



A YEAR OF SEX FANTASY TALES

**JUAN
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A Year Of Sex Fantasy Tales

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Salanova J.

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12 stories, 12 characters, 6 men, 6 women. It begins in 2015 and each story represents a country further east and 10 years before the previous one, until it goes around the world. In all of them, sex beats as a life force. Beat by beat, full of bodily sensitivity, twelve characters, six women and six men, enter worlds where reason is overwhelmed by passion, diving into the past on a continuous journey to the east. At every stop you will face real people, patients with social diseases that make our planet such a complex and sometimes inhospitable world. Sex made into fantasy as a vital impulse will be the constant that will animate the development of your existence. An impressive voyeuristic visit to the last century of our history.

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A YEAR

OF SEX

FANTASY TALES

"Casa el Molino" Collection

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Cover image: The fisherman's wife's dream

by Katsushika Hokusai, Japan 1814

DEDICATION

These stories are aimed at...

people who have formed long-term relationships and remain happily paired although they are attracted to the problems of other people in unstable relationships.

people who throughout their lives have not been able to stabilize themselves as a couple despite continuing to believe that this is possible, and are still looking for their prince or princess.

people without love, who live an individualized life, centred on ephemeral sex and in a stable relationship with a group of friends with whom they can struggle with loneliness and social anxiety without sharing their bodies.

To all of them a warm embrace from a person who believes he has belonged to the three groups throughout his life.

REFLECTIONS

Desired life surpasses life,
and enriches it
of unknown experiences
when desire becomes action.

PREFACE

These stories are going to transport you far away, in a centennial journey, to countries near and far, to the coexistence of mythologies and very diverse religions, to hallucinatory states caused by drugs or unexpected mental stimuli, to the appearance of historical conflicts that are still alive, to a fusion of reality and fantasy that transcends our rational ways of living.

In one place or another, in one time or another, you will discover within these pages a naked, crude, palpitating, unsatisfied loneliness... that tries to confront itself with the achievement of a liberating sexuality. It is in this vital tension that the narrative pulse is established.

Of course, behind this subdued solitude, lies an unjust social structure, imprinted by the inexhaustible voracity of power, in the various ideological formats (from the more or less disguised dictatorships to the speculative absolutism of liberal society). The tormented protagonists of the stories shown here are victims of this global situation, with which the reader can easily identify at the beginning of the stories. Each in his or her own way, in the depths of the dead leaves, is searching for a place, although as the story unfolds, in an attempt to escape from the daily inertia, the characters usually enter into an unexpected and unusual adventure that we could not have imagined.

The liberation through an unknown and more savage sexuality, stimulates the action of these protagonists.

It is not the first time that Juan Salanova has faced, beyond fiction, in his daily practice as a teacher in Mesones de Isuela, in the early 1980s, the courageous confrontation with a regressive Spanish society in the face of a natural expression of sexuality, a hindrance to a Francoism still in force in many spheres and social customs. He tried to develop in his classes a lucid, practical sexual training, devoid of the classic censorship, too disturbing for the reactionary minds of a sector of the local families. The conflict originated in the town crossed borders, reaching a place in the multitudinous Spanish television of that time. Juan Salanova became a symbol of the path to be taken, within the educational sphere, towards a free and liberating sexuality.

These stories present the horizon of people who, in different cultural contexts and historical moments (including our country in 2015), do not manage to enjoy a harmonious, natural, full, integrated sexual life in the personal and social development they yearn for. Sex beats in them like a kind of erotic machine that needs to be refuelled periodically, if not like a sleeping, unpredictable or indomitable beast.

He encourages non-conformity in these pages, the rebellion against the society of virtual spectacle that floods us. This is because, according to what is written, it is possible to go beyond our small daily island of constrained sensuality, which is alien to shared intimacy and cooperation in solidarity with human beings and other living beings on the planet. It is possible to open our small stronghold of routine time and step-by-step renunciation to new horizons, almost without having noticed it.

Regardless of the current debate on the percentage use of the brain, the author proclaims - through the skills of his characters - that it is possible to develop our physical and mental capacities more and better (although they sometimes use psychedelic substances to achieve this). That it is possible to allow a freer, more original, satisfying and compassionate sexuality to emanate and be fulfilled. That it is possible to make a better world.

Juan Salanova has an extraordinary weapon, his imagination without frontiers as a writer, to achieve this. Thus, a certain confrontation takes place between the critically realistic and documented setting of his stories, with the irruption of dreamlike escapes and fictional elements that tend to provoke the outcome of an overflowing fantasy. All this wide universe shelters these stories, unique personal odysseys of the last century that have led us here.

Emilio Pedro Gómez, poet

NOTE.-

Text in italics by Zbigniew Herbert

INTRODUCTION

I begin these stories after overcoming two experiences of creative work, generating unreal characters, places and situations, all of them framed within a post-apocalyptic world.

The motivation for this literary genre was the intellectual enjoyment of making life of fiction emerges from nowhere, confronted by the white box on pale blue of MS Word, together with the need to give meaning to a solitary life of retirement, which would allow us to stop the mental decadence produced by age.

Reality has been and continues to be my source of inspiration. The books or films that marked my life, the people and events with whom I interacted, have been distilling the energy needed to expand the lives of my characters, their places of life and their interactions included in the plot.

These 12 stories represent the 12 months of the year, and each month there is a protagonist around whom the action takes place. 6 women and 6 men alternating each other will show us their lives, their existence that balances between reality and desire.

I am aware of the enormous power of sex as a universal attraction for humans, which is now definitely segregated from reproduction. That is why sex, even if it is not the main component of every story, will always be part of the protagonists' lives.

I have tried to avoid writing an erotic novel, describing sex-based existences, because I believe that, even knowing all their potential appeal, the meaning of life and human evolution to death is paralyzed if it is reduced to a progressive series of libido, orgasm and relaxation, which requires a continuous start, in a loop of obsession that limits and even stops other mental abilities.

The alternative complement to these sexual lives will be fantasy. Fantasy unlimited in time and, space and populated by diverse beings that live together in the same environment. Fantasy of the impossible, rejection of the usual reality such as exhausting monotony, coexistence of the conscious life, in solitude or in society, with dreams of pleasure, dreams of seduction, dreams of overcoming unsatisfied realities, dreams of conscious happiness during the day from night dreams ruled by the subconscious....

Don't look for real humans, people of your time, men and women idealized by social media. They'll be more than that. The dream of reason produces monsters... and wonders, and paradises that your heart can feel if the story manages to make you participate as a character.

Tobed (Zaragoza), August, 18, 2018



TALE OF THE VIRTUAL CIVIL SERVANT

Zaragoza (Spain)

October 2015

Once again, the holiday season had arrived, reminding her of the passing of time and the different ups and downs that her insecure life had led her to.

She remembered years of absolute revelry, wanting to cover all the concerts, all the street shows, drinking without rest until she was taken to bed to the inexperienced ephebe of the season, with whom she had a semi-unconscious sexual relationship in which she had to go beyond the limits of ignorance, in a cold orgasm that was compulsory, if not unnecessary. It was a time of hedonic youth, conceived as a race of attack and conquest of the maximum possible of companions in the shortest possible time and with the maximum frequency that she could assume. But that was already over when the new rivals showed her clearly that her body had stopped shining, indicating her march into the adult world.

She also remembered that time when she felt the social pressure of the need for mating and reproduction and how the great Babylon on feast day was transformed into escapes to shelters of intimacy where she could deepen her human relationships, both physical and mental. From those years came the beginning of her monogamous pairing with her now ex-husband. With him she had two daughters who, after going through phases similar to those she had enjoyed before giving birth, lived happily married abroad, concerned about promoting themselves socially through well-paid jobs for both spouses.

But now she was in the third phase. As it had been happening for the past few years, it used to be a getaway into a single, all-female group to some natural refuge where they could kill their anxiety. Always the hiking in the autumn nature, full of the changing colours of leaves that announced the end of the year. In contrast to the permanent green of the holm oaks and pine groves, the range of warm leaf colours ranged from dark cherry red, pinkish red of the virgin vine, shades of green to red in the terebinth, and decadent yellow of the leaves of the walnut, peach and poplar trees. The deciduous vegetation was only waiting for another pink frost to go to sleep for a few months.

- Why am I thinking this? - she said to herself, stopping watching the local holidays program.

She noticed that she had been watching it for a while, without even reading the multitude of shows, divided by icons of different colours that made up the events of the first day. In fact, her mind had been wandering through the past, not being satisfied by any of the options she remembered choosing during her local festivities over the years.

