

THEREFORE I AM

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PART I

When I grow up...

I was very young back then, seven at the most. Grandpa was peacefully sipping at his coffee and I was very angry.

“What’s up?” he asked. I looked him in the eye, I often did, I can clearly remember to this date, even after so many years. It was like looking into the depths of the horizon, it soothed and reassured me.

“I am very angry.”

“Is that so?” I could sense the tenderness in his tone, but he would not ask what I wanted. We stayed in silence for a very long time, long enough to finish my candy and his coffee.

“Can I have a Fanta?” I asked.

“Maybe, why do you want a Fanta?”

“Because I never can have one at home.”

“Never?”

I told him how the day before, during a birthday party, mum had forbidden me to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which I preferred. I then promised the world I would drink nine in a row when I grew up, ten was a difficult number.

“You find it mean because you are furious.”

“I am furious because it is mean.”

When I grew up...

I was technically an adult, in my late twenties at least. Grandpa was peacefully sipping at his coffee and I was very angry.

“What’s up?” he asked. I looked him in the eyes, I often did, I can clearly remember to this date. It was like looking into the depths of the horizon, it soothed and reassured me.

“I am very angry.”

“Do you want a Fanta?” I laughed joyfully and I could sense the tenderness in his tone, and I loved it. We stayed in silence for a very long time, long enough to finish my coffee.

“Can I have a Fanta?” I asked.

“Maybe, why do you want a Fanta?”

“Because I never can have one at home.”

“Never?”

“I do not seem to be able to find peace. I envy you deeply.”

“You can’t find peace because you are blind.”

“I am blind because I can’t find peace.”

“Have I ever told you the story of Roe Deer and the Flies?”

“I fear you.”

“Once upon a time there was a roe deer that was fond of flies. Well, in reality, he disliked them as much as all of his breed, as they pestered him when they rested on his eyeballs and nostrils. But they bewitched him with the music of their wings and their permanent company and dedication. So much so did they appreciate him, that they took care of his dung.

He felt so indebted to them that he did not chase them away, even when they took over his eyes and nostrils. As a result, his eyesight and sense of smell dimmed.

One spring evening, as he grazed in a clearing in the woods, he was attacked by wild dogs. Always vigilant of the wolf, he heard something odd. They came from downwind their scent clear, but he could not smell them, and by the time he could make them out they had closed in. He made a dash for the forest but the dogs caught up with him.

The maggots in his larynx suffocated him quickly.

The flies came to bid their final farewell. They then settled onto the dung of his executioners.”

“It is a beautiful story grandpa, but how is it supposed to help me?” He did not answer me for quite some time, I knew he would leave me out in the cold for a while. I felt something hitting home, but could not translate it into any kind of idea.

“I guess the roe deer had not been true to himself,” I ventured.

“Right, he forgot who he was and became someone else, and that killed him. We all must forget who we are for a while, we are so vulnerable in our early stages of life that we have to adapt to survive, to find our bearing, to feel loved. But this adaptation to the environment feels so real that we end up confusing it with who we really were and still are. We can’t find peace because we are blind.” A glimpse of hope fed off my desperation, my intuition tickled but my brain did not.

“How do I switch the light back on, grandpa?”

“Do you remember your Fanta drama?”

“How could I not, the story of my life.”

“You found your mum mean because you were furious. You were not furious because she was being mean.” I held up the silence for a while.

“Maybe, how will I find out?”

“You have to go back, undo your way. Find out how you got here, who you really are. And you have to understand that you are not the only one, but just one more, everybody has the same predicament.” It is the human struggle, but few dare to take it on and drift like the roe deer until they get swallowed by the world they tried to adapt to.”

“And how will I do that, grandpa.”

“You are the only one who can do it, but I can help you. See, each of us is unique but not special, just one more. By trying to be special, we can’t be unique. I will retell you stories my patients related to me over years of therapy, in the intimacy of my consultation room. You won’t know who these people are, but you will see people you know in them, parents, friends, bosses, you name it, and one of them will be you. Find yourself, and in doing so understand the world you live in.”

“What kind of stories?” I asked hoping to deceit my intuition.

“Stories of mad people who struggle to understand why they are who they are. Blind people in search of their Fanta, like yourself.”

“When do we start?”

“You are not going to like what you will see, my dear.”

“Is there any alternative, grandpa?”

“Get me some coffee.”

PART II

I Perform

Angel felt alone in the hotel room. He enjoyed being alone, despite the dreaded loneliness he rarely was aware of. He could be a bit more himself, relax somewhat, away from the spotlight, from the performance. He could dream up success but without the risk of failure. He could enjoy the pleasure of being his own judge.

He had a long day ahead, and he needed to plan and to get a lot of things done before the dinner party. Guiltily, he thought about procrastinating a bit, before being haunted back by the endless tasks. Dreaming, planning and hard work did build up tension, but they kept him virile and in high spirits. And he could crank them up if he felt a touch sad or frustrated.

It was a big and luxurious room and he enjoyed it enormously. It was not so much the comfort, but the status it brought with it. It symbolized all the successes he lived for, and made it apparent that they were worthwhile. And they were, as his proud mother and his network of admirers would testify to. Those included friends and family in general, as well as other prescribers of appreciation like teachers, bosses and envious peers. He knew he should be proud of himself. Few people he knew achieved as much as he did.

He felt little compassion for those who were always complaining instead of working hard. If you wanted something, you worked your butt off for it and life would reward you accordingly. And it was not always a bed of roses, there were some bondages, but that was the only formula to become someone. And some nasty decisions came with power, it could not be helped. He always tried to be nice to people and never openly bragged about his successes, but life had marked him to not be just one more, and that was that. Not everyday life, that one did not interest him.

He enjoyed being alone despite the dreaded loneliness he rarely was aware of. He could dream up adventures with his Indians and cowboys, and it was nice to always win. But he was modest in his impressive triumphs, showing a candid heart to those defeated. He liked being a nice guy.

As he got a little bit older, he played that he would be successful and wealthy when he grew up. It felt relaxing to do so, some sort of guarantee.

There was something about success that incommoded him in as much as he cherished it. It made him proudly shy when mum bragged about his achievements. They were true ones, but they felt fabricated, somehow embellished.

One afternoon, he was at a school party with a group of children and a teacher. He was asked to leave the group and come back shortly thereafter. He and the teacher grabbed a little white plate. He was asked to mimic the teacher's movements, who was dragging her index finger under the plate and over her face. The children around him giggled and shuffled around, although the teacher did not. Then he was given a small mirror, where he could see his face smeared in black. There was exaggerated laughter all around. He hoped the earth would swallow him. It did not, but shame did.

So, he made a second secret pact against humankind. This had been the worst possible feeling he had had in his whole life and he would do anything to avoid it. From there on, he always behaved appropriately.

Hence, the first pact became null and void after the second. During a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number.

The party was climaxing if judged by its boisterousness. He moved lively among groups, joking and sharing someone else's life. He cheered up when he got the attention of someone, particularly if they had some kind of pedigree. It was a tiring and uneasy experience but a necessary one, to be performed stoically or a bit drunk if necessary. It gave him a sense of belonging, although he would not be able to picture where exactly. He was fine, doing well.

He never felt this way before. He always rode his predicaments graciously. His partner called him after the party and asked him what he felt, what he wanted in life, who he was, what he thought about...pretty straight forward stuff he initially thought. But then he was overcome by a sense of infuriation followed by a feeling of hopelessness. He could certainly respond to all those questions. It was just that, his replies looked appropriate but did not seem to answer anything. That made him restless and drift towards panic. He thought about all his achievements, and he wondered what the people that he wanted admiration from would advise him.

He was not going to live with this panic, he was going to do something about it.

I Am

Margaret's mind raced while she waited in the little room at the back of the shop, for the security people to return with the police. Would anyone find out? What was the legal consequence of shoplifting? She had never been caught before. There would surely be a police record, but as an adult it would not be reported to her parents. Sometimes she forgot that she was an independent adult. There would probably be a speedy trial but she need not tell anyone. She would require a lawyer, though, her father or her husband used to take care of these things. She felt helpless and did not know what to do about it. She would have to find a friend who knew a lawyer.

But her real problem now was to figure out what to say at the office. She told them she had a doctor's appointment, and that would have given her enough time to go to the gym and to the hairdresser, which was conveniently located at the gym. She was often late for work, but there was a team-mate who covered up for her, and her boss liked her, so she got away with little privileges like these. But today she had to do her nails and that would take somewhat longer, which was why she said that she had a doctor's appointment. Corporate policy required a sick note, but her boss never insisted. This was a two-way street as she made herself fully available when at the office, or even after working hours. Her boss was going through a rough patch and she always had a shoulder for him to lean on. Her miniskirts also cheered him up, but there was nothing going on between them.

She could live with not going to the gym, but her nails were in really bad shape and she would not be able to do them tomorrow, in time for the weekend party. But she also knew she had exceeded the limit on her credit card and was now drawing from the family account. Her husband would be mad at her again and might even cancel the card, which would be terribly unfair because she had spent some of her own money on a yellow dress for their youngest daughter. She wanted the best for her children. She did not want them to suffer. Her husband said their children would end up in boarding school, and she used to joke that if they went to a nice town she would go with them. Only the smaller one found it funny.

But he also said that she wanted to control their lives. That was contradictory, she found because either she was a control freak or some *laisse faire*, he should make up his mind. She hated it when he underestimated her. If she was not good enough, why did he choose her? He used to tell her how special she was, how tender and loving a person she was, how she made him feel supported at all times. But he was not caring for her as he used to, and that enraged and distressed her, made her feel small, vulnerable, and confused.

It was perhaps for this that she did not reject the advances of Paul, a well-off businessman she met at the gym by chance. It all started with little jokes that made her feel liked and appreciated. And then things finally got out of hand during a corporate off-site two years ago. She even doubted who the father of her last child was.

Her head was spinning. She was used to drinking and it took quite some amount to get her into such a dreadful state. It might have been because she did not eat enough that evening. She liked to eat, but she would regularly throw up. She had

to, the gym alone could not keep up with the regular amount of calories she ingested and she loved her slender figure. She loved to party, she loved to have people around, she hated to be on her own, particularly last night, which she spent with her lover.

Her husband finally found out about her affair. Her initial surprise and firm rebuff fell away once he got the emails out. She was furious with him for reading her emails and breaking into her privacy, but it later became obvious that his discovery was due to a lack of carelessness with passwords. Still, he should not read her private emails.

The problem now was that she would have to choose. That was something that she particularly disliked. She was sure she would be able to choose between them as both did want to have her, but she could not have them both. It reminded her of a similar situation years ago when she was in high school. It was fun then. Now it was more complicated with children and financial issues involved. She felt very stressed out. If she did not choose her husband, it would be more difficult to cover her unfaithfulness up. She would not be able to put up with mum's preaching. She would give her husband another opportunity. That would settle things with mum too.

She remembered as a girl during a birthday party how mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. And she did.

I am Tough

Alister remembered as a boy during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. It was not easy to differentiate them by taste, which was infuriating, you could go by colour to make sure you did not get it wrong. You could be punished when you made mistakes, even if they were not your fault. He had felt like shoving the nine Fantas up mum's ass, ten even better.

He felt enraged, for as usual he would have to bear the brunt of things. He listened to mum's heavy snoring while he was waiting for the surgeon's post-operative visit. He was on his own, Dad and his siblings were nowhere to be found. Julian, alias Dad, had left with that woman and was hiding somewhere in the mountains with his piano and his paintbrushes both of which he was useless with.

He was not convinced this operation was necessary. He was suspicious the doctor had pushed it to charge them the fortune she was getting paid. The insurance approved the operation and he drew some comfort from that. He remembered when he broke his collarbone and one surgeon advised him to undergo surgery, another the contrary, both were reputable surgeons. He took the decision on his own, after thoroughly pondering over their motivations. You could not trust anyone, including the top professionals. Everybody seemed to play the system by hiding behind ambiguity.

He was in no hurry though as he had a lot on his mind and he had a lot of paperwork to do, snoring permitting. He was a hard worker, his success rode on hard toiling more than talent, he always felt. He often sensed he had less talent than some of his peers.

When would the bloody doctor come? They must feel theirs is the only valuable time. He would give him the third degree, he would find the truth, he was not going to be cheated. It was unacceptable how things had been run and they needed some straightening out.

The surgeon came and they had a smooth conversation at first. He began to challenge her, building up his case and anger, until they had to move to a private room, away from the public eye. He threatened her he would sue her and he could sense how she felt deeply intimidated, which relaxed him somewhat, so much so that when his siblings eventually joined they were both joking over a cup of coffee. His siblings were a bit puzzled he did not call them on their mobiles but soon forgot when they heard the good news.

