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Whores & More: Selected Stories by Hernán Migoya

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WHORES & MORE:
SELECTED STORIES BY HERNÁN MIGOYA

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SELECTED STORIES BY HERNÁN MIGOYA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Translation

By

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories written by Hernán Migoya from the books, *Todas putas* and *Putas es poco*. The stories have been translated from the original Spanish to English. The selected stories demonstrate the humor, style, and neurosis typical of Migoya's writing.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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INTRODUCTION

Hernán Migoya, born in Barcelona, Spain in 1971, is a writer of novels, short stories, biographies, nonfiction essays, comic books, and film scripts. Migoya worked as editor in chief for the legendary comic magazine, *El Víbora* from 1992-1998. Today he is one of the most—if not *the* most—prolific comic writers in Spain. He made his literary debut in 2003 with *Todas putas*, which became the subject of political controversy when Migoya’s editor, Miriam Tey, was assigned the position of headmistress at the Instituto de la Mujer. Migoya, and in turn, Tey, were accused of producing a misogynistic work, denigrating to women because it exposed the insanity of certain politically correct views by showing them as extreme and hypocritical. The book risked being censored and the matter was even discussed in the Spanish Parliament, but ultimately, all accusations were dismissed. The stories appearing in this translation thesis are taken from *Todas putas* and its 2007 sequel, *Putas es poco*.

THE TRANSLATION

Working with Hernán Migoya’s writing has been informative, challenging, delightful, hilarious, frightening, and most of all, satisfying. I first came across his work while living in Spain, and shopping at El Corte Inglés where I discovered *Putas es poco*. I was immediately attracted to the book for its intriguing cover because I do in fact judge books by the cover.



The image of an attractive woman smiling sweetly, phone in hand, dressed like a sexy housewife, and with a black eye, caught my attention. Later, even more intriguing, I discovered that the “girl” on the cover was Migoya himself. The depiction of Migoya as a battered pin-up is an ironic twist in response to the accusations of misogyny. Only after having read the book and deciding I’d like to translate it, did I discover that *Putas es poco* was the sequel to the controversial *Todas putas*.

The majority of Migoya’s work is highly risqué in its treatment of sexuality and human nature. Worried that some readers might find the vocabulary and subject matter offensive, I spent about 20 weeks translating early 20th Century Spanish fiction, but finally returned to Migoya’s stories because I enjoy them and feel imaginatively at home in the world of *putas*.

One of my greatest triumphs in translating Migoya’s work came with the renaming of dildos. In the short story, “The Job,” the original Spanish mentions four dildo names, to give an example of the type of work with which the protagonist is consumed. The original four are: El Quitapenas, El Palitroque, El Falofel, and El Falo de Vigo, which literally translate to The painkiller, The little breadstick, The Falafel (with a play on the spelling, replacing the second “a” with an “o” to connote “falo,” the Spanish for phallus), and Vigo’s Phallus, respectively. Clearly, none of these names call out to the female sex toy consumer, “Buy me! I’m sexy!”

After spending hours, maybe days, researching sex toys on the internet, making note of names, visiting discussion forums with titles like, “What did you name your vibrator?” and trying out hundreds of names that sounded too silly, too bland, or too serious, I finally chose four that I thought appropriate for Migoya’s comic voice—and I understood better than ever how no translation problem is ever too trivial to be taken seriously. Migoya’s thought-provoking writing and his intricate use of language make translating his work both challenging and fulfilling. It has been a pleasure working with such a creative and talented author.

I
The Job

I'm an expert on battles. On losing them. All of them.
The Seven Samurais, by Akira Kurosawa

I wonder what I'm doing, standing here, freezing cold at the edge of the ocean, imagining the swell of the waves held the answers to all my questions. I don't know why the ocean calls to me, why it wants me to leap. I wonder if I have the guts to go into the water for good. I wonder...

Oh, right... now I remember.

“Have you finished the catalog yet?”

It's true, Loreto was an attractive woman. At least, I thought so until I started working with her. When we assumed the roles of employer and employee, things changed quite a bit. In fact, I was completely unaware of her appearance anymore, the way you becomes oblivious to your own stench.

“I'm finishing up right now.”

I clicked on the last folder. There, before my eyes was a life size picture of a huge, fifteen-inch long, orange vibrator. A smaller dildo branched off from the shaft, a textured offshoot meant for anal pleasure while the main feature rotated and penetrated the vagina. I wrote up a description in great detail—fabrication, of course; the wholesaler only provided the dimensions of the toy and what it was made of—I went on and on, typing about its quality craftsmanship and efficient performance, and then baptized it with a name: The Dynamic Duo.

For forty-three work days I had dedicated five hours per day to sitting at my computer, writing descriptions of rubber, jelly, and silicone dildos, vaginal, anal, and double-dong vibrators, plastic vaginas, blow-up dolls, China balls, penis pumps, harnesses, anal plugs, sex toy kits, condoms, and anything else that made up the erotic store's online catalog, and then coming up with ridiculous names for each one: The Dr. Phal, The Little Pink Lipstick Dipstick, The Dill-dō Pickle, The Uncut Lover; ridiculous shit. This is how I was wasting my creative talent that,

according to my former film institute professors, was overflowing out of me in every direction without my knowing how to channel it properly. If they could see me now, I thought, a brilliant contributor to a third rate porn site. Maybe, after all, this really was the best outlet for my talent: naming lousy dildos for people more fucked up (or literally, less fucked) than I was.

People have to fuck.

“It’s done,” I sighed, relieved, unable to hide my glee.

“Perfect. Can you come and talk to me?”

And she hung up. I shook off the drowsiness that nearly put me to sleep at my desk each morning—and which I gave into once I was at home, in spite of my promise to take advantage of that free half day to write more screenplays and plan new shoots—and backed up my documents. Then I sent an email to the sales manager confirming that the catalog was finally complete, got up from my seat and abandoned my workspace which was protected (protected?) by a grey conglomerate partition that separated me from the rest of the employees, who were also separated from each other by identical gray partitions.

I walked around my cubicle and found myself face to face with my boss, seated at her grandiose editor’s desk. She was also the young owner of the online magazine, the entrepreneurial business woman who, only a few years older than me, had recognized the wide profit margin to be had from a subscription-only erotic website. It goes without saying that Loreto’s interest in the world of porn was purely economic: she was in the industry only for the money, which was either a shame or a relief.

“I want to talk to you for a minute.”

“Sure, of course.”

Aaah. . . aaah. . .

In the background, coming from the adjoining room, was the constant moaning of the girls hired to masturbate for the web cam, one of the priciest and most popular services offered by our magazine. Each week, a Basque baker sent a lovely cake he'd made himself to one of the girls who seemed to keep him online all day long. Who knows what kind the cakes were.

“I have something very important to tell you.”

Aaah. . . aaah. . .

“I have something to tell you too.” This couldn't go on any longer—no more writing for this fucking catalog. I'd sworn to myself, time and again, that I would say to hell with this job. I would march over to Loreto's desk and spit it right in her face: I quit, I can't take it anymore! Every morning I spent a half hour sitting on my bed, staring blankly, incapable of conjuring the strength to get up and face another day, unable to gather the tiniest bit of energy I had left and trick myself into facing the prospect of what awaited me in the coming hours. Each morning with Laia asleep at my side, I'd resist waking her and begging her to take care of me, to make me quit the daily torture of that damned job, and to tell me to listen to my heart and follow my dreams. But I never did wake her, because I knew she wouldn't say those things. She wouldn't understand. Thanks to the job we were getting by, even though it didn't pay enough for me to continue at The Film Institute.

For months I had tried lying to myself, telling myself I'd be able to do both at the same time: work a more or less stable job while continuing to work on my creative endeavors, writing and directing short films, and then some ingenious producer would be so blown away by my work, he'd decide to finance my first full-length film and then, boom!, after that I could make a living doing what I loved: making movies. I'd be a star director like my idol, Alfredo Martorell, number one at the Spanish box office, a man so ingenious he'd come up with *The Wounded*

Father, the greatest masterpiece in Spanish film for the last twenty years. I'd seen *The Wounded Father*, at least fifty times. I adored that movie. I knew it scene by scene. And deep down, I knew—I was absolutely positive—I could do it better. Someday, I'd make a movie even better than *The Wounded Father*. And the audience would laugh and cry and say to me, "You have made the pains of life and death all worthwhile, just to see this movie." I WOULD DO IT.

But every afternoon, I'd come home so depressed and demoralized that it was impossible to sit at my desk to write and plot out storylines, much less make plans for a new film shoot: to call the actors (volunteers), a cameraman (volunteer), a cinematographer (volunteer) and everyone else who would work for free to help organize a production that seemed incapable of meeting a deadline, and even if it did, the finished product would be far below everyone's expectations. So all I could do was sit there, reflecting on nothing, floating into the void. And when I'd come to again, I'd be overcome by fits of anger: screaming inside and cursing my fate. Why couldn't I have come from a family with money, or have a partner who was interested in my work and who would help with my productions? Or why, at the very least, didn't my parents kick me out at sixteen so I could have learned the ways of the world and gained enough street smarts to be able to walk over whoever it took to reach my goals and be a winner? Finally I'd come to the conclusion that only the premature death of my parents in a car accident—they'd been in one when I was young but, unfortunately, had walked away unharmed—would have guaranteed success in my life.

But all of that was going to change. I couldn't ignore fate. It was time for me to tell Loreto that I was finished.

It was time for my life to truly begin.

“I want you to take over as editor of the magazine.”

“I wanted to talk about that too. Look, lately I’ve been thinking... WHAT?”

“I want you to manage the website.”

“...”

Aaah, aaah...

“Get it? I want you in charge of all of this.”

Oooh, oh yeah...

“No, to be honest... I don’t get it...”

“Well, clearly, I want you to be the new chairman!”

“But... you’re the chairman... Or, chairwoman.”

Oh, God...

“Yes, but after five years, I feel like things are heading in the right direction and it’s about time for someone else to take over. And—

Oh! Uhhh. . .

—you know, Luis and I think the time is right to have a baby. . . So it’s best if I begin by appointing someone.”

“But, I... I’m just not sure. . .”

“I can’t think of anyone better to take the reins. I’m very happy with your work here. You’re perfect: you write well, you’re organized and you’re one of the few men who doesn’t like porn. What I’m saying is, you have what it takes to make it. Of course, you’ll have to put in eight hours a day, or whatever it takes.

Mmmmmm, mmhmm, mmhmm. . .

“I. . .I don’t know what to say. . . I feel like I won’t be able to—“

“Of course, your salary will increase considerably. How does 2,000 euros a month sound?”

“...”

Yummyummyummy...

“...”

Huh, uh- huh, uh-huh...

“Are you listening? I said—”

“Yes, I heard you, but—”

“I know, I know; I’m aware it isn’t much. But we’re a modest company, you know that, with few employees. Small, yes, but solid. And you’d receive a cut of each subscription you sell during the month, which could add up to an extra 6,000 euros at the end of the year.”

“...”

“So?”

“I...I don’t know what to say.”

“Naturally, the chain of command won’t change right away. But after a while, when you feel more comfortable with the position and you’re more familiar with its resources and operation, the decisions will be yours alone. I’ll only put my hands in to get paid. In any case, if you have any suggestions about making changes, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Aaah, yessss, AAAH...!

“Could we soundproof the walls?”

I went outside and leaned against a pillar at the entrance. Dear God, why are you doing this to me? You’ve tortured me for months, and finally I make a decision sure to cause the

biggest fight ever between me and Laia, and just when I'm ready to make the definitive move, you put an offer in front of me that anyone in their right mind, or at least in the financial trouble I'm in, wouldn't hesitate to accept. Laia would never let me turn down the job. Web director. Huh!

But I knew if I stayed, I'd never get out of that building. I'd end up listless, settling for the fate of a mediocre, Joe Blow, common worker. I'd become idle, sluggish, and I'd stop fighting for what I really wanted. I'd kiss the dreams of my youth goodbye.

The job would save my finances and kill my spirit.

Was there no other way? Maybe if I talked to Laia.... What was I thinking? Between the prospect of making regular mortgage payments with a good salary, or continuing to walk a tightrope, with no net and no end in sight, Laia wouldn't hesitate to choose the first option. The second wouldn't even be an option.

But I needed to hear that the second option did exist. I needed someone to support me, to tell me I wasn't crazy for thinking things could be different, that there was more than one way. I didn't have to work a job that made me want to puke. I could choose to be happy.

I needed an objective opinion, one truly separate from the one I knew I'd get from Laia. I thought of my friends, but none of them seemed qualified to give advice. Both of my best friends were married: Carles had given up on his passion for painting and was now working in a bank; David had been punished all the way to the altar and now devoted himself to selling artificial plants all over Spain; they both represented the type of life I was trying to avoid. That left only Santi, who was a junkie, and I couldn't rely on him. His parents had thrown him out of their house, and God only knows where he was living now. All things considered, he represented exactly the type of life I risked facing if I didn't take the job.

Who else could I turn to? I miserably concluded: no one—unless I could go to my parents. And I certainly could not. My mother would tell me with that typical maternal wisdom to just accept it, and my father couldn't care less what I did. It would take an entire afternoon of me begging just to get him on the phone.

I was at a lo— Wait!

Suddenly I saw the light: I could go to Lucía. Of course! It had been months since I'd called her...but I was sure she wouldn't mind. Lucía was perfect.

I rummaged through the loose papers in my planner, hoping I hadn't thrown her number out. No, there it was, crumpled, beneath the words "assistant director." I'd been saving it just in case. But not for help with a new film.

Lucía had been the greatest complication in my five-year relationship with Laia. I'd met her a few years ago in a theater. We were looking at the same poster at the entrance and for some reason we just started talking. I had found a person who had some of the same interests as me: she was writing, and dreamed of someday directing. In the meantime, she was studying design, working as a clerk in a video store and helping to shoot short films as a director's assistant. She gave me the address of the video store where she worked and I told her I'd come by to say hello, not really meaning it. Laia and I had lived together only a month and the thought of cheating on her didn't even cross my mind.

But the next day, I caught myself stopping by the video store, with the excuse that it was on my way to The Film Institute—which was true. But I'd never walked to school before. And the next day I stopped by again. And the day after that.

Naturally, we quit meeting at the video store and soon met in a theater, then at a pub, and finally in her bed.

Luckily, it didn't last long: it was over after a couple weeks. The routine crushed us, and the sexual and intellectual chemistry that had been awakened seemed to fade along with the excitement, killing our attraction to one another. One day I quit calling her and went back to taking the bus to the institute, and she didn't try to contact me either.

Several months had gone by since I'd heard anything from Lucía, but she was a smart, independent girl, capable of taking care of herself, and working on her own projects—the perfect person to give me an objective opinion, or at least an opinion more akin to my own.

