

## SILENT SIGNS

*Olga Zilberbourg*

### 1.

My sister Zoe, a travel writer, had just returned to New York City from Tel-Aviv or Riga or St. Petersburg when somebody told her I had three months left to live. The news struck Zoe as rather odd: nobody at the headquarters of the travel publishing firm where we both work could trace the source of this information or venture a guess as to the cause of my impending death, and Zoe is not the one to believe uncorroborated rumors. She brushed the idea aside, and proceeded doing business as usual: finished her report on the latest adventure, ordered new custom luggage from *Signe Mou* on Fifth Avenue, and went out for lunch with her boss, our chief editor Karen Everest. Karen is Zoe's boss only nominally; in fact, Zoe herself hired and trained Karen during her own brief stint as the chief at Kongo-Roo. The job kept her stationed in New York for several months at a time—it was the longest period of time Zoe had spent in one place since college, and she almost single-handedly caused the demise of this 100-year old organization driving everybody crazy with her constant flow of ideas for radical change. It was she who opened our surprisingly successful West Coast office (hiring me as a technical editor), and immediately attempted to do the same in China and Ireland, I think. When those ventures almost bankrupted the company, Zoe announced that she was a travel writer at heart and turned her position over to Karen. They say that after two and a half years of tenure my sister's office had remained a bare white-walled room without a single picture or personal item.

The counter-revolution enjoyed far more success than the attempted revolution, and ever since peace has been reinstated, the wisened office staff does everything possible to insure that Zoe is not in the office longer than is absolutely necessary to approve the final edits to her columns, process the paperwork, and receive an expense check. A week or two after receiving the news about my upcoming death, Zoe departed on her next trip to Patagonia or Tasmania or South Africa where she spent about two months of extensively researching and personally exploring the local art markets. A brilliant writer and more recently an art critic, Zoe insists on learning at least the basics of all the dialects within her itinerary; she is fluent in four languages, reads a dozen more, and can effectively negotiate with almost anyone on the planet. When she finally returned to New York armed with finds, enriched with stories, and suffering from an olfactory hallucination causing her to perceive the odor of coffee in everything from office supplies to recently printed gallery brochures, everybody from the



**UNTITLED (INSPIRED BY SILENT SIGNS)**

*Gay Degani*

30<sup>th</sup> to 35<sup>th</sup> floors was feverishly discussing the advance of my terminal condition. It was widely believed that I was in a very bad shape, yet nobody dared to contact me directly or made any attempts to inquire about my health and spirits. They were waiting for a sign from Zoe about the appropriate course of action. Zoe was unintimidated even when she realized that her next business trip was going to take her to San Francisco: my current residence and her hometown that she left shortly after college more than twelve years prior. Of course, she had no intentions of seeing me.

Zoe had another lunch meeting with Karen Everest during which she dropped a hint or two questioning the necessity of her presence in San Francisco, but straw-haired Karen is one of those perfectly amiable people who survive in this world by projecting their value system onto others. Karen believed so strongly that Zoe's first goal in life would be to reconnect with her dying sister that she completely failed to understand the true meaning of those leading statements. Zoe simply shrugged her shoulders: she'd be able to avoid me as effectively in San Francisco as anywhere else. Within two days, the 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> floors collaborated on a card—*Dear Agnes, Get Well Despite All Odds*, surrounded by flowery signatures of 42 employees and three interns. The 32<sup>nd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> floors purchased a medium-sized wooden statue of what they thought was a Kenyan god of longevity but in fact was a Fish God. The 35<sup>th</sup> floor generated a check for my daughter Liza's college tuition. All of this was packaged in somber colored paper and handed to Zoe (they barely caught her as she was entering the elevator). Deciding to dispose of it all upon arrival, she stuffed the packages, including the bulky statue, in her brand new *Signe Mou* trunk and boarded the plane. Upon landing, the luggage encased in beige leather and bearing two name tags—one on the outside, one on the inside—was strangely missing. When the matter became known, the West Coast people blamed it on the fake longevity god. The East Coast people cancelled the check and sent another one by mail.