He was thinking about her, which he sometimes did, even though it had been long ago. It still made him feel terribly sad, even after all these years but he could not avoid a sense of joy, of self-respect, and he shivered when he remembered how he lost his self-control and how he enjoyed it. Cathy was a remarkable person, by whom he never felt judged, particularly when they disagreed. Sexually he was able to relax with her, to feel her body and his pleasure, and he did not focus on the strength of his erection. She made him feel like a good and worthy guy, and she was sometimes capable of making him surrender his irony about life, whilst still appreciating his sense of humour. How he wished they could still be together, although he secretly suspected

that sooner or later he would revert to his true self. But it was still nice to dream that it could have been different.

The woman who was still his wife would try to take advantage of him, as she always had. She always tried to make him feel guilty and this time would be no different. She was being conciliatory, which made him especially suspicious. Could he trust his mother's advice, or should he rely on his lawyer's? Perhaps he could find a way to reconcile both. If he could postpone the whole situation things would become clearer. Of course, things could deteriorate in the meantime, but he had to avoid making the wrong decision in his haste to sort things out. He would not buy into her accusations. It was she who had not stood behind their initial deal. No, he would not tolerate that. And he would certainly not tolerate her using the children as currency.

Was reconciliation an option? It did not look like it, but you always had to keep all options open and go through them with a calm mind. Maybe it was not the most obvious option. Well, anyway he would ask her to give him additional time on the grounds that he had to take care of his mother, who had just undergone a major operation. In the meantime, he would ask his lawyer to draft a detailed settlement that would leave his options open. At some point, he would have to address the issue with his children too. But he had this crucial meeting coming up and he needed to focus on it in the coming days or weeks. He had to make sure he kept all options open. A drink would do him good.

I Am in Cahoots

Frederick had never killed anyone, ever, so far. He felt like killing many times, and he came close on two occasions, but was thwarted by the narrowest of margins. He felt like killing right now, his mind racing to come up with a plan that would not land him in prison. Peter deserved it, and therefore he would not leave things as they stood. His wife begged him to drop the issue in the hope that he could perhaps still save his job—they needed it and he had only a few more years to go to be entitled to a full retirement pension. “Please,” she had begged. But for Frederick treason could not go unpunished.

He spent his life in the mountains and forests, except for a brief spell in the city university on a grant. But he dropped out as he had the intellect, but his instincts defeated it. He did not put in the hours, he could not quite commit and believe in all that crap he had to study. He was a man of action with little tolerance for theories or sentimentalism. He understood he might have forgone some good career opportunities, but he was no city boy anyway, and unlikely to fit in a corporation taking orders from some conceited boss.

In the end, he could not avoid having a boss, but he compensated for it by managing his boss. But that happened after he was kicked out of the Forest Ranger’s department, where he served as a hunting guide. They knew about his poacher’s past but turned a blind eye to it, given the great knowledge it had given him. He did not stop poaching, more out of the thrill that he could get caught, than for any real benefits. And they never caught him, but they were aware, and kicked him out after the first warning.

And he took revenge, and turned to poaching in earnest, setting up a lucrative organisation. He escaped several raids, one of them involving a major law enforcement deployment. This did not scare him, but he knew his days as a free person were numbered if he continued.

He became a private game guard working for a wealthy individual who had rented long-term hunting rights for a prime reserve. He became the boss of his boss and everything went fine for a decade, except for the game, which was hunted well beyond the legally established quotas.

Eventually, the lease expired and he got a new boss. Paul was less interested in indiscriminate killing and had a more romantic approach to hunting. That worked equally well for Frederick and he managed to convince Paul to hire Peter. It all went well for the first couple of years, while Peter was learning the ropes but then he turned on Frederick.

Peter needed to know that this was not the way that that was not the way things were supposed to be. He ought to be grateful to Frederick for his job and Frederick would in turn care for him and defend him, but he needed to stay loyal. Peter seemed to understand, but then was encouraged by Paul, the new boss, to take more responsibility. Frederick warned him again but this time he could feel Peter’s loyalty wobbling. He felt betrayed by Peter stabbed in the back, and therefore went into action, competing hard against him, undermining his work by giving him the worst and most difficult areas, while he harvested the best trophies in record time.

But the boss would not only be guided by results and supported Peter. Frederick would have no more of this sentimentalism and challenged his boss. First, he

sought recognition for his results, which he got, at least nominally, but which would not come with the empowerment he had hoped for. He got irate and handed in his resignation, which to his amazement was accepted. Worse, they lectured him and gave him a second chance. He cornered his boss but did not blow his brains out for reasons he still failed to understand. That is when the second opportunity evaporated.

There might be a third one if he apologized and fell into line. That was the smart play. He hated postponing the resolution of conflicts and he had no problem in going to Peter's house and butchering him like a pig. And it felt only right, as Peter owed him his job. But he would swallow the humiliation, as his wife suggested, and this was not the end of it.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. He would not wait until he grew up. He stole the nine Fantas, and one on top, and he shared them with his cronies. He then asked them to help him beat up his best friend. He had betrayed him.

He squandered the third opportunity and he remembered the joke of the frog and the scorpion. A scorpion asked a frog to carry him over the river to avoid a fire. The scorpion would not sting him, as they would both drown if he did. But mid-river he stung him anyway, and the frog asked why. "It is in my nature," the scorpion answered before drowning.

I Have

Jordan was driving home from his golf club when he almost crashed into another car. For some reason he did not see the red light although he drove this road at least twice a week. He was an absent-minded person and he felt it was getting worse with age but his doctor disagreed. Perhaps it was related to Sue's proposition despite it being nonsense. However, it kept creeping into his mind, which tired and irritated him. It would eventually recede, and everything would be all right again. Time, patience and common sense always persevered in the end, would not be any different this time around.

His son Mike encouraged him to press on and start dating Sue. At first, he pretended not to have heard him. He actually didn't the first time around. His son was the provocative type. But he would not do anything while his wife was still his wife. Not only was it inappropriate, it was also childish, a Hollywood type fairy-tale. Was he supposed to go through a teenage love now? He could not remember having one even when he was in his twenties. Life did not work that way, that he knew from experience. Life always let you down, at least a bit, unless you took it for what it was. Big excitements and expectations always led to disappointment.

He fared well in life and it was not by luck. He enjoyed success in his professional life, which yielded a high standard of living. He worked hard and for the most part followed the rules, or the generally accepted principles that applied at the moment. He was level-headed, adapting to life when necessary, and enjoying his moments of pleasure when he could. And there were many of those, a nice meal, with a good wine, a good book, some golf, and music, particularly music. It had a strange effect on him, it made him tickle in the inside, to the point of sometimes scaring him, an almost erotic feeling.

But his son was critical of this lifestyle, his son wanted something more exciting for him. He accused him of being like a machine on stand-by, for others to call on when they needed something. Never saying no to anyone, never feeling tired or being sick, pain just being a minor bother. There was of course that one time when he had been very sick. He had been posted to Congo to head a very important project for his employer and forgot to take his malaria tablets. He got the disease but would not stop working until he had to be evacuated as a medical emergency and came close to dying. That was when he embraced a deep Faith in God. He was a religious person, as his parents taught him, but he never thought much about it.

Faith gave him peace and structure, a roadmap through life and beyond. And he was very grateful for it, and went to church every Sunday to thank God. He would be horrified of being like some of his friends who always questioned the obvious. He preferred concentrate on daily life, and that was absorbing enough, he felt.

Sue was a problem nevertheless, and his son another one, even worse. Why could they not leave him alone, he had enough on his plate himself. A quiet life is all he wanted. She liked music, that is how they met, and she was very knowledgeable. That is how he first took notice of her. She was a very attractive woman, there was no question about that, and he appreciated it early on, but it was through the music that he felt more interest than he wished for. Besides, the sexual part was not so important any more. Well, he would not mind, it was some time since he tried for the last time.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number.

He eventually realized mum was right, nine Fantas would give him indigestion, and so would Sue, even if she was the orange version. He had avoided many mistakes in life by controlling his Fanta intakes, as well as other intakes. He loved eating and drinking but managed to command moderation. He still sported a generous belly, which matched well with his double chinned round face, and that gave him an affable and trustworthy presence. A lovely guy, Sue described him, and it had felt awkward the way she said it. He felt warmness before, beyond his tommy, but rarely this extra something that was hard to describe.

He thought about talking all this over with his good pal Julian, but never did. He trusted him fully, and his advice was usually spot on. But he did not want to bother him, be a nuisance with this stupid little senile impulse. He did not want to waste his time. He must be very busy now anyways.

He decided he would postpone the whole affair for a while. It was summer time and he would soon head for the beach anyway. When he returned after the summer, he would then take things up again. He felt all right, he almost always did.

I Am Aroused

The silence could be felt throughout the meditation hall. Only the unsynchronized breathing of eighty souls could be heard. The strident rattle of the lawnmower outside the room suddenly shuttered the silence.

"I know it is infuriating," interrupted the meditation guide, "it is for me too. Life is not always perfect, controllable or smooth. It is often stubborn and unpleasant. Let us take this as an opportunity to blend a deeply spiritual moment with the whims of daily life."

Fifty-seven seconds after the meditation guide finished speaking, the door of the hall creaked open. Shortly thereafter, the lawnmower went dead, after some disturbing exchanges of voices for the meditators. The door creaked again as Isabel re-entered the room and resumed her participation in the unsynchronized breathing of eighty souls.

She felt pleased with herself, but she could not get back into her meditation. She wondered what she was doing there. She hoped meditation would quieten her down, and it probably did, but something was burning inside her, and nothing could extinguish it. She wanted to be with Eve, she often thought about her, about them. She had made a deeply rooted phantasy come true. It was not really the lesbian part, she enjoyed sex with her husband, which they had regularly, but the freedom to unleash an energy deep and low inside her. Before she was only able to fantasize with it, and she felt very guilty, for nothing. Masturbation did not quite get the energy out, because it was not just a sexual desire. Now she could release it all, and there was hardly any guilt, but there was anxiety. That is why she took up meditation, and seriously, and it worked, but not quite.

They were introduced by their husbands, and got on well from the beginning, but nothing out of the ordinary, some unnecessary shopping, some criticizing of their husbands, the usual stuff. Eve was so fresh, so unbounded, so gay, that she became a magnet, with an attraction force that could not be resisted. Isabel lost control over herself, which frightened her as much as it excited her. It was a very confusing feeling at first, because she had always been, and still was, a control freak, as her husband, children and friends could well attest. But the energy she experienced was so strong she would not resist.

It was when Eve tied her up that she felt the most pleasure. She surrendered completely and she loved it, her orgasms building up with hardly any additional arousal. She had to stop this, regain control over her life again.

She remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. She had challenged mum back then on why she could not have her Fanta, she really wanted it. She would have them now, it was her right, she really wanted them. No mums would stop her.

But the anxiety never let up, it might be her right, but it did not feel right. Her junior years at school came to mind. They were run through all kinds of sports and cultural activities. The goal was to find out what they were good at and what they liked doing. That would increase their chances of success and self-satisfaction in life. Those

who demonstrated talent were encouraged to follow it and got unofficial special status.

She was not particularly good at anything, she went for badminton and playing the flute. It got you through with some respect and a reasonable effort. She would have loved to try martial arts and climbing. She had a taste of them during vacation time, almost by chance, and she loved the intensity and the adrenalin rush. But those were not on offer at the school. Neither were dancing and acting, only ballet and classical theatre. She wanted the wild, free versions of them.

Now she had a passion that was so intense that it gave her a right. No one could show a higher intensity than herself, life had given her that trait, talent if you will, and she had to follow it.

She exited the meditation hall before the session was over, the creaking of the unoiled hinges suddenly shuttered the silence, took out her mobile and dialled Eve's number. She felt a deep and low heat building up.

I Sacrifice

An aura of excitement reigned in the restaurant. The reserved section was in the basement, an ancient cave in the heart of a vibrant city centre. The diners chose the place in search of an extroversive intimacy. The *leitmotiv* of the gathering was to celebrate the return of Sonia, after an intense and risky humanitarian stint in Cameroon. They wanted to do so away from the eyes and ears of other clients and in the loudest and most boisterous way possible. A late finish was on the cards.

Sonia was a gynaecologist at one of the major hospitals in the city, from which she had requested a one year leave of absence to do an unpaid stint at *Mayo Rey* hospital in the town of *Rey Boub*a, deep in Cameroon's northern savanna.

She was greeted with grand applause and yells. She was beaming. She embraced and kissed everyone in the small crowd, while she thanked them for being there.

The party dragged on into the early morning. Everybody ate and drank their fair share. Sonia seamlessly rotated her position sharing some time with everybody. She recounted the uncommon experiences and strong emotions she had lived through, repeating herself countless times. She didn't mind.

