

L.

"You speak English?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Fifty for a fuck, thirty for sucking."

"How much for talking?"

You grin, manifesting your contempt at the very idea of talking with a customer.

"Same price. Fifty for fifteen minutes."

I'm standing on the sidewalk. You open the door to negotiate, and I can take a better look at you now. Black hair, little nose, beauty spot on the left cheek. You're the one I am looking for. No shade of doubt. My baby.

"You'd rather suck my dick than talk with me, huh?!"

You laugh at that. A good sign, a sign that you'll respond. I smile back at you. The girls in the street are semi-naked, but my babe wears a pair of trousers whose metallic tint glows in the night. My baby has style, always had.

"Where are you from?"

"Czechoslovakia."

"Good. I think I'll buy some of your precious time."

You lock the door behind me and guide me in. I follow you through a maze of corridors and staircases. It is a sex building comprised of several houses. Every inch of it has been used in order to cram as many rooms as possible. A strong smell of sperm and cheap deodorants invade the hallways.

You bring me to a room on the second or third floor. The room is small. There is a bed next to the right wall, and a closet to the left. I take off my jacket, and put it on the bedside. I sit next to it, close to the door. There are no windows. I can almost reach the wall in front of me with the brace of my arm. You have to hop over to reach the end of the bed. You sit on the mattress, leaning your back against the outer corner.

"Do you mind if I turn off the lights?"

Did you understand? I reach out for the switch and turn the lights off. You mumble something in Czech, then you go silent. Our eyes soon grow accustomed to the dimness of the room. There is a faint radiance of neon lights permeating through the slits of the door. On the wall, our shadows are big and dark. Bigger and darker than our real selves.

I need to focus. I close my eyes, begging for silence. But there is no silence. I can hear belts being undone, zippers flying open, pants dropping, penises erecting, I swear I can hear the noiseless penetrations. There are moans and laughs and cries, and then there is the crumpling of bank-notes and the chinking of small money on tea saucers. Finally it is silent. The quietness I was craving for. There is a holiness about it. I want it to enfold us and trap us within, forever and ever. But I know this is not possible. So I open my eyes again and start talking.

You are my baby and you died a while ago. You won't remember, because it was me who killed you. For the next quarter of an hour, I will tell you our story. You won't believe a word of what I'll say. You'll think I'm nuts, and you may even rejoice in anticipation of how and what you're going to tell your hooker friends. After a while, you won't even listen to me, busy with the mental structuring of your anecdote. But it won't matter, because a millisecond before my time will run out, something will happen in your mind, something so fierce and swaying that your life will take a new turn. You will understand my story, understand that it is yours as well. You will be impatient to hear the rest. Your cold heart will swell with the warmth of love and through me, you will embrace humankind. I will continue to talk uninterrupted until the utterance of the last word of our story. At that moment, a new and reconciled woman will have taken possession of your body. You'll be grateful to me and I'll be grateful to you, and we'll celebrate our renewed union.

I'll start with a note you wrote on May first, 1990. You taped it to the entrance of our flat to ensure I wouldn't miss it when I returned. Here's what you wrote.

"I finished all the chocolate. Please don't be mad at me. I'll bring some more when I get back. Promise. Love. L."

Now, you aren't from Czechoslovakia. You were born in Marseilles, France, in 1964. In 1974, your family moved to Brussels. You were having trouble to adapt. Kids were laughing at your southern accent, but you soon picked up the proper pronunciation. You made friends and you got good grades at school. Your family was privileged, you always got what you needed and more. In 1985 you went to the Art academy. The next three years you studied drawing. We met in 1986 and soon fell madly in love with each

other. In 1988, my job brought me to Amsterdam. A year later, I found a place and I proposed you join and live with me.

You were enthusiastic about that prospect. You brought a truckload of stuff and moved in. The flat was tiny, but well located: close to the centre, in a nice neighborhood.

Our fourth year together passed like a breeze. Amsterdam held its promises. The city was romantic and full of mysteries. There was water everywhere, bringing a breath of the ocean along the streets bordering the canals. The wind was forceful, but it was also revitalizing. It was carving lines in our faces. We liked them better now.