Uniformly bad omens accompanied Zoe on her cross-country trip. She was unable to sleep and a Harry Potter or a Narnia novel she had brought along was missing the last three pages. A couple occupying the window and the middle seat of her row spent every moment of the six hour flight investigating the contents of each other's mouth with their tongues. The position of involuntary voyeur caused Zoe slight discomfort by limiting her view to straight-ahead and into the aisle; the shock, however, awaited her upon disembarkation when it turned out that the woman and the man were both adulterers. The scene unfolded by the side of the barren baggage carousel, where he and she were pulled apart by their respective and equally unsuspecting significant others. The parting glances that the maladroit lovers managed to exchange amidst welcoming hugs and kisses from wife on one side and husband and children on the other side of the

moving platform flooded Zoe's heart with memories of the lover from her past. She was overcome with longing for companionship (male, 30-50, athletic figure, likes to fish, good sense of humor) and a desire to get out of the airport as quickly as possible.

Lean, mean, and baggage-free, she took the subway to her downtown hotel. All through the ride she absent-mindedly fingered a large brass key tucked into the inside pocket of her jacket, but it's a customary gesture for her and didn't bring to mind the house on top of Telegraph Hill. Still, the good-faith fairies must've put up a united front against her, because she missed her stop and instead of the safe haven of her hotel room ended up directly by the Bay. As I understand, it was mid-afternoon on a sunny spring day. The water sparkled invitingly. There were dozens of sails littering the view on both sides of the Golden Gate Bridge. Supposedly, Zoe couldn't resist. She had been a sailor and a surfer since before I was born, and even though she no longer practiced the life aquatic, she became immediately overwhelmed by the sight of this particular body of water. A more down to earth conjecture is that it was a beautiful afternoon and she had nothing to do. So when she accidentally ended up at the Bay, Zoe decided to use the time for pleasure and went down to the boating marina and cajoled her way on a yacht.

Meantime, an email from Karen taught me to expect Zoe—despite all odds, despite the fact that she hadn't spoken to me or returned my phone calls or email in three years after a particularly lovely time we shared together in Hawaii. So at first I sat by the living room window of our old house, and then, when Liza came home from school, and my hope started to give out, I went outside and looked for her on the streets of the city, the parks and alleys, cafés and bars that we hung around as children and young adults. I also knew this to be a part of Zoe's routine: every time she arrives to a new place, she starts crisscrossing it in all directions; "making a mental map," she calls it. Somewhere along the way she picks up an actual map of the city and traces her route on paper. Sometimes she takes pictures of random street corners and lampposts and "you are here" sign-maps, secretly believing in her own genius of photographing the mundane. As I roamed the city streets that night, I kept picturing what she would look like with a camera on a string around her neck, obsessively documenting everything from Victorian façades to Jesus Fish bumper stickers. Soon it got dark, but I continued walking through the night, combing the neighborhood from the Marina all the way down to the Mission.

I came home just before sunrise to find Liza asleep in her bed. She must've waited up for me, because she was still fully dressed, a desk lamp shining brightly directly on her forehead. I turned off the lamp, covered her with a blanket and went downstairs to sit in my favorite chair by the



window again. I could see the outlines of the city hills shaping down below in the early morning dusk and I kept imagining Zoe lost somewhere there. There, where it was still night, she wandered into Chinatown, and submitting to her tourist lot, shrugged her shoulders and bought a hot and greasy sesame seed ball from the bakery we used to frequent as children. She ate it sitting on the bench at a bus stop and wagging her feet in the air. Following this brief repose, she continued her directionless trek and—completely lost, purely by chance—walked by the apartment building where we lived when we were very young and the tree in the park on which she could still read our names. She walked by the primary school that grew even more decrepit with age. She walked past my house and saw Liza’s bike parked in the driveway. She still had absolutely no intentions of announcing herself to us.

