



a comet appears
jess moleman

A COMET APPEARS

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Jess Moleman

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MARCH ELEVENTH

1.

The young man was sitting at an outside table of a bar at the Plaza de Armas in Tumbes, northern Peru. He sipped his instant coffee. It was March eleventh, around ten in the morning. Not many people were around so the young man took his time to get lost in thoughts. His name was Robbert Codde. Without unnecessary detail about the colour of the sky (stark blue with an occasional stretched cloud), the smell of the air (dusty with hints of decay) and the climate (sweaty sunny still) that is all what needs to be said about the setting. A common one. Think Third World tourism. Think taking photos nobody will enjoy watching. Think flipping through a guidebook to find another destination, a destination worthy to get going again. No place to stay. From across the square, from the side of the decorated stage, another man approached Robbert. He walked straight to the young man and sat down at the same table. All seemed normal. All seemed like this and only this was the proper way to be. Like it was rehearsed. Robbert returned from his thoughts to the real world.

“So we meet again,” the other said as his greeting.

“Do I know you?” Robbert asked.

“You have always known me. Don’t you remember?”

“You look familiar, like I ought to know you.”

“We haven’t spoken in a while.”

“We probably haven’t, if you say so.”

“When was the last time we met? Let me think,” the other said and so he did, eyes up as if inventing the story, rather than remembering. And so did Robbert. He took the last sip of his coffee and observed his

strange guest. The other looked familiar. It is like looking at an old photograph, he thought, one you forgot was ever taken. You know the faces but don't remember the people connected to them, their stories. They were the same age, the two young men, or somewhere close. And the other too is a foreigner, a stranger, a European. More Mediterranean, though, Robbert considered. Spanish or Italian mixed with a northerner like me. Blue eyes and darker hair, this colour called auburn. His skin more tanned, a sharper nose. He ordered another coffee and so did his guest. Then the other said, "Madrid. I think it was Madrid."

"Where we last met?"

"Yes, near the fountains, just before Plaza de Colon."

"I think I now do remember something. But then you have changed."

"And so have you," the other said. "I didn't recognise you, almost. It is good we meet here and not in, say, Oslo, where your looks would not have made you easy to recognise. Your blond hair here is a rarity, as is your pale skin. I was drawn to you like a magnet, you are an easy prey."

Why does he say Oslo? Robbert thought. The mere name of that city made him want to return to his comfortable thoughts of before.

"That has been two years now," the other continued.

"Two years and two months," Robbert said. He tried to focus again.

"So you actually do remember?"

"Now I do remember."

"Good, then now we can catch up a little. Or are you in a hurry?"

Robbert looked at the other. He knows I am in no hurry, he thought. Nobody ends up in Tumbes with a coffee in a hurry.

"There is time," he said.

"Tell me something," the other ordered, "as it already took me two years to catch up with you."

2.

Other voices hovered over the square, remote voices from the streets around them. The wind it pushed them by, this dense moist wind. Lone words or half a sentence; they drifted by on the occasional breeze which lightened the atmosphere. Not conversations, no, barely recognisable as

human sounds. A scream, an encouragement, maybe an extract from a passionate discussion. Voices. Voices belonging to lives belonging to people belonging to families, to stories, hopes, dreams, successes, failures, ideas, plans. Belonging to a world, the world, the world in which we live. The voices, showing that we live, that others live. The sounds, giving a faint hint of life. And every three or four isolated words (or however they are presented) give a snapshot, a snapshot of love, relationships, desires, futures and pasts. Snapshots.

“What do you want to hear?” Robbert asked.

“Everything,” the other said.

“Everything?” Everything is a lot.

“Yes, everything.”

“Alright then, where do you want me to start?”

The other did not say anything for a while, long enough for Robbert to light a cigarette. The other signalled to be invited one. Took one. Then they smoked together. Blue fumes rose slowly in the heavy morning air to mix with the wandering conversations. He interests me, this stranger, even though I hardly remember the last time we exchanged a word, Robbert thought. Or even that we have. Curious, how he does that. I feel like talking to this visitor that I am supposed to know. Is it him or the silence of the last days, weeks, maybe even months? Robbert inhaled deep. And exhaled.

“I remember last time,” the other said. “You were different then, younger, fresher. There was more energy in you. Do you remember? You sat on the boulevard and you were reading. I joined you and like now you didn’t recognise me at first. But after a while came the stories. You were so full of ambition, ideas. I never imagined, back then, to find this boy here today, alone in silent thought. What has happened since that day in Madrid?”

“A lot. I guess a lot has happened. Or nothing,” Robbert replied. A new silence fell. Cigarettes were finished, coffee drunk. A distant bird sang a simple tune. You could see the shadows change as the sun headed to noon.

“*Es que, no sé,*” Robbert said. Suddenly he spoke Spanish. The other didn’t seem to mind.

“Take your time, *no hay prisa,*” replied the other, there’s no rush.

“I guess time is what happened. Time. I was full of energy, but naïve. That I have lost, some of it. I guess that is what people refer to when they mention growing up. The naïve youngster in me is retired, the youngster that told the stories, the ambitions, the ideas in Madrid.”

“Retired or killed?” the other asked. What a question, replaced would have sounded so much more appropriate, but he is not one to choose his words without caution.

“Youngsters don’t retire, do they? They grow up, so in your words I guess mine is killed.”

“Who killed him?”

“Do you mind a cliché?”

“No.”

“Life. Life killed that young man,” Robbert said.

“That’s quite some cliché. What a shame we have to turn to clichés so early in our conversation. These two years since Madrid have brought you more than clichés, I know. This way we start off on the wrong foot. Are you sure this young man is dead? Are you sure your life killed him? Explain your cliché.”

“You ask quite something, this early in the day. Is there no need for small talk? How is the weather? That. To warm our voices and ears before we hit the heavier topics.”

“So there will be heavier topics?” the other asked.

“After a mere five minutes we talk about youth murdered while growing up. At this speed before lunch today we have addressed everything between the Spanish Civil War and the consequences of abortion,” Robbert responded with a hint of desperation in his tone. He was unprepared, had not spoken to people in a while. The other smiled a curious smile.

“And Oslo,” the other said.

“Fuck, yes,” Robbert said, the foul word in Spanish. Spanish is the language chosen for foul words. *Joder*.

“And then, after lunch?”

“We’ll take a walk and forget about it all,” Robbert concluded.

They lit another cigarette. He looked across the Plaza de Armas. The sun, the trees, an occasional Peruvian. This is probably the only nice spot in Tumbes, Robbert realised. Our walk can best be a couple of times

around the square. This is no place to live. But of all places, I have chosen this one to find myself again. Maybe because there is nothing to distract me, apart from the occasional *chola* who joins me as I drink my late night beer. But they are not out for paid loving or a week of presents before they leave you empty-handed and with some kind of disease. They are nice company. Light. Not like him, the other. But maybe that is what I need more. And this place doesn't annoy me like some of these other insignificant villages all over the world. Still, to live and to die here as people actually do. I don't know, I think people have to move. The old men here, however, and the old women have been away. There has been a war here. They have seen war. So many people have seen war. Where my thoughts go, Robbert then thought. His cigarette was smoking itself. The other looked at him and at nothing in particular. *No hay prisa*. Break the silence.

"We have a lot to talk about, it seems," Robbert said.

"Like always. There are still stories in you. Maybe the youngster isn't dead, not dead at all," the other replied.

"Maybe not."

"And there are still stories in the living you."

"I guess there are."

"Are you ready to tell some of them?"

Robbert doubted, looked once more at all the details of the square. "Yes," he then said, certain of his words. "Do you know where you want me to start? Oslo? As you keep repeating that city."

"If you like, start with Oslo."

3.

Robbert lit another cigarette. Smoking, he knew from experience, can be a most useful habit. Whenever in need for a little bit of respite before answering, a cigarette wins you the time. After one deep drag, he swiped his blond hair from his front and then he started,

"Back in Madrid, only a few days after we spoke, I met Malin. I probably told you about her, as I had already met her before. But a few days later I really met her, I really got to know her, so to say. She was a blonde haired girl, tall, about as tall as me. Beautiful because of the faint hint

of well-developed sexuality that surrounded her. Her aura of soft and naked flesh, of opportunity. She was Scandinavian, Norwegian. Easy-going, nice. Good company. You can imagine her, I suppose.”

The other nodded.

“Do you remember the weather we had back then? It was sunny, pleasant. More than once I walked through the streets in only a T-shirt. And jeans, of course. But it could rain as well. And we, Malin and I, we got along just fine. We thought about friendship and other illusions. Most of our spare time we spent in each other’s company. We walked through La Latina together. At night, we looked for a restaurant to have dinner. Often we danced until the early hours. And then this one day there was rain and we were homebound. Homebound in my home, my little rented apartment. That night there was a bottle of rum and my iPod with nice music and the rain slamming against the windows. And then there was no more rum and soon no more clothes and a moment of weakness encouraged by flesh and a morning in which we before anything saw each other. So long for the innocence of our relationship.

But that was Madrid. Two weeks later, I left for Peru. In my back pocket, on the airport, was a little note with her phone number. In our short term memory there was love made, so often, on a bottle of rum and some simple desires. But then came Peru. And it took six months and a world of experiences before I was back on European soil. There I remembered her number. Early October and eight months after our goodbyes we decided to meet. That became Oslo.”

Robbert looked at the other. I have left things out of the story, he thought. And he knows. The things unsaid made more noise than those I dared to mention. The other nodded, slowly. “Continue,” he seemed to say. A three-second breeze tickled the leaves above their heads. Robbert listened, he continued,

“It was the first time I moved up north and Norway made a good first impression. I met Malin at the central bus station and I told her that. She seemed happy to see me.

—Right, she said, —and what exactly have you seen? The airport and a transit bus. Don’t be silly.

—Forget about it, I said, —I like your country so far.

—It’s good to see you again.

—Those could have been my words. You look good.

—Right, you flirt. So how are you doing? Tell me everything, she ordered me, much like you just did.

—I guess we have enough time to talk about everything, what about a drink first?

It had been eight months since we last had last seen each other, but what are eight months when you have some ten days to kill and only a handful of nights as the foundation for this adventure? To be honest, for me it was quite a challenge. The first minutes went alright, though. And it was good to speak some high quality English again.

—You want to go into a bar or do you prefer to have a drink at home? she asked. Her home sounded tempting.

—I'd love to live the nightlife of this city, but I say it's up to you.

—There will be time for nightlife. Let us go home and catch up instead.

And we walked the fifteen minutes to her house, mostly chatting about the obvious. You know this feeling when everything seems to come together? Well, these fifteen minutes I felt like that. Oslo is wonderful at night, nothing like Lima or Madrid or Amsterdam. And I felt I fitted there. And Malin obviously fitted there. She was stylish, in a short skirt with boots and many accessories. I had brought a bottle of whisky to be friends and I also carried a bottle of champagne in my backpack because that felt like a good thing to do and it was because we popped open the bottle and talked and sat down on her bed and then everything went like back in Madrid. I remembered Malin as an easy-going girl, positive, with a bright look on life's difficulties. For Malin, as far as I knew, there were no difficulties. For Malin there were only things that she had not worked out yet.

—So did you meet anyone special in these eight months? she asked me, on her bed, in her apartment. And I knew there was no need for a lie.

—Well, I have a girlfriend now, a real one, I said.

—That must be difficult, but wonderful too. A beautiful girl, I suppose.

—I do think she is rather good-looking, yes. What about you?

—I met millions of special people, but in this sense only one. A guy

from New Zealand, Malin told me.

—Are you together, like boyfriend girlfriend? I asked her. Strange enough I felt as if something had been taken away.

—Well, in a way we are and at the same time not. He's back down for a while.

—So, we are in the same situation, with thousands of kilometres between our lovers and us.

—We are in the same situation, with hours of flight to our partners. And she unbuttoned my shirt. —And we are in the same bed. And nobody is watching us here. And I took off her necklace.

—Would you cheat on him? I asked her.

—Would you cheat on her? she responded.

And we put the glasses away and dimmed the lights and I knew I was still attracted to her. Blue eyes, blonde hair and model-like shapes. I remember how proud I felt to walk next to her in Madrid, especially when there were others I could show my good fortune. Something similar to a pimp, or a famous sportsman, or simply a damn lucky guy who is easy on the women and got lucky with one of the most beautiful of them. On beauty, Malin was by far the most conventional girl I dated the last years; the kind of girl you have in mind when you are fourteen and recently discover your sexuality. The kind of girl you picture when you are masturbating. Maybe, because she's the kind of girl most standard porn movies are shot with. Not my type, on the outside, but no sane person can let go of a chance like her. And on the inside we were alike, although alike is way more relative when you meet too many strangers. If you know nothing about cars, two black ones might seem pretty much the same and if one of them is a Maserati, you are stupid not to drive it. And that is how I felt about Malin and that is the way I felt attracted to her.

And she said, —It is only natural and you know how I love it.

And I said, —I've seen first-hand how you love it.

—And I still love it, she said that night in Oslo. And we took off each other's clothes and as it felt stupid to be naked without a proper kiss, like prostitution. I tried but she hushed me. Let's do it dirty. Put your tongue to better uses. And I couldn't help a little laugh and she laughed and no magic was broken as this was hunger and in hunger there is no

magic, only greed. We got greedy alright and we didn't satisfy ourselves until we saw the sun coming up through her bedroom windows. Not that this means that late as the sun has a different rhythm up there.

And, —I missed this, I said.

—And me? Did you miss me? she asked.

—You are this and that I missed.

—You're a very nice boy.

—You're a very nice girl.

—Now be a good boy and strengthen up as I don't think we will be leaving this room tomorrow. *And we did not.* We first kissed over delivery pizza and there something went wrong, looking back. But Oslo made a good first impression and so did Malin, again. And I felt proud to lie there in her soft and clean and big bed with white and red sheets and her tender body all mine just for a couple of hours. I bit her ear and fell asleep.”

And now see what he has to say, Robbert thought. But there was only silence from the other, as if to digest the story. Only for a while, but long enough to be silence. And then the other said,

“Shall we order a beer? What you still need to tell might ask for some alcohol. And I think it's still too early for whisky.”

4.

Another woman brought them their beers. The one who had brought them their coffees had taken a seat in the shade of the bar. The new waitress was no woman, no, a girl still, far from grown-up. Maybe seventeen, although that's hard to say in these regions. At first the sun makes women look younger and then it turns them old overnight. Robbert and the other looked at her with mixed interest. The girl threw a timid glance at Robbert and a curious one at the other. She promised good things, as do so many young women.

“So you did go to Peru?” the other asked.

“I did.”

“Good. Good to hear,” the other then said. It sounded like he wanted to close the subject. They lit cigarettes. The other asked the girl who brought the beers to buy a package for him. Then he continued, “So this

is coming back? This isn't the first time you are here. There is a reason you choose Tumbes, of all places, to let me catch up with you."

It didn't sound like a question, Robbert thought. What he said was no question. It was a conclusion. And it was a correct conclusion.

"I have been here before. I have been here once. Here in Tumbes, I mean. On this terrace, even. On this square. Maybe, I even ordered a coffee with the girl who just brought our beers."

"When was this?"

"Some two years ago. Less."

Once again a silence fell. He has a nasty way of making me talk, tell it all. And Robbert remembered the last time they met in Madrid more clearly now. We played the same game. We talked the same way. I talked; the other listened and asked with as little words as possible just enough to hear me out. I did not mind, then. I had almost finished university. I thought I understood the world. Everything. I didn't know how much everything really is. The world, I thought, was mine. And I had loved to talk about this world and about how to make this world a better place. For all and most of all for myself. The other's ears were more than welcome. How things change. That was, now, long ago. It feels longer, still. Time is a strange thing. Robbert remembered the last time they talked and the January sun that shone through the leaves on the Castellana. He remembered the smell of the city. Madrid. The dirt and the exhaust gases and the stale beer in bars and the refreshing rain and the noise. The endless noise. And the life. The girls. The alcohol. His first experience with cocaine. And his second. And then first countless Spanish girls, Erasmus students, daughters of tourists. Some days he felt all he ate was fresh girls' presence and their thick tongues and the world was so easy and he understood it all. And the day he left. Malin at the airport, a little note with her number in his hand. No tears, no hard feelings. That would change. And in between this strange encounter with the other. How often had they almost met since? Or met? And how?

The other interrupted his thoughts. "Why were you here this first time?"

“I had been in Lima for about three months,” Robbert started. “My visa was about to expire so I had to get out of the country. But that was not the only motive. On the black market in the old city centre you can get a stamp and the required papers for a couple of dollars. Less than the price of a bus ticket to the border, even if you take the cheapest line. And I had met enough people who could help me with that, people who could solve everything. I had been in the hot and dirty city for three months and I truly had to get away. You know this feeling when a place gets too small? Lima got too small, with its millions and endless neighbourhoods and relentless pollution.

There were the days that became more of the same. More parties, more new friends. More cocaine, more alcohol. More fancy dinners that I forgot the second I walked out of the restaurant door. More breakfasts with take-away pizza. It simply became too much. And then there was this thing with Vanessa——”

“Vanessa. Another name,” the other said. And he continued, with a suspicious tone in his voice, “You have had a lot of girls in the last two years.”

“You should have seen my cell phone back then; the thing was filled with the numbers of girls for one night. Vanessa was another one of them, started as another one of them. That, as well, had become too much. If you read my diary from these weeks, you will think you’re in a cheap porn movie. Naked bodies surrogated a story. And I had stopped using condoms for some time already; it was just too much trouble. I worried like crazy over diseases and AIDS and becoming a father but I could not put myself to using protection. And the girls didn’t ask for it. And they didn’t use any protection themselves. I mean, against babies. For all I know I have kids walking around somewhere from these three months.

My head was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I think I smoked about two packages a day, on the quieter days. And on top of that, Lima’s nine-month winter began. The days turned grey. Sometimes it was cold, not more than fifteen degrees, especially at the university where I worked.

And my work, too, didn't work out the way I wanted it to. With all the other distractions, I couldn't focus. I hardly worked and when I did, I spent most of the day drinking coffee and smoking.

And then one night I found myself in La Victoria, Lima's most dodgy neighbourhood. I was drunk. I was coked out of my mind. A taxi driver had dropped me off there. I lost my credit card and some dollars that night, and something more: The last remaining bit of innocence, or naivety, or, whatever. And I had my first experience with firearms. The next day I collapsed in a shopping mall. I lay on the ground for at least fifteen minutes and then security carried me out. This was, in its very specific way, my limit. Almost too lost to understand these hints I realised I had to go. I had to get out of there.

The next day I bought a bus ticket up north. I had to get out of the city, out of the country. Ecuador, Columbia, Brazil. I didn't really care. My first stop was Tumbes."

Robbert thought back to this first time. I hated this place. I hated it from the very first second I got off the bus. It was in everything the opposite of what I left behind. He looked at the other. Another story that had raised more questions than it had answered, he knew. The other would ask about them all, as he had done in Madrid. But do I have all the answers this time?

The other said, "And did you find what you were looking for? Did you find the break you needed in Tumbes?"

"There was sun, it was quiet. I spent three days here. Exactly here, in this bar. It was... I should say it was okay."

"Okay?"

"I had time to think. This place is so incredibly boring. There isn't much more to do than to think things over."

"And that's why you are here this time?"

"I guess I don't have to answer that," Robbert said. The other handed him a cigarette.

"But did you find what you were looking for, that first time?" the other asked again.

"To be honest, maybe I don't know what I was looking for," he said.

"Time to reflect?"

"Maybe only some time to get sober again."

Robbert inhaled deep. Cold turkey on life. But I was addicted to that life. I am, still. Within a week everything was back to normal. Habits have gravity. Pleasure has. The break from them merely made me realise how much I loved what I was doing, the same way a break from smoking makes you realise how nice it is to smoke. One week of peace and quiet and then the gravity field of my previous life pulled me back in. Pleasure is a bitch, stronger than cocaine. There is no way out. Pleasure is a whore, always spreading her legs for more. A delicious whore. Walk away and she will draw you back to her side, whether you want it or not. *Fuck*. In a low voice he said,

“I don’t think I found what I was looking for.”

6.

It turned noon but apart from the angles of shade’s shapes, not much changed on the Plaza de Armas in Tumbes. Still hot, still moist, still quiet. The two young men drank their beer. When they finished them, they ordered new ones from the young waitress. And Robbert asked for the menu. Then he said,

“What do you know about me?”

“What do you mean?” the other answered.

“I mean, you seem to know quite something. You seem to know more about me than I thought. You ask these questions; they’re exactly the right ones.”

“I know what you told me, in Madrid. And I ask the obvious questions. Wouldn’t you ask the same?” the other asked.

“Yes, I think, or, I would probably. I usually ask the questions, these questions. But then, you knew about Oslo. What else do you know?”

Robbert was curious. What he does, I can too, and probably better. To control a conversation. To let others talk. To get to know exactly what you need to know and always a little bit more than the other wants to give away.

“What do you know about me?” he repeated.

“Alright, as you ask,” the other said. “We have known each other all our lives. Or, I have known you. You seem to forget about me all the time. Like when I came over here or when I sat down next to you in

Madrid. But we have met, with intervals, all our lives. Over the time, maybe ten times.

Of course, the first years I don't really remember. We were too young to form memories. We were inseparable. But then we were separated. Destiny and the way it had to be, I guess. So we started meeting. What I know about you is what you have told me. And what I ask is what I don't know about you, but know that happened. I know, just like you, what to ask to get the answer for what I want to know or need to know."

The girl came back with two fresh beers and took the orders. Ceviche for the two of them. They were the only customers, although it was lunch hour.

"So, what do you know about me?" Robbert asked. And he added, almost as an apology, "I'm just curious, that's all."

"I know that two years ago we met in Madrid. You had almost finished university and were full of ideas. Ideas about this world. You were almost a qualified economist, but you told me a voice in your head whispered there had to be more, more than numbers and profit and percentages. That there had to be more was something you had told me almost every time we met. This time, however, you were going to figure out what more there was. You planned a voluntary internship in a development country. To improve your chances in the world of big money and good ambitions, you said. To see the reality of the world you were sure to influence, you said. You were ambitious, very ambitious.

We talked about politics a lot, in Madrid. You had become a liberal. A real free market would solve everything, you said. If everybody took responsibility the world would be better, you said. Full freedom combined with true responsibility was the key. Madrid is a city well suited to talk about politics, as it has truly known many different political ideologies. And you had studied the city's history. The consequences of socialism, fascism, liberalism, monarchy and the influence of republics are clearly visible in the city's history and people. It inspired you, strengthened your opinions.

But you had also changed. You had discovered girls. I mean, really discovered them. I know you've always been fond of our female counterparts and their different way of being, but now it were their bodies that fascinated you. That is why I mentioned Oslo. From how you talked

about Malin, I knew you would end up in bed with her. And knowing you I knew you weren't into real one-night stands back then. You felt something for this girl; you would visit her afterwards. And it's no rocket science to know someone like you would find someone to love here, in warm and passionate Latin America. One and one are two so visiting Malin again meant cheating.

And I know the girl you found to love is Vanessa. *Don't look surprised!* It is in your eyes. It was in your eyes when you said her name. And you are here again because of her. And she has changed you. And as change in you never comes alone, she has turned your world upside down. She brought doubt to your old world, renewed your world. So I guess you're here to find your way in your new world."

Robbert listened with the increasing realisation that, *Yes!* these weren't discoveries he was trying to hide. The other could easily have seen them in his eyes, in his behaviour, in the mere fact they were in Tumbes. No, this was no rocket science, but still awkward to hear, said aloud. He remained silent for a long time.

7.

The young waitress brought them their food. The plates were well filled. With Ceviche, Robbert noticed once again, they always serve you more than you expect and the plate empties faster as well. Strange food, but there's nothing better. The girl tried to make small talk. She seemed to have opened an extra button of her blouse. The young men had a good view of her promise. She smiled. Maybe, Robbert thought. It might be good.

"What are they like?" the other asked, "the Peruvian women."

"You mean like this one?" Robbert pointed with his head to the young waitress who had poorly hidden inside.

"Yes. And not only in bed, but all of it. How is it to be with one?"

"Heaven and hell," Robbert answered resolutely, happy to have left the previous truth behind them. Then he took a piece of the raw fish. "I can tell you a story, if you like," he continued, his mouth full, "but don't eat all the Ceviche." It was the first light-hearted thing he had said to the other. And not even really light. Friendship, for what that

is, was still far away.

“Peruvian women, you ask. How it is to be with one. That one, for instance. One night in Lima, before Tumbes still, I went to do some homework in a bar in Calle de Pizzas. Studying Spanish or recalculating some numbers, I don’t remember. I ordered a bottle of beer, opened my books and did some exercises. After about half an hour Tobias joined me. He was my flatmate, my only European friend in Lima. A Norwegian. We drank beer together and I studied. Not much later two girls passed by our table to give us a flyer.

—What is it for? I asked.

—A tattoo shop down the road, the smaller of the two said. And as proof of their story, the two of them sported a collection of tattoos and piercings on their petite bodies. She, the smaller one, wore pants shorter than my boxers and the other one regular jeans. Both wore the single-colour tight tops that are easy and without personality.

—Is it your shop? I asked.

—No, it’s from a friend of ours.

—Okay. And I lit a cigarette. Then I asked them, —Do you want to sit down and have a drink with us?

There was some doubt and giggling and then the small one came to sit next to me and the regular jeans one next to Tobias and we poured them drinks and talked a little about tattoos and art and other stuff that pops up in your head in situations like this. I noticed how the small one had a tattoo half hidden under her mini pants so I asked her what it resembled. And she showed me a dragon or something that closely resembled a dragon but was no dragon.

—What more do you have on your body? I asked her.

—I have a piercing in my nipple, she said.

—That must have hurt.

—No, it’s okay.

—Do you like it?

—It’s beautiful.

And to convince me she pulled up her top to show me her little breast on which she had a piercing. I noticed she was very young. And it surprised me. Back then, things still surprised me. So I said, —Don’t you feel weird to show me that?

—No, it's art, it should be seen, she said.
—But it's in your nipple.
—But it is art.
—It's in your nipple.
—It's art.
—Do you show your art to everybody?
—I show it to you.
—But isn't it for special people only?
And she said, —You are special.
—Do you have more art that is special on your body?
—Yes, here.
She pointed to the centre of her mini pants.
—Do you show that to everybody as well? I asked her.
—No, but I will show it to you.

Then we finished our drinks and flagged down a taxi to go home. The girls were already divided and I was already excited and I sat shotgun. At home, I got a bottle of whisky and two glasses and took the small girl with the dragon tattoo and the nipple piercing to my room. We sat on my bed and drank whisky and listened to music. Then she took off her top and I took of her mini pants and her panties. Where normally hair grows she has a tattoo; a heart, a little bit to the right. I kissed the heart and a little more and we did some other things and then we fell asleep.

The next morning I woke up with a kiss on my chest. —Good morning, she said, —I have to go.

—Good morning.
—You are special, she said again.
—I'm not.
—You are special. Do you want me to—— And she pointed at my lower body and smiled suspiciously.
—No, thank you.
—But that way you will remember me, at least today.
—I will always remember you, I lied. (Well, I didn't but you know what I mean.)
—You will not.
—Leave your phone number.
—It's on the note on the table next to your bed.

—Thanks.

And then she left. I closed my eyes again and did myself what she wanted to do for me. I picked up my phone and called her.

—I will not forget you, I told her.

—You will, she said.

—I will call you later.

But I would never see her again.

Then I got up and put on the water for coffee. In the shower I could see my white, untattooed and unpierced body. I made two coffees and walked into Tobias's room. His girl was still there but now she did not wear regular jeans because she was naked and she didn't hide herself under the blankets or even with her hands and she smiled and I tried not to look at her.

—I brought you coffee, I said to Tobias.

—You're a hero, he said.

—Was she any good? I asked about his girl, in English.

—No, but I will try her again after this coffee.

Then I lit a cigarette and the girl bummed one and that gave me the chance to take a good look at her body. She looked old with all the wrinkles sleep had given her light brown skin. Her tattoos looked like bruises in the dim light, but she was sexy in a way, smoking a cigarette completely naked. We finished our coffees in silence.

When I left the room to go to work the other girl got up to give me one kiss. The decent goodbyes kiss in Peru. But it was not decent, because she was naked. She put the top of her finger in my mouth, smiled and then put it between her legs. Tobias grinned and I watched her turn around and get back into bed. Her behind was shaped rather well, but I had severe doubts about her inside. And that is what I think about Peruvian women, now. They make love like it's the last time in their life and they love it. They tease and make you feel the luckiest man alive. They're dirty and friendly and up for everything. But you cannot live with them. Not more than one night. They are, sorry for the words, untrustworthy sluts.”

Robbert filled his fork with Ceviche and chewed well. The other was clearly amused by the story. Robbert saw his eyes look for the young waitress. Will he think she is the same? Well, probably she is.

“You cannot live with them, but still you travel the world for Vanessa,” the other then said.

“She was different. Vanessa in relation to her peers was like chalk and cheese. She was worth travelling for.”

8.

“Two years ago today was a Saturday. I was still new to the city, had only spent little over a month there. Lima’s impressive contrasts between rich and poor still struck me. During the day I pretended to work for the poor, at night I lived like the rich. This particular Saturday was no exception. No exception at all. And Tobias and I did what we had done almost every night since the first Thursday we hung out together in the busy alleys of Lima’s nightlife. We drank a bottle of whisky at home, played pool and listened music. Then we headed to Miraflores and played some hands of poker. Around one, we went to a club. I had never been there before but we were to meet some girls we vaguely knew so that didn’t really matter. Before we entered, we talked about the possibility to take all four of them home. I suppose we were drunk. No, I am sure we were drunk.

Inside we continued with gin tonics. And we did some coke to stay awake. The girls, well, were acceptable. If you are new to this country every girl looks like a princess. Their black hair, their black eyes. Their firm bodies and their nice smiles. And with a bit of persuasion they all want to. One of them was a little fat so we talked about only taking the three slim ones home. And then I saw her.

She was there, dancing with a friend whom I later learnt to know as Lola. Not too far away. The two girls looked at me. I looked at them, trying to decide which should be the one to approach. Imagine every girl is beautiful and yet there were two who were from another world. There was something around them, a vibe, a radiant light of beauty and innocence in the dirty way. They appeared like sisters, although they didn’t look like each other. Vanessa and Lola. Damn, they were hot.

From the coke and alcohol and something deep inside telling me they were special birds I gathered some guts to walk over. Maybe three steps were all it took, that close had coincidence already brought us. A step at

a time, being pushed by other visitors, and all that was left were three. Not much but a big step for even the coked me. I said Hi to none of the two in particular, then flipped a coin in my head and choose Vanessa. She said Hi. We had a three-minute How-Are-You talk. Lola went to the toilet and we danced together. Vanessa was the most beautiful little thing I had ever seen in my life. She was all positive energy and youth and dreams and everything I could wish for in one meter and sixty centimetres of nicely curved flesh. *Her eyes!* Her eyes looked at me in a way eyes had never looked at me before and we danced and then the DJ played the song that would become our song and her eyes shouted Joy. A lost feeling of insecurity came over me. With my entire drunk and drugged self, I fell head over heels in love. I didn't know what to do; awaited something, anything, to break the spell. Closer and closer, we danced. I put my hand on her hip and the touch alone felt better than the nicest things I had touched so far. Muscled and full of movement, the comfortable way of warm and sweaty. Our noses less than a hand apart we danced the entire song. And then, finally, we kissed.

Within an hour we were in my bed. No, well, maybe that's not true, but it didn't take long. And we made love as if I had never made love before. I felt like at last I really lost my virginity. Every piece of clothing I took off resembled the most pleasant action thinkable. It was like unpacking a long awaited gift and being surprised by its actual beauty. I couldn't even do the things I used to do. Her body, once naked, was not meant to be used for joy. It was meant to be worshipped. Never before I kissed a girl so much and so intense on a first night. And when I woke up the next morning she was still there and she was still beautiful (something that isn't always true). So we exchanged phone numbers and I messaged her and I knew I could love this girl. I would give it all away if I could only be with her."

Robbert had been telling enthusiastically, repeatedly spitting along with his words and waving his hands. His eyes as if somewhere in his head wonderful pictures accompanied his account. The Ceviche on his plate hadn't changed position. The other smiled. And he knew this was not the only positive story to tell, but maybe the best. And then his eyes focused on the raw fish, the onions. In one night we have lived our entire relationship, Robbert thought. All the months that followed had

the same plot. It was like a preview, like the cover text of a novel. He looked at the other and continued, now in a small voice, "That night I called her, but the line was dead. I tried it again the next day. No change. I tried it every day until the next Friday, but the line stayed dead. Then I gave up. And I hated her. For the very first time I hated her."

9.

The young waitress was waiting for them to finish their food, for Robbert to finish his food. The other had finished a long time ago. The beers were finished too. Robbert pushed his plate away.

"Let's take a coffee, I'm not hungry anymore," he said.

The other smiled. Friendly. "You are still full of stories." And then, "But your stories are different. They are not about your dreams; they are about your life. Instead of forward, they look back."

"Maybe some of my dreams have been replaced by real life, real experiences."

"Yes. Let's take a coffee."

The other waved to the girl and ordered two coffees. When she walked inside, they lit cigarettes and leaned back in the plastic chairs.

"So, why are you here?" Robbert asked the other.

"We needed to talk again."

"You travelled the world to talk?"

"And you travelled the world to reflect."

"I have travelled for lesser reasons."

"I know."

"Why do we need to talk?" Robbert asked, taking a deep and long drag from his cigarette.

"Because sometimes the two of us have things between us that need to be spoken out. Because sometimes there is a need to get on one line again, you and I."

"You mean that sometimes we need to reflect together?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Why?"

Now the other inhaled the smoke deeply and for a long time. It was a way to pause the conversation. When he blew the now grey smoke out,

he continued, "Because we do more than meet. Our lives are entwined. We are one and the same and the complete opposite at the same time. When you succeed, I fail. And when I succeed, you fail. And I've been having a blast the last couple of months. That was about time, after this months-long time of being the underdog, after Madrid. But it means you're staggering. And that's good, for a while. But we need to stay on track, both of us. Because we are the same, although we're the complete opposite. And if you lose yourself, I am lost. And if you lose me, you are lost. It's a trap and alone I can't escape.

Robbert did not know what to say.

The other said, "I'm here to keep you on track. I am here to make you okay again. I am here to help myself through you. That's why we need to talk."

"That's not exactly what I expected to hear," Robbert said sarcastically. "I think you make something simple complex."

"Not really," replied the other, "it is simple, certainly. It's called friendship, the brotherhood type."

Robbert had nothing to say to this. Neither did he know what to think, so he did not think. There was a silence and then there was coffee and a smile from the waitress and more silence and pouring hot water on instant coffee powder and stirring with a spoon and the wind brought the sunny sounds of salsa played somewhere near the Plaza de Armas. He drank his coffee and burnt his mouth.

"Damned," Robbert shouted. "Damned, *god fucking damned.*"

"Sorry," the other replied.

"No, I am sorry. I, I don't know."

"There is no need to know. Believe."

"What you tell me is hard to believe. It means——" What does it mean? Robbert thought. "It means. *Come on!* What does it mean?"

"It means we'll be here for a while, my friend," the other said.

"Until?"

"Until we are one and the same again. And the complete opposite. Until we're balanced."

"Balanced," Robbert repeated. He tasted the word between his lips. Now he drank the coffee without burning his tongue. The caffeine on an almost empty stomach made him nervous. He should have eaten more Ceviche. "Are you real?"

“I am as real as you are.”

“Are you as real as this table? Are you as real as the coffee?”

“I am as real as anything you see. The trees, the little stage, the waitress. I am as real as you.”

“If you succeed when I fail, why don’t you enjoy your successes?”

“Because I need you to go on, so you can fail a long life long,” the other said.

“Then you’re here only to help yourself!” Robbert cried.

“And to help you, because without you there is no me. Not the me I am,” the other responded, quietly.

The salsa sounds drifted by again. Still there was an occasional breeze to pick up the sounds and bring them to the two young men. But the wind didn’t bring refreshing air. No refreshing thoughts. It had become even hotter, more humid. Denser. This wasn’t the best time of the day. This wasn’t the best time of the year. And this isn’t the best time I’ve been having in my life, Robbert said to himself. This is nothing. Why am I here and why is he here? Now I know. He told me. But how can I believe such a story? *How!*

“Has it always been like this?” Robbert asked.