This year must be different - she said decisively.

She was now faced with her new situation: old and lonely, but with enough energy to be able to live with young people who were 30 years younger than her.

She went to look herself in the mirror and saw that her eyes were still full of life. It was some time ago that her tragedies had been watered down, dominated by the instinct for survival. Her face, however, was not lying. Nor the short hair and the multi-coloured strands that favoured her timeless image.

Staying for the holidays like in your younger days? With her girl friends, all singles who spent their time gossiping in closed groups, without daring to assault strangers? Alone? Alone. Was she crazy? In those days of gregarious exhibition, was I going to be alone in the city? Did I want everyone had the same idea in mind: she's crazy! Wasn't she going to feel lonely and rejected by the many groups who were absolutely open to friends and drastically closed to "outsiders"?

She first considered what would be a priority for her. Meet people, talk to people, have fun naively with people? No. No. The latest TV rubbish shows had given her something she had been dreaming about for a long time without being aware that she wanted it so badly: the possession of a young, strong man.

A phone call interrupted her existential wandering. It was Virginia who, as always, couldn't stand her loneliness any longer.

- Eva, how are you!

- Good. Watching the program. It's full of shows.

- But are you planning stay in town for the holidays? With all that turmoil? If one can't even move!

- I'm thinking about what to do.

- I have the solution. We, the singles group are renting a mountain shelter. Now the mountain will be beautiful.

- I imagine you mean "singlas", don't you?

- Well, Fidel's coming too.

- I see.

Fidel was the regular companion of the group of female civil servants. He was platonically in love with one of them, who rejected him with determination. Otherwise he was a small, nondescript man without clearly defined sexuality. His time was divided between his work as a school caretaker and his mission as a companion in the service of the group in his spare time, both to fix a tap for them when they needed or to get their tickets for the cinema premieres in advance, so as to avoid them having to wait in line.

- Well, I'll think about it.

- It's just that we have to book now...!

- Well, you can count me out. I'd rather stay home to rest. I'm tired of so much VAT - she lied, using her job in a tax office as an excuse. - Have a good time. Send pictures.

- I insist. Think about it and tell us tomorrow. We're all leaving. And Fidel.

- I don't feel like travelling this year, Virginia. So stick to your plans. I'm definitely staying in Zaragoza. We'll tell each other how we did on the way back. I'm sure you'll have a great time. The forest will be beautiful.

- Well, if you change your mind, let us know. I don't know. You seem a little strange to me. Is something wrong with you?

- No, no, I'm fine. It must be the years, which are ageing me. Seriously, I'd rather stay. Go ahead with your adventure.

- Okay. Yourself.

I didn't know why, but she'd wanted to hang up earlier. She had not been able to focus on her friend's suggestion. Actually, she'd barely heard it. It was a no from the beginning.

As always when she felt her vital emptiness, she sat down, and immediately lay down on the sofa, and put on her favourite trash television. A group of young and old, busy, and varied people, in branded clothes that fashion stores probably gave them to get free publicity, repeated daily the anodyne, scandalous themes of their celebrity list with no cultural relevance for the country. But it was their voices, their themes, their liberal and reactionary ideologies on a personal and social level that attracted her. Understanding the discourse of celebrities in elegant TV sets demanded a minimum of mental effort. They played being close characters seeming to be below the national average in order to attract all social classes.

That day, for the tenth day in a row, they repeated the imprisonment of a famous imported sportsman, for having evaded from the Treasury everything his whitening lawyer had recommended. The pregnancy, childbirth and subsequent divorce of the daughter of a national singer, who had found a money-spinner vein advertising all her social events, which she had to renew every three months at

the latest, to ensure the contents of the gossip magazines that populated the waiting rooms in paid medical consultations, could not be missed either.

The phone rang again. It was her niece from the village.

- Aunt! How are you?

- Hello Belén. All right. What about you?

- Everybody's fine. Surprise! I'm going to go pass Pilar holidays with you. My parents allow me this year. Good!

It was an unexpected proposition that for a moment made her think that her single friends had been smarter than her.

- I'll be there tonight around 9:00. You can pick me up at the station, right?

- Sure, honey. Tell me the exact time - Eva replied, mumbling her discontent and thinking that her sister was using her again without even calling her in advance. Perhaps she had thought that if she asked Eva, she would make an excuse, as she had done in previous years.

So she was going to be a godmother-cook. It wasn't very exciting, not really.

- I arrive at a quarter to 9:00, aunty. On the bus. Wait for me with your car at the top gate of the Intermodal and I'll go upstairs. A kiss. A kiss - and she hung up.

She got up lazily and went to see her refrigerator, where there was no too much food to eat, so as not to indulge in pleasures, especially sausage and cheese, to which she was addicted. She found that the new news meant that the next day she would have to use the shopping cart and fill it up because sometimes her niece would bring several people more to her aunt's house for lunch.

At 8.30 a.m. she was walking slowly along the sidewalk next to the street entrance to the station. She would even have liked to have had a cigarette when she saw so many adults smoking while they waited like her to pick up the next generation. That day the usual collection space was crowded because at 10 a.m. it was going to be the opening parade of fiestas with their floats, puppets and giants, which nobody wanted to miss.

- Aunt! - The emotional voice of Belén, whom I had not seen in a few months, dominated the crowd. Pulling her little suitcase cart she swept over her and filled her with kisses. Her niece was a sweet, tall, well-built niece, with an optimism that radiated everything.

- Didn't you want me to come? Well, I'm here now! Let's go to your home! Come quickly, we have to get to the opening speech!

The aunt began to blame her sister for the holiday "gift" she had given her. It was evident that Belén's energy far exceeded her own possibilities. It made her feel even older, accustomed to the tranquillity and relaxation that allowed her to live a sedentary life reduced to small spaces, mainly an office chair and a computer screen in front of her, both at work and at home, with only a temporary stay in the kitchen and living room before going to bed.

- Belén, calm down! We have to go home. You have to make your bed, sort out your clothes, have some dinner....

- No, I'll do it later. I'm dating today to see the opening speech from the beginning. You'll come, won't you?

- If you've already dated someone I'm not necessary, am I?

- Come on, aunt, it's holidays.

- Who are you meeting?

- We'll meet the whole village crew at the town hall gate.

- What are you talking about? It'll be impossible. You won't even find each other.

- Aunt, don't be old-fashioned, there are mobiles!

- If you want, I'll go with you until you find them, but then I'll come home.

- What a spoilsport you are! I don't need you for that, I'm 16 years old and I know the way. So what are you going to do?

- Me? - I had a busy day today. I want to rest. I'm sure I'll watch the opening parade better than you do on TV.

- On TV? You're so bland.

- I prefer it this way. When you see that tow truck coming by with the camera, you wave at me, okay?

- Sure, and I'll also say hello to my parents who will surely be seeing it too.

- And how late do they let you out?

- Time? Come on, aunt. There is no time in the Pilares. Give me the key, and when you get tired of TV pain, go to bed, I'll be home myself.

- Are you sure your mother didn't set a time for you?

- No, she didn't tell me anything. Call her if you want.

Not much time had passed since her niece's exciting lift home. Now Eva was on the sofa, drinking a smelly mint infusion as she watched the human marabout swirling in front of the city hall. Music, gigantic floats, spectacular mobile artefacts, the heavy giants moving with the characteristic hieraticism, due to their difficulty to transport them, music, shouts, beeps, sounds of vuvucelles, the famous football trumpets that had become fashionable after the World Cup in South Africa a few years ago, applause, screams... in short, it was the annual massification of fun for the Aragonese tribe.

When she got tired of seeing the thousands of heads moving together, which for her was obviously nothing new, she thought do some zapping.

News... no. Movie... no. Gossip... no, no...

When unexpectedly appeared on the screen a computer screen with a dating chat, Eva sat up, her back well resting on the back of the sofa. It was a well-informed documentary about the latest trends in the virtual relationship that the Internet allowed. According to the voice-over, it was an upward trend and one that foresaw a promising future that would change social relations. Pure fantasy? A fleeting taste for novelty?

Then she remembered her office partner. From the beginning Mesalina stood out over her fellow colleagues in decision, sharp tongue, often charged with procacity. Eva had never really managed to establish a cordial relationship with her as she should have done as a neighbour. In her few brief conversations she had always felt intimidated, unfeeling. Mesalina's eyes were telling her without words that she was a tasteless shy. And Eva had to avoid looking at her and focus on her work in order to survive in that unbreathable air.