I have examined and reexamined every moment we spent together on the island of Kauai in Hawaii three years ago to figure out what might have offended or upset her, but the details are simply slipping away from my memory. In any case, right now, I have bigger fish than my sister to worry about. I heard from Liza’s grandmother that my ex-husband Wash has been bitten by a shark while surfing in Santa Cruz almost three

months ago. Supposedly, the shark mutilated three of his limbs and most of the vital internal organs. He was taken to the local hospital and was doing better for a while, talking to Liza on the phone. We even planned a weekend outing so Liza could see him, but they needed to operate on his pelvic area, and that was more than he could handle. Yesterday, his mother called to say that he passed away on the operating table.

She was crying on the phone, and all I could do was offer my help in organizing the funeral that's been scheduled for this Sunday morning, when Liza and I were going to go down there anyway. There are at least three other exes to contact that I know about. In any case, between funeral planning and trying to somehow mitigate Liza's very vocal grieving, I don't really have any more time to spy on my crazy sister and obsess about her heartlessness. Liza thinks I should send her an email to let her know about the funeral. It seems unlikely to touch her, since even the news of my own imminent death did not elicit any response from her, but I'm tired trying to second guess her actions. I'll send her the same invitation as everybody else and let her deal with it as best she can. Perhaps despite her aversion to the past, she'll find it in her heart to send flowers to Wash's grave. They tell me that when people ask her about me, she does respond with "Agnes? I hope she's doing well."

I just wish I could stop thinking of her as a ghost walking past my house: thin, greasy hair, blank eyes moving from window to window but not seeing anything. She walks without pause and does not turn around, does not even slow her pace. Just one glance up—one look would make me shudder. No matter how hard she tried to erase us from existence, we're still here, and her presence in San Francisco is a sign of acknowledgement.

## 2.

Three years ago—no, four, because all the planning had been done a year ahead—Zoe paid for a Hawaii vacation for her brother-in-law Wash and her sister Agnes in honor of their 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary and Wash's first show at a major gallery. She coordinated schedules, purchased the airplane tickets for the two of them, and rented a cottage on one of the most popular surfing beaches. Zoe arranged for their daughter Liza to stay with her grandmother for the duration. She even called the resort manager and asked her to treat the guests as newlyweds, with chocolate on the pillows, fresh flowers on the table, and towels formed into cute animals. She thought of everything.

It so happened that at the time Zoe herself was working on a series of extensive articles about the islands. During her brother and sister's vacation on Kauai she would be staying at a lodge on another part of the island, at some distance from the vacationing couple, yet close enough to be available for a visit or two via a scenic beachside drive. It was clear

to all parties involved that Zoe had attempted to recreate—with an upgrade to the comfort and style—the circumstances when they all just met: she and Wash surfing, the three of them hanging out and making bonfires out of discarded wood and garbage on the drab and foggy Ocean Beach.

Unfortunately, two months prior to scheduled vacation, Wash received a series of scathing reviews for his first solo show at a downtown gallery, and subsequently ended up in court-prescribed rehab due to a drunk driving violation. A month prior to scheduled vacation, Agnes packed up her and Liza's things and moved back into her parents' house. Life was moving ahead at a very fast pace, and Agnes felt like she could definitely use a vacation.

The sisters met three days after Agnes got to Kauai. They had (the three of them, Wash included) dinner reservations at a kind of burger joint that takes reservations six months ahead.

"Where's Wash?" Zoe asked when she found Agnes waiting for her at the booth, alone.

"We're getting divorced," Agnes replied.

Zoe was on the verge of laughing in her face, when she saw Liza hiding behind Agnes's back.

"I thought this could be a good chance for you and Liza to get to know each other better," Agnes offered.

Zoe glanced at Liza and averted her eyes.

"When did this happen?" she asked, clearing her voice.