Angel was a workmate at the hospital as well as a former classmate at Medical School. He was in psychiatry, a speciality not yet available or even taken seriously at *Mayo Rey*. They had dated on several occasions, but her commitments appeared to get in the way of their relationship.

"What's up baby. You're quite skinny. Eating and saving the world don't match up apparently, do they?" asked Angel.

"Good old Angel."

"Reporting for duty."

Sonia was in her late twenties, with black hair that matched her eye colour, and a deep and committed gaze. Her eyes shared a well-proportioned round face with a sharp nose and fleshy lips. She was just short of one meter seventy, with a slender figure and small, firm breasts. She never paid more attention to her appearance than was absolutely necessary but she was very keen on dieting. "We are what we eat." she used to say.

"You're hilarious Angel, but true to yourself I must admit. Let's catch up later, and if you're in the mood, I'll tell you what I've been up to. Will you try to take something seriously for once? Will you do that for me?"

Sonia was considered generous and obliging by those who knew her. Since her tender years, she had shown a zealousness for humanitarian causes, which granted her esteem and recognition from peers, family and friends. And she was quite successful at it, raising funds and mobilising people. Her commitment to this never waned, her enthusiasm was like a drug. Right after having been assigned a permanent position after Medical School, she asked for a leave of absence to go to far away Cameroon. Once there, she engaged on a crusade against what she felt was inhuman behaviour such as breast ironing and female circumcision. As a matter of fact, that was the reason for her early return. There had been some cultural clashes at *Mayo Rey* Hospital. But she was proud of her work, it kept her going.

"Is there anything more serious than to realise humanity doesn't change?" said Angel.

“You’re a cynic. I believe in a better world.”

“The triumph of hope over experience. You know what? Maybe it’s you who is the cynic. After all, I’m quite happy about life as it is. That’s not cynical. Cynics aren’t convinced of their causes. They need to evangelise. They even dare to think the world wouldn’t turn without them.”

“So, you think I went to this shithole to teach them a lesson because I’m full of myself?” answered Sonia releasing her hand from Angel’s grasp.

“I just think you care too much for other people, you should care more for yourself, and perhaps myself too.”

“I will when I have the time, but for now there is too much to take care of.”

“Yeah, if you keep going like this people will love you, even owe you something and with so much enthusiasm you will not even feel tired, always on a high.”

“You are drunk Angel, I do not want to argue.”

“You never did.”

“Do you enjoy arguing?”

“It is not about enjoying it, it is part of life.”

“What is wrong with your life Angel, can I help you?”

“You are an angel, how could I argue with you?”

“I am sorry if I hurt you, I did not mean to.”

“I have just been hoping you would since I met you. Get real, just be one more human being on this planet, stop idealising this world and yourself.”

“You are drunk, my dear.” Drunk or not, Angel always seemed to be capable of shaking her believes, even making her feel wicked.

She remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. But she changed her mind and gave them away as a present, it tasted so pure.

I Endure

They suggested Cathy take a sleeping pill to help her be as rested as possible for the upcoming challenge. But she refused, she did not need that kind of help, she never had. Getting to sleep, however, was proving to be difficult, though, and she was having trouble controlling her thoughts. Mike said it was fear, with a big grin on his face, then fell asleep next to her. But it felt more like sadness, and anxiety, like years ago, when they suggested she could be depressed, which she certainly was not. Whatever the feeling was, it did enrage her and she could not justify it, not with her track record.

She won many medals, broke several national records, and did well in international competitions, including an Olympic representation for her country. She never took anything, legal or illegal, she just worked her butt off. She always had, in anything she did, that was her receipt, and it worked. Perhaps she could be kinder to herself, but then, there were so many things that she wanted to try. And there were endless obligations and commitments she did not know how or want to turn down. People needed and appreciated her work, her knowledge and her dedication. It did not make for a relaxed life but she could not help it. She knew she would need to set some limits, her body was telling her via multiple ailments, despite it being well trained and looked after.

She would need all her physical and mental strength and skill tomorrow. She wondered why was she going to risk her life, voluntarily, for no obvious purpose? Ropeless climbing,- she liked the term free solo climbing better, Soloing even better,- was not an Olympic competition, it was even illegal in certain jurisdictions. Soloing was to achieve zen like concentration. A symbiosis of the rock, the mind and the body. Concentration taking over fear and time, a sense of not missing or lacking anything, the ultimate therapy, a dream of happiness. If only she could drift into that sensation, live the moment to the extent of not having to long for something that always seemed to slip away, being able to stop those endless demands of achievement.

Free solo climbing would be an achievement itself, and if she failed, she would not have to live through the shame of it. But if she pulled it off, she would be recognized differently among her fellow climbers. Soloing brought embedded status with it. And there would be pictures, the whole ascent would be photographed and filmed. Certain magazines would cover it and she would become part of a selected group. Her mother would come across one of those magazines and reprimand her, and that would be sweet, mother would feel for her, maybe she would even be proud of her, like when she earned all those medals, something she could not get enough of.

She had to get some sleep. She looked at herself in the mirror and felt sadly proud of what she saw. She looked at an athlete's body, well but not excessively muscled, just as much as their performance required. She was not in her prime, although her body still commanded respect, but no tenderness. It was a hard body that matched the wrinkles that age was chiselling on her face. She experienced nimbleness but no spontaneity, that was the price to pay for precise and extensive effort.

She looked at Mike across the whole bed, softly snoring. Did she love him? Of course, she did, otherwise she would not be with him, would she? Why was she questioning everything tonight? The risk was just theoretical, she was well trained and knew the climbing route by heart. Her mind was tough, as it had always been. Yes, she loved him, but she could also live without him if need be. However, she sometimes felt she went overboard in what she was ready to do for him. But Mike needed her so much and he admired her equally as much. He was so proud of what she was going to attempt tomorrow. And he would be there with his camera to record it, and they would celebrate and relive it afterwards. Mum would not be there, of course not. How could it even cross her mind? She laughed, imagining her mother forbidding tomorrow's challenge.

She remembered during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number.

She did not get much sleep but the following morning she felt fit and ready. The doubts and fears of the previous night had vanished and the old competitor was back in charge.

She closed in on the rock face and placed her hands on a rough edge. She looked up and concentrated on the key spots. The adrenaline rushed through her blood system, it felt like home. She pulled and her body left the ground.

I Trust You

The sunset reflected a dark, rich, orange warmth that burned his soul and ignited his hope. It was a nice picture and Julian would try to paint it. He had tried several times before, but to no avail.

Alice failed him, and once more his hope was on the loose. Their relationship might change, but he doubted it. He could not trust her anymore, not quite, not after what she had done to him, or rather, had not done. The story of his life.

He shared everything he had with her, his soul as well as his goods. He divorced Sue, his wife, he married her, he half lost the relationships with his children, and he put all his goods at her disposal, including his little house in the mountains. He cherished that place, he had always perceived it as the refuge of his soul, and always dreamed to share it with the right person. First with his wife, then with that relationship that was never meant to be, and now she, his big hope, a dream come true, to sail the final chapter of his life. He was always accused of being a romantic, but what else could beat the melting of two souls in the ultimate expression of love.

But she seemed to see things differently now. Apparently, he did not show enough commitment. He could not believe what he was hearing when she said it. She accused him of not seeing her, of not caring for her and her needs, that she was looking for someone who loved her in the flesh, not someone who wanted to gobble her up. In the flesh, seemingly did not mean sex, she was content with their sex life, as was he. He got pissed off at first, but afterwards his anger turned into puzzlement.

He believed that love was about trust, about being able to show yourself naked, without shame, without risking humiliation, about unconditional acceptance, even of the darkest sides you usually kept to yourself. He knew he was an introvert, and he always found it difficult to share his life with others. But when he was sure he had found the right partner, he did not hold back. Yes, he wanted intense intimacy with the most important person in his life. What was supposed to be wrong with that?

He felt terribly frustrated, but even now, after several disappointments and probably not too many years left, he did not give up his dream. It was too good to admit defeat. He might give her a second chance.

The previous night he had a recurring dream. He was behind a glass window from where he observed a group of children playing soccer on the street. He wanted to join them but the glass would not let him. He tried to break it, but could not and felt deep anguish and frustration. The ball would then hit the glass by mistake and shatter it. One of the boys would come asking for the ball and he would panic, until he realized she was a girl. They would play on his side of the glass for a long time, before joining the other boys.

It was an unsettling dream, it left him with a feeling of emptiness he could not bear. He decided to play some piano. He was an average musician, and music spoke straight to his heart. He frequently resorted to music when his mood was shaken, for good or for bad. Music felt true, without the need for thoughts, it was kind to him, and it spoke to him as well. He was giving his best shot at playing *Beethoven's Für Elise*, or was it *Für Therese*, he was as confused as are music historians trying to clarify who *Beethoven* composed the bagatelle for.

His wandering gaze came across the sunset picture he wanted to paint earlier. He picked it up and his sight got lost in it. Outside, beyond the crystal window, the sun

was setting too. He looked outside to contemplate it. The perfectly rimmed feature of the sun in the picture could not be seen, just the orange reflections. The clouds partially covered it and filtered the colour to a pale orange. It was still beautiful, but it could not match the picture, except for the beauty that arises from living things, he pondered, while a faint, unconscious grin shaped his lips. He went to his bedroom and came back with his high-resolution camera. He loved photography, nothing could capture and retain magic like it. He clumsily opened the glass window and took pictures in a staccato manner. The light was dimming fast and the horizon was changing its feature. It would soon be dark, he thought, and he turned away.

He printed the set of pictures and looked at them. He wondered which one to paint. They were all pictures now. He might as well take the most beautiful one, and that was no doubt the original sun setting picture. Where and when did he take that picture? Then he remembered it had not been him. His ex-wife had taken it, during a summer holiday, from the top of a cliff overlooking the ocean. Maybe he should go back and play some more piano. He had not mastered *Für Elise*, or was it *Für Therese*, quite yet.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. If only he could find the right person to share them with.

I Belong

Steve felt tired, and that confused him. He hardly ever felt tired, he seemed to be alien to the different shades of pain. As a child, he regularly caught chills because he never felt cold and did not wrap up. He felt cold now though, a chill that was not physical, that he could not quite describe, he just knew that it was new and painful. But being confused was what unsettled him most. Why was he confused? It was not typical of him.

He was a hands on, determined person, perhaps a bit stubborn at times. He considered himself a reasonably cheerful and positively minded guy, full of energy and willing to help where needed. He did not remember the last time he had been sad, but he was now. He was sure of it and it enraged him, which was also rare for his normal behaviour. He did not have a volatile character, rather a smooth and non-aggressive one, to the point of infuriating friends at times with his calmness. During work interviews, when asked about his weaknesses, he would answer that he was too much of a hard worker and that he cared too much about the people around him. He knew people gave those answers in interviews to avoid showing their genuine weaknesses, but in his case it was true. That is why he was considered a very good leader at work, as well as at his home resident's association, where he was the president, and at two not-for profit organisations with which he was actively involved in. And probably also why he excelled as a mediator and was regularly asked to intervene when conflicts arose in the community. Why was he so disoriented then?

Dad was dying in hospital. This was certainly unfortunate but it was a fact of life, he was in his late eighties. This was not the first time he tended to dying people. And Dad and he never were particularly close. He loved him, of course, but never a role model. He always felt he was not enough. Dad did not even criticise him for decisions he knew he disapproved of. He did not criticise Dad for it either, he found his own way somehow. He was well respected at work, was a good provider for and caretaker of his family, and his friends knew they could rely on him. He would do anything for friends and family, even to his own detriment. Why was he enraged then?

Only once did he remember Dad being nasty to him, and he felt humiliated and discredited. "You have given up living to avoid suffering," Dad had said. He did not answer him, he just changed subjects, which made Dad mad, to the point of leaving the room, but not before exclaiming, "forger!" What was he supposed to say? It had been a sheer provocation. Besides, no one had ever accused him of such crimes. Was the whole world wrong? What was he supposed to be forging?

He did not listen to the priest's words. It was a grey and chilly winter morning and he felt the cold in the shadow riddled cemetery. He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number.

He never did, did he? He swapped them for recognition, for acceptance, first from Dad, then from the rest of the world. He was not the altruist he sold himself as. His generosity came at a price, he did not give it out for free. But he paid the ultimate price, did he not? That was what Dad meant when he said, "You have given up living to avoid suffering," was it not? He could feel the rage inside in him building up. And he

could feel fear too, deep fear. Fear of not knowing who he was, what he felt or what he wanted. Deep sorrow overwhelmed him, Dad was dead and he would not be able to ask him, share with him, confront him, shout at him or hit him. He was gone and he hated him for it and he hated himself for not having hated and loved him when he could.