“In a way. We meet when one of us endangers our balance, himself, when we call for each other. Like now. Like when we met in Madrid. And the times before.”

“But in Madrid I was happy. I remember being rather happy. I was balanced!” Robbert cried, in unbelief.

“One alone cannot be balanced and definitely you weren’t. You were happy. But you were not balanced. Do you remember our discussions? Do you remember that what weren’t your dreams? Do you?”

“No. I don’t. And I don’t believe you.”

“I will tell you. But first let’s finish our coffee and take a little walk. A little exercise will do us good. It will help to take some tension away.”

The other called the waitress and paid. He paid for everything. And he tipped. He tipped well. The young girl shone with happiness. The other promised to come back later that day. The young girl shone even more and promised some things herself. Things that involved much more primitive emotions than the vague discussion the two men had but that go equally smoother induced by alcohol. Then they got up.

From the Plaza de Armas they walked to the old boulevard with the fountains without water, the cheap Chinese restaurants, the street vendors, the dust and dirt and sadness of Tumbes. The sun didn't help in the city of endless summer. This decline was used to the light that makes other godforsaken places look a little bit better.

"What do you believe in?" the other asked.

"Right now," Robbert said, looking at the things around him, "right now not that fucking much."

"You used to believe in a lot."

"I never believed much. I'm an agnostic thinker. I believe in what I see and understand. And right now I don't understand all that much."

"And all you told me in Madrid? Your dreams, your ambitions. You believed in them."

"Those were naïve dreams."

"You're young to be so bitter, to be so cynical. You're young to have lost your beliefs, your faith," the other said.

Another tourist tried to take a picture unspoiled by the two wandering men. They sat down on a Gaudian-style bench to allow some space for the memory to be made. Robbert watched the tourist, an elderly man. Then he dug up his cigarettes from his pocket and lit two, handing one to the other. He said,

"Men aren't supposed to be as old as we are now. If I had been born a hundred years ago, I would have lost more than only my beliefs at this age. I would have died on the battlefields of the Great War or fighting either communists or fascists in Spain. Men aren't supposed to reach our age. Only the losers and the leaders are. And I am no leader. Men are supposed to reproduce young and then die. And if they cannot reproduce, they are still meant to die, no excuses. That way our species survive. I'm a danger for not being dead and I have a responsibility for not having died."

"Do you believe that?" the other asked.

"Yes."

"So you do believe in something."

"I guess."

“What is your responsibility?”

“Good question,” Robbert said. “I don’t know.”

“Try,” the other ordered.

The tourist had finished his photo or had given up and scampered away. They had the boulevard to themselves. All that was left were some people trying to sell lighters and candy.

“Sometimes I feel like Johnny Depp,” he said. “Johnny Depp in Fear and Loathing Las Vegas, this scene where he tries to hit these imaginary flies in the car. It’s better not to be too close to me when I feel like that. My body produces its own cocaine. In these moments I feel strong and proud and my mind doesn’t work a hundred percent okay. And I feel closely connected to the history of my people. The rich white highly educated Europeans. Once we were called Aryans but I don’t mean only them from these couple of years. And I maybe feel proud of how they contributed to history. They made me a slave-trader, a mass-murderer, a conqueror by birth. Blond hair, blue eyes. A leader of the people. A chosen one. Me, I, heir to such a rich tradition.

And I don’t agree with what they did. But in these moments I feel special for being part of that legacy. The legacy, and my blond hair and blue eyes, my being European, it gives me an assignment in life. It is like being born from a murderous father. I will have to live my life to undo their actions. Not to undo, rather to compensate. To make sure my people are not the evil of history. To use what we have to make this world a better place. Because what I have——

I don’t think white Europeans are the most suitable leaders, but the world still treats us as if we are. I can do whatever I want because I am one. And I have done so, but not in a good way. I have abused it as my people have done in the past. And that I didn’t die in one of the wars we started, makes me responsible for using my privilege to better this world. But I don’t. I only make it worse, as a truthful heir.

And when my body produces its own cocaine, when I feel like Johnny Depp, I know I am more the mass-murderer than the person who betters this world. I am the loser, the follower, the one susceptible to drugs and alcohol and short-lived pleasure. Not the leader who makes changes. So I should have been dead. I should have climbed out of the trenches on July the first of 1915 and have been shot. I should have woken up some-

where in 1935 in the Republican zone of Spain and be hanged.”

“So you think you would have been a fascist?” the other asked, curiously.

“A fascist, a nationalist, whatever. Long enough I have thought I would be on the good side. Of course, we all think that. But that is because history has shown us who the good ones were. Back then, would I have known? No. And I know that I am not the only one. So many people say *never again* and that they never would have supported the regimes that caused so much misery but why then does it still happen every day? Because we cause it. We, the same people. We allow Israel to massacre innocent Palestinians. We allow AIDS to cleanse Africa. We allow our governments to be formed by people out to purify our population. We allow farmers to be owned by corporations. We allow peace soldiers to rape young girls. We allow wars to start more often than they end. We allow everything. And nobody does a thing. They shout *Quiet!* when I question Israel’s politics and they look away when our soldiers bomb a country in the Middle East. If you don’t stand up against that, if you don’t try to compensate our wrongdoings, you’re just as much part of the problem.

And I tried to stand up. I tried to make a change. But all I did in the end was sleep with girls and use cocaine and drink too much whisky and do nothing at all. I’m just as much part of the problem as part of the solution. I am the problem!”

Robbert had almost been screaming near the end. His face had turned red. Once again, little drops of spit accompanied his words. The other didn’t say a thing. Nothing happened. Slowly rest returned in Robbert. I have gone too far, he thought, too far, too soon. I have never said these words before. Never like this.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t know,” he said.

“Don’t be. This is why I am here. And you still believe in a lot, I see. Anger. Anger is uncontrolled beliefs. Anger is frustration because things don’t work out. Anger is fear you might lose something valuable. Anger means you care. I’m happy you finally let your emotions go.”

“Still, this is too much.”

“No. This is good. Remember we need to balance again. And to balance us, we need to balance you. And to balance you we need to get your

emotions out, layer after layer. Love, fear, anger, sadness, all of them. Because if we can get them all out you can construct new emotions. Positive ones. So, unleash your emotions. Layer after layer.

And remember what I said about being unbalanced in Madrid. You were. Everything was beautiful and nice and you knew it all. What you lacked was a frame of reference. The frame of reference you just gave me? I don't know, but you missed connection with reality. I came to give you one, but it turns out you were more than able to find one yourself. Now we need to find the balance between dreams and reality, between illusions and truth. To find the balance in you to balance us. I see we are making progress.”

11.

Nobody, not even a lost Peruvian, joined the two young men on the boulevard. It was dirty hot on the burning bench where the two were sitting. He hit me, he hit me straight in the face, Robbert thought. He hit me with his questions. He hit me with his comments. He hit me, *he hit me*. And he knows me. And he makes me get to know me better. And I don't know if I want to know me. I don't know if want to face my emotions. What is hidden is hidden for a reason. What is hidden should stay hidden. And he hit me. And I cannot hide. I cannot hide. Minutes passed by, then Robbert started,

“The first Saturday I was back in Holland after Peru I decided to do it all differently. I met up with a friend for drinks in Amsterdam. We ended up in a quite hip place, this type of place you never know about whether it's there only for the gays. My friend told me about her life and I told her about mine and we talked about love and not being there and how much we liked each other and we had fun.

Behind my friend, facing me, was a girl so pleasing to the eye I could not help but throw an occasional glance at her. She noticed. She sat at the bar with a friend, another girl. Not that she was my type. It was the kind of girl that is beautiful without sexuality. She could make a good friend and in my life back then there was place for some fresh friends. So when it was my turn to get us new cocktails I made sure to order them near her. Who knows?

—Hi, she said.

And I said, —Hi.

—How are you? I asked.

—Having a good time, and you? was her response.

—Catching up with a friend and letting my eye get caught, I said what I admit was somewhat cheesy, so she said,

—I know what you're about to ask, so don't hesitate to.

—That's funny, that you know. Usually I'm the one who can read other people's minds.

—Then I think you just met an equal. Is that your girlfriend? She pointed at my friend. A normal friend.

—No, or, I don't like to say no that definite. She is a good friend and someone I like to hang out with.

I wasn't really paying attention to the barman but he was doing so with me, I noticed from the corners of my eyes.

—Time to drop the question, darling, or move on, she said. Darling is, in Dutch even more, a dirty diminutive and she gave the word with her pronunciation exactly the correct feel. *Schatje*.

—Can I offer you a drink? I asked with a double question mark.

—It's not that easy, you know.

—It's never that easy.

—Let it go. I will get my own.

And, —Whatever, I said. And I placed my order and took the drinks and sat down with my friend again and she gave me this look that asked a question I couldn't answer. But eye contact remained and when my friend went to get our last round and her friend was at the toilet and we were facing each other with nothing in between I couldn't help but get up and walk over to her again.

—So, what is the question? I asked.

—Is that you pick-up line? she replied.

—I am not picking up anyone tonight.

—Neither am I.

—Then that's settled. Now, what am I going to ask you?

—That depends.

—On what?

—On what kind of boy you are.

—I'm the direct type. I ask whatever I need to know.
—Then the question should be "aren't you this one girl?"
—So I should know you?
—It looks like you don't.
—I don't. Should I?
—No, but boys who stare at me as you did, they usually know me.
—Which means that you're famous?
—Not a whole lot of people know my name, if that what you call famous.
—How do people recognise you then?
—Well, they might have seen me in a magazine or on the internet.
—*Can't you just be straight with me?* It looks like you're playing miss important but I simply think you look okay and have this nice aura around you and that's what I wanted to tell you. Nothing like did it hurt to fall from heaven and stuff. I don't need that.
—I guess I was wrong about you.
—I guess you were.
The whole conversation started to annoy me.
—So I guess you're a model and I should have seen you in a magazine or whatever but *unfortunately* I haven't exactly spent a lot of time looking at the ads in Dutch fashion magazines lately, so sorry that I didn't come over to ask you an autograph.
She pissed me off and I wanted to walk away.
—Meet me outside in half an hour, she said.
And I was perplexed but curious as you can imagine. After our drinks I went out to put my friend in a taxi and on moving out the girl put up two fingers as in two minutes so after I closed the door of the taxi I lit a cigarette and waited. She came out alone.
—Let's start over again, she started.
—Alright, I said, —Hi, how are you?
—Hi, I'm fine, she said, —thank you. And you?
—Fine as well.
And we laughed for the absurdity of the situation and our terrible role-play.
—What do you do? I asked her.
—I'm a model, she told me.

—Wow, a model. What kind of model?

—And there we go, she said. She picked up my hand and played with it. I let her. And there I guess our later friendship started. Exactly there, on a street in Amsterdam on a Saturday night and she looked so nice and friendly without a hint of sexuality even with her short skirt and she laughed again and so did I and the pause before her next words was where our friendship started.

—I am sorry. I thought you recognised me. Men, boys sometimes do. Quite often actually. But they don't like that and usually they don't come over. But I think you don't have an idea, she said.

—I really don't have an idea.

—I know. We wouldn't have been here if you had known.

—You're making me curious.

—That's part of the fun.

—Ruin the fun.

—I'm a model in the entertainment business.

—Alright? I asked.

—As in, I take off my clothes and make love and people make photos and videos when I am at it and I earn a good amount of money while doing so.

—A porn actress? I asked.

—I don't like that term, but that's roughly it.

And I ask you, would you judge your friends if they turned out to be working in the entertainment business? I said, —So men come over because they have masturbated with your help?

—There you go.

—Well, I'm sorry but I don't think I've ever seen you before.

And after a break I added, —I am usually more into the Latin girls and not that much in the ones I have in my own country.

She laughed.

—You're ruining my income! she said.

—I will Google you tomorrow, don't worry. And if I like what you have to offer, I promise I will buy a DVD or something.

And we were laughing again. Then she looked me straight in the eyes.

—Would you like to have a drink in my place? she asked.

—Okay, I said. And off we went.

In the last two years I've met quite some extraordinary people and even more normal people with extraordinary lives. It is easy to close your eyes and walk past the murderers, the soldiers, the coke dealers and the prostitutes. It is easy to ignore the fundamentalists, the corrupt police officers, the beggars living in the streets. But they still exist. They are a part of this world as much as you and I are. I don't go out to meet them, but somehow I attract them. I have learnt valuable lessons from these people, about the value of another man's life, for instance, or that it is sometimes wise to lose a good hand with poker when you know the guy on the other end of the table carries a gun. And I had never met a porn actress before. And I certainly wasn't asked to come home with one."

Some street dogs ran by. They didn't pay attention to the young men talking. The one talking, the other listening. Their dirty rotting tails told Robbert to take a little break and then go on.

"Her apartment was at walking distance or at least we walked to her apartment. That was good. I like cities at night. Everything is a little more beautiful, a little more pure. And you don't see the dirt and dust that well. You will see that Tumbes is better at night too. On our way we passed an adult video shop. She took my hand and dragged me inside. It was the first time in my life I entered such a place and I didn't really feel comfortable.

The girl went looking for something specific (and even asked the shopkeeper about this) and I grabbed a DVD from one of the shelves to make me look more at home. Something with pregnant women. Then she showed me a DVD.

—I don't know that one, I said, —is it any good?

I tried to act secure.

—I should say yes because look—— She pointed at one of the seven girls on the cover dressed only in panties, —this is me.

The girl in the photo pressed her breasts together and didn't look at all like the girl standing next to me.

—Debby Double? I asked about the name under the photo.

—It sells.

—But I guess you're not Debby Double?

—I am, when I'm working.

—What's your real name?

—Sofia.

—I like the real one better.

—But it doesn't sell, she said.

The shopkeeper was looking at Sofia who for him probably was Debby. I looked at the DVD again.

—I have this one at home, she said with a smile, —in case you want to watch it. And she looked at the DVD I was holding. I apologized. She said, —Don't worry, I have seen things far more dirty. There's something for everybody.

And I felt guilty and a bit stupid for making a wrong impression. We went out again. Her apartment was small but very nicely decorated. Stylish. All the furniture and equipment were high quality stuff and I felt at home immediately. She prepared two drinks and we sat down on her big soft white bed. She put on some music. I felt good.

—How did Sofia become Debby? I asked her.

—The usual, she said. I had no idea about what the usual could be so I asked her to elaborate. She explained, —When I was eighteen a friend knew a way for me to make some easy money. As every eighteen year old, I needed more cash so I was interested. He took some pictures and there it started. I got addicted to the money and the attention. Every time I wore lesser clothes in the pictures. The steps from decent photography to dirty porn were small, natural. Before I turned nineteen, there was little I had not done for money.

—You started when you were eighteen?

—A girl's body is worth most at that age.

—Please, I shouted. Although I *of course* also like young girls' bodies, it is confronting to hear it said aloud by someone who I already liked as much as Sofia.

—Don't be angry about that. I made a lot of money doing something I really love. You have watched porn as well. Do you think these girls were much older?

—I am sorry.

—You are a man, you cannot help it.

—But——

—Let's change the subject okay, she interrupted me

—Okay, I said relieved.

And we talked about our lives and how different they were but the same as well and I told her about Vanessa and she told me about how there was no one in her life.

—But you meet a lot of guys, I said.

—I cannot date them, I have to keep professional and personal life separated, she said with a smile. —They can only have my body, never my heart. And sometimes I love how they use my body but I never felt anything more for them.

—Our hearts is all Vanessa and I share most of the time.

—Sometimes I tend to forget that love like that exists, she said and in her eyes I saw we had to change the subject.

And I got my iPod to show her a picture of Vanessa and she loved her. It was a good picture. She asked how she was in bed and I told her she was the best I had ever met but then I didn't have as much experience as Debby. And then the drinks made us tired and the music made us drift away and she said it was no problem if I stayed for the night and I said I really liked her, meeting her, and she said it had been a while since she had met a boy like me. While she undressed, I turned around and looked at the wall or the window or maybe a door because I was only not looking at her and not at anything else. And I felt innocent again. And clean, in her spotless white bed with the many pillows around me. She stroked my hair and I put my hand on her stomach such as you can only do with friends and I did not get excited. And she kissed me on my cheek. And we cuddled. Then we fell asleep.

Sunday morning sun lit the room when we woke up and with a remote control she put on Sunday morning music and I hadn't felt that Sunday in a long time. We stayed in bed a bit longer so the feeling would stay. We did not make love. And after an hour she got up to take a shower and I got up to smoke a cigarette and she joined me before taking a shower because she felt like smoking too.

—I like your house, I said.

—Thank you, she said.

—Not to insult you, but I had expected something different, I said.

—I am more than just that.

—I know.

—Thank you.

And, —Thank you, I said.

From the open window, we could see the street but the people in the street could not see us that easily. Sofia looked good for Sunday morning and her face was nice without the makeup and with her big sleep shirt and under that only panties, she looked like these girls that make coffee in the morning in commercials.

She said, —I study at university as well, you know.

But I didn't know because she hadn't told me.

—I study psychology. Can I tell you why? she asked.

—Okay.

—I have seen some bad things in my world. Quite some girls did not have the opportunities I had because men are treating them badly. I want to help these girls. Give them a better chance. I save money as well, to start my own foundation once I'm finished with my studies.

And I gently touched the shoulder that was furthest from me without making it a hug. Then we were quiet for a while.

I said, —Maybe that is your double. You live two lives at the same time. I used the English word as reference to her other name. Sofia smiled.

—I better go and take a shower, she said. And she kissed me and went over to her bathroom. I got up from her bed and turned on the TV. Next to it were some of her DVDs. For a second I doubted but then I picked the one on top and put it in the player. I knew I would never Google her or rent a video starring Debby Double. The first minutes were okay, maybe even beautiful. She was in bath but with quite some makeup and most of her private parts were hidden by foam but I could see she had firm breasts and nice little nipples what I really like. Then a guy came in and she got out of the bath and I had to turn the DVD off because it looked very bad and her face was in pain and the camera had no respect *and I did not want to know this*. I sat on the bed again. Sofia came out of the shower, a towel neatly wrapped around her fresh smelling body.

—You look shocked, she noticed.

—I, I'm sorry but I watched a little of one of your DVDs.

—Was it that bad? she said with a wink and a smile.

- It looked like you were in pain.
- Sometimes I am. Men like that.
- I really, really didn't like that.

She sat down next to me on the bed and I smelt shampoo and cleanliness and beauty.

- Better not watch them then, she said.
- You have a beautiful body though.
- Thank you.
- You really do.

—There's a clean towel in the bathroom. I will make you some coffee and breakfast.

And in the bathroom it smelt like girls and there were creams and tubes all over the place and it was so innocent and the water was hot. Halfway in she opened the door and peeked in.

—Don't worry, nothing I haven't seen before, she said. —I put a clean boxer and shirt at the door.

And she did and closed the door again and when I put them on it was a nice shirt and the boxer felt like brand new and there was even a toothbrush I could use and I used some of her perfume and her deodorant and some of her wax and it felt so natural. Before she could give me the coffee I kissed her on her forehead to say Thank you. And she said Thank you too and we were happy and spent the day drinking coffee and talking and playing computer games in her unmade bed.”

And then the boulevard was empty again. And it was still hot. But Robbert felt better. He liked this story. He liked Sofia. She was what was left of happiness in him. The little that was left. In such an unexpected person.

12.

Robbert lit another cigarette. Then he caught a coughing fit, one of these that tells the story of cancer and a young death and ignored sickness. And maybe one day I will have to stop smoking, he thought. But without cigarettes, there are no stories. Without whisky, there is nothing to tell. Without girls, there is no illusion. And I am supposed to be death anyway. *And I have tried.*

“At least you have lived,” said the other.

“Back then, yes, I tried.”

“And you succeeded.”

“Somehow.”

“One could easily envy you.”

“That’s because the day is still young.”

“Is youth not exactly what should be envied?” asked the other.

“A young day is still sober, full of truth. It is the day’s night that can tell of success, of succeeding, of having lived. Only the day’s night can be envied.”

“But the young day is full of promises, as is the young man. Promises, the promise of life to be lived.”

“Promises!” Robbert cried. “Promises like to be broken. Promises wish to be broken. A promise is no promise if not broken.”

“Bitter. How about your promises? How about what you promised me in Madrid? So much you have not broken.”

“That’s because the day is still young.”

“Full of truth.”

“Full of truth and promises about to be broken.”

Robbert got up from the bench. As in anger, he started walking a few metres up and down the boulevard. Up and down. Up and down. His head low, next to his shoulders. What do you know about promises? he wanted to ask the other. What do you know about the only promises that matter and breaking them? Have you ever seen eyes that have been told to be protected forever and the fear of what followed? Have you ever promised yourself to not to and then done it? You know fuck all about promises. What do you know? *You know nothing!* Nothing. You have not yet heard half. *Half!* And you call me bitter. *Let’s see what you think tonight* when I have told you about promises.

“I will tell you about promises!” he then screamed.

And he still walked up and down the boulevard.

“Sit down,” the other said, “and tell me about promises.”

Robbert did not sit down. “I promised you to make this world a better place, for one. Even if it were only for one single person, but a better place nevertheless.”

“So you did.”

“So I didn’t.”

“But you tried.”

“I doubt that,” said Robbert. “Let me tell you more about promises. I made the most important of promises. Let me tell you about that. *Let me tell you*, as that is what I want to tell.”

Robbert sat down and looked at the other. The other nodded.

13.

“A month or so after I met Vanessa I ran into Lola. I was going out in the same club where we once met. I hadn’t really spoken to Lola the first time, but that night our eyes met and met again and after some hesitation I walked over to say hi. Remember that I hadn’t seen Vanessa again after she left me to enjoy her memory. I had tried to call her, but after a week of trying to reach her and put some extra meaning to this one so-sexy night I had given up. That was hard enough, for me. Every chance I had I revisited the place where we had met in the hope of seeing her again. That I didn’t, for so long, made me wonder if she was real, or just my conscience telling me something in a strange way. Now I met her counterpart, the girl a flip of a mental coin on the first night excluded from my sexist desires.

—What a coincidence, I said, —I had not expected to find you here.

—To find you here, you mean, Lola said. —That surprises me more.

—How do you mean?

I gave her a thought or two; maybe I could sleep with her, enjoy this young girl’s body for pleasure and as vengeance for the beauty lost in her friend. I shook the thought off almost immediately. I did not trust her. I should not.

—We thought you were here only on holidays, some sort of sex tourist, fucking my friend and leaving again, she replied. Between us, there was no friendliness; the conversation felt awkward.

—No, not at all. I live here, work here.

—What a surprise, Lola said sarcastically. A silence fell. The only subject we shared was Vanessa and I did not yet want to bring her up. Lola continued, —What kind of work do you do?

And I explained her about the internship I was doing, the research

and how it was meant to help Peru develop. Throughout my explanation, her interest increased. We had something in common apart from her friend's body.

—So, you are here to help Peru? she summarised my story.

—In a way, I confirmed.

—Do you like Peru?

—I love the country and I like I'm doing something for it as well.

—I'm happy for that, she said.

—What do you do? I asked, expecting her to be a student. In a way she was, but she also explained me about a project she was helping in the slums. We shared the belief that there was something more. No longer did it feel awkward to talk with her; we had clicked. Then I popped the question and she explained why Vanessa and I had only shared one night. It turned out I had a number that was not hers, something with the last two numbers mixed up. I didn't tell her everything. I didn't tell her about the girls I had slept with to take my revenge, my revenge on the pleasure Vanessa had not given me after the first night. However, I did tell Lola about how I had not been able to shake off my memories of her friend. I entrusted her that I had fallen for her. Lola gave me the correct telephone number. We kissed each other on the cheek to say goodbye and I promised to make up for everything with Vanessa.

From in front of the club I dialled Vanessa's correct number. It was maybe four o'clock, late. We connected and I explained the situation shortly. Logically, because she hadn't received any calls whatsoever from me her trust in me was gone. Thank god Lola had sent a message already telling her I seemed okay. We decided to meet the day afterwards.

When I saw Vanessa that next day I wanted nothing more than to take her home and relive our passionate night, but I couldn't get her to. We spent a wonderful night, talked and rebuilt a trust we hadn't needed before, but did now. She didn't allow me to take her home, but she did allow me to take her out. So we started a series of innocent dates with good conversations over coffee or a fancy dinner. Sometimes Lola was there, too. She was our referee. I felt for friendly Lola, she became our communal friend. In the mean time, Vanessa and I, all we did was kiss and sometimes she allowed me to fumble with her in a dark garden near her house. It drove me crazy. *And I loved it.* She promised, though, she

promised such good things. And she stole my heart. And then broke it. And then repaired it. She drove me crazy.

I couldn't get her to sleep with me. Instead, she said, I had to like her. And I liked her, but my words weren't enough. Referee Lola made me work harder, really love her. I knew she was the key to Vanessa's body. I had to play both girls in the right way. And I loved Vanessa, showed it in the best ways I could, but to my question to sleep with me, her answers remained a firm negation. Lola told me not to give up. Vanessa gave me just enough to work even harder. Both girls drove me crazy. They occupied my mind all my sleepless hours.

All this I took with me in my luggage to Tumbes and Ecuador, on top of what I told you earlier. I had to think about the promise Lola forced me to make Vanessa, see if I could. I didn't know."

14.

"Back in Lima, I got a bit of help from luck to help me change Vanessa's answer to my question. While I was up north a new couple had moved into our apartment block, just below our apartment; a young married couple. They put up unprotected wireless internet. When I returned Tobias had already downloaded some high quality videos that left little room for imagination about the female actresses.

I had spent about four months without internet porn and I needed it. Physical pleasure at its best, I reckon. Vanessa had made me desperate and I could not find satisfaction in the one or two (three, four) girls I tried in between, so clean digital hot models were my salvation. The next week I spent privately watching all types of action on his Mac. In a way, it is better than the real thing and it makes not as much of a mess. At the end of the week, while I was at it, Vanessa called and asked if we could meet. I invited her over. I hadn't heard from her since I got on the bus up north and in Ecuador they have another type of cell phone network so I couldn't contact her. Just across the border I had sent her a message to catch up, unanswered until that day. Now she would come over.

I finished what I was doing, closed the Mac and cleaned up the apartment a little. Watching internet porn is a lifestyle that involves other things, such as only eating take-away food and then leaving the empty

boxes all over your apartment. I emptied the ashtrays and went down to the shop to get some sodas and cold beer. Then the waiting started and it lasted for about an hour and then the bell rang and Vanessa was downstairs so I opened the door and she came in and she was very beautiful. She was so very beautiful that my heart jumped in my throat. She was so very beautiful that I loved her more than I had ever loved her before.

And this was before I had even really started to love her.

But as I had watched videos over the wireless for a week and had just satisfied myself, I loved her differently than I had loved her that first night and the few times we met since. For the first time I did not want to do what we did this first night and what I had tried ever since but wasn't able to do. I loved her as a person. So we drank Inka Cola and we played a little game of pool and I gave her a good handicap but I still won the first game. And then we drank more Inka Cola and we played again and now she was a little better because I really tried to lose. And we listened to music and she chose the songs and she chose really nice ones.

And then we drank beer because the Inka Cola was finished. I loved everything she did. When I felt like it, I made her a compliment that I really meant, not only to see her as I had seen her that first night. I said such things as, —There are not a lot of girls that I know that listen to such good music. And she replied things as, —There are not a lot of guys that like the same music as I do.

—I know some of them, I said.

—But I don't meet a lot of them, she said.

—I can introduce you to them. I think you will like them.

—I don't want to meet them.

—But I think you will like them.

—I don't need more guys to like. I like you, she said.

—And I like you, I said.

—I like you more, she said.

—I always will like you one more than you will like me.

—And I will like you infinitely more than you will like me.

—But then I still like you one more.

—That is impossible, because I will like you infinitely and one and infinitely more.

—And I will like you one more than that.

—You cannot. I like you more. I win.

—Okay, you win.

—I win, I win! I will always like you more.

—I missed you.

—It was only a short time you have been gone.

—Still I missed you.

And then she asked, —Can we go to your bedroom?

And I did not respond immediately.

—Wouldn't you like another beer first? I asked.

—No, I would like to go to your bedroom.

—Then I will take the bottle so we can have another beer.

And we went to my bedroom and sat down and I lit the candles and went back to the living room to get my iPod and we drank one more glass of beer each and listened to more music and then she lay down and said she really liked me once more and I lay down next to her and we started kissing.

—Do you really like me? she asked.

—Yes, I said.

—Why do you like me?

—I like you because you are not only beautiful but also intelligent and because I really like it to be with you.

—Don't you like my body?

—I think you are the most beautiful girl in the whole universe but I like you more because of who you are.

—But do you like my body?

—I love your body.

—I love your body as well.

And she was silent for a while and I didn't know where we were heading but I didn't care because I was really happy to have a girl so very beautiful at my side and to listen to nice music with her and I didn't care about anything else. I had left her a fucked-up person before Ecuador and then I changed and all the masturbating had relaxed me. We kissed again. She said, —I think you really like me. She said, —I really enjoyed what we did our first night. She said, —I loved what you did with my body, how you kissed it everywhere. She said, —It's warm in here. She said, —Don't you want to do what we did the first night?

And with the nice music and with the candles and with that I felt so happy to be there with her, we kissed and cuddled and hugged and slowly got naked and I did for a long time what she so loved our first night. It tasted like strawberries and I never tasted that before. Not only she loved it, I loved it even more. I loved to see her belly tighten when I really tried to make her feel happy. I loved the music and the little sounds she made because she had such a good time. I loved how the candles made reflections on her beautiful skin. I loved to feel her nipples harden under my attention. I loved how she couldn't stand it if I kissed her feet. I loved how outside it slowly got dark. I loved her eyes full of joy. I loved when she all of a sudden acted like a prude school-girl. I loved how I had to work and worked and worked. I loved to see her thoughts disappear when I finally penetrated her. I loved how she looked so naughty that everything started over again. I loved the cigarettes I smoked in between and the music that kept playing. Four hours passed without notice and I kissed every inch of her body and everything tasted like strawberries. Then we dressed again and on the street I found a taxi to bring her home.

—I am so happy we met again, I said to her.

—I am so happy you like me not only for my body.

—But I love your body.

—I noticed, but now you also like me.

—I liked you since the moment I saw you.

—You only liked my body, she said like a teacher telling a small boy he has been lying.

—I loved your body, but I really like you too.

—Yes, now you like me, because I made you like me.

—That is true. You made me really like you.

—I know. I noticed.

—Thank you for making me like you, I said.

—Thank you for liking me and loving my body and what you did to show me, she said.

—I will always like you and love your body and show you.

—I know, but first you needed to really like me. Now you like me. Now you can show me whenever you want to.

—You are very intelligent.

—Thank you. Will you always be like this? she asked.

—For you, I will always be like this, I said. *And I know about these words*; have heard and said them so often that they have become painless lies, but this time I meant them. And she got into the taxi and I wrote down the number on the plates for security because I never wanted to lose this girl again. On my way back up to the apartment, there were butterflies in my stomach. In my room it smelt like strawberries, there was a little bracelet she had worn around her ankle in my bed, and I put it around my wrist.

There was brown hair everywhere, which made nice shapes on my sheets. I finished the bottle of beer and blew out the candles and lay down on my back and remembered every second of these four hours in which we made the room smell like strawberries.

And I remembered what she had said, just before we made the most beautiful love. And I remembered (*I remember!*) the promise I made.

—Why is it that when I find something so good, it will be taken away from me so soon? she had asked.

And after a silence I had said, —I will never leave you. We will always be together.

And I meant it.”

15.

“What is it with you and girls?” the other asked after the silence that followed Robbert’s words. Silence it seems, Robbert thought, is our way of turning a page. And every silence is a page. Turn a page, adjust your eyes to new words that make new sentences that make new stories. New meanings. New thoughts that go nowhere. And it is our way to think. Think about new steps to take. Like the silence between take off and touch down. Another way of turning a page. Too often clouded with senseless small talk. Too often ignored by stupid small talk. There should be a no talking sign next to the no smoking one.

“I guess I simply like girls,” he replied.

“Don’t we all?”

“Well, in a way. And, not to offend you, but I think most of us like the small time pleasures they bring. You know, at night, in bed. Girls

and women even more, are skilled messiahs of short-lived pleasure and gifted takers as well.”

“And you are not one of them, one of these seekers of pleasure?”

“Pleasure is a hint of happiness and its biggest adversary. Without knowing, I have looked for happiness more than for pleasure. Pleasure never gave me real pleasure. And I have had my share of pleasure.”

“Pleasure disappointed you, so you looked for something better,” the other said, without a question mark.

“And there is something better,” Robbert said.

“Happiness?”

“I don’t see happiness as something that can be obtained. Pleasure can, but happiness is in the beauty of everyday life. Remember I told you I think that men are supposed to die young? What need is there for happiness in a short life? None. A man is built to need no more than pleasure. And women have developed the skill to achieve a higher state of mind when the ones they give pleasure to have died. Women have learnt to appreciate things, small things. This joy in small things is happiness.”

“And now that men also live longer, they need the same.”

“But they can’t achieve it, because they’re only used to pleasure. Therefore they look for happiness in pleasure and force the same upon women. That makes everyone unhappy.”

“So, what is it with you and girls?”

“They can teach me to find happiness.”

“When you steer away from seeking pleasure?” the other asked.

“When I allow them to grow beyond where I am supposed to be. Because I am supposed to be dead. They lure me into easy pleasure but have this so much more beautiful happiness inside.”

“And that’s why you didn’t sleep with Sofia.”

“But others did, so she was kept from happiness as well, as I would learn later.”

“But you did sleep with Malin. You didn’t allow her happiness?”

“I was too young, then, to know this. And Malin in my world was for pleasure and pleasure alone. Be not mistaken, though, that sleeping with someone does not necessarily exclude happiness.”

“Later you did sleep with Vanessa as well. Was that sleeping with for

pleasure or happiness?”

“Pleasure at first, certainly, mere pleasure. Remember how we met.”

“So you looked for pleasure in Vanessa. Was that wrong?”

“In a way it was. But then she was still too young to have developed the skill to bring happiness. Her role was to bring pleasure to men about to die. And then I didn’t, so I took her happiness away far too early.”

“You did?” the other asked and a silence fell when a page was turned.

16.

“Instead of fulfilling my destiny to make the world a better place, I became a murderer. A murderer in the search of pleasure. If you care, I have a story about pleasure versus happiness. About one night of fun versus a life long of guilt,” Robbert said.

“Tell me,” the other ordered.

“Back in Peru, some weeks after Vanessa and I became serious again, I was at my job. Around one my boss started to round up his loyal employees. The Toyotas of his friends took over the little parking lot at the back of our office. Older and carefree men disturbed the peace and quiet that had made my morning rather productive. Coming back to Lima and finding rest in Vanessa relaxed me enough to become useful. Nonetheless, I returned to my old rhythm, slowly. That day there had to be a football match on television I realised and recalled something about the Champions League final. Football and I, well, never really found much mutual affection. For work, however, would be no more time today.

—Robbert! Man of the women, Basilio screamed. He was one of the older men and I was his favourite victim for hugging and slapping and joking and winking and other grown-up things. Basilio, his name, he had said, was something royal. Basilio was a royal friend, one to have around for good food and quantity drinking.

—Come and drink beer and eat Ceviche with us. You can drive with me in my car, he said.

—I like that, *me gusta*, I said (my Spanish back then wasn’t exactly of a level that allowed me to be very eloquent).

—I like that. Mister I Like That. You like women, beer and good food. How are the women? Basilio asked.

—They're okay. I still like the Peruvian girls. Probably I'll marry one.

—You like them, that's good. Come with us and we will drink beer and eat Ceviche and then we'll go out and find us some beautiful girls to marry with.

—I thought you liked the European girls?

—I like all girls. But we will find you a Peruvian one and me a European one and everybody will be happy.

He laughed his full and warm laugh.

Basilio was a great guy, but the type that hadn't quite adjusted to the unexpected eighty years of life he had to fill somehow.

—You come with us? Drive in my car, my friend! he said. So I saved my files and closed my office and moved a couple of doors up to my boss's desk and it was full of people there. For sure, something important was up. Something like a Champions League final. Already everybody obviously had some alcohol in his or her blood.

I looked at the paper that held the bets to put my Soles to some good use and saw we were going to see Arsenal against Barcelona. As I still felt like I had Madrilenian blood left in my veins, I wouldn't dare to support Barça, so I put my ten Soles on Arsenal. The stakes were something like three against one to their advantage. As expected this resulted in a huge discussion about my stupidity and the odds of me winning being practically zero. Already tired of this same old story I walked out in the middle of the discussion to smoke a cigarette. I could hear them going on inside so I wasn't needed in there anyway. Basilio came out and unlocked his car.