Things were just fine in Waterland till I noticed that they were not. Later, I would meditate on signs that I had let slip away. Omens that, at the time, I did not register. I was busy with my work and I'd come home late. I'd fall asleep within minutes, too exhausted to pay attention to you. It may sound strange to you now, but that life suited me.

I cheated on you in the course of a trip to Barcelona, during the winter of 1990. You remember my Spanish friend, don't you? That guy you used to call Mr. Government. Anyway, when I came he had little time for me. He explained to me that he was living a fiery love affair, and left me the keys to his studio. I called a girl that I had met on the train, and we met in a bar. That night, she came over and we fucked madly until dawn. I'm not sure why I confessed it to you, but I did. Your notes in the entrance multiplied and became more delirious. Here's a sample:

"I'm sick  
my heart is aching  
you're never there when I need you  
You're killing yourself in me, you're killing my friend, my family  
you were home to me  
I'm homeless now  
my accomplice, a rat  
all lost, it hurts  
L."

And here's another one:

"Where are the pills that erase memory?  
L."

Before I left for Barcelona, you handed me a letter. You said I'd have plenty of time to read it during the trip. But in the train, I was sitting with that girl and forgot all about the letter. Anyway, soon after my return, you became seriously ill. Your appetite vanished and your health declined. Your family brought you back to Brussels and put you in a clinic. According to them, I was the source of all evil. Visits were denied me. Eventually, you regained some strength and moved to an apartment in Brussels. The place belonged to your father, but I'd sneak in secretly and regularly until January 27th, 1991, the night when I put an end to your sufferings.

After I killed you, I decided to get away with it. I never believed in the justice of men. It was not hard to crack the safe in your apartment: the code consisted of the digits of your birthday. I picked up a substantial amount of cash and mentally thanked your family. With the money, I could have fled to many exotic locations, but I hated the idea of a self-imposed exile. During two days, I stayed in the apartment next to your corpse, thinking of a solution. Your mother started looking for you, leaving worried messages on the answering machine. Time was pressing. Finally I called Mr. Government and told him what had happened. He said he knew someone who might help me and gave me a telephone number. The country code was 49. Germany. I called. Introduced himself as Mr. Recker. We agreed to meet in Frankfurt.

What? No, I'm not finished. I know a quarter of an hour has passed. Yeah, and? Money? Ok, I understand. I'll pay the price, but please don't interrupt me anymore. You're jeopardizing the process with these worldly worries of yours. Agreed? Now let me proceed with rest of our story.

It was cold in the airport. I bought a sweater in a duty free shop. I let people pass by me, walking giant steps on the moving platform. I watched the jungle of planes from a distance, wings and trunks like so many carcasses in an elephant cemetery. I took a cab and checked into a nearby hotel. The room was bright and clear. There was a plate with chocolates on a table near the bed. I checked the bathroom. The towels were properly folded, displaying the logo of the hotel. A strong smell of disinfectant, not dissimilar to the one I'm inhaling right now. Then I took a nap.

I woke up at 19:00, dazed and hungry. I went down to the dining room. Most tables were empty. I sat at a table near the window. I could see the

street from above: cars and people. There was a man eating by himself, and there was a couple, sitting close to each other, a few tables away. I looked at the man, then at the couple, then at the man again. It could have been either of them. I waited for a sign.

The man who sat by himself let his napkin drop. He didn't reach for it. I approached him. He invited me to sit.

"Mr. Recker?"

He nodded swiftly, then asked, "have you brought with you what I asked?"

I gave him an envelope which he opened promptly, verified its content, and put away in his jacket. It contained the keys of your apartment and half of the money I had collected from the safe. He smiled approvingly. He wore a blue suit, a dark green tie on a blue shirt, bluer than the suit. His hair was white. A healthy man in his early fifties.

I followed him out, into the city. He was walking fast. I wished I had time to scan and memorize landmarks, so as to be able to orientate myself in case of necessity, but he was too quick. He stopped in front of a storehouse. Inside, we went past an atelier, into a yard, until we got to a second house in the rear. He rang twice on its doorbell. A woman opened up. She led us to a waiting room. A bottle of brandy and two glasses were disposed on a wooden table. She left us alone.