But she had known for some time that her neighbour was stealing time from the administration. She tried during a part of her shift to chat in silence with more and more contacts of unknown places. Once she had had to pass through her territory, because Eva considered it to be forbidden land, she had seen her screen completely occupied by profiles full of pictures of faces and torsos of all kinds of men, before whom Mesalina's voice was filled with sensual nuances that floated in the air throughout the morning, both in her treatment to the public and in her conversations with the other female colleagues, since in that section they were all women.

Yes, it was that screen they were quoting and presenting in the documentary. According to the broadcaster, infidelity was now the rule, and the successful website allowed millions of heterosexual men and women who were attracted to the adventure of meeting unknown people to share their bodies when they came together, both personally and sexually.

The title of the website was now in the foreground on her TV, and no more advertising was needed. Eva was immediately curious to see it. She turned off the TV, the computer and while it was booting she cooked herself some dinner. Then the phone rang. It was her sister.

- Eva, did my daughter get there all right?

- Yes, too well. She left everything in her room and ran away. She told me she was meeting the villagers. She also told me you didn't set any time for her to come home.

- You know what happens. Since there are many of her friends who live in the city, they get a little out of it. When the others go home, she'll be back in your flat. Don't worry. Leave her alone.

- Well, you're her mother. This is Guesthouse Eva for whatever you need.

- Eva, she was very excited about it. She isn't going to stay alone in town. I'm already texting her to make sure everything's okay.

- And does she answer you?

- Not always, but don't worry, my daughter is a responsible girl.

- I've already given her the key. I'm not going to be the control centre. I'll tell you tomorrow if everything's okay.

- I'm sure everything will be fine. You'll see. Thanks for everything, sister.

- That's what we're here for.

When she left the phone she saw that the computer screen was waiting for her orders.

- Explorer.

- Dating pages - she typed.

In front of her she had the first results. Meetic, eDarling... but they were pages once she had heard her work mate laughing at, which she called convent flings. She decided to look for something stronger.

- Liberal dating pages - she re-typed. And there was another website that had recently made headlines because of the identity theft of its user profiles. But it wasn't the one she wanted either. She tried it one more time.

- Sexual dating pages - she typed now, looking forward to the result. Yes, there was the name XXX that obsessed her. She had found the door to an unknown world that she nervously wanted to explore.

Even with the nervousness of a teenager, she chose the heterosexual option for women and was able to spy on the calls of men and women who smiled at her as if they had known each other all her life. But just seeing didn't do her any good. She wanted to meet.

Even with doubts about whether what she was doing would be crazy, she signed up.

- Username: Virginia

- Password... Email... Message: Looking for pleasure - she wrote without knowing if it would be too direct.

- Photo.... - She decided not to put anything in.

- What an embarrassment! If my friends or office mates see me. I'm dying, sure!

When the programme confirmed that the registration was correct, she was able to enter the privacy of her 'virtual boyfriend'. Men of all ages, of all races, of all physical appearances looked at her smiling and seemed to tell her to choose them.

She didn't have to wait long. At the moment she had the sign that someone was writing to her. Alongside the photo was the age: 33 years old

- Virginia, my name is Black, I'm looking for a woman like you to get to know each other and have a nice time together. I want to make you really happy. Write to me.

Eva was amazed. A handsome young man gazed at her with a sharp look that seemed to see beyond her surface. She really liked him. She started to press all the icons in the interface until she managed to open his profile. To her surprise, in addition to other data about his weight and height, it said he was 9,500 km away.

- But where is this guy? she said to herself.

- Where are you? - she typed.

- I'm a man tired of working at sea and I want to stablish couple with you. Do you have a picture? I'd really like to see you.

- No, I'm new, I don't have a picture yet.

- Give me your email. I have a lot of work to do and I can't write properly here.

- But where are you?

- I want to leave this job and relocate to your country. I've got enough money for us to have a comfortable life. This is my email. Blackwhite1999@fake.com. Write to me. I want to hear from you privately.

Before her the email that was attracting her shone with a distinctive colour. She had serious doubts about the sender of those messages, doubts that would have been expanded if she had known the meaning of the word "fake" in the email. But she belonged to the generation of French learners, only translating it into Spanish. She paused for a moment at that message and did not know why she was thinking of her ex then. Perhaps by comparison to the inclusive styles of men when they want to be husbands. But her second ex, of whom she had trouble remembering even his physical features, would never have spoken like that. She had been the one who had set the direction and rhythm of their life as a couple. He had let himself be carried into everyday life, towards a socially accepted state that made life easier after the age of 40. When no child was born after ten years of living together, he managed to get pregnant another woman 20 years younger and began his life as a father.

Eva finally agreed. Why not keep talking? It was far away and he didn't know her address or her phone number. If she wasn't interested in what he said, blocking his email was enough. She was aware that she was filling her existential void with another unknown, distant life, with hardly any references, without even the other side having a picture of her. Going to her email server, she wrote to blackwhite1999@fake.com.

- But how can you talk like that if you don't even know me? Tell me about yourself, please.

- United States Marine Engineer on mission in Kuwait. I'll be leaving soon and I'm transferring to Europe.

As the conversation progressed Eva was finally able to see that she was talking to a machine.

- You can see me naked on the website "XX naked.com". Turn on your webcam.

- God! she said, and immediately closed any virtual contact.

She started to think. What was the point of talking to women without an interlocutor on the other side? Among the various possibilities she could think of was a way to increase the visibility of the ads that always floated around the ends of the screen without her being aware of them, by having more and more people connected to them. The virtual interlocutor would be just the bait for her to keep seeing the ads. And she learned that the first rule of chatting was lying.

Nightmare night, feeling that they were using her body, without even looking at her beautiful blue eyes, without her head having any other function than to use it to kiss her lips and touch the rich hair which she felt so proud of. A night of hormonal disorder, upset stomach, rolling over in a bed that seemed to be shared with strange men who were thirsty for sex.

At 8:00, tired of rolling, she got up and went to the bathroom. Her still drowsy eyes seemed to be asking an irresolvable question.

- What am I doing? she said to her tired face that she saw reflected in the mirror.

As she was on her way to the kitchen to prepare her brief breakfast, she heard the key to the door. Finally, her niece arrived.

- Good morning, Aunt! We brought you some dumplings!

The plural verb made her look more closely. There were two girls holding each other by the shoulder, with slightly tipsy eyes, who looked at each other long and hard.

- This is María. I think you know her. She also comes from the village. Since she has no room, I invited her to come to your house. You're okay with that, right?

- Hi María. Would you like some coffee?

- Better orange juice if you have it, Auntie. My throat's dry.

After a quiet breakfast, the two girls went to sleep and Eva returned to her usual solitude. She couldn't stop thinking that these holidays were going to be different, although she still didn't know if it was good or bad.

As she watched the daily shows of the previous day and the programming of that day and beyond, she heard the sound of whatsapp.

- Hi Evi. How's it going? We are enjoying a fantastic time. And the valley is beautiful in autumn. How about you? I'm sending pictures.

Virginia was still so passionate about Nature, using it as a mechanism to replace her lack of a partner, whom she was incessantly looking for, with less and less success.

After several photos of colourful leaves, rivers, mountains and bridges, a personal photo of Eva in a bathing suit unexpectedly appeared.

- Cool, huh? I took it from you in Cadaqués. Remember? Well favoured you are, you jerk.

It was true. On that occasion, the combination of light and posture had given rise to an unreliable image. For those who did not know her, she represented a woman 20 years younger than herself.

She could not spend much time inactive, only contemplating the idealized photo on her mobile phone.

- Why don't I put this picture in the chat room? That way it will be easier to know that whoever is on the other side is a real person - she said unsure.

Even though she had not been an adventurous girl throughout her life, this time she was. It was a different vacation, and she had decided to indulge everything. Hidden from her usual environment of friends, she was now a single woman determined to open the door to the world of sex with lonely strangers locked in a rectangular space.

Soon she was able to see her enlightened profile of the beautiful young woman she appeared to be, with the chosen age assigned to that image.

It didn't take long. Insistent beeps began to come to her. Immediately she turned the volume down, frightened at the thought of her niece hearing them. To her surprise there were already calls from interlocutors on the other side of the dating page. Behind the hello that seemed to be the usual beginning, the messages were full-blown attacks.

-How beautiful you are! How I wish I could have taken that picture of you in the summer! Shall we meet to see each other? - said number 1, and next to the message there appeared a bald and smiling head, which wanted to preserve his youth in vain.

