Catherine when Ara was a baby, and only occasionally made demands. Ara's hair was beautiful. He wondered if her father had prevailed, if she had ever worn it short. Ever dyed it. He wondered how she'd lived, what levels of happiness had been possible. The guilt began to rise.

She took off her sunglasses, set them down on the low table. She turned to the side so he could see her profile. Could he be sure? She was looking towards the island, the vanishing wake of the ferry. He still had a photograph of her, holding the mooring rope of the boat they'd taken out to the sunken city, pretending to pull it ashore. Her big hat shadowing the sweet curve of her nose. He'd transferred it from phone to phone, between laptops. The attendant came back with an order of coffee, elaborate silver cups, dusty sweets on a wooden plate, the full works, not how it was usually served here. It seemed to be the friend he was interested in most, though he was being polite to both, refusing the payment offered. Good, he thought, leave her alone. He could feel his phone vibrating in his trouser pocket. It stopped, then after a moment vibrated again. Eymen. He ignored it. Truly, he did feel doglike, stalking, as if hungry for scraps. Just go to her, he thought.

He stepped forward, put his hand on the railing. She took a sip of coffee, another, admired the cup and set it down. She stood. She pulled a bathing suit from her bag and said something to the friend, who nodded, collecting hers. They skirted the rows of sunbeds and went into a cubicle together. A minute later they emerged, laughing. She had on a dark-red suit, a colour that was unexpected. Her skin looked paler against it, lunar. They stowed their dresses and shoes under the loungers. Her limbs were long, her body compact, the hemlines of the bathing suit sat demurely, while her friend wore a green bikini that revealed more, and was full-figured, what he'd always thought of as his type. The friend clapped her hands together. They laughed again and went down to the diving platform and the sea ladders, dropping out of view.

He moved forward, took the steps down to the next level. He caught the look of the attendant, who was removing the coffee cups. He shook his head, cut the air with his hand, and the young man retreated. Her book was lying on its cover, the pages flicking in the wind. When he looked over, she was facing his way and his stomach lurched. Her eyes slid away almost immediately. She turned to face the water. The waves were moderate. The roped buoys of the swimming lane lifted and lowered. They were trying to decide whether to climb down the ladders, jump or dive, he imagined. Six feet of air in between was not insignificant; Derya always divided the cautious from the brave. How had she done it before?

The friend pointed. The head of a turtle had breached, just beyond the cordon. There was a green-grey shadow where its shell sat under the surface. A few biters had been around recently. Eymen had been got on the calf, quite an impressive welt, a red half-moon and a round of precautionary antibiotics. This could give him reason; he might warn her. But still he did not move. The beaky head popped up and down a few times and then the turtle disappeared. The women turned to each other. They kissed briefly on the lips. Then they kissed again, longer. Ara brought her hand gently to the other woman's face. It was an unmistakable gesture. Intimate, sexual.

Maybe he wasn't surprised. In the years of life that really mattered, men had failed her. Kindness was one thing; he knew he'd always been kind. Love flooding the right chambers: that was undeniable. But those questions, of definition, roles, commitment – those questions demanded everything. What had he given? This was ego, of course; he was indulging himself. You were born with attractions. Her mother had said something once, hinted. It had been here, fooling with coffee grounds and fortunes on the Lycian tour, while Ara was talking to an older girl on the boat. His reading, he remembered, had been indistinct – roads. In the bottom of Catherine's cup – a small black storm, grains shaping a car.

He was beginning to feel cold, though the sun still had strength. It would not really be cold until November. The two women were about to dive and he was thinking of the North Sea, the time he'd swum in it, the almost electrical shock as a wave broke over his back, shingle pouring up his shins as the sea retreated, then stumbling over, flailing rigidly in the water. Even the salt had tasted different, denser, caustic in the eyes and nose. Here, he could swim for hours. The heat reached to the bone. But he was cold, as if this was the season of another country, as if he was opening the door on that autumn night, to the hard wind and rain, the news. If he'd had longer, maybe, or if he and Catherine had married, he could have made a decision that would have mattered in the end. Maybe he could have run with Ara. But everything had happened out of order, too fast, and the lines, no, the law, had been made clear to him.

He found himself half-kneeling, half-sitting on a lounge, an awkward position he did not understand, couldn't adjust. The friend, the lover, jumped. She tucked her legs in and neatened her splash. After a moment underwater she reappeared, face to the sky, her hair slicked back. It's warm, come in! Ara waited a moment, then she dived, cutting the water vertically, like a dropped knife. It was an incredibly graceful movement; so adult. She was gone, deeply, barely any foam. Ten seconds, fifteen – long enough that he felt a flurry of panic. She surfaced. Her girlfriend said something, seemed impressed, perhaps it was the first time she'd seen that. They swam round each other, floated on their backs, then swam out to the cordon, resting their arms along the rope.