—Will you ride with me, my friend? he asked.

—Alright, I will ride with you.

—Go and sit in the car. We will drink a lot of beer and eat Ceviche and then we will look for beautiful women.

—Sounds like a good plan.

—How are the women in your life, my friend?

—I'm still dating Vanessa. That's going pretty alright.

In fact, at that point, Vanessa and I were doing amazing. I loved her so much I couldn't stand falling asleep next to her because that meant that I would miss a minute of her delicious presence.

—Still the same woman? We will find you another one today; you should enjoy your youth!” Basilio said.

—We will see.

—Yes, we will. But first we will drink beer and eat Ceviche and watch football.

—I like that.

—I like that. Mister I Like That! You like women and to make love and you know nothing about football.

And he laughed his laugh again and slapped me on the back.

—You’re right. Let’s go.

So I sat down on the passenger’s seat of his Toyota, engine already running. Because of the heat I left the door open, for now. Basilio sat down on the driver’s seat and started sounding the horn for everybody to hurry up. There was not much reaction. He picked up a half-empty bottle of Pisco from the back seat.

—My European friend, he said, —let us drink for winning the bet.

Feeling forced, I took a large sip.

—For winning the bet, I said. And he drank.

—For women, he said and I drank.

—For all Peruvian women, I said and he drank.

—For beer and Ceviche. I drank.

—And for football. He drank.

—And for all the beautiful women in the world. I.

—And having sex with them. He.

—For the gods of love.

—For us.

And with that, we had finished the bottle of Pisco, which went back empty to the back seat. I could as well get wasted. Basilio put the engine in free and almost kicked the accelerator through the bottom of the car. Still no reaction from the people inside, discussing their bets. He put the engine back in gear and we drove off. Obviously he felt like he had waited enough.

—Beer and Ceviche and women, my friend. We have to go!

And so we were the first to be in the restaurant where they had already put all tables around the television that was at full volume on some pre-match show with screaming Peruvians. The moment we sat down (both

with a good view, because although I don't care about football I cannot stand to only hear the action) the first bottles of beer were put down. To keep the pace low (I knew we could do more than a couple of bottles even before the others arrived) I lit a cigarette and he lit a cigarette and filled my glass and we cheered and drank the cold beer. Lighting new cigarettes with the butt of old ones we waited for the others to arrive. We drank beer, but little because of the smoking. I am repulsed by getting totally hammered over lunch. Sometimes there was no choice. Like this day.

Bottle-count went up fast enough though. I talked with the few women present about everything not related to beer or football or Ceviche and they liked that I was still with Vanessa but then the guys screamed and filled my half-empty glass with fresh beer and I was dragged to their world of pleasure. The food came in abundance familiar to the upper class in poor countries. Before the game started a second order was placed.

The house dealer walked in and up to me and I gave him a two-hundred Soles banknote but couldn't explain I did not want it all to be used so fifteen minutes later my pockets were filled with six half gram packages of coke. To keep up with the drinking (my head was already turning and I had difficulty to focus on the television) I went to the toilet and used half of one and then on second thought the entire package just to be sure. I felt better. The food tasted better and the guys liked me better because it was now I who filled their half-empty glasses.

I lost the bet. Well, all right. I didn't really have any idea about the game played anyway. The waiters took away the food and some of the more responsible people went home. Outside the sun was setting and we placed a third order. They kept bringing the next last two bottles of beer every ten minutes. I still had five packages left and then four to keep the remaining alcoholics alive. At eight we finally put our glasses down but I felt like going on for hours. These damned drugs, they will kill me one day. We were three. Basilio drove us home and near my street we went into a chicken take-away for dinner and ate on the Toyota's hood. We also ordered some more beers.

—Now we have had our beer and Ceviche and chicken and we need women, said Basilio.

—We need women, said Pepe, the third.

—Let's go to Miraflores, I said for that is the place to find easy women in Lima.

—Miraflores is good. There are women.

—Women.

—And beer. We need more beer.

Indeed the bottles we bought were empty. One had fallen off the hood and shattered in a million pieces. A police pick-up drove by very slowly and stopped a little down the road.

—Damned, said Pepe.

—Sons of a bitch, said Basilio.

—Now we're stuck here.

—We can't drive. They'll stop us.

—Sons of a bitch.

—I'll go and talk to them, Pepe said. And he did.

That made everything more difficult. Everything, as in driving away without being stopped. We could bribe them, easily, but that would be a hassle. I thought about laying a line on the hood to get my head clear again. Basilio went back into the chicken place to get more beer. Pepe was still talking to the police. Overall it looked pretty bad from my point of view but as I was outside of myself and rather high I enjoyed the situation. Basilio came back with only one bottle what was suspicious. It turned out he had broken the other one inside the shop already. They didn't serve him anymore, so I would have to get in to get more, if needed. They always serve gringos. We popped off the cap and Pepe came back.

—They won't be gone for a while, he said.

—Sons of a bitch. What did you say?

—I asked them what they were doing.

—And what were they doing.

—Watching us.

—Sons of a bitch.

So we sat on the hood and finished the last bottle. I remembered it was only some five blocks to my house, so I invited them over. We left the car parked on the sidewalk, with the shattered glass next to it. The police pick-up turned and followed us at an unmistakable distance. They

couldn't get into my street though, because of the fences, and we had our own security, whom I bribed to make sure the police wouldn't find our house if they were in desperate need for money and found another way in. I had played these cards before.

They loved the pool table. I left them playing to get some bottles of beer downstairs. When I came back they were still playing. They really loved it. I put on some music and we drank some more. Inside, however, we didn't really get into a better mood. So I went outside, again, to see if the police were gone but they weren't and waiting around the Toyota so I flagged down a taxi and brought it to our gate. Basilio and Pepe got in and we were off to Miraflores. On the dashboard, waiting for a light to turn green, I did another half package. I could feel my cell phone buzzing for a while, but didn't make the connection to answering the call. Nothing was important enough to stop this quest for women, or whatever. *Pleasure.*

It was a Wednesday and not much was open, so we got out at Kennedy Park and went to a dirty reggaeton bar. On the toilet I emptied the package I opened in the taxi. I had three left and there was coke all over my black shirt, I saw in the mirror. As well as I could I brushed it off and licked my hands clean. Then I picked up a fight with a guy who was looking at me in the mirror. —What the fuck are you looking at? I asked in English with a numb tongue.

—*¿Qué? No te entiendo,* or something like that the poor fellow said. But I didn't care. Before I knew I had thrown my fist in his face and he fell down against the sink. There was blood on the mirror and blood on the sink and all of a sudden I was sick of the place. On my urgent way out I practically walked over people and I didn't care to tell Basilio or Pepe I was off. From there I went straight to another bar and straight into the toilet to do another package of which the best part ended up on the floor and my shirt. I sat down at the bar and challenged the barman to a game of poker. I went all in on the third hand without ever really looking at my cards and he had a pair of jacks. He only served me soda and didn't want to play again as there was no honour in winning, so I left.

Almost next door was a tourist or prostitute or otherwise dodgy club so I straightened my shirt, smiled at the doormen, paid the entry fee and walked to the first two single girls I saw with the jarra of beer I got for

my entrance ticket. We chatted a little (I chatted, they didn't say much) and I tried to kiss both of them, got hungry and invited them to pizza. It was almost two o'clock and we could just enter one of the restaurants in Calle de Pizzas. Over pizza I grew bored of them and left them without a word and with a banknote of which the change would have been enough to buy their services for the entire night. I flagged down a taxi and let the driver take me to a casino near Plaza San Miguel where I only played the horse game, betting on red and blue all the time and encouraging the little horses with their plastic jockeys like it were a real race. They served me enough free rum and coke (the coke in bottles, the one with an article) to keep my spirit lifted and my losses acceptable.

One of the waitresses paid me extra attention so I chatted her up and when her shift ended, at four, I took her home and straight into bed. We got naked and at that moment my body had used all its reserves. Energy, inspiration, desire, all the hormones needed to end this quest for pleasure with some high-quality pleasure, gone.

I started crying.

She comforted me into a feverish sleep. I dreamt I was an angel chasing the devil and then becoming the devil to burn down a church full of innocent girls. I dreamt I was in an empty theatre to read from my first published book and the only person there was my primary school crush who laughed at me. I dreamt about a school full of dying people because I hadn't closed the tap and now they were drowning.

When I woke up the next morning immediately I knew I had almost killed myself. *My head!* You have no idea how much it hurt. The girl was still there, still naked. She slept deeply and wore an innocent smile on her young face. Obviously, her dreams were better. She might have dreamt about a future in another world, where she didn't have to work at her age until four in a casino, a world where she had fair chances, a world where boys picked her up not only because of her body. Her story was a cliché; I knew it or thought I knew it without a word from her. She was young, alright, and beautiful enough to be tempted into working for a casino well before she finished the education that could have given her a fair chance on a better life. Another five years and she would be too old to make elderly men raise their bets. By then she would have a couple of kids walking around and wither her life away in a two-room

apartment in the poorer neighbourhoods of town. I felt sorry and guilty and anxious and I couldn't control my limbs the way I was used to. If she was dreaming about a better life, I would not wake her up to ruin this little moment of happiness.

I tucked the girl in so she wouldn't get cold and went down to get fresh fruits and orange juice and yoghurt. A cigarette made me throw up. Then I prepared her a good breakfast. Maybe I tried to make up for all the things I had done the day before (or in my life, maybe) by being good to this one innocent girl. *But you can never do that.* There is no way of making up for everything. Not a final word with a priest or accepting whichever faith with your last breath, nothing can make up for the mistakes you make, what makes me think maybe just maybe we are not meant to make up for mistakes. Maybe just maybe all we can do is pay the price. And a day like that night before came with a price and a breakfast in bed would never be accepted as payment. Everything comes with a price, and eventually you will have to pay it. And when they serve you the bill, a credit card brings you nowhere. That's the easy thing for religious people. They only pay when they die. The impious like me pay for their deeds every day. There's no hiding. No breakfast or tucking in or being nice can take that away. And I did have a huge outstanding bill, believe me. I still do.

We showered and dressed and I invited her for a coffee in Miraflores and she accepted. At least in her history I wanted to go down as somebody nice. When we kissed goodbye, on the cheek, and she gave me her phone number I remembered last night's calls. Seven missed calls from Vanessa.

She answered on the first ring.

—Hi, finally! she said, —I've been trying to reach you all night.

—Yes, I only saw that now. I'm sorry.

—We need to talk.

—Go ahead.

—No, really, I mean, face to face.

—Okay, let's meet in the StarBucks in Óvalo Gutiérrez.

—Better in the park. Can you meet me in an hour at my place?

—Okay, see you there, I said and hung up.

And something had to be up. I felt this was it. Here came another bill

and I surely couldn't pay this one by telling her how nice I had been to the girl that had slept in my bed that night. Slowly I walked to her house as if to postpone another minor execution. Thousands of thoughts went through my mind. About her finding out that I had slept with another girl, about her parents finding out about me, about what not. Something had to be up.

Although I walked slower than I had ever walked before, I arrived way too early and sat down on the kerbstone in front of her house. I doubted about a cigarette as I still felt rather weak. Something was about to change. Her posture when she approached me confirmed something was about to change. Her words, which she didn't doubt to bring at first sight, changed everything.

—I'm six weeks overdue, maybe seven. A tear appeared in one of her eyes. —Yesterday I checked. And it was positive.

And we and our world collapsed. I hugged her, *but what did that help?* We were going to be murderers, a heavy toll for some minutes of pleasure. I did the maths and realised it had to have been our first night together, before all my truthful feelings for her. *And you ask, did I did I take away her happiness in exchange for pleasure and I did. I did ruin her happiness because of my pleasure. A two-second orgasm in exchange for two lives ruined; hers and the baby's. In equations like this pleasure always loses but still in real life we usually see happiness lose. Did I? Yes I did. I did.*"

17.

Robbert looked around the empty boulevard. Then he looked at the sun. The sun was still high, but the worst heat was over. *And the worst had yet to come.*

"The decision to abort our baby was easily made. Not that it was not a difficult decision, but we had talked this over before. We were both too young and especially too immature to carry the responsibility of a child. Where to do it, however, was an entirely different question. Abortion is pretty illegal in Peru. Therefore, in Lima there are only so many respectable places where it can be done. The majority of women, however, have no other choice than to go to illegal clinics under often

embarrassing conditions.

Money is a key factor. I had access to money, sufficient to sort this out, but that didn't make it a whole lot easier. Nobody was to know about it and especially not her parents. This made it impossible to go to one of the upperclass hospitals Vanessa knew of, because that was where her parents would go for a medical check-up, or friends of her parents. In the end we settled for a rather small private clinic down south where (as far as we knew) nobody related to her ever went. And if finding a place was already stressful, organising everything without getting into fights was even more so. I admired Vanessa's every move, though. She dealt with it much better than I could have ever hoped for. I think I might have had more difficulties with the decision than she had and I didn't feel particularly comfortable the morning we took the bus to the clinic.

—If you want to, you can still change your mind. I will help you whatever decision you make. You know that, don't you? I said.

—I don't want to change my mind. I want this to be over, she said.

—I know you want this to be over. I feel so sorry for you. But you know I will support you in every decision you make, don't you?

—Stop this. We've been over this and we're not going to keep the baby.

—But if you feel bad about it, I will be there to support you. You know that, right?

—Of course I know that. But what are we going to do? You will stay here and throw your life away over one night of fun? It is better this way and you know it.

—I only want you to feel okay. And that you are happy with this decision.

—I am happy with this decision.

—Is there anything I can do for you?

—You could support me instead of talking about this.

—I will. I will and I will not talk about this anymore.

—Good, she said.

—Is there anything I can do for you? I asked.

—You have done enough already.

—Really nothing? I asked again.

—Open the window if you want to. It's hot.

So I did.

—Are you better now? How are you? I asked.

—I am fine.

—I will always be there for you.

—Okay.

—Will you be with me for always?

—Don't ask that.

—Is there anything more I can do? Do you want some water?

—I am okay. Just relax.

—Okay.

And I was quiet for a while and once every so many minutes I would start the same conversation. And she was still okay. —I love you. I said. The lighter Spanish one, *te quiero*, which means something like *I want you*.

—I love you too, handsome.

—I love you more.

—You cannot, because I love you for two people now, she said.

—Okay. This time you win, but only today.

—I always win. I am the best.

—You are the best. You are perfect.

—I am only perfect with you.

—I love you.

—I love you more.

At the clinic for me everything went by like a silent movie. A very friendly nurse who threw me a terrible look took Vanessa away from me. I was obviously the wrongdoer here. But I could understand that. *I was the wrongdoer*. I think I might have read some magazines waiting for her to return, but mostly I recall a big clock, the ones you have in train stations, ticking the minutes away in which I didn't know what was happening with Vanessa. She never told me what it was like in there, behind the doors, with the friendly nurse and probably more people. Every minute I looked at the clock, and sometimes more often and I wouldn't see a change in the hands. There were noises but I didn't know if they came from what they were doing with Vanessa or just noises that belonged to the place. I didn't want to smoke a cigarette out of fear to be

outside when she returned. Nobody had explained the procedure to me. Was there narcosis? Were there needles and thread and knives and scissors? Was it nothing more than a strong pill and some cramps? Vanessa never told me and I haven't had the guts to look it up on the internet. All I know is that something died that was also mine and I killed it *and I made Vanessa sad and sick and damaged for life.*

When she finally came out I didn't look at the clock anymore and I never really did look well because I don't remember the hours I've seen, only the minutes. And every minute was a separate minute, like a journey to go through. Time had no correlation in the time I spent inside. In the bus back to her house we did not speak."

18.

Together Robbert and the other walked to the riverside where beaten-down architecture left an impression of the cities you see in after-the-apocalypse movies. Or a warzone. That with all this sadness and mere uselessness Tumbes is still mentioned in the Lonely Planet surprised Robbert. But then, he thought, what kind of guidance has this guidebook ever given me? I would have use for a guidebook that really guided me. As if that could ever exist.

"And you know what the worst thing was?" Robbert asked.

"I can think of a thing or two," the other said. But if he could think of them, he didn't say them out loud.

"The worst thing was that nobody could tell me what to do. Nobody could tell me what to say to Vanessa, how to comfort her. *Not even Lola!* Lola had been my guide to Vanessa, had helped me to find her heart again. I trusted this girl, hoped for her help whenever in a difficult situation. Fuck, I couldn't even talk about it with Lola. And nobody knew anyway. We, the two of us, couldn't even talk about it. We didn't know what to do or say. We were alone, both of us.

And that's what struck me most of the past two years. I am alone. Nobody can tell me what to do, what to say. What to choose. I have to make the choices myself. All of them. And I don't know if I can. I can't."

"But you have your examples, haven't you?" the other asked. "People

to follow, I mean. People who can show you or tell you which choices to make.”

“I do. I met some examples. Gurus, if you like. But they don’t tell me. All they say is that I have to figure it out myself. Make my own mistakes. Learn my own lessons. But I’m so tired of making mistakes. I’m so tired of not knowing what to do.”

A young street vendor had walked all the way down the empty riverbank just for the two of them. They bought a coke and some candy to support the lonely child.

“You see,” Robbert continued, “I don’t know but maybe this is also a consequence of growing too old. You know, I am only the second generation of boys who doesn’t get decimated by a war and the generation before me, my parents, were too busy working hard to have a decent life. And they gave me a decent life. They have given me everything. They have given me freedom. But this freedom comes with choices and decisions they cannot help me with, because they never had to make them.”

“Now you’re going too far,” the other interrupted him. “I like your theory but this is nonsense and you know it is. Millions of young people grow up just like you and they never have your problems. You cannot blame this on anything but on yourself.”

“Alright, I am the problem too. I am aware of that. But most people my age never have these things running through their head because they choose to live their life the way their parents did. Or they don’t choose to do this. They just do it. They’re not aware of their freedom. They’re not aware they can be so much more. They don’t see their chances.”

“Now you’re portraying yourself as something special. Robbert, he who sees his chances! Don’t you think that had you been something special, you wouldn’t have been here?”

“Where would I have been?”

“How should I know? Somewhere your so-called specialness makes a difference? There have been people who stood out all through history and I don’t recall reading in my history books about them travelling to Tumbes to waste away their valuable time with memories of self-pity. They stood out. They were really special and they stood out. More than one of them well before your age.”

“Thank you,” Robbert said with a sarcastic tone. “Thank you for reminding me I’m fucked up. But may I remind you that most of these people were real leaders? They got the chance to stand out because they stood out all their life. That’s why you read about them in your history books. I never stood out. I’m nothing more than a regular kid who is born with too much freedom and too many choices and without the regulation system that would have made my life so much easier a couple of hundred years ago.”

“So you’re a loser?”

“Whatever,” Robbert said angrily.

“No. Not whatever. Are you a loser, then?”

Silence.

“Maybe I am,” Robbert then said.

“Maybe?” the other asked.

“Alright, I am a loser.”

“Why?”

“Fuck, mate. What do you want?”

“I want to know why two years after I met an inspiring young man in Madrid all I see is a depressed shadow. Someone who travelled the world and did drugs and women and everything that could have given him some strength in life, but who came out lost in self-pity and thoughts about the impossibility of life and happiness. I want to know what happened to you!” the other cried.

“A lot happened, I already told you!” Robbert replied, as if in defence.

“Let’s take a walk,” the other said. “This place gives me the creeps.”

19.

They followed the river downstream until they reached the road where the long-distance busses pass. Last time I was here, Robbert thought, things were very different. Less than two years ago. Time is a peculiar thing. This bus ride up north seems closer to today than, say, this last time at Barajas. And that’s only some months ago. It even seems closer by than this morning. And that’s only so many hours away.

They entered the city centre again and walked past the Plaza de

Armas, past the place he met the other. Up the steep road and into the narrow streets that made up the eastern part of the centre. After some left and right turns, they found a place where they sold fresh juices and sat down at a table. Inside, but near the open window.

“Interesting how a little walk refreshes the head,” Robbert said after they ordered.

“Interesting indeed,” said the other.

“I had breakfast here, the last time.”

“You have a way of coming back to places.”

“I guess that gives me something to rely on.”

“Like Madrid,” said the other.

“Madrid had its reasons.”

“Like Oslo,” said the other.

“Oslo had its reasons.”

“Like Lima,” said the other.

“I guess even Lima had its reasons.”

“And Tumbes?”

“Tumbes never had any reason.”

“Not even to rely on?”

“Not like the other places.”

“Do you mind going back?”

“I don’t.”

“Not to Madrid?” asked the other.

“Not in the least.”

“And Oslo?”

“Never.”

“Lima?”

“That’s another story.”

“Then tell me the first story, there will be time for others.”

“Madrid or Oslo?” Robbert asked.

“Don’t forget Amsterdam,” said the other.

“Like you I have a tendency to forget Amsterdam.”

“Amsterdam is just as important.”

“Well then, let me put it to you in another way. Sofia or Malin.”

“With a juice I’d go for Malin.”

“Oslo it is then.”

And now he knows it doesn't hurt to tell, thought Robbert. Not anymore. Oslo doesn't hurt. Oslo was beautiful. In its own Northern European expensive and sexy way. Beautiful Norway. Beautiful Oslo. Beautiful Malin.

"In the end, that week in October, eight months proved to be enough. Or we had this magical thing people sometimes have. Two days we spent in bed, three nights. We only left to get drinks from the fridge. We only dressed to open the door for the delivery food. And we were only quiet when we were both asleep. And we made love on all possible levels. Sweet tender love with fingers that gently comb sweat-wet hair away from the eyes. Dirty hungry love with grunts and Malin on her knees. Long intellectual love where we lay down and talked and talked and talked and we enjoyed to feel each other inside. Funny laughing love in which we used whatever was present to surprise the other with unknown pleasures. And we laughed and we grunted but most of all we talked and talked and said everything that needed to be said and so much more. Like now, but naked. Her deep blue eyes filled with compassion when I told her about Vanessa's abortion and shiny from laughter's tears when I told her about my stupidity and it was all so natural. So natural. So normal. So the way I wanted it. And so good. And so not guilty. And she told me about her boyfriend. And about how he made love to her. And about how she never had made love as well as with him. But I didn't feel offended. Vanessa was the best for me in a similar way. Malin was beautiful. Malin was a model. Malin was what young boys dream about. To see Malin in her bed that soon wasn't clean anymore. To see her curves. To see her lack of pubic hair. To kiss her armpit and then the side of her firm little lovely round breasts and to stroke her perfect long blonde healthy hair. To be there and talk with her. That is paradise. My paradise. In that bed I felt complete. In that bed I felt accepted. In that bed I felt nothing but pleasure and happiness and soft wetness, wet softness. Her lips. Her nose. Her ears.

But of course we were cheating. She was cheating. I was cheating. We cheated on our loves and we tricked each other. We tricked each other into believing we were our other love. We tricked each other into believing this was not cheating. Maybe we even tricked each other into believing we were made for each other. Into believing life had led us

there and there, in that bed, was where we were supposed to be. And into believing we never had to get out. That we were married. That nothing but making love could make us last forever.

But then life and love have to keep each other balanced. One life, one love. And damn we brought a lot of lives to her bed. And a lot of love. Her life, my life, the lives of the people we loved. Their love and our love and in the end the bed was full of life and love and stains from drinks and pizza and all this love and——”

Robbert stopped talking all of a sudden. What And? Yes, and *and*. And then. Then you damn well know what. Nothing. Nothingness. And nothingness.

“And the third day we woke up and took a shower and cleaned the apartment and she gave me a tour around Oslo and we ate in a restaurant and I learnt the exchange rate of their money and noticed things were rather expensive especially as we had been smoking like chimneys on ten Euro a package cigarettes and we decided to take it easy. And taking it easy gave us time to think. And to think a little more. Think instead of talk. Thinking is no good. Not if you just messed with the balance between love and life. And love kind of had forgotten life was the stronger one. So life caught up with us and she dropped the question.

—Where do we stand, now?

—And where do we go? I said.

—So you don't know either? she asked.

—Not at all. You see, for eight months I haven't thought all that much about you. For eight months I haven't thought that much at all. And not about you. I remembered you, of course, sometimes. And always with a smile. I told some people about you. The Norwegian girl I met in Madrid. The Norwegian girl I had this amazing sex with in Madrid. This beautiful amazing wonderful sexy delicious Norwegian girl. And now you're the Norwegian girl I cheated with, on the love of my life. In Oslo. I cannot tell this story.

—And for me you're the Dutch boy I did and did again. And you're cute, but you can't be more than that in my stories.

—I know.

—Good.

—Good, I echoed her.

—Good, she repeated.

—Will you go back to Peru. For her, for Vanessa? she asked.

—I will. As soon as possible, I will. And you, will you wait for him?

—Yes, I guess, she said.

—So, I said.

—Yes, she said.

—Why do we meet again? That we meet again——What is the meaning you have in my life? I asked her. I had no idea. I like it for people to have some meaning in my life. (Everybody likes it for people to have meaning in their lives.) —And what is my meaning in your life?

—Maybe to have this little conversation, she said.

—Maybe.

—Maybe to realise there is another. There is another for both of us. And although they're not more than a dream now, we have to believe in this dream. And we can do other things, but we have to stick to this dream. We have to trust in our dreams.

—Do you dream about him?

—I do, she confessed.

—Also when you're in bed with me?

—Yes, she said.

—So do I, I said.

—I guess we better stop making love then, she said.

—I think we never really did. I guess we made love with our dreams.

—So we didn't cheat?

—No. We didn't.

—And if Vanessa did the same?

—Do you really think she doesn't?

—Mine probably does.

—And does he think about you when he does so?

—I hope so.

—So do I, I said.

—Does that mean they don't cheat either? she asked. But she knew the answer. We understood each other well enough.

—You're right, I said, —we can better not make love anymore. Now we know this, it is cheating, I guess.

—But maybe the others exist for us. For us to see if we're stronger.
—You reckon?
—It could be, she said and she threw me a curious look.
—You mean the opposite? I asked.
—The opposite.
—Don't you think there would have been a sign somewhere along the road?
—What kind of sign?
—A little sign something was up, a dream, a memory brought on by a familiar smell in an unfamiliar bed, I don't know.
—Maybe there have been but we didn't see them, she said. —We were too busy fucking to notice even the change of day into night.
—Do you think we will see something if we continue making love? I asked.
—If we continue cheating? she asked.
—I thought you said it wasn't cheating?
—Still I think it is.
—Then maybe we will get a sign later.
—And until then, better not make love.
—Better not.

And we didn't. We spent ten more days walking around Oslo. We drank four-Euro coffees. We watched movies. We visited museums. We talked. That we kept doing. And at night we cuddled. And we took showers. And we walked around naked through her apartment in the mornings. And she didn't excite me anymore. And I didn't excite her. We were like brother and sister. And we never cheated again, these days. Not one second. Not even the night we came back as drunk as we had been in Madrid, our first night. But no sign came. We took pictures that night. One of her. One of me. To remember always we had to believe in our dreams. And to remember that if everything went wrong we had someone nice somewhere. And to remember when we were old how beautiful the other had been. It's a beautiful photo, hers. I still have it. She is still beautiful. But we didn't make love again. And when I left Oslo I left her as a friend I would forget as soon as the plane took off and then we didn't see each other for something like a year and that was okay."

“More than a year had its reasons as well, I think,” said the other.

“Not really,” said Robbert. “In the end it simply didn’t work out. Time didn’t. A year can be short and long at the same time. And with seeing Malin a year was short.”

This is the kind of day where you get saturated by all the drinks in bars and restaurants because there’s too much time, Robbert thought then. Caffeine, alcohol and juice mix up my system already. And there’s still to come.

“What did you do after Oslo?” the other asked, clearly not saturated by the stories.

“I met Sofia. I worked hard. I called Vanessa to tell her I loved her five times a week.”

“Was it difficult to remember her, to remember her as what she meant to you?”

Robbert hesitated. Then he pulled the collar of his shirt down, a little to the left. “With this?” he asked. Parts of a black tattoo showed, at least a woman’s chin and chest were visible.

“Your white and untattooed unpierced body isn’t untattooed anymore,” observed the other.

“Can you see what it is?”

“There’s little doubt.”

“Who it is?”

“Vanessa.”

“Vanessa, yes,” said Robbert. “I thought it was a good idea. Thought. Past tense. The simple past, when this one thing was sure. She.”

“A memory?”

“And more.”

“Love?”

“Love leaves marks without tattoos.”

“But there has to be more to the story than only her.”

“It’s not only her. No, it’s only her but the tattoo is to remind me of more.”

“Of what?”

“Of a time in my life, of things that happened.”

“It is a memory?”

“It is to never forget certain memories, to be reminded about them every day I wake up.”

“What certain memories?”

“The memory of a very special girl that helped me to find love and of the love named Vanessa and things that happened afterwards. After all the things with our baby and killing it, life took some sharp turns. Death always has had the tendency to get to me. I get weepy when I see a rerun of the Challenger explosion or a protester being lynched in Asia. But when I became a murderer myself, it seemed as if I had made a bond with death. And I do not mean my death. I mean the death of others.”

“There was a very special girl,” the other repeated.

“Not like that! The very special girl was Lola. My Lola. Vanessa’s Lola. Lola, Lola, Lola without whom I had never been able to be truly happy and Lola who taught me all there was to know about loving Vanessa. Lola, with whom I spoke little but knew was always there, looking over Vanessa and me. Lola, Lola, Lola. Lola who I felt was stronger than me, above me. Lola who looked like a girl to take on the world, a girl that frightened me in the nicest of ways. Lola, sweet wonderful helpful lovely Lola.

Vanessa and I, in the time after the abortion, the killing, we took our love easier and I tried to settle in some sort of normal life. No more cocaine, no more one-night stands, no more pain to others. The abortion was on a Friday. In the weekend that followed we didn’t see each other. I called, but she preferred to be alone. She felt bad and so did I. *But almost certainly not as bad as she felt.* I spent the days reading and writing and I smoked cigarettes by the package. And I drank a bottle of whisky on both Saturday and Sunday. This kept me okay. I wouldn’t do anything else anymore. And I would only love Vanessa. I loved her a lot, more every day. On Monday I went back to work. My boss called me in his office immediately. It had been almost two weeks and I had called in sick. His office smelt of alcohol and he didn’t look happy. He sacked me on the spot.

So I called Lola who I remembered to be a volunteer in a small school project in a slum near my house. They were building a school for people without money to enter the formal educational system. Lola thought

good of me, so minutes later I was called by the leader of the project. He hired me on the spot. Not hired as in really hired; I became a volunteer. That way at least I would have something to do during the day.

The times that followed were easy ones. I think I was happy. At night I would meet Vanessa to have a nice dinner or eat something quick in the MacDonalds or spend the evening with a coffee in the StarBucks or we would go to see a movie and eat popcorn. We talked a lot and every time it was better than the time before. Then I would bring her home and kiss her and we would not make love for a long time but we loved each other more than ever. And when I didn't spend the night with her I would play pool with Tobias or go to a bar to have a game of poker and I lost more than I won but I didn't care.

In the weekends we went to dance, somewhere in a nice club with nice people and nice music. And three or four times a week I did work for the school as a volunteer. During the week I carried construction material to the little spot we owned in the slum or looked around the piles of discarded furniture lying around in the streets to find chairs and tables and occasionally something I could make into a makeshift chalkboard. Or I went through the thousands of books donated by a Western library to select the ones that could be used as teaching materials. Or I painted the walls. It wasn't much of a school, yet. Between the cardboard houses we had a patch of dirt and we had built walls of similar cardboard and a roof of plastic sheets supported by a weak wooden structure and there was no electricity and no water and no toilet and the floor was made of pressed mud but it was our school and we loved it and so did the kids. Already, over thirty kids came whenever they had time to play and learn basic things. In the weekends and the afternoons, when the volunteers didn't have to go to school themselves or to give classes to the kids, I gave classes in maths or English. And together we worked on a strategic plan. We thought about ways of raising funds. It was a great time and I felt useful.

Lola almost lived in the school. Our relation became friendship, we friends. The type of friends that are friends because they're related to the same person and depend on each other to keep this communal friend the happiest person in the world. I always kept some fear for Lola, did not really feel at home with her. Remember, she had the power to

take away Vanessa, I thought. She had the power to take away all I cared about at that moment.

Lola, as Vanessa, still lived with her parents. Her house was at walking distance from the project, so when there was a lot to do or when I felt like it, I stayed over at her place for the night. We would eat chicken with fries or rice and potatoes and then buy some bottles of beer and stand on the street and drink from one glass to make the beer last longer. On Fridays or Saturdays sometimes we went to a bar with the volunteers and I would buy the first round of drinks because I was the only one who could afford that. And the next round Lola would pay because after me she had most to spend. And then we would walk back to the houses and at first this would mean a lot of commotion because there weren't that much white people going there, but after a couple of weeks everyone knew me and it would be just another walk through the night. And every time fewer kids screamed *gringo* and more screamed *Robbert* and I felt welcome.

With Lola and her friends from the neighbourhood I sometimes went to the local food market and bought fresh vegetables and fish. Soon I knew the street plan by heart. The bed where I usually slept had a view at the stars. And there were chickens walking around. And sometimes you could hear gunshots in the distance. I always slept well. The streets were dirty and there were little pools of water that never dried up even though there was no rain for weeks and if I wore flip-flops the next day my legs would be all red and spotty from the bites of nasty little insects. Once or twice I got really sick after eating something in the streets.

And at night, looking at the stars, Lola sometimes came to my room and lay next to me to look at the stars together. We talked about everything. At first mostly about Vanessa. How we met, how we met again, our problems. Later we talked about absolutely everything. Hours and hours and hours we could talk. The red tips of our cigarettes another star in the sky. But we never did anything, don't get me wrong. My love for Vanessa back then had no limits. And Lola was off-limits. One night of sex with her would mean the end of so many nights with Vanessa. For me it was refreshing, a Peruvian girl who didn't undress the moment we were in bed together. She was like a sister. She was my bigger sister. She was my guide. Beautiful.

I learnt so much from her. I learnt so incredibly much from her! So much. She was only twenty years old, but in her looks at the world she appeared older. I don't mean conservative, as older is often misunderstood for, but wiser. She had a way of expressing herself with words I could not have found to say the same, not in a lifetime. I learnt so much from her.

She taught me to look with different eyes at poverty.

She showed me the happiness of poor kids.

She taught me the constellations.

She taught me the street language everybody used.

She redefined commitment for me.

She taught me to recognise diseases in kids.

She helped me to put a name on feelings.

She taught me poor people are not victims.

She understood my problems with Vanessa.

She showed me the definition of four Euros a day.

She showed me what my textbooks never did.

She inspired me to do something more.

She taught me to live a better life.

She made me make promises I still try to keep.

And then one day Lola and I opened the school early in the morning to prepare that day's classes. There was a terrible smell in the little building.

—What is that? I asked. Lola wasn't that impressed.

—There must be something bad in here, she said. She walked into the building and in the closest corner was something covered with flies. —It's a dead dog.

—A what?

—A dog that died. It looks like a puppy, still.

She walked over to the thing on the ground.

—Why do we have a dead dog in our school?

—Because it died in our school.

—Why did this dog have to die in our school?

—Could you stop asking stupid questions and help me solve this?

And we laughed a bit but that didn't solve the problem. And I couldn't stand it in there. The smell was terrible and the animal was in an appall-

ing state of decay, something that probably already started when it was still alive. The flies didn't make it much better. I threw up just outside the school, after a panic spurt.

That didn't make it much better either. Lola didn't look happy with me; the dog didn't trouble her that much. I picked myself together because I was supposed to be one of them and equal and helping and her friend and a friend doesn't leave dirty work to a girl. Together we walked to the end of the street where people usually threw their dirt and found a plastic bag and some wood and we constructed a makeshift coffin. Lola used it to pick the dead body up and I heard bones snap (at least in my head). I held open the plastic bag while Lola pushed the coffin in. It made me feel dirty. Together we threw the bag on the same pile of dirt where we got the materials from. Then I lit a cigarette and gave the animal a farewell thought. Lola was already cleaning the fly covered spot when I got back.

—Why did this dog have to die when we were opening? I asked.

—Animals die. They don't have much choice, she answered.

—Why do you think it died?

—Hunger, a disease, violence, how should I know?

—I don't know.

—Neither do I.