- I'm interested in your profile. Send a naked photo - said number 2, without any image that could help to glimpse who the nudist lover was.

-You eat prick? said number 3 without any modesty. The photo that accompanied such a violation of any intimacy was a muscular body showing its virile attributes with an obvious provocative message, but the shot had no head.

She felt the same nervousness again that she had experienced the night before. She was being the victim of a very dangerous addition. She was going to be a voyeur for strangers and at the same time she was going to be an object of voyeurism for them.

She heard music and screams in the street. She got up from her chair and went out to the terrace. As she watched the brass band pass by with the big head and the children who were running away and chasing them, she thought of 3 people who were sharing her autism.

- A rejuvenated bald man. A freak who doesn't even dare to show his face. A vicious man living by and for morbidity. What a future I have!

But the process of attraction had taken hold of her. For the next few days, her life would be based on looking anxiously at a screen where her privacy wanted to be violated, not safely kept at all, making her desire beat in an environment of such obvious insecurity.

- Where are you? - Eva wrote to her first suitor, the one who had seemed less determined, but who she saw as a match for her.

It took a while for the message to be heard, but in the end there it was.

- In Centrovía.

- In Centrovía? - she said strangely, trying to locate the place she had heard of but never been to.

- Where is Centrovía?
- Near Zgza. Next to Plaza Imperial.
- Aren't you off duty? It's Pilar fiestas.
- No, I work. I'm a truck driver.

There was a moment of silence, necessary for her, because as a regular civil servant she had never dealt with a truck driver in her entire life. She thought of the crazy race she'd signed up for. She was forgetting all the years she had spent, meeting people before deciding to love them. But virtual allowed to share and expand desire through a fine human link. In it, personal reality, both economic and social, had no relevance.

- See you on Skype? - was the next message that came into the computer, with no first question mark, which seemed to be common in the chat.

- No, I can't right now. I have to go shopping. Tonight.

Eva was suddenly in a hurry to organize her flat where she had to play the aunt.

- This afternoon. I'll only be here eight hours. Then I have to go.
- This afternoon at 4:00.
- OK. A kiss beauty.
- Goodbye.

With the illusion of her new extrasensory date in her mind, she set out to do her usual glamorous work, beginning with the purchase of plenty of food for her niece and possible guests. She knew that she was still on the familiar rice-macaroni-burger-pizza-potato--coke-ice cream youth diet, so the next few days wouldn't be too demanding for her.

When she had finished her routine household tasks her niece and companion finally got up. It was past noon. Immediately they ate voraciously everything the aunt put in front of them.

- And you didn't go out last night, Aunt?
- No, I was tired. I went to bed early.
- How boring! It was all packed! You call someone today, okay?
- Don't organize my life, little one, I'm old enough to know what I have to do.
- But you're not staying home again today, okay?
- I'll call someone. Let's see what you can tell me about you last night. And don't let it just be about clubs, drinks and hot guys.

As I suspected, the explanation of the girls, told with all the adolescent intensity, was an endless one. They had embarked on a continuous wandering through night bars, drinking and talking, until the fumes of alcohol and sleep redirected them to auntie's home.

When they had finished eating, the two young women got caught up in the world of silence. They read and wrote on their cell phones, organizing their second day of fiestas. So as not to upset Eva, they picked up the table, put the dirty dishes in the dishwasher and left again.

- But you're leaving? Don't you want some coffee?
- No, thank you, Auntie. We're leaving, the villagers are waiting for us at the fairs. Bye-bye.
- But you've got money?
- Yes, my father gave me. Bye-bye.

She was free and alone again. Her trucker fantasy had been going around in her head since she left the chat room. She poured herself a cup of coffee and watched the news. The wars of always organized by those of always and suffering those of ever. The gossip programs had dropped to low levels of quality. As she had not sat down to see them for days, she now didn't manage to recognize some of the little people who were walking around the screen proclaiming their mental vulnerability.

She couldn't stop thinking about the apparent human closeness that floated universally on the airwaves and in which she could so easily participate. Without even finishing her coffee, she sat back down on the computer and entered the chat room.

More messages awaited her, some brief, others explicit in their bodily desire, and she was even sent some old-fashioned, romantic lover's message, which admired in rapt fascination her unreal image.

Eva thought about how easy it was to establish a virtual polyandry which the new technologies allowed. But she still maintained the rule of fidelity to the word given. She looked for her first choice and wrote to him.

- I'm already connected.

For a moment there was no answer. She thought she might be playing polygamy and might be talking to another woman. She reviewed other personal profiles of the list of men on the show, waiting for their princess of that day to call them, and she was amazed at the richness of expressions, the abundance of situations, the variety of desires that the human sexual instinct encompassed. She finally got the message from the truck driver.

- Hi.

- Waiting for a while.

- Nap time

- What's your name?

- Ismael. And yours?

- Virginia - she lied.

- Enter Skype and call Ismaelca.

Without being very sure of what she was doing, she opened the program and the webcam. When the camera finally transmitted the images from the other side, before her was a naked, excited man who looked at her with the glow of immediate desire. She was very impressed by the image, but did not close the program.

That night Eva recalled her virtual odyssey. Following the instructions of an expert cyber-fucker, she had given herself over to the most daring language ever used by her. Bathed in the security of her absolute freedom, she had reached orgasm feeling her cyber-partner explode on the other side as well. Chat was definitely a very powerful drug.

On the next day, each moment she spent alone was a complete immersion in the new world she had discovered. She thought she couldn't let herself be carried away by a pseudo-accompanied loneliness. What she had done left her so dissatisfied that she thought of erasing everything from her computer. But she didn't do it. If there were so many men looking for a partner, she had to find someone to share her time, her pleasure and her need for mental communication. She finally saw him.

On the screen she now had the man she had dreamed of all her life. He was about her age, with short hair and blue eyes, a calm smile of someone who feels sure of himself. He seemed to be saying, "Call me".

Before moving on, she checked his profile. His name was Exter, though she knew that names were of little use here. A strange message full of personal passion filled everything:

"I'm here to love you forever. Don't be afraid. Don't be insecure. Forget about your past failures and the fear of failure that guides your present life. I need you as much as you need me. With me, with you, together we will live eternal life of absolute happiness. Call me"

Never in her life, Eva had heard such melodious words that her heart beat with such impetuosity. It did not seem possible that a human being could say that in a vacuum, to anyone who read it.

- What is the trap behind this message? she asked herself.

After reading such a message, full of love and security, she could no longer discard that message as she had been doing with the others, full of hot chat procacities. And she wrote to him.

- I was impressed by your message. Who are you?

- Extra, your true lover.

- I don't know you. You don't know me either.

- I know you now, believe it or not. The lover's job is to love the beloved. When love is the only reason for life, all other problems disappear. And I love you. I'm going to love you forever. And you will love me forever.

- You overwhelm me, Extra. I'm not used to being talked to like that. It seems unreal. Are you a machine?

- No, kiss my lips and you'll see that I'm as alive as you are.

- Am I dreaming? Kissing a screen? This is crazy.

She backed off from her chair and started to think, why she didn't go out and meet real people, people who lived near her, who she could have adventures with sensibly, with the possibility that they would last. Exter was very attracted to her but she didn't want any more virtual sex. She thought about asking him out on a bar date. Then she heard it.

- Eva! Come on. I'm waiting for you.

- What? Where are you? How do you know my name? What do you want? Who are you?

With some fear she approached the screen. Extra's image glowed all over the monitor. It was a video image. It seemed to be seeing her, it seemed that his eyes were following her.... his smile was a magnet that directed her steps... she could not resist kissing him...

That kiss sucked up to the last of her cells, taking them to the other side of virtual reality, recomposing them into a new and astonished middle-aged woman who could not help but admire the world she had come to. It was in a silicon valley, dominated by its characteristic metallic grayish colour, where all the dreams that allowed to overcome human limitations had come true, to the point of forming a society of excellence generated by the most intelligent technologies, where the most stupid human generation that had created the planet lived pleasantly.

Eva disappeared forever from Zaragoza. No one else heard from her. In their family they were aware that she had spent a lot of time in a well-known hot date chat, but her friends were unable to provide any information. They didn't even know their friend was spending her time on it. No one was able to provide names of their last relationships. The dating company, under pressure from the police, pointed out that it had come into contact with their machine hook and contributed to the conversation it had started. It also pointed at the truck driver, married with two children, but, in addition to the conversation that was systematically recorded in the company, it gave them a story so clarifying that they had to discard him from the list of suspects.