"I filed on Friday, and hopefully he's going to sign before we come back." Zoe listened while Agnes recounted the events of the preceding weeks. Liza sat between the sisters, for the first time in her life actually wondering who indeed was her mother. She couldn't figure out which of the two she liked more. Agnes was bigger and softer of the two, while Zoe was smaller and edgier. Zoe's words came fast but distinctly articulated, every one of them was a shard of glass directed at her sister's heart, and Agnes deflected the attacks by becoming as malleable as a marshmallow and overcompensating with good will and general sense of well being. There was a tone of apology in Agnes's words, as if her separation from Wash was a personal attack against Zoe. Both sisters avoided looking directly at Liza, although once in a while Agnes would put her arm around the girl's shoulders. Liza perceived almost as much mystery in the reasons why Zoe wanted to have nothing to do with her as in the fact that Agnes tried so hard to become everything to her. She also noticed that at the end, Zoe still refused to understand the gravity of the situation.

"I'm sure we can still reschedule Wash's flight," she offered. "There's no reason he should miss this trip. All you need is just to schedule some time to be together. You've always told me how you never get enough time to be alone, just the two of you."

"Zoe, listen to me! He's still in rehab, and this is his second time

around, and I don't want to stick around to see what happens the third. I'm done."

"He must've cheated on you," concluded Zoe tightening her lips.

Agnes shrugged her shoulders. At the time, Liza thought that the gesture meant "I don't really want to talk about this." Later at night, as she was lying on the sofa in their cabin, staring in the darkness and listening to the sound of the waves and crickets outside, she realized that it also meant "Of course, he did" and "No use in being angry at me." It was her father's gesture, she thought, remembering his sun-bleached hair and eyes reddish from sand or alcohol. Missing him had become so customary to Liza in the last few weeks, that she knew exactly what to think of next: his voice, his shoulders, his hands, and his surfboards that were gone, all of them, completely gone from their stands in their garage. She cried herself to sleep.

For Zoe, that dinner was the end of their long-coveted Hawaii vacation. She left her fish taco untouched, and later in the week she actually called Wash's mother who corroborated Agnes's story in major details and dictated the number of the hospital. Zoe considered calling the rehab to find out if he needed anything, but then decided it would be more seemly to track Wash down after he'd finished his treatment. Agnes, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed her burger bundled with rice and Taro root, while Liza ordered a French vanilla milkshake for dessert, and the two of them made plans to go on a hike with Zoe the very next day and a visit to the spa on the following. Zoe had to work, but her sister offered to cook for her and Liza one of these days—and did, twice, after which they drank mai tai's on the beach and talked about . . . well, anything but Wash.

### 3.

San Francisco is a city for young people. The steep, crooked streets take a toll on the heart, while intoxicating flowers that line and shadow them deplete the breathable air. I was young here once, and it was the center of the world for me then. Returning here now seems to pile the weight of the years on top of my shoulders. The ocean breeze does me no good: my back aches, my eyes water. Not a single familiar face, not one beloved face waits for me here. Alas, I've got a job to do. Even as I arrive to the city, my life seems to fall in the tracks of a realized metaphor as the airline loses my brand-new *Signe Mou* suitcase.

I was invited here to write about the opening of the New Art Museum and to anticipate the effect of its presence on the local scene. It's an important gig, so important that even knowing my contentious relationship with this city, Kongo-Roo's chief editor Karen had no choice but to buy me airfare. I had tickets to attend the opening gala and scheduled

interviews with the museum curator and with several gallery operators downtown, as well as in the East Bay and Peninsula. A freak mid-spring ice storm in Arizona that delayed the shipment of the central piece for the central hall of the museum ruined this week of art appreciation for me. Of course, I would still go on to have the scheduled lunches with the gallery people, but all conversations these days begin and end with climate change. Instead of the new museum, the local art community is abuzz with finding the new ways of fighting global warming and getting their voice heard across the continental divide. First and foremost, I get my turn to make an unsolicited recommendation to the curator of the New Art Museum, Mr. Semblant. Since the gala opening had to be postponed due to the storm, I suggest that he takes this chance to rethink the bulky central hall installation of ferrous metal and get on board with the movement by purchasing a whole bunch of green art from the local talent. I know at least one man's work he could use. He needs to think about it, he says.