I helped her to cover the parts of the dog that still lay in the school with sand. I lit a cigarette in the school to mask the dead smell. Lola left to buy some disinfectant.”

Robbert stood up from the plastic chair in the juice bar. The other looked surprised. Standing up is an understatement, he jumped. Can I smoke inside, *can I smoke inside?* he wondered. “Can I smoke inside?” he asked the waitress. She waved *Okay*. With a cigarette lit he continued.

“I waited for Lola to return, or for one of the other volunteers. After an hour or so of waiting one of the volunteers came running to the school. —You don't know what happened, I said. —There was a dead dog in the school.

And this volunteer who usually was very polite and happy and interested only said, —We're not opening the school today.

—Why not?

And all he said was, —Lola is missing, gone.”

—Have you chosen a star? Lola asked.

—A star?

I didn't understand. There were hundreds, thousands of them. A star, you don't choose a star; stars are there and I didn't understand.

—A star for you, she explained. —There are enough stars for all the people in the world. Everybody can have a star. That's not more than fair.

—I have no star, I said.

—Choose one, you also deserve a star.

I looked up at the hundreds, thousands of stars. How do you choose a star? Below the equator stars are different, not the ones I used to look at when I was younger. How does one choose a star? There are so many.

—That one, I said, and I pointed at a very bright one. Lola placed her head close to mine to have the same view of the sky.

—No, she said. —You cannot choose that star. A star so bright is probably already taken. Do you want to share your star with other people?

I didn't want to share my star; I only wanted to share my star with Vanessa and Lola and it would be our private star and everything on this star would be brilliant and beautiful and now I really needed a star *I really needed a star.*

—Which is your star? I asked. Lola took my arm and helped me find hers.

—Do you see the two bright ones over there?

I nodded.

—Now measure the distance between both and take eight times that distance up.

I did what she said.

—Do you see the very small star there? The star is not really bright.

—I see it.

—That is my star.

Now I wanted a star even more and I wanted a star close to Lola's star and I wanted to know whether Vanessa had a star and all our stars should be close together so we could travel from star to star. About the width of a finger to the right of Lola's star I saw another small star.

—That one! I said.

—You cannot have that star either, Lola said. —That is Vanessa’s star. But you can have the even smaller one in between. Do you see that one between Vanessa’s star and mine?

I saw it, but with difficulty. I didn’t want a vague star. But I did want a star between Lola and Vanessa.

—That star will be my star, I said.

—Then now, whenever I look at my star or Vanessa’s star, I will also look at your star and remember you, she said.

And that was so beautiful and after that we looked at the stars so long and we guessed to whom certain stars belonged and every now and then I tried to find our stars *our three little stars* to make sure I could find them *and I could*. Why have I never looked at that star again *because I remember all without* but don’t you want to dream away with the stars *I miss her enough to also miss her star* but her star is still her star *and then I see Vanessa’s star that doesn’t hurt anybody to look at the star will hurt* look at the star tonight *I will* but I remember Lola also without her star.

22.

“They found Lola’s damaged body the next day. Abducted, raped and killed. Dead. People said she was the second girl that year to die like this. She never told me about the first girl. It was her neighbourhood. So full of life. Dead. Dead, dead, dead! Lola, sweet little Lola. Dead.”

Robbert’s cigarette was done and he lit another straight away. Maybe he was crying.

“They raped and killed her. Twenty she was. Beautiful. Innocent. She had never slept with a guy, she had told me. She wanted to save that for after marriage. She never raised her voice. She was always there. She had inspired me and made me smile and given me a reason. Dead.

The morning they found her the volunteers gathered. And again not knowing how to act I smoked in the street in front of the school which seemed even more dirty than normal. Some dogs walked by and they looked guilty. I threw a cigarette butt at them, but they had also lost one of their kin not too long ago so that wasn’t really a nice thing to do.

Throughout that morning the news about the rape and murder went around the little community a couple of times and every time someone knew some new detail. On her way to buy disinfectant she had been pulled in a car on the busy road that bordered the neighbourhood. She was driven to a shed on the outskirts of the slum. There she had been raped and her dead body was found in one of the dirt piles at the limits of the buildings. Everybody seemed to know who had done it. I never saw police and we did not open the school for another day but the kids came nevertheless and we consoled them although they didn't really understand what happened and I took them to the playground and we danced a little bit and I didn't really understand what had happened either but I smoked a lot that day. This was not my community it happened to and I never really became part of it in all the time I spent there. She was my friend but only for such a short period of time. When others talked about her I realised I hardly knew her. Just like the young children I didn't understand at all what had happened to her and why and the consequences. So we danced together.

But I had lost a friend and nobody never really knew about how important that friendship was to me and maybe she and I didn't even know about it until it was gone because she was gone. And all of a sudden she was so important to me. And so dead.

In the weekend we buried her in a coffin that very much resembled the one we had put the dog in and in a spot that resembled the dog's graveyard as well. It was a sad service and a lot of women were crying and the kids now understood better what happened and the parents looked really sad and quite some people were looking at me because I was not part of this but I was there so I put myself at a respectful distance and smoked and cried *and cried*. And I thought about how that night I would sleep in a comfortable bed after a nice dinner with Vanessa in a world where people die because they use drugs or kill themselves because they can't wear the latest fashion or just because they are old. And that Lola did understand this, this difference. Lola could have explained everything and I would have understood and I would have been okay and standing next to her. But I could never talk with her about it. Never because she was not there anymore. In the coffin, in the ground. My friend who I admired. Dead.

And I stood there with my expensive clothes and a package of Lucky Strike and an innocent young girl was murdered and raped and dead and would never bring smiles to the people again and would never be able to help me again. So many good ideas she had told me about in those nights with the stars above our heads. And never did I meet a person talking so much about making the world a better place and doing even more. I thought about the sparks in her eyes when the kids came to school, her happiness when one day I had constructed a little bench where the kids could work on. I thought about her always-messy black hair and her curious smile and how one day she wanted to study to become a doctor but first she wanted to do this. And I thought about how I owed her everything. She didn't have to be there, but she was. She took her responsibility. I thought about how she always smelt nice in a place so dirty and that her smell probably was the smell of an angel. The unique smell of someone merely doing good for others. And I thought about the dog we buried together. And that I had thought that I could come down to the slums and lighten up my spoiled and meaningless life by working in this small school project and that everybody would be happy and everything would be beautiful and nice and happy and beautiful. But nothing will change because of me. And that maybe it was because of me she was dead. To be seen with a white boy. A gringo. And that I am as much a part of the solution as I am a part of the problem. And when her parents threw sand on the coffin and everybody was crying I walked away even farther. *I was so stupid* and I still am. Vanessa joined me, her black clothes and her sad eyes and just too much for a little girl.

—Come, she said. —Come and join the service.

—I prefer to say goodbye later, when everybody is gone.

—We will go back often to do that.

—I don't understand it, I said.

—Did you understand what the people said? she asked.

—I guess I understood that. But I don't understand what happened.

—You don't feel well, do you?

—No. I never should have come here, I think. Not here to the slums and maybe not even here to Peru. I don't belong here. Sorry for ruining your life.

But she said, —Thank you for being here. And not only for you and

me. Not only because of what you mean for me. Thank you for being here for everything you do. You have brought a lot of light. In my life and in Lola's.

—No, I said.

—Shut up, she said. And I did.

Then, after five minutes or so, Vanessa took my hand. Her black eyes had the most beautifully friendly look in them I've ever seen.

—Thank you, she said. —Let's go to Lola's parents, they will appreciate it.

And they did."

The other looked in expectation at Robbert. A short silence allowed the two young men to light two more cigarettes.

"And you know," Robbert said, "life should have been so fucking beautiful. The sun, the girls, that I was out there helping. And it was all so close to perfect. You see, Lima in early winter is very nice in its grey ways. Very nice indeed. No place to be down. Damn. In winter, in Holland, with the rain and the wind and the cold days, there you can feel down. But I felt down. I felt lost.

And I felt nothing at the same time. Empty. I felt nothing. And I felt love for Vanessa. Or, love. I told her I loved her. *Te quiero. Te quiero, te quiero, te quiero.* And I think I loved her. And I felt guilty. I felt guilty, because in the end, doesn't love mean to protect? And how good I had proven to be in protecting. *I could not protect her.* I had failed her friend, I could fail her likewise. Everything, a lot went through my head at that time.

So I went home with Vanessa, the very night we buried Lola. We lit candles for her. Tobias had gone out. That made us happy. Or at least so we said. It made me happy. And we put on some music. And we went to bed. We undressed. Not to make love. We undressed to get the dirt of our bodies. The dirty clothes, filled with the emotion of the day. And naked we went to bed. We simply lay there, her head on my shoulder.

—Why are good things always taken away from me? she asked.

—You have been through a lot, I said. I didn't know what to say.

—Why? she asked.

—I don't know, I said.

—First the abortion, then Lola. And then you will go too, she said. I

heard tears in her voice. Tears I could understand.

—I will never go, I said.

—You will.

—Not like that. I will always be with you, somehow, I said. —And so is Lola. And I looked down at her head that was on my shoulder and how her dark hair made nice shapes on my tanned but white body. And her skin was so beautifully brown. And her body so nicely curved. And I thought about our stars always together *our stars always together*. Vanessa was lying on her side, her right side, one hand on my chest, the other against my side, her thumb almost in her mouth. Beautiful. A beautiful sight, even through the sadness, the bad things we had seen.

—I love you, she said.

—And I love you, I said.

—Will you always carry me with you? she asked.

—I will, I said, —always.

And there I decided to have her on my shoulder like that forever. With everything that reminded me of her, flowers, curves, all in black, like her eyes. Not only to carry her with me, but also Lola, also our murdered child, also how I felt that one night. It took me a week to design the tattoo. One week. Drawing, designing, doubting. Then we went to put it on my body together, Vanessa and I. And it will always be there. She will always be there now. *And Lola*. When I look down, alone in a hotel room, I see her. Always. And for a long time that made me happy for her and sad for the things it reminded me of. Now it makes me feel neutral. Only sad, sometimes, for Lola. I miss her a lot. I wonder what would have happened had she stayed with us.”

23.

The day was coming to an end. Not the day, but daylight. Daylight was coming to an end. The sun started to set, in the distance, above the sea. Darkness was about in the city of never-ending summer. There was still a lot of evening left. And then night. Short days, long nights. Down at the equator things are different from high and dry in northern Europe. Together the two young men walked back to the boulevard they

had visited earlier. In Tumbes there is not that much to do. Now the sun was setting the city looked even more miserable. Soon, Robbert knew, the city would finally tune up a little, when all light had gone. Night in the city, sometimes so beautiful. Sometimes so sad. They passed the Plaza de Armas again. The young waitress stood outside, looking for a lost customer, maybe a tourist. She smiled. The men smiled back at her and then walked on. The boulevard was busier than before. People were looking for a place to eat. A Peruvian Chinese restaurant did good business, the television set loud, the menus dirty from years of use. New prices were scribbled with pen over the printed numbers. Only the plain white rice had stayed the same, but who ordered plain white rice?

With their hopes not too high the two young men sat down and placed their orders at random, picking from the higher priced sections to be sure food would be good. Mistakes.

“Your stories, your ideas, they only trigger more thought,” said the other.

“So do your questions,” said Robbert.

“Have you ever thought you think too much?”

“Isn’t that the curse of our generation? Bereft of real things to worry about we waste our time thinking. Thinking about things we shouldn’t think about because the thinking alone makes them impossible to have. Because there are things you shouldn’t think about too much.”

“Things like what?”

“Things like what to do with your life. Things like why we exist. Things like how to be happy.”

“And you think there is no use in thinking about that?”

“I’ve thought about it and my conclusion is that I shouldn’t. I. And I don’t think I’m anything special, no exception. Take happiness, what we already addressed before. I thought about how to be happy a lot. That didn’t make me happy. And then I walked around in the school project a couple of days after Lola was murdered and I saw happiness in the other people and I didn’t get that. How can you be happy so soon after what happened? Not to mention, how can you be happy living there? There is nothing, the standard of living so low. More than once you could see children scavenge for food. Violence, poverty, hunger. *How can you be happy there?* And then I realised most real happiness I’ve seen in places

where it is furthest, at least by our European standards.”

“Because these people don’t think about it?”

“They still have other worries. Like how to get food to the table. Like how to make ends meet. Happiness accidentally happens to them. And now I know they are right. Happiness is not a goal. Happiness is in the things that happen. In appreciating what happens. In small things. Not in thoughts.”

“So you stopped looking for happiness?”

“I wish I had. Earlier I mean. Then, back then, I only looked for happiness. Everywhere. And instead I found pleasure, its cheap equivalent. In drugs, in girls, in extreme experiences. And pleasure works, it builds adrenaline and that feels damn good. For a while, at least. But it fades out. It’s not the real thing. Like drinking Red Label instead of enjoying a single brew.”

“You compare happiness with whisky,” said the other, surprised.

“Happiness can be in whisky, but whisky does not bring happiness.”

“That is what I mean.”

“Sorry,” said Robbert, confused now.

“You think too much,” concluded the other.

After the food they had another instant coffee. Happiness is in coffee, Robbert thought. Happiness has been in coffee so often that this alone is an argument for not looking for it. The coffee in Café Zeta in Lima, in the morning, with the sun and the traffic and a pen and paper and me writing down what Vanessa and I had told each other the night before. And how beautiful that was. And relaxed. And how I thought happiness was a feeling only valid in retrospect. And how that alone is an argument for not looking for it. Because you can only look back at things that happened, not at thoughts. Thoughts have no value in retrospect; they only make me remember how naïve I used to be.

“Shall we take a little walk and end the day with a good whisky?” the other asked. “Look for the happiness in a glass? All our talking has made me tired.”

They walked to a square near the Plaza de Armas. On the corner was a bar Robbert remembered from his last visit. It looked like a post office but once inside it was actually a good place to have a drink. Surprisingly fashionable for Tumbes, dark with black topped tables and comfortable chairs with coloured pillows. The bricks of the walls were visible and only decorated with small mirrors and classic beer ads. Behind the bar there was a huge collection of liquors and even some five whiskies to choose from. They ordered two of a relatively good brand without ice. At the early hour they were the only customers, which they just as well might remain for the night to come.

“How did your time in Lima end?” the other asked. “After Lola you still had some time left, didn’t you? What did you do?”

“Well,” Robbert started. Then he took a sip of his whisky and inhaled deep to get the full taste to go around his mouth, tongue and throat. They lit a cigarette each. “After the thing with Lola I continued working in the school project. Vanessa’s words had given me strength. But I decided to stay low profile. I tried to. It, let’s just say, had been enough for me. Five months had tired me like five years. In that era I doubted whether I could grow very old if I were to continue living at the rate I had done since January. And I loved Vanessa. I wanted to grow old with her. So I tried to take it easy, grow old.

Vanessa practically moved in. Practically meaning, she moved in. Her parents never asked a thing, I suppose. They probably never even really missed her. So she brought some bags with clothes and some stuff she took from her place. A hair-drier, some framed photographs, her favourite cuddly-toy. Our apartment was a house, but not a place to seriously live in, although Tobias and I had done so for quite some time without considerable problems. Vanessa added a bit to that, in a good way. But really, it was a special place.

Our little apartment was by far the best I have ever lived in. Tobias had brought up a pool table and I bought some candles and my iPod played songs whenever we were at home. When we were not down at a bar in the city’s richer neighbourhoods, there was a party. And all parties were those you see in Hollywood highschool movies and always

hope to participate in but of which everybody says they only exist in movies but everybody is wrong. In the end I guess every girl in Lima must have seen the insides of our apartment. And it was a good place for parties because there was almost nothing we owned. Nothing could be broken, or stolen, or dirtied. We owned two king-size beds, we owned two regular chairs and one desk and one comfortable chair that I used to put my dirty clothes on and Tobias's bathroom had a curtain and a little dustbin and mine only had a dustbin and such a thing in the toilet that makes the water turn blue when you flush until you have flushed too often and need to replace it. There was a refrigerator to cool our drinks but then we didn't really need that because we always bought them downstairs in the little shop and we never had food because there were enough restaurants in the neighbourhood. And we didn't have things like plates or knives anyway. Well, one knife to cut the limes and the orange-chocolate cake we would have on a Sunday morning and there were six spoons and a water boiler and six glasses which could be used for everything from milk to Mojitos and also a corkscrew and I think there might have been some other things that were left there by people who felt like leaving something. Maybe because they felt pity.

But we were not to be pitied. We had everything we needed. And then even more, because Vanessa moved in and slept next to me every night and was there every morning and I would look at her face while she was sleeping and I promise you there is nothing as beautiful in this world.

And then our living room, finally, was mainly occupied by a couch, some ashtrays and candles and in one corner there was a plastic flower which really gave the place some splendour. Without the flower it would have felt empty. Since that flower I appreciate the lively effect green has on otherwise grey places. And, of course, there was the pool table.

You don't know about the uses of a pool table until you have owned one. At first it served to get people over to our house but once the parties were famous we could use the pool table for whatever we felt like and I think we pretty much took the uses of a pool table to its ultimate frontier. Like, it's not like we did not play pool at the table. There were always some balls somewhere to be found and we had the cues and even these bluish things you use to chalk them and occasionally Tobias and I would play a series of games or other people would. But then, we

ate on the table whenever we took a take-away because one of the two couldn't get out of bed and we built Tobias's architecture models and I wrote down thoughts with chalk on the blue carpet and there was nothing better than to lie down on my back and feel the concrete under the blanket and smoke a couple of cigarettes and feel alive. The table was the guest of honour at our parties and we would cut the limes on the board and mix the drinks and of course we spilled on the table but who cared? And if the party got late people would lay lines of coke on it and it would be something solid to hold on to for those who got too drunk and if it got really late and there were only a few people left and the beds were already taken or when somebody wanted to, two or more people would climb on the table and have fun with each other and that would leave really nasty stains. After a few months the table told everything about our life and by then the carpet had the nasty effect of giving some extra effect to every strike. And by then Vanessa moved in and she didn't want to make love with me on the table because it was so dirty. But we played a lot of games of pool. She had no objections to that.

And after a party, the next morning, after I brought a coffee to Tobias in his room, I went and sat on the table and smoked a cigarette and talked with him from there because sometimes in the morning it would just not be nice in his room. Or I listened to music and tried not to dirty my jeans on last night's residues, the large windows open to get the smells out. Or I waited for Vanessa to wake up, a fresh juice at my side for her.

We did not clean. Down, at the gate, was a little boy who had rolled down from the mountains to find his fortune in Lima and he opened the gate for us and washed the cars of the owner and earned maybe fifty Euros a month so we would give him some Soles to clean our apartment. His name was Luigi and sometimes we invited him to play a game of pool or to drink a beer with us but he would never come to the parties as he had to guard the door and I guess he also liked the tall blonde girls that came over sometimes, hardly dressed, and to look under their skirts when they walked up the stairs. He said so, at least. I wouldn't know. He was a good boy and later when summer ended, I gave him my old jeans, which made a funny sight as they were rather fashionable, even though they were old. Not that I'm a racist but all guards I have ever seen only wore beaten down cheap jeans and it was just out of

place to see him like that but at least he wasn't cold anymore and now he even opened the door in the middle of the night if he woke up from the sound of the taxi. Luigi with his curious smile and my jeans and how he was happy after we had a party because he had opened the door for some beautiful girls.

And he liked Vanessa. He told me. He had never seen somebody so beautiful. Neither had I. And one day Vanessa opened the curtains of my room. And from the roof you could look into my room because it was at one of these light-shafts. And she was naked and Luigi just looked down from the roof where he was repairing something and after that he told me even more often he had never seen such a beautiful girl.

Luigi. I often thought about him when I had something nice going on. We gave him food and clothes and raised his income a little bit but we also made fun of him and also in his face. And like all people who have an assisting or attending job he must have known everything about us. He cleaned up after the parties and picked up the used condoms and brought the empty bottles back to the shop and tried all he could to get the stains out of the pool table. But when I left the city, to be honest, I forgot about him as I have forgotten about so many people back there who deserve to be remembered for what they did. I wonder if he remembers us."

This was where the other had finished his first whisky and in the short silence in which Robbert got lost in thoughts about the little apartment he finished his whisky as well. They ordered two more and lit two new cigarettes. The place was still empty apart from them and the waiter.

25.

"And that was how we spent these last weeks in Lima," Robbert continued, his new drink in his hand. "Vanessa moved in with me in the third week of June, something like that. We had five or six weeks left, together. It was a great time. And by the time my stay in Lima neared its end, it even got better. We spent more time together than I ever had spent with any girl. We went to the theatre, to museums, to hip parties, to bed. A lot of our moments together we spent in bed. Talking,

or eating ice cream, or making slow and sweet love. So often we forgot about the first hours of a day because we spent them on each other. Really, time together makes a relationship worth its while. And making love as well. But most of all we talked, listened music. I got to know her body by heart. I still do. Her tattoos, her piercings, the little holes in her lower back.

Two or three times (two times, but that sounds so little) we went to Lola's grave. Her death threw the only shadow over us. Literally, because Lima's sky was packed with clouds all day long. That gave our visits to her grave this extra that made them beautiful in their sad way. Sad. It was definitely sad and we were confused about it. We knew not what to do, what to really do. You see, death, death I think is something you need to learn. We were not experienced. We were murderers. We were not experienced. In my life I have lost nobody, had lost nobody. Neither had Vanessa. Death for us had been on television. Death for us had been a concept. Together we could beat this concept. We were invincible. Immortal. And had Lola still been alive, so would she have been. But she was dead. And that conflicted with us. It was our only conflict.

—I think Lola would have wanted us to enjoy every second, Vanessa said the second time we visited her grave.

—Nobody knows what the dead want, I replied.

We looked at the flowers we had brought. The earlier ones were completely brown already. Vanessa picked them up.

—It's an expression, Vanessa said. —Lola would have wanted us to go dancing, for example. Or Lola would have wanted us to paint our hair green.

—I know, love.

—Sorry.

—Don't say sorry.

—You're right, sorry.

We laughed and then swallowed our joy because where we were was no place to laugh.

—Lola would have wanted us to laugh, I said.

—I know, Vanessa said.

We felt Lola close-by. Every time when I turned a corner I expected to see her. Her death was so strange, so far from anything I could relate

to. I still do. Lola never left my head. She said some things; things I remember every day. In a lot of ways the dead can be more alive than the living. So many living I have forgotten, even among those I once knew well. Lola I will never forget. Maybe that's why I think I should be dead. Maybe that's why I envy more dangerous times. Maybe not for others, but to be remembered myself.

—Sometimes I feel guilty, Vanessa also said that day near Lola. —I feel guilty for having the best of times while I should be feeling bad for her.

—Do you think Lola ever wanted anybody to feel bad for her? I asked.

—No. No of course not. She wanted to live her life making people happy.

—I understand you, love, I said. —I understand because I too feel guilty.

What was true. What was why we probably talked more than made love. What was not bad and bad and not bad.

—I miss her, Vanessa said.

—I miss her too, I said.

—I love you, she said.

—And I love you.

—And I love Lola, she said to the grave. —I love you, beautiful friend. I will always love you.

Tears welled up in her eyes. And tears welled up in my eyes. We were crying. I held Vanessa close. It was no bad sadness we had, rather an innocent sadness of missing. This sadness I would learn to know thoroughly. This sadness I would learn to appreciate. This sadness that expects return. We knew nothing about death. I still expect Lola to return. I still do.

—Thank you, Lola, I whispered when we walked away. —Thank you for Vanessa. Thank you for what you told me some weeks ago. I promise I promise I promise.

—What? Vanessa asked.

—Something between Lola and me, I said.

She looked at me. She smiled at me. She did her signature little run on the spot hugging me.

—We owe her a lot.

—We owe her everything.”

“The weeks passed by too fast, and before we knew it was our last night together. Everything was arranged. I had finished my work, said goodbye to the people in the project. For the occasion she had taken a day off from university, one last day to spend together. I flew on a Saturday, in the afternoon, and after a good lunch on the Friday and some sweet coffee, we went to bed for the last time.

Unbelievable, we were indefatigable, couldn't be satisfied. Really. It was the slowest, nicest, most precious love I ever made in my life. Although I tend to say that often. Twelve hours. Halfway we ordered delivery pizza. We burnt candles all the time, but there was so much time, I had to change the candles at least three times. And all the time we talked.”

The other interrupted Robbert's long monologue, which gave him the chance to drink some of his whisky. “What did you talk about? What did you think?” asked the other.

“Everything. Love. Life. Lola. But most of all that this wasn't the last time. And about how she had to go back home the day after.

—I don't want to go home, she said.

—I know, beautiful girl, I know, I said. But did I really know this?

—And I don't want you to go home, she said.

—I have to. There are things I need to finish. But I will come back. Soon. I promise.

—When? When will you be back?

—Before the year is over, I told her. And I knew this was going to be hard. You see, I couldn't miss her, not even for a minute. When I was at the project and she at university, I missed her. That distance, maybe twenty kilometres, was unbearable. And the distance would become some eight thousand kilometres, four hundred times more. I couldn't miss her four hundred times more. I couldn't miss her at all.

—I understand you have things to do, she said, —don't worry. I will be waiting for you.

—That's so sweet.

And she meant it, I knew. And I meant it. We meant it. We would wait. *And I really thought I meant it.* Every word. Every word I said.

—Kiss me again, she said.
—Where do you want me to kiss you? I asked.
—Everywhere. The way we once started.
—Then I will kiss you everywhere, the way we once started.
—I love you, she said, while I kissed her neck.
—I love you more, I mumbled.
—And I will always love you one more.
—Then I will love you infinitely more.
—And I one more than infinitely.

I went down her neck, passed her vivacious breasts and kissed her stomach.

—How much do you love me? she asked.
—Always more than you love me, I said.
—You can't, she said, —it is impossible to love more than I love you.
—And still I do, I said.
—How much?

From her stomach I went to her hips, on the outside, down her legs. A kiss for every centimetre of her caramel coloured skin.

—One and infinitely more than you love me, I said, kissing her knee.

—And I one more, she said.
—You can't, I said.

—I can, I win! she said. —I always win. I am the best. I love you more.

From her knee I went up her leg again, this time on the inside, until where it tasted like strawberries. Until her little button that helped me to silence her. Or, silence, stop her saying things.

—This time I will win, I said. —Because I still love you more and you can't deny.

And I stuck my tongue in her and she couldn't reply nor deny nor do anything else than murmur and enjoy and feel happy for some ten minutes and then, when I went up to kiss her on her mouth, she said,
—I love you.

She said, *te amo*. Not *te quiero*. Not the light version. The real version. The for life version. For the first time. And I said the same. And then we fell asleep for thirty minutes or so. And I woke up because she was

returning the favour.”

Once again, the other had finished his drink earlier, but Robbert caught up and they ordered a third round. Two girls and a boy entered and sat down at another table. The bar started to look like a normal place to have a drink. The music was turned up a little. Almost, the place didn't look like a far-out corner of the world.

27.

“We repeated the same words the next day at the airport. *Te amo*, and, *te amo*. And so much promises and then tears and we tried to drink a coffee but I couldn't get it away. I couldn't swallow. And under the television that said my flight was boarding, we kissed and cried and drew an audience and then I had to walk through the gate because my plane would leave in fifteen minutes and I still had to get through immigration and security and find the gate.

I cried so hard immigration let me pass without checking. The woman just stamped my passport and then security helped me get through the metal detector and a service girl brought me to my gate, which was great because through my tears I couldn't see the signs. I was the last to board. And I stumbled through the tunnel until a steward picked me up at the entrance of the plane. The steward understood me.—Why the tears? he asked instead of simply saying the robotic words of welcome. His words brought more tears, the Dutch he spoke which made it so clear I was heading home. He walked with me to my appointed seat and helped me to put my carry-on luggage in the overhead compartment.—You just sit down and I will take care of you.

—Thank you, I said.

—Can I bring you some whisky? he asked.

—Yes, sorry... Please, yes.

As the guy spoke Dutch and I hadn't spoken my native tongue for months it was hard for me to express myself well and the tears and my thoughts *and that was not helping either*.

And he walked away while the rest of the plane was preparing to take off. I had an aisle seat but nobody was sitting at the window. The steward returned with the whisky. No ice. He was a good guy. Trembling

and still crying I sipped from the plastic cup. Before the plane started moving the steward had brought me another one.

—It's a girl, isn't it? he asked.

—It's a girl. It's the love of my life, I said, still uncomfortable with my native language. My contemporary emotions I had never expressed in Dutch. They were new to me and I didn't know the vocabulary.

—Holiday?

—No, I worked here for six months.

—I'm sorry, he said, and, —Would you like me to keep on bringing you whisky?

—Yes, I'd appreciate that, if it's no problem.

And even though the whisky was not really good and the plastic cup didn't help the taste, it made everything a little bit better and when the plane took off, I had my third one. I switched to the window seat and through my tears and the little round window I saw the lights of Lima. Millions of little lights and thousands of cars moving to and from *and one of these moving lights carried her* and I looked at them and got so angry at the injustice I was feeling. Her 'why are good things always taken away from me' came back to me every other second and I felt like screaming, screaming at the loudest and running and jumping and fighting just to kill the pain inside. And I felt I betrayed her, already. And Lola, whom I also left behind. And all the other people. And everyone. And Vanessa. *Vanessa*. The whisky helped. Whisky always helps. After the lights I saw the harbour and after the harbour the sea and the plane made a slow turn and through holes in the dense clouds I saw the last lights and then we were too high and I was really gone. I still cried and four more whiskies later I still cried. By then not only my steward but almost every steward in the plane looked after me and they were very friendly and they said very nice things and I could see they were honest and they really tried to get me drunk to ease the pain.

They said things like —You will see her again if the feeling is this strong.

And, —In a few days everything will look different.

And, —Just remember all the beautiful things you did together.

But that last one was not good advice because it made me cry even harder and finally an attractive stewardess came to sit next to me and

she put her arm around me and held my hand and that helped. I think I fell asleep with my head on her shoulder.

I woke up when last day's steward served me black coffee without asking and without sugar. I could have married this guy. Outside there were only clouds and the in-flight information said we were about to fly over London. Breakfast was more coffee and I seriously died for a cigarette but all in all I felt much better. At touch down I might even have felt good. I saw the green grass so typical for my country. I heard the language I'm raised in all around me. There was a faint feeling of coming home, returning to a real home. But I can now say I couldn't settle. I didn't feel at home at all after the initial feeling of belonging. My parents picked me up from the airport and in the car back to their house where I would live for the next two months I told some of the parent-proof stories. I didn't tell them about Vanessa. And even though I really moved in with them, with my own room and my clothes in a wardrobe instead of in my backpack and dinner at seven with them and my sister whenever she was at home I didn't feel like home. Most nights I slept on the couches of friends around the country. First, to catch up, and later, when being in Holland got on my nerves, only to be on the move and forget the emptiness I felt inside for only a few moments.

Lucky Strike must have been happy with me; I smoked some two packages a day. Ireland or Scotland or wherever they make whisky must have been happy with me; every week had its days in which I drowned an entire bottle. The few moments of happiness were when I called Vanessa. And we talked like we were next to each other. And most conversations would end in impossible promises. After two weeks I asked her through the phone if I could call her my girlfriend and she said I could call her however I wanted to and that she called me her boyfriend already and I wrote that date down to always remember. I thought it would last forever. I thought I would be back soon. I thought we would have babies without killing them.

Through my university, where I almost finished my studies, I got a nice job writing business cases and they paid me enough to save some money. I got through August and thought it was going to be okay but then my friends all went on holidays and I slept for two weeks at my parent's place and it drove me crazy. The nights I couldn't call Vanessa I

silently read a book, a bottle of whisky always within reach and a cigarette dangling from my lips. The words I read did not really come to me, only my own thoughts.

I thought about the million things I hadn't yet told her and the few moments we had shared. During the day I would drink black coffee and write the business cases and look endlessly at her photos. Then my parents went on holidays as well and I was really lonely. I can say I couldn't settle at all. At night I woke up and called to Peru to find her maid with a note that she left with friends. I walked around the little village my parents lived in afterwards without a jacket to at least feel something.

I only felt lost.

And then I finished my studies and my contract ended and it was late September and I had lost two months of my youth to smoking and thinking and nights in which I could only talk about Vanessa and to whisky and I had a beard for not shaving and overall I looked very unhealthy at least according to everyone around me. So I booked a flight up north to catch up with Malin whom I hadn't seen since Madrid that January and hadn't spoken that much either. My flight was early October. And it felt good to be in the Amsterdam Airport again, with my backpack full of clean clothes and an adventure ahead.

And what happened then, I already told you. I hid in Malin's bed for some days. We had our talk about cheating and honesty. About something that might show us what we did was good. About love.

I saw Tobias too, in Oslo, I nearly forgot."

"I wondered where he had gone," said the other. "A man in your stories. It sometimes seems your life is only you and women."

"My life is mostly me and women," Robbert admitted. "When I think things over, most of all. There are men. There are many men. I don't really care about men. They are alive. You know how I think."

"It's only you and all the women in the world."

"Not all of them."

"You and women of the world."

"Something like that."

"And sometimes Tobias," said the other.

"That's it," confirmed Robbert.

"And he is only a secondary character."

“No! That’s not how it is. All of them. Each and every one, are primary characters. All of them influence me. All of them made me who I am. All of them brought me here.” Robbert was screaming. His arms waved around.

“Then why do I feel all you care about is the women?”

“Because they’re all I talk about,” said Robbert although he knew the other knew this too.

“Why?” asked the other.

“Because that makes me feel good.”

The other smiled at Robbert. A smile of affirmation. A smile of *I got you*.

“Always when you know the answer for a question like that—” He snapped his fingers, at which he failed. There was no sound. Nevertheless, Robbert understood the sign. “—it means you have thought it over. Always when you respond immediately and fiercely, there is a story. Maybe there is room for one last story tonight. Will you?”

“Because you see through me, you know I will,” said Robbert. “But with another whisky.”

“Had we finished already?”

“Does it matter? I will make it a nighttime story. An easy one. A whisky one.”

28.

And with their new whiskies Robbert started his nighttime story, bedtime story. The last for the day.

“Tobias said, —So this is the Norwegian model you have been bragging about?

And Malin said, because she is not one to be silenced by rudeness, —There was no bragging involved. All he has said is probably true. Are you jealous?

We had gone for a walk that morning and after some unclear phone calls I managed to meet Tobias in a park near the Palace. Malin had walked me there.

—When I look at you, Yes, I think I can be jealous, Tobias said, because he neither is one to keep up appearances. —Yes, because it turns out the

stories have been true. You are a delicious girl. But then, why jealousy when soon we will have the city to ourselves?

—Are you proposing something? Malin asked.

They continued in Norwegian, a language I don't master. I can mimic the sounds though. I love the sound of their language. It sounds like making love with words.

—*Jek bar-e si va dhu tank*, Tobias said.

—*Gott dag vi-te va jek tank*, Malin said.

—*Din ø-y-e fortelle mek allt*, Tobias said.

—*Vill dhu mening mek ø-y-e eller mek crop*, Malin said.

The song continued. In this language I am lost. If women are difficult to understand, Norwegian is a queen. If I am searching, in Norwegian I never find. If the language of love knows no borders, Norwegian is its opposite.

—What are you talking about? I asked.

—Nothing, Tobias said.

—Nothing, Malin said.

—Okay, I said.

—I will leave you two alone, Malin said, —So you can continue to brag about me. And others. Have fun.

And she left, leaving Tobias to look at her.

—Well done, my friend, Tobias said.

We walked to a bench. We sat down. We lit cigarettes. It had been a long time. *Only two months*. Still good to see you again. You too. That way. Always. With some friends it never takes long to get somewhere. Tobias is such a friend.

—Yes, he asked. —Are you still with Vanessa?

—I am, I said.

—And Malin?

—We needed some nights to get used to the new reality.

—Okay, Tobias said. —Why?

—You have seen her.

—I have seen her. Why?

—She is impossible to resist.

—Aren't all women? Tobias asked.

—No. Or yes. There are women I can resist, I said.

—Attractive ones?

I hesitated, of course there are, I thought. Women are important, but not that much. Then I remembered. —Yes, also attractive ones.

—Give me one name.

—Lola.

—And if she hadn't died?

That was a good question. That still is a good question. What would have happened if she hadn't died? So much could have.

Tobias continued,

—Can you be faithful? Truly, I mean.

—Should I be?

—No.

We laughed.

—Of course not! When you're thirty-something you can settle down, now you should enjoy! Catch your share of STDs. Fuck around! Man, it's good to see you again.