Fearless. Adept. Is this who she had become? He wanted to know everything, every detail. What she liked to eat, what she had studied, if she had studied – she must have, she'd been clever – the music she listened to, whether sadly or dancing. Which moment had she realised what death meant, and who had comforted her, brought her water when she was sick. Whether she had taken her driving test, whether she hated cars. Could she sing, paint, did she believe in a god? Did she remember him? He wanted to open her bag and rifle through it for clues. Or just sit and wait for her to come back, try to embrace her, say he was sorry. And tell her, though perhaps it was unspeakable, and she must already know, that she looked like Catherine.

It was impossible. He couldn't go to her. He didn't exist any more. She could easily have found him, if she'd wanted to, if she'd come to this town as anything other than a tourist. Reunion was easy these days, even after so much time. And she didn't exist either, not this grown version. What existed was the first perpetual story – a girl, four years old, who had, sometimes, to his discomfort and pleasure, called him *Baba*. The smell of apples in her shampooed hair as she kissed him goodnight. Her little plimsolls on the station platform, walking away from him and towards her father, not understanding this wasn't just a visit with a man she hardly knew, a stranger, who now had every right to keep her. As she'd mounted the train she had suddenly begun to cry and struggle, realising something was wrong, and she'd been lifted aboard quickly and disappeared. Before going to the station, he had tried to explain about the accident, the weather, how people sometimes ended, but she hadn't understood. I can still see Mummy tomorrow? He had tucked things into her bag, snacks, her favourite soft toy, and written an address, though she couldn't read yet. Her father

he'd taken by the collar, pushing him hard up against the train. He'd said nothing, nothing meaningful. Just a few words in his first language the man couldn't understand. And then he'd walked away.

What surprised him most was how quickly Catherine had become the past. Like posting a key back through a letterbox. Like turning out the bedroom light. Shock, and hurt, yes. But the wound of lovers lost was seldom fatal – he understood. Ara, though, was alive, and gone, and his love remained unspent. Work – God, how he had worked after. Almost to the point of empire, almost to the point of collapse. He was single, successful, still had occasional girlfriends, a house on the road near the ancient theatre, an orchard with wild splitting fruit; he was a man who'd conquered England, they said, even if they teased him about his habits. He'd never married, never settled. But his life had not felt childless.

The currents must be warm out there – the women showed no signs of swimming back, even though the light was fading. The attendant was by the bar, having a cigarette. The evening prayer would start soon over the loudspeaker. Eymen would be fuming. Most likely, he had left the café and gone into the han, to play backgammon with Kenan. He stood stiffly and jogged back up the beach steps. Aslan Bey, the owner of Derya, was feeding the parrot. He greeted him but did not stop. One exceptional, rude day after 20 years of courtesy; surely that was allowed?

At the top of the steps he turned towards town and ran along the street until he got to the kiosk. Eren's youngest son had taken over for the night, a low-lidded boy who spent too long making the right change. He scanned the stocks, bought a cheap packet. He ran back down the road to Derya, passed Aslan again and the attendant; they must have thought him mad, and perhaps he was. He moved through the loungers, to the edge of the lower platform. The sea was sapphiric, empty. They were coming dripping up the steps from the shower. There was no time to hide. He moved to the side to let them pass. Pardon, he said. He looked at her. She glanced at him, thanked him, and smiled. Her eyes were exactly Ara's. *Küçük ku*: he almost said it. He stood still, waiting, feeling as hard and exposed as the tombs along the hillside.

The women passed by, collected their towels and dresses, and went to the cubicle, leaving dark wet footprints on the walkways. He made sure the door was shut and moved to their loungers. Someone – the attendant, probably – had turned her book over to stop it from spoiling, marking a page that the wind had chosen with a paper napkin. The title was complicated. There was a diagram of a man on the cover, and the organs inside the chest were visible. A medical journal of some kind. Perhaps she was a doctor, like her father. The thought did not make him unhappy. He lifted the book and placed the sunflower seeds underneath, then turned and walked quickly back up the steps and away from Derya. They were the ordinary brand, unshelled, so her fingers wouldn't struggle.

Sarah Hall's new story collection, "Sudden Traveller", will be published by Faber & Faber in November