I walked over to a payphone on the corner. I hoped Lucía hadn't changed her number. I dialed and waited.

“Hello?” she answered right away, but it took me a second to recognize her voice.

“Lucía?” I asked, holding my breath.

“Yes? Who is this?”

“It's H. Remember me? It's been a while since I've called...”

“Ah, H., it's you...” her voice was tinged with recognition and subsequent disappointment. “How are you?” she asked, uninterested.

“Oh, good, really good.... Look,” I tried to hurry, anxious about how fast the pay phone was sucking up my money to connect to her cell phone. “I have a problem...well, it isn't really a problem, it's... it's a dilemma, and I'm not really sure how to deal with it. Actually, it's good news...”

“Uh-huh. Listen, now isn't the best time...”

“Wait!” I blurted semi-hysterically, rushing now, “Look, I've been offered a really well-paying job. It's a simple job, monotonous, but very well-paying. The thing is, it's eight hours a day.”

“How much are they paying you?” Finally I sensed some interest in her voice.

“Uh, well, that’s the thing. They’ll pay me... 2,000 euros. Not bad, huh? It’s not much compared to what some people make, but I’ve never made that much and—”

“Take it.”

“Huh? Sure, if it were an excellent job, a great opportunity, but you know I want to direct films, that’s my lifelong dream, and if I take this job I won’t have time to.... I feel like if I take this job I’ll have to give up directing for good.”

“Take it,” she insisted, now clearly irritated. “Don’t be stupid. 2,000 euros is a lot of money.”

“Yeah but...”

“It’s a lot of money. Look, I have to let you go. The baby is crying and I have to change her.”

“Wha—?”

She hung up.

I stood there perplexed, staring at the receiver in my hand like some antique, public-use dildo—a work-related habit. So Lucía had a daughter. Dear God, I thought, everyone’s been afflicted with the same sickness. Everyone!

I stood there for several minutes, just looking around. Where could I go? Besides the obvious, was there no other option?

What did I do before Laia came along when I didn’t know what to do? All my life, in the face of a seemingly insurmountable problem, a compromising situation, a dilemma like the one I was now facing, what had I done?

Then I knew.

There was a movie theater nearby, inside a shopping mall on the boardwalk. I walked toward it. I knew that once inside, I'd be protected and comforted by a peace that my wearied mind craved. The answers were there.

I'd been doing this since I was a teenager. If I got some awful news and the sadness was too much to bear, or if the next day I had an exam and the thought of spending the afternoon studying was overwhelming, I'd take refuge in the darkness of a theater. Let myself be enthralled by the fiction of the movie, carried away and invigorated on a journey to an unknown destination. At the end of an hour and a half, I'd emerge into the light refreshed and cured: answers at my fingertips, fears long gone.

It never failed.

And it wouldn't fail this time either. I got to the cineplex and as I always did, anxiously reviewed the posters at the entrance. I chose the longest movie. Three hours was enough time for my soul to escape the fog of my own delusions, and by the time I went home, I'd have made a decision.

The movie opened its universe to me. For three hours, I traveled through it, with it, immersed, completely at its mercy.

When I returned from my journey, I was exhausted and grateful.

But still, I didn't have an answer.

For the next half hour I wandered, oblivious, down streets and boulevards, not knowing where they would take me and not much caring.

It hadn't worked this time. My failure had been confirmed. I had resorted in desperation to the last golden ace up my sleeve, and it turned out to be a bluff.

The only thing left to do was to go home to Laia. It was getting dark and it was time to face the music. In the end I would have to take responsibility for my life. Grudgingly, I tried to get that through my head. My feet stopped. I looked up. Where was I?

I had walked down to the beach. There I was, alone in the sand, not a soul in sight, facing the tide crashing into the shore. I walked a little farther, to the water's edge. I don't know why, but the sea was calling to me; it had an overpowering magnetic pull. I looked to the horizon and at the waves that were coming and going, and as they went away, the pull became stronger, like the sea was tugging on a mystic cord tied to my soul.

Fuck me, I thought, I'm a coward, I am such a coward. I've always been a coward. I've never dealt with things head-on, I've never done what I really wanted to, I've always doubted myself at the last second, always wavered. Now my feet are taking me right to the water, I can feel the ocean calling to me, but I'm incapable of throwing myself into the abyss. I can't even bring myself to shout, "I'm going in, and that's that!" I don't trust my wings to take me, one way or another, to a place where I won't need any luggage. That's why I can't say no to the job: I'm scared to death. I look to others to understand and coddle me because of my lack ambition (and maybe talent) and my damned spinelessness. I will always be a crybaby. That's me in one word: crybaby. Shit, I kept thinking, if I had the balls, I'd throw myself into the water right now without a second thought, without taking off my clothes, without any apprehension, headfirst, just like I should have thrown myself headfirst into pursuing my dreams.

Do I have it in me?

I'm still here: wondering what I'm doing, standing here, freezing cold at the edge of the ocean, imagining that all my questions will be answered in the swell of the waves. I don't know why the ocean calls to me, why it wants me to take the plunge. I wonder if I have the guts to go in once and for all. I wonder...

The idea of throwing myself into the water has instilled itself in my mind like a divine message, this life or death matter as a measure of my self-worth, a trial by fire in which I prove to myself that I can take control of my future. But don't think the fear has just evaporated!

My mind spins for a half hour: is it a good idea to jump in? Or not? What if I catch a cold or the flu? What if I drown? It's getting late. What if I catch some infectious disease in this filthy city water? Is it worth trying to prove something to myself? What *am* I trying to prove? I know what I'm trying to prove. Is it worth it?

God, help me!

I leap into the water, terrified, and penetrate the cold, wet blanket that wraps, carries, and soaks me through: shoes, pants, (planner!) shirt, jacket. . . a riptide shoots my glasses off and I have to force myself to go out further to retrieve them.

I'm terrified.

What the hell am I doing?

I manage to come out of shock, wake from my self-induced paralysis, and turn around. I make a panicked effort to hurry back to shore, trembling with each stroke, and full of fear that I won't make it back, fear that now, since I've already determined to throw myself into the water, it won't be possible to take back my will, change my mind, and escape that liquid trap. Once I feel the sand under my feet, I run, drenched, from the sea. I look around, dripping with water and shame, feeling devastatingly foolish. Luckily, no one has seen a thing.

I smile indignantly at the irony that I've managed only to demonstrate my inability to act on impulse, to the extent that I spent half an hour in a fit of irrationality, hesitating and doubting myself, turning what should have been a spontaneous act into a calculated one, while trying to prove just the opposite. I did it so I didn't have to hear myself saying, *You're a coward!* I did it because of fear—the same fear that had me wanting to off myself.

A part of my mind continues desperately searching for a logical solution. Still, it's the question that keeps re-emerging, more imposing than ever: Now what?

I walk back through the shopping center, my clothes dripping, leaving a generous trail of water behind me. The people in the aisles turn nonchalantly to look at me, trying not to appear alarmed. I feel like a beast emerged from the bottom of the sea, coming to deliver a sentence of disease and damnation to all humans, to all living beings who are capable of making their own decisions and who set out to do whatever they want without having to deal with the steely opposition of their worst enemies: themselves.

I'm tired and ashamed. I can't get into a taxi with my clothes soaking wet and my house is too far away to walk. Furthermore, my so-called acceptance of fate is conflicting with a fear of catching pneumonia I never knew I had. It's starting to cool off and my mother always told me it was bad to walk around in wet clothes.

So, I've decided to pay a visit to Alfredo Martorell, my favorite director. He lives here, in the *Zona Olímpica*, an unsightly sanctuary of buildings and cement plazas and apartments for the upper-middle class and newly rich. One day, about a year ago, I approached Sr. Martorell at a film festival. I told him how much I admired *The Wounded Father* and invited him to have a beer. We hit it off right away because *The Wounded Father* had gotten awful reviews and was a

box office disaster. His later successes came from studio work, far removed from the aesthetic quality of his masterpiece. He was so appreciative of my passionate defense of the film that he ended up giving me his phone number and address, and told me to stop by one afternoon for a visit. All I'm doing is accepting the invitation. I know he only said it to be nice, but that's not my problem.

So, after looking in my dripping planner for the exact address (luckily the water only blurred everything around the edges and hadn't gotten to the middle pages), I keep walking until I find it: double doors, gray metal and glass, on the central artery of the *Zona Olímpica*. It's nine o'clock at night. I push the buzzer to his apartment, hoping he isn't entertaining or in the middle of some artistic or bohemian activity that I'll be interrupting.

"Who is it?" Through the intercom, an ultra-masculine voice breaks the silence of the night.

I start squawking like a parrot, aware that I have to convince him quickly, before he looks too hard at my bizarre image on the security monitor.

"Hi, I'm H., remember me? We met at the Sitges Festival. I do short films and stuff too, well, I shoot movies. Look, I've just been in an accident. I fell into the sea. It would be great if I could come up and—"

Zzzzzz. The intercom buzzer interrupts me, and, heart in my throat, I open the heavy door and enter the foyer.

My clothes are still soaking. I contemplate whether I should take the stairs or the elevator, and decide on the latter. It's better to drip on the floor of the elevator than drip up four flights of stairs and possibly cause some unknowing tenant to break their neck.

When I get to the landing, he's eyeing me from the doorway with a couple towels under his arm, dressed in his famous, tight, snakeskin pants. Does he wear them at home too, or did he just put them on when I got here? He doesn't seem annoyed, just flabbergasted.

"What the fuck happened to you?"

"Remember me? I'm—"

"Yes, yes, I remember. Come in, come, out of the hallway."

I enter his apartment, then an enormous living room where a little brown-haired girl, maybe eight years old, is sitting in front of the television playing a Playstation. She looks up at me, indifferent, for only a second, and immediately goes back to concentrating on what truly matters to her.

"I, I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Let's go to the bathroom. You need a shower."

We go upstairs. I have never seen an apartment this large or this extravagant. (So you *can* make money as an artist?) There are two floors and we walk down an unending hallway with countless rooms on either side that, to be polite, I'm careful not to look into. He shows me to a door at the end of the hallway, while he goes through another door.

"I'll lend you some of my clothes to change into."

I go into the bathroom. It isn't as big as I thought it would be, but I'm sure it isn't the only bathroom in the house. On the opposite wall, the much-needed shower is awaiting me. Alfredo comes in with clean, dry clothing, nicely pressed, and two towels, which he kindly offers me.

"What happened to you?" he asks.

I realize that I want to tell someone. And who better, right?

“It’s a long story. I didn’t really fall into the sea. . . I threw myself in. I did it to decide whether or not I should take a job. See, I’ve been offered a pretty well-paying job, but, if you remember from the conversation we had when we first met, I want to make it in film and devote myself to what makes me truly happy. So I threw myself into the sea to prove that I could make a decision on my own. It’s always seemed sort of impulsive and romantic,” I smile coolly and gesture as if to say, *you know what I’m saying*. “But I only managed to get wet and bother you.”

Alfredo doesn’t say anything. He only looks at me. No one has ever looked at me this way; it’s like he’s discovered a Martian in his bathroom and he’s scrutinizing its appearance to make sure it’s not just some human in disguise. Suddenly he realizes he’s staring and turns away to hide his rudeness, leaving the clothes on the toilet.

“I’ll leave these here for you. Return them whenever.”

He leaves without another word. He doesn’t get it at all, bless his heart. And I get in the shower and feel like shit; only slightly better than dead.

A half hour later, when I come out, having changed into his pants and shirt, which, as I suspected, are way too big for me—I’m also wearing running shoes four sizes too big—the little girl is gone. Alfredo brings me a Coca-Cola, looks me in the eye, and with a long sigh, and framed by an immense bookshelf full of videos and DVD’s that seem to silently affirm his words, he says, “I don’t know what you’ve decided, but if I were you I’d take the job. You’ll never regret doing it, but you might regret not doing it. And you can always quit if you don’t like it.”

I lower my eyes and nod, submissively.

“Hello?”

“Laia, it’s me.”

“Where are you? It’s late and your supper’s cold and. . .”

“I know. I’ll get something on the way, don’t worry. I have a surprise for you. It’s good news.”

II
The Vision

He would find rats the size of horses and
maybe he'd even come across a human skeleton.

It was a long shot but if he found it,
if he found that, he would be rich,
incredibly rich with mysteries
--*Chico de Madrid*, Ignacio Aldecoa

"The night said you were mine."
--*El gato que está triste y azul*, Toto Savio

"The eye always wins."
Walerian Borowczyk

This is important, so listen:

On planet Earth, there lives a boy named Asdrúbal who cannot close both eyes at once. He can only blink one eye at a time.

Bizarre, right? But how lucky for me.

In 1956, a dimwitted redhead named Sue Landford had the same idea, to put this story into writing in a tidy essay for her English professor at Hoboken Institute in New Jersey. But lucky for me, the lively Lolita was paying more attention to the risqué faces and lip gestures of the naughty new boy in class. In the end, with her head in the clouds—or something like that—the idea went out the window, whisked away by the new boy's sighs which were totally unconscious and really had nothing to do with her at all. When it came time to put pen to paper, Sue opted, instead, to write a glorified autobiography, a work that hasn't yet made its way into the annals of literature.

Consequently, I sincerely believe that this story of Asdrúbal is one hundred percent original. Now, I know a person can never really be one hundred percent sure of anything, but, everything has already been written. . .

I'm getting off track. As I was saying, Asdrúbal has to blink with one eye at a time: first one, then the other. Try to do it yourself: first the other, then the one. Feels awkward, right? As a result, Asdrúbal found himself, one way or another, always having one eye open. He was always seeing something, at all times. Constantly.

Now, I know that blinking really doesn't cause a major loss of vision, if any at all. Our eyelid falls so fast, the eye barely registers a thing; a flicker, a single frame in a film reel, a blink (in the end, it is what it is) in the electric current, practically undetected. We don't usually notice such involuntary phenomena, but unfortunately, other people notice. Imagine a well-meaning

classmate trying to maintain eye contact with Asdrúbal: one eye coming, the other going. The eyes of this individual unconsciously following the alternating movement—now one, now the other—of Asdrúbal’s eyes, unable to settle on only one¹. He or she will surely be ashamed and pity the poor defective boy. Imagine poor Asdrúbal in the school yard, trying to hold an age-appropriate conversation, insecure and visually stuttering in front of his classmates, those elegant synchronized dual blinkers.

When the left falls, the right rises, and when the left rises, the right falls.

How much more he will suffer if, on top of all this, the boys in his class are inclined to teasing and ridicule, and the girls snub any supposed physical defect, and surely this is how it is at his school. That’s the way it has been and the way it always will be in our schools, where “normal” is a most admirable trait during those insecure childhood years and any exception to the norm—to normality—is punished with the most cruel jeering and humiliation.