And we laughed and talked about all the girls we fucked, all the girls we betrayed, all the near-or-real-trouble. Tobias appreciated the troublesome dishonest nights more than the straightforward love stories. I appreciated Tobias. I copied him or he copied me or we copied each other or we copied people we respected or I don't know. He said Vanessa was the best reason to masturbate and I felt proud. He said Malin was a reason to be faithful and I felt proud for not being so. He said women are honest neither and I knew he was right. It works like that, you know. Just like that. Exactly. Men are considered the evil in love. But there are two. Two sides. And he knew and I knew and we knew how to solve this. And I asked him why. And he said because men can't adjust to life beyond eighteen. No real man ever grows up. The only adults are women. Strange adult in Spanish is a masculine word. But then pussy is masculine as well. And penis is feminine. And women grow up but what is the fun in growing up if you're the only one? Boring boring boring boredom. And they together are so grown up. And that's why we can't. Because there needs to be balance. And therefore they like us. That's why they accept us. That's why they too cheat and lie and are unfaithful because they need this balance. Because men don't die, we don't grow up. Instead, women stop doing so. And we're the same.

Tobias said, —We have adjusted already.

And I thought he was right. He was often right. I thought.

And then we talked about experiences, anecdotes. We shared ideas, hopes, dreams. Literature, arts, women. It was like in the old days. We went for a bottle of whisky that attacked our financial means. Then we attacked all means. We played pool, we played poker, we scared away innocent young girls. We had dinner and we talked some more. It was like the old days. For the first time in months for an entire afternoon I felt like I was doing alright. Tobias encouraged me. I was doing alright. Tobias did the same. I was doing alright. In some years everything would balance. I was doing alright. We didn't have to grow up. We were doing alright. I was doing alright.”

MARCH TWELFTH

1.

The other had gone, disappeared. At least, he wasn't there. He wasn't there where he had been last night. Last night, after some more whiskeys. Not in the hotel room. Last night, conversation went nowhere. Finally, the other started talking, told some stories himself. Girls made up a great deal of what he said as well. Sometimes Robbert knew the girls. Sometimes they were strangers he would have loved to know. The details in his stories, sometimes it went too far. Alcohol opens. Was women really all the two cared about? Yes. No. It appeared to be. Men. There was more. Next were his ideas, dreams. Making a career, having kids, a car. And slowly the bar filled up. People came in, young people. Private conversation went to socializing. The girls; the young, young girls. The promising girls. And then there was more alcohol and things that shouldn't have happened that did happen as things that shouldn't happen always do. Then the hotel. They went home, the pay-per-day home, together and alone. Without them, the things that shouldn't have happened. Good. And they fell asleep. And now the other was gone. And Robbert tried to remember everything about the night and the day before until he concluded that the other had really gone and not never been. Or at least for now.

Robbert took a long shower, the hot water cleaning his body. Dust, sweat and sleep were watered down with cheap hotel soap. He masturbated, a thing he hadn't done in a long time. The satisfaction lasted not even a second. Disappointed and feeling dirty again he brushed his teeth. Then he got dressed in easy clothes and left the hotel room with one look back to make sure the other really wasn't there. As always he

felt guilty about leaving the bed unmade, conditioned as he was to take care of his own business.

The hotel was near an indoor market and outside motor-taxis competed for his attention, but the walk to the Plaza de Armas was only one cigarette long. To the right, right again, up the hill and on the square a little to the left to end up in the same place where he had his breakfast yesterday. He chose an outside table, but not the same one as the day before. Although often the changes in table were the only change in his daily routine, Robbert stuck to this rule of changing tables on every visit as a real traveller does to the same country. He ordered a coffee and was attended by the older woman (her younger colleague hadn't arrived yet). Then he lit his second cigarette to kill the time waiting for the water to be heated and the instant coffee powder to be found.

As always with a cigarette, thoughts took over his head. If this were a movie, he thought, the best had yet to come. And if this were a book, it was written badly. There is no plot, no development of character. It is just me who returned to a place where once I found nothing. What was exactly what I was looking for back then, maybe, and didn't find. But now I might be looking for something more. And I am not going find it here. If anywhere, not here. This girl, how did I end up here? These dreams, where did they end up? And if this were a movie she would be here. And if this were a book those dreams would have become disillusion. And in the movie there would have been a crowd of strangers, applauding for the kiss. And in the book the dreams and then disillusion would have turned into another kind of ambition. Maybe the opposite. And against better judgement I'd have followed them. As I followed her. As I followed whatever was there to follow over the last years. These dogs, running after a fake rabbit in the races. That was what I was. Running without a cause after fake ideals, fake ideas. And now I ran here. I'm a dog. *Woof. Woof. Fuck.*

All I learnt is to have a huge load of self-pity. Look at me. Look how bad I'm off. Look, *look!* I'm a dog. And everyone is against me. Look. Pity me. And such a character doesn't make the movies. Such a character doesn't make a novel. Not even Holden Caulfield pitied himself. I pitied him. And then I wanted to be him. And now I've turned into everything but him. Turn into someone else. Don't ever try it. You will fail. He had

ideals. I had ideals, now I have none. To make this world a better place. I can still do the alphabet with countries where people are killed in conflicts. Afghanistan, Burma, Congo, Colombia, China. The alphabet two, three times. *And he tried*, cared about nice people. And I sit here, waiting for my instant coffee, pitying myself. Look at me, I can do the alphabet. A, B, C, D, E, F, fuck. And it's *all* but my fault. *Don't let anyone lie to you, not even loved ones!* Not even yourself. And how I didn't allow girls to give me a blowjob because I thought that didn't show them the proper respect. Also something I took from Holden, what did he say? If you like a girl, then you're supposed to like her face, and if you like her face, you shouldn't do dirty stuff to it. And I consider a blowjob dirty stuff. But what did Vanessa do? What did I let her do? What did I ask her to do? All these ideals, lost. And now I follow my primary instincts. I'm a dog. Fuck.

And where is the coffee? I don't want to hate another race for not bringing me my coffee. And I can't hate races, because I'm white. I can dislike the Jews, the black people, women, but I can never say that. I'm too white. I'm suspicious. And in the end, I don't really dislike them. I don't dislike anyone at all. Actually, most of them are rather nice people. Seriously! Only sometimes, when they have worked hard and smell like sweat and come too close. I don't really dislike anyone. Myself, yes. And her, yes, not really, yes, sometimes, yes. Definitely sometimes a little bit. *Why don't they bring my coffee?* There she is.

The older woman placed a big pot of hot water and a new can of instant coffee powder on the table in front of Robbert. He thanked her. Then he made a coffee. There was enough water in the pot for two or three coffees, but he knew they would only charge him one. So he would tip. Tip good. People don't drink coffee here. People don't drink coffee in the countries where coffee is made. They drink Coca Cola though, but hardly coffee. They export their beans, have them turned into powder and buy them back. What a waste. But that doesn't mean you should take advantage of them. A can with instant coffee powder like this is at least twelve Soles on the market. And in these remote areas even more. With the coffee at two Soles on the menu and me using so much, they never make a healthy profit. I wouldn't be surprised if they made a net loss on me. So I tip. It's risky business though, tipping. Tip too much and they

think too much. Like this young girl yesterday. My god. She promised something with her brownish fleshly firm breasts contrasting with the white too far opened blouse and that makes me want to bite them, kiss them, gently touch them, take pictures of them and masturbate thinking about sucking them. And then he promised with his generous tip. And then the promises were due, over whisky. Poor girl. Nice girl. Sexy girl. Delicious girl. Where are you?

And it is the knowledge they bought the coffee for you. Because you drink the coffee and they don't. So yesterday somebody went to buy new coffee for the gringo. And what if he hadn't shown up? Twelve Soles is the average daily income of the people here. All income gone to the gringo who didn't show up. But they don't say that in the Lonely Planet. And they don't tell you about so much other things. A restaurant with burgers, alright. A hotel with swimming pool, alright. But a bed under the stars with an intelligent girl who gets killed only because she's a girl, not a word! The ease of losing your heart? Silence! Don't get tricked by the fake dealers, yes, they write. They are cops! But that you're supposed to bribe them, supposed to fight and betray *and*. Be honest please. I should write a real dangers and annoyances about the world, Robbert thought. Not the stuff like although Peru is considered a safe country travellers should be aware of the usual scams. No. The real dangers and annoyances, by me, by Robbert Codde. Like, watch out, their daughters are beautiful and intelligent and great in bed but they will one day break your heart. And, the cocaine is wonderful and cheap and high quality but after a while it will ruin your heart and head and hopes and dreams and everything. And, don't go to Tumbes unless you're in really serious trouble with yourself. And remember that to pity yourself as a white northern European male who has no AIDS and who is not gay and who is considered relatively attractive especially by unknowing Latinas who fall for his blue eyes and blond hair *is a fucking waste of time*. And I don't need that *and I don't want that* and I never wanted that and I don't want that now.

Cheer up.

This coffee is really nice.

Never-ending summer.

What was I thinking about?

And he didn't remember so he lit another cigarette and made another coffee and ordered some eggs on toast with a fresh orange juice and then he waited.

2.

From the other side of the Plaza de Armas, the side where the hotel was, Robbert could see the other coming. Full of energy, ready for the new day, a fresh pace like a renewed man. He put his hand up once he was within greeting range. Robbert nodded back. Then the other reached the table and sat down.

"I thought you had gone," Robbert said.

"Only to buy some things," the other said. He waved to get the attention of the waitress. And when she was there he also ordered breakfast. It felt like planned.

"I brought you something, a gift," the other said.

"What is it?"

"Something I think you will like." And the other got a package of rolling tobacco out of his little bag and put it on the table in front of them. "I also bought paper." He dug in his pocket, then his other, and placed a little carton package on the table next to the shag.

"What? Where did you get this? It's, it's my favourite brand."

"I know."

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

And Robbert knew it was virtually impossible to get your hands on a package of rolling tobacco on this side of the world. And even more impossible in Tumbes.

"I also bought tickets out of here," said the other.

"Tickets out of here? Tickets? Where are we going?"

"Surprise."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"But——"

"Aren't you going to roll me one, cowboy?" the other asked. And, confused, Robbert did. It had been a while since he had rolled a cigarette

like this, but it worked out alright. He handed the other one and then rolled another for himself.

“Thanks,” he said, “but I don’t understand.”

“Trust me. The only thing you will have to do is not do something. Don’t get stuck here today. I know about your tendency to get stuck in places. Over a girl. Over a body, rather. Don’t do that. Not today.”

“Okay. As in, I can’t see that happening here.”

“You said the same about Lima,” said the other.

“That surprised me. That wasn’t planned.”

“Then make sure you do plan today. Plan not to.”

“It won’t happen here,” said Robbert, unsure why.

“Good,” concluded the other.

“Good,” repeated Robbert, not that certain it was. What was good?

“Let’s enjoy our last day here, then.”

The breakfast was served. Toast, fried eggs sunny side up (the yellow too yellow) and plastic marmalade. Very natural juice, no sugar. Sun, again, and some birds whistled. A very, very normal morning. There was nothing in the air.

After breakfast they ordered more coffee and rolled more cigarettes and there was not this need of the day before. No need for these stories, for this trying, for searching, for formalities, for revelations. Mostly the two men sat in silence, drinking and smoking. Or they said things like, “Don’t you love fresh juice in countries like this?” and, “After a while instant coffee is quite alright.” and, “Strange there are so few tourists.” and, “Do you think it will be awkward to see that girl again, after last night?” Because that after all the talking and when the place filled up last night and that they got into conversation with the younger girl who had served them the day before was on the top of both their minds. And she had kept her promise so well. She made a lot of promises. And then the things that shouldn’t have happened happened and maybe, just maybe, this young waitress did things and one of the two young men did things. And these things definitely would make seeing each other again awkward such as it’s awkward to see someone you asked out again after this someone said no. Especially when the other is maybe sixteen. And you’re not. So they decided to pay for the breakfast and walk around town again.

They looked at the water in the river from the bridge that connected the city to the south of the country. Water. Plain simple nothing-special water coming from somewhere and going to the sea and then to wherever it pleased.

“I really never planned for this to happen with Vanessa,” said Robbert. Water inspired him to open up again.

“But she did not only happen,” replied the other, “you also allowed her to happen again.”

“I went back, yes, if that’s what you mean.”

“That is what I mean.”

“I went back for her.”

“For her,” the other repeated.

With the water nothing but really nothing happened that could even give the tiniest explanation for the silence that followed these words. So the silence had to be the natural kind. The kind used to put emphasis on the things that are said. Some call it the awkward silence, others truly divine. It defines as well. And then,

“I have taken so many planes the last two years,” Robbert said, “for so many reasons. Sometimes it felt like everything was another take-off and the uncomfortable air-conditioned atmosphere and these stupid little cans of soda with too much ice and a friendly voice telling me the outside temperature in yet another town. And of all these flights, of all of them, maybe the only one that made any sense was the flight back to her.

To fly for love. To travel for love. To get on a plane on a journey I couldn’t completely afford to follow a dream that had existed and lived in the back of my mind ever since and probably would never come back. It felt so stupid and so good at the same time. It was beautiful, only to be on that plane. Only to do it.”

“And then?”

“And then the plane touched down on Jorge Chavez and it was Lima all over again and this time no plans to make the world better and no ambitions and no future and only one thing I wanted *and that thing was her* and only maybe so many metres away. So I ran through immigration,

ran through the airport. Almost forgot to pick up my backpack and then ran through customs with my fingers crossed they wouldn't check me and they didn't. Into the arrivals hall. Looking. And then,

—Love! I screamed. She was there.

—Love! she screamed and I crossed the five meters that still separated us.

—You're so beautiful, I said. First words are important and I had practiced them. I wanted to say something a little bit more poetic. Something a little bit more memorable.

—No, she said.

—You look stunning.

—You're here.

—I love you so much.

—I love you more.

—I missed you.

—Love.

—You're so beautiful.

—No, you are! And then I jumped on top of her and she almost fell over because of the combined weight of me and my backpack.

—I missed you so much, I said.

—You're here, she said.

—Let's go outside.

And we went outside and it rained. In Lima. In summer. It never rains in Lima. And it was like how sometimes in movies all of a sudden there is sun while it is raining all the time to make a moment even more dramatic. And she was so beautiful I couldn't believe I was there with her. But she was there, with a little bottle of Inka Kola and I took that and drank it and then we kissed in the rain and we both tasted like Inka Kola and I cried and she cried and I lit a cigarette but only wanted to kiss her so I took one drag and threw the rest away.

—I missed you so much, I said again.

—I missed you, love.

—Now we are together.

—We will always be together, she said. And we took a taxi to the city centre and it was dreamlike to be back and the wet streets looked different and it was night but I loved her and we checked into the hostel.

Then we went to have a beer. And I couldn't stop kissing her.

—I missed you so much, I said for the billionth time.

—I have been waiting for you all the time, she said.

—Thank you.

—Thank you for coming.

—I dreamt about this day.

—I can't believe you're here.

—I am. I cannot believe I am here.

And I took her hand to feel that it was true and we drank our beer and I ate something because I was ravenous and then we walked back to the hostel.

—You're here, she said. She couldn't believe it either.

—I will always be where you are, I said.

—How are you? she asked.

—I am so happy. I love you.

—I love you more.

—I will always love you more.

—I will love you infinitely more.

—You cannot, I said and I meant it.

—I can. I love you more than the stars and the moon and the sun and the rain and the sand and——

—We're the same again, I hushed her.

—We are the same.

—You are perfect.

—I'm perfect with you.

—We are perfect.

—We are perfect together.

—I love you.

—I love you more.

And we went on like that and then I went down and bought some cans of beer in an all-night shop and we drank them on the bed and we played our Guess-The-Number-And-If-You-Are-Wrong-You-Will-Have-To-Take-One-Item-Of-Clothing-Off game and we were stripped and we looked at each other and there was pure unconditional love and then we made unconditional pure love. And I bit her ear. And she bit my neck. And I kissed her belly. And she kissed my nose. And I hugged her.

And she hugged me. And we cuddled. And we made love. And I made her dirty. And she made me happy. And I made her make noises. And I had missed these noises. And she even made me make noises. And we repeated our words all the time. And we repeated our actions all the time. And we caught up for weeks of the months without the other. And it was unreal. And then she fell asleep.

And if there was one night in my life I could put on repeat if I had the chance, it would be this night and only this night. From the second I saw her again at the airport to the moment I felt her shudder into sleep. Every time again, to see her, to have the drink, make the love, fall asleep. Again, see her again, another drink, more love, sleep. See her drink make love sleep. Again and again. Over and over again. All the time. Rewind and play, stop rewind. See her all the time see her and have our drink our love our sleep. Maybe six hours but these have been among the six most valuable hours of my life. *But that I don't know.* There have been so many wonderful hours. The stars with Lola. The Sunday morning with Sofia. The rum with Malin. *But these six were beautiful so beautiful.* Different. And I know there is no way I can ever live these hours again although I still see them in my dreams. And now I want to cry whenever I think about them. I want to cry because the passing of time is something I cannot stop and I cannot undo. My definition of temporality is these six hours. Every second of these six hours was a second only lived once and although every second is a second only lived once I'm more aware of these seconds and the impact they have had on my life and everything that happened in these seconds in these hours on this rainy summer night in Lima. The way I couldn't close the windows all the way when we were about to make love; how I noticed my white shirt had been stained by an opened shampoo bottle in my backpack; how her eyes twinkled when we sat entangled on the bed; the taste of the beer after almost a day of airplanes; the fact that we left without waiting for our change in the bar because we had to be together right there and right then. All of it was one time, one shot and we scored. And every second you should try to score because every second might be this second you want to have on repeat forever when you meet new people and tell them about your messed-up life because your head screams with the strength of a thousand voices and talking about it in one voice

is all you have to silence them because somewhere after these seconds something went terribly wrong.

So I said to my sleeping everything, —I love you. I love you for me and more than I ever loved anything in the world. And I don't care how much you love me and maybe you love me more than I love you, but I cannot love you more than this. I cannot love anybody more than I love you right now.

And that was very true.”

4.

Robbert presented the other a cigarette, a normal one. He wanted to treasure his gift. They smoked together and then threw the butts in the river beneath. The water carried them away to the sea immediately. Next the other offered Robbert a cigarette and they smoked another one.

“And you know what is so strange?” Robbert asked. “That I was really happy. But then, that night, I had a dream. And that was so strange. Because I was happy. And this dream was so bizarre

I am standing in the middle of a huge desert. There are other human-like creatures around me, at a distance that looks alright in a desert. Maybe they are people. They look at me. And the strange thing is that the desert is like a steep mountain, and that I am standing on this vertical wasteland. Gravity goes parallel with the surface, but somehow I stand tall in the little gravity field of the desert. It feels like I'm standing in the Sahara on a little globe in our real world, exactly that angle. And I can't fall. Do you understand what I say? I can't describe it any better.

And the other people look at me. I think they are people, anyway. And that is not strange because I'm holding our world in my hands. It's a small blue ball, a little bigger than a football and it's all we are. Our entire world in my hands and there are six billion people on this ball. I know that and they live on it and they love on it and they lose themselves on it and they kill each other on it. The other people talk to me; they tell me to throw the ball up and catch it again. They are more powerful than I am. They force me to act with their willpower. They force me to throw our world and the six billion people and all the buildings and farms and factories and lakes and roads and churches and mosques and

animals up and catch the ball again. Just once. They whisper to me, *just once, try it once*. And their words are powerful. So I throw the ball up, but up in this dream world is away from the desert. The ball gets in the parallel gravity field that is stronger and the ball falls down and down in that world is not back to me but away from me. And I will never be able to catch it again. And the ball falls farther and farther away from me. And I will never ever be able to catch it again. I threw our world away and everything it is and all we have and I didn't catch it and it is all my fault and I woke up.

And it's a dream I've had before. But never when I was next to a girl. And never when I was this happy. And it was so strange.

The first time I had this dream I was only twelve or thirteen years old. The dream came with a smell and a taste and the voices of the human-like creatures that told me to throw our world up and this taste and this smell and these voices didn't go away when I woke up. They are always there, telling me I should do more and that I threw our world away and that I am responsible for all that happened and happens and will happen and that only I can stop it again. And later I learnt to silence these voices with whisky and cocaine and marihuana and everything that does not give my head the time to settle down and relax.

And to make love shuts them up. And Vanessa shut them up. And to make love with Vanessa had kept them quiet since our first night. She was a medicine, was, was, was. My little medicine. My drug.

And I noticed that when I travel the voices take some time to catch up with me. And that's maybe why I travel. And I noticed that when I dated many different girls the voices needed time to get acquainted with the new girl and kept quiet for a while, so I dated as much as I could. I noticed that the voices were silent whenever I was in extreme situations, so I tried to be on the edge as much as possible. But they were always there, hushed or aloud. Always there. And they constantly told me I did it. I am responsible. I am the only person who can change this.

So I sat up in bed, this very first very special so special night with Vanessa and I woke her up.

And Vanessa asked, —What is it, love?

—Nothing, I said, because how do you explain that? I'm sorry my little cute princess but I just had this fucked-up dream and maybe that

means I'm crazy so although I travelled the world for you, maybe we should end our relationship now *because I am crazy?*

—Are you sure? she asked. She was no stupid girl.

—No, but I will tell you later.

—You can tell me now.

—I know, but I will tell you later.

And I put my hand on her arm and I didn't know why that night and why with her and why in this hostel so I said, —Go back to sleep, love.

—Hmmhmm. Come and lie next to me.

So I did. I held her and smelt fresh sleep and the residue of love made on her body and it smelt really nice, way better than my desert.

—Are you alright? she asked again.

—I am okay.

—What happened?

—Just a bad dream.

—I will protect you.

—You cannot, not against this. But thank you.

—I will always protect you, love.

—You're sweet.

—Don't worry.

—You're beautiful and you smell really nice, I said and I buried my nose deep inside her hair.

—No.

—You are perfect, my love.

—Only with you.

—I will never leave you.

—I love you.

And then we were silent and I felt her shudder into sleep again and some time later I must have fallen asleep as well, because the next thing I remember is smoking a cigarette with the sun peering through the half opened windows and Vanessa's head on my free arm and the smell of a just awoken city."

“Let’s go,” said the other.

“Where to?” asked Robbert.

“To where we can sit down for a while and have a drink. Down the road. Follow me.”

The two men walked down the road, away from the city. Here the houses were more scattered; houses that were more shops or workshops with a curtain as a door. Flat roofs, walls painted with advertisements for beer. Children played in the sand. In the shade of their makeshift stalls parents awaited a customer who probably only showed up once every so many days. An occasional truck blasted by, one of the driver’s hands always on the horn. Street dogs scavenged the dirt. A place like any other in the poorer regions of our world and it reminded Robbert of what he once wanted to change. Maybe a thousand metres down the road they found a little bar. Two faded plastic tables that once were bright red and an assortment of chairs under a thin tree, nothing more. The bottle of beer they were served to share was not really cold.

“I think we should have a toast,” said the other.

“To what?”

“To you. To us. To being here?”

“To being here, then.”

“Or do you have a better suggestion?” asked the other. He hadn’t raised his glass for the toast yet.

“To being here, that’s okay.”

“It’s special enough, you being here.”

“And you. But it is, you’re right.”

So they toasted to being there.

Then Robbert said, “I start to believe that you are real. And if you are real, then this is real. And if this is real everything that has happened was real. Really real. As real as my tattoo is real, which is very real without a doubt.”

“I am as real as real can be,” said the other.

“I start to believe that. You know, for a long time I wondered, what if this were a dream; what if I woke up one day and were still in Holland, in the small student room I left behind? And you know what, in a way

I would be happy. If this were a dream, I would be happy. If I woke up and looked down and noticed there was nothing on my chest, no ink and no pressure.

And I know where I fell asleep if this were a dream. Exactly. It's a lost night, somewhere in the early autumn three years ago. Because the next day I woke up and they told me I could go to Peru. And ever since I've sometimes doubted if all this were only a dream."

"Because you cannot believe it? Or because you don't accept it?" asked the other.

"I accept everything, but I can't believe that happened what has happened. You see, in a way everything has a place in this story. And I think that's strange. Because life is not a story and there is no plot so a lot of the plotlines should die out or disappear and they don't. Everything seems to have a place. It's just too coincidental. I don't know."

"And you do think all this has a plot," said the other, with an inquiring tone in his voice. Robbert knew he did not believe there was a plot in all this because he did not believe it himself or he did believe it or he did not. Still.

He continued, "For example, I couldn't really afford this second trip to Lima and, well, I cannot control my expenses so I ran out of the little reserves I had before my flight back. And then all this with Sofia started (I will tell you about that later) and I had no job and no money and rent to pay and food to buy and cigarettes to smoke and nothing, nothing to pay my bills with. And then out of nowhere I find this job, within what felt like days actually, that does not only bring me money but also the opportunity to take Sofia out to forget what happened (I really have to tell you about that) and helps me to be together forever with Vanessa. And at the same time it's the end of it. And that brings me here. And had I not been here two years ago then I wouldn't have been here now. And it always goes around in circles. Life goes around in circles. And now I am where I was some two years ago, so my circles are two years. And I only recently figured that out. So everything will happen again. But it cannot, had not all in the previous circle happened. And I go around again. Two years, because when I think back it has always been two years. Two years and another circle. The same all over again. First the loneliness, being lost, then finding love and a purpose, then losing my

purpose to the love, then losing the love and finally losing all purpose and being lonely again. And what I learn I take with me as memories and scars, but it's never enough to break from these circles. Three I've counted for sure, thinking back. Maybe even five. Ever since I went to high school. Six? And they're always some two years and——" Robbert suddenly fell silent.

"What?" the other asked.

"And something like every two years I meet you. Without any prior plan, out of nothing, somewhere."

"I thought you didn't remember even the last time we met."

"I told you I do now. And now the other times come back. Do you remember them too?"

"Of course, but——"

"Shh, Be quiet. First there is now, just after. And then there was Madrid, when I just decided to take my chances abroad. And then there was back at university, when I was so fed up with my studies that I decided to do this international development thing, which brought me here in the first place. And two years earlier, when I started this bullshit relation with that girl who I thought was the second love of my life. And we talked a lot about that, because you were there also two years earlier when I had only recently broken up with the first love of my life. And then two years earlier. You are there every two years and always at the beginning of a circle, or at the end, as circles have beginning nor end. Fuck. What is this? Tell me, dammit. *I want you to tell me now! Why do we meet? Who are you? Joder. Porque has venido aquí? Why do you show up at all in my life? Cuéntame, por una vez en tu puta vida cuéntame! Tell me, godverdomme, vertel het me!*"

They say you can't hide an accent when you are emotional. You can't hide your native tongue either. Robbert used all the languages he mastered and even those he didn't master to swear and shout and he took his time. Slowly, his words died out; he was sweating. And finally his words were nothing more than lone sounds, almost silence. All the time the other said nothing. And when Robbert stopped, in all languages, they drank their beer.

“What happened with Sofia?” the other asked. He finally broke the silence that had been surrounding them for a too long time. Robbert did not respond.

“Hey I’m sorry,” said the other. “We happen to meet once every two year. Maybe there is a reason behind that and maybe there is not. There are people I meet every four years. And people I meet every two months. We meet every two years and in your life there’s always something that just happened. That isn’t me.”

“I know,” said Robbert. And then, “I think it’s more that I realise how strong this two year circle is.”

“At least you know there will be good things coming to you as well.”

“You can never know the future.”

And they were silent again. Robbert got up to get another bottle of beer from the poorly cooling fridge. He signalled the people running the place not to worry, stay seated against the wall of your little shop. The smiled and nodded.

“Sofia,” he said when he sat down again. “One of the last days in Peru, that January, she called me on my Peruvian cell phone. We had been sending messages all the time I was there. Small things. Her call surprised me and I immediately knew something was up. When I answered the phone I was certain.

—Robbert, she said, with so many tears in her voice that I could hear them across the Atlantic and through the shitty connection. I asked her what was up.

—It’s terrible, she said. -I, I—

And then there were real tears. I had never heard or seen her cry, or talk about that she did it. Sofia is a very sweet, but strong woman. I couldn’t comfort her; I didn’t know what was the matter.

—Remember this bar where we met? she asked. Of course I did, it was one of my more pleasant memories. She continued, —Yesterday I went there and there was a guy who recognised me. But he was friendly. And good-looking. And I guess I missed someone friendly around me now you’re not here. You know, a hug, a cuddle, some well-meant words. And this guy, he bought me a drink and it was really nice—

She interrupted herself with tears and I heard her swallow to continue. I couldn't think of anything better to say than *It's okay*, which it wasn't.

—And he must have slipped something in my drink, because I remember he asked me to come home with him and I never say yes but this time I did. I couldn't say no. And everything felt strange but I wasn't afraid. *I was afraid*, but I couldn't do anything. And we went out and he took me to a car and he called people on his cell phone. But we didn't go to any home. We went to an abandoned house behind the Red Light district. And I was so afraid but I couldn't do anything. And he took me into the house and there were more men. Two or three. And——

Again tears made it impossible for her to speak.

—What happened? I asked. —What did they do to you? Tell me, you can tell me.

But she kept crying and I repeated that she could tell me.

—They raped me. Robbert, *they raped me*. All of them. And I couldn't do anything. And they did terrible things. And. And. And it hurt so much, so much. Robbert, I feel so dirty.

And what do you say then? *Fuck*. The sun of Lima in summer burnt in my neck, I just had my morning coffee and I was looking forward to my last nights with Vanessa. And we were so many thousand kilometres apart. I heard her desperation but I couldn't feel her pain. I couldn't. And I could not comfort her. All I could do was promise her to come home soon. And I promised to try to change my flight. I had a five day stopover in New York on the way back. I promised to try to cancel that. But I also thought that was good, because I was out of money, almost, and couldn't afford New York. And that made me feel bad. She was still crying and she kept repeating it hurt and I remembered the book I once read about communication between men and women so I didn't ask her if she had reported it to the police and other solutions but only listened.

—They also made photos, she said.

—They didn't use condoms, she said. I wasn't surprised by that. I didn't think about diseases like she did. I didn't use condoms either.

—It hurts so much, she said.

—I thought he was a really friendly guy, she said. And I remembered she said she only needed someone. A hug, a cuddle. *I wasn't there*. We

had hugged, cuddled. For sex she needed no other men, she had more sex than you and I and a lot of other people together and got paid for it. We met to be nice with each other. To feel human warmth. To feel love. And she missed that. And now three or four men had raped her and taken pictures and I was in Lima smelling like Vanessa because of the love we made only hours earlier in my hotel bed *and it didn't fit.*"

Robbert emptied his glass at once. They drank from these small glasses so typical for development countries, smaller than a glass to drink juice at home. Really small. Still it was too much to drink at once unless you had to forget something, something to drown in alcohol.

"I couldn't change my flight. I tried, but of course I hadn't paid the couple of Euros extra to make my ticket flexible. So I couldn't. And you have no idea how terrible New York is when you're almost out of money and when your friend, maybe your best friend, needs someone more than I can imagine someone ever needs someone. So I spent my days counting the hours left and walking around Manhattan and Brooklyn looking for cheap places to drink a coffee or have some food. In the end New York isn't that expensive, so I had enough money to buy whisky and try to forget everything going through my head. Don't forget I had left Vanessa again too. That hurt as well.

Fortunately I had bought a lot of cigarettes in Peru and I smoked almost all of them in New York. Ten packages in five days.

And then at last my flight home, to Sofia, and I bit my nails for the eight or nine hours I was in the air. She was waiting for me at the gate in Amsterdam Airport. It's a strange experience to be picked up by a porn actress from an international flight. All people who look at you seem suspicious. But it's even stranger to return from a month's journey so full of experience and happiness and new stories to tell and not be the one who is expected to speak. She was. Sofia was. She looked amazing. And she looked terrible. She is so naturally beautiful that even without makeup and with red eyes and her shoulders down she has an enormous impact on me. Simply seeing her and then remembering why we were there. Amsterdam Airport never felt so fucked up.

—What happened, beautiful, I asked her.

—Hey handsome, let's forget about that for now. Cheer me up with your stories, Sofia said. We took a taxi to her house. The once so stylish

apartment looked like a student flat now. Empty bottles of strong liquor and even more bottles with maybe two fingers of their poison left were all over the place. She must have been drunk for the best part of the past days, I thought. The bed was unmade. Clothes lay everywhere, some torn to pieces. And through all this chaos it still smelt good, like her, like Sofia the way I knew her when I kissed her on her cheek a month earlier to leave her for a wonderful adventure and to make stories to share. We sat down on her bed and then she started crying.

—Let it all go, pretty, it's alright, I said.

—I, I, I——, she tried.

—Shh, you don't have to say anything, just let everything go.

—I feel so dirty.

—I know, sweetheart, I know.

—I feel so, *so dirty*.

—Ow lovely one, you're not.

—Don't call me nice things, I'm filthy, please.

—You are the same for me.

—I'm not, I'm dirty.

—You are the same for me. You are the same amazing beautiful nice lovely person for me.

She only cried.

—I love you, I said, —I love you and I will always love you.

—You love Vanessa; you cannot love me, she said.

—I love you and Vanessa. I love you differently.

—Don't say these things, I don't deserve them.

—You do.

—I don't.

—You do, believe me. And I gently pushed her shoulders to the bed so she lay down and I put on a face like an art analyst or at least the face I thought they would have when inspecting a piece. —Wow, I said, —Wow, wow, wow.

—What? she said, and she stopped crying.

—I think what we have here is a typical case of a natural beauty. What we call a girl to die for. My first assessment, worth to be loved for life only by the best. Let's have a closer look.

I bent over to inspect her face. She had a timid smile on her face.

—Stop it, she said, a twinkle in her eyes and voice.

—Character: Fierce, intelligent, humorous. That surely increases the market value.

—Stop it.

—Well maintained, only needs some chocolate and some sleep and someone to hold her to be in a near perfect state. Maybe some kisses here and there——

—Stop it!

—Definitely no copy. Original. Like this you don't find them often. My final judgement, a world-class girl. The person who she allows to spend his life with her will be one of the luckiest people on earth.

And she laughed and I kissed her on her forehead and she dragged me down and we lay together on the bed and hugged.

—I missed you, she said.

—And I missed you. And I'm sorry I wasn't there, I said.

—Don't say that,

—I say that. But I promise you I will stay here, with you, as long as you want me to. I will take care of you. I will be your fake boyfriend, everything but the sex.

—Please no sex.

—Of course not.

—I don't think I will ever have sex again.

—Who knows? But I will make love to you with my clothes on. Real love.

And she said, —Thank you.

—Thank you, I said.

And that was what we did. I stayed with her. I cleaned her apartment. I bought flowers and chocolate and threw away the empty bottles. I made her food, healthy food. Salads, fish, homemade bread. I called her friends in what she called "The Business" to tell them to leave her alone. Over the days she told me what had happened. It was terrible. It was more than they had ever done to her in her movies. It was difficult. We cried together. Then we threw away her movies, all of them. Together we went outside with a plastic bag full of them and we brought them directly to the waste disposal of the city. All but her first movie. That one she gave to me.

—For when you miss Vanessa, she said.

And I told her I had my own photos and videos of Vanessa to entertain myself. I kept the DVD nevertheless; I hid it deep down in my backpack. She slept a lot. When she was asleep I would pass by all the sex shops in town to get her DVDs out of the windows. And we talked. We talked so much. And after maybe two weeks we concluded that they had raped Debby Double, not Sofia. And with that, Debby Double had died. I took Sofia out, the day after we had this talk.

—Where are we going, she asked.

—Trust me, I said. And she did. First I took her to a hairdresser. We cut and painted her hair. Then I took her to a clothing store and we bought a couple of new outfits. When she was trying them on, I deleted all the numbers of her previous life from her cell phone. Everything but the ones I knew were friends or family. Back at home I went through her wardrobe and put all her sexy underwear and short skirts in a big bag which I later brought to a second-hand shop. We deleted Debby Double from her life. That night I said,

—Debby Double is now gone, you're pure Sofia, one-hundred per cent you.

—Thank you, she said.

—Sofia, a natural beauty. Sofia, my little sister and my most special friend.

—Thank you.

And later, when we were in bed together, she asked me if I still had her first movie. I still had, somewhere between socks and a handful of cheap presents I had bought in Peru for people I hadn't seen yet.

—I want to see it, she said.

—Do you think that's okay? I asked.