"So", he said, "when did it happen?"

"Last Monday."

"Where is she now?"

"I left her in the apartment."

"Where exactly?"

"In the bathroom."

He nodded in disapproval.

"Look", I said, "I'm not asking for your appreciation."

"I understand. It's not that bad. You'll stay here for a couple of days, I'll do the rest. In the meantime, Mrs. Recker will look after you. Don't worry about the hotel, it has been taken care of."

He left me in the waiting room. I poured myself a glass of brandy and lit a cigarette. I was nervous. I waited about a quarter of an hour, then the woman came in. Said she was Mr. Recker's wife. About forty, harmonious traits, shiny hair which she wore in a bun. Quite attractive.

"I don't know how to thank you and your husband", I said.

"Don't. It's our job", but she said it gently.

She guided me through the house, then showed me my room. Handed me freshly ironed towels. Then we went to the living room, served us tea.

"You don't have to talk if you don't want to", she said.

"Ok." I didn't want to talk. Not now. But something was bugging me.

"Is Mr. Recker flying to Brussels in person?"

"Yes. He'll be back by tomorrow evening. He's used to it."

"But what if the police get there first?"

"What difference does it make? As long as you stay with us, you'll be safe. Now why won't you relax. It's already late and tomorrow is a long day. I made an appointment for you with Dr. Kustel at ten."

"Dr. Kustel?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it's mandatory. He's carrying the evaluations. We want to maintain a certain level in Haupthof".

"Haupthof?"

"That's our residence. You'll be put there - if you pass the tests. 180 kilometers from Frankfurt. You are now at our private house. It's a temporary arrangement, but it's part of the procedure."

She accompanied me to the first floor. Before retreating, she said, "Don't worry too much about tomorrow. In twenty five years, only two candidates have failed. And I didn't need Dr. Kustel to see that they were disturbed. As for you, I can see you're a fine man. I'm quite certain you'll make it."

The room had a bed, a wall closet and two more furniture items. I opened the window so as to get rid of the smell of wood. Outside, the street was silent, offering nothing to soothe the emptiness of the night. I watched the parked cars and all these tiny black holes in the concrete houses. I had never seen that street before, yet it felt like I'd seen it a million times before.

I had almost forgotten why I was here. I had killed you three days before, but my perception of time was getting mixed up. My mental imprint of you was already subject to transformations. There was this image in my mind, haunting: a blue tongue hanging out of a mouth. It was huge, disproportionate, swollen. That image was an intruder, it didn't belong to me. It belonged to a story without a name, blended with scraped memories of old movies and pointless flashes. Junk.

I heard a crack on the ceiling. Mrs. Recker, probably. I could kill her too if I wanted. The thought of going upstairs and doing her in, surprised me. It was absurd. They were treating me like a patient, or a refugee, someone

with problems that called for solicitude, if properly rewarded, that is. Without a second thought, Mr. Recker had left his wife with a stranger who had killed his. It had nothing to do with confidence, or goodwill. He just knew the sort of person I was.

Killing Mrs. Recker was a silly idea that would prove nothing except that he was wrong after all. I tried to imagine myself in a cell. The prospect of sharing a room with people was not that dull. It could be redemptive. But then, I could always do that: hop to a police station, give myself in and rock the jailhouse rock. Instead, I decided to give the Reckers a chance.

When I undressed for sleep, a sheet of paper fell out of my trousers. It was your pre-Barcelona letter, a message from beyond.

"Brother in Love,

Yesterday I decided to write you a letter. Too many of my thoughts get lost in the vacuum of day to day life. I feel a need to trap some, and, while I can, instantiate them in ink.

In our face to face conversations, interferences distract me from the essential. Later, when I'm alone again, I feel horribly guilty. The essential is like a snake, when you think you have a grip on it, you see that all you got is dead skin. And then it comes back, unexpectedly, for instance when I ride the bus, or wait for you in the coffee shop...

In front of you, I tend to forget the meaning of words. I'm busy with the listening and the representing, translating your language into mine. My mind gives me a hard time with memories, visions, fragments of dreams, things I have to do... Enemies of the essential. But what else matters?