Asdrúbal’s nickname is Clock, a gift from his class. When he passes a fellow student, he invariably hears “tick-tock, tick-tock,” followed by unmistakable muffled laughter.

It won’t be difficult to understand the loneliness Asdrúbal sees himself doomed to, if at some time you’ve felt alone—and who’s never felt alone, no matter what sex, species or planet you belong to? The loneliness surrounds him every day of his life, and never changes or varies, no matter how long he’s been tick-tocking.

Trapped by his crystal balls, his meaty marbles, Asdrúbal keeps a distance from his cruel classmates. And as if reclaiming the organic being of his eyes, delighting in his misfortune, he

¹ Because—and I feel bad even bringing it up—while we don’t always notice it, or it seems completely contrary, when we look into a someone’s eyes, face to face, it’s impossible to focus on each eye at the same time and we can’t look at both of them at once, no matter how hard we concentrate! In reality, we NEVER look at both eyes! Because of a mere biological factor; how unromantic, right?: “I looked into her eye and then I looked into the other one, and I said, I love you.” Ugh!

marks the rhythm of his steps with the imaginary tick-tock that regulates the rise and fall of his eyelids. Tick, one step, tock, another. Tick. . .

Now, this is not a case of a boy not getting enough love at home. His mother loves him with vehement resolve. True, he can't count on a father's love, because, due to circumstances that, at his age, are inconceivable, he's never known his father. What he does know is that it could have been worse: he could have been born the child of an abusive father—there are certainly many of them around—like some of the notorious battered children in his own class who are, in turn, merciless to their classmates. They are especially mean to Asdrúbal, and still he only blames their cruelty on the malicious father. Asdrúbal's mother works in the post office, weighing packages and sticking stamps, and she devotes the few remaining hours of the day to caring for her son and to lying on the couch, sighing, exhausted.

His mother, of course, noticed the abnormal blinking immediately, as soon as it began several years ago. Several years for Asdrúbal, that is, not for us. As a panic-stricken mother who lives only for her child,² whose existence depends entirely on the child's existence, she rushed him to the doctor, afraid that her son was suffering a grave problem and the strange blinking was merely a symptom of some greater incurable illness announcing its presence—a strange way of making itself known—in Asdrúbal's organism. So when the doctor, after months of tests and examinations, diagnosed her son's supposed mystery illness as no more than a pure and innocuous muscular inability to synchronize the closing of the eyelids, the woman was wholeheartedly relieved. A little too relieved, if I'm completely honest, because over time, for Asdrúbal, not being able to close his eyes in tandem, has become a severe burden. But for his mother, it's NOTHING: because he's her son and because she loves him exactly as he is, the

² So hopelessly devoted, as the saying goes, as to go against everything natural and renounce life completely, as readily as giving the shirt off one's back.

whole world should love him too, just as he is. Oh, these mothers who love their children so much they don't even recognize an actual affliction.

Once in a while, let it be known, Asdrúbal has walked in to find his mother crying. She'll hide her face and pretend to be dusting a shelf, but he knows. Asdrúbal has only cried once that he remembers. Not at birth; that doesn't count. He can't remember the reason, but because he couldn't close his eyes to shed a decent tear, the experience was deprived of any comforting effect, and instead turned into a hideous and terrifying experience as his eyes seemed to be drowning in a flood. He decided he would never cry again. And he has kept this promise.

At that age when the only thing that matters is what other people think—and no one can escape it—Asdrúbal tried a thousand ways to conceal his defect—let's call it that just for once, so not to swell the ranks of the intolerant torturers. With patience and skill, he practiced quickly closing his eyelids, one right after the other, one right on the heels of the other, two planes called to action and willing to perform a stealthy drop, matched in time with only a microsecond's difference. But as soon as the second eyelid lowered, the first had risen. The effect was even more bizarre than the usual bizarreness, because to anyone else's eyes, his appeared to be executing syncopated winking, which caused even more hysterical outbursts all around him. As soon as the other children noticed, they didn't hold back a thing—including angry wads of spit from the girls.

Though minute, visual interruption happens to be necessary for the moisturization and preservation of the eye and relief of ocular irritation. The rest of us disengage from reality for a number of hours each day during a restful dream—but not Asdrúbal. Unable to administer a synchronized descent of the eyelids, Asdrúbal is forced to shut down one eye, only to liberate the other, incapable of simultaneously lowering both sets of blinds that cut the rest of us off from the

exhausting outside world. The rest of us surrender to the affections of an obscure universe that loves us or frightens us, but either way, always silently promises to return us unharmed to the place of departure. For Asdrúbal, even sleep is punishment.

One afternoon, Asdrúbal discovered that his mother was a regular consumer of sleeping pills. He discovered this when he asked her why she took so many red pills. (The color red bothers him; he doesn't know why, it's just part of his make-up. Just like some people don't like the looks of white mulberry leaves, the feel of peach skin, or a stranger's sweat.) His mother gave an acceptable answer, so Asdrúbal asked if he too could take them. His mother said no, "They aren't for children. If you take too many, you could go to sleep forever and never wake up."

"Like papá?"

This time his mother didn't answer.

Let's take a look at how Asdrúbal sleeps. It takes over an hour to accomplish, and only after he has forgotten about the unrelenting tick-tock and surrenders to it, the way a guinea pig surrenders itself to the hypnotic tick-tocking of a watch, even if it's the only sound disturbing the silence of the cage. It is only then that he manages to fall asleep and calm his spirit. And thus, the moment arrives when Asdrúbal, commanded by his exhausted body, lets himself go and releases his eyelids to their proper spheres, leaving them to their own will—of which they have none—to rise and fall tiredly, directed only by each eye's fundamental instinct for survival.

The neglected and aimless eyelids, by free will of the organism, reluctantly slow down, and move with exasperating lethargy, like tired wings beating, or heavy paddles maneuvered by a dying oarsman, and sluggish progression, like the crawl of a slug or the soft throbbing of a mollusk, to the point that the only inherent request of the open eye, managed by the body's own

biological mechanism, like a cerebral response to a progressive burning sensation, is to pull the selfish curtain and secure it, ipso facto, while the neighboring curtain rises again to re-admit the world's stage without disturbing the child's rest in any way.

And what does Asdrúbal see through the open eye appointed to said world's stage?

I come from a certain stock of human beings who, for all that has been said about the benefits of practicing good posture for the vertebral column and for the rest of the organism, have never been able to sleep lying on their backs, in other words, horizontally, face-up, upon the neck, back, buttocks and legs, supported on top of the mattress and forming a straight line between the bedroom walls. Therefore, it is impossible for me to imagine Asdrúbal sleeping in such a position and involuntarily visualizing the ceiling, now with one eye, now with the other.

For this reason, after minor speculation, I have decided to put him in the easiest position, the most common for humanity. Asdrúbal winds down and sleeps with simultaneous comfort and apprehension, lying on his side, facing one of the concrete walls of his bedroom and the window that looks across the courtyard to the apartments of his noisy neighbors, who don't interfere—thank God—in this story.

And so, Asdrúbal's eyes are confronted with alternating views: an aluminum framed window on a segment of wall—but not the ceiling—and the empty other half of the bed.

Do these images interrupt Asdrúbal's rest or disturb perhaps the sweet affairs of his mind, spellbound in the fumes of comforting lethargy? No, not even close. Not without effort anyway.

Yes, it's true that, thanks to the inescapable, unending vision of Asdrúbal's eyes, the unremitting images always accompany his nocturnal journey. But they do so on another level. Sometimes Asdrúbal even forgets about them, and that barren scenery transforms into a curtain and backdrop. And on some of these occasions, the bleak scenery even turns into a one-

dimensional screen where the other scenery, the fantastic, exotic, dream scenery, is projected. There, he is admired and fearless. On rare occasion, the screen interferes and prevails in his head, waking him and forcing him to abandon his amazing kingdom, forcing him to see, to see another damn time, the aluminum framed window on a segment of the wall—but not the ceiling—and the empty other half of the bed. A segment of bare white wall, the aluminum framed window, always cold and un-inspirational, and the other half of the bed, always empty, no one at his side: no one to love him.

Oh, don't give me that old "a-mother's-love-is-all-you-need" story. Were you never a child, you crabby old goat?

Loneliness surrounds the child who can't close both eyes at the same time. He is relentlessly surrounded, but most of all, during the night. And there's nothing he can do to shut his eyes to this loneliness. *Tick-tock, tick-tock*. Sometimes it's *tock-tock*. The loneliness knocking over and over on the door, demanding his partial notice.

But things have changed. Because for two or three months now, Asdrúbal has been having the same dream.

Well, it isn't *exactly* the same dream. It would be more accurate to say that he dreams about the same person.

He doesn't know who she is. He's never met her. He's never seen her (I mean, in real life). Yes, you've guessed it: He's got a dreamgirl. An adorable blonde girl. Maybe an angel. Angelic she is, without a doubt.

The fascinating thing about all of this is that he doesn't even know if he's really dreaming.

Why do I say that? Well, hang onto your chair because what I'm about to tell you is tricky and it may take a while to explain: in Asdrúbal's dream, when the girl appears, there is no IMAGINARY SCENERY. (Suck on that, Sue Landford!)

Understand? Wait, I'll try to explain a little better (ugh, this is hard, so pay attention): what I mean to say is that there is no scenery in Asdrúbal's head interfering with what his eyes capture each night as they alternately open and close. That is, if we're talking about a distinct scenery. But it could be that the scenery where the little girl appears is the same, detail for detail, as what Asdrúbal sees with his eyes!

So, both are superimposed, but they're identical. Probability full of improbability, obviously; unconsciously, his imaginary scenery would have to replace, with a slight change in perception, the actual scene that tortures each eye.

But let's not spoil the party before it begins and let's not sabotage our own attempts at creating splendor.

Asdrúbal is utterly beside himself in love.

It couldn't be any other way: he doesn't know where she's from, her place of origin, but she is adorable, as I've already mentioned. Adorable. Of course, the poor child can't possibly know, and if he does know, he can't accept that she is only a creation of his own mind, of his imagination run rampant, runaway in the witching hour; freed are the reigns of his most basic being, and why not, of his soul. He couldn't accept, if it were explained to him, that the object of his adoration only signifies a typical diversion, a distraction on behalf of a sensible mind, his sensible mind, desperate for the love and affection of a divine being: for the love of someone superior to his mother and greater than himself, someone who can convince him that his misfortune has some purpose, that his life is worth the suffering. Someone who controls his

destiny. Asdrúbal couldn't accept that his beloved is a mute projection of his subconscious because when he dreams, she, the girl, is lying right there at his side, breathing, not going anywhere. And she has come to him precisely because he is the way he is.

It isn't difficult to understand why Asdrúbal believes in her existence. When he sleeps, the little nymph appears vibrant at his side, at his very side, materialized on top of the covers, the white sheet, that portion of the mattress that had been cold and empty until now. The girl doesn't say anything: he looks at her and smiles, his pupils dilated in the gentle light, but sufficient to make her out, lying on his bed, carelessly reclining on his poly-blend bedspread, which has to cause discomfort and maybe even itchiness after a while. In a white dress stamped with roses of every color except pink, there she is, eye candy, just within reach. His arms long to embrace her, to hold her. They could, but they don't. He suspects deep down that he's afraid to reach out his hands and try to touch her, for fear the fantasy will be exposed. Whatever the reason, the fact remains: he never hugs her. He only looks at her, the ascending lid and the descending lid, now one, now the other, and she is always there, virtually motionless, barely swayed by his altering point of view, that sweet eternal undulation that puts order and happiness in his restlessness.

But obviously, her presence is not eternal, after all. When Asdrúbal least expects it, when he is admiring her, engrossed with both eyes to admire her all the more, the girl suddenly vanishes into the air, fades to translucence: the bedroom scenery takes over from there. Terrified, the sleeping Asdrúbal thinks the girl has only disappeared from his sight and closes the eye he thinks she's disappeared from. Sometimes he's right, sometimes he's wrong. Even if he's right, the happiness still doesn't last. Because when the open eye, seeking respite, abruptly demands to close, the relieving eye still can't locate the darling, and neither can the other when it

immediately reopens: she has been vaporized and only the pitiful bed remains, an image superimposed or real.

A minute passes and Asdrúbal realizes he's awake. His proof is in the irritation of his eyes, reddened by exertion.

Like clockwork, the girl reappears the following night. On certain occasions, when the previous night was frustrating, beyond frustrating, Asdrúbal tries to speak to his phantom girlfriend. He tries to peel his lips apart and whisper some charming expression, something he's never before had the opportunity to say. But in those moments his mouth doesn't respond, as if it had become infected with the same sort of self-government as his eyelids, deciding to immobilize and fall perpetually silent.

Having said this, I should also make it clear that the girl doesn't seem bothered in the least.

So what's she like? Imagine total relaxation. Absolute happiness. She's reminiscent of something you sense you might've intuitively felt, but you're not sure if you *really* felt it. If you saw her (and in your case she could take any form or incarnation), you'd immediately say: "Oh, now I remember! Now I know why I'm always caught up feeling unhappy and irritable, longing for who-knows-what. How unlucky for me! Somehow, my primal being remembers what I lost right at the beginning: it was this. . ."

And so Asdrúbal's nights pass, marked by two eyelids on uncoordinated rotating shifts, in the company of a girl who fills his empty hours with affection and importance.

Asdrúbal hasn't cried other than the one time, as I've already mentioned, but recently something has begun to change in him. The first days, following the first nights sleeping in the company of the girl, he was surprisingly vivacious and cheerful, setting aside his usual passive

and apathetic self. Even his mother noticed the change, mistakenly attributing it to her son's growing up; breaking out of his shell, if you will.

But in more recent days, Asdrúbal has come to replace that carefree enthusiasm with an increasing irritability. Any little thing can set him off—just ask his mother. It's not just that he's aloof and anti-social. He is beginning to snap back with spiteful remarks. And he throws outrageous tantrums when Mamá serves spinach omelets yet again, even though he has told her a thousand times that he doesn't like them, and for the thousandth time she is surprised.

Yesterday, for example, he threw his plate on the floor.

Asdrúbal feels he's been cheated. Yes, he's always felt this way, so he should be used to it; I know, but try telling him that. If you'll allow me to speak on his behalf for just a moment, I will argue in his defense that this feeling, frankly, is of a different caliber, and the boy has certain justification for his cynical attitude: before, Asdrúbal only wanted to assimilate into the world and resign himself to a relatively tolerable life where the other mortals accept him just the way he is. Now Asdrúbal knows what happiness is, he has experienced it, even if only a little, and he can't imagine giving it up or accepting that the source of his happiness doesn't belong to the real world.