We're sitting in a rooftop restaurant with the view of the Bay, the two bridges, and all seven hills. The place is quieting down after lunch. Remaining customers are peeling oranges and sipping their coffee, discussing business deals in hushed voices and taking cell-phone pictures of each other. Mr. Semblant, a handsome man with broad shoulders, takes a glass of port and offers me a cigar. I am tempted to accept even though I don't smoke: I am attracted to him, at least insofar as he reminds me of another. I let him smoke in peace and drift off to the street. There is a key in my pocket, a large brass key with two very quaint sets of teeth side by side, like a shark's. A key that opens a single door of one house in San Francisco. This is what makes me feel like I own the city. I've been fighting off this illusion the whole week, and I'm beat. I've had a glass or two of wine and my mind is slightly clouded over. I search and cannot find the reason why it was so important for me to forget about this key, to don the innocent eyes of a tourist, to pretend I was just passing through. I slide my fingertips along the rugged edging, a customary gesture of frustration and anticipation. Once upon a time, the key provided protection; today it's an empty symbol of lost hope, of hope that I must lose. I wonder if I am ever going to be able to come to terms with the idea that there's no reward for all the suffering and hardship that awaits me down the road. I am ensnared by the lore of all the traveling people; perhaps, I am no different than the others who have traversed the world to find that what they were looking for was hiding in their own backyard.

I make my way to the hilltop house by way of crooked streets washed with cherry blossoms. Here's the school, there's the bakery around the corner. Everybody's doors and windows are open to take in the mid-afternoon sun. Music and laughter streams from all directions, but I climb further and further away from the commercial neighborhood and soon can hear only the heavy sound of my own footsteps. I stop to take a

breath. My back aches.

The house is drowning in rose bushes. The white and pink tea roses are blooming. The living room window is partially open and the tulle is billowing in the wind. There is a bicycle parked in front of the garage. I walk up the front steps and pass through the door. It's cool and dark inside the house; a slight fragrant breeze roams through the rooms between the open windows. I take off my shoes in the hall, and step barefoot on the old Mediterranean tiles lining the floor. I make no noise. I find nobody in the kitchen and the kitchen itself remodeled: new stove, a dishwasher, Subzero fridge with a giant freezer. I go upstairs. The door to my daughter's room is shut, and I don't dare to knock. I wash my face in the bathroom, and then go to my parents' room. Agnes sleeps here now; her clothes are in the closet, her jewelry on my mother's dressing table. There are pictures: of me, of Liza, of our parents, of Agnes when she was a teenager and we just moved into this house. I look for more pictures. The heavy family albums are on the bookshelf downstairs; I find more pictures in Agnes's own desk and inside the dresser; there are several pictures stuck to the fridge and several more, framed, on the coffee table in the living room. I go through them all.

As obsessively as I'm looking for a picture of Wash, my sister has likewise destroyed all the evidence of his existence. Once I've shuffled through the papers in the secret hiding place behind the stairs, there remains no choice but to search Liza's room. I silently enter the room. She's taking a nap in my old bed with a pattern of starfish chiseled in the headrest. I look through her desk, going through locked drawers and diving into diary pages. I work quietly, but still she sleeps uneasily, turning from one side to another and struggling with her blanket. I flip through the pages of her books, one by one, and finally find what I'm looking for between the pages of her sketchpad. There were two pictures: on the first one Wash is on the beach. He's taking off his wet suit, one of his broad shoulders exposed to the blinding sun and his straw-colored hair looking almost white. On the other one—well, it doesn't matter. That's not my Wash. I take the surfing picture and stuff it in my backpack, between the pages of my map.

Mr. Semblant is waiting for me where I left him, at a table of the rooftop restaurant with the excellent view of the city. He has finished both his port wine and his cigar and is now anxious to go.

"Shall I give you a private tour of the galleries?" he offers with exaggerated politeness.

I hesitate. It's still Friday afternoon, and the water in the bay is sparkling in the sunshine. Still I refuse to give in to the inevitable.