His body trembled, he was not getting enough air, he did not know what to do, whom to talk to, where to go. He felt alone and scared.

I Have Affection

“Where is your father?”

“He is right next to you, mum.”

“Oh, there you are. I did not see you. I don’t think I will ever get used to your ghost side. I will take the children to your mum and dad and I will meet you at the party.”

“I would rather go with you.”

“You promised you would stop at the mall to buy the wine, and we will be late if we all go together.”

“Sure.”

Peter could feel the dread of showing up at the party on his own. But of course, she was right and he did not want to upset her. He would check where her car was parked before he joined the party. But then he thought he might not find it if she did not park close by. He hoped to be lucky and he hated to argue with her. He despised arguments in general, especially within the family. But he also loathed these social parties, and for some reason he disliked her boss, who he would have to put up with the whole evening. But after a while, with the help of a drink or two, he would be all right, and it would be a lot easier if she was around. Everything would be all right he assured himself.

Shit! He did not discuss with her which wine to buy, and she could be so picky at these little details. What would be the correct price? Red or white better? Rosé was out of the question. Well, why was it out of the question? It would be a creative alternative. Stop fucking around and get the bloody wine, any of the wines she had previously bought. He thought about calling her, but experience suggested otherwise. His eyes wandered to a stack of soft drinks on the floor.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party how mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. That would take a lot of courage though, and it would not be worth the fuss, but it would be quite something, would it not? He was sure that one of his friends, Justin, would do it, but then he was quite a character. Sometimes he wished he could be an extrovert too. Maybe not nine, but maybe two or three just in case one broke or just to make sure he did not run out of them. Whenever he travelled, he loved to take everything he could think of, just in case something happened. And it was always a pleasure to be able to satisfy someone else’s needs, if the opportunity presented itself, and to not have to ask or depend on others.

He would be safe if he bought this wine. One bottle or two?

His heart was racing when he pushed the bell button. He could hear the party going on behind the closed door but nobody answered the door bell. He waited, and some long minutes later other guests showed up. He acted as if he had just arrived.

The alcohol eased him into the party and he was immediately happy he bumped into two guys who worked in his wife’s team, and who he knew from other events. They stuck together for most of the evening. He showed great interest in their lives, and it worked. She spent most of the party around her boss, which was

understandable because this was a business gathering and she had to look after her job.

They had a different approach towards their professional lives, to life in general as a matter of fact. He was faithful to his mum's vision that it was better to not stand out, to not draw attention, either way. It could only generate either scorn or envy and none of them would bring any good. But she liked to shine, and in that sense, he was the right partner, he guessed, which did mean she would likely stay by his side. That felt comforting.

The party would soon be over and he felt increasingly happy. It would be cold outside when they left, but it would be nice and warm at home. And tomorrow was Saturday and he would go biking with his friends. Technically they were a team randomly assembled by a common interest, but for him they were friends that sometimes felt as close as family. He loved to have friends, to feel their warmth, and he strongly believed that the more friends you had the lower the chance of being left alone if something bad happened. He was always open to friendships.

Love was more difficult, he believed. He sometimes daydreamed of having a marvellous partner who loved him as he was. It would then be easy to commit fully to the relationship. But in practice it was more difficult. It felt like putting all your eggs in one basket. And why would she love me unconditionally anyway? He would not, he did not. But he was thankful that she did stick around and that she had given him a family. Nothing felt like family. The future of course was uncertain and could bring trouble, probably would, anything could happen, but there was only that much you could brace for. He prepared himself for many of them.

When he was about to start his car, his mobile phone went off. It was his wife, her car did not start, and she explained where she was. He knew, he had checked before joining the party. He was not prepared for this setback. He wanted to go home. He sensed a burst of rage building up, and got scared and felt guilty. "I am coming, sweetheart."

I Seduce

Eve wondered where she had gone wrong. Things were not going according to plan. Not that she had any preconceived plan, she was far more spontaneous than that. No, Ernest was the problem, he always was, or had been for a long time now. She gave him the best years of her life, but he was not able to appreciate her. All she asked for was respect and some room for her needs. That was all, but apparently, it was too much to ask.

She remembered their early years, when they started dating. He adored her, attracted by her sexuality at first, then by her warmth, her kindness, her spontaneity, and her self-assuredness. At least, that is what he told her and she believed him. She had been with a few other men before, and after, and during, and she could tell when they were for real. Yes, she was a very passionate woman, there was nothing like love in this life. What could beat love? But she could also be faithful, and had been, for as long as it was possible. Years.

They married after a number of on and offs. She was surprised when he proposed, honestly surprised, her track record was a bit mixed. And that proved his love to her, his passion and adoration. She quickly accepted. And she gave him three children, which he then stole from her. But that happened later, before he loved her as she expected, as she knew him. She felt like a beloved wife, a valued mother and an appreciated partner. She got her way most of the time and he hardly ever disagreed.

But later things changed, she could not feel the intensity of the early times, only when they reconciled after a row, but she had to kick up a few fusses to make them happen. She had some secret very sporadic encounters with other men, out of desperation, but they made her see the light. She needed a change in life, she needed to feel again the intensity and the admiration that an intimate relationship was supposed to give.

She was not so naïve as to expect her husband to readily agree, that is why she visited a lawyer first. She had hoped that he would eventually, even if only grudgingly, understand that it was what this moment in her life required, that it was the best for both, even for the children. The children would benefit from parents who did not quarrel, would have a model for the future if they were ever in a similar situation, and if they ever got back together the children would enjoy a quality relationship between their parents. The children of course understood shit of the whole affair and wanted their parents to stay together. That did not help. Ernest looked at her as if he was talking to someone fresh from Mars. That infuriated her, she felt humiliated and misread, but she pushed through, sure of her success.

She did not expect him to put up such a fierce legal battle, and she certainly did not expect her children to side with him. Not at first, but after the first two years they went to live with him. That became a big problem, financially and of course emotionally. But there was no point in wondering where she had gone wrong, she did what she had to do, the children would eventually understand, but she needed to figure out where to go from here.

She could try to go back to him, but he had changed, he used to be a lot more pliable, in the good sense, more human and understanding. His look during the last court hearing told a different story to the imprint her mind had of him. That would not work, and it was not what she was looking for in any case, their story was over. She

was willing to reconsider even when she proposed to split, she even ventured five years, but not anymore. He had scuppered his chances of any reconciliation. He would have to prove his commitment beyond any possible doubt for her to reconsider now. Ernest could stick their unfinished house up his ass, and that of the bitch he was currently fucking. He would never have someone who did love him like she had.

She had a new boyfriend now, someone that loved and valued her and that had come unexpectedly at the right moment, relieving the financial pressures that were mounting. She found it tough though to be with him when his children were around, it just hurt too much not to have her own around. She would do anything to have them back, but not what they demanded. She would not apologize, she did not have to, even if she was wrong. They would eventually understand, although it was taking longer than she had hoped for, and it was wearing her down. Maybe that was the reason for her recently discovered illness, which was serious, maybe not life threatening, but serious. It made her think of the past and maybe she would have to revisit some chapters of it. She thought about her own mother.

She remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. It was of course not possible to seduce a Fanta, but you could seduce someone with a Fanta, particularly if your tender lips first softly caressed the cold metal rim and playfully spilled some of the liquid. Imagine nine!

I Suffer

Alice loved to paint, and doing so surrounded by nature was a bonus. The sky was blue and the warming sun sparkled the late afternoon. She liked rain better, nothing smelled like rain in the countryside, and the sweet melancholy it brought enchanted her.

She was painting an impressionistic representation of the landscape that granted her the freedom to be original and accurate. Painting allowed her to be creative and to deploy hard-learned technique at the same time. She loved being creative, it brought her a sense of uniqueness and it made her feel special. But it was challenging, as reality stubbornly reminded her. She rarely felt her work was good enough, despite the praise she received from people whose opinion she trusted, and she felt uncomfortable when they did.

But it was better than the sense of vulgarity that overcame her when she did not reach her standards, or the resentment she experienced when her work was not understood after hours of tenacious and disciplined toil.

She saw herself permanently compared to painters with the dedication, resources and experience she did not. But she would not give up, on the contrary, she would put even more energy to overcome the gap she hoped she would bridge one day.

They would always settle the argument claiming that she was too emotional, as if she would not be able to perceive what was going on, akin to an hysteric diva. Yes, she was emotional, but also someone for whom deep and complex thoughts formed part of her understanding of the world. Her ex-husband, Steve, used to joke “they are not complex, they are entangled,” and she used to laugh at it, but felt abused. And rightly so, because he proved to be an abuser in the end.

She loved him with a passion and devotion no one would ever give him again. She was always available for him, wrapped up in him, giving his needs preference over hers. Steven was not able to appreciate it and made her feel the whiny needy wife. She did hold on, for too long she later realized, even after the abuse became physical.

She still resented her behaviour more than his and she would feel vulnerable when she occasionally met him. And she hated herself for it, but she did not know how to stop it. She dreamed of finding a worthwhile partner who would appreciate and protect her. For a long time, she was willing to go back to him but she was happy to have found someone else whom she loved and desired.

They had a good sex life, better than she ever remembered having. She longed for him and pictured having sex with him in idyllic places. He made her feel very close to him, important and desired, and she was willing to try out things she had never dared before. Sex was very important to her but it never quite met her expectations, and this time it felt different, although it would not be the first time her hopes ended in disappointment. At least this time she suspected there was a balance between what she was giving and receiving.

Her thoughts had been drifting, she would soon have to get ready for the family event. She would wear something simple but sophisticated and elegant. She perceived herself as stylish when she compared herself with other women, even those in fashion magazines. She remembered the times when she went about dressed in

rags, and that is how she felt too. Not anymore, now she was in love and stable in her job, although she never had a passion for a professional life.

She would wear the white dress with the loose fit and the low-heeled sandals. She liked wearing loose garments, they made her feel free. Her sister Rachel would be pissed off with her wearing the white dress. Maybe not, many times she thought Rachel would be mad at her but then was not. She grabbed the last white dress when they both went shopping and both were keen on it. No rock paper scissors. The story of their life.

She was the first born of a family of four. Rachel came right after her and they had a troubled past. Her parents told her that she tried to throw Rachel out the window shortly after she was born. She did not remember but had felt like that many times, still did sometimes. Rachel was always in the way, taking advantage of mum's preference for her. And Rachel always took advantage of her experience in life but did not show any sense of appreciation. And Rachel would get all her clothing just when they were slightly small for her. And she had owed her money too.

Rivalry was lower with her other siblings, perhaps because they were males. They grabbed most of her father's attention and she longed for a closer relationship with him. But he recognized her first-born status and gave her grandma's wrist watch to symbolize it.

But it was mum with whom she had the most difficult relationship. They never had major quarrels. That is how much she cared about her. She tried everything to get as close to mum as she was to her other children but to no avail. For as long as she could remember.

During a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number.

Enough of this, she thought, it is time to get ready for the party. It felt good that her better-half would be with her.

I Hide

Mary was home, feeling its warmth, perhaps a bit overdressed. The news broadcast was airing some accident involving an avalanche. She felt for the casualties, and imagined a snowball, round like the world, getting ever bigger and running her over, like in the cartoons. She liked to fantasize and was well trained at it. It was a way of engaging with the world, it made it more manageable. It also helped her develop her views, intuitions and ideas, of which she was quite sure and adamant, much more so than about her feelings. It often felt as if thinking and feeling about the same experience was a separate experience. Years ago, still a child, the family dog passed away. She felt very sad and she shed many tears for him, but not when she thought about him. It was as if they were two different experiences, of which she was glad, because it made it possible to keep him alive in her memory, and she had been very fond of him.

She very well knew though that she felt pissed off now. Her boss asked her again to work overtime and she agreed, and had to forgo her gym class. Not attending the class was not the worst part though, far from it. What brought this dreadful feeling was not having been able to say no, not having stood her ground. It made her feel so small and the world around her so big, so inaccessible.

At least at home she felt warm and safe, but still a loser. She had achieved many things in life, including challenging ones, without the help of ambition, but her sense of self-esteem was never quite there. And she punished herself for it, as did her father. That definitively did not help. Anyhow, the outside world felt hostile, hypocritical, ignorant in many ways and brutal. It paid off to be careful when choosing with whom to get close and how close. The room for disappointment was huge.

So, she tried to limit the situations where she could be challenged by life, and that meant spending long hours with herself, preferably at home. She did have friends, and had had several intimate relationships, and she enjoyed getting together with family, but her attention and involvement span was limited and had to be controlled.

She found pleasure in spending time with herself, in her deep inner world. From there she could safely contemplate the outside world, including some of the most banal things. She grinned to herself when she remembered how she was fascinated in watching ants at work. As she was very curious, she also quite enjoyed gossiping. It was not so much about judging other people's life, but about connecting with the world, it provided references, even innumerable points of views.