The mystery remained unresolved and the matter has long since closed, in the face of the disbelief of Eva's office, police and environment.

But Eve lives her immense eternal happiness in the company of the alien she dared to kiss, in an unknown, trouble-free place. And she'll never come back.

TALE OF THE GYM SLAVE



La Ciotat (France)

November 2005

Carlos kept looking at Mediterranean Sea to relax his impulses, with the resemblance of existential nausea slipping down his lips. He was the only human being along the promenade of his small coastal town. Sunset had arrived, bringing to the trees of the walk successive waves of strong cold winds, which forced life inside the homes. Only some hasty car was passing through the street, getting lost in the distance. Then, silence.

The waves came to break on the shore, creating the relaxing daily rhythm of repeated noises over and over again. Each heartbeat of the sea was an impulse to his existential reflection.

- What am I doing here? - he said quietly.

He thought again of his mother, with whom he lived at the age of 36. She was a divorced teacher who had been laid out on a couch on retirement. There she was accompanied by an insistent talk of never-ending gossip programs that kept her in absolute silence and without provoking any reaction. Carlos had long since given up about accompanying her as a TV viewer. After fifteen minutes of listening to the gossip of empty characters, who were increasingly enriched by their insults and social nonsense, Carlos' sensitive state of mind was decaying to the point of absolute hatred for humanity. After his usual withdrawal to his room, which repeated day after day, he finally decided not to watch TV with his mother anymore. Their family life consisted of sharing an elegant but cold flat, where the voices from TV for the mother and the chill out music for the child coincided, although in separate rooms. Dinnertime, when they were both at home, was just over ten minutes to eat their usual pizza and ice cream accompanied by a couple of glasses of wine per head.

But this time his mother had gone on her extensive retirement holiday, usually to the Amalfi coast, and he was free at home. Free but bored, almost depressed. Something was missing in his life. Someone with whom he could feel his heart beating in parallel. He went through the many faces with which he had lived in one way or another. Although a few still shocked him, he thought he probably didn't know what love was yet.

He had plenty of company, they entertained him, almost adored him, but his short-lived companions considered him to be just a throwaway guy, and his feeling of loneliness remained and grew as he was spending his life in their provincial city.

For them, Carlos was a juicy topic of conversation when he appeared in the supermarket to buy his unsophisticated food. At 5.30 a.m. the coffee chat around a table at the middle-aged clients' bar usually focused on the body quality of their collective gigolo, before being given a lift to the family home and not seen each other until the next day.

- Look at him. He looks gorgeous in his jacket!

- This week, he's probably been at the gym.

- What shoulders, my god!

- What's going on? Who are you talking about? - the least adventurous woman in extra-marital matters said.

- Don't you see his athlete's body?

- That boy?

- His name is Carlos and he's very eager to give us pleasure, isn't he?

- Yes, of course he does," said his regular clients, amidst size-indicating hand movements, whispers and laughs.

- Haven't you tried him?
- Me? I don't do that. I have a husband.
- You're stupid. Are you going to compare a farm chicken to a pheasant?
- I'm happy with him.
- You've got used to easy life, lack of emotion. Try this once and then we'll talk. If you decide to date him, I have his phone number. And it's only fifty euros, whole service.
- Please don't talk like that. It bothers me.
- You've been a nerd ever since we were in high school. You're missing out. I used to think so too. But I fell. And I don't regret it. What I was missing....!

And so Wednesday afternoons went by. After the incisive glances of the women on each centimetre of his anatomy, calls and datings, demanded with total discretion, would arrive, which were progressively increasing in frequency, so that these joyful married women of La Ciotat could continue to combine their extra-marital sexual encounters with work and family. Carlos had always admired his clients' ability to make his role of satisfaction go completely unnoticed in such a small town.

Carlos was spending his life between the daily punishment of bodybuilding in the gym and the hourly sex he so successfully offered at homes. But now, in front of the sea, next to no one, he was thinking about the meaning of what he was doing, what it might take, what the future might keep for him.

He felt the weariness of a dark day. His daily activity of punishing his muscles with the sophisticated torture machines that filled the space of gym, as job training for his job, became increasingly uninteresting to him. He'd been thinking about retiring for a while. While doing weights or cycling or walking on various machines he had already remembered his whole life from start to finish.

- Will I always be like this? Will I end up an old man with an impressive physique and an empty head?

He knew he had to keep his body resources stable and even improve them, as his clients detected any excess or defect that had arisen and did not hesitate to let him know. And he kept on and on running without moving, pushing machines for nothing over and over again, swimming laps and laps in the pool to always returning to the starting point. Action without imagination, without illusion, without satisfaction.

But now he had another reason to stay there day after day. It had been 7 years since his partner died, the most intense social experience of his life.

He stared into the void as he heard Mina's distant voice and laughter come from the past. And he remembered. He recalled that they met one night of partying as they listened to the emotional strength of Manu Chao's voice, covering an August night sky. The following week, Charles was already installed in the young woman's flat in the poorest part of Paris. For him it was an unexpected well-being to enjoy a beautiful young woman with ebony skin and stunning eyes. But it wasn't an exclusive love. Unwittingly, he became just another pimp in the neighbourhood, conscientiously organizing and tidying the flat and the food for both of them, based on the abundant income that his wife's unparalleled beauty brought to the home. These were years of shared happiness, of travels and adventures, of sensations of deep pleasure for two new young adults, until the final drift began in Amsterdam.

While at Noord's campsite, where they arrived on a free ferry, made available by the city to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, Mina began to dive into a nearby tent when drug was offered to her. Carlos couldn't stand the sight of the needles and that was his first big disagreement.

Heroin became part of their lives, in their completely conflicting attitudes. His life got worse when they returned to Paris. Mina under the effects of drugs began to accept unlimited clients, the relationship with Carlos, until then so well shared with her clients, was reduced to moments of fall into

a drowsiness from which he could not get out but at the cost of more drugs. Finally Mina disappeared, moved to her pusher's flat, where income flourished with the sale of drugs and sex. Carlos, for whom his life at the time had no other meaning than the attraction for Mina, went to rescue her to the nerve centre of Parisian drugs, to get nothing more than a great beating from the thugs who were the protectors of the business, from which he had to take time to recover. Sometimes he still felt the itching, perhaps psychological, in his humerus that was broken at the time.

He fled from there to take refuge in his city, to live off his mother's income, and that would remain his life for a long time, until that very day.

He'd never see Mina alive again. He knew that she had died and he went to the funeral to hear all the contempt that had come from the heart of her parents who had already lost their loved one a long time ago, pouring all the guilt on him and cursing the passive young man.

Since then he stopped approaching women and it was a long time before he allowed his body to be used again for the first time for money. It was one night at his mother's birthday party. A friend of hers practically raped him while they were both in a state of complete intoxication. It was not much more than satisfaction of the desire retained for too long with hardly any awareness of the other person, but it was the starting point of Carlos' life from then on. On the bedside table it was fifty euros notes. The unexpected companion of that night had set his fixed rate for the coming years.

He remembered his pre-teen years, harassed for being the teacher's son. With a daily frequency he was bullied collectively by the future workers and husbands of La Ciotat, they told him all the insults they knew at their age, they beat him and stole his books and money. The situation became so stressful that he ended up hating school as a whole, hating it for the rest of his life, and refusing to go to class. A change of school meant a relative calm but learning and Carlos were completely divorced. Now when he made love with all his passion to so many women in the city, his greatest pleasure was to dream that it was a domination struggle that paid back to the horned husbands all the aggressiveness that had been inflicted on him in their student days.

Everything changed in his strenuous routine of gymnastics and sexual services when one day Aphrodite appeared. She stood next to him on the gym running machine and did not seem to notice his presence. But the sky opened up for Carlos. It was an improved Mina, more mature, with healthier features, a faint natural smile that shone while she was running, with a body to dream about, just his size.

Over the next few days and months, Carlos was punctually present at the date he had not been invited, and his eyes could no longer turn away from her. Unfortunately, on the second day of such platonic admiration, he was called to the gym office. The young woman had complained that Carlos was keeping his eyes on her and she had begged them to tell him that she was a married Muslim woman and that she did not want to be disturbed or even approached. Carlos was forced to forget his youthful illusion, but although he tried, he couldn't do it. He was in love. He continued to coincide whenever he could with the young woman's fixed schedule and sneaking in with eager looks when she didn't look there.