—That girl is not me anymore, she said. So I got the DVD and put it in her player. Together we watched her very first porn movie. And we laughed about it. In fact it was a beautiful movie. She was very young, maybe nineteen, and a little insecure. We laughed a lot, probably to hide all the strange feelings going through our heads and bodies.

—That girl in the movie is really beautiful, I said, —but you look better.

—Thank you, she said. Then she got up and undressed. I turned my

head away, as always.

—Look at me, she said.

—You are a friend, I don't want to see you like this, I objected.

—Look at me, please, she repeated. It was a difficult situation. I more or less understood what she wanted, but I couldn't be sure. So I looked at her. I blushed. Opposite me stood a normal but very beautiful girl, naked. Of course I had seen her body. And of course I had seen more than enough girls naked. But never like this. And it was a very special moment.

—Do you think I am beautiful? she asked.

—Yes, I said. —Yes and you are more beautiful than the girl in the movie.

—Do you like my body?

—I, I cannot say that.

—Why not?

—Because you are my friend. I like what's inside your head.

—But would you make love to me if I wasn't your friend?

—I have a girlfriend, I stumbled.

—I know, I'm sorry, she said.

—Yes, I then said.

—Yes? she asked.

—Yes, I would make love to you. You're beautiful.

—Thank you.”

7.

“You and your girls,” said the other, wagging his head like an Indian. “What you tell is sometimes hard to believe. It is never normal. But you do try to make them happy. You are a good friend to them.”

“Thank you, but I'm not sure about that,” said Robbert.

“You spent weeks with Sofia to get her back on track.”

“Also for me this was a good way out.”

“So you didn't have to worry about the emptiness after leaving Vanessa again?”

“Amongst others, but even more so I didn't have to worry about the things I did have to worry about.”

“Such as the money problems you mentioned earlier.”

“Such as the money problems. And the Vanessa hangover. And the same question as always what I had to do with my life and myself,” said Robbert.

It was the hour of the siesta. They took their time. The sun was high, their desire for more alcohol low.

“It was easy for me,” Robbert continued. “You see, all this time I lived off Sofia’s money. I didn’t have a dime. I ate her food, drank her alcohol, smoked her cigarettes, slept in her bed. She never said a word about that, unless when I objected and she objected in return and told me how much I deserved this in exchange for what I did. She even gave me pocket money. Not like that, of course. Not the way kids get pocket money, but not that different either. She told me to keep the change when I went out to buy something. Sometimes over twenty Euros. And although I used that to buy her chocolate and flowers and other things, I felt guilty about it. It just felt not good. That’s just not the way it’s supposed to be. A man should always be able to survive on his own and especially not have to rely on a woman. Even more, a man should always support a woman.”

“And you are all about equality——”

“I am. I still am,” interrupted Robbert. “Look, men and women are completely equal. For me, they should have the same rights. I can’t see why they don’t——”

This time the other broke him off. “And how often have you paid everything for a girl?”

“Often enough. But that’s not it. Men and women have the same rights, but not the same obligations. There are things a man should always do. And things a man should never do.”

“Like live off the money of a girl? That is a contradiction with the same rights. Doesn’t a girl have the right to pay for you?”

“She has. She can pay for dinner once in a while, or whatever. But a man should not and cannot live off a woman’s money. A man should support a woman, not the other way around. It’s the responsibility that comes with growing up and not dying on a battlefield. That’s our obligation in exchange for not giving them their freedom, for growing old and impossible.”

“What a ridiculous and old-fashioned thought. Do you really think this?”

“Yes I do and thanks for calling me ridiculous and old-fashioned. I only think this is the way it should be. No bullshit, no freeloading, simply taking your responsibility as a man.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“Because at that time I couldn’t. But I felt guilty. Man, I felt guilty.”

“And what did you do about it?”

“I found a job.”

“That sounds like the perfect solution,” said the other, with an ironic undertone in his voice.

“Thanks to her, I have to admit. Or, thanks to what she was going through.”

“You became a porn actor?” said the other. The joke didn’t register and Robbert looked agitated. An angry silence fell between them.

“I’m sorry,” said the other, “bad joke.”

“Maybe not,” replied Robbert. “Maybe I should have. But I cannot. My body is not made for that. My mind is not set to that. It’s every man’s dream, but I cannot separate sex from longing for a girl. Having sex for money, no, that isn’t me.”

“So what kind of job did you find?”

“Well, because of what Sofia was going through I came into contact with many organisations. I needed help, you see. I didn’t know what to do with her, how to help her. So one day I was in the office of such an organisation; one that helps people in difficult situations. Education, awareness, support, these kind of things. And I chatted with a young girl there who helped me to some information. And that was a nice conversation and two days later I was hired by them. Soon after that I spent my days doing something remotely useful, for once in my life.”

“And Sofia?”

“I moved in with her, fulltime.”

“You?”

“I moved in with Sofia. My clothes in a wardrobe, dinner together at her dining table. I moved in all the way. The apartment where I used to live I was not welcome anymore. I hadn’t paid rent and no money to do so either. Also, I didn’t feel like moving in with my parents again.

And Sofia didn't feel like being alone in her place. So I moved in with her. That was best for both of us. She had much needed company and I, I as well. I could use some distraction, something to occupy my mind. And I found that in Sofia."

8.

"Why did you need distraction?" the other asked. "Vanessa?"

"Maybe distraction is not the best word," Robbert said.

"What is a better word?"

"Something to have in my head to silence the other thoughts," Robbert answered, not sounding completely convinced himself. "You see, my weeks with Vanessa had left their marks. What I mean to say is——"

And he fell quiet for a second, trying to remember what he meant to say; why Vanessa and her stories and their time in Lima were in his mind like he was there again, like not a day had passed.

"It is— it feels like I'm there again, now."

"It didn't go exactly the way you expected it to?"

"How did I know what to expect? I am not experienced in waiting months for a girl who lives on the other side of the world and then indebting myself to fly there and see her and as a matter of fact I'm not experienced at all in these cross-cultural relationships. In university they taught me the basics of cross-cultural communication but that course never included the type of communication needed when a girl is naked on top of you. And my Spanish courses never included words for the fights we had or the misunderstandings we faced. I was unprepared for this. Every day was a crash course in relationship survival in Spanish. *So many fights.*

But that was a good thing too. It meant we were having an intense relationship, one with fights, which is a real one."

"Do fights make a relationship?"

"For me they do, especially with a Latina. With them it is fighting or passion and nothing in between, like I told you before. Heaven and hell."

"And that they're all, if I recall correctly, untrustworthy sluts?"

"Vanessa was different."

“You said that too.”

“I did.”

“What did you fight about?”

“About what not?”

Robbert lingered for a moment, played with the question, although this was definitely not a question.

“I don’t know about what not,” said the other.

“Maybe we never fought about the scarce time we spent making love. That was always good.”

“And everything else?”

“Everything else. And it was always the same. —Whatever, she would say, rather angrily, whenever we fought. And my reaction would be to ask if she could please care. That I wanted nothing more than her to care and not say Whatever. *Como quieras*. Whatever. *Me da igual*. But to me it didn’t. I wanted something more.

I especially remember one fight. They were all the same, but this one somehow stuck. It was not the first, not the last, nor the most intense one. But this one stuck.

—Yeah, whatever, she had said as always. *Ya!*

—Not whatever. We have a fight and all you say is whatever? *A mi no me da igual*.

—Do we have a fight? she asked.

—Well, I guess so, yes, I said.

—I don’t have a fight.

—Then why do you walk away and act so coldly?

She wanted to walk away from me and didn’t talk anymore. The typical signs. This was maybe the second week I was with her but the signs were already more than obvious.

—I don’t have a fight, she repeated.

—Then why do you behave like this?

—I am not the one who’s acting differently.

—You are acting differently.

—No, you are. Look at yourself, she screamed. —*Déjame en paz!*

I looked at myself as you do in one of these moments where you feel like you’re not in your body anymore but looking down on some person you don’t really like at the moment because from outside it all seems

simpler but I couldn't see what had happened that made us end up here. Or, I could see what happened and I wanted to talk about it. Vanessa didn't. She rather walked away. *She always rather walked away.* We had a nice culture clash going on and unlike me, she didn't want to resolve it, which was actually more the real clash than why we clashed earlier. Because we clashed over pizza. Delivery pizza to be exact. Delivery pizza can never break up what so many fancy restaurants have created. But I felt like she used me as a walking ATM and she felt like I didn't trust her and then I tried to apologise because I know I am stupid when it comes to that and she didn't take that and said she didn't care and that's how we ended up there. And there is outside in the night. Cars passed by. Occasionally a taxi stopped to try and pick us up. I didn't let her go, not yet.

—Come on Vanessa, what is going on? I said.

—Nothing, nothing is going on.

—Why do you act like this?

—I don't do anything strange.

—What's up?

—Nothing.

—I don't believe you, something has to be up.

—Nothing, *Nada*, I'm okay. I want to go home, she said. I knew there was no discussion about that.

—Please don't run away, I said.

—I'm tired. It's okay.

—I love you.

—*Whatever.*

She walked to a taxi that was waiting.

—Stop. Let me bring you home at least.

—I can go myself.

—Can't I come with you?

—*Whatever.*

Her damned whatever which was whatever whenever something else was really needed.

—Yes or no?

—Like, of course you can come.

And we walked up to a taxi and she gave directions and we arranged

the price and got in. We were silent for the five minutes it took us to get to her house. I tried to hug her but she felt so indifferent that it hurt. We got out. I paid.

—How are you? I asked.

—Okay, she said.

—Really?

—Yeah, really. I'm tired.

—I don't want to fight with you.

—And I don't want to fight with you.

—I'm sorry, I said like I always said I was sorry although, now, I know I wasn't always sorry and didn't need to be sorry all the time because it wasn't only me.

—Don't feel bad. Nothing happened, she then said.

And I hugged her and still she was rejecting me, I felt it. The feeling of her rejection will never leave me, it was so strong. And this was nothing like we could be but so much like we were ever more often. We didn't fight and if we did we still didn't and we never talked things over, never looked for a real solution and we just moved on and left another little broken piece of us behind and we built a pile of misunderstandings and anger and bad memories and when it snapped we just moved on again and the day afterwards it would be like nothing had happened but something had happened. Something always happened. But all we did was build another pile. And another.

So I said, —Sleep well.

And she said, —Good night.

And I asked, —Will I see you tomorrow?

And she said, —Okay.

And I took that for a Yes but it meant No-Or-Well-Maybe-Five-Minutes-Late-At-Night-But-Don't-Count-On-It and *a day alone heals all wounds*. I guess this is what they call love; to hate each other and miss each other and fight without reaching a conclusion and once in a while have a moment that makes all this worth it. Because we saw the sun set with a cold coke and I fumbled with her hair there where it started in her neck and all our little fights would be forgotten. And if this is love then Vanessa was good at it for all these little moments she created. And my time with her was just as much of these little moments as our big fights

and I never took the time to make up the balance, to check if it was all worth it. There is no accounting in love, at least not for me. And I don't think I'm strange in that one. And I think it is good, because when you make up the balance very few relationships are worth it, I reckon.

And she walked to the gate of her apartment and I walked to the main road to get a taxi and she turned around and I turned around and our eyes locked and she ran to me and all the pizzas in the world were forgotten and we kissed and I lifted her up and she lifted me up and it was all good all over again.

—I can carry you. I can lift you, she screamed with the enthusiasm of a fifteen-year old. —Vanessa is the strongest!

—Vanessa is the strongest. And the most beautiful

—I carried you I carried you I carried you!

—You are so beautiful.

—You are way too skinny. You weigh less than me. I can carry you.

—And I love you for that.

—And I love you.

—I will always love you one more.

—Then I will love you infinitely more.

—You can't. I win.

—No, I win. I carried you.

And we kissed and kissed and we stumbled kissing a little bit down the street to where there was more darkness and privacy and jumped a little fence to be in a sort of backyard we knew very well because we ended up there months ago when we were still summer lovers and I took her top off and kissed her mouth and her neck and her small firm breasts and then we made love against the wall and after that in the taxi home I felt stupid and dirty and happy and sexy and pleased and stupid and happy and stupid and always the same. Because next we fought over high-heels. We fought over the Peruvian flag. We fought over shaving pubic hair. We fought over Inka Kola. We fought over traffic lights. We fought over open windows in the bus. We fought over having sex in the MacDonalds. We fought over street children. We fought over our favourite flowers. We fought over the charge for a taxi ride. We fought over the presents I wanted to buy for her friends. We fought over her friends. We fought over having sex with her friends. We fought over the

sex her friends had. We fought over inviting for dinner. We fought over dinner. We fought over the names of our children. We fought over the use of condoms. We fought over the time. We fought over where to go out. We fought over kissing her feet. We fought over sports. We fought over stupid anecdotes. We fought over my friendship with Sofia. We fought over a motel. We fought over dancing. We fought over stealing a bottle of whisky. We fought over fighting so much. We fought over fighting over fighting so much. We fought over nothing. We fought over everything. And then I had to leave her again.”

“That’s a lot of fights,” said the other.

“It kept us busy.” Robbert laughed.

“You laugh about it?”

“Don’t you think it is funny?” he said, “We had so much fights there wasn’t even time to have make-up sex for every fight. But we tried. To have make-up sex every time. So we made love absolutely everywhere. On the beach, in the MacDonalds (which resulted in a new fight), in the houses of her friends, on the beach again. And I think that saved us for the time I was there with her. It wasn’t much but it was good enough for me because how many boys my age don’t want to have sex with a model-like Latina and clash with her as in passionate movies only to have sex again?”

“I think it sounds like a tempting offer to many of us,” said the other.

“Would you do it?” asked Robbert.

“I have seen the girl. Yes.”

“You see.”

“But a relationship?”

“I know.”

“Travelling half the world for that?”

“I know.”

“Believing in it?”

“I know.”

“Did you believe in her when you left her again?”

“Yes.”

“A lot?”

“More than ever before.”

“Tell me about that,” said the other.

“Later, let’s have another drink first. All this conversation about fights and sex has made me thirsty.”

9.

The other walked over to the refrigerator where the beer in their roadside bar was kept. Nodding to the owners he took another bottle and walked back. Then he turned around and also got some snacks. Both were hungry.

“So for you that is love,” said the other. “Fighting and making love and that the entire time.”

“Basically that’s it, I guess,” said Robbert.

“It sounds shallow.”

“And maybe it is shallow.”

“Shallow love, so you also live a shallow life?”

“Probably.”

“You have become a pessimist, someone who only looks at the dark and disagreeable side?”

“I think I have become realistic.”

“Thanks for that cliché,” said the other, but he didn’t look like he meant the thanks.

“You’re welcome.”

They drank some beer and ate some snacks. Then Robbert continued,

“I think our *fin de siècle* generation is among the shallowest in world history, anyway,” he said, pronouncing the French so badly it sounded like Spanish. “I refer to my generation, our, the white northern Europeans with some brains in their head. We just don’t seem to care. It’s all the same, we get high on coke and don’t have to worry about the consequences. We can pay the expensive restaurant we stumble into and don’t get fat from the burgers whose yellow sign we’re drawn to like moths to flame. We have sex without protection because AIDS does not exist and babies can always be cancelled. We loiter carelessly through university as by now university is adapted to the less fortunate, to give our countries’ stupid masses a chance because our countries are so wealthy the

governments don't know what to do with the plebs instead of stalling them as long as possible. And there are no wars anymore to decimate the worthless masses. Don't get me wrong, I'm as much part of the useless masses as not. But more not. The best jobs are always for us, for the people like me, because our looks are a rarity that makes us beautiful. Blond hair, blue eyes, rather tall. How many people are like that? And we swim in money and spare time so we travel and put tattoos on our pink skin. We're shallow. Damn, I am shallow.

So some try to escape, give meaning to this emptiness. I tried. But development work only magnifies our weaknesses. Drugs are better and cheaper and more readily available. Girls are easier. There is more risk and risk means survival and survival some kind of meaning. We look for risk. Police officers can be bribed. And worst of all, the experience, the stories, also make the girls back home easier. The women of my generation love to sleep with people who seem to have escaped. And thus nobody really escapes, never. *Nobody, ever!* Only a handful out of thousands. The others only get shallower.

And that's where I am right now. More shallow than I've ever been, but also with a better idea of the world, of what I could have done, could have been. And that eats me, eats me from the inside. I've seen the misery, reality, of not being part of this selected group. But all I did was using it to see the sweetest and most beautiful girls of the world naked. I know what there is, out there in the world where things are not yet shallow, but I only turn more into my own group. And I like my kind, maybe just a little bit too much, like others did halfway the last century. And maybe I even feel superior. Sounds familiar? I feel superior, not maybe. Because I can do it, I can get away with it. That's how shallow I've become. *Can't you see you I get away with everything? Everywhere?* My meaning to this world has become to feel superior and whatever happens confirms my opinion. I feel lost."

"So what should be the meaning of this world?" asked the other.

"The meaning of life, you ask?"

"Yes."

"Nothing. Life is life and that's basically it. You can write a book about it, or get drunk discussing it, but life is life and it has always been like that and it will never change. And you need to live it. Life is to live. To

live means to do something, anything. And they say good things come to those who wait, but that is rubbish. I see people wait every day but what good comes to them? They wait and they grow old and when something good comes along they don't know how to grasp it and the good moves on. Good doesn't wait. And life doesn't wait. And to live doesn't mean to wait. If you wait too long you will not even know how to get moving again. Good things pass by those who wait.

So for a long time I preferred to run. I rather ran and jumped on the first thing that passed by and felt good. And then I ended up heartbroken, or broke, or jobless. Or a fancy combination of all and more. That is life, but dammit that is shallow! And sometimes I ended up in a great place with great people and everybody smiled and there was music. That is to live. And people like to ask what the meaning of life is, because everybody has something intelligent to say about that but nobody knows the answer. It is to live. There is nothing more and not much less. You have to be the strongest most desirable healthiest fastest of them all, reproduce and die before you use too much valuable resources better fit for the younger generation. That is the meaning of life. Live, love and die. And if you wait you die but don't live and don't love. And if you do, you are fooling yourself."

"To live means to do something, anything," repeated the other.

"To wait to discover your meaning of life is not doing anything," said Robbert. "That's maybe what makes our generation so shallow. We're rich enough to wait, in university, in our first jobs, until our meaning of life shows up and all of a sudden we are a dentist and we always wanted to be a dentist or we are a tree hugger and all we always dreamt about was hugging trees. But I refuse to wait until my meaning of life makes itself known. That is shallow. So I rather do something, anything. But in the end it is the same, because I did so much stupid things I had better done nothing."

"You went for love, that is something."

"*And I have been the guidebook example for that!*" Robbert screamed. "I waited for my love to show up, remember, waited months to go back to her. *I waited!*"

"But you went back. That is doing something."

"I guess it is."

“And you believed in it when you left this second time.”

“True.”

“Can you now tell me more about that?”

10.

“I guess it started in her room,” Robbert began. “I looked at Vanessa in the mirror. We had made an hour of fancy love and now she was fixing her hair. I smoked a cigarette.

—Do you want to go to the beach this weekend? I asked.

—Okay, she said.

—We can get a hotel and stay two days.

—*Normal.*

Her Spanish word has no translation.

—We can eat nice seafood there.

—*Ya!* she screamed, annoyed.

—What is it?

—Nothing.

She didn't turn around. She did not even look at me in the mirror. I feared another fight.

—It's the last weekend I'm here, I then said.

—I know.

—We should do something nice.

—Okay.

—I want to go to the beach, I said.

Silence.

—What do you want to do? I asked

Silence.

She finished her hair and put on some perfume. Her sweet smell that wasn't hers but some designer's brought back so many nice thoughts. The windows were open and the last sunlight came into her room. I was hungry.

—Shall we have a nice dinner? I then asked

—Okay.

—In the Italian place nearby?

—*Normal.*

And when she was finished we went out and walked to the Italian restaurant. Vanessa didn't say much. She looked beautiful in her white summer shirt and her tight jeans. The white made her skin seem darker, or maybe it was the darkness of the early night. And I thought about how she had this caramel shade all over her body and about how I loved to kiss her everywhere and how she loved that and that she always smelt very nice and that I loved her.

—Only ten more days, I said, —and then I will have to miss you again.

—Don't say that.

—I promise I will make these days wonderful.

—Ten days is a long time.

—I miss you already.

—I always miss you. Even when you're near I miss you. I miss you when you go to the toilet. I always miss you.

—I will always be with you.

—No, she said and I could see tears in her eyes and I understood that this was why she was so silent earlier.

—I will always be with you, I repeated.

—No, you will not.

—But I love you. I have never loved anybody like I love you.

—There will be others.

—Why do you say that? Do you think that I travelled half the world for just any girl? I am here for you and that is not even half how much I love you. I would go to the moon to love you.

—And would you come back if you were there?

—I will always come back to you.

—And the other girls?

—There are no other girls.

—Just me?

—Just you.

—Forever?

—Forever and ever and ever.

—I can't believe that, she said and I saw the tears again. The restaurant was still very empty, but we went to have dinner anyway. I was hungry as I am only hungry after sex. She ordered lasagne and I Italian

meat stew. The waiter was really helpful and there was even wine. We both took a glass of red wine. The wine was okay.

—I want to live with you, she said.

—And I want to live with you.

—No, you don't understand. I want to be with you and live in the same place. I want to try to live with you.

—We will live together, I said.

—That is impossible.

—Why?

—You live in Europe and I live here.

—I will move here to live with you.

—No, she said and she looked me in the eyes for the first time in I don't know how long. —No because your dreams are not here. You should live where your dreams are.

—You are my dream.

—Don't be stupid. You have other dreams. You want to make this world more beautiful. That is your dream.

—I can do that here.

—You will be unhappy here, she said.

—I will never be unhappy when I'm with you.

—Even I cannot always make you happy, not here.

And I didn't know what to say to that. Vanessa took a sip from her wine and I took a sip from my wine and we waited for our food in silence. Later, over her lasagne, she said, —I am going to Europe.

And I almost choked on my meat.

—Now you are stupid. You can't come to Europe.

—Why not?

—Because—— And I could give no reason, then.

—I can go to work there, study there, whatever. I already started with the preparations.

—What, I mean, when, how?

—I will go to Madrid and study there and we can live together.

—I am not from Spain.

—But it is close.

—It is close, I admitted. —When?

—In October or November or something.

—Really? I asked.

—Really, she said.

And thousands of thoughts ran through my head because I couldn't just move to Spain and what if it didn't work and how long had she been thinking about this and why didn't I know and what would happen in Madrid? And even more thoughts about visa and money and that intangible things became solid too fast and whether I had really meant everything I had said and thought about her. And more. But Vanessa didn't seem to think about anything at the moment. Her brown eyes shone and she held her glass of wine near the rim in front of her face with her hand towards me so it looked like the glass wanted me to be happy and then I thought *fuck it* and stood up to kiss her over the table and my glass of wine fell over and she laughed and this was an opportunity *and we were running* and we kissed."

"Beautiful," said the other. "And then?"

"Then we finished our food and we took a walk and talked it over and made love another time and we went to the beach that weekend to a hotel and we went out and burnt our skin and the last days passed very fast. And then Sofia called and everything went crazy and when I left for New York, at the airport, Vanessa and I kissed and I promised to try to visit her in June or July and we said everything was different now; different from the last time we were like this at the airport. But still I cried. I cried for leaving her again with all the changes that would occur in the mean time and I cried for Sofia and dammit, that wasn't a great time."

Robbert finished his beer and with that the bottle and he felt a little drunk.

11.

"Have we had lunch already?" asked the other. "I'm hungry."

"I think not," said Robbert. "Do you want to eat here?"

"Let's go to the city." And so they paid their laughably low bill and walked up the road to the city. Both could feel the alcohol and the walk was going to take some time.

"When you left for New York, I left for Norway," said the other.

Robbert was surprised; the other sounded like he was about to start

a story himself. The first.

“I went to see Tobias and Malin,” the other continued. And then he waited for some kind of response.

“Why? I mean, good for you. Um——”

“I needed to know about you and I was curious about them,” said the other. “You can imagine they were surprised to see me. But it was a good time anyway. It is cold in Norway in winter. Refreshing, one might say. Even in Oslo, which is, after all, in the very south of the country. I don’t want to imagine the cold they have in the north. To live there, in winter, must be what survival really is all about. The only thing of any importance is not to freeze to death. Refreshing to have only one thing to worry about. Refreshing, maybe because with the heat here some refreshment is what I need most.”

The other lit a cigarette and offered one to Robbert, who accepted. They were walking very slowly down the dusty road.

“First I went to see Malin,” the other continued. “Her apartment was easy to find and she was at home. You are right, she is an especially beautiful woman. When she opened the door I was completely surprised to see so much beauty in one person. A very natural kind of beauty. A wonderful person, also in her head. I figured that out when we spoke, later. But at first I couldn’t get a word out. She is like, like opening your refrigerator on an extremely hot day and finding one cold beer between the vegetables and milk and what else, such a beautiful and pleasant surprise. The first I had to do was apologise for looking at her like that, but when I had introduced myself, she invited me in anyway.”

“What did you talk about?” asked Robbert.

“Ow, nothing special I believe. She told about her life and asked about mine. And she asked after you.”

“She asked after me?”

“She hadn’t heard from you in a long time, she told me. She was curious to know how you were. I told her you were in Peru visiting Vanessa and that made her happy, she said. But I now know that was not true. You probably know by then she had broken up with her boyfriend and was feeling a bit lonely in cold Norway.”

“She told me later, yes.”

“Well, we talked about that, amongst other things.”

Strange, Robbert thought. He comes into my life and although this surprises me every time, that's more or less okay. But now he starts visiting my friends as well and I don't know what to think about that. I think I don't like that. That's my life. And he may know about my life but from my mouth only. The stories others tell might not be the same as the stories I tell.

"She told me she had been waiting for you, after Madrid," the other continued. "And when you came to Oslo after all these months she had hoped it meant something more than the sex you had in her bed. I couldn't tell her much, couldn't explain things to her. I hadn't seen you for a long time either. For a longer time than her, even.

And then she invited me to stay with her and not in a hotel. There was no need to pay for a bed when there was one in her apartment, she said."

"There is only one bed in her apartment," said Robbert. "Did you?"

"That was not our intention, I think. She didn't have much to do, so she liked the company. And she is friendly, you know that. She went with me to pick up my luggage and then I moved into her place."

"Did you sleep with her?" This time Robbert finished the question.

"Does that matter?"

"I'm merely curious."

"I think it doesn't matter for the story, but *Yes I did*. Not that first night, and not the second, maybe the third. These first nights I slept on her couch."

Robbert threw his cigarette away, a cigarette that wasn't fully smoked yet.

"What?" the other asked. "You ignore this girl for months and you know how she can be. This third night she went to brush her teeth in only her underwear and you know how she looks when she is like that and then she told me she was cold alone in bed and whether I did mind to sleep in her bed as it was a double bed anyway and nothing would happen do not worry and then we accidentally started kissing and what does a man do then?"

"She is part of my life, one of my friends, you shouldn't get involved with them," said Robbert, angrily.

"We talked about that, being involved in other people's lives. About

changing them, influencing them, and then not taking responsibility. You know what she said? She said that if you cheat on your girlfriend with a friend, *no*, if you travel to another country to sleep again with a girl you slept with before you met your girlfriend, you change something. She said a man then makes a choice. She said then you choose to make this one girl a special girl and that this means responsibility. And she said you didn't take yours, your responsibility."

"She never told me that when I met her after that."

"Maybe because she was still thinking it over. She hadn't made up her mind. Her theory wasn't ready yet. Maybe it changed afterwards."

"Her theory?"

"About influencing other people's lives. Obviously you had been telling her so much about how you wanted to change the world that it got to her head and it made her think. We discussed for hours about this, she was well read-in on the subject. She seemed to have played with this question regularly. Is it okay to influence other people's lives? she asked over and over again. And her answer was that you cannot *not* influence other people's lives but you should take the right responsibility, even with the stupidest things. And you had given her a perfect example of a stupid thing."

"What stupid thing?"

"Flying back to Peru to continue with the girl you betrayed with her. With that, she thought, you also betrayed her."

"She always knew I was going back to Vanessa, all we had was sex!" cried Robbert.

"There is no such thing as only sex," said the other.

"There is. I have had enough only sex to know that."

"And how do you know there were no other feelings involved in your so-called only sex?" asked the other. "How can you know that all the girls you only wanted sex with had the same feelings for you? How many are there? Ten, twenty, fifty? Do you really think all of them thought, 'That was nice, only sex, now I can continue my life'? Have you not told me differently yourself? Have you not felt differently yourself?"

Robbert did not say anything.

"Yes you have!" said the other. "You have told me about how stupid it is to make love to a girl because you can even though you know she hopes

for more. And still you did it! You have told me you feel a big responsibility for what your people have done to this world and that you feel the need to act accordingly. And yet all this beautiful talk about taking responsibility doesn't apply to your daily life. You seem to be two people at the same time; one who tells the beautiful stories and one who tries to get into girl's panties as much as possible. And then they're the same. And that makes me think, no, that made Malin think (because these are her words) that you only say the nice words to—— You see? And she was pissed about that because she felt she deserved better and she felt Vanessa deserved better and she likes you enough to even feel you yourself deserve better. And I think she deserves better. So I made love to her. Yes I did. And I liked it and I think she liked it.”

Robbert said nothing and looked at the ground. Then he said, “I think you're right. I think this is what I have been trying to tell you over the last two days.”

“I don't want to offend you,” said the other, probably aware of the impact of his words, especially as they were chosen so carelessly and the entire conversation came out of nothing.

“You did, however,” said Robbert. “And I think that is a good thing. Sometimes. Now.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to. I just wanted to tell you this.”

“Thank you. Don't worry.”

Then both stayed quiet for a while.

“Did you really enjoy it?” Robbert asked the other. “The sex with Malin, of course.”

“Yes. Yes I did. I think a sane man can only enjoy sex with her,” replied the other.

“Good. She is a special girl. She deserves to enjoy and be enjoyed.”

“Wise words, my friend.”

“Thank you.”

“Anyway, she must have changed her mind about this responsibility thing, as she decided to meet you again.”

“It can be that she didn't change her mind, but that I changed according to her mind,” said Robbert.

“That sounds like another story,” said the other.

“It is, but let us first walk to the city and get some food.”

“And you went to see Tobias too?” asked Robbert.

“I did,” said the other. “Yes I did. A *tour de Norway* in a way, was it not for that I only saw Oslo.”

“Oslo.”

“You have not yet been there, in January, have you?” asked the other.

“I haven’t. They say it’s dark.”

“It is. Day lasts only four hours, maybe five. The cold is intense, but clean. Nice cold. Like the heat here is nice, clean, not like Madrid’s heat. Remember us sweating near Colon that January? The cold in Oslo is not like that.”

They both lit a cigarette.

“After I slept with Malin I left for Tobias,” the other continued. “It was a strange experience, waking up the next morning with her on my side and we both felt (or at least I felt for two) I had to leave. So I did. When I first rang Tobias’s door he wasn’t there, but his flatmate told me where to find him. In a bar, drawing. He is like you, I noticed later, in a different way.”

The two young men reached the city limits, the tarmac of the bridge shiny in the high sun.

“I bought us two coffee and we talked. What he had been through, what I did. The casual first conversation talk. And then we changed to whisky. With the night so soon in the day the hour to go to stronger drinks and more intimate conversation comes early. We spoke about literature, culture, life. Women.”

“The typical,” said Robbert, only to say something.

“He told me how he disliked being back again, how it was difficult after his time in your Peru,” continued the other, as if uninterrupted. “About the differences between northern Europe and the southern Americas.

—If life is shallow, he said, —it is shallowest here.

And I asked him to elaborate on that.

—It comes down to what is important in life, he explained. I liked what came next. Probably you’ve talked about this too, in the many deep

conversations he told me the two of you had had.

—Here in Norway, he continued, —it is important to be dressed sharply. To know the latest fashion, to be up-to-date on world issues. World issues such as which movie won the last big award; such as which writer is a must-read nowadays; such as which philosophy is the one to adhere to this week. And that bored him, as it does bore you, as it does bore most.”

“We talked about that a lot,” said Robbert. “We definitely talked about that a lot. About how people can feel down for not being able to participate in a discussion because they haven’t seen the latest independent movie. About how kids don’t feel comfortable in school because their clothes are last season’s fashion.”

“And how a couple of months abroad,” the other added, “can show you that in fact these are not the most important things.”

“That for so many people the daily food is their only worry.”

“And that these people, although in a far worse situation, tend to be happier than the rich fortunate intelligent northerners.”

“Exactly. Imagine that your biggest problem, your most important task every day is to bring in enough money to eat and feed your family. It’s sad and it’s beautiful and for millions it is their primary responsibility. Imagine that. So you drive a taxi, or you sell soft drinks in your little shop, or you guard parked cars. And when the day passes, and when you have your three or four dollars what is all you need, your day has been a success. Your family has food; you yourself have a full stomach. You can be happy. And so they are, I’ve seen them. And it’s sad such basic things as food cannot be taken for granted by so many millions, but these people always strike me as positive. Then, on the other hand, you have us, sorry, me and my fellow northerners——”

“Include me, for sure,” interrupted the other.

“Then you have us and we have food and we have education and we have clean water and we have a warm house and we have rights and there is usually no fear about anything and even if we’re too lazy to work and too lazy to make something out of our lives a government will support us and we can live and we never have to worry about food and shelter. And then, instead of being happy——”

“——we worry about being dressed according to the latest fashion,

about having read the latest book by this and this contemporary writer who is everything for one week,” said the other. “This was exactly what Tobias said, the exact same structure, the exact same examples, the same.”

“We spoke about this often. About how a developed society has developed problems. And how developed problems are so much harder to solve. Bringing food to the table is something one can solve, no matter how hard it may be. To always be up-to-date on the tendencies of contemporary fashion is close to impossible.”

“And that’s why, according to Tobias and obviously to you, people in developing countries are happier (and better) people than those in the developed world.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Robbert.

“I think that’s a bold statement, though,” said the other.

“Don’t you agree?”

“I agree on your reasoning, but I don’t agree on the conclusion. You see, it’s damn easy to romanticise the poor man’s life when you’re rich, but poverty itself is not romantic at all. I have the feeling that you and maybe Tobias and the others you hung out with miss thrills in a society where fashion and culture are of the utmost importance, because for you, *yes for you!* this lifestyle is an easy one. One you’re raised in, one of which you know the rules and the best way to deal with it.

I mean, look at you, dressed not super fashionable but to the latest fashion, with your brand-A jeans and a shirt that costs twice the average monthly income of the people here. And alright, you don’t see the difference between your shirt and a one dollar one, but that doesn’t make the difference less. And you fly around the world for a handful of Euros. And you know where to eat the best food and what are the best drinks and have the nice stories, but you are very much part of this society you look down on.”

“I never denied that, I think,” added Robbert, to what he felt should be his defence.

“But then you are the type of man that thinks it’s romantic to live a shitty life, to have a shitty job, to be in a fucked-up relationship, to have to sleep in the streets. These things are as romantic to you as they are uncommon in your daily life. Hell, it’s probably the reason you talk

about how you should have died young and how so many of the world's problems can be traced back to men not going to war. And you are the same as people who go to have a look at the pyramids or closer to home, to where we are now, Machu Pichu. They go because this is romantic and uncommon, not part of their daily life. And that very same way you go and work in a shitty job, find yourself an impossible girlfriend and live among the poor. You're a tourist in the lifestyle of others. Pyramids don't interest you, so you visit the slums."

"This Tobias didn't tell you."

"These are my words, the ones I thought about when chewing over this conversation I had with him in this very bar on this very first day we met."

"It's the same reasoning we have seen so often these last days," said Robbert.

"It is. And I know you agree."

"I agree," Robbert concluded. "And now we're both such a tourist with an incredible hunger and the money to spend it on a high-quality meal."

And the other smiled and nodded and against their habits they entered a fancy looking restaurant they had walked past until now to order two big red steaks of superb quality for a price that would have made any local cry in disbelief. And the two men loved it.

13.

The hefty meal and little much later, as if only the sweaty heat and fine spread dust made conversation flow, Robbert and the other relaxed in two easy chairs in the restaurant's lounge. In the air-conditioned or at least cooler environment they enjoyed two large Pisco sours and the feeling of thick red steak sliding into their stomachs.

"After some months in Holland," started Robbert. *Thank god we can smoke inside!* he thought. "After I returned from Lima and you probably from Oslo, well, more and more I became fed up with the life I was living, which was not good and did not make me happy. I refer to the shallow life, the life in which what mattered was not what mattered for me. Everything looked great; job, a good place to stay, a dear friend

around all the time. Still I got fed up.