She thought about the upcoming Saturday. She had invited a couple of friends over for dinner. She usually did not have people over as she did not like it. For one, it did put herself in a very competitive position with herself, wondering if she would be up to the task. For another, it felt a bit like an invasion of her privacy, and she would not be able to leave whenever she wanted. It felt like a self-imposed stricture. Friends or family sometimes complained about her sociability, but it was her way of saying no, of being true to her needs, and that was that.

She checked her fridge and her pantry. They were at rock bottom levels, as usual. Most of the time she was frugal with herself. It was not a money issue, but a way of life. It felt as if it did keep stress on check, the less she needed the more likely it was she would not run out of things.

She went back to the living room and laid down on the couch. She covered herself with her favourite blanket. She might not need too many things, but she attached deep meaning to the things she cherished. She did not quite know why but they certainly did not let her down like people often did. She looked after them and they usually lasted many years. A similar thing happened to her with some places to which she attached a very special meaning, beyond what the experience she had lived there would suggest.

The mobile rang, but she did not feel like standing up to get it. She would return the call later. Her favourite television series was coming up anyway and she did not want to miss any of it. Besides, what if it was her mum? She would start reminding her all over again that she had to reupholster the dining chairs. Worse, it could be her sister-in-law and that conversation would drag on for ages. Or it could even be the bitch. But of course, it was her fault, because she had not set the limits the situation had required. And it was not the first time. She was not close to many people, but when she did get close she committed deeply and was extremely hurt when she felt let down.

She finally gathered enough strength and stood up to pick up the mobile, her curiosity getting the better of her. To her relief, or disappointment, it was a message reminding her she had to pick up her cousin from school. When she came back, the television series had already started.

She remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. She was hoarding them at home now, you never knew what to expect.

I Own You

Nicolas watched his smartphone with pride and pleasure. She looked beautiful to him, but, more importantly, she appeared subdued. He would be ready again soon. He enjoyed taking her from behind, like most mammals do. It did put things straight. It also allowed for reasonable pictures, like the one he was watching. He loved to take pictures while they fucked, and to show them to people, friends or otherwise, but he normally did not distribute them. He occasionally did some proper filming, but it was too much of a fuss and it fucked up the intensity of the moment.

She was doing fine, for the time being, not like his wife. He did not divorce her, because it was easier this way. They lived together, with two of their three children, and they ran a family business together. His involvement was part time and each of them ran different areas. They still fucked from time to time. She knew about his girlfriend, anyone who cared to know knew, and she possibly had some affairs herself, but not at home. He would kill whoever he found at home, and she knew it. He would not bring his girlfriend home either, there was no need.

His wife proved to be disloyal. Not with other men, but with himself. For many years, she was fully dedicated to him and he loved her. Nobody had that status before. She admired him. For the very first time, he was able to merge with someone. He gave himself to her. He felt powerful and safe. But then she claimed that he had a complete hold over her and that she needed some breathing room. She started to mingle with some of her old girlfriends and signed up for yoga classes. She broke their blood pact and he took the appropriate actions.

He had always been an intense party boy, but had restrained himself considerably since he married. He reduced the heavy drinking and he had only some sporadic affairs, and only for sexual reasons. Now, he gave a full swing to his senses and it felt like the good old times. He abused substances and engaged in an intense sexual life as well as in the illegal car races he had always enjoyed so much. He was a fearless driver and good with women. He would pay for women when needed, but he was very good at seducing them too, which he enjoyed so much. He did not belong to anyone and there were no limits, including law and order. He had his own sense of law and order, and he liked to brag about it. He almost got caught twice, but he knew better.

This was until he met his girlfriend and he settled down somewhat. After a while he felt she was all right, but then again, so had his wife for quite some time. He turned to their sex pictures in the smartphone. At least she was good in bed, or on the couch, or in the car or in the toilettes. She would always please him and he could feel his power.

Sex had always been important to him, since his very early years. He must have been six, seven at most, when he peered through keyholes in search of some excitement. His parents were quite careless about their intimacy, and it was not that uncommon to hit upon some fun. And dad sometimes had girlfriends over, and that meant more party time.

He could not get enough of it, nothing gave him the intensity of sex, the harder the better. A girlfriend once convinced him to try a softer, more tender version and he agreed, in exchange for going full throttle thereafter. He briefly enjoyed it, a lot more than he could have imagined, but then he felt weak and was not able to go full throttle

after all, and that made him very angry. But he got his revenge later that evening and everything went back to normal. He never tried that nonsense again, but he sometimes had trouble releasing himself fully, and few things felt worse than that. He got around it by fully concentrating on his pleasure and by increasing the intensity and frequency of intercourse. You had to own the moment and everything in it. Although, it was far better to own someone he could trust, and to whom he could give everything and become her master. That was unrivalled, but difficult to find, as his marriage had proven. It was the story of his life.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. He took all the Fantas he could find in the pantry and gave them to his girlfriend neighbour. He knew it would get him into trouble at home, he would probably get beaten, but at least this time it was for a good cause. After giving them all to her, he asked her to run away with him. She agreed, but the next day her mother returned the Fantas and there was no running away, and he got beaten. Could he trust his girlfriend? Was she willing to merge with him? He had spent his prime physical years in the army, special ops. Tough guys you could trust, whatever some of their criminal records might say. Those were probably the only people he had ever trusted in his life, his family. But you could not fuck them, at least that was not his cup of tea. Where could he find a special ops woman? The story of his life.

I Am above

Henry did not know how he felt, but he knew what was right, and it was his obligation to make sure it got executed. He had been appointed to a senior marketing position at the corporation he had just joined after twenty years of hard work at his previous employer. He would have to act cautiously, take some time to understand the procedures and customs of the new workplace, and get a sense of what his new bosses were like.

After that initial phase he would make the necessary changes to reposition the products he was responsible for at the top of the market. That was what he promised during the recruitment interviews, and senior management was very impressed by it. He thought it was rather obvious, but apparently that was not the case. He knew their products, they were those he competed against for more than a decade, and they were up there with the very best. Better than the ones he managed in his previous company. He was puzzled why they did not perform better, but he realized that that was the reason for hiring him. And he would deliver. People at this place did not seem to understand how their market worked. He wondered whom he could trust within his team.

Most seemed technically capable, but they all seemed to lack a clear method, clear procedures. He would need to build in some of the procedures he applied at his previous job. They were more like principles and rules than procedures. It took a while for the previous team to understand their full merits and to comply with them, but they finally understood. It would not be any different now, he knew, people were generally stubborn and did stick to preconceived habits. It was his job to convince them.

He hoped he would be able to do so subtly. It was in their best interest, they would personally and professionally benefit from that knowledge. How he wished someone had provided it to him. Instead, he had to grind through years of hardship to develop the knowledge he now had. Unfortunately, the world was unreliable and one had to find one's own right way. The story of his life.

Dad wanted him to be a doctor, like himself, and he went to medical school, but left shortly before finishing. He realized, to Dad's huge disappointment, that cutting up people was not his cup of tea. Dad was a general practitioner, and he wished for his son to follow in his footsteps. His decision to drop out kicked up a huge fuss in the family. High expectations had been vested in him becoming a top surgeon. He admired Dad greatly and he did not want to disappoint him, but at some point he decided he would go his own way. Dad advised him to finish medical school, he only had one year left, but he made up his mind and went straight into business school. Now the problem was his own child, as he did not want to go to business school, he wanted to become a professional musician. He did not think it was a sensible idea, but he would let him try for a couple of years. He could then go to business school.

His thoughts went back to his business plan. He quickly identified the flaws in the current approach. He had a very sharp eye when it came to picking up errors and imperfections. His son got furious at his ability to pick up dissonant chords, but he knew that it made him a better musician.

He also felt enraged with the way things were run here. But he controlled his urge to set up a meeting and tell them all what kind of morons they were. Experience

told him otherwise. Not only did rage not get the message through, but it frightened him even more than it did the targeted group. Loss of control was not only wrong and useless but very distressing. What would he be capable of if he did not control himself, he wondered.

He had learned that having a way with people was less threatening for everybody, the sandwich protocol, two slices of bread on the outside and one slice of meat on the inside, a compliment, the truth and another compliment. People turned a lot more receptive, and he felt accepted and recognized. It was no substitute for toiling and getting things right, though.

His body language was in sync with his mind. His behaviour, could sometimes feel a bit cold and circumspect but always carried a touch of elegance, even aristocratic, that inspired trust, a solvent person.

He felt his approach worked for him, at least most of the time. Although it did not quite work a few years ago when he underwent knee surgery. It was not a life-threatening operation, and he did certainly put himself in the hands of a top surgeon, although not the one his dad had suggested. He felt very frightened and lonesome, despite having the love and support of his family. He tried to postpone the operation for as long as had been possible. He remembered dreaming how he replaced his knee himself, while mum reassured him everything would be all right.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. He should have told mum, that it would have been more appropriate to postpone than to forbid. But deep inside him, he wanted to crash each every one of them on the back of her skull, squarely on the occipital.

I Enjoy

Things were turning out better than Justin had anticipated. He would have preferred to be somewhere else, but he miscalculated and was now stuck. He saw an advantage in joining the Army but he never thought he would end up in a war. The plan had been to exploit the opportunity of gaining a college education while making money and having some fun. But then this stupid war came along and now he had to put up with it. He might have to do two tours, but he was developing some strategies on how to avoid the second. The first one he was lumbered with, and that was that.

He was a lieutenant assigned to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of a specialised mountain division, and they were currently deployed at a remote combat outpost in the mountains. He really liked his platoon, but was unimpressed by good old Sara, his captain, whom he found weak and unreliable. That meant he and his unit had to take care of themselves. The story of his life.

They had already experienced combat on several occasions. That is when he discovered his new family- "one for all and all for one." Friendship had always been important to him, and he had many good friends back home. They treasured each other heartily and in most cases, they would not spare any effort for one another. But this was a whole new level. People were willing to die for you and had proved it. In combat there was no country, faith or any other bullshit, just those fighting alongside you. You were true blood brothers. He had never felt so much at home, even safe despite the war. He would have to make sure that this did not end after the war.

And it was fun too, the comradeship went beyond the fighting. He remembered someone saying that war was ninety-five percent boredom and five per cent combat. They hung around and teased each other for many hours a day. They shared whatever they had, and that included weed and whatever else was available. He enjoyed those relaxing moments big time. If only there was some sex around. He was trying to persuade the right people to find some when they went on patrol in the village. Of course, it was not very safe and was completely forbidden, but manageable as a team. Proper food would have to wait until they got back home, or at least back to main base.

War is no bed of roses, but not everything was negative about combat. Since there was no way around it, you might as well try to have some fun. It reminded him of one summer when he had skydived, and of course some of the training they had received had been quite spectacular. Adrenalin was quite something, and you got it for free. Besides, with their resources, their chances of fatalities were much reduced. At most ten minutes after contact was made, they would have air cover from the Apache attack helicopters, who would sort things out in a flash. Anyhow, the enemy knew it and chickened out way before that. And when on patrol, they were always under the cover of the 50 cal. heavy machine guns and the mortars from the outpost. Plus, the enemy was not well as trained as they were. Their snipers never hit anything at the post. True, there was that one night when the post was almost overrun, but it all went very quickly, they almost did not have time to realize they were under attack. And boy, the fireworks were quite something. And it would not happen again, they had heavily reinforced the perimeter with claymore mines and cleaned up any possible cover the mountain would allow. With thermal and the night vision equipment they would spot

them before they knew what hit them. At worst, Viagra, the platoon pet, would spot them, he was hot.

The events at the village went somewhat over the top, but at war it was not always possible to judge things as in civilian life. He remembered captain Willard in the film *Apocalypse Now* saying "How many people had I already killed? There was those six that I know about for sure. Close enough to blow their last breath in my face. Shit ... charging a man with murder in this place was like handing out speeding tickets at the Indy 500." Nobody wanted to talk, and they had to find out who did it to sergeant Stevens. The girls probably did not do it, and they did not resist much after all. It was the mother though who got the worst part, although it was more of an accident, no one was supposed to be shot. With the chaos that ensued, the bloody place lit up like a torch.

Something felt terribly wrong when he zipped up the body bag with sergeant Stevens inside. This was not supposed to have happened. People died in war but not sergeant Stevens. It could have been any of them, it could have been him also. And the way he died was horrible. The unit's spirits were low and he had to do something about it. These were good chaps and he could not afford to not have the unit in fighting capacity. He would talk to them and he had stashed some undisclosed weed for an emergency, and this qualified as one. They would stick it out and reacquaint their past selves.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. The problem was when you confused ninety for nine.