Man wants man. Man needs man. Man searches for man in between the legs. That quest, that hunt, is what keeps us alive. A man alone is nothing, meaningless as a star that could not reflect light. Before I met you, I felt useless, superfluous, and I was always gloomy. At the age of nineteen, I did something silly. I climbed to the roof of one of my parent's flats in Brussels. For two hours, I was sitting on the edge of that roof, preparing to throw my body into the void. But someone noticed me and called the firemen. My parents paid the bill.

Do you see now why they're so protective?

Lately, I haven't been well. It's been tough for me, everything's so new. I lost all my vantage points.

I got the results yesterday, and the doctors said they were conclusive. It's malign. Somehow I don't believe them. I'm regaining strength and confidence. I assure you. Today, I love myself, my body. I owe that in part to you. You initiated me to certain things I wasn't aware of. I want to thank you for that. My trust in you is boundless.

I'm not ashamed anymore of my desire, my animality. I long for you. I'm a she-wolf, and I want to rove with you in the prairie. But there's got to be a herd around us. Otherwise it would be meaningless. We wouldn't last long. Women between 30 and 35 are ripe for children. My female body, my female wisdom urge me to give birth to a child. I want you to know this fact and give it the attention it deserves. I don't want to put any pressure on you. I'm confident that someday, you'll feel ready.

It's summer now, and it's easy to wake up in the morning. The sun is shining, and the body stretches smoothly. Nicotine and coffee help us during the day, music and wine during the night, but I fear wintertime. Those long and dark days. How will the stove comfort us then?

L."

I had breakfast in the kitchen. Mrs. Recker came in with some papers, said it was a contract, asked me to read and sign later. Then she asked me to follow her and took me to a room in the rear, a place I hadn't visited the day before. A middle-aged man sat behind a desk. "Doctor Kustel", she said before retiring.

The doctor was a big man with a beard and spectacles.

"Please take a seat."

His voice didn't fit his looks, it was way too pitched for his size. He asked me about you and about what I had done to you. I answered his questions calmly. I told him the truth. After I had told him the facts, he asked me the reasons. The why was much harder to explain. There was no single truth. There were many of them, and each one defied the others. I told him I couldn't find a reason, that it was too early to answer that question.



Then he asked me about my health, if I was taking medication. I said no, not anything like that. After a while, he said, "as far as I'm concerned, you're fit for the residence. I'm sure you'll like it there. How could you complain? You've been fortunate enough to avoid prison. Which is not to say you'll avoid the consequences of your act. A great deal of suffering awaits you. You will have time galore to meditate on the deed you have done, and measure its devastating effect on your psyche."

When I left the doctor's office, I saw Mr. Recker in the hallway. He said that everything went smoothly in Brussels. He asked me if I had read the contract. I said that it looked fine to me. Then he asked me to pack my stuff and wait in my room for a sign.

An hour later, I sat in the back of a blue Mercedes, riding to the ultimate destination. Mr. Recker took the A4 direction Bad Hersfeld, then Eisenach. I watched the German countryside through the window. I wanted to ask Mr. Recker if he could see it cheating us, making us believe that we were cruising through it, while it really was revolving, circling around us with the placidity of a vulture. But he seemed concentrated on his driving, and I didn't say anything. We exited the highway at Herleshausen, drove through Wildeck-Obersuhl and into a forest. We had been driving an hour and a half when Mr. Recker engaged into a private property. The entrance sign read:

"Haupt Hof - Privé Clinic"  
"Willkommen"

It was an eighteenth century chateau shrouded in a big property. Dr. Kustel was waiting for us in the yard. I didn't see him leaving Frankfurt, so I wondered how he got there before us. He took me to the garden, an Italian abbey courtyard awash with floral compositions. The doctor explained to me that the property used to be a hotel. When Mr. Recker inherited it, it was derelict and close to bankruptcy. The conversion to a specialized clinic had given a new life to the place. And Dr. Kustel pointed at the ancient stucco shelters in front of us, with polished bas-relief illustrating biblical scenes, as if making a point.

I was introduced to my fellow residents in a spacious lounge with ebony panelling and a crystal chandelier hung low onto the ceiling. Twelve men were seated in four couches arranged in a square. Mr. Recker said, 'please

welcome our new guest". One by one they approached me and shook my hand. This was my first day at Haupthof. There would be many more.