There were the two-hour phone calls with Vanessa that would bring us nowhere nearer and which in fact more and more took less than two hours and occurred every week less often. There was Sofia who suffered a lot and whom I just could not help like I wanted to. There was Malin who wrote me long emails and asked for me to come back even if it were only for a couple of days. And there was my job that sounded great on paper and in bars and on my resume but which didn't really contribute to a better world, I fear to say. It didn't take long before I answered on the question what I did for a living that it was my job to spend money and drink coffee with nice people.

After a meeting somewhere in the city I loitered longer and longer on the streets of some neighbourhood, drinking a coffee with Sofia or any random friend or just smoking cigarettes on the Museum Square and I took days off on the premise of having something important to do and I would stay in bed the entire day. At a field activity I met a young volunteer from a befriended organisation and she told me she missed some love recently so we made it later that day but that wasn't what she meant and she started to call me every other day, which annoyed Sofia and made the general mood in our apartment not a very pleasant one.

Nothing came together and I was heading nowhere with my life. Vanessa couldn't give me a date for her flight to Madrid; I couldn't give her one for a last visit to her country of birth. It felt like I had already taken a dead turn, like I was heading down a dead end street of which even the dead end was uncertain. In short, I was fed up with the life I was living.

Every afternoon I looked through the windows of our apartment to see the same street and the same people at the same time and what changed was that the sun set later as we were approaching the longest day. And after that the sun would set earlier every day. And that was it for change. When I was not at home or on the phone with Vanessa or doing extra hours in the office to make up for days in bed I walked senseless rounds through the city centre, at first, and the duller commuter neighbourhoods, later, when I had got tired of the centre.

I read piles of books which I bought in cheap pocket editions, as I tend to do with all books, and was especially touched by the ones

about people who fought all their lives to achieve things and the successful love stories and I realised I had settled down too fast and too easily after all the rapid changes in my life. Like a fast moving train life cannot be put to a halt without some time to roll out. Like forcing water in a bucket to remain still after it is disturbed. Like caging a wild animal and expecting it to pose for photos the next day. My body had remained but my soul still moved on and with my heart in Peru this left the I quite torn up.”

So nice to be able to smoke here, Robbert thought again. And the other wasn't disappointed either. Both were alternately rolling fresh tasty cigarettes. I don't know if he listens, though, as he doesn't say anything. A hefty meal, let it go down and take this episode with it. Then he continued,

“Late June I was officially too fed up to be considered a nice person. My alcohol consumption increased to unknown levels and my only limit to smoking was the speed at which I could end one cigarette.

The last Saturday of June I sat on Sofia's bed, our bed. She had made a salad and the evening wouldn't go down in my history as eventful, so far. We drank the leftovers of a bottle of wine.

—You look troubled, she said. Usually our more serious conversations were left for later in the evening. A trick we learnt to forget about her troubles and get her back on track.

—I guess I am troubled, I said and I turned to face her.

—What's up? she asked.

—Nothing real, I guess.

—But what is it?

—You will think I am stupid, I said. Strange I kept my reserve to a girl that never had any reserve to me.

—You are not stupid.

And she left the silence untouched as it grew uncomfortable and she showed no intention of breaking it and so it grew even more uncomfortable.

—I guess, I started, —You know when I moved to Peru I had a dream. I didn't want to follow the easy way although I easily could have. I thought there was more than my job and one point seven kids and a monthly contribution to UNICEF. I really wanted to make a change and leave this

world a little better, even if it was just for one person and just a little bit. But I went to Peru and I did this inconclusive project in the slums and lost Lola and met Vanessa and then I returned and I could only think about her and did meaningless jobs to be with her again. And I lost a year of my life and I had fun and it was a great year for I also met you but every time I told people I wanted to make a change I was only telling it. And I lost a year talking about my dream and in the meantime I only dreamt about Vanessa and us together on a beach and making love in the sand. And then when I was there earlier this year I saw the poverty and I saw young children who sold roses in the middle of the night and all I did was buying one rose for Vanessa and thinking about her and enjoy. I didn't do anything. I only told more people about my dream——

I lit a cigarette because this was probably the longest uninterrupted monologue I ever held in the presence of Sofia and she didn't say a word but simply looked at me and I was made to continue.

—And damn, now I'm here in Holland and I'm not with the girl I dream about and I don't know if we will ever be together again and I'm not working on the dream I talk about. I do this stupid job and it works to ease my conscience and it helps that when I tell about it people say, "Wow, you really do good work" but I don't. *And you know it.* I'm really making a mess of things and I keep telling myself that for now it doesn't matter because I want to be with Vanessa and when I'm with her I can fulfil my other dream. But that's just a lame excuse. *I'm fucking up.* I ended up exactly where I didn't want to be when I booked my flight to Peru but then without the benefits it would have had if I had just chosen to live the easy life from the start.

—You know how I like to play poker, right? I continued. She knew. We played an innocent strip poker sometimes, stopping before we showed our private parts. —Well I feel like I've raised high on the first two cards, which were rather good, but now that everybody went along I doubt and start to check *and I might even throw my cards away and lose big time.* I should have thrown them away one and a half year ago or I should dare to raise again and again until I am, *fuck*, until I am what I tell to everybody I am. And I should do it now, before I'm out of the game.

My cigarette had smoked itself during the monologue. You have seen how I have the habit of letting that happen. In fact, it is happen-

ing right now.”

And Robbert took a deep drag after tipping the ashes of his half-smoked cigarette.

“Sofia looked at me like she wanted to see whether more was coming but this was what I had in me for this monologue so she got my empty wine glass and placed it on a bedside table and then she looked at me again but this time with a different look. And then she turned and put herself on top of me and kissed me. And when she had kissed me she said (which I try to give word by word the way she said it, although I don’t like to talk in third person about myself),

—You’re such an amazing guy. *Shh*. Allow me to finish my words as I have allowed you. For months you sit next to me on my bed and you hold my hand and you listen to me and you make my life wonderful again. *And even before all that happened you did!* You make my life worth living again. And when you buy milk you buy it like it is the most special thing to buy in the world and you make the young girls at the counter turn red. You make your world a beautiful place to be and you invite a lot of people to your world.

—And quiet, she said, because I was getting uncomfortable and tried to hush her. —Quiet, she said, —now it’s my turn to tell you something. You have the brains and the wit and the guts and the energy and everything to do whatever you want to do. And you do so. And you know that when you don’t do what you want to do it is because of you and you alone. And you’re more than right to dream about Vanessa. And you’re more than right to dream about making this world a little bit better. But you also know that if you keep dreaming nothing will happen. And you know that! Fuck! Dammit, Robbert, of all people you know. Do you know that?

—Well I guess—— I said, rather weakly.

—Say, I know, she replied fiercely.

—I know.

—And you know what, she continued, —You already know what to do, don’t you? You have this plan in your head and you know you should just do it. And that’s what makes you such an amazing person. Because you are here every day to be with me and talk with me and tell me what I should do and where I should take my life. And you help me and you

bring me presents to make me happy and I learn so much from you. And you have it all in your head but you don't always know it yourself. And then I tell you and you will say Thank you, but it is you who did it all. But you don't think you're important enough to just say it like that, so you let me say it. Am I right?

And hell, had I turned red by then. I can't take a compliment, really cannot. And I wasn't even sure this was an all-out compliment, but still I felt uncomfortable with it. I wanted the conversation to be over. And I wanted it to continue just the same.

—Well I guess—— I said again.

—Say, *You are right*, she said.

So I said, —You are right.

—I am right because you are right.

—We are right, then, I concluded. And we laughed a little bit, but uncomfortable. Her words that according to her were my words didn't really make sense but they were right so we were right.

—So, what's the plan? she asked.

—I have to get out of here, I said. —Not out of here, away from you, but away from Holland.

—You have to.

—I know.

—I knew you know, she said and I didn't doubt that.

And she climbed on top of me again. Playfully, as if we were eight again and our only worry was to be home in time to see our favourite cartoon on television.

—You are right, I said to her smiling face hovering above mine.

—So, where are you going? she asked.

—I think there is only one logical answer to that question.

—And I know where that is, I think.

—You know, I confirmed

—And the girls are pretty there, she added with a nice smile and she kissed me again and we rolled over and now we felt like we were fourteen and about to lose our virginity and a little nervous but more excited because of that. —For how long? she asked.

—I haven't really thought about that. I said.

—I would love to see that country as well, she said. —After all you

told me about it.

—Do you want me to ask you to come? I asked.

—You want me to come? she asked.

—Do you want to come? I asked.

—Let's go and meet Vanessa, she said enthusiastically, —then I can keep an eye on you so you don't make a mess of the whole situation.

—And I can keep you away from the guys. A blonde girl like you will get her attention there and you know what they say about them, I said and I had forgotten all about her recent fears so delightful was the atmosphere in her bed.

—I have always had a desire to find out which rumours are true, she said, —and so far they haven't disappointed me.

—Have you ever, you know, with a Latin guy? I asked.

She looked at me and now we were eighteen and experienced but not experienced enough to do all on autopilot and talking to hide our fears. She still sat on top of me, in control. And she leaned back and looked up.

—You know, I think I am ready again, she said, more to the wall than to me. And I saw I shouldn't interfere. —I think it will be good again, for me. Not as before, but real now. With somebody I trust and somebody who can make me happy. And I know who it should be, but I don't know if I can ask him.

She focused on me and I understood her and felt that if not I my body was okay with that. —You see, he has a girlfriend far, far away and we are good friends and I never want to lose him. And this time it would really mean something to me, she said.

And I let the silence after her last words grow uncomfortable and then asked, —Are you really ready?

—I am.

—And I am, I guess.

And she loosened her muscles and took me in an embrace and we kissed again. And we were twenty-something and more experienced in love and life than one would give us but also fourteen and about to do something unforgettable and sacred and everything in between and maybe even younger and older and all at the same time. And it was so good because it was meant and true and intense and exactly right and it

cured us both of so much more than only the night's weighty talk. And when we finally fell asleep many hours later it was like the most natural thing in the world. Peru it would be, with all the old problems I made and the new little one we made that very night but didn't care about. Peru, an ex porn star and a failed economist. But then both adjectives weren't so sure anymore. And I bit her ear and fell asleep."

14.

"That must have been awkward, going there with a girl you slept with," said the other. "Not to mention sleeping with your friend, her, after and through everything." They were still chilling in the classy restaurant. Being the only customers left at this late hour, they had the place to themselves. A skilled and reserved waiter brought them another Pisco.

"It didn't feel awkward, not when we left," Robbert said. "Two weeks and some more special nights later we stood at Amsterdam Airport, waiting for our flight to Lima. And although by then I knew better the ways of Sofia than Vanessa's, it was her, Vanessa, I longed for. I was nervous, about to see the love of my life again."

"The girl you cheated on so many times," said the other.

"I thought differently about cheating, back then. There were many girls to have sex with, but only one to make love to. And although a small voice said I had made love with Sofia, a bolder voice told me this was another kind of love, sisterly love. I rather not thought about it. And I still don't, I guess. My mind was full enough already. I was nervous, had called Vanessa the night before, not telling her, keeping it a surprise. She would be at home for the weekend, she had told me, maybe go out with friends. And I had talked to one of her friends and that night I would give this friend a call to surprise Vanessa in whichever bar she would be. I was nervous."

"A nice surprise you had planned, I have to say that," said the other. "Definitely very nice."

"Also, this time it would be different. I talked it over with Sofia. She had still a lot of money left and took most of the costs on her account; the flight, the hotel. In exchange for how I had helped her, she said, and

for giving her the opportunity to get away and arriving somewhere safe, in a place where I knew the drill. Four weeks, our return flight was in a month, and in that time she also wanted to see something of the country. We would try to take Vanessa, make it a real holiday. How beautiful the prospect was, how naïve.”

How incredibly naïve, indeed, Robbert thought. How often have I thought this decision over, this stupidity to fly to Lima unannounced. And moreover, how badly I played my cards. There, then, I guess I made the biggest mistakes of my life.

“We checked in at the hotel,” he continued. “It was early night when we arrived. Dark already and cloudy as Lima’s winters tend to be. Sofia joked about us being the only people on earth flying from summer in the northern hemisphere to winter in the southern. The Limerian winter night was not really cold but a change from Holland’s comfortable summer with its twenty degrees. The city smelt the same as I remembered, the sounds were the same, but the feeling was different. I took that for better, something much better. We had a shower and after all these months and especially the last two weeks we absolutely stopped bothering about being naked with each other. Remember how I once thought Sofia was beautiful without being sexy? That had changed. I looked at her; her beautifully cut blonde hair (the paint after her reformation had washed out), her tight body and the little belly she had developed due to my good care. A belly that made her look more natural, less porn. A belly that was not at all a sign of eating too much, more of being healthy again. I cannot, I couldn’t, *I got an erection*. I was maybe an hour from seeing Vanessa again, maybe five, six from making love with her again, and I got aroused by the body of another.

—Is that one for me, or for Vanessa? Sofia asked when she noticed.

I lied, —For Vanessa.

—She will be very happy tonight, said Sofia. —And I’m so curious to meet her. Then she smiled, walked over to me and whispered in my ear. —Maybe we can get her into a threesome.

And then I took a shower, cold as showers can be, and dressed and perfumed and Sofia switched through the channels of Peruvian television and I called the friend who said at eleven there and there (in Barranco, I knew the place) and that Vanessa had no idea (which became

obvious in a painful way somewhat after eleven) and we went down to have dinner, say hello to some of the people I still knew in the restaurants and bars near Kennedy Park, where we had our hotel. I had them fall in love with Sofia and Sofia fall in love with the city. The night felt promising.

In the taxi to the bar, on the boulevard of Barranco, my nerves were all over the place. Sofia was the perfect companion. She kept quiet and hadn't made any sexual reference after the obvious one I initiated myself. She was curious in the rare non-jealous way only so few women control when it comes down to meeting their peers. When we entered the bar, Sofia squeezed my hand.

—I'm even nervous for you, she said. —Where is she?

And I looked around and saw the familiar faces which were her friends' and I saw, with her back to me, the hair that had to be Vanessa's and then I knew it had been a big surprise, a very big surprise for her that I was there.

—What is it? Is she not here? Sofia asked. We were still standing in the doorway.

—She is, I said.

—Where is she? Sofia asked. I pointed to the girl I knew was Vanessa. Sofia looked.

—The one who is sitting on this guy's lap? she asked and at that exact moment two or three things happened. First of all, the guy who was the guy on whose lap Vanessa was sitting kissed her in her neck. Second, one of Vanessa's friends looked in my direction and recognised me and realised too late that waving and pointing was not the best thing to do. The third thing, maybe a consequence but nevertheless a third thing was that Vanessa looked around, saw me, jumped up, remembered something, *hesitated*, made a decision, ran to me, saw me waiting, walked the last three metres, stopped in front of me, waited and then said,

—*Amor!*

Which sounded so well meant, so straight from her heart. This and a pinch from Sofia in my side got me out of my shock.

—*Amor!* I said and we kissed, first carefully and then full on. And we hugged. And then I introduced Sofia who was considered *Que guapa!* and somehow the guy on whose lap she had been sitting had disap-

peared and stupid as it may sound was forgotten as well. And so many other things happened that night, things I didn't notice but realised later. Like that Sofia and Vanessa talked a lot although Sofia didn't speak Spanish and Vanessa could be shy in English, and how they were all compliments about the other to me. Vanessa, —*Que guapísima tu amiga, ojalá un día sea así.* Sofia, —She is probably the most naturally sexy girl I have ever seen. Vanessa, —*Es lesbiana? Me gustaría besar con ella.* (Vanessa had, as I doubt to have told you before, some highly appreciated desires to touch and kiss girls she thought were beautiful, a habit I usually strongly encouraged.) Sofia, —What are the odds of a threesome with her? Vanessa, —*Estoy celosa de tu amiga, tan bella es.* Sofia, —That you let her alone for so long, unbelievable. And it was unbelievable and the night was unbelievable and unreal and strange and yes and no and drinks and dancing and the girls talking and yes and no and yes and no. And three hours later the three of us were in the taxi back to the hotel. All of us on the backseat; I in the middle and the two girls at my sides. I had put my arms around both and the girls chatted about what I think is get-to-know chitchat for girls. Is your hair real? Is your skin colour real? I love your skirt. Do you wear coloured lenses? Can I borrow your dress one day?

—What now? asked Vanessa when the taxi stopped in front of our hotel.

—We have a big room with two separate bedrooms, I said.

—I sleep with Sofia! said Vanessa, laughingly. Sofia laughed too and the two girls got out. I paid the taxi driver and felt a little uncertain. I can be pretty selfish when it comes to being with a girl and that blinds my sense of humour. In the end, of course, it worked out the way we all expected. In the end, I say, because the two girls spent quite some time going through Sofia luggage and made all sorts of promises and then occupied the bathroom for a surprisingly long time after which Sofia whispered in my ear, in Dutch, —Her body is amazing, in real life so much better than on the photos. After which I could finally take my love's hand and lead her to the big soft white double bed. We undressed hungrily and I saw her pubic hair was very well maintained. Add that to the guy I then remembered.

—Do we need to use a condom? I asked. We had stopped using these

again in January. Vanessa looked down, away from me.

—I think we do, she said.

—Okay, I said. I got up and took one from a package in my luggage.

—Sorry, she said.

—Let's not talk about it, I said. —Not now, not yet.

—It is nothing anyway.

—Let's not talk about it.

—I only want you, really want you.

—And I only want you.

—Have you?

—*Please let's not talk about it!*

—You must have——

—Vanessa, please.

—With Sofia?

—Vanessa!

—I can understand that.

—Vanessa you are the one I love and no matter what you did or I did *tonight I want you* and only you no matter what you have done and what happened and——

—I want you too, she interrupted me.

—I love you, I said.

—I love you too, she said.

—I love you more, I tried.

—And I will always love you one more, she said. I smiled and forgot about everything.

—Then I will love you infinitely more.

—You cannot, because I will love you one more still.

—And I one and infinitely and one and infinitely more.

—You cannot, I win!

—No.

—Yes, I always win!

—No, but tonight I will let you win.

And she was happy she won and I forgot about the condom and we were like the very first night again and her caramel skin drove me crazy and I tried not to be bothered by the new positions she tried throughout the night (ones we never did before) and probably she tried not to worry

about the new ones I tried and hours were minutes and some minutes I hoped to last for days. And in the morning when we woke up because Sofia had brought breakfast up and came into our room, she made a funny comment about how noisy the hotel was and Vanessa turned as red as a Latina can become and I smiled and Sofia gave me a wink and everything was perfect for once.”

15.

The sun started to set on the second day the two young men spent together. The cool and earlier well-lit lounge got hidden in shades, turned grey. The quiet hour between late lunch and early dinner, when nothing really happens. They paid and went out.

“What was up with this guy?” the other asked.

“I never found out,” said Robbert. “We did not talk about him and I never saw him again. In the weeks that followed, Vanessa sometimes pressed her phone away when I think he called but he wasn’t an issue.”

“Weren’t you curious?”

“I guess I was not. I guess I was so used to the lying and faking which slowly had become the conditions of our relationship that this guy and his implications did not even register. I worried about him as little as I worried about the girls I had slept with in the time I was supposed to be faithful to Vanessa. Not even a hint of guilt.”

“Did she know about you and others?” asked the other.

“She never asked about it. She assumed it though, I know that. I assumed she did sleep with others as well. A lovely lonely beautiful easygoing girl picked up as a one-night-stand is bound to have more of these moments. She wasn’t exactly your traditional shy ponytailed girl that needs six months of dates and presents before she allows you to enjoy her more private pleasures.”

They bought cigarettes in a small roadside shop, the one that can be picked up and replaced when the street empties and people group elsewhere. Then they sat down on the kerbstone, a small wall in fact compared to the road, and enjoyed the last rays of sun, broken by the shade of dying or dead trees on the other side of the road.

And now what? Four weeks, four million emotions, four billion and more details that led to so many changes, small and big and important and insignificant *and beautiful and ugly*. Growing up too fast and being set back in time too. How memory paints everything with a bright brush, *in the past there was only sun*. Day one seeing Vanessa again for whom I cried when lonely at night so often and to hold her in close embrace again. Feel her heartbeat revive my heartbeat and how we had exchanged hearts to always carry the other inside. The promises whispered when drunk with love made and love felt and love lost. Every inch of her body I knew so well a new surprise. The changes she had gone through and the ones I noticed. Day two waking up with Sofia so friendly and comfortable and when Vanessa had left for home, the lunch in my favourite restaurant on the boulevard of Miraflores and the winter that didn't really matter. How we talked her over, Vanessa. What a beautiful person, Sofia said. What a friendly person, Sofia said. What a funny person, Sofia said. Coffee at Café Zeta where so often I sat alone. Now together. Pancakes for dinner, the three of us again. Vanessa who tells me this is the best thing anyone has ever done for her in her life. How she cannot concentrate because of it. Vanessa who tells she can't really come with us if we travel around the country. The things she has to do to get to Europe. Day three and Sofia is out for a morning walk and in bed with Vanessa she tells me about how she makes some money modelling. A friend knew an easy way for her to make some money. Money she needs to get to Europe. The obvious question I ask. The truthful answer she gives. That I don't know what to think about it. Sofia, later that day, who promises me to talk it over with her. *Maybe it's nothing*. And it is not always bad. And it is a good way to make some money. And you like me, don't you. And I did that. You are a beautiful person. You have helped me so much. It made you a better person. So why not her? She is yours. She loves you. I love you. I love you too. And for the first time I feel a little guilty when I see Vanessa that night in the StarBucks in Óvalo Gutiérrez where we drink a hot sweet drink.

Day four when I show Sofia the city. We walk down Arequipa from the Óvalo Miraflores to block thirty or so. Then in a micro down this

other street, what is the name again? Bolivar, I think. Until I recognise some buildings and we walk around a little bit and we find 28 de Julio and then my street and I show her the house where I lived and from there in a taxi to the city centre. The price is still five Soles. The buildings amaze her like they did me once. Vanessa had whatever to do. At night she shows as promised some of the photos. She is beautiful and still pretty much dressed. All I see is a hint of the body inside. *Then I see the body inside.* Day five when I take Sofia to Magdalena del Mar and to the mall all the way down Javier Prado. Day six when Sofia wants to see more of the country and we buy tickets for a bus and at night Vanessa who doesn't want me to go and more promises *and she can't come to the hotel* and she wants to come with us but then only the weekend and Sofia who says I have to think about myself as well and the two girls, my two girls, who talk and talk and talk in English and I get drunk and then Vanessa can come on our journey. And then again she can't. Day eight when Sofia leaves with Vanessa and I wander around the city alone, have lunch in a restaurant I have never seen before, play some hands of poker. When evening falls, nothing from the girls. Vanessa doesn't answer her cell phone. I leave a message. The minutes, the minutes, the minutes. *The ceiling of my hotel room, the different speeds of the fan and its related noises, the taste of the different soaps. All television channels and the empty rooftop terrace where I wait thirty minutes for my drink and smoking, smoking, smoking and out on the streets and buying more cigarettes and smoking and smoking and memory tries but can't paint this waiting so much brighter.* Then, near eleven, I am hungry. A message. An advertisement. Dinner. Smoking. Another message. Come in an hour to Vanessa's place and they show me the pictures Sofia has taken of Vanessa and they are beautiful and I didn't know Sofia was a photographer and she tells me she picked up quite something on the job. Vanessa turns a little red when I click through them on her computer. I have seen this before, nothing new, I tell her. What will you do with them? What will she do with them? What, what, what?

Day nine and our bus leaves and I kiss Vanessa on her cheek in the morning and see you soon. It becomes kind of a routine. Sofia stays amazed by the countryside. We see the poor roadside houses. *Such sadness!* So good you try to do something about this. *I don't.* You try. I tried.

At least you know about it. At least you don't close your eyes. What have I contributed? Stop it. The people look happy though. I think they are. Look at that girl, look at her dress. So beautiful. You are too. I like it to do this with you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. No, thank you. Vanessa is amazing. Why did you take yesterday's photos? Better me than an unknown sex-obsessed guy. They are the first to take advantage. Did you tell her you— Of course. What did she say? She has her limits, she said. Did you have your limits when you started? Yes. And you crossed them? Yes. Why? It just happened, don't worry. I do. You shouldn't. How do I know she won't cross her limits? She is prepared now. Your photos were great. My model was great. Still. *Look at these dogs!* Day ten, a hostel that's not in the Lonely Planet. Small houses, dark children, the sounds of a nearby market. I love this place already. It doesn't matter there is no hot shower? It is beautiful because we have no hot shower. A car passes by with loud music. I want to dance. We can. Really? Always. So beautiful! Day eleven and when we wake up we can't help it. Day twelve, another ride another village. Everything is beautiful! Again we can't help it. Day thirteen. It's the food. I feel so dirty. It's the food, the meat yesterday. You can best just let everything go, stay in bed. I will buy you some medicines and Aquarius because that helps. I feel so bad. Don't worry, love. *Love!* So hard to keep the two and their specific words separated. So hard not to whisper Sofia in Vanessa's ear. So hard not to whisper Vanessa in Sofia's ear. Just stay in bed. You are sweet. I have had this so often, I know how it feels. The streets, full of life. The streets, so lonely so all of a sudden. The streets, scary in their pureness. The light! Here you go. I feel better already. Tomorrow you will be alright again.

Day fourteen, let's go back to Lima. Can you travel? One more day, maybe. Of course. I call Vanessa, she is happy to hear my voice. How is everything? Sofia is a little sick. Take care of her! I will. How are you? *Normal.* You? *Okay.* *Que más? Nada. Tú? Nada tampoco. Pues. Te amo. Te amo también. Yo más. Si.* Day fifteen, at night in Lima. Vanessa comes. Is Sofia alright? She is. Better. Good. Thanks. I sold the photos. Can I invite you for a dinner? Sofia can come. I don't want to, take time for yourself. Vanessa, I love you. Do you mind what I do? It is to be with you I do it for. I know my love. Yes, she is my love, she was my love. When will it

be? October, maybe November. I can't wait. I can't wait. I can wait less. We're together now. We will always be together. There is no boy like you, I will never let you go. After you I will never love a girl again. Don't say that. It is true. It is not. It is. Not. It is. No. Yes. No Yes. I love you. I love you more. No, I love you more. I know. How do you know? Because there is no girl like you. And Sofia? Sofia is my friend and I love her but not like you. Have you slept with Sofia? *Sofia is my friend*. She is beautiful. Not as beautiful as you. More beautiful. Maybe, but for me you are. She is blonde. And that is why you are more beautiful. Have you seen her naked. Silence. Then, yes. Silence, then, again, you know what she used to do. I know. Vanessa smiles. Did you see her there? I did. What did you see? A video. When? When I met her. Was it beautiful? No, it made me sad. Why? She was in pain. I don't understand. Just take care my love. I will. *My love*. And send me your photos, for when I am alone. Aren't memories nicer? They are. Come and I will give you another memory. Happiness. Come. Let's take photos. Yes? I want something for when I am alone as well. And day fifteen becomes day sixteen and seventeen and eighteen *and let's go out tonight!* I love her I love her I love her. Another drink. Another drink. Sofia. Vanessa. You are beautiful. Another drink. Can I kiss you. Robbert, do you mind? Not at all. You kiss really nice. You are beautiful. You really don't mind? I love it. My two favourite girls making out. Kiss us too! Vanessa. Sofia. Vanessa and Sofia. Let's go to the hotel. *Hah hah hah*. Alcohol. *Hah hah hah*. You have seen me naked. I have seen you naked. You have seen you naked. And we are naked. We are naked. You are naked. She is naked. She is naked. He is naked. I am naked. We are naked. We are dirty. No. Yes. Yes. Good. We are naked. Play with each other. No I like it. I do. Wow. Yes? Of course. A dream. She is good. You are good. Please. Thank you. *Thank you*.

Day nineteen and I wake up and look right and see a familiar sight, a sight I love. I look left and see a familiar sight, a sight I love. I close my eyes and combine left and right and this is not familiar. And I love her. *And I love her*. And I loved her. *And I love her*. Still. And not anymore. Hangover. Was this good? It is a memory. I am sure the blinds were closed, but memory has added sunlight to the sight there in that hotel bed. Sunlight on the white sheets. Sunlight on the blonde hair. Sunlight on the brown hair. Sunlight on all the nice curves and sleeping smiles.

Sunlight on the pink nipples. Sunlight on the brownish nipples. Sunlight on the curled pubic hair. Sunlight on the wrinkles we made and even sunlight on the two smells and the two auras and, and, and, and, and, and, and, and.

17.

“Where are your thoughts?” the other asked.

“Not far,” Robbert said, “in Lima.”

“The four weeks.”

“Those four weeks.”

“Where in the four weeks?”

“Near the end.”

Near the end. The last weekend. —What do you want to do, Sofia asks. Our last Friday. Vanessa is not with us. Morning. Coffee. Cigarette. More coffee. There is one thing I want to do. One thing I need to do. One thing left to do.

—I want to visit Lola, I say.

The bus to her neighbourhood, it is familiar. I have taken this bus like, so often. When we get off, Sofia holds my hand. A short walk. Robbert! Robbert! The kids. You’re back! Robbert! How are you? Who is the girl? *Que guapa!* Sofia, Rafa, Dani, Jessica, Simona, Sarah, Oscar, Sofia. They leave us alone.

The familiar streets, so little has changed.

—We’re almost there, I say.

—Only a bit more, I say.

—This way now, I say.

—Here it happened, I say.

—Now it’s not far anymore, I say.

And we are there. How long has it been? So little has changed. I have brought flowers. There are other fresh ones. The little grave. The little girl. I cry. Sofia holds my hand.

I cry.

I fall to my knees.

I destroy my flowers.

I cry.

Sofia helps me up.

I cry.

—Lola, I say. —Sweet beautiful wise special Lola.

Sofia says nothing.

—I'm sorry Lola, I say.

—I'm so sorry for everything.

—Everything you have ever said has always been true. And I'm so sorry for everything.

Sofia looks at me. She says, —You couldn't help it, could you?

I look at Sofia.

Sofia looks at me.

I take Sofia's hand.

—I'm sorry Sofia. I'm sorry Lola. I'm sorry for being confusing, for being confused.

—It is okay, Sofia says.

—It is not, I say. —I should be there. I should be dead. If anyone, then never Lola. Lola, can we please change?

—Don't say that! Sofia screams.

—It is true, I say. —I should be there. If I could, I would change.

—And do you think that will change anything?

—Yes.

—What?

—That Lola was a better person than I am or will ever be.

—Don't say that.

—But it is true.

—You shouldn't say these things.

—But I do.

—And you shouldn't.

And we stay at Lola's grave and I feel stupid and Sofia holds my hand and I hold hers. And I think about suicide and does that help and *what an asshole I am for even thinking these words*. Sofia didn't do that. Vanessa didn't do that. What have I been through? I am a loser. A loser. A loser. And now I dishonour Lola's grave. And I destroy her flowers. And I shouldn't be here. And I should be different here.

And then, but I have lived. I have lived for Lola. I have loved for Lola. I have promised Lola to love Vanessa. I have loved Vanessa. And I have

betrayed Vanessa. And then Vanessa betrayed me. And then we were even. And now we are even. But I never did not do what I promised you Lola. *What I promised you Lola.* I will live for you, a bit. And everybody will live a little for you. And you are still alive. And I'm sorry for making a scene. I am sorry I am sorry I am sorry.

—I'm okay now, I tell Sofia. —Being here confuses me.

—That is okay, Sofia says.

—Let's go back and drink a coffee with sugar for Lola, I say.

—Did she like coffee? Sofia asks.

—With a lot of sugar.

—Then we will drink coffee with a lot of sugar.

—And a cigarette.

—And a cigarette.

And then we go. In the bus back. Robbert! Robbert! See you next time. Who is she? *Que guapa.* Yes she is. I love her. Lola, I can love. I love too many. I love you. You're still in my head every day. I love you. I will come back. *I will come back.* I will love for you. *I will love you.* I will come back. And now we will drink a coffee for you.

And that night we drank cocktails for her. And that night we made love for her. And the next day we made love for her. And we had lunch for her. And we. We. Saturday. We. Our plane. We took a taxi.

18.

“And now?” the other asked.

“I'm there.”

“At the end of the four weeks?”

“At the end.”

“And how did it end?”

“I don't know,” said Robbert. “The same airport scene. It ended with the same airport scene as before, but differently this time. Sofia and Vanessa had clicked. They said goodbye too. Real goodbye. I felt left out. Sometimes I am so selfish when it comes to girls I love. Sofia offered to help Vanessa to get to Europe. It wasn't the money anymore, she said. It were the papers. And then the kisses and my tears and Vanessa looked like she didn't understand them and the last ones to hug were Sofia and

Vanessa and that struck.”

“We’re almost there, aren’t we?” said the other. “We’re almost here. I’m about to discover the reason why you are here.”

“Almost, yes.”

“Do you see how the sun sets? Do you need dusk or dawn for the conclusion?”

“Nothing. I need nothing. Only a little bit more time.”

Only a little bit more time.

19.

Robbert continued, “One night under the stars, Lola and I, she asked me why I liked Vanessa. The last days of her life had already started. What did we know? In her life everything needed future, to be useful.

—What do you like about Vanessa? she asked.

And I ask you to ask yourself that question about anyone you’re with. What do you like about them? I had never asked myself that question. Never.

—She is beautiful, I said after some hesitation.

—Beautiful? Lola asked. Not as in doubt, “Do you really think she’s beautiful?” More as in not understanding the word. As in, “Is that it?”

—Not only, I defended myself. —I like to be with her but I also like that she is beautiful.

—To be with her?

—Yes.

—How?

That question did it. I truly knew not what to say but nevertheless I said and I said, —To spend time with her.

And I knew that was not enough so I added after the break, —To talk with her. Yes. To talk with her, I said.

—What do you talk about?

—A lot of things, I said.

—Such as?

—What she does. What I do. Our lives.

—And your dreams?

—Sometimes, I said.

—Do you know about Vanessa’s dreams? she asked.

—Of course I know about her dreams, I said.

—What are her dreams? Lola asked.

I said nothing. I said nothing because I knew nothing. I said nothing because at that time I did not know Vanessa’s dreams. I said nothing because in fact I had never spoken with Vanessa about dreams. We spoke about—— we spoke about going out. We spoke about the last movie we had seen. We spoke about where to have dinner. We spoke about sex. And I did not know so I said nothing and Lola was without forgiving that night.

—What do you like about Vanessa? she asked again.

And I said, —I think I like that she is beautiful. And I think I like, you know, to make love with her. No, I like to make love with her. Yes, I do.

—And you like that she loves you, she said.

And that was true and that stayed with me and that did not ever not a second leave my mind again and Lola did that and I tried to change that *but I couldn’t* and Lola already knew but Lola did not judge because Lola was not the type of girl to judge and I was her friend and Vanessa was her friend and friends and friends and friends *I don’t know* friends don’t judge I guess and she liked Vanessa and I really liked Vanessa but I could not for the right reasons and Lola knew because Lola was Lola was so special *and fuck she shouldn’t be gone* because she did not judge and she was so right always so right in a way that I could only appreciate.

We stopped talking there. She stopped.

—Never fool yourself, Lola said. —Never fool yourself into believing lies are true.

—I will never fool myself, I said but I did not understand.

—Promise me.

—I promise you.

—What have you promised me? she asked.

—I have promised not to fool myself into believing lies are true, I said.

—And what does that mean? she asked.

—I don’t know, I said.

—I know, she said.

—What does it mean?

—It means that you believe in your own judgement, she said. —It means that you believe in yourself. It means that you make decisions and live accordingly. Your dreams. It means you live them. It means you must never let anybody hold you back. You are responsible. You succeed or fail. You are responsible, success or failure. And the only way to succeed is never to believe in lies. Not even lies told to you by loved ones.

—How can loved ones tell lies? I asked her.

—Because they blind you. And blind you can't see what is true. Only what is in your heart is true. Only your dreams. Only your feelings. Only the things you try so hard to hide. And to understand them you have to believe in yourself. Only if you know and trust yourself you can succeed. Only then you can succeed in life and love. Only then you can truly love.

—Do you know and trust yourself? I asked Lola.

—Not yet, she admitted. —But I try. And so should you.

—I promise, I said.

—What have you promised? she asked.

—I have promised to try to believe in myself and never let anyone tell me lies, I said.