I Am Attractive

Ernest was leaning on a boulder overlooking the valley. He could see their unfinished home, felt it crumbling to the ground where it had once felt sturdy.

It is very unusual to know the date of your death, but Ernest did. At this moment, he was not thinking about committing suicide. He already felt dead. His wife, Eve, had asked for a divorce. For hours he felt no anger, sadness, joy, relief, remorse, guilt or any other symptom associated with break ups, just fear and hope. He thought about what he should be feeling.

He did not sleep throughout the night, his mind spun endlessly and he was exhausted. The writing had been on the wall but he could not believe this was happening. He would do anything to reverse this situation. He was feeling responsible for what was happening and was willing to do things completely different, as she had asked him so many times before. But he also felt abused, ripped off. He was willing to forget anything to mend this situation. His bowels churned violently when he thought about telling his parents. He invested so much energy in doing things right, in being a good and loving guy just to make a fool of himself.

He remembered their many fights, and in particular the sweet reconciliations. And they would make love and he would work hard at her enjoyment, so much that he forgot about his. Sometimes it felt like going through an exam. Well, they did not really fight, Eve would have some pressing complaint and he would keep quiet or, occasionally, he would have a burst of anger but then he would end up asking for forgiveness. She would be reluctant at first but then she would love it and he would go about his own business. She would take the opportunity to praise his love, or tenderness, or something. He just could not have enough of her praise, he needed it to keep going. Particularly social events, where he could not help his shyness unless he dared to brag about some of the topics discussed. It never looked as bragging, which made it a lot more effective and allowed him to back off if things did not go his way. She was very proud of his views, although sometimes she would criticize them severely and he would feel very angry or hurt.

He was confused because he believed that happiness was about hard work. Everything could be achieved with hard work. He worked hard for his family, his wife, his career, his everything and this situation was disconcerting. Maybe it needed more work. He shed the first tear.

The summer heat was building up even in these early morning hours. It would be a very hot day, but he could still smell the little dew left. He took a draw of his almost finished cigarette. He would have to contact a lawyer, if it finally went that far, and he probably should tell his boss, there weren't really that many friends to tell, and mum and dad, how was he going to do that? His stare fixed on his left foot sweeping the ground, would he stay at home, what about the car and...he remembered their last summer at the beach, the children had...how were they going to tell them, maybe they did not need to tell them now, there had to be a way out of this. "Stop it, stop it, stop it," he shouted and kicked at nowhere and felt some relief. And his mind wandered into the past.

During a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. If only he could drink five Fantas like his friend Mike. But he would never manage to be like him, Mike could really manage difficult situations. He for example would not have a problem in sending this bitch to fucking hell, where she belonged. He would know how to stand his ground. But of course, he had tons of things Mike did not such as sophistication and therefore he would not fully understand his predicament, nobody would, that was the problem. But their couple relationship was so unique that it was difficult to explain. Still, where did it go wrong? This could not be real. There had to be something more.

I Avoid

George spilled the wine all over his lap, staining his new expensive cashmere jacket and silk tie. He did not know what to do, and waited, while his resentment spilled too. It was stupid to use such big balloon wine glasses when the table was so small. He had requested the glasses himself, such premium wine merited them, but they should have removed some plates or something. He felt stupid for dropping the wine and fearful of the upcoming scolding from his wife. It was already happening, he could hear her in the background. There was no point in fighting back, there never was, even if it encouraged her even more. Maybe he should though, but not now, he would order more wine, it was excellent, and relaxing at the same time. Besides, it was the only way she knew to show him her love.

Eventually things calmed down and he could fall back on his thoughts. Last time he checked, he concluded that the ongoing conversation had not much merit. He noticed that there were several conversations going on at the same time, and everything was very noisy. These people did not really know what they were talking about. People in general did not spend much time educating themselves, though they spoke as if they did. He did read a lot, not just for fun, but to acquaint himself with the best-informed views on the topics that interested him, or even those that did not, but which he felt he had to be informed about. It was like a full belly but somewhere in the brain.

He finally intervened against all the noise and the high-pitched talk. He pushed through his views to great effect, although with considerable effort. And they were generally accepted, everyone realized the depth and the coherence of his vision. One of them made a soft challenge, which he successfully rebuked, in spite of the high tone and the frantic gesturing on her part, which he felt annoying and unsettling. He sensed the admiration in the group, and he rejoiced in it privately, before falling back on his thoughts.

He did realize that he was not a very sociable person. But that was not quite true, he felt, he enjoyed mingling with special people, those who brought something unique to the table, not just the ordinary everyday stuff and so often in a melodramatic way. People were plainly fooled by media and stereotypes of all sorts and they had trouble looking through all those scams. But some did see through, and those he liked to be with. But there weren't many of them and thus there were few opportunities to interact. That was also all right with him, because he disliked frequent or long interactions, particularly if they were very emotional. But he thought it was definitely important to get together with elite people of all sorts. It was not about being close to power or money but about being close to excellence, of almost any kind.

In the end, it was about developing a spiritual sense of life, the ultimate expression of excellence, connecting with the highest level of development. He thought and read a lot about this topic but somehow never quite managed to find a solution that gave him the peace he was looking for. He toured the history of philosophy and he read all the major philosophers, and he was an avid world history reader as well. He thought he had the full picture, although he never contrasted his views with anyone else's. He did not feel the need to join any formal forum to debate or enrich his conclusions, other than with his therapist, who was much more than his therapist.

The thought of his ex-lover unexpectedly passed through his mind. The woman who earlier challenged his thoughts, reminded him of her. Mary said he lacked compassion and she left him. What on earth did compassion have to do with erotic love, he wondered at the time and still did. She seemed to have seen through his mysterious inaccessibility at first, and to have appreciated his spirituality beyond sex and affection. But to her it was apparently the same thing, and he was willing to concentrate on basic instincts as the building block of something deeper down the line. Not that he disliked it a bit, but he felt confused after a while. She was not interested in high level discussions, but rather in having experiences together. She accused him of a lack of compassion when he showed little interest in starting a life together. Not only was he a married man but it all felt to him like a very dull prospect. She burst into tears and left him. He thought about trying to win her back. That is when he decided to start a therapeutic process. He felt understood by his therapist and secretly he hoped the process would last for very long.

His wife nagged him about excessive drinking when he asked for another bottle of wine. He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. He later realized there was no point unless there was a Reserve Fanta version, then he would have checked with the Fanta *sommelier*. He laughed at his own joke, it was so funny, although only few people would understand it, he knew, and that was good enough. He was sure his therapist would. He had to tell him.

I Am Safe

Rachel felt flushed with happiness. She usually did when when she was acknowledged. And there were few better moments than when acknowledgement came from your boss. She did not admire many people, but she did admire her boss, at least at this very moment she did. She admired her previous boss and things almost got out of hand. Maybe they did, but just very briefly and nobody found out. Nobody she did not want to find out about it, that is. This of course included her husband and her family but not some of her close friends. She felt guilty about it and needed to tell someone. She would have to admit being a little proud about it too. People thought of her as a good, nice and meek girl. She also perceived herself as someone reliable and capable.

Her current boss thought so too, he could count on her, even for intimate matters like a lifelong split. He was in the midst of a break up with his wife and in need of advice and understanding. There wasn't anything between Rachel and himself, nor was there going to be, but she felt the tickle of power and acknowledgement. She did not feel she was doing any of this for compensation, just to help, and she relished doing it. She looked herself in the mirror, and she liked what she saw.

Rachel felt scared, when she felt out of control. She worked hard to make sure things went according to plan, and felt hick ups and surprises could be avoided other than force majeure. She had studied hard and received good grades, had never come home late or drunk, almost never, had always been nice to grandparents and guests, but she had often been blamed while her sister Alice got away with doing as she pleased. She did not feel she was an envious or extremely competitive person, no more than life demanded.

She hoped her boss would back her with the new improved conditions she was requesting. It was important to her, not just the economic side, which was always necessary, but also the new rank. It was not about bragging, but you only got credit for what was official.

Mum always managed to get on her nerves. She did not think the dress Rachel was planning to wear to her cousin's wedding was appropriate. Rachel went to the dressmaker on three occasions, before mum and herself finally agreed on the style, and on top of it, she invested much time in finding the right accessories, and even the make-up to go with it. She pictured the whole outfit over and over in her mind. She also fantasized about how everybody would stare at her during the wedding. And, yes, she also pictured the rather dull dress her sister would wear. Although, much to her distaste, she was not sure she would get as much attention as Alice. Yes, mum always managed to make her unsure. Most people would picture her as a very secure person, but mum seemed to always make her wobble. Even her boss trusted her judgment in the most intimate and delicate circumstances and she was proud of it and of herself.

She would do anything to avoid a row with mum even if she had to wear another dress. She would not wear another dress, but would somehow manage to make it look different to mum. She hated arguments, they made her feel restless, even vulnerable, which contrasted with her assuredness. She did not seem to be able to find the right answers in those circumstances, they overwhelmed her. She cried many times after disputes, especially with mum. Fear, her husband Henry once told her, and she laughed at his remark, although it was not funny. He sometimes had these not so

funny comments, like when she told her that she did many things for him but without him. She got mad and went to cook dinner. That night they made love but her mind was somewhere else. She had so many things to do.

She thought about plastic surgery to get rid of all those wrinkles and sagging skin. Besides, she hated her nose, right there in the middle, sticking out of her brain like a beacon for everyone to see. She would never do boobs, nobody really saw them and there were other forms to disguise their true shape. Her husband's pecking order would have differed and her boss would not tell the difference in the boob's shape. Besides, mum would never approve. Dad would not notice, perhaps he would if they were her sister's. Maybe she should do tits and the hell with the wrinkles. That would certainly turn things upside down, and she remembered when she was a little child. During a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number.

She made up her mind she would go for plastic surgery, cheeks, forehead and nose. And she would get herself a personal trainer.

I Blend

It was a shock for everybody, after so many years of an apparently happy marriage. Sue found out through an email she came across accidentally. An endless thread of exchanges between two lovers preceded that first mail. She was not able to finish reading as it was too painful, and she had read enough to understand. But she did not understand, and she retrieved the full thread and read through each and every one of the messages, sometimes more than once. The fact that his lover was the music teacher she hired to help him cope with retirement gave a perverse twist to the whole affair.

Julian did not deny anything and was not very explicit about anything either. He even seemed proud and somewhat defiant. She found it disturbing, difficult to believe. She never expected to be in this situation, and therefore had no reference on how to behave, but he was not being very helpful either. She could suffer dearly and then possibly forgive him, sooner or later, depending on his attitude, but he was not playing his part.

She could deal with the pain, her endurance was limitless and amply proven, but something unsettled her terribly. The night before, she dreamed that someone chopped off her limbs. And that is how she felt, maimed, unable to take care of daily life. He did not seem to appreciate how deeply she loved him.

She always supported him and understood his views, feelings and needs. And it was not difficult for her, in many instances, to feel the very same way he did. They were so close and now he was behaving like a stranger. She certainly felt like a stranger in this mess, as an observer of someone else's tragedy. He did not show regard for the way she was feeling. This was not quite new, but she hoped he would eventually realize. Maybe this situation was an opportunity for him to finally understand and be less selfish.

Then she thought it might be her fault after all. Maybe she did not pay enough attention after his retirement and after the children left home. She stopped cooking as she used to when the children were around and he was used to her excellent cooking. And the children's departure left a huge void in the house. She should have bought a dog. True, he did not like dogs and whilst he loved his offspring, he was not fond of children. But something could have been done to avoid this, she was sure of it.

She had to take the first step and openly forgive him, even publicly, so that he would find the reassurance that he was not rejected, that her love was still deep and unconditional.

She was having coffee in her new living room. It was not that new anymore, five years had passed since her divorce. Many things, emotions and events had taken place since, but strangely enough she did not feel that different. She started several therapies to help her cope with her life, but she was not really able to metabolize her drama. She would not forgive him, unless something dramatic changed, but she could not get over it either. Whenever she tried, she realized she could not isolate the situation. They had their children, for example, she did not have them with someone else. How was she supposed to separate them from him? Even the material goods had meaning. She was living in the house they rented out as an investment before divorcing and never lived in.

The children stuck to both but she had more contact with them and that was comforting. She expected them to be more on her side, but he was their father after all.

She had not really had any serious dates so far, only skirmishes. She sometimes wished she had more contact with men, but she was too lazy to get going. She would change that in the future. But what for, to go back to square one again? It seemed men in her life could not be trusted, certainly not her dad or her husband, ex-husband was the appropriate term. And she always had trouble drawing the attention of men, at least those she was interested in. The whole affair felt laborious, hazardous and frightening. She felt melancholic when she dreamed about having a new partner.

She remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number.