One Tuesday Aphrodite didn't show up. Carlos realised it immediately. The time that he now spent between levers and weights, which before used to pass quickly, became eternal. The automatic movements, which he used to make at the same time as her without any effort, were once again a boring and annoying workload. He looked at his growing muscles day by day, and knew that he had reached a level that was highly appealing for his clients, although he no longer had any illusions.

When three weeks passed without seeing his idealized queen, he knew that her absence was more than just a disease, his initial assumption. He asked the gym managers but no one knew anything. His interest in continuing to build more muscles in his body declined so much that he thought about quitting. Without her presence there, exercise was an ordeal.

When he least expected to solve the mystery, he saw her. She was dressed all in black. Yes, it was her. Was she in mourning?

A restrained feeling, the need to be close to her prompted him to speak.

- You're Aphrodite, right? What happened to you? Why don't you come to the gym?

She looked at him with a frightened face, seemed to be trying to protect herself from such unhealthy company by covering her face and quickly crossed the street without even looking at him.

- What happened to you? Are you going back to the gym?

Aphrodite's hasty steps were lost on the opposite sidewalk, without even turning her head.

- Poor. That's too bad. Becoming such a young widow - he heard a former client beside him said, accompanying her granddaughter home after school.

- Widowed? I didn't know anything. What happened to the husband?

- Those damn cars, getting bigger, getting faster....

- An accident?

- Yes, a tree collision. He was charred to death. It's a good thing he was alone. A tragedy. And she doesn't have anyone here anymore, poor girl.

- No, I didn't know that.

- How about you? Are you still working on the same thing?

- What? Yeah, I'm still the same as always.

- See if I can call you one of these days. I have a malfunction in the bathroom. I need a plumber.

- Well, all right.

Carlos also crossed the street without having hardly listened to the job offer that the old woman offered him.

- Widow? Is she not going to the gym anymore? -he said to himself.

Now more alone than ever, with the relaxing sea breeze blowing in pleasant humidity, he was thinking about her. What was the point of staying there with nothing for a 36-year-old man? It was throbbing for a widowed woman who didn't even want to see him while time passed, without any other illusion, without a project. The beloved face and sweaty eyes that occupied the whole of the firmament appeared again before him. He couldn't stand the image and came home.

As always, sitting on his mother's plaid sofa, beer, pizza and a bit of television.

The phone rang. It was his fuckbuddy Beatrice, the only single girl in the city with whom he had found a certain sexual and personal affinity. She was the confidant of his problems and of his current troubled state, although until then she had had little success in convincing him to find an honest job.

- Hey, Carlos! Can you talk?

- Hi Beatrice. Yeah, I can always do it with you. How's work?

- That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Don't you know who came to the travel agency today?

- Tell me.

- Your platonic love.

- Aphrodite? Is she going to travel?

- She's leaving.

- What do you mean, she's leaving? Where?

- She bought me a plane ticket for a flight in a week's time. Marseille-Asmara. She told me that she's fixed everything and that she's leaving with her family. Do you know that her husband was killed in an accident?

- Yeah, I know. Asmara? Where's that?

- The capital of Eritrea. Near the Red Sea.

To Carlos, this geographic information still didn't tell him anything, owing to his illiteracy caused by the years of school bullying. But then the idea came to him.

- Beatrice, are you there?

- Sure. What's the matter with you?

- I want another ticket. Next to hers.

- What do you say?
- Yes, I want you to book the ticket and order 2. I'll pay you for the other one.
- Are you going to Eritrea? Are you crazy?
- I don't have anything here. I'm into crazy things.
- You don't know what you're doing. You look like a kid. I'm certainly not going to that country.
- You take out that extra ticket, okay? Or shall I stop by?
- Come tomorrow. I haven't booked the other one yet because I needed her passport.
- What time is Aphrodite going to the agency?
- She told me about 11 o'clock.
- I'll be there at 9:00, okay? I'll bring my passport and money. And if you want, I invite you for lunch and a nap.
- Very generous you are. Too bad you don't even want to travel to the Costa Brava with me.
- Another time I'll do, I promise. Now I have to get everything ready, as in a week's time I'm going to the jungle.
- Jungle? Before you come take a good look at the city and the country you want to visit. Round trip ticket, right?
- Did she ask for it?
- No. I told you she's leaving. Just one way.
- Just one way for me too.
- Unbelievable. No, return ticket for you.

After a few days of collection and closing, Charles, with his four-wheeled suitcase, was at Marseille airport trying to find his way to the chosen flight. It was low season for tourism so it did not find too many crowds.

Once in the queue waiting for his turn, half hidden, he noticed the arrival of his beloved love, also alone, which in no way imagined that she was going to coincide with her gym mate from La Ciotat.

In the waiting room while waiting to get on the plane, their eyes met, but none of them said anything. Carlos looked like a city disregarder and sat far away from her, apparently involved in the reading of a travel guide about Ethiopia and Eritrea. Aphrodite put on some headphones and closed her eyes. Music, inaudible to others, seemed to be relaxing her.

At their arrival at their seats of a narrow plane of two seats per row, the young woman became impatient.

- But did you get the seat next to me?
 - Yes. I'm on 22 aisle. And you?
 - 22 window.
 - Well, we'll travel together. It's all right.
- Aphrodite didn't seem to think this was such a coincidence.
- Tourist trip, right? - said Carlos in a disinterested tone.
 - No, family matters.
 - I'm going to Eritrea as a tourist.
 - Alone? In this day and season?
 - Yes, in low season there are very good prices - he continued with the same tone.

Aphrodite put her headphones back on and listened to the music, which the young man perceived faintly. And so the first part of the journey went on. When Aphrodite fell asleep, Charles was able to contemplate all her beauty closer than ever. Her black, long, strong, shiny hair. Her face strong, smooth, with curves carved with chisel. Her body strong, healthy, emanating uncontained femininity. Strolling through her silhouette was the greatest joy for a young man who had possessed too many bodies and loved too few. Aphrodite was a magnet to him from which he could no longer be

separated. Unable to resist, he leaned over her and kissed her hair chastely, skipping the interpersonal distance. But unfortunately that was when the young lady woke up.

- Stewardess! Stewardess!
- Sorry, I wasn't doing anything. I only kissed your hair because... because I love you.
- Stewardess! Come on, please!
- What's going on? - said the stewardess in alarm, coming quickly.
- Give me another seat! I don't want to be with this man. He has had intentions.
- Another seat? OK, it's no problem. We have plenty of empty seats.
- Excuse me, stewardess. It was nothing. I got carried away by my impulses. We are friends.
- What do you mean, friends? I don't know him!
- You're lying, Aphrodite. We've known each other for a long time.
- Calm down, please. If the lady doesn't want to be with you, I have to find another place for her.
- If anyone has to change, it will be me," said Carlos, saddened.

Feeling the looks of the whole passage behind him, Carlos walked towards the tail of the plane occupying one of the last seats. He was again, as in his last days of school, the last in line.

During the second part of the trip, Carlos, in one of the last seats of the plane, embarrassed and having nothing else to do, devoted himself to recognizing the territory he was heading to and which seemed to be very different from the African jungle that appeared in his children's stories... What would happen when he landed at the airport?

- I will not be separated from her! - he said forcefully within himself, as he thought of the fateful moment of coming ashore. She'd probably have her family waiting for her. He would be left alone in an unknown country of incomprehensible languages, Arabic and Tigrinya, as he had read in the travel guide, with whose reading he was trying to make his journey easier and help him reduce his blood pressure.

And the fateful moment of getting off the plane came. He should have stayed at a safe distance from the woman he loved, but when they took out the luggage, he followed her.

- Aphrodite, please give me a chance. I tried to forget you, but I can't. I came here for you. I'd die if I couldn't see you anymore.

- Please, leave me alone. I'm a widow, I'm going back to my homeland. That's all over now.
- I just want to see you again, I want to be with you, don't leave me alone.
- Hail Aphrodite! - was heard near them.
- Cugino Paolo. Chè allegria! Come sono felice di rivederti!
- Anch'io, cara cugina. Ma chi è il ragazzo?
- Un francese che viaggia nello stesso volo.
- Niente di te?
- No, figurati.

- Excuse me, sir. Can I travel with you? I'm going to the same place as Aphrodite. I'll pay for your trip.

- Cosa?

The cousin looked at Aphrodite. The other man knew her name. There was something between them.

- Non accettare. Andiamo subito. Dopo ti spiego. I'm sorry. You can't come, Frenchman. Happy holidays, - said the young lady, closing the door of the van behind her.