Three years have passed. What? Fifteen minutes? I thought we had an agreement, you wouldn't interrupt. Be quiet. Silenzio! Or whatever it's called in Czech. What are you trying to tell me? Listen, just listen, ok? It's our story. We're almost through. Calm down. Let me tell you how I came to find you here in this tiny sex room of yours.

Like I said, Haupthof was three years of voluntary confinement in a golden prison. Life was a routine of extraordinary numbness. I slept, ate and defecated. On sunny days, I walked in the garden, on rainy ones, I stayed in the lounge or read poetry in the library. As time went by, my memories were decomposing. I felt like I was leaking from all over. I had almost forgotten you. All I remembered was a collision in the vastness of my past. A self-contained nexus, unfinished business...

Dr. Kustel was seeing each of us regularly in those purported therapy sessions. During our first encounter, he had said, "You're in good company here. All our patients have committed the same sin. They know the toll it takes on a man's life. They are going to help you stand upright and overcome the obvious obstacles. Many people kill their wives, but, as we see it, only the foolish ones surrender their fate to justice. Only the coward delegates punishment to others. Only the fainthearted needs the authority of a court to see his deed concretized. A sentence to assert the gravity of his crime. Bars to epitomize the ineluctability of his damnation.

Petty murderers.

I do not believe blindly in society, nor do I believe blindly in justice. We at Haupthof do not subscribe to any kind of ideologies, doctrines or ethics. You are here among twelve individuals with no interest in consensus. Twelve men who share nothing in common except the biographical curiosity of having killed their next of kin. Plus, admittedly, the fact that they were resourceful enough to finance their early retreat from society.

These people were not born to kill. If they are criminals, then it must be of a special kind. Victims of their own fantasies and illusions, they are foremost refugees of love. You see, women are our dearest possessions. All cultures are based on their circulation between groups. They are the ultimate gift. Ask any father. Since the dawn of times, women were traded in different sets of rules so as to ensure continuity in our existence. We depend on them. You killed one, and this is why society is after you.

Should your alleged offence be decriminalized? I cannot speak on behalf of society. I, for one, believe it is a difficult matter. But I consider it my duty to watch after your sort. And so do Mr. Recker and his wife. We put ourselves at risk so as to give people like you a decent living, a second chance.

But the rest is up to you. Your task is heavy: speculate on the hidden motivations of your deeds, invent punishment, seek salvation. As you will see, you will get a tremendous amount of support. Think how to deal with the horrendous feelings of guilt assailing you. Share your experience with others, learn from their own.

Feel free to partake in the workshops. You will find the schedule of the activities on the announcement board, near the entrance. It is updated on a weekly basis. As for me, I'll be seeing you once in a while. If you need anything, let me know. I'm at your service. Good luck."

I didn't go to the workshops, nor did I open my heart to Dr. Kustel. I had done my thinking, there was nothing to say. No use for peer support, I deemed myself indulgent enough. I had loved you for all the wrong reasons. I didn't want to betray you over and over again.

What Dr. Kustel had said was true. I found myself among twelve ghosts with very similar stories, coping with a murderous past in their own way. But, unlike he had stated, I didn't see courageous individuals who had chosen the path of redemption by their own means. True, we were eschewing the authorities, but only to secure the remnants of a supposed dignity. We were cowards, that's what. Champions of screwed love formulas. Masters in love going amiss, love that turns into hatred and murder. How could anyone be of any use to another?

We thought we felt guilty, but we were only being gloomy. Greeting each other politely in the morning; sharing our meals in an oval-shaped dining room; celebrating morbid anniversaries, not being sure if we were the actors or the subjects of our endless mourning.

We were worshippers of yellowing photographs. Twelve portraits of slaughtered women raised as so many icons. With features screening more character and liveliness than their husbands ever would. Beyond the postures, one could see the unpreparedness, the fragility and the tenderness. And the men, hysterical, whining about these things, the things they have done - things that cannot be reversed, nor repaired.