That moment popped into her mind from time to time. She sensed she had not drunk those nine Fantas thereafter, and that made her sad. But it was a moment when she knew what she wanted. It was not Coca Cola, it was not even the lemon version. She knew it was the orange taste and plenty of it. She even dared to ask for it too.

She wondered what her current Fanta was? She had not asked for Fantas most of her life. She had distributed them to anyone who cared to ask, particularly to her husband, ex-husband. She was not even able to accept Fantas when offered to her, of any flavour.

She promised herself she would drink one whenever she had an opportunity, preferable the orange version. Two was a difficult number.

I Covet

It would soon be his turn. After so many interventions, over decades of service, Philip could still feel the tension build up in anticipation of the engagement, much like first time sex or a moment of danger. He had similar sensations when he engaged in risky activities. When there is something you really want, you must take risks. But they did not quite feel like risks at the time, the thrill of the conquest anesthetised the underlying fear, that must have been there, like common sense. But it was all worthwhile, as not just his current position proved, but the world-wide praise and recognition he had received over decades of toil. His parents were also proud of having a professional or recurrent United Nations envoy in the family.

And rightly so, because it took quite some skill to pull off all these missions, even when they failed, which of course most of the time they did. That was not the way to measure results in this environment. These positions required leadership, you had to have a way with people while drawing respect for yourself and for the institution. But, yes, results were sometimes frustrating. After all, you could not expect a single man to change the world. He thought he could, though, in the early days. Those were tough periods, climbing up the ladder of the Humanitarian Industry, all the way to the top. He started early, spending his vacations during his college years working for charitable organisations, even at the expense of nice all paid for family vacations. And he got involved in whatever clubs or university sponsored projects would contribute to his curriculum and would prove his commitment to the humanitarian cause.

The field projects were the toughest ones. Especially when you had a family. His wife, Isabel, was always supportive of his career, but it still meant many months away from home, most every year, for many years. He regretted missing some of his children's early years of development. But he realized that life was a permanent trade-off, and this was, unfortunately, an unavoidable one. He was very thankful he had married the right partner, and he valued her support immensely. She adored him and that made him feel very loved. He considered himself a highly independent person, as his way of life demanded, but he felt on the brink of a deep and dreadful abyss during a couple of crises they went through. He had never been in such a dark place before, and he promised himself he would not go there again.

The Russian representative was wrapping up his conclusions. He could not stand guys like these. They reminded him of one of his bosses at the Foreign Office. He liked him at the beginning, but his initial judgment turned out quite poor. Recently returned from one of his lengthy and risky field jobs he accepted a dull office job. It was important to spend some time at headquarters every now and then. He put up his best and most charming side, always willing to give a ready hand and never complaining. To no avail, the moron would not play ball and he stuck to some old fashioned and ridiculous views. And of course, he did not get the recommendations he was seeking. He could still feel the rage when he thought about it. It was always the same story when you dealt with mediocre people who could see no further. He could be somewhat stubborn at times, when defending his point of view, but he usually got them through because they had some merit. Of course, you had to deal with the right people.

You could not say the same of the Italian representative though, certainly not physically, she looked gorgeous. She reminded him of Sonia, good old Sonia. She was one of the people who understood him best. They met in Cameroon, where she was doing some extraordinary humanitarian work. They fell in love at first sight, as the saying goes. But then they realized that they could not reconcile their love with their lives. Since then, they met in New York a couple of times, by chance, and they briefly relived their past. But nothing could live up to the old days in Cameroon. The spirit of adventure, the freedom to behave like teenagers with few boundaries to honour. Once they went bungee jumping and...

It was his turn to speak. "Mr President, it is with the honour and the responsibility that my position commands that...", how many times had he repeated those words, but could not have enough of them. In the early years, he could sometimes sense a little erection, or not that little, at times, when the moment came.

His speech went fine, that is, as fine as one could expect. Obviously, everybody stuck to their preconceived views, which their respective governments established before all the speeches took place. He got his standard blurred mandate, and he would sit down with the different factions to try to agree on some peace agreement. The world of power worked that way and the humanitarian industry had to adapt. Still, many things could be done for those suffering the conflict and his speech concentrated on those aspects.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. But why drink them? If you managed them correctly they could get you a long way.

I Indulge

Donald felt all right, despite the severity of the situation. Rape was a serious offense and the charges brought up against him were well supported, his lawyer had explained to him. Personally, he neither accepted nor denied the charges, it all depended on how you viewed things. He certainly felt randy, and she led him on, but then felt otherwise. That would not work with him, nobody fucked around with him, and he fucked her, right there. She cried and begged, but she should have made her mind up beforehand, not when he was loaded.

It reminded him of his boxing years, when he was loaded for bear. He loved boxing, possibly the only moments in his life where he could be himself, with only limited risk of being admonished. Referees could be quite whimsical at times. He could unleash his inner energy in its full intensity, right there, with no delays, enjoy his power, the defeat of his opponent, sense his muscles and bones crush under his punch, and be rewarded for it rather than face the risk of imprisonment. Sometimes you lost, all right, but that was just an incentive to load up further energy to take on the next fight.

And boxing kept him fit and more or less away from alcohol, drugs and partying. It got him off the streets and into a routine. He left school when he was fourteen and by then he had already been arrested twenty times. And home was not an alternative. You were either alone or you risked been beaten, until you learned how to box and how to defend yourself. That was why he became interested in boxing, and his stepfather was his first bout. By the third he made it into the winning circle and the asshole had to leave. Mum was not happy with him leaving, despite the fact that he used to beat her. Mum was never proud of Donald, always ticking him off, hitting him when he was young and weak, because he did not get to school or because he came home with things he could not have paid for.

It went downhill all the way after he stopped boxing. On and off drugs, driving under the influence, fighting, including incidents with police officers, and now this rape shit. There were other similar situations before, but none of the other bitches dared to report him. And he was not done with this one, once the legal proceedings were taken care of.

They reached an out of court settlement on the rape charges, but it cost him an amount of money he did not have. This would add up to his already generous debts, and there was no fucking around with his creditors. There was only one way to sort out that level of debt, and it was not legal.

He avoided a jail sentence but was ordered to undergo three hundred hours of community service. That is when he met a weird guy who led the service project. He soon realized this one was different from the many others he had met. He had his own very same intimate energy, but such a different disposition which sat like an uppercut to his heart.

Weirdy just talked about daily life for a long time, and he felt himself softening when he was next to him and feeling increasingly anxious. Weirdy charged him, out of the blue, one day over lunch.

“You look sick,” he ventured.

“Just tired.”

“Better than sick.”

“Same thing.”

“How come?”

“I just feel bloody weak.”

“Why did you box?”

“Like Mike Tyson once said, *I just want to conquer people and their souls.*”

“I also used to box,” explained Weirdy and Donald flinched in surprise.

“Why did you box?”

“When I was in the ring, I reacted to my opponent’s punches, it almost felt as if I was defending myself, and I could disregard the consequences of what I was doing. Rather than a person, the guy in front was just a dangerous threat, an object that I had to eliminate.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I came out badly from a bout. I had to rest for a long time and I got very frustrated. There was no way around it, I could not fight it off and get back into the ring. I realized I had limitations like everyone else. Worse, I depended on other people for my recovery. At some point, I could not see those people as objects anymore. And I realized that my limitations were there to protect me and not to thwart my liberty. The fact that reality was too big for me to control felt relieving, and I could stop running away from it. And yes, people had feelings and views I could perhaps learn from, and they were not just evil souls I had to control.”

“Was there any turning point?”

“When I realized how much pain I had caused.”

Something struck home with Donald. He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. When he could count to ten he came back for his Fantas. Mum was no match for him then.

He returned home after finishing his community work, and there were two guys waiting for him at the door.

I Am Fine

Mike was very excited about the project, the projects rather. It was meant to be one, but he could see many potential alternatives within it, as well as follow ups and add-ons. It was like one of those decision trees where A could result in B or C and then each of those in two further options and so on.

His enthusiasm made him anxious, it always did, except when he was climbing. Climbing made him focus, there was no way around it otherwise he would drop from the rock. Yet, the adrenaline rush kept the excitement running. It was like taking drugs while being overly conscious and concentrating at the same time. That was particularly exciting, because concentration was not one of his strengths. He was too much of a dreamer for that. He thought the world could be a better place and he fought hard not to be engulfed by its miseries. He had many plans for it, which he hoped to be able to complete at some point.

Climbing allowed him to move up, rather than down, all the way to the top, as close to heaven as possible. He felt it was more of a symbol of his high ideals than of any deep faith in some form of god. And it required strategy and skill, you could not just go. You had to plan your routes, and be cunning, not just strong. The problem was that, as he got better at it, he sought bigger challenges and that meant higher risks. They scared him, how could they not, but they also excited him. He pictured himself doing a ropeless climb from a distance, as if he were in a movie, the tension building up, slowly edging up the rock face, then a little slip that almost made him fall off, and then reaching the summit amidst the applause of the people watching and filming. He loved the slipping part, saved by improvisation.

He turned his thoughts back to his projects. It was funny how ironic life could be. He was always a poor student, never terribly interested in the boring stuff they taught him, which felt very repetitive and ordinary. He had other strong points to make it through life though. Nobody could deny his amiability, his social skills, a joke always at the ready, and his relentless optimism. He had some trouble finding a mainstream job, he felt the underdog at the time, but he set up a business which was thriving. He was well off and could choose his working hours, not like all those mainstream employees who looked so smart at the time.

He turned his thoughts back to his projects once more. He had to consolidate some of the spin-off alternatives. He remembered the joke of the guy that ended a very long letter saying, "excuse me for the length of the letter, but I did not have time to make it shorter." He laughed at his joke heartily. And Cathy would have laughed too, had she been here. He was so lucky to have met Cathy, they were meant to be. They knew each other so well, even though they only met a few weeks ago. Twin souls. He had been with a fair share of women in his life, and he liked them. They activated him, made life exciting and refreshing. The beginnings were particularly energizing, even more so with age, few things could rival that initial intimacy and validation of each other. Early sex, especially if it was intense, was as potent a drug as you could find, even more than adrenaline. It was just so difficult to keep it up.

But it was different with Cathy. She was also in love with experiencing a full life, sensing it as something beyond the everyday. He was sure he could make her happy, and that made him even happier than he already was, enthusiastic and proud of himself. And this time everything would hold up.

He really had to concentrate now on the projects. He would need some help though. The core of the project was not his idea but something that was developed and tested in another country. His value-added was to spread the concept out in his home country on the back of his existing business. But he wanted to make a lot more out of it. And it all had to comply with local laws and getting the relevant authorisation. He hated this part, not only was it boring, but you could not trust all these so-called authorities. Instead of providing safety and protection, all they did was charge you taxes. He preferred his own laws.

He would drive out to the nearby mountains, barely fifty kilometres beyond the city limits, and do some climbing until late afternoon. That was a good spot to think about the projects. He would then meet up with Cathy for a romantic dinner. Tomorrow he would have to sit down with his project manager to go over the different options.

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number. And he did, he opened and tried them all, but did not finish them. In the end, he was not sure if they were orange or lemon, perhaps even a coke might have slipped through.

I Comply

Sara did not care what the unit thought of her, she had a responsibility and she would carry it out. She was a captain assigned to the 2nd Brigade Combat Team of a specialised mountain division, and they were currently deployed at a remote combat outpost in the mountains. There were few women leading combat units in the army and she was proud to be one of them. But pride was beside the point, getting the job done, fulfilling her duty as she was supposed to was the goal.

She felt the current emergency was ambiguous and she hated few things more than ambivalent situations. And she had to call the situation on her own, as always, the story of her life. When she joined the army, she thought it would be different, she would finally find order, a reliable authority and clear instructions. But she was the authority out here, in the middle of nowhere, and no one to turn to.

She imagined what the Major would have advised her to do in this situation. The Major was someone she could always rely on. She treasured his knowledge, his leadership and his decision making. He was an inspiration throughout her military academy life. He made her feel safe, except for that one time, when he tried to go a step too far. It was all very confusing, so much so that she tolerated the situation for a very short while. She knew he must have been drunk, as her father must have been that one time too.

The incoming mortar fire was getting more accurate but there wasn't much they could do about it she thought. The enemy had deployed their mortars somewhere on the other side of the ridge, out of sight. It was getting dark and air support was out of the question. There was no protocol to follow in a situation like this, and all the options she could think of looked terribly risky.

"Captain, they are going to fucking smoke us if we don't do something about it," shouted lieutenant Justin.

"Stand to lieutenant and wait for your orders," she shouted back angrily.

"Sir, in a few minutes they will have figured our grid out."

"If they do not run out of shells before, the spotters will locate their position. They must have spotters themselves. We must be able to track them down and to put the snipers on them. Don't panic lieutenant."

