La Pirueta
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Reader:
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This is the story of a Guatemalan – called Eduardo, like the author – who goes in search of a Serbian pianist by the name of Milan Rakic. Since their first meeting Milan has been sending Eduardo regular postcards, and suddenly they stop arriving, and Eduardo is moved to try and track him down and find out what's happened to him. It's a novel about music, as much as anything else, and about the world of the gypsies in Serbia (Milan's father was a gypsy, his mother a Serb).

It's a short book – under 150 pages – broken into four sections, the first very short (just a few pages) and getting progressively longer.

In part I we learn that Eduardo hasn't heard from this 'Milan' for a while, and he has decided to go and find him. He's had a lot of postcards from him, but recently they stopped arriving, so he decides to travel from Guatemala to Serbia in search of his lost friend. Why he decides to go is not clear, really, to us or to him.

In part II we learn about Eduardo's girlfriend, Lia, and about how they first met Milan at a cultural festival in Guatemala where he had come to perform. Eduardo shares with Milan a love of Theolonius Monk – he's a big jazz fan (in a past life, he thinks, he must have been an old black jazz pianist in the American deep south – or possibly a hooker there who used to hear jazz a lot…). His real love, though, is gypsy music – indeed, he'd give up classical music altogether, if he could. We learn in this section, too, about Eduardo and Lia's love-making, and the way when it is over she always sits down with her almond-coloured notebook and draws the orgasm, or orgasms, she has just had.

The majority of part III is made up of Milan's postcards to Eduardo (his 'Eduardito'), sent to him in Guatemala from around the world, always with no return address. They don't usually tell stories of his travels but little bits of gypsy lore, the origins of the music, etc. Sometimes they are entirely wordless and Eduardo struggles to decipher their hidden significance.

Though the book is about the quest for Milan, Eduardo doesn't actually leave till part IV.

So he goes – he arrives in snowy Belgrade and is met at the airport by the friend of an acquaintance from back home, who helps him to settle into a flat and sets him on his trail with some pieces of useful advice.

There is a lot of snow, there's a kid on the street playing an accordion, there's a friend-of-a-friend called Slobodan who will help him out with his search (even though he – like everyone else – gives every impression of hating the gypsies) in exchange for something – though it's not quite clear as yet

what this is…

Slobodan takes him to a gypsy camp, introduces him to Petar, who in exchange for money will track down this Milan (if he really does exist). They sit around the camp and exchange stories (translated first from Romany to Serbian, then Serbian to English, English to Spanish) and drink Turkish coffee. Eduardo thinks they all rather remind him of Latin Americans.

(Back at his friends', he hears the story of the woman who lives next-door who beats a wet cloth against a chopping board, to sound like she's tenderising a piece of meat – so that her neighbours think she can still afford meat…)

That night Eduardo ends up in a neighbourhood called Gardo, following a tip-off. After dodging a group of neo-Nazis he finds two men who lead him through the night – the snow, streetlamps, breath visible – all very atmospheric – to a rusty door which they enter, but from which he is barred admission. When he finally remembers the Romany word for 'earthquake' and is allowed in – is it a party? is it brothel? – he hears piano music, and follows it upstairs, where he finds…

No, he doesn't find Milan. This book is beautifully done. It's slight, and subtle, and a fine piece of writing, and the structure and framing of it are unusual and effective. What Halfon is doing is not an easy thing to do; for one thing (among other challenges), neither music nor sex are easy to write about well, and he manages both (though he does it sort of aslant, often not quite writing about them, but there they are all over the story nonetheless…); and the whole is very simple and precise in tone – very readable prose, with surprisingly little dialogue (what little there is, is almost hidden, just slipped discreetly between commas); elegant, unusual, sometimes witty.