Carlos ran to the other side and almost begged the driver to take him with them.

- Mi dispiace - was the answer.

The vehicle started leaving a considerable cloud of dust behind its wheels. Carlos stood still, sunk in tragedy. In the distance he could still see the sign for the van. Pizzeria Sorbillo.

- Are they Italian? he said to himself, and thought he had to keep reading the guide.

When he approached his suitcase, it was missing. From then on, he was going to travel light of luggage. Fortunately, he had his backpack, wallet and guide with him. He approached the information desk and was told in an understandable francoitaliano about the direction of the pizzeria and how to get there by bus.

That night Carlos had an excellent pizza dinner at Pizzeria Sorbillo, a fairly successful approach to the original house in Naples, under the perplexed gaze of Aphrodite's cousin. Luckily the place also offered rooms and Carlos did not hesitate to stay there. He knew his beloved goddess would be around.

In a spartan room, with a mattress on the floor as the only luxury, Carlos spent a night worried about his African future. To avoid this, he continued to read the Eritrean guide and saw its interesting places, its currency, its languages and its history. Then he understood why his host spoke Italian. Eritrea had been a former Italian colony in Mussolini's time.

The next day, at breakfast, he began a conversation with his cousin.

- Are you Italian?

- Io? No, ci parlo italiano perché mio padre fu soldato con gli italiani tanto tempo fa. Capisci? Mio padre... soldato.

- Okay, I understand. Your father soldier.

- Tu resti qui per quanto tempo? Quanti giorni, capisci?

- I don't know - he said with a shrug - I want to see your cousin.

- Sei veramente innamorato di Afrodita? Amore?

- Yes. I want to live with her. Forever - said the young man, having his index fingers joined together to expand the possibilities of being understood.

- Parlerò con lei. Vieni qui a mezzogiorno. Capisci? Alle dodici qui - he explained with the help of his fingers.

After a long walk to the Catholic Cathedral, also a legacy of the Italians, at 11:30 Carlos was already sitting in the pizzeria, nervously awaiting the arrival of his beloved. He imagined that this would be the final day in his pretensions to fall in love with Aphrodite.

At twelve o'clock, the woman of his dreams came in. She wasn't going alone. She was accompanied by two old men she imagined would be familiar. They sat at another table and seemed not to notice his presence. They were served their food and began to eat, as they discussed quietly, while they glanced briefly at the lonely young man. Even from a distance, though he did not understand what they were talking about, he felt an evident disagreement between Aphrodite and the two men. When they finished eating, the conversation seemed to fade away. At first glance it seemed that the old man sitting in front of the young woman had said the last word.

After Carlos had already eaten two pizzas to spend time and when he felt his hopes were waning, the waiter approached his table.

- Lei è invitato alla tavola dei signori di là. Mi accompagna, per piacere?

The gestures left no room for doubt. He was asking him to go to Aphrodite's table.

After the introductions, he was invited to sit on the free seat between Aphrodite and the more assertive old man, his father. A conversation followed between the father and the young man, which Aphrodite would translate without being allowed to participate.

- I've heard that you are after my daughter. Is this true?

- Yes, I'm completely in love with her. I'm sure of it. I want to live with her.

- But she doesn't want to go back to Europe anymore.

- We can live here. I don't care about that. I just want to know if she wants me. I know Aphrodite now is a widow. We met at a gym in La Ciotat. But I still don't know if she likes me, I mean, if she likes me as a husband.

He told us that your profession, whatever it is because he did not want to describe it to us, is not very honest.

- My life in France is over. I want to start a new life here. I am strong. I can drive. I can work in anything.

- We are Eritrean Catholics and as such we believe that in order for the Most High to forgive the sin of heretics, they must suffer a penance. Would you be willing to do the penance assigned to you by our priest?

- I will do whatever you tell me to win your daughter's love, - he said, staring at her for a long time without blinking at all, though he only got a glimpse of her between surprised and intimidated.

The second old man, the young woman's uncle, who had hitherto remained silent, introduced himself.

- I am the patriarch of Asmara and uncle of Aphrodite. In order for you to aspire to the love of our daughter in faith, you must repent of your sins, fulfil your penance, and be baptized as a new man. Then we can bless your marriage, so that God may give you children to make you happy until the end of your days.

- What am I to do? said Carlos, almost interrupting him.

- If you really love Aphrodite you must go to the land of Aphar to do your penance. You'll work first. Then the shaman will give you the sacred drink so that you can wait in full purity for the flower to come out of the tree of the dragon's blood. You will remain there until his flowers come out, bathing in its blood. Bring Aphrodite a bunch of dragon flowers and then you'll be worthy of belonging to our tribe. Are you willing to face the challenge?

- Yes. Whenever you want.

- To the caravan!

They all got up quietly. The patriarch took Carlos by the hand and they began to walk, followed by Aphrodite and her father. The street was full of voices incomprehensible to a foreigner. They were buying and selling, greeted and laughed, and as they approached their destination, the energy in the volume of the voices increased. At the end they arrived at a large stockyard where about twenty camels remained tied up, who were being saddled and their supplies checked, as they faced a long journey. It was the salt caravan. This time, a young French urbanite without any knowledge of beasts of burden or of the language spoken by the natives would be part of the expedition.

A few hours later the caravan left. For a few days Carlos would be a camel driver for the first time in his life. At his farewell he could take nothing but a long look of interest from Aphrodite, whose image would follow him everywhere during his period of penance.

Sun, wind and dust, days with eternal hours of mechanical leg movements following those of the camel drivers and camels that preceded him, absolute concentration on the absurdity he had gotten himself into, unmoving contemplation of the incomprehensible conversations of his companions while they ate something and drank another cup of hot tea at night,... and again a bolting sun, unbearable, because they were in the hottest place on the planet, the desert of Danakil.

In a few days Carlos got burnt, peeled, burnt again but survived covered with aloe gel, changing his clothes for the same chilaba and turban that the others wore. On the way they only found another caravan travelling in the opposite direction, with the camels loaded with large plates of fossil salt. Among the caravaners they exchanged joyful conversations, laughter and believed that they used the word French several times in their conversations.

Carlos had thought that the end of the journey would be an idyllic oasis of the Thousand and One Nights, but to his disappointment the caravan stopped in a ghost town. Everything around him was part of a lunar landscape dominated by silence and emptiness. They were already in another country, in Dallol, a former mining town from which Europeans had extracted salt and potash in the past. From that past, only the remains of buildings, machinery and railway parts remained in a desert with no tracks.

Over the next few days, all the men worked hard to get as many plates as possible out of a salt lake that had run out of water. Levers, pickaxes, chisels and hammers, everything was good to get

salt out of that infernal depression. There were nights when the pain and fatigue kept him awake. Then he lay looking at the brightest moon he had ever seen, while he heard the melancholic songs of the Afar men. Then he saw floating before his eyes the last look of the woman who had changed his life, the day of farewell.

The night before returning with their load, there was a party and everyone danced and sang around a fire made of wood that they had carried there. They even offered him wine, which he hadn't tasted in a while. When they least expected it, a man with black skin, black clothes, and huge eyes staring at them appeared.

- Mr Jean, Mr. Jean - they all said at once, and in a second silence reigned.

The newcomer approached Carlos and for his relief spoke perfect French.

- Are you the Frenchman?

- Yes, me. My name is Carlos.

- I am Monsieur Jean, your shaman. I come from Sudan. I must congratulate you, you have passed your first test: heat, wind, loneliness and work. Tomorrow the caravan will leave but you are staying with me. When the dragon's blood tree blooms, it will be the moment when you can meet your beloved again.

When the first rays of sunshine illuminated the dry land, the caravan returned to its destination with its load of salt, but Monsieur Jean and Carlos took a different path, mounted on small donkeys, which seemed impossible for them to carry a person with them, but they did. Soon the smell was noticeable. It was a pungent, acidic smell, greatly annoying to the sense of smell, but Monsieur Jean, who preceded him by pointing the way, did not seem to appreciate it.

- What is this smell? Carlos asked.

- You'll soon see - was the laconic answer.

Indeed, as soon as they reached the top of the hill, Carlos could not believe what he was seeing. It was hell on earth. Bubbling lakes, yellow, red, green, red waters, with 1 acidity, where there was no life, because in them sulphuric acid reigned, preventing any cellular life. An apocalyptic yet real vision.

- What is this? - he asked him

- The entrance to hell. You were going there, but I'll save you. Your sincere love has saved you.