"They haven't for the last half hour, Sir, and it is getting dark. We need to get a scout team out now, Sir."

She was ready to take tough decisions if they were right and required, but she did not want to put her unit at risk. She allowed her men to conduct tough interrogations, like when they were investigating sergeant Steven's terrible death. Things got out of hand that time, sometimes they did when you were pursuing the right objectives. And she did not weasel out during interrogations, although she did not supervise the one that lieutenant Justin and some of his men carried out on the two girls, where their mother ended up shot. She could not be everywhere and she always suspected the lieutenant. And she was now sceptical of his idea of sending out a scout team. What was behind his thinking? Was he trying to make her fail, expose her leadership to her superiors?

"Sir, shall I tell the scout team to gear up? They are pinning us down." She could hear the irritating words of the lieutenant in the background.

“Ok, but I will hold you responsible for any casualties. And I want you to go with them, understood?”

“Sir, they already left.”

“When this is over I will report your insubordination, lieutenant.” She could hear their own mortar team starting to return fire guided by the gridlines provided by the scout team.

She was listening to a Bruce Springsteen song on her smartphone, while she remembered, as a girl, during a birthday party mum had forbidden her to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which she preferred. She then promised the world she would drink nine in a row when she grew up, ten was a difficult number. She doubted what to do, what was the right thing to do? She was confused, after all mum had forbidden it, and she must have had her reasons, although she never explained them. On the other hand, she had to make sure they would not expire. She felt her rage building up. She wanted to smash them all, but that was not the right thing to do, she knew. What should she do?

...Some girls they want a handsome Dan
Or some good-lookin' Joe, on their arm
Some girls like a sweet-talkin' Romeo
Well 'round here baby
I learned you get what you can get
So if you're rough enough for love
Honey I'm tougher than the rest...

That night the enemy almost overran their position and she was proud of her leadership. She found immense power where she had many times before, in rage, the sweet captain turned wild, like a wounded buffalo she fired her assault carbine to the last clip, and lobbed grenade after grenade before drawing her handgun and continuing to shoot, braced for everything and nothing.

She felt very tired, as she often did, life was full of enemies who wanted to overrun her. Maybe it was wiser not to report the lieutenant. She had re-established her authority and it was debatable, from a strictly tactical point of view, if the decision to send out the scout team was the right one. She tried to remember what the infantry manual said on comparable situations. How would the Major have acted?

I Hate,

“I hate having to wait to complete this ordinary procedure. I had an appointment, which seems to be of no relevance to you. Do you think your time is valuable? Well, so do I about mine. Now, can you please call your manager?”

Privately Paul felt bad after having kicked up a fuss but he could not help it, and after all he had good reason for it. He despised having to run errands and planned them carefully to minimize the amount of time involved in running them. It made him mad when someone’s incompetence derailed his plans. He wasn’t just being impossible, he had other much more important matters to take care of and people seemed not to realize this, or even worse, seemed not to care. That was the problem and not that he had a volatile mood. Sometimes maybe, like everybody else. Besides, if you don’t ask you don’t get, no matter how much it may piss people off.

But he felt agitated and was not able to calm down despite his clear reasoning and motives. It was not something new, far from it, but it was confusing and even surprising when he thought about it. But lately it had gotten worse, since he met Margaret. He could feel the excitement when he thought about her, and the drive in him, big time, but also the void, the uncertainty, the fear of not getting her. But the fear came with the excitement of the challenge, and that he loved as much as he suffered it. And she was worth it, someone of another kind, the most special woman he had ever met. People would probably just call it love, but he knew better.

The problem was that they were both married, and that might be an unsolvable one, a thought that tortured him and made the longing more intense. He did not tell anyone about it, except his close pal Angel, and he wondered if that was wise. Angel was not going to let the cat out of the bag, that he knew, but Angel did not seem to understand his feelings, the depth of them, how unique they were. He even said once, then took it back, that it was all about the challenge, not about true love. He really kicked up a fuss about that one.

Paul knew he was very competitive and was equally proud about it. He cherished few things more than winning. Not only did you gain something, but you also took it away from others. He often felt life denied him of things he felt entitled to, like Margaret, and competing and winning gave him some of it back. What he also liked about competing was the lack of guilt, which regularly popped up when he longed for something. Competition made it fair to fight for his intense desires. He could expose himself without the shame that frequently overcame him when he tried to fulfil his passions, particularly if they had a sexual element to them, and there always seemed to be one.

Margaret was perhaps the first person who realized who he really was. The difficulties he endured in life, and how he fought to overcome them. She was the blessing he was waiting for. It felt like a reward from someone up there that had finally decided to give him his fair share. Mum certainly had not.

He remembered, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number.

He felt he would have to fight for his share. But despite his intense emotional state, this time he would fight off his impatience and keep a cool head. He had the

personality and the experience. He considered himself a confident and independent person. Although he was running the company his father founded, he considered himself self-made too, he had brought the company to a different and higher level, although the current difficulties did feel like a blemish to his track record.

Anyhow, he would pull the Margaret affair off. He had seen worse. If she was willing to go all the way, he would also have the courage to hold up. Her husband was a nobody who could not appreciate her and treat her accordingly. He would not be a match for him.

And what about his wife? They were very close, but that was a long time ago. She never gave him her unconditional heart, and she reminded him of his mother. She did love him but she always preferred his brother Julian, who, by the way, was a perfect asshole.

And the children? Well, yes, the children. He always provided, including some spoiling, but they always stuck to their mother. He tried hard at times but always felt he was falling short. No match for her charm. The bitch said he was not empathic and far too obstinate to reach their hearts, even authoritarian she told him more than once. It is easy to say when you do not have to work your ass off and engage all those morons at work as he had to, daily.

Anyhow, that was that, and now he had to tell his wife and the girls. "I am a freak," he thought, "a fucking monster. I destroy everything I touch, all the people I love. Where is the tough Romeo that is willing to die for love? What if I got it all wrong? Will Margaret draw back or will she go all the way?"

He did tell her about Margaret. He started smoothly, trying not to hurt her more than necessary, but she did not want to understand and she started attacking him. He held on for quite some time, but at some point, he felt ashamed of feeling some pride from her suffering. Then she started to draw her beat, where she knew it hurt, and she started lecturing him, and it really got to him. He kicked up a big fuss, only the ensuing remorse was bigger.

I Worry

James was furious, rage filling up his body and threatening to burst it. He could not remember having had that sensation before, which frightened him, and made him angrier and more desperate. He had to stop this loop or he would turn mad. He tried to regroup, this was not himself, something in the food must have got to him. No, it was not the food, it was this...this guy, his...his Maestro, how could he have done this to him? That was probably why they called him Weirdy.

James was always willing to sacrifice himself to become a better person, ready to forgo mundane pleasures to perfect his spirituality. He only once missed one of Maestro's classes because Dad was sick, otherwise he was never late. He felt he had made great progress in getting to know himself and in having a more loving attitude towards life. He still cared and worried endlessly for his family. Most people told him that it was too much, but he was all right with it, it was important to safeguard them.

He really felt he had found his way with Maestro. He even indulged in mundane pleasures that he had forbidden himself before. Some of them, well, he could only indulge on his own or with selected people. They made him feel a free man, and that was all thanks to Maestro who gave him the liberty to do so. And he allowed Maestro that privilege. He did not need anyone to know his way, he had a clear sense of what was and what was not to be done. So, why did Maestro attack him?

He said that his consciousness was purely mechanical. James laughed at first, thinking it was a joke. Maestro neither laughed nor elaborated, and that was when he started to sense his rage building up. He could have controlled it at that point, had Maestro behaved as a true leader, but he added insult to injury, and said, "let your rage guide you," before turning around and walking out. What an asshole! And I called this Maestro?

I am really to blame, I should have stopped this nonsense long ago. Why did I need to engage in this stupid consciousness crap in the first place? I have always been a well-educated person with a clear idea of what to do. Blood pressure was somewhat high and skin rashes indicated high levels of stress, according to a dermatologist, but what do they know about stress? He was just worried about his family and his job during the crisis. He did not lose his job, nor did he fall behind in any mortgage payments, but he wanted to be prepared in case something happened, and that got a bit on his nerves.

This dermatologist moron, well, his best friend from school, suggested he go to Maestro's yoga and meditation sessions. And it looked good in the beginning. He realized how unaware he was of his needs, and he engaged in different sports and cultural activities. He agreed a precise weekly planning with his wife to respect each other's space and to not neglect their duties. And he would still go with the bloody dermatologist on Sundays to the game.

He used to go straight back home after the game, but as of late, on the back of some self-caring principles learned at Maestro's, he yielded to some of the other guys' partying practices after the game. And it felt good, so relaxing that his wife encouraged him, despite not really knowing what was going on there. Was it all wrong? Should he go back to...to where? What did it mean "let your rage guide you"?

He remembered, as a boy, during a birthday party mum had forbidden him to drink a Fanta, the orange version, which tasted like the lemon one but which he

preferred. He then promised the world he would drink nine in a row when he grew up, ten was a difficult number.

What would happen if he drunk nine Fantas? It was certainly not right, that he knew, but would they quench his rage? The right thing to do was to store them home and drink them in an orderly fashion, leaving some in case they were needed in the future. He would not be able to respect himself if he drunk them now, and that would make him furious. Or did not being able to drink them make him furious? He realized that what really made him furious was to not be able to accept that he wanted a Fanta as much as he wanted it when mum forbid him to have one, regardless of whether he drunk it or not.

He could feel his rage settling down, and he could also perceive how anxiety was setting in. A sensation of loneliness, of nothingness and impotence gradually overcame him, like a blue sky growing overcast. A blue sky that never sees the warming sun.

He anxiously pulled out his mobile and dialled Maestro's number. There was no reply. He shuffled his way to a bar and dropped himself on a stool by the counter. The music was playing from two speakers above him, and he became aware of his heavy breathing.

“..We the great and small
Stand on a star
And blaze a trail of desire
Through the dark'ning dawn...”

“What would you like to drink, sir?” asked the waiter.

“Fanta.”

“Lemon or orange?” He stared at the waiter in amazement.

“Orange, what else?”

“Ice and lemon?” demanded the waiter shrugging his shoulders.

“Straight from the bottle.”

“They only come in cans. I must have been a child the last time I saw them come in a bottle,” replied the waiter.

“...Let the river run
Let all the dreamers
Wake the nation
Come, the New Jerusalem.”

PART THREE

I Travel

My trade is to travel. It requires a destination and a bearing. That's the rule. Otherwise it would just be roaming, and that's not real. It is a man's job. Other warm-blooded animals don't travel, the best migrate. For the rest they wander, with intention.

But I'm a traveller.

The first, and last trip, I could not carry out. Though how I wished I had! It had everything, magic, adventure, love and guaranteed success. But I had to settle for a scavenger hunt that always returned me back to the start. And it wasn't for want of trying that I had to swap paradise for groundhog-day.

Searching for a destination is always the starting point. My original one was to feel loved by my Mum and Dad. It would necessitate different bearings, but would achieve the same goal; to draw attention. For one it required achieving things, while the others the opposite. The means of travel was also binomial, behave or misbehave.

I chose to achieve many things and to behave very well. And I succeeded! I felt highs, but not peace. So, I achieved more and more things and I behaved even better.

Yet, life, which is very unjust, rewarded me with a whack. So, I changed course and jumped into the non-achievers or victims boat. I felt it was only right if life had treated me so unfairly. And at this I performed to my very high standard, as usual.

One day, someone gave me a board to cling onto to save me from drowning and I changed destination and bearing. During that trip, I understood that I was my own board. I changed my destination because the original one had been achieved with my birth.

My current trip doesn't have a destination or a bearing, at best small migrations. Roaming with my pride I sometimes touch on that craved for peace, and I get high.

Therefore, I Am

Grandpa died and in doing so left me out in the cold forever. He left me a farewell letter:

Is the night the beginning or the end? That night was long, very long, because being the first, it is the only one and there is no notion of time.

The stars and the moon were there, as always, but I couldn't see them because it was overcast. Invariably, the day broke but the fog concealed the landscape, yet it was much brighter than at night.

The fog slowly cleared, as it always does when I wait long enough and I surrender to the sun I can't see. The landscape gradually took shape from the blurred blot, a shocking and diverse one in which apprehension gives way to peace when I let myself flow and trust. Cliffs with beautiful and treacherous snow on their peaks mutate into forests and rivers as they lose height, pride and vanity. They give way to a more lush and diverse life; but only after the grey skies unleash their wrath threatening to bring back the night.

Not now, not yet, but eventually, and until then the day will be ever clearer while it fades into the night and I will wonder, as always, are there stars, if I can't see them?

THE WHOLE PICTURE