"I would like to take this opportunity to rethink the placement of a few pieces, particularly photography. Your outsider's perspective could be invaluable," he adds noticing my hesitation. He's got pale blue eyes and

pink narrow lips. He helps me to put on my jacket, and leads me toward the elevator.

I make a counteroffer, and although he's initially flustered, we end up spending a pleasant afternoon together after all. There are plenty of yachts available for rent in the marina, and Mr. Semblant agrees that such a beautiful day calls for something extraordinary.

#### 4.

Death is a game we play, a game of wordless signs and unanswered feelings. One day it might cease to amuse, but even then it will not lose the force of its impact. Agnes believes meeting death face to face is the ultimate test of one's character, and Zoe holds category of character unimportant and death as integrated into the texture of being. My daughter Liza is still very young and has not been able to get past the terror that paralyzes her thoughts at the mere shadow of death, and I personally prefer to deal with it by refusing to think at all.

Agnes and Zoe were in the middle of the first round of this game in the spring of our first meeting. Their parents had just died, and the two girls were living alone in a mansion at the top of Telegraph Hill. It was an old house meant for a large well-off family, tiled floor in the hall, dining parlor, and in the kitchen, creaky wooden staircase upstairs, four sparsely furnished bedrooms littered with books and left-wing periodicals. Zoe was older and had a degree in journalism. Agnes was younger, and didn't know what to do. They went to the beach a lot and talked about love. Agnes read poetry and Zoe dreamt of far-away places. It wasn't as romantic as it sounds: loneliness led them to loud and abusive fights with each other. More annoyingly, they were short on cash and Zoe was trying to finish school and Agnes was looking for jobs, and they relieved tension by screaming at each other about responsibility and obligations. They ended up at the beach one time when Zoe ran out of the house in tears and Agnes was angry and chased after her and they ran for fifty blocks crying and screaming at each other and then sat on the beach and talked about how they loved each other but couldn't live together.

I've never met two people who were so similar, yet refusing to acknowledge that similarity in each other. Zoe slept with me because she saw me as a libertine and her chance to get away. Agnes slept with me because I was Zoe's friend and she was feeling very lonely after Zoe went away. Both of them wished to get pregnant—strangely believing, in that way, they would be able to resurrect their dead parents within their own bodies. To them, I was a source of nourishment, a way to satisfy their craving for love they lost. They believed that once they had the baby, they wouldn't need me any longer. Except they learned very soon that they had been deceiving themselves, that their desires ran deeper, beyond what

they could comfortably share with each other, and a baby girl could not satisfy them. They argued again, but still could not tear themselves from each other and divide property and possessions. Instead, Zoe went away, and when Agnes wanted her back, she found me again and invited me to share their house. When I agreed, Zoe understood this as a sign of my love for her even as she was on the other side of the continent. In every one of her articles, from the most junior pieces heavily edited by senior staff to the mature award-winning travelogues, she found a way of writing about me or Agnes or Liza. She did a whole series of articles about surfing; she played endlessly with the letters of our names; she endowed the characters of her articles with our body parts—it is amazing how many people around the world are graced with a dark mole to the left of their belly buttons.

No use: she still had to share me with Agnes, Agnes with Liza, all of us with my mother, with the whole world. No matter how far away Zoe traveled, she could not change the circumstances. She could not possess us and she could not get rid of us. And so Zoe was the first one of us to die. One day she simply disappeared—stopped answering messages or phone calls. When nobody at her office could reach her for over two weeks, they contacted the family. We traced Zoe's route, and were surprised to discover that she vanished very near San Francisco: she was on a small yacht that stopped transmitting radio signals right off the coast. We put together a funeral. Liza cried terribly—she had met her famous mother only once and never again. Agnes tried to rededicate herself to our daughter after that, but death had become an obsession with all of us. Agnes achieved it by the power of will and imagination alone; and then I started drifting. I mean literally, I would just lie down on my surfboard and paddle for hours. I'd say that my relationship to death was contemplative: I was constantly aware of its presence. It's a strange way of living one's life, single-mindedly devoted to the idea of death. I can only hope that Liza will grow out of it.