We all give in or give up sooner or later, this is true. We bury the memory of something, some thing, of what or if it ever really *was*, we are not sure, but we bury the memory until there is only a trace of a glorious past that couldn't possibly have ever existed. But it did exist. And Asdrúbal can't bear waking up each morning and watching as his darling disappears from his eyes and from his bed.

Each morning he spends more time lying there. But it hasn't done any good since she only appears in the deepest phase of sleep, when Asdrúbal has already given up waiting and someone or something else decides that it's time for her to appear to him.

So this week he has employed a new approach. Instead of investing more fruitless time in bed, he has asked his mother to enroll him in soccer, even though he knows his companions don't want him there. But he isn't doing it to win the favor and esteem of the other boys who have rejected him until now. How surprised they are to see Clock running and jumping and skipping around the ball like a titan.

And why is he making such an effort if his intention isn't to be accepted by his classmates? They don't even matter anymore. He couldn't care less about them.

He wants to come home, worn out and exhausted, take a relaxing shower and go to bed, completely drained, to dream, dream, dream.

And his eyes can rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall.

Whatever.

I suppose you've already predicted the outcome of this story.

As have I. But I only recently figured it out, so don't be so sure of yourself. It came to me when I decided that the girl would appear in the same background that Asdrúbal's eyes mull over each night.

It's a beautiful ending, but sad. I like sad endings.

Sad but true.

Asdrúbal has already given up trying to bring his darling to his reality. He's not completely conscious of this though, since he has been backing away, little by little, from reality, and now he wants nothing to do with it at all.

Asdrúbal remembers what his mother told him about the pills she takes to fall asleep. He recalls perfectly which ones they were: the ones that boast that abhorrent color.

Asdrúbal pilfers the bottle of pills, and ten minutes after saying goodnight to Mamá, takes advantage of an impulsive trip to the bathroom. Instead of peeing, he takes out the pills and takes his time in looking at them from the unique perspective of each of his two eyes, first with one, then with the other: they are more shiny through the first eye, and dull through the second. Two at a time, he takes them with determination and water from the faucet.

Until he has taken twenty.

Stuffed full of narcotics, Asdrúbal returns to his bedroom and lies down on his side to wait for the pills to take effect.

He smiles with anticipation, waiting to fall asleep.

He falls asleep without knowing he's sleeping. He sees her there, in front of him, and she returns his gaze. She is so pretty, so beautiful and precious and adorable and kissable and so completely his that Asdrúbal wants to cry for the first time out of sheer joy. Because when he made the decision to never again shed a tear, he didn't consider that sometimes we also cry for joy. Or maybe he didn't even know. What a wonderful discovery!

So he cries, he weeps in his sleep, fearing the tears will forever obscure his object of affection. But she isn't obscured. Only blurred.

When the crying is over, she returns. Still there. She never left and she's never going to leave. She'll never allow Asdrúbal to be alone again.

Asdrúbal smiles, because he knows that now, nothing can spoil his happiness.

Asdrúbal only has eyes for her. One and the other. Right?

Asdrúbal doesn't even notice that he's already been looking at her for over an hour with the same, single eye.

The other has closed and hasn't opened again.

III
A Man Alone in Paris

I went to Paris intending to postpone my suicide. But with nothing better to do, I thought I'd try soliciting sex. I'd never slept with a whore and I was tired of resorting to masturbation.

I bought a guide to the city and then perused the sex ads. Having been born into a generation characterized by a certain shame when it comes to contracting the services of a prostitute, I decided to try my luck with the personals instead: *liaisons* between sexually liberated people where one assumes that the women, like the men, are in search of the same brand of fun, in this case, without the strings of a traditional relationship. Like swinging or partner swapping.

After a lot of should-I-or-shouldn't-I, I called the agency that seemed most promising. A sickening sweet female voice apologized for not speaking English or Spanish. To the best of my ability, I explained that I wanted information about her services. She very kindly indicated that it would be best for me to stop by the office. As a matter of fact, I had tried to do just that, but couldn't find the place. She informed me, to my surprise, that the actual suite number was different from what had been listed in the ad. I agreed to be there in two hours.

Excitement and anticipation filling my heart (yes, my heart), I headed to the agency, secretly hoping that along the way I'd run into some woman so magnetically drawn to me she'd want to make love at no charge.

The downtown building stood out among the surrounding sleaze and squalor. I climbed the broad and creaky stairway like a thief, prepared to throw myself back down at the slightest hint of a curious neighbor. This time I found it: on door 133, just as the saccharine voice had said, was the agency's sign: One-For-All Contact.

I was greeted by a very attractive girl in a tight shirt, her skin shiny with the luster of cigarettes and savvy. At first she didn't seem to recall my appointment (she asked which

member of her “team” I’d made arrangements with), and told me to wait while she went to figure out who I’d spoken to.

The office was rather strange. If I were to conceive of a model office, serving as a cover for some scam or fraudulent enterprise, I couldn’t have designed it better myself: a spacious, clean room, great views, a wood desk, three chairs, three framed, decorative landscapes, and not much else. No telephone, no computer, no fax; not even a photo or sign indicating what type of business took place there. No nameplate on the desk, no official papers, no business cards, nothing. The office could’ve been dismantled and set up again on the other side of the city in less than half an hour. Sappy background music was playing and I realized, slightly unnerved, that it was coming from an inconspicuous cassette player set on the floor in the hallway.

There was something on the desk: a stack of promotional postcards with retro pictures advertising a late-night pool party at a luxurious resort. The club that had organized the event (a club whose name differed from the place where I was) offered free admission to club members. The chance of going to a free-for-all sex party put me back in good spirits. Maybe I was in the right place after all.

The harlot returned. It turned out that, apparently, she *was* the one I’d spoken to on the telephone. In any case, she would tend to me personally. I began to wonder if there were actually any other girls—certainly anyone else working there would be female—taking clients. I had no idea who or what I’d find beyond the gray shag carpeting of the seemingly endless hallway, and yet it didn’t seem like there were any other prospective clients besides myself.

Slightly nervous at this point, I asked her to tell me, in detail, the nature of the services offered because I really wasn't sure. I knew my French wasn't setting off Gallic fireworks, and I was really only looking for a good time: a few laughs and some sex. But mostly sex. No love or long-term commitments. Puckering her well-trained mouth, as if teaching a baby to bottle-feed, the girl told me that they received visits from men and women, married and single, with interests and desires similar to mine, and that her job was to make sure those men and women found an acceptable partner. I asked how much it would cost. She told me that first we would see if they'd be able to meet my needs and then we'd talk money. It was right then that I suspected my tastes might cost more to satisfy than I was willing to pay.

The girl picked up a pad of paper and tore off a blank sheet—completely blank: no letterhead, no company name. Not a sign, not a clue, as to what this agency really did. With a cheap little pen in hand, she prepared to take down my information: age, height, occupation. I only gave her my first name—she didn't ask for my last name or didn't insist on knowing it—and my telephone number, which I immediately regretted giving out.

Next, she asked me to describe the type of woman I was interested in. I would've answered truthfully, but I was sure she'd heard it a million times: "French girls, naturally," and I didn't want to come off as the typical horny sap. I opted instead for a false naivety, confiding in her that what I really liked more than anything was a good sense of humor. But she wasn't buying it: "And physically?" Her face, I said, I always notice a pretty face. "*Oui, mais, très fine ou voluptueuse?*" I cleared my throat. Doesn't matter. I guess, maybe, more curves; but whatever, what's next? "Intellect?" It's all the same to me. I wanted to say that I found all types of women fascinating despite their supposed level of intelligence, a concept I felt was rather relative. But my French wasn't good enough for specifics, and I didn't want her to

misunderstand that by “relative” I meant all women were idiots. So I limited myself to claiming that mostly I wanted an upbeat girl with a good sense of humor. Above all, a good heart.

“Yes but, what race?”

Now we were getting down to brass tacks. I turned in my chair, with an undeniable smugness that yes, this was indeed beginning to resemble what I’d suspected: an “a la carte” service. Not that it bothered me; in fact, just the opposite. This way, I’d avoid awkward preliminaries, and the sex was a guarantee. Now it was only a question of how much money I’d have to shell out.

Without hesitation, I told her I was interested in all races, but that I had a special weakness for black girls, because you don’t see them very often in my country. She nodded, as if to say, have I got something for you, little boy, you’re going to shit.

She put an end to the interrogation. With a smile as authentic as her hair color, she asked me to wait while she checked her database for an available and compatible girl. And would I like something while I waited? Coffee perhaps? A cigarette? I *was* feeling anxious. She offered me one from her own pack. I lit it with her lighter and asked for a glass of water. She left the room promising to be back soon.

Enjoying my cigarette, I imagined arriving at a party like the one on the postcard, “Get your bikinis!” I had always dreamed of coming home to a harem of naked women, waiting for me, immersed to varying degrees in an indoor pool; even though my greatest fantasy involved sneaking into a women’s dressing room where I could spy on the unsuspecting clientele.

Suddenly, as if partly an answer to my fantasy, a giant black woman, somewhere between runway model and porn star, slipped in through the door. Her mammoth mammaries were poorly contained in a see-through top, and in her considerably large hand she held a flimsy,

plastic cup of water. Never had I seen such an eloquent manifestation of the baser male instincts materialized: a massive, sexy mandinga, holding a ridiculous glass of water suggesting determination to satisfy her hypothetical master's most erratic and frivolous wishes. An offering from that mockery of femininity, from both slave and master, she said with her eyes, "How would you like me to quench your thirst, pathetic creature?" Like playing a poorly rehearsed role, the woman leaned toward me with phony nonchalance, XXX nonchalance, and placed the cup in my open-to-anything hand, my inclined-to-entertain-her hand. The ebony empress departed, pleased at having fulfilled her naughty attempt at dominance.

There was no doubt about it. This supposed "meeting place" for men and women seeking a casual fuck turned out to be an escort service for select gentlemen. Gentlemen with—how should I put it?—ah yes, with financial freedom. Financial freedom which allows access to desired sexual freedom.

I was beginning to feel like I was drowning. No need for black girls or pools. The room began spinning all around me...

What if there was more to all this? What if this unassuming company specialized in something else? The only indication of its existence was the small sign on the door; no hint, however, of the *type* of business conducted behind the door. The large but practically empty apartment could be vacated in minutes. No documents, no forms, no paper or digital archives to betray the nature of the operations that took place there; even the sign could be unscrewed in seconds and replaced with another one. This place could be anything. What if they were in the business of making fools like me disappear? Abduction and kidney harvesting? Collecting incriminating evidence to blackmail the poor suckers later on?

I stood up to calm my nerves, and also to make sure I wouldn't be caught off guard by some syringe-wielding masked person who intended to sedate me, cut me into pieces and sell me at wholesale. I looked out the window. I was on the sixth floor, at a considerable height, and right in the heart of Paris. I began to fear for my life. It was time to get out of there.

My consultant returned just then and, to my horror, closed the door and shoved one of the chairs against it. Did the door not close right? Or was she trying to lock me in? Maybe both.

Well, she said as she sat with some papers in her hand, I have two candidates, so let's see what you think. I noticed that the printouts consisted of printed text but no pictures, which disappointed me a little; nevertheless, I had recovered some sense of calm and so I leaned back in the chair to enjoy the description my consultant had prepared for me: two girls who would fit me like a ring to a finger, to put it crudely.

My excitement was mounting as she pointed out the qualities of each candidate for mistress-to-a-stranger: the first was named Catherine, she was Dominican—ergo, black—a cheerful girl, medium height but very shapely—here, my consultant gestured with her hands so I'd get the idea (she was on to me). “Catherine can hold her own in any conversation and she speaks English and a little Spanish, which, for you is perfect, right jackass?” (this last part she didn't say, but I saw it in her eyes). I nodded appreciatively, yes, how perfect, right? We'll have so much to talk about! On to the second candidate: “Her name is Adeline, she's part colored, part French, but with very light skin, VERY voluptuous, lots of curves, considerably intelligent, she's into sculpture—” Sculpture? “She doesn't speak Spanish but she yearns—you might even say she's desperate—to meet foreign men and experience all types of pleasure.” Here, she looked emphatically into my eyes, I've got you pegged little boy, you can't fool me: ALL types

of pleasure, willing to do ANYTHING in bed. I wondered how she could possibly know such specific details.

She'd probably asked more questions the day the desperate sculptress came to the agency, in dire need of manly company to alleviate her terrible loneliness.

By this time it was clear to me what this business was really about and now I only wondered how much it would cost me to sleep with one of those natural wonders. And by some stroke of luck, both of them were available that very afternoon, which was perfect for me because I would only be in Paris for a couple days, right? Right, I confirmed while imagining myself walking down the street on the arm of a classy minx dressed in high heels and a see-through dress like the ebony vixen with the tiny glass: even in the charming avenues as anonymous and decadent as those in Paris, it would take some major balls to get through this.

She asked me which of the two candidates I liked more.

I asked if she could show me any pictures of the girls and she responded that this wasn't a supermarket. She answered with calculated irritation, clearly another standard, automatic response to a question she'd been asked too many times. I feigned mild disappointment. I wanted to give her a justifiable explanation, something like, "Any time I make a purchase I demand to see the merchandise," like an experienced whore connoisseur, but again, I lacked the words in French and it wasn't worth offending her or causing a misunderstanding. At this point it was only a question of payment—either they come cheap (as in price) or her business wouldn't stand much of a chance with me—and I realized I still didn't know one important detail about the two candidates, so to kill a little time, I asked, what color are their eyes? To this day I don't know why, and I probably never will, but I am only attracted to dark-eyed women, and I'd forgotten to tell her. I learned that Catherine had dark eyes and Adeline, light. To hell with the

sculptress. *Voilà*, now I have the perfect woman...and the possibility of meeting her this afternoon. That's what I call luck!

The critical juncture, equally anticipated and feared, had finally arrived: what's the damage? How much would her agency charge for acting as intermediary between *moi* and such a prized beauty, for initiating the coming together of two wandering souls, in need of consolation, tender words and savage sex? My consultant tore another blank piece of paper off the pad at her side (the company didn't seem to have invested much in any sort of organized system, so maybe it wouldn't be as expensive as I'd imagined) and gave me a detailed explanation of the charges. I'm telling you exactly what she told me: six hundred euros for the *droits d'entrée*, meaning registration with Club One-For-All Contact; plus two thousand euros for eight *rendezvous* (I couldn't figure out if that meant with eight different women, and if I had to pay extra each time I wanted to reconvene with the lusty black girl who I was already aching for—ah, *au revoir* my luscious *dominicana*, I'll never forget you, you filthy slut); or fifteen hundred for five *rendezvous*, or one thousand for three.