Expectably, during these three years, the stories came, one by one. At the time I wished them to be similar to ours, at least remotely relevant. But they left me puzzled. Twelve stories, different, but the same. Twelve crooked ways leading to an ultimate mess.

Some had loved their women, and some had hated them. Some had killed them fast, and some had killed them slow. And then, there were those who genuinely felt remorse, and those who were pretending.

Haupthof was forever. Living in the past, we all had our fetishes. Some rooms were stacked with souvenirs and personal belongings of the late wife, some others, like mine, deprived from trophies but haunted by thwarted visions and spectral memories...

We had rampaged magical continents, and then studied our booty. We tried to solve the riddles of the pillaged artifacts, but they were just staring back at us with empty orbs, saying nothing at all. Sometimes, I had the premonition that time would come to pursue their promises, make their hidden prophecies come true... But in the meantime we all were equally dying from slow decay in a luxurious setting indeed. With little to hold on to.

Every now and then, prostitutes were brought to Haupthof so as to distract us from our solitude. Last December, you were here, but at the time I didn't know it was you. After dinner, we sat in the lounge. Beer and cocktails flowing incessantly, the atmosphere heating up, urging for sex.

But I wasn't in the mood for sex, and I just sat there, drinking. You were in the couch opposite, flirting with the doctor. Then I noticed the spot on your left cheek. It was hidden by make-up, but it slowly emerged after some kissing and a cocktail spill. L. had a beauty spot at the same place. I couldn't divert my stare from it, I was enthralled.

Just above the couch where you and the doctor were sitting, an African mask was displayed. Some kind of trophy. It was an inverted face. The cheeks were hollow, and the mouth was a perfect circle. I looked at it, and then at you, and I felt something I couldn't put in words.

I went to bed, leaving you and Dr. Kustel and my fellow mourners to the joys of the flesh. I didn't sleep that night though. I had had a revelation, and I didn't know how to interpret it.

It took some time before I found the answer, but I soon reckoned that hope was stirring in me again. At last, it felt good to be alive. I was dreaming of faces now. Every night, endless faces blending one into another.

The sequence would start invariably with you as L., gradually morphing into the face of the hooker, the last image being always that hollow African mask.

I knew there was something to unravel, but what? how? The enlightenment came yesterday, in the library, while I was reading the obscure verses of one L. Kolway.

"And your eternal face;  
resurgent with history to come."

I sneaked out from the estate and hitchhiked to Frankfurt. I knew where to go. I cruised through the red light district and here I am. With a proposal. I want you to change mask again. Invert it. Your hooker's make-up is a masquerade, as hollow as the African mask that hung above you that night back in Haupthof. The spot that you wanted to hide was unveiled after all. Maybe you didn't notice, maybe you didn't care, but it was a sign. Masks are not what they represent, but what they transform. And you are a professional transformer, aren't you?

Since that late December night, you've inhabited my dreams. I need you. I have money left. We could start a new life. The hooker that you were guided me to this room with a mercantile strategy in mind, but when we'll leave this room behind, you'll be unsullied. Pure as a newborn, your spirit will raise and roam free. You'll be my muse, and I'll be yours.

"So? Do you accept my proposal?"

You look at me lengthily, in silence, and I distinguish moisture in your eyes. You are crying of emotion! I grab your hand and we take the way out. It is already dawn. Two guys are posted on the sidewalk by the entrance of the building. You address them in Czech. You want to share your joy, tell them all about the transformation, the new life opening up... As they are approaching me - I assume for shaking hands in congratulation - I feel a heavy blow against my head. I fall to the ground, and watch them stomping me in the ribs. They kick hard and you join them, stabbing my face with your stiletto shoes. When will this end? But then everything goes black.

I come to my senses on the other side of town. I hit the concrete and I must have been lying there unconscious, but how long I don't know. I was covered with bruises and one eye wouldn't open. I limp to the A4, my body aching, and start walking on the security lane, direction Eisenach.

In this early morning, cars are speeding by under a clouded sky. I watch them with my good eye. A weird sight: with each car the sensation of an imminent collision with the oncoming traffic. Inside my pain, there is something like a roar building up. I walk faster - my left leg lagging behind - chasing after my future through cars and clouds and clashes... my future, staring at me from the horizon with an eye too many.