Enduring as he could the unbearable smell, covering his nose, coughing, he followed the shaman to the top of a mountain with trees. He recognized them. They were like the ancient dragon tree of Icod de los Vinos in the Canary Islands, where one of his French clients had taken him for a sentimental getaway as his friend Beatriz called those weekends of intense sex in a hotel.

Following a known itinerary, they finally reached the largest tree in the xerophilous forest.

- Strip naked, completely - ordered Monsieur Jean.

Charles stripped off his light desert clothes and, following the shaman's instructions, stood by the tree. Monsieur Jean pulled out a machete and slashed the tree trunk over Carlos' head. He closed his eyes, frightened, to feel immediately that his body was covered in a red milky liquid.

- May the blood of the dragon deliver you from your filthiness - said the shaman, raising a small cross made of eagle's toenails.

- May the dragon's blood cover you with goodness and human love - he continued, touching a rattle made from a small dried pumpkin.

- May the blood of the dragon open your heart to be reborn in a new reality - he said, bringing a wine pumpkin to his lips.

Carlos, after so many days of unfulfilled thirst, drank the concoction until he emptied the pumpkin. And he immediately began to feel the effects of ayahuasca.

One day passed, one night passed, the next day came and Carlos was still out of this world. His body was a realm of sweating and chills, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, peeing and diarrhea. His mind, completely dissociated from his red-tinted flesh that rolled on the ground, ascended over the trees,

strongly inspired the vapours of earthly hell, and ascended with them into a sky far from the planet, overshadowed by distance. He felt the people with whom he had been related and he detected his fear of loneliness, his desire to find meaning in life, he contemplated his trembling, ecstatic, sunken eyes, anesthetized eyes and even dead eyes, to see on the other side the happy eyes of children for whom time is not a concept, eyes of joy and happiness, of acceptance, of interest and belonging. He saw himself as a child with his mother holding his hand, but the mother sank into a sewer without any complaint, as if the sinking had been part of his life forever. The boy became young and then the mouths appeared. He felt the pain of mouths ripping out his eyes, and though they came back in his eye sockets, sadder, more insecure, they ripped them out again and again, until he saw nothing. He heard only the laughter of the thugs who had found such pleasure in his blindness. But there came out a lightning sun in the shape of Aphrodite's head, and the laughter was fulminated by the rays of lightning coming out of her eyes. From his mouth emerged a fountain of hot urine that was poured over the bodies, destroying them, turned into dust that slowly fell into Dallol's sulphur hell, blowing up millions of multicoloured fireworks that filled the night, making it day. Then he saw himself rising from the depths of the sulphur, in the form of a great transparent serpent with his human head ascending to the aphrodisiac sun, through the mouth of the Sun-woman. That's where it all ended up. A soft, warm snow covered the stars, covered the acidic lakes, covered his eyelids that covered his whole body... And then he knew the meaning of the word peace.

When Carlos became conscious, recognizing the environment in which he was, Monsieur Jean was quietly having tea.

And so many days passed. Charles became immersed in the very broad culture that emanated from the wise shaman, and in turn he told him about his European life, which the master did not know.

When summer came, the dracaena ombet flourished. Bunches of white flowers opened up and beautified such a harsh environment, making people love life of a planet that produces eternal life, season after season.

- The day has come, Carlos. Let's go back to the salt mine.

The journey back in search of his beloved was a constant obsession for him. He had to keep the inflorescence in water so that the sun would not wither its beauty and would devalue the gift so hard to win for her.

He came back excited about his story with a happy ending, but it couldn't be. A bomb on the ground destroyed his illusion, blowing up the camel, the pitcher and the flower. Assaulted by a guerrilla group, in a few minutes the catastrophe flooded the desert and silence saw the lamentations through the smoke. Camel drivers killed, camels and cargo stolen. When the police arrived, they could only count the dead. Carlos wasn't there. His track was gone.

Two years later, Aphrodite was among her usual group of French tourists, telling them the history of her country while accompanying them on the monumental circuit of Asmara. It was a very hot day, so at noon they stopped at an open-air bar under a plastic roof that provided shade and partially mitigated the heat. On national television, the news was on. A flashing Latest News sign appeared on the screen, and then a hooded man chained a bearded white prisoner to the camera. It was Carlos.

- Read - said the hooded man urgently.

Carlos obeyed immediately.

- The African Revolutionary Movement, in the face of France's imperialist attack on our Muslim brothers and sisters, and after refusing to withdraw its crusaders from the Middle East despite successive threats that such an expansionist policy would cause the suffering of its population, and refusing to negotiate the release of its people by an exchange of prisoners, has tried and sentenced to death the French citizen Carlos, born in La Ciotat, as a representative of the attacking power. May Allah take him to His bosom.

A tense silence followed the statement. The hooded man put a curved knife in front of the camera and grabbed the hostage by the hair.

- Aphrodite, I love you! - was heard rumbling before the desperate gaze of the guide, expanding the image in a few hours to the whole world.

The blood spurted out under a head where only the image of Aphrodite bathed in purifying dragon blood, attached to his own, remained momentarily.

The following week, the front page theme of the beheading, present in all media, provoked a national crowd in the cemetery of La Ciotat. The heartbroken mother, overwhelmed by the media event, accompanied by Aphrodite in all black, could do little more than insistently repeat:

- Thank you, thank you very much.

And life continued on the planet, as the contradictions of an unjust system made standard are repeated and even extended.



TALE OF THE MOTHER OF THE 7 DWARFS

Sant'Alfio, Sicily (Italy)

DECEMBER 1995

It all started on Black Friday. Alessia and her husband, Massimo, went down to the shopping centre near Catania, where the announcement of the pre-Christmas sales deeply attired the compulsive cravings of her husband, hardly contained after a period of summer tourist boom. In their village, there were more and more people who sooner or later would ascend Etna from their village, after having a soda or a cup of coffee, buying the appetizing sweets that the husband made and were sold by Alessia with her usual spontaneity and joy.

After taking one of the trolley and, in imitation of so many other consumers, pushing or rather leaning on it, they entered the overheated hall. Before entering the larger stores, several people offered accessories at stalls along the corridors, hoping to take a few crumbs of the wallets filled already for a short time in the pockets of the mass arrivals of mountain people that Friday.

Alessia was particularly impressed by a mushroom stand. They were not the typical seasonal mushrooms that attracted Sicilians, more and more gourmets, more and more eager to try new flavours. It was a botanical stand, an extension of the usual florist's shop, perhaps the idea of the florist after having made a big profit in All Saints' Day. In there different types of mushrooms with pleasant colours were offered, as if they were flowers, the flowers of the forest in autumn, each with explanatory info. Although Massimo didn't seem to pay any attention, the usual outing for the marriage meant that everything had to be done together, so if one stopped, the partner had to also stop and wait until the object was left or bought, in order to continue together to the next point of interest, because that was a couple who get along fine. In that place, a dwarf with oriental features passionately explained the virtues of each specimen, as if it were a treasure.

- Black truffle and white truffle / aroma for the throat.

Alessia sniffed like a dog, trying to catch something of the scent of that exquisite mushroom.

- Russula white foot, purple foot / the first is good, the second is bad.

People smiled at the occurrences of the simple couplets that the charlatan shaman hawked.

- Amanita caesarean, amanita muscaria / one delicious, the other devilish....

- Look, Massimo. That's the dwarf mushroom. How pretty! It sounds like a fairy tale.

- But I don't think it's edible, is it?

- I'm going to ask. Excuse me, excuse me! Can that red and white mushroom be eaten?

- This one? The amanita muscaria?

- The one with dwarfs in fairy tales.

- It has been consumed for thousands of years. It has been the inspiration for religions and literature. You can travel and dream with it. It's the mushroom of the gods.

- It's poisonous, isn't it?

- It is not food for the stomach, but it is for the mind.

- And can be found somewhere?

- In the pine forests under the volcano.

- What's the matter, Alessia? You're not going to go and pick non-edible mushrooms, are you?

- her husband scolded her.

- Wait, Massimo. It's funny, really.

- No. Let's go now. This is not for us.

As they moved away, Alessia heard the salesman say something about a well-known tree, the oldest chestnut tree in the world.

- The Chestnut of the 100 Horses? It is close to our village - she said to herself, given her husband's scant attention, more concerned about the gifts she wanted to buy for the family.

- Let's see what gifts we buy, which today are discounted.

- And extra food for these days too?

- No, it's too soon. We have our refrigerator jammed up.

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