She must have seen the face I made because she quickly added: with the last option (she probably said plan), the one for one thousand euros, the six hundred euro registration fee is already included, so there is no additional cost.

“So? Which option sounds the best to you?”

I started thinking about getting out of there with the tiniest bit of self-respect. Six hundred euros was exactly double what I'd estimated as a likely cost, and I wasn't willing, not even in my wildest dreams, to pay that much. I knew I could buy a porn flick that afternoon, and that within the next few months I'd spend the same amount of money on visual aids for

masturbation purposes but—for Christ’s sake!—that’s after several months and *never* could I imagine wasting six hundred euros on one measly screw. No fucking way.

She wouldn’t let up. “Which package would you prefer?” I stuttered like a pathetic housewife trying to get rid of a salesman: I have to think about it. I can’t make up my mind. To stall bit more and disguise my resolve to get out of there pronto—how was I going to get that chair away from the door without it being obvious that I wanted to fly the coop?—I asked her what forms of payment were accepted. Delighted, she made it clear that I could pay by check or cash, whichever I’d prefer. I assumed an I.O.U. was out of the question.

I didn’t say anything. The girl, whatever the hell her name was, leaned toward me, concerned as a pediatrician specializing in retarded children: “What’s the matter? Is it the money?” Now I was insulted: No, it’s not the money, I just have to think, I just... without having seen them... Another piece of paper from the pad, rrrriiip: “Look, sugar, I can give you a discount, you only pay six hundred euros and I’ll let you have two dates so you can decide which of the two girls you like more. And to top it off, I’ll let you pay in installments: three payments of two hundred euros, or two payments of three hundred or, as a final special consideration, four at one fifty. She wrote this all down for me so there would be no way even the dimwitted Spaniard could misunderstand. Ah, good, I whispered, nodding appreciatively and concentrating on the paper with the payment information, as if, in spite of everything and against all odds, I really did NOT understand.

I couldn’t beat around the bush any longer. I just wanted to get out of there. Look, thank you very much for the information, but really, I have to think about it, I’ll call you this afternoon. “Are you sure? We close early today, at five.” Positive, I’ll let you know before five. “You’ll have to call immediately if you want to arrange a date with Catherine this afternoon, you know

that, right?” Yes, I’ll take my chances, if not today, another day (there’s no high or low tide when it comes to my balls); in any case I’ll call this afternoon—why on earth did I give my real phone number when it would have been so simple to change one little number? I could always come back later and say, oh, I made a mistake, sorry, it’s a *trois* instead of a *deux*, but no, I always have to be so honest, to the point of giving my phone number to this mafiosa, and who knows, they’ll probably highjack my phone line and rack up a load of charges, these things happen, they might as well have the pin to my ATM card, get the fuck out NOW!

But LOOK, she said, slamming her hands against my reflection in the table, her face now only centimeters from mine, “What are you going to decide out there that you can’t decide right here?” Well, I, it’s just, ultimately, first I have to do some calculations to see... “You have to make sure you have the money?” No, no, it’s ready to go, I have the money, it’s not the money, I just really want to think it over, I want to think about it, thank you for everything, I’ll let you know this afternoon what I decide.

Lucky for me, she backed down. If she’d kept insisting, I would have given her the six hundred euros, but who knows if I’d actually have the nerve to show up to meet the *dominicana*; it would’ve been far too much humiliation to arrive only to find that it was the *dominicana* who didn’t show up. Fortunately, my hostess recovered her smile and an upbeat disposition. She even moved the chair away from the door for me, releasing me into the blessed outside world. I bolted into the hallway, keeping my eyes peeled for thugs with sacks and blackjacks, lying in wait to jump naïve tourists like me for six hundred euros. “Don’t you want my card?” Oh, yes, I said, stopping at the entrance and realizing my mouth was bone dry. “It might come in handy when you call me this afternoon,” she added. I forced an awkward smile.

She handed me a card with the name of the agency, this time printed clearly, and underneath: Your Consultant, followed by her first name, but as I expected, her name was handwritten. Aha, so she could erase it whenever she wanted.

I zipped out of the building with a mixture of intense terror and no less intense relief, bordering on something close to happiness. When I got to the street I turned off my cell phone. I'd keep it off until five, maybe six, just in case. I threw her card and the papers with the payment options in the trash (yes, I really did get rid of them; for Christ's sake, I just happen to have an incredible memory). I only kept the pool party postcard so I could fantasize about that utopian orgy I'd never partake in. Sighing, I walked aimlessly, glancing in every direction to make sure I wasn't being followed. Convinced that I was alone, a wave of euphoria came over me: and to celebrate my fortuitous emancipation, I took myself to McDonald's and splurged on a value meal, super-sized.

IV
Long Distance Relationship

I don't know how to tell a story, but allow me to tell you a true one. A story so true, it's like it actually happened to me.

I've been in love several times, but none of them compare to what I felt for her. She worked at a newspaper kiosk in the mall, across from my popcorn stand, where I waited on couples who came to make out at the movies. I served them mechanically and sometimes I'd hear them thanking me, mistaking my foolish smile and vacant stare for politeness. To be honest, I never even saw their faces, only hers.

I was obsessed. She had a heavenly body, delicate and touched by a natural grace that made her celestial in my eyes. Her face was absolutely divine. I silently worshipped her each time I opened my popcorn stand, and I'd casually turn to meet her gaze, which always seemed to be there, waiting to bathe my naked, devoted body with her warm eyes. We never exchanged a single word, but I never had a more pleasurable or rewarding job than selling popcorn across from a goddess.

I approached her once to say something, but then I just bought a newspaper instead. I never read the paper; I used it to clean out the bottom of my popcorn popper. I think she knew.

I kept looking for excuses to talk to her, to move from our non-existent relationship, based solely on my visual servitude to her, to a more substantial and complex one. I tried to get things rolling by planning fortuitous encounters, imagining effortless, spontaneous conversations that, no matter how they started, always came to the same happy ending.

I did it.

One day she simply came over and asked which movie I'd recommend. I stuttered the name of the one I liked best, and then she asked my opinion about another one. I said I hadn't seen it.

That day, after my shift, we saw the movie together.

Kissing the goddess was strange. Like crossing a threshold that one has mentally drawn a thousand times without ever hoping to actually cross it.

On another occasion, we made love. It was a letdown. There I was, inside of her, finally looking at her face to face, her breath in my nose, her perfume in my eyes, her eyes crossing to see both of mine.

But she wasn't the goddess I loved.

It didn't take long to figure it out. We continued seeing each other, but my enthusiastic devotion turned to the deception one feels after discovering that a deemed superhero is really just like everyone else. The disillusion of a dreamer whose celestial wonder is given a scientific explanation. The disappointment of a child who discovers movies aren't real life.

More than any other feeling, I was overcome by disenchantment that her perfection was distorted by an inconvenient point of view. It was a futile effort trying to see her as the perfect-bodied, immaculate beauty when I held her in my arms. Up close, her flawless features transformed into remnants of mascara, grotesque pieces of an abhorrent face, terrifying fragments that were in no way related to that harmonious conglomeration I had worshipped. A lazy eye, a pockmarked cheek, stinky lips, one of her nostrils a gaping hole.

And so I realized that I loved her from a distance: close-ups did nothing for her.

I told her that we couldn't keep seeing each other. I didn't offer an explanation. She walked away, slouching, shoulders fallen, head down.

But the next day, the girl I loved was back. There she was, in all her glory, her proud, perfect head, her delicate body in a perpetual state of grace. Her fiery anger played up the sexiness of her features, which were only beautiful in relation to each other, working as a team.

One without the others changed everything. I realized then that our love story was one-sided and it would only work from a distance.

V
Inseparable

Mario and María were Siamese twins and they were in love. They were conjoined by a rib and shared their spleen, stomach, and one kidney. They had two hearts that beat as one. They couldn't live without each other.

They were madly, yet tactfully, in love. They had been together forever and couldn't conceive of a life apart. On many occasions, during pointless conversations, they had toyed with the possibility of undergoing a surgical separation. How would life be then? They'd be able to make love like a normal couple, they wouldn't have to worry about the other's bodily functions, they could go off alone for a few hours and then spend time together again. They could keep secrets.

And that's exactly why they didn't want to be separated: they were happy to share everything, including a body. Besides, such an operation was unthinkable in their case: the equal division of their torso would have shorted each of them a vital anatomical organ. They were literally dependent on each other for basic survival. Only if one of them died accidentally, would the other have the right to use the healthy organs, to get rid of the leftovers, and to live for the first time as a free and single person. But neither of them wished for anything like that because they were in love and they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together.

Mario and María did not make love. At least, not in the conventional sense. They couldn't. But they could lie in bed, face up, and touch each other in the most intimate of places. Their favorite caresses were those where the sensation was mutual, in the intercostal region where they shared, for the most part, the skin and muscles of the torso. It was incredibly sweet to experience simultaneous sensations, to know what the other was feeling, because it was the same for them both.

No, they didn't want to be separated. Ever.

But one day Mario discovered that María was cheating.

Not physically, of course. Neither of them had ever had sex with anyone else, and even if the opportunity had presented itself, the involved party never could have carried out the act so inconsiderate of the other half.

And yet, every now and then, Mario caught María quietly watching as a couple passed at two distinct paces, observing the way they embraced and then freely moved away from each other; appraising the way their bodies pressed together when they kissed. Mario was aware that her curiosity was beginning to threaten her resolve to take pleasure in non-coital lovemaking with her brother.

For the first time, his sister-lover had a secret she didn't share.

Mario expressed his suspicions.

At first, María denied everything, but shortly after, with a pained expression on her face, she broke down. She wanted to know what it was to feel a penis in her vagina. She wanted to have a man inside her. She wanted to know how to truly make love.

It was almost more than he could bear, but Mario agreed to let her have sex with another man. He did ask though, that she do it only once. He was already going into a state of heartbroken shock and could only bring himself to endure it one time. María, crying happy tears, promised that it would be just that, that she had never doubted her love for him, and that she only wanted to know how love was for the rest of the world.

María went to her friends and people she knew, in search of a candidate. As she made the offer, having spiced it up with an attractive monetary bonus, Mario stood by as witness to faces of concern in the best of cases, irritation in others, and blatant disgust in most. María wasn't intimidated—they were well accustomed since childhood to all types of stares and

remarks—and she continued her tireless hunt until she found a willing person: a stranger Mario approached in a bar during an uncharacteristic night out on the town. The man didn't hesitate for even a second: it was only natural for a woman to have such a desire, and the special circumstance of having both a woman and her brother pinned beneath him didn't bother him one bit. What's more, he was young, handsome, and seemed to be in good shape.

They decided to meet the following evening to give the stranger one last chance to change his mind, but he didn't. The handsome stud arrived at their house, ready to hold up his end of the deal. He arranged María and her brother on the bed, covering Mario but not María with the sheets, and then he penetrated her. María was not a virgin thanks to Mario's charitable finger acts, but none of her previous experiences even came close to this fantastic, explosive invasion. Mario, with tears in his eyes, looked the other way while his sister's pleasure was made evident through the quaking of their own shared flesh. María's pleasure was his pleasure, his martyrdom.

Naturally, this wasn't the only time María had a taste of that dish. It was quickly apparent that she wanted to repeat the experience, always with the young stud, always in exchange for the same amount of money. About once a week, Mario bore witness, his face as far away as he could manage, to the same insufferable torture of this man coming between him and his sister, giving it to her, taking her to places that Mario could never take her, even as attached to her as he was. And the worst part, the peak of his punishment and humiliation, was that each time it was over, Mario had no choice but to be right there and see the ecstasy in María's glowing eyes. It was far more than he ever thought he'd have to endure: for the first time ever, María looked at him as if he wasn't even there.

After a while, the handsome stud didn't even charge to sleep with Mario's sister. A mortified Mario listened to them, sprawled out beside him, grinding, grunting, moaning in ecstasy, while was met with the obligation of seeing in his neighboring body, a happiness that he could not take part in, that he couldn't even feel, not this time. He was confronted with a private place in María's life that for once, he could not enter. Soon he began to masturbate to the rhythm of their groans, creating his own place, distracting himself with the pleasurable no man's land that he and María still shared.

Finally, the day arrived when the young stud showed up at the house for a date that had never been arranged.

"I've come to take María away."

"I know," Mario answered.

"How do you know?" She demanded.

"Did you forget that there are no secrets between us? You don't love me anymore."

"No," and after a lengthy silence, "How long have you known?"

"Your heart doesn't beat in time with mine anymore."

"Yes, thanks to him it beats faster now."

Mario accompanied them, of course. He was the first lover scorned who had no choice but to escort the runaway couple. He was also best man at their wedding. They assured him that they would always respect him, they would treat him like one of the family and that they would never consider separating María from her brother.

If Mario was supporting all of this, it was only because he knew it couldn't last.

Mario saw it coming before it happened. The three of them always slept together, but one night, after the lovemaking, Mario sensed in his sister a wholeness more intense than he'd

ever felt before, as if she'd just realized a possibility that filled her with both fear and excitement. Mario hoped he wasn't right.

He was pretending to be asleep when his brother-in-law got up and came over to his side of the bed. He was wide awake when the pillow came down on his face with a suffocating force. He didn't fight death when it came to him in the form of a bullet. Before the shot, he felt the weight of María's hand on the pillow.

María alleged that her brother had taken the gun from the nightstand while she and her husband were sleeping. He seemed dissatisfied with life and wanted to end it all so that his sister could live a separate, independent and dignified life.

Which was, in reality, absolutely true, every word.

VI
I'm Fucked

To Santiago Sequeiros, who was also there.

“The celebration of life has a lot to do,
in some way, with the celebration of death.
To live as if there is no tomorrow
implies that there may not be. So,
an escape from the mundane will always carry at its very core
a suicidal component.”

Escape from the Mundane (1793), Lord Huntington

The tiles on the wall are so small and meticulous that they seem to be moving. They quiver like atoms and he knows they're secretly switching places without him noticing. *But I see it.*

He quickens the tap tap of his foot because he thinks the seconds will pass faster if he does this. He watches the rear ends of nurses as they pass and then stops his eyes halfway along their trajectory; that's where it starts and later, it ends as it ends. He looks at the old people across from him and wonders if they're wondering what he's doing there. Shame makes him think they've assumed the reason for his visit. *No, I'm healthy. This is just a routine check-up.*

But it isn't routine, is it? If it were routine, you probably wouldn't have come.

You're convinced that you've got IT.

ALL BECAUSE OF THAT BASTARD SUSO! Drunk fuck, drunk, sick fuck. Idiot.

Him and you.

Tsk, tsk, what a way to begin the year. Isn't there any way to start over? No, of course not. You'd do it exactly the same all over again. Idiot.