—You will get there, she said. —You are a very nice person but you have a dark side, a weak side. I'm sorry to have to say it like this. I like you, you know that. But you have a dark side, a weak side. A dangerous dark side. I fear this will bring you down one day. I don't want to see you fall. *Never*. Will you promise me you will never fall while I am alive? And after that. *Never*. Will you promise me that? Lola asked.

—I promise you I will not fall, I said.

—Because when you fall, you will take Vanessa with you.

—I will not take Vanessa with me.

—Always be good to her.

—Of course! I said.

—No, really. Be really good to her, Lola repeated.

—Always.

—Even when that means you two cannot be together, Lola said and she looked at me and I felt she meant this and it was like her saying goodbye had we known the future.

I did not know what to say. I did not and I do now. I think I do now.

No, *I do not*. But I should have. I should.

—Promise me one last thing, Lola said. —Promise me to always do the right thing for Vanessa.

—I promise you, I said.

—Also when that means leaving her.

—Also when she is better off without me, I promised.

—That is a promise you cannot keep, Lola said.

—I know, I said. —But you will be there to remind me.

Within a week after that night she was dead.”

20.

“That should have said something, I guess. Somewhere there was a message in everything that happened and all the things Lola told me and that now she wasn’t there,” Robbert carried on, “But of course I was blind. Blinded. I have been blinded so long. When Lola disappeared, so did the things she told me. Only why I liked Vanessa, that question I repeated every day. And soon I had an answer. I liked her because she was in so many ways what I was not. She completed me, that was my answer. She was a challenge and a teacher and a lesson and life at its best and what I missed and so much more. I repeated this every day. I started to believe it. I started to trust it. I started to trust myself. What I did was good. Vanessa and I was good. Everything was good. Nothing would ever be able to get to me. Look at me growing! Look at me blooming! Look at how I am what I am and what I am is what I want to be and I am that I am that I am that and everything will be alright. Happy endings, happy endings, happyendings happyhappyendings. My god the path had been difficult, I said. My god people have even died. I make world literature. I make history. I am a story because I got there. Look at me. Look! Look everybody *look!* And Vanessa and I are perfect. We are perfect. Thank you Lola for telling me that I need to know *to find out* why I like her. Because I know why I like her, hell, I love her! (I love her I love her I promise.) I am stronger and know who I am. I like me. I trust me. I believe in myself. Nobody can lie to me. My only loved one will never lie to me. And I will never have to leave her. Lola, I will never have to break my promises. Our story is difficult. *I am stronger*. Diffi-

cult. What a story. I should write it down. This makes world literature. A happy ending after all. Happy endings. This is history.

But I should have read more world literature. Good literature. I should have studied more history to learn this one important lesson about happy endings.”

“Continue,” ordered the other when Robbert seemed to take a break.

“Happy endings! I flew back to Holland with Sofia. We both had needed the break and been inspired by it. Happy. She went back to university, something she neglected since they had raped her. Happy. I returned to my job with the notice I’d move to Madrid in November. Happy. I continued to live with Sofia and that felt better than before and more intimate, although we stopped having sex because my head was elsewhere and it reminded me of that short-loved threesome and the third person in it. Happy.

—So, I asked Sofia, —What is your final judgement about Vanessa?

And she said, —Sometimes I wonder whether you are real.

—I am real, I said surprised. —Really really really real.”

“Funny, that question,” said the other.

“I know, it’s the question I asked you,” said Robbert.

They both lit a cigarette.

“Sorry for interrupting you,” the other added. “Please tell me about Sofia’s final judgement. I like Sofia in your stories and I trust her judgement maybe better than yours.”

“Yes. So. We were back maybe a week and for some reason I had never stopped to ask her this. I asked her and she asked me whether I was real and I said,

—I am real.

—I’m sure you are, of course, Sofia said.

—Why do you say that? I asked.

—Because maybe you are not real. You know how people pop up in your life and they seem to make sense? There are people you meet and you meet them and that is it. And then there are people you meet and you click and you make love and everything is beautiful. And then there are people you meet and somehow they make sense. You make sense. You are right at the right moment with the right stories and we get into the right situations and. And that makes me doubt whether you are real.

Can a person make so much sense and still be a real person?

—Is that a question? I asked

—That was an open question.

—People can make sense *of course people can make sense*, I said. —But I don't see how I make sense.

—We meet. Remember how we met? And so much happens but we meet. And then first we are friends and real friends and you remind me some men do other things than fuck me for money. And that men can be nice men. You. And then—— Sofia swallowed and tilted her head down. —Then I get raped.

I put my arm around her. I moved to sit somewhat closer.

—And you put your arm around me like now, Sofia went on. —Really put your arm around me and you show me again men are nice. You. And you help me and I get over it slowly and then we have sex and that is more making love and for the first time in many many many years I truly enjoy sex and not the money. And you do that! But all the time you are away. You are near, but away. You are with Vanessa, but with me for the time being. Like you have to show me some things but can never be always there for me. You see? And I love you *I love you* but I am not madly in love with you because you have Vanessa and that was clear from the beginning so you only show me things. And you make sense because of that! Can't you see you make sense? You make sense! You!

—But there is more, she said after a second's break. —There is more because you take me to Lima and I meet her. I meet Vanessa. I meet the girl that is between you and me. I meet the girl that allows you to show me all these things without ever getting too close. The girl that makes you make sense. You see? This girl was not just any other girl like *Let's see who Robbert fucks this weekend*. No this is the girl who is the root of everything and the you and everything. And I meet her! And I like her. No. I love her. I loved her at first sight. I loved her from the first second we talked. And I felt guilty. I feel guilty. I slept with her, Robbert! I slept with her. I slept with your girlfriend because I love your girlfriend.

Sofia got emotional.

—I know you slept with her.

—How do you know? Sofia cried.

—Because I was there, remember?

And Sofia had to laugh a little bit. She gave me a warm and innocent look that made me feel stupid.

—Men, she said and laughed some more. —Yes, but I also made love with her without you.

—When? I asked, not knowing whether I should be angry.

—When we made the photos, and some more. I am sorry, Robbert. I truly am. I didn't want to do it. But I loved her, you see. I felt so much so strong so direct so immediately for that girl. And we made love *yes we made love* I cheated on you and your girlfriend and——

I placed my arm back where she had pushed it from. I held her again. I was not angry. My first response never has been to become angry. Let it be. Later I will know what to think. But I knew I didn't really care. Had I not endorsed Vanessa's homosexual feelings? Had I not slept with Sofia too? Was I not as much the problem as the solution. I didn't blame. I put my arm around her, instead.

—Is that your final judgement about Vanessa? I then asked Sofia, to lighten the atmosphere. —That you love her? I think I take that as a compliment.

Sofia looked at me. And then she understood. And we understood. There was no need to feel ashamed, to feel guilty.

—It is a compliment. But can't you see the deeper meaning? she asked. —It is not Vanessa. It is not Robbert either. It is you, the two of you. You make sense. Again you showed me something. You showed me it is possible. Love is possible. Real love, unconditional love, pure love, private love. Above all, exclusive love. And you know what? I think for me it is with girls. I think I love girls. I think I am a lesbian. I think, since you met me, you have showed me so much and you have showed me that I must be with women.

—I have made you a lesbian?

—No, you have made me make myself what I really should be and I think that is a loyal trustworthy easy-going woman who fancies girls more because *because I don't know why* and I don't think I need a because *this is just what I feel* and that is all and nothing more.

—Okay.

—And that is thanks to you, to you and Vanessa. Ever since I met you, you have guided me towards this point. Sometimes you meet people

because they have to show you something. I feel like you are such a person. And so does Vanessa. And Vanessa also because she kept me from you. Without Vanessa, you know what would have happened. So it's not only you. No. It is Vanessa and you. *And sometimes you meet people who are only there because there is something they can show you what you can't see yourself.* And it is hard to believe these people are real. It is hard to believe you are real. I know you are, but maybe you are only an illusion. Maybe we met because I had to learn something. Maybe you are not real. Sometimes, I think, you meet people who are not really there.

Sofia stopped. She had reached a conclusion, I think.

—Pinch me, I said.

—Pinch you?

—To verify that I am real.

And she pinched me and we rolled over. I wanted to kiss her but then refrained.

—I guess I can't kiss you anymore, can I? I asked.

—I guess you can.

—But——

—One last time.

And that was the last time.”

21.

“The last time you slept with her,” repeated the other.

“Yes.”

“How did you feel about that?”

“That was good. I was counting down the days to be together with Vanessa, to be together with Vanessa as example boyfriend girlfriend together. Although I knew not how long to count, not yet. But I knew to go one-hundred percent for her meant to close down other chapters. Sofia was one.”

“And then?” asked the other.

“Then came two.”

“How?”

“On a sunny September afternoon I decided to visit Malin again. It had been a while as you know and her long emails almost obliged me.

She got so enthusiastic that I booked the first affordable flight for a long weekend late summer in Oslo. That was the first of the last four flights I took before we met here yesterday. Counting down. I was getting there. Here. Four more flights.”

“Oslo, Amsterdam, Madrid, Lima,” counted the other.

“Exactly,” confirmed Robbert.

“Oslo, again, finally,” repeated the other.

“Oslo, finally.” Robbert looked at the other. A day ago, yes, he thought, you said Oslo and I thought Oslo and well, here we are today. Oslo, again. I have the feeling you, or I, or we, or the time the stories the day the weather the drinks the food everything will make me understand.

“Oslo. I knew the city, the country. I knew where to find the bus to the city centre at the airport. I knew where Malin was waiting. I knew where to turn a corner to get to her apartment. In a way it was like coming home. A home I had neglected. There are so many homes, it’s difficult to maintain them all. And I will be honest with you, as I have been throughout the last two days, but I didn’t really know why I was there. I was there for Malin, who wanted me to be there. And I was there to have a chat with Tobias, because that would be nice. But I saw no reason for me to be there. Not yet. Neither was there a tangible reason not to be there. I simply was.

—Hi, Malin said after we kissed each other on the cheek, —I have been awaiting you.

—Hi (my love, I wanted to add, because this combination had been so normal lately, but I didn’t), I have been waiting to see you again, too.

—Instead of waiting you could have come by.

—I have been busy.

—With what? she asked.

I was lost for an answer, truly. My work? Not really. How many long weekends had I spent caring for Sofia? Sofia? Not busy enough, ever since we first slept with each other, to live lives without saying more than goodnight for days in a row. Vanessa? Our once weekly calls in which we talked about our feelings and dreams, they had become at best a biweekly update of what we ate and did in the weekend. Elevator conversations I stretched to last an hour because that way I felt like we still shared something.

So instead I said, —I guess I haven't really been busy.

—Honesty, from you, a treasure I reckon.

—You know how I think busy is having bad priorities, I said.

—What made me a priority again? Malin asked.

—I don't know.

We walked to her apartment. Slowly. There wasn't much to say. We had updated each other thoroughly in recent emails. You're still with Vanessa? You're not with your boyfriend anymore? What was his name again? I see. Oslo looks nice. It looks the same. So you remember? I do. I truly do. And then we were inside and we settled and night was falling and she made a salad and toast with garlic and butter. Something light.

—Have you come to have sex with me? she asked.

—I have no such plans, I said.

—Good, she replied with determination, —as you're not going to get it from me.

We finished our meal. I made coffee.

—What are you doing nowadays? I asked.

—I'm ending my thesis, at least, I pretend to. I fear the prospect of not being a student anymore.

—What is it about? I asked. —Why do you fear that prospect?

—That are two very different questions, Malin said. And she decided to tell me first about her thesis, a subject that will sound familiar to you, I suspect. She had been working on it for a long time, at least as long as I knew her. I had never bothered to ask though. We were sex and now she had to be more or nothing. Her hypothesis was that with the growth of individual opportunities the communal responsibility an individual feels diminishes. It was her own subject choice, but her university had applauded the idea. To find the perfect method to prove or dismiss the theory had taken its time. In the end she had done hundreds of interviews with people from as many different backgrounds. All sounded rather complex and a lot of work. —Yes, it took time, she said. —And then the hypothesis proved false.

—How is that?

—You're not a scientist, she said, something very true. —The opposite seems true. Individuals with a wide scale of opportunities feel great communal responsibility.

—And what made you think otherwise? I asked, as I saw these findings were a disappointment to her.

—You, she said.

Silence.

—You and people like you, she clarified. —But then I thought about it and you do fit the profile I found. Yes, you do feel communal responsibility, although you have skilfully neglected your responsibility towards certain individuals, but you don't translate it correctly into action. That is my conclusion. Yes, you, *we do* feel responsibility but No, you, *we don't* take action accordingly.

Malin continued, —And that fits so perfectly well with my view of the world that I find it difficult to keep this conclusion down to the basic scientific facts. It is everywhere! Everywhere. It is in the popularity of the three-week journeys to some remote corner of the world. It is in the yearly solidarity fair where we happily donate money. It is in the hundreds of young people doing six months in Gambia or Bolivia or Vietnam who come back to brag about the Malaria they caught and the locals they fucked. It is in the television shows with B-stars unsettling a poor community in the jungle of a Third World country. It is—— And she gave many other examples, which I have forgotten but I agreed and I told her I agreed and we philosophised for some time about it.

Next up was the second question I had asked. I repeated it,

—Why do you fear the prospect of not being a student any longer?

She looked at me, amused. —Why do you think?

—Maybe because, I proposed, —then you will become part of the same world you just described?

She laughed. —I think I kind of like that place though. But that is a secret, don't ever tell anyone. No, I fear the prospect because I fear the prospect of losing my freedom, having to settle down. I liked the last years. I had amazing experiences, had a wonderful time with incredible strangers. I don't want to lose that. Can you imagine me settling here in Oslo, no man on my side, doing a job?

I couldn't.

—I want to enjoy my youth a little bit longer, she said with a smile. She changed position, approached me and then, you know how Malin can be.”

The other looked up from the fingernails he had been biting. Continue, he nodded.

“She wasn’t as determined about the sex thing as she was about her thesis, but very convinced about enjoying her youth. This is a nice way of saying that without discussion and without bad feelings after the food and the coffee and some drinks we ended up in her bed and fuddled and cuddled and played with each other’s body.”

“She loves you,” said the other.

“We like each other a lot and it felt right but I was counting down——”

“No, you’re not listening,” interrupted the other, “she loves you. She wants you to be that man by her side now she’s leaving her youth.”

“I, it is——” tried Robbert.

“She loves you,” repeated the other. “Look, forget about the love you made. I know how she makes love. I have seen her curves, tasted her flesh. You can describe it with a lot or little detail and it doesn’t matter because I know how it is. And she loves you. And that is not about the love you made, it has never been. It is about a way to get to something else that with you can only be reached through sex, she thinks. But for her it has never been the sex. Sex is for you what makes a relationship. To make love, you say, when you mean to make a relationship. But for her it never was an end, only the means.”

Robbert did not say a word. Alright, he thought, maybe she loves me but, *What but?* No maybe she does *yes* she can do that but that isn’t relevant, is it? Or is it?

“Go back to that one night,” the other said. “Go back in your head. Think it over. Start when you stopped your love making, but if you like a little before, to get the atmosphere right.”

What a curious thing, Robbert thought. Curious indeed. We made love. Love is nothing new. And we had done that before. Madrid, where we met. Oslo, the year before. And these two or three times over the telephone, with the webcam and photos and nice. And maybe when I picked her last year’s photo from between the pages of a book I was reading to get inspiration to masturbate was making love as well. *And yes*

it has too often too much too only been about sex for me. But I was counting down. A last time. *A last time.* After counting down it would be no more. No more making love. A last time. And it was a first time that night. And a last time. Every time after a while is a first time. And after a while there is always a last time. A tried first time. A for now last time. Same old beautiful old. Will she allow me? She did. Will she allow me a bit more? She did. And then grow together, build something that will be there the next first time. It is like we talk. Even after months, maybe years of nothing there is no need for small talk. We start off where we stopped last time. And we stop the way we started. The days in between have done nothing to change us, only to make us realise how beautiful it is the days are over. Every time so beautiful. It was, I should say, every time so beautiful.

And it is, in its own way, with Malin. But what is it he means? So we made love, our first time, our last time, and then? We smoked our cigarette (Damn the girls that don't smoke, I will never date them again). We cuddled again. Another go? No. So she stroked my hair. She stroked my hair? Yes she did. She stroked and stroked and stroked my hair. *And stroked my hair.* And then my back. And back to my hair. And my face. And then a kiss. Another kiss. Innocent kisses. And she stroked my chest. And I put myself on my stomach because that's how I sleep but she continued. She stroked my back. Light strokes, sweet strokes. I must have fallen asleep. I fell asleep. Is it that? It is that.

"She stroked my hair, I think you mean," said Robbert, back to Tumbes where the sun had set on his autumn thoughts.

"She stroked your hair?" repeated the other.

"Yes, or is it something else?"

The other asked, "Did Vanessa ever stroke your hair?"

And from Tumbes Robbert went down in thoughts to the Peruvian capital, to these many hotel beds, to the apartment he once shared, to the beaches and their motels, to the small blue bedroom near Óvalo Gutiérrez and to the ow-so-many other places where he and Vanessa had made love. I can't recall her stroking my hair, he thought. I can't, but she must have, doesn't she? She did things far more intimate. She must have stroked my hair. I stroked hers. I remember that. And when we woke up in the morning? No. I don't remember.

“I don’t remember,” Robbert concluded.

“But you think it must have happened?” asked the other.

“It must have. We were in love.”

“Then it should have happened. Are you sure you don’t remember?”

The nights with ice cream and wine and music and hours full of love. So many kisses. So many kisses everywhere. Every inch of her body I kissed. What she did to me. That was love. *You cannot*. Well, of course you can. But it cannot be. I don’t remember. Not once. Really, not once. Or this one time in her bed, before we had this fight about whatever it was we felt fighting about? No. She let me stroke her. I stroked her.

“I really don’t remember,” said Robbert.

“Malin loves you,” said the other.

“Okay,” said Robbert.

“Not just the sex with you,” the other added.

“Okay,” repeated Robbert.

“The whole of you.”

“I believe you.”

“And you?” asked the other.

“How should I know?”

“Listen to what your heart tells you. Trust in yourself.”

23.

Welcome to the deepest darkest part of my brain, where I know all these little things. We humans do have this notorious sixth sense, we only lack the ears to hear what it has to say. Sometimes, someone needs to tell me what I already know in order to hear it. Robbert knew he also knew this all along.

It is not that I don’t see these things, don’t notice them. Our senses register way more than we can process. It is that I don’t process them. All that happened over the last years is somewhere inside, a big pile of information. Raw data still, as I lack the skills to form it into coherent memories. All these details I forget and remember and forget and remember *and they are still there somewhere*. At random I draw from them. The sound of a slamming car door when Lola went to buy detergent. Another draw. Debby Double’s DVD the night in Amsterdam, girls

only. A line from an email, all I need is someone who will fly for me. A conversation with Tobias about cheating, which is immature, and relationships, which are mature. All the promises I made. The few promises I kept. Vanessa who never sent me anything for my birthday.

One big pile of everything I know. It's all in there. All I need is some time to listen to all of it.

24.

“In the end it was late November when Vanessa would come to Madrid,” Robbert said. They had gone to a bar to have some bites and a whisky. It was time to end the day. “I think what went before is not relevant. The calls, the countdown of days, the gathering of the little I owned and saying goodbye to Sofia. The intense contact I had with Malin, yes, that maybe is relevant. How I planned it so that I was in Madrid when Vanessa would arrive. The first days there, looking for the perfect hotel to spend our first European night together. A more painful countdown of hours. And then, to the airport.

Madrid International Airport. Barajas. How often had I been at airports in the past two years? But never like this. Always to take a plane or to get my backpack into town or to say See You Later to friends or to cry. Never without a flight number on a little paper in my back pocket. Never without going myself. Never to pick up Vanessa. How often had I been at airports? I tried to count.

Fourteen times.

Twenty-eight if I counted the arrival airports too.

Thirty-one if I also added the transfer airports.

What was the airport I had seen most in the past years? I tried to remember all the airports. Lima. Oslo. Madrid. New York. Amsterdam. I had been in Amsterdam on practically every journey. Amsterdam was my number one airport. There everything started and ended. Not in Madrid. Not in Lima. Not in Oslo. Maybe now in Madrid. How often had I been in the airport of Amsterdam?

Twelve times.

Waiting for Vanessa, the little thought game entertained me. I had two hours to kill. I was early. I went out to smoke a cigarette. How many

cigarettes had I smoked in the last two years? On an average, a package a day, seven packages every week. Seven times a hundred weeks made seven-hundred packages. Seven-hundred packages times twenty cigarettes made fourteen-thousand cigarettes. Fourteen-thousand cigarettes times five minutes made seventy-thousand minutes, which made about eleven-hundred hours, which made about fifty days of non-stop smoking. That makes an addiction. How much money had that been?

Some two-and-a-half-thousand Euros.

The day was comfortable, a little cold but okay. There was sun. It was a nice day to arrive in Europe. The waiting made me nervous. Still I had two hours to kill. Plus the time she would need to get her luggage and maybe the plane was delayed. I checked the big screens but they only said, under Coming From, Lima. And the time she had put in her message. Two hours. How many hours had I waited for her? No, that was unfair, we had waited for each other. Divided by two, then, to share the burden? No, it should be doubled because we both had waited. People wait a lot. Too much. I went to buy a coffee.

How many beds had I slept in over the past two years? That was a hard one and it took me my entire coffee to try to remember all of them. First my old bed in Holland, then the one in Madrid, then in our house in Lima, but between that in the bed of Malin in Madrid and the beds of so many friends and Sofia's bed and all the hotels, and more. *This was hard.* What did count as a bed? A couch? Yes, I would count the couches. A towel on a beach? Also. Everything counted, as long as I slept in it. A cramped chair in a plane? No, these didn't count.

Eighty, maybe?

I checked the arrivals board again and nothing had changed, except for the time I still had to wait. I went outside to smoke another cigarette. How many girls had I slept with over the last two years? *How do you mean, slept with?* Well, shared a night with. No, well, okay. How many girls have I made love with? Vanessa, Malin, Sofia, the tattooed girl, the casino girl, the NGO girl, Vanessa, Sofia, Too many. *The casino girl not but so many others in Lima yes so many others everywhere* but I only remember the casino girl *that is not true* I remember them all. And then, How many girls did I really make love with? One. One, one, one. Vanessa. She was the only one. I'd trade them all for her plane to

be right here right now and us together and a soft bed and a bottle of whisky and delivery pizza. Time went by too slow. The counting game bored me.

I walked to the gate where people were already waiting. For the same flight? It looked like it. A lot of people. And they were joyful. There were balloons and kids in Sunday dresses and bottles of Coke and talking in cell phones. I checked my cell phone. Still way more than an hour to wait. I sat down against a pillar and watched the people. Who were they waiting for? Friends? Family? A lover? It looked like family. I was the only blond person, but to that I had learnt to pay no attention. For me there was no difference between the colour of one's skin or hair anymore. People are all the same. They are born somewhere and can't settle or there is war or they leave to make a better living and they leave their loved ones behind. And then some years later on an airport somewhere in the world under the white lights and on the broken tiles they wait for hours for people they hardly know and then they know each other again and everybody is happy. And the people were joyful. Why wasn't I? And it's the best reason to travel, love. Even love that is no more than a memory of love once lived. The memory of six hours in a hotel bed. Family, friends, their memory. Even the promise of love. *Even the idea of love.* There is no other reason to get on a plane across oceans and continents. Only love. I had learnt that much.

How often had I thought about her? No, no more counting games. A lot though. I had thought about her all day. And the day before. A lot. She was a memory and a promise and an idea and only an hour away. All these months were nothing compared to an hour in an airport. I had put on my best clothes. My heart jumped so fast and so hard in my throat that it scared me. I could have died then. I could have died of a heart attack. That would have been ironic. Settle down my little heart, settle down, I said to myself in Spanish. *Tranquilo mi pequeño corazón, tranquilo.* But it didn't listen. She still had my heart and I still had hers. And her heart was happy she was coming again. Her heart would be with her and mine with me. I went out to smoke another cigarette and then in to drink another coffee and then there were only thirty minutes left and the plane still wasn't delayed.

She might have been on the ground already.

I walked to the gate.

Why hadn't I brought a balloon? I had nothing. I had my secrets to hide and my love to give and my clothes and a compliment to make but I had nothing. Nothing is very little to end up with after two years. Nothing is very little after all the waiting. Nothing is nothing. Should I buy a balloon? Or a flower? I checked my pockets. Nothing of any value. The little coin I had kept, the change from the first taxi that brought us home the very first night when everything was simple and everything was future. My lucky coin. I would give her that. It was a fake. The real one I had spent on whisky or cigarettes or cocaine. One Sol. I could give her that. And what more?

My love. I'd give her my love but my love had come so cheap to so many. It had no value. And my stories. Cheaper still. All lies. My love, please come. The people were getting nervous. Forgive me for stretching these two hours to such length, for me they were. And I like to treasure them, these two hours. The last two. Change was due. And then it happened.

The arrival hall's doors opened to let the first travellers out. I checked their tags, they were from her flight. My heart jumped and jumped and jumped and I wanted to go to the toilet. More travellers. How long? Three, four more. A family. Happy cries. Embraces. Kisses. One more, a businessman. Nobody. Eight. One of them? No. She! Yes! No. Yes! No. What if I didn't recognise her. *You'd recognise her from her toes alone.* Her toes. Open doors, open! Open, open, open damned doors! My life for you to open, open, open!"

25.

—Love!

—Love.

—Love!

—Love.

—Hi. *Qué tal?*

—*Pues, aquí.*

—And how are you?

—Good, nothing. Quiet. You know me.

—How do you feel?

—*Normal.*

—I feel great!

—Okay.

—It is so nice to hear your voice again. I missed your voice! You sound so sexy.

—We spoke only three days ago.

—I miss you even after one minute.

—*Ay, amor!*

Silence.

—What did you do this weekend?

—Nothing special.

—Did you go out with your friends?

—*Pues, si.*

—Where did you go?

—The same as always.

—Don't you want to tell?

—There is nothing to tell. My life is boring, you know that.

—Your life is not boring! Don't say that. I am interested in everything about your life.

—I know, because you are crazy.

Laughter.

—Your life is not boring.

—It is.

—No.

—Yes.

—No.

—Yes.

—Okay it is. How is everything going with the papers to come to Europe?

—It is so much. You have no idea how much it is.

—Do I need to help you?

—No.

—I really want to help you, you know that, right?

—I know that.

Silence.

- I love you.
- I love you too.
- You are so special.
- Only with you.
- No, also without me.
- Okay.
- What will you do this week?
- Nothing, the regular.
- Are you going out?
- I don't know.
- I am sure you will go out!
- I probably will.
- You are so special.
- So are you.
- Thank you.
- Love?
- Love.
- I have to go.
- Okay, thank you for calling! You are so special. I miss you so much. I cannot wait until you're here again. To hold you. I want to hold you. I miss you. *Te amo, te amísimo.*
- You can't say that.
- Why not?
- Because that word doesn't exist.
- In my language it does.
- Your language is strange.
- My language is made for you.
- Okay.
- De verdad.*
- Te creo.*
- Thank you.
- Normal.*
- So?
- Will you call me again?
- Of course I will call you again. Very soon, in two days?
- Send me a message when you want to.

—I always want to.
—I have to go now.
—Okay, I love you.
—I love you too.
—A big kiss for my princess.
—Bye.

26.

“And the doors of the arrival hall opened and three big suitcases were pushed by a small girl in tight black jeans with a grey top and beautiful hair and the smartest of noses and it was her so I jumped the fence, pushed my way through the other waiting people. Love! Love! My love! I forgot the compliment. Ow love! My love! She said. *My love!* My love! My love! Ow I missed you. How was your flight? Love? I want to go to the toilet. Did you have to wait long? Push my luggage, will you. Love? Please! Of course, everything for you. Thank you. Good-bye! Who is she? I sat next to her on the plane. Oh hi. I’m at the toilet. I will wait here for you. More waiting. Minutes, minutes, minutes. This is what I want. *This is what I wanted.* This is what I want, exactly this, always this, forever this. To wait for her when she’s at the toilet, to wait for her to dress, to wait for her to make a decision about the food she orders. Now we will be together forever and ever and ever and ever and our dreams are together and we are entwined and now we have a real future. And now I can go and become someone. Finally rest. Is that her, coming from the toilet? No. There she is; she changed. How beautiful! You’re so beautiful. Yes. I missed you so much. Don’t you feel it? I feel it! What is it? Let us get a coffee. No? Let’s get a taxi. Okay. Forever and ever and always and forever.

And it was over. It was so painfully goddamn hard all of a sudden clearly definitely without a doubt unexplainably over. So over. Sparks? Sparks, sparks come sparks *goddamn ungrateful sparks.* My love, love?

She arrived with Comet Air, which I considered more than a coincidence. And I thought that was funny. To wait for her was like to wait for a comet. It’s all beautiful, a burning star and you make a million wishes, it is all beautiful. And when a comet hits it unsettles every-

thing. Its impact throws all life upside down. But comets never hit. They arrive so rarely only their arrival is beautiful. A burning star and all its wishes and then it disappears without ever fulfilling a promise. I had made wishes, *I had made wishes*, I had made so many wishes. At least my comet had appeared, for what that is worth.

The taxi, the little apartment she had rented. Hello, I told you about these old friends. This is Robbert. Hi. Peruvians? Yes. Madrid is like Lima. Everything is so small. Are you tired? Take a shower. I have rented a hotel room tonight. I understand you are tired. No really! I understand. Enjoy your shower. A long flight, yes. I know. You look so wonderful. I mean it. There is time. I will see you tomorrow? Please, let me see you tomorrow. Yes? I will call you. I love you. I really love you. Bye. You are just tired. See you tomorrow. It feels so good to see you again. Tomorrow. Yes tomorrow. Sleep tight, my love. I will dream about you.

There was no tomorrow. I did not see her again. I remembered Lola, what I promised her, *I should have*, when after a hundred unanswered calls I went by her apartment. Calling felt like headbutting through a two-meter thick solid concrete wall and still I did it and I did not manage. They didn't let me in. Another so many calls the next days remained unanswered the same. I tried Yes I tried. It surprised me. Never had I fought so hard for something. Not for the kids in the project in the slums where Lola was raped and killed. Not to get Sofia back on track after her horrible experience. Not in my job, not in my studies, not in my life. Not at all. But I worked. I worked and worked and worked. Countless nights I worked. I sent cards, emails, messages, everything unanswered. I awaited her, made reservations for make up dinners, I worked harder than I had ever worked before. And the result, it was the same.

And now she is like a porn actress I once was in love with. I can give myself pleasure looking at her photos. Damn, I can perfectly well come imagining her lips where they give a man most joy. I miss her body and her mood swings and having someone to give me attention in the morning but I don't really miss her. She is my porn actress *my real porn actress* and I'd love to make another movie. I miss her hips, her caramel coloured shoulders between my hands, her brownish nipples to make her groan. But I do not miss the fights, the meaningless hours on the phone, the waiting, too much waiting, forever waiting.

And it is so damn hard to miss the pleasure she brought, her soft warmth all over me. I do not need to talk; we have nothing to say. I don't need to invite her to dinners anymore. I want her warmth. I miss the sex. I miss the comfort of knowing she was there. *I miss the comfort of knowing someone loves me.* And now I don't even know whether she ever did. Hell, I reckon that means, that means I somehow really ought not to miss her.

Not to miss her at all.

I reckon it means I miss something that never was.

Maybe.

And that I shouldn't miss.

But of course I do.”

27.

Thunder or clouds in the distance, that would have been nice. Or, say, a sunset with a red horizon. Dark shades, an unusual silence. A chilly breeze from the sea, full of salt and wetness. A car with the lights on, passing by at low speed. Gear low. Sound low. Low, low. But it was not like that.

Just another early night. People on the streets, some. Bye sun. It continues. Everything continues. *Every day is only one and one and irreversible.* Every choice is irreversible. Every choice not made is irreversible. And unique. Like life. Like chances. Like not making it. Like lies. Like liking and unliking and liking another time and counting down and counting games. “The few things I know about pleasure and happiness, love and life and how to balance it all I have learnt the hard way,” said Robbert. “And then I unlearnt them all at once at that airport, that November afternoon, that one minute of all built up hopes proven ridiculous. Illusions *damned dreamt stupid illusions.* I have been a trader in dreams about happiness for the best part of the past two years, but I only took pleasure. And sometimes I had to pay the highest price. And I've systematically broken down all that could be happiness or pleasure or love or life and now there is not much left.”

And I have thought about my role in life which was to make a difference and which became to be with her and which became *I don't know.*

Nothing.

And I have dreamt about having a reason to move on and found it in making a change for many which became making a change for her which became *I don't know*. Nothing.

And I have hoped for the pieces of the puzzle to fall together as they always do and then learning to help them fall and now they don't fall at all. Still the puzzle looks rather finished, though.

“Who am I? is what I have asked so often. Why am I here? and I don't like philosophy so I don't like that question because in life there is no why. Only what. What you do is why you are here. And then, and then, *what then?* In the end, some do things and most do nothing. So I am part of the most. And I feel bad about that. Maybe I still want to be young again and have the strength that comes with being young. The naivety. Maybe. I don't like the youngster in me dead. Or retired. And maybe the chances are still there. But now I am tired. *Fuck it*. I want to drink and do drugs and fuck and destroy everything which includes first and foremost me.”

The other continued, “As you have done basically the last two years if I am to believe your every word.”

“And as I will probably always do, considering no word was a lie.”

“Because with all the tools and all the advantages and all the hopes and dreams and knowledge and freedom and money and experience and everything still sometimes things don't work. *And it's so easy to give up then*. Maybe it's the best thing to do, even.”

“I have been born in the wrong era,” Robbert then said. “The first twenty-something years, yes, they were alright. But I missed my war and survived the troubles I found myself and now I'm not equipped to do it on my own. And I have not found the right girl to guide me. My nymph only guided me away from any meaning at all. And away from others who could have guided me. And then she left me, to wither there. I should have died somewhere useful along the way. Why are contemporary times so safe?”

“You have proven to not only not be the leader you referred to——”

“But also the loser, I know.”

“Go look for danger, then, if you really think it's all that bad.”

“Where?”

“There is enough danger to be found. Weren’t you able to do the alphabet?”

“I was. Hell, I still am.”

“Pick a letter.”

“I.”

“You.”

“And where is that?”

“Wherever you can be useful.”

“And where is that?”

“Maybe not only in the most remote corners of the world.”

“But closer to home they don’t need me.”

“Don’t they?”

“I guess.”

“Try, you need not be on the other side of the world to be someone.”

“And the tasks I have been given?”

“You gave them yourself.”

“And my history, my responsibility?”

“It will continue, also without me.”

“Also without my agreement.”

“And does that matter?”

“Only a while.”

“And lesser every time.”

“And was it useless?”

“I have learnt.”

“And I have seen things.”

“Made love.”

“Helped a handful.”

“Seen some truth.”

“Yes.”

“And now?”

“Here or there?”

“What I couldn’t find or what I have neglected?”

“I guess you know.”

“I guess I know.”

“Although I never know for sure.”

“Who knows?”

“See you in two years I suppose.”

“See you, then.”

Robbert remembered the bus tickets he had in his pocket. Ticket, it was only one. Tumbes Lima. The other was a receipt. On the receipt, a penned down copy of a flight number. Lima Amsterdam. Alright, back at last. Maybe the best reason to travel is to return one day. Maybe the best reason to live an illusion is to wake up from it.

Life is easy. Love is cheap. And everything is so incredibly beautiful. Let's do drugs. Let's dance with sexy people. Let's make love. And everything is so incredibly beautiful. The city lights at night. The fluorescent drinks. The smell of endless summer. Everything is so incredibly beautiful. We can change the world. We are the future. We will make it happen. And then a comet appears...

A comet appears tells of a young man's quest to unify his conflicting ideals. Torn between his ambition to live a good life and the love for the life he lives, the protagonist struggles with happiness and pleasure, dreams and reality. It's a story about being lost and finding love, an account of growing up and making choices.

A comet appears is Brett Easton Ellis's *Less Than Zero* for the low-cost-airline generation.



Jess Moleman (Utrecht, 1981) lives in Madrid, where he works as a teacher and a writer. *A comet appears* is his debut novel. For *A comet appears* he used his own international experiences and anecdotes typical for 21st century northerners, which he heard from the people he met on his journeys.

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