Suso is a bum. Not only is he an alcoholic, a loose cannon, a godless man, a lost cause and a loser, he's also your best friend. *If he weren't my best friend, he never would've introduced me to Lucía, right? None of this would have happened.*

Lucía. For fuck's sake, she isn't even that hot! But you wanted to start the year off right, didn't you? There you were, at the first party of the year 2000, a night full of promises. With your psychedelic pants and your trendy shirt. Your head shaved, which isn't fashionable because only bald people shave their heads—which is why you do it—and that smile of yours that does the trick every time, you know that, even though you're filled with self-pity.

And there, in the pub you'd all agreed on, was Suso, welcoming you with a smile even wider and less sincere than your own, measured by the amount of cash some unfortunate

recipient of the Suso Smile had supplied the month before. He owes you five hundred euros, right? Thank God things are going well for you at work, huh? Ha ha, because everything else. .

Another *orujo*, Suso? Jesus Christ, always guzzling, you never stop. Your teeth are rotten from drinking and smoking. Your body is saggy and shriveled like Mr. Keith Richards whether you're going to bed or just getting up, hung over or at the height of intoxication. You talk like a barbarian, especially when you're screaming like a banshee in the night. You have that dirty suit your father gave you and you've been wearing it for months. It stinks to high heaven. You have so much potential. And who knows what else you have.

Who knows what else he has, right?

And that night he had Lucía at his side, one of his countless lovers, although this one belongs to a higher rank: the girls who are also his friends. Meaning those poor things who've fallen in love with him.

Lucía isn't beautiful, but she's cute. She's older than Suso and me; she must be around thirty-five. It's best to try a little of everything, right?

Suso starts talking about himself, as usual. End of the year, don't have a pot to piss in, my father won't send me a dime, my editor is constantly hounding me to finish my novel, claiming he's taking it up the ass—well, he shouldn't have given me an advance! On and on and on. Always the victim, never the problem.

But Suso, even in his advanced state of intoxication and caught in a nauseating spiral of mental bludgeoning, noticed after two hours that no one was paying him any attention, and furthermore, that he was a third wheel. Lucía, too, wanted to do something special to celebrate the New Year. What would make it special? The act itself or the novelty of the *courtier*?

And you didn't object.

The night passed between more drinks and laughter, yours and Lucía's, because Suso's laughter was being extinguished with each watery shot of indifference. Suso, today Lucía says no no no, so that you'll leave with some other woman: I'd like a spontaneous fuck with a sincere guy, rather than a sincere fuck with a spontaneous guy.

Suso understood and, maybe for the first time in his life, did the responsible thing: he was the first to leave the party. He didn't even offer an excuse when he left. That's what it means to be best friends. Everything is understood.

You were singing victory, weren't you? Sing, sing! You left together, wasted, five minutes after Suso said goodbye, when you were reasonably sure you wouldn't run into him on your way there, puking blood into the gutter beneath a scaffold. On your way to where? Well, to her house. Neither of you said it, but you both knew that after the pub the only logical destination was her place.

And yes, they came across him—Suso, that is. Luckily, he didn't see them. He couldn't have. Lying in the middle of a public square, in a formal garden, sleeping off everything he'd put into his body. It's safe to say he'll wake up with his dick exposed, like that night the gypsies took his pants, or missing his wallet and watch, like another night when he'd dozed off in a tunnel in the Metro, one shoulder shoved against the wall and knocking on death's door, or.... Don't laugh or you'll wake him!

And you arrived at her apartment, which could have been anywhere for all you know. She took you upstairs, right? Without a word, as is acceptable for brief visits.

And she guided you in the dark toward her bedroom. And she kissed you, stripped you, and fucked you.

By the time you made it to third base, you were already half asleep, mouth half numb from the alcohol on your lips and on hers. But still you persisted. At any cost, you had to finish the round, the game, to mark the beginning of a prosperous new year, the new millennium.

And you gave it all you had.

But my dick wouldn't respond! you think now, mentally sniveling over it. For obvious reasons: the alcohol, tobacco, nerves, the desensitizing rubber... yeah, yeah...

Why did Lucía have to interfere? Why!! My dick was limp, shriveled, deformed, unable to penetrate anything or anybody. My natural response in these situations is to head for the door, see ya later!; as if nothing happened, fall asleep at her side until the next morning, or split and hail a cab in the street. That's what feet are for. Whatever. She wouldn't have noticed anyway, in the state she was in.

This bitch could have stopped since you were ready to give up.

But no.

When you see that it isn't working and you say, OK, the real challenge is getting women into bed, getting off isn't as important, and with your tail between your legs, you shrug your shoulders and, without knowing how, you're going, there you go, backing out from between her legs.

But no, she won't let you go: she grabs your ass like the brakes of a train clamping down on the tracks, and says, what does she say? It gives me a chill just thinking about it: "Take it off..."

And you cheer right up. She wants you to put it in without a condom! Did you hear right? *Yes! She wants me to take it off, holy shit!* And you go ahead and take it off, grateful that she too, thinks it's only the layer of latex that is robbing your member of sensitivity and therefore

stimulation and therefore hardness, that this doesn't usually happen, grateful she's the one to suggest you take it off, this sort of thing never happens. Yeah right! This has happened a thousand times, and the women always suggest you do it without a condom, and it's always made you nervous. In those situations, like a decent, responsible citizen, you have refused to take it off, or didn't put it in. But now...now you aren't thinking and everything is in the name of celebration.

So you forgot the most important thing as you entered her.

You forgot the most important thing.

Yes, it only took a few seconds. You remembered it right away, that's for sure. And you reacted too late. Far too late.

What was it that you forgot, idiot? What did you forget?

Answer me.

Come on, tell daddy.

You, cock-fucking-sucker, forgot that LUCÍA IS BANGING SUSO!!

Jesus. You remembered on the third or fourth thrust, as I recall. And then you pulled out and I believe your dick was even more shriveled up, remember that, hot shit? And you mumbled some excuse like, "No, no, it's just that today I'm not..." or, "Look, I'd rather not..." You don't remember. What does it matter? You already fucked up, pal.

And then Lucía gives an understanding sigh and suddenly gets up, much more collected than you, and lights some candles, and you see a little shrine, and when you ask what it is, she tells you it's a little reminder of her brother, who died of AIDS.

And there it is. Right there, right then, either the ceiling or the floor collapsed.

In other words, what if everything you know about Suso is just your own negative thinking, unfounded suspicions, a lack of faith in your friend's health because you know he always rides bareback, but now it turns out that with Lucía, it's not a matter of mistrust, but if by chance Suso had never given her anything—as if that's wouldn't have been bad enough—her own brother died of AIDS!

Now, of course, she'll tell you that he was a junkie. You've never known anyone with AIDS who won't die a heroin addict or a queer, that's for sure. But the campaigns on television, the campaigns. The doctors say that here, without a condom, we'll all be snuffed out.

What a depression you went into. You left as soon as the sun came up. Sure you were polite to her, you were friendly, yes. She was a victim, just like you. It was only later, when you pissed away the liquids and the fog had lifted, when your head cleared, that you remembered it was Lucía who'd suggested you fuck her without a condom, to venture into the rattlesnake nest, your little buddy completely exposed...**FUCKING BITCH!**

In the end, you're fucked for sure. A month, an entire month waiting to go to the public health clinic to prove it. What if, what if. Any way you put it, the whole idea of the condom is a scam. How can they expect guys to use condoms if you can't feel a thing with them on! **CAN'T FEEL SHIT!** When they invent a condom perfectly sensitive to touch, I'll be the first in line to buy them. I swear. But until then...

It's already too late. What good does it do to be sorry now? God, I won't sleep around so much. I'll find a nice girl and I'll be good and I won't spend all day chasing women.

But what does it matter at this point? No one will want you with the disease. Probably. Twenty years of life. They flash before your eyes, and now you see yourself dead. Maybe you'll meet some bimbo who will stand by you forever. Some no-name bimbo. (Love of your

life? Kiss that goodbye.) Some no-name bimbo who's okay with losing you in the middle of her life. And you'll always have to fuck her with a condom, my friend. That's the other thing. You'll probably enjoy using your tongue or fingers more, since fucking will sometimes get tiring for you. And let's see if after six months, which is your record with any girl, you continue waking up next to her. A person gets tired of always fucking the same chick.

More than a thousand people test positive each year, so even if Lucía didn't get it on her own, from having shared a fucking toothbrush with her piece of shit brother, Suso... fuck... Suso has to have it. Statistically he has to have it. He's gone to bed with everyone: junkies, psychopaths, drunks, whores, editors.... Everybody! And Suso didn't use a condom with Lucía either. She told him when he called her a couple days later to find out. He infected her with his paranoia, just as he has been infected with the disease. Shit.

I'm dead. I'm already dead. From now on, I will live like a prisoner. With Spartan discipline. From bed to modest work at the office, from the office to the gym, from the gym to supper at a vegetarian restaurant.... They say the medication makes you sick, but all the same it will help you to live a healthy life. Healthy life, healthy life. Without tobacco, without alcohol, without coke. A clear mind, enjoying the moment. Without meaningless distractions, without perverted thoughts, without lapses in memory.... Finally the healthy and centered life you've always dreamed of.

You begin to notice the tingling again; the first symptoms are already hitting you. You can see yourself on your deathbed saying goodbye to your parents; you: a tiny fillet of meat with a voice; your parents: poor things. Your mother warned you, "Son, be careful, don't be stupid." Oh my God! Don't go to pieces here, not here in the waiting room. Don't start crying, it won't

do any good, it won't be so bad if you just quit thinking about it, if you constantly think about the disease it will progress more quickly. And the old man looking at you will watch you die.

But it's eating away at your entire body. It consumes you. You have to let someone know or you'll die. Can they admit you right here? Right now? You're in outpatient, but.... Your head is spinning, you can't breathe. You're going to faint in your chair!

The old man smiles: you're fucked, you won't make it to my age.

You're falling...

"Victor San Justo?"

That's me.

You sit up, about to cry. But you hold back. At least wait until you're in the exam room before bursting into tears over nothing. He'll understand. The doctor has to understand. It wasn't my fault, doctor. It was her. It's all her fault.

I will do whatever I have to do not to have this.

Whatever I have to do.

The doctor, neat and indifferent to your suffering and tingling, can't be bothered. He looks lazily for his examination clipboard, makes insignificant and irrelevant comments, asks if I smoke.... Get to the fucking point, Jesus Christ! Doctors don't fuck or take chances. As you can see. Bastards. They know it all. They know all the consequences, and therefore, they don't fuck or take unnecessary chances. That's why this guy is so calm. What, you don't *like* to fuck, you son of a bitch?

And then the doctor looks despondently out the window and begins to talk about the advantages of going mushrooming at this time of year.

You leap at him and grab him by his white lapels.

“Do I have it or not! For God’s sake, don’t you see that I can’t wait any longer?!”

Stunned, he looks into your eyes.

And finally, he tells you.

And you lower your head and yes, you begin to cry.

You hear someone open the door, but you can’t stop.

VII
I Don't Have Fat Friends

The writer sits at his computer. He hasn't managed to rid himself of his fear, so he cradles it like a baby he's trying not to wake while he writes. He has masturbated, to relax. The baby need not be awake to paralyze his hands. As best he can, he begins.

In spite of his youth, Martí has already learned the following: a womanizer hates all other men because most of them have a woman in their lives and he never will—no matter how many women he's had at any one time. Still, he pities other men, because a woman is never with only one man unless no other man wants her. Eventually, pity turns to self-pity, sometimes vague and dull, sometimes harsh and unbearable, when he realizes that age is always vying against him.

He also thinks—and he's put a lot of thought into this—that there can be no seduction without manipulation. At first it took a lot for him to play a woman's passionate strings, to arouse in her the physical and mental response he was going for. After he realized that most women want to be played before giving in, and that the reciprocation of their love is in no way affected because of this manipulation—meaning, the quality of love isn't tainted—Martí decided not to repress his desires and always go all the way when preying on his emotional victims.

I don't want to be accused of misogyny, so Martí shouldn't be particularly likeable. Also, it should be made clear that all of his thoughts are his and his alone. Let's say he's around twenty-five years old, from an upper-middle class family (everyone knows that the greater the character's wealth, the greater the reader's hatred for him), and has never wanted for anything as far as education or material possessions are concerned, having been adored by the grown-ups in his life, especially by his loving and leisured mother. In school, his grades were always good but never great, which implied a certain absence of imagination and drive. Incentive, ambition, oomph. He is basically a mama's boy: he's never had any troubles in life, never endured any

personal traumas, and never weathered social or political struggles of any sort (he belongs to a class high enough to allow for ignorance of everything below it). Let's say he doesn't care a thing for the future of humanity or his generation, and his own future doesn't interest him very much either.

But a year ago, when the housekeeper called Martí at school, he found himself having to grow up very quickly. He didn't turn on his cell phone until the professor had finished his lecture, and when class was dismissed, Martí returned the call, thinking it had to do with his mother. She was, in fact, the cause for the call. The maid had gone to wake her and found her dead. Heart failure, it seemed. His father, head writer of the state-run radio station, had gone to work bright and early, like every other day, without noticing anything strange about his wife, just like every other day.

Martí didn't really feel the blow until a few months later when it hit him that human fate was utterly ridiculous: his life was meaningless, his mother's life had been meaningless, and now she was gone. Even more upsetting, his father took the opportunity to bring home a cute young radio intern—in fact, she and Martí sometimes met in the halls at the university—who he'd quickly moved in, and worse yet, his mood, appearance, and general quality of life improved. He was happier now that Martí's mother didn't exist.

This caused Martí colossal rage, especially when he stopped to think—as seldom as possible—that his own life hadn't undergone any great transformation since his mamá's death. He was old enough that her absence didn't cause any radical changes to his daily life, with the exception that it was now his father who provided a weekly allowance, and there was one less cheek to kiss when he came and went. For Martí, maturing didn't mean losing a loved one.

Maturing meant becoming aware of how little it mattered to lose one. And consequently, life—his own and the lives of others—lost all importance to him.

He began to unconsciously project this apathy and indifference onto the rest of human souls, men and women alike. But it was at the moment when he quit showing the slightest consideration for women that he experienced success with them—we're talking sexual success, of course. So much, that he couldn't help but notice and, in the future, strategically practice this previously undiscovered deliberate disregard.

There were three basic reasons for his newly awakened appetite for women: first of all, of course, was the lack of any direction or goals, an infinite emptiness on which his being was constructed and which incensed his libido to act as a substitute for everything else; the second reason was maternal extinction which caused him to seek feminine affection to shelter his currently light existential load; and the third reason (which doesn't even need explaining) for that rare and insistent collector's zeal was the thrill of competing with and defeating his degenerate father on his own turf. Naturally, Martí's first objective was to do his best to seduce his father's girlfriend, which he didn't accomplish since the girl was attracted to older men. Instead, he finally stood up to his father in the most serious fight they'd ever had, and ultimately succeeded by instilling in his father insecurity and awareness of his imminent old age. His father threw him out of the house—which Martí found a bit over the top but also gave him a measure of moral triumph.

It wasn't enough for Martí to be kicked out of his father's house and, unsatisfied, he decided to drop out of school—he was finishing a law degree at Pompeu Fabra, a private university—and break up with his steady girlfriend—who, interestingly, he had chosen to please his mother. We'll say that Martí grew up in a hurry after life threw him this curveball. I should

say that at this point, I completely sympathize with him and I hope that deep down, the patient reader feels the same.

But, so not to inflate our fondness of him, let's say that Martí finds work quickly since he's well-known—somewhat famous—in the world of communications where his father has always advanced, and a former friend—whose lover was also stolen by Martí's father—offers him a job at his movie production company. Obviously, Martí got the job thanks to his last name, but is it no less certain that his father's former friend—Chema—is willing to throw him out in the blink of an eye if he doesn't play by the rules.

Two weeks later, there's no need to worry, seeing as our young man is not only an excellent worker, he also has no creative interests, a quality which makes him perfect for dealing with production. After working as an assistant on a few films and a half dozen spots, Chema puts him in charge of a movie.

At this point, the narrator has lost the thread of his story, so, tired of his own plot, losing interest and freezing cold, he goes to bed to take a nap. A couple hours later he returns. His head feels like a Popsicle or the crust of stale bread, but still, he forges ahead.

Surprisingly, in Martí's hands, the project turned out just fine. Between producing the screenplay and planning the shoot, Chema would have been completely satisfied if it weren't for the time Martí spent throwing himself at his boss's daughter—who also worked there (another case of nepotism). But after three months, the daughter (whose name shall not be mentioned so not to strain the narrator's brain) confesses she's pregnant. Chema and Martí force her to abort

the pregnancy and later, Chema forces Martí to split (Chema is a bit of a dimwit and will never learn: he should have suspected as much since the apple doesn't fall far from the tree...).

But Martí already has sufficient experience to move up in the industry. This time he does it at a film festival. Salou's International Feel Good Film Festival is one of the most important festivals in Spain, and *the* most important in Cataluña. In these times, given the distinction and importance that all of Europe has bestowed on feelings (feeling good, of course; though for Martí, it would be more accurate to speak of pornography than of the idiocy of heartwarming feelings), a festival like this depends completely on support in the form of millions of euros and congratulations from the Regional Government of Cataluña, the government of Madrid, and European Monetary Funds. In any case, the previous

“...the previous” what? The narrator shakes out his arm, among other things, because his fingers are stiff and he's too stubborn and cheap to turn on the stove, a little electric heater that, according to him, costs too much. He throws in the towel, and the next day, surprisingly, picks it up again. He makes several changes, including the name of the protagonist, and continues, more satisfied with himself. Given that he doesn't know what he expected to accomplish with that last sentence, he starts with a fresh one.

Oriol didn't understand that official defense of “feeling films,” a niche in which a select few wanted to classify the entirety of European film, as opposed to—according to those same despicable few,—“special effects films,” supposedly exemplified by the United States industry. Personally, Oriol had never been so excited in all his life as he was about American films, but he wasn't willing to say this out loud, now that he'd come into lucrative work. The salary was

excellent (courtesy of the city of Salou) and furthermore, because of the job's official nature, he could speak Catalán at all times, his mother tongue that sadly, he'd been accustomed—by force—to renouncing in other settings because of the unfortunate abundance of *charnegos*, Castillian speakers, in Cataluña.

And if that weren't enough, all of his co-workers were women, except the higher-ups and the festival's selection committee.

Typically, and especially at the point at which we find ourselves, Oriol would classify these women into three specific categories:

1. Women who are sexually attractive. This faction typically includes 60% to 80% of the female population, depending on the setting and social class (obviously, higher class, more sexually attractive; though this could be a result of natural selection). In any case, he followed his own cannon of beauty and didn't obsess about body measurements if she had a pretty face. In this respect, the statistics didn't hold up since, at first sight, out of all twenty female co-workers busy on different projects in the festival offices, Oriol was only willing to go to bed with five or six of them. Namely: Roser, a redhead with captivating translucent eyelashes, responsible for the Catalán film section; Teresa, a chubby blonde with a pretty face, in charge of public information; Sole, the lively flirtatious secretary to the director; Lidia, a striking girl of 5'10" with black hair styled in the shape of raven's wings, in charge of festival invitations; and Laia, an intern doing clerical work in the press department, a very pretty petite brunette. Gina, another chubby blonde and head of the video section, was also, at first, attractive enough to easily exceed his standards, but after several days of working with her, he noticed an extremely unpleasant, sour, and offensive body odor. Five in all. Only 25%. Good, Oriol thought, less chance of disaster.

2. Women who could be exceptionally pretty or beautiful, but who Oriol didn't consider sexually appealing, because of incompatible tastes or a lack of chemistry. This was the case with most girls he got along with or had befriended: Oriol did not tolerate women with low self-esteem, and usually treated well those who were comfortable with their bodies. At the festival, there were just two: Sandra, cleaning lady for the flights and transport department, a chestnut haired, Castilian speaking gypsy with an irresistible sense of humor; and Begoña, a super-sexy high-maintenance type, bordering on forty whose job was unclear to Oriol (he only ever saw her making calls; weeks later he found out she had something to do with public relations, so therefore, her work didn't really begin until the start of the festival itself), and who passed the hours roaring with laughter. She seemed to have seen it all before, and perhaps she had: she changed out boyfriends with any man who caught her attention. Oriol found them to be allies to talk about sex, movies, celebrities, the gossip going around the festival, and all the other shameless and artificial nonsense (the only thing that interested them) that their shallowness required.

3. Finally, according to Oriol, all other women usually fell into a third category: the sexually unattractive, or more specifically, the ugly and unworthy of even the slightest attention. Oriol harbored such indifference for them that it was impossible to hide when dealing with them. Most of them realized it, of course, and reciprocated his hostility. These women and their responses didn't matter a bit to Oriol, who liked to think that mediocre women usually belonged to this group, when in reality, he simply saw no need for them sexually, or in any other way for that matter. Therefore, he looked down on them. He lumped the rest of his coworkers into this group: thirteen in all.

Oriol's work consisted solely of arranging hotel reservations for those invited to the festival. Keeping in mind that around 150 VIPs were invited to the festival—25% connected to the movie world, another 25% connected to politics, and the other 50% made up of friends from one of the other two groups—and if we add the several journalists from the most powerful and popular media who enjoyed a free room or gained access to a hotel through this department, the job would understandably be a much more arduous task than one would initially think. In the Barcelona office, where they were located until the official inauguration, Oriol relied on Roger, his supervisor and the only other man who was in the office every day. The selection committee barely ever passed through, and the director, an old nostalgic man who spent his evenings watching silent films in the local film library, came around even less often. Roger was a handsome, married fortysomething whose graying hair made him look wise beyond his years.

On the first day, Oriol casually commented, "Lots of women here."

His companion replied curtly, "Too many." And then pointedly, "Watch it."

Oriol was pretty sure he knew what Roger meant, so for the next few months his on-the-job motto was no hunting in forbidden territory. Don't shit where you eat, he told himself, and it wasn't hard to stick to this principle. He would get his fill during the actual festival, but until then, he would abide by his self-imposed limits. And in the meantime, he kept his hunger in check by hooking up with random women in bars, night or day, fucking each one three or four times, or until he was sick of them, and then he fasted for a couple weeks, taking time to recuperate and sink his teeth into the next target. He was like an overfed bear that holds a fish under his paw for a while, plays with it, and when he gets bored, throws it back into the river. Actually, Oriol spent fewer days fucking than not fucking, at a rate of approximately one in three

days, but the variety of captured specimens more than compensated for a period of forced abstinence.

And so went the months of preparation prior to the festival. His work was appreciated and relatively simple, and Oriol liked being surrounded by women. He silently took note of their conversations, their comments, their likes and weaknesses, learning, retaining, reflecting on all the things they were teaching him about themselves. He didn't expect to understand them any better, but simply soaked up any hints he could make use of at the hour of seduction. The details that surprised him most only confirmed his prejudices: women's concerns were, for the most part, banal and irrelevant. Their only interests were mainly related to life in its most mundane sense: what to eat, what to wear, how they looked; not much else. Oriol didn't understand why men were so patient with them. They weren't worth the trouble if the price was having to spend an entire lifetime with only one.

Only Begoña and Sandra (the first, divorced with a son and well aware of what she wanted; the second, recently split from an unhappy love affair and very aware of what she didn't want), exhibited a healthy and estimable assurance worthy of admiration. Begoña was very feminine, but she called things as she saw them; Sandra used more vulgar epithets than necessary, which proved to be hilarious. They were two exemplary humans, and Oriol condemned himself for his incapacity to fall in love with either of them.

Meanwhile, he eliminated Lidia from his list of candidates. Like the majority of pretty but shy girls, she had a boyfriend, surely the first guy who ever asked her out, and to attempt an affair with her would have meant risking confrontation and, eventually, a possible work conflict that Oriol wasn't willing to shoulder. He didn't want someone hanging on him, and Lidia was the kind of woman who would only leave her boyfriend for a better catch. Convincing her that

Oriol was a catch would be easy, without a doubt, but in the long run, the hard part would be getting rid of her, and he only wanted to bounce from one pussy to the next.

For several days the narrator returns to his story, going over what he's written. He is satisfied now, like the traveler who begins to see his destination on a route with no landmarks. His fingers fluttered over the keyboard writing the last pages, with the grace and precision of a brilliant pianist...ahem, of a good pianist. He inhales, and goes back into the jungle.

The whole team was transferred to the Gran Hotel Salou a couple days before the festival where several guest rooms and three or four conference rooms were used as improvised offices and a center of operations. On the afternoon of the move to Salou, Oriol had to take a taxi with Roser, the redhead with the impenetrable eyes. Minutes before, while they were both taking the elevator down, Oriol looked at her from just a foot away and, hypnotized by the deep amber of her pupils, felt the air charged with dizzying electricity. The current emanating from Roser transmitted to Oriol an almost uncontrollable urge to kiss her, and when they exited the elevator, he kicked himself for not having done it. So he spent the taxi ride verbally caressing her. "What beautiful eyes, like ever-changing pearls of light." Roser seemed surprised by his bold advance, then visibly pleased yet reserved, and finally she surrendered to Oriol's protestations. He was compelled to kiss her with even more urgency as the setting sun played on the iridescence of her eyes. The star was swollen and orange and gave off dreamy rays that intoxicated Oriol. During the last five minutes of the ride, he insisted that she give him her room number. Roser flat out refused. Oriol cursed himself and resolved not to jump on his co-workers, at least not until he was on safer ground.

When the festival had officially begun, Oriol's days consisted of going to the room in which he worked, along with a couple interns who had been assigned to him, confirming all the reservations, redistributing cancelled reservations or juggling to make something out of nothing. The hotel had been overbooked a week before the event began, and only because he was sharp as a tack and quick on the uptake did he manage to adequately satisfy the most important requests and cause the fewest disappointments. When he was sure that the job was more or less under control, he began to leave day to day management to the interns while he passed his time dropping in on his coworkers; visiting Lidia in the room next door, to flirt and tell jokes and extend invitations to the day's showings; in the auditorium equipped like a press room, to jokingly wrestle with Laia, just to be able to touch her; over yonder in the information booth to show Teresa how much he knew about film and to make her job easier by giving visitors any information about the schedule that she was unsure of. And of course, he didn't deprive himself of passing through the hotel lobby where a small VIP room had been set up and buzzed with the inexperienced and vivacious disorganization of various recently contracted beauties entrusted with the task of managing and assisting attendees in solving any unexpected predicaments. Oriol, playful as a grasshopper, messed around with them: all young women (from eighteen to twenty-two), and all lovely, the pretty ones and the ugly ones. Then, like a relieved dirty old man with a sparkle in his eyes, he would excuse himself, promising to be back, not without carefully avoiding the Catalán Film booth so not to run into Roser, a bullet he wished to dodge.

Oriol firmly and sincerely believed that any one of those girls would willingly fall into his trap, and he felt like he'd been received the transplanted feet of Fred Astair. On the fifth night, once his departmental work was on the right track and it was safe to say that there was no

chance of unforeseen revocation of his staying on with the festival, he resolved to go out on the prowl.

Each evening, the guests and the staff who weren't busy went to a night club near the hotel: the Oh Defiance/Habit. It was your typical club for the types Oriol despised: washed up snobs and groupies; nonetheless, all the guests went there after the last cinematography session of the day, when it was easy to make conversation after the long day of work, and the intimate mood was obvious in their surprising congeniality. This was the first night that Oriol made an appearance, allowing himself a respite from the demanding hours and hours on end of doing paperwork and making phone calls.

None of his chief prospects were there yet, so he set about to down a few gin and tonics, and smoke his Lucky Strikes. The upper level was already three-fourths full when Oriol resigned to get in line for the bathroom; the urgency of his bladder couldn't wait any longer.

"What's taking so long?" he asked a girl in jeans and a t-shirt waiting ahead of him, knowing lines of coke were being snorted inside the bathroom.

The girl shrugged, but Oriol realized that she didn't speak Spanish. First he tried a sentence in English, abandoning all interest in what was happening behind the door to the crapper.

The girl was German. She explained, in English better than his, that she was the star of one of the movies in the competing movies. Oriol hadn't seen the film, and he preferred it that way. In his experience, when you met an actress you've seen on the big screen, her beauty usually disappoints you, she is transformed from divine to mundane; but this girl, Yvonne was her name, was a small gift from the gods: thin and well-proportioned, with smooth and delicate features, and eyes darker than the shadows of the club.

Oriol fell for her immediately and didn't leave her side all night. They got drunk together. The best thing about Yvonne was that she didn't seem like an actress: she didn't look around when she talked, or take the attention of any small group for herself, or even mention her job all night. She simply told Oriol that it was her first time in Spain and that she would like to enjoy it.

On the other side of Oriol sat Lucía Allende, another actress he'd met at the office. One day, a few months back, Lucía had called asking for the director; when Oriol told her he was out, she gave her name and mentioned that she was interested in attending the festival. Oriol wasn't sure what right an unemployed actor had to invite themselves to the event, so he was prudent in his response. Still, the actress managed to fall into his graces—they talked for over half an hour. Later, the director permitted the invitation, since they were always short on stars, even if they were only second or third rate, as was the case with Lucía.

After running into her a couple times in the hotel lobby and exchanging pleasantries, Oriol began avoiding her: Lucía was very attractive woman with a long neck and delicate shape, of indeterminate age, somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five. Yet, as time seemed to have stopped for her skin, there was no stopping the years from accumulating in the depths of her black eyes.

Now, Lucía, like Mohammed deciding to go to the mountain, sat down resolutely next to Oriol, with the certain disillusion that he would be flattered by her presence. But Oriol was aware that anyone with any aptitude or who showed any interest at all could make her eyes light up, and he preferred not to be this person. Coming to this conclusion surprised him: once and for all, his addiction to sexual conquest wasn't unabashedly driven by the anticipated pleasure of handing out another gold medal—even if only to congratulate himself—since fucking Lucía

Allende would have called for quite a brilliant medal on a winning bosom like hers. As soon as he could, he left her jilted and went looking for the German girl.

Oriol devoted the next two hours to sweet-talking Yvonne, but she was smart enough to save him the effort. Soon, the drinks and a couple lines had them making out. Oriol had chosen a corner that denied the bouncing spot lights, and yet Teresa and Laia passed by a few times, glaring right at him. While he was kissing Yvonne, Oriol sensed the gossip coming from the lips of another woman, but he wasn't sure who this other woman could be.

At five in the morning, Yvonne asked if he'd like to go to the hotel. Heart in his throat, Oriol accompanied her away from the club, trying to make sure their interlaced fingers would pass unnoticed by the public eye.

They ran the rest of the way, jumping and screaming, burning their cocaine energy, stopping in front of private entrances to giggle and make out. In the hotel lobby, they submitted to guilty silence, conscious of the seemingly innocent stare of the receptionist on duty. They got on the elevator and Oriol praised their luck.

“What's your room number?” Yvonne asked.

Oriol thought she would prefer to spend the night in his room, but then got a bad feeling when she pushed the elevator button for her own floor. Oriol pressed his body against her.

“We go to your room?”

She shook her head. Oriol pretended he hadn't noticed and placed his cheek on Yvonne's shoulder. He stayed this way until the elevator stopped.

Yvonne pulled away from him and entered the hallway, but she did have the decency to turn around, “Good night.”

Oriol stood there, too drunk to hold back, “Why?”

Yvonne smiled, but looked sad. Oriol wanted to say something more but nothing came out. He could only part his lips and wrinkle his brow. If he'd been able to add anything, it would have been "cocktease," and she would understand, even if she didn't know the word.

"I have a boyfriend," Yvonne smiled. Oriol didn't speak, mentally pressing for more time, but the elevator doors began closing before him and he was too stunned and his pride too wounded to stop them.

The elevator stopped on his floor. He walked toward his room when his cell started vibrating. He looked at the text, "Room 643." He sighed, too angry and disgusted.

He closed his door and within seconds, the slamming of another door echoed through the hallway.

The narrator pauses to savor recreating the event, wondering now if it ever actually happened or not. He looks out the window, testing fate that his neighbor will be naked on the other side of the window. What kind of woman gets naked in the middle of winter in a neighborhood like this? But he only sees the sad panorama of drawn shades and lowered blinds. Oh well. What happened next?

The next day, he hardly left his office. His interns were surprised by the momentum and concentration he demonstrated when it came to solving pressing problems. He was still angry and didn't want to look at his co-workers. He felt cheated in the worst way possible for a man: when at the last minute, already trapped and released from the overconfident hunter the prey regains mobility, leaps up and takes off, as if nothing had happened, probably to fall into a trap set by someone else. Boiling rage and powerlessness don't disappear in a few hours, sometimes

not even after several days. At night Oriol stayed in the hotel so not to run into Yvonne. Deep down he thought too kindly of her to ruin another run-in with name-calling.

He could always have a good time with some of the other girls. He wasn't in the mood to feel up his companions—he wouldn't get his fingers burned again—with terrible results/consequences—so that the next morning, during a team break and now more relieved of the night's frustration, he went directly to the VIP room to relax with the girls who were buzzing all around him. He noticed one in particular, a dark, heavy-set girl with plump lips, black hair piled on her head, and dripping with glitter.

“That hairstyle fits you perfectly, you're very pretty,” he attested in his smooth *I'm-saying-this-with-the-best-of-intentions* way, while resting an arm on the bar, sure that Errol Flynn would have done the exact same, except with his penis.

The girl grinned. “Stop, you're killing me.”

“You look like Betty Boop. You're adorable.”

“Well I haven't even had time to fix myself up, with all the commotion around here,” she said, like she didn't care, but the bait had been taken.

“How long do you have to be here?” Oriol continued, redirecting the conversation to his interests.

“Don't pay any attention to the sweet things he says.”

Oriol felt the fire flare up in the unhealed scabs of a wounded man.

The voice belonged to Roser, who sat down without Oriol realizing, on the other side of him at the bar. The chubbette turned away, more comfortable to go unnoticed:

“He said I have pretty hair.”

“He always says charming things to everyone, whoever will fall for it.”

“It worked on you.”

In the red stain of Roser’s cheeks, Oriol saw the same fire he had harbored, and he knew his fury had met its match. He decided to go on feeding it.

“Sorry I didn’t come to your room last night,” he said, “I didn’t feel like it. Did you wait up very late?”

The chubbette left. She knew all she needed to know. Roser was about to cry. Oriol smiled and without another word, he made his way to his office as fast as he could. He felt luminous and victorious, but a tiny quiver in his stomach told him he was walking on shaky ground.

That night, at the Oh Defiance/Habit, he washed his hands of all of them and focused on drinking and laughing too loud at the innocent jokes his intern friends were telling, making a show of doing well for Yvonne, who was on the terrace pretending to listen to the director. The interns were twenty-two, but next to them, Oriol felt twenty years older than he was. All of them were admirably awkward and shy.

“I’m going to teach you something,” he told them, on his fourth gin and tonic.

At the other end of the bar, he had caught eye of another little daisy from the VIP room, a graceless blonde with the mannerisms of a model who, because of her fascination with glamour, wound up with inflated-looking lips, lined in the reddest red lip liner, outside the natural lines. She responded to his smile with one just as inviting.

“She’s a local, and the locals here drop like flies,” he spat with virile malice. The others only smiled with the camaraderie expected of them. He left them and, with the moves of a torero, strutted across the space that separated him from the girl, holding his gin and tonic

symbolic of a banderilla. Euphoric, he slurred, “What’s up?” He didn’t know her name and it didn’t seem pertinent to ask at that moment.

The girl responded sincerely and sweetly. Oriol didn’t note any of the signs women give to show disinterest (no icy glare directed at anything but the speaker’s eyes, peppered with SOS laughter aimed at whoever passed by, no blank stare punctuated by insignificant nods denoting that she wasn’t listening and didn’t care). Vanessa—fuck, what a name—as she was called by another girl in the VIP room, seemed genuinely interested in him. She smiled at all his lines, unapologetically intervened the conversation with pertinent and fitting comments—even though he was paying more attention to the sweet smell of her breath than to her words—and appeared enchanted to have captured Oriol’s attention. Of course, after a half hour came that silence between them that can only be broken in two ways.

Oriol remembered Yvonne, who was still on the terrace, looking in the opposite direction but watching him from the corner of her eye. He finished off the gin and tonic and went in for the kill.

“You have a beautiful mouth. I’d love to kiss it.”

The silence that followed was heavier than the previous one. Vanessa continued looking into his eyes, never changing her expression. Oriol wondered if he should kill the animal with the sharp edge of his tongue, but didn’t have time to decide.

She burst out laughing.

It began as a faint giggle that with each melodious fit, burned into Oriol’s mind more disdain and disbelief. The giggle turned into a guffaw, and two separate streams of tears spilled down her white cheeks. The laughter didn’t stop. Oriol smiled and tried to stay in on the joke, but everyone who turned to determine the reason for that cruel merriment ended up looking at

him, and it didn't take much to figure out his role in this scene. Oriol noticed that he was surrounded by mocking faces, understanding faces, and even sympathetic faces—those of his interns. He waited for an end to the laughter, but it didn't come. He saw the chubbette watching him with a triumphant smile. Was the other girl Laia? He gestured toward his empty glass, knowing it served as a flimsy excuse to get out of there, and that he did, not even stopping at the bar.

On the way to the hotel he still had the glass in his hand. He wondered why he hadn't gone looking to speak to Yvonne. He could go back. Yes, he could do that. Surely Yvonne would be willing to talk. It didn't matter to him that she had a boyfriend. What did that matter? He wouldn't steal her forever.

In the hotel foyer, he ran into Sandra and Begoña, relaxing in the dark of the closed bar. They'd been dancing in the club—Oriol had seen them from from the bar, but he was too busy checking out other girls to join them. They could tell he was in a bad mood so they made up personal tragedies to entertain him and before they left, they kissed him goodnight. Oriol sat there, alone, smoking the end of Begoña's cigarette, and wondering why there always came a time when no person or thing could distract him from himself. His existence depended on people and things that didn't even matter to him.

He heard the clearing of someone's throat. He looked back, toward the bank of already set tables. He noticed a dark shadow, darker than the others, begin to move toward him. It was Roger.

“What's up?” It was the only thing that occurred to Oriol to ask.

Roger sat down beside him, in the chair where Begoña had been sitting. Going by the look on his face, he seemed to be top of the world. He lit a cigarette and reclined in the chair.

“I was the joke of the party.”

Roger inhaled in that deliberate way of a smoker who allows himself only one a day. He exhaled a cloud of smoke and eyed it with a look of intensity or insanity.

“You should never say a word. Never say what you’re thinking. Just be. This is how it works.”

Neither of them said anything. The silence enveloped them just as the smoke did. Roger finished his cigarette and snuffed it out in the ashtray in front of Oriol, who noticed his hand. He wasn’t wearing his ring.

“Good night,” Roger mused.

“Sleep well,” Oriol said, his tone suggesting appreciation. “I think of I’ll go with you.”

They took the elevator together. It stopped a few seconds later.

“Wait, this isn’t your…” Oriol began to say, when he saw Roger about to cross the threshold. But he was interrupted just in time.

Roger turned to look at him and said goodbye with a slight grin.

The elevator doors closed before Oriol could see if Roger stopped at Yvonne’s room.

The next day Oriol found out that Yvonne had returned to Hamburg. He was crushed, but it didn’t take long for him to recover and get back to the speed necessary for his way of life. For the rest of the festival, he flirted with all types of women, but didn’t sleep with any of them. He wouldn’t have managed to anyway, at least not with any of the staff: the word had spread about his encounter in the club with Vanessa and everyone was laughing behind his back, and whispering that he was pussy hungry. So he simply collected phone numbers from his new acquaintances, saved them, and immersed himself in his never-ending workload.

Two weeks after the festival had ended, he did his best to call every girl he'd met during those ten days. And he spent the rest of the year sleeping with as many of them as possible.

The narrator finishes his story, and feels content. So satisfied, in fact, that he decides to turn on the stove for a while. While he warms up, he reflects for a few seconds on his single life and wonders what he should do next. Write another story? He'd like to call someone, but there are no papers with numbers scribbled on them for him to try his luck. He sighs, closing his eyes, and remembers the good times.

VIII
With Bated Breath

She smiled warmly, out of habit, as she opened the door, but the flicker in her eyes betrayed alarm at the unexpected visitor. Before she could utter a “hello” or an “oh!” of surprise, a gloved hand kissed her mouth and yanked her along with him as the other hand slammed the door shut. Sour taste of leather, like leather boots. Yes, now she was scared. He held his hand tight against her face, stifling her weak protests, pathetic and unsure until the other fist began punching her. After the third blow to her temple, she was out.

He carried her to the den and put her on the floor. He was wearing jeans and a sweater. He smelled faintly of tobacco. He got down on his knees beside her, and supporting her neck like Jesus Christ supporting the thirsty, he proceeded to clobber her face with his right fist. His arm rose and fell mechanically, never holding back even a second, so not to weaken his resolve. First he gave her three more enthusiastic blows to the head, to make sure she was unconscious. Then he lowered the aim of his punches, discharging his bulging knuckles onto her cheekbone until it busted like a hard-boiled egg. Moving on. He crushed her nose with purpose. The cartilage cracked like frozen, water-logged planks of wood. Shards of blood and snot exploded and the nasal septum collapsed with the sickening snap of used toothpicks. Her mouth erupted as well, kicking off its annihilation with a spewing forth of blood, which really brought out the red of her hair. Blood flowed in streams from the splits in her lips. He shifted his feet a few centimeters, trying for a better position to amplify the force of impact, and through the splintered crimson of her inflated lips, he noticed her teeth were dropping away, first only a few, then all of them. A canine came loose and fell into her throat. He shook her dazed head with both hands and listened to the sound of teeth rolling around like loaded dice. Just for the hell of it.

She began involuntarily coughing, spurred by the pain of her gums and the spinning of her head. He continued his rhythmic percussive litany, sensing the harsh point of an incisor

digging into one of his fingers, having broken through the blood-and-eyebrow-licked leather. Finally, like a dog who learns the hard way, the last canine gives. Her mouth turned to a dribbling ashtray, soft to the punch.

She was coming to. She tried pleading but her throat was obstructed by pieces of teeth and bloody mucous. He had to whack her in the throat, firm, rapid thumps with the base of his open hand, to snap her larynx. Blood was streaming out the corners of her mouth. Coughing and wheezing like a cow gasping for air, followed by the guttural bellow of loosened vocal chords.

And then nothing. Her eyes were already closed for good, but he pounded and beat them to a pulp anyway, just to spread the news that there wouldn't be anything left of that pretty face.

There wasn't much more to do. He let what had once been a head fall to the floor, a pulpy ball of sticky hair, marinating in a constant stream of blood flowing between the tiles. He stayed crouched down, feet safe from the fork in the stream, his face fixed and despondent, looking away. His anger hadn't bubbled up until, and it needed an out. His shoulders trembled and each quiver brought more tears, pearls of helplessness breaking through. He held his hands a few inches from his face so the tears wouldn't fall onto the tiles. His eyelashes trapped the teary beads like a fat spider hoarding rain. A silhouette howling in agony next to the body, like a Neanderthal wailing over the death of his woman, like Adam determined to live with one less rib. The crying stopped as abruptly as it had begun.

Knowing that his assignment there was nearly complete, he announced a final goodbye and got up to begin departure. He inspected the rest of the apartment, but was already sure that he hadn't left any clues. He'd burn the gloves at his house.

When several hours later his wife found him in his favorite chair, he had showered, changed, combed his hair and gotten rid of any hint of crimson from his clothing. He greeted her and professed his love for her, holding back nothing. And when they embraced, he held her tighter and more intensely than usual. She smiled, letting herself be spoiled. He took advantage of the situation to kiss her on the neck and breathe in the lingering smell of a lotion that wasn't hers, confirming his suspicions.