

50 shades of dating

Salud, dinero y amor

Title of the original version: *50 tinten Tinder*

Copyright: © 2024 Chee Webb - Greet Embrechts

Bookmundo

ISBN: 9789403745466

NUR: 302

English translation: Chee Webb

Revision English translation: Patricia Smith

Cover and internal design: © Chee Webb

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Salud, dinero y amor



CHEE WEBB

Trilogie

50 shades of dating - 1

Salud, dinero y amor

50 shades of dating - 2

Sol y sombra

50 shades of dating - 3

El número 50

For George

Me gustaría pasar el resto de mis días con alguien que no me necesite para nada, pero que me quiera para todo.

I would love to spend the rest of my days with someone who needs me for nothing, but loves me for everything.

- Mario Benedetti

The Foreplay	9
Speedy Gonzales	14
The Jack of Hearts	20
The Good Lover	59
The Adulterer	64
The Border Crosser	67
The Chainsaw Man	76
The Sergeant	78
The Facebooker	86
The Cormorant	89
Luka Bloom	164
The Engineer	169
Mister Tango	174
Prince Philip	177
The Sailor	180
The Model	184
The Romantic Soul	193
The Narcissist and other Lunatics	211
The Dancer	215
The Ceramist	232
David Bowie	278
Robert Redford	325
The Greengrocer	329
The Stalker	342
Tom Cruise	346
Antonio Banderas	357

She stared through the window at the rain. Rainy, that's how she felt, inside and out. She wept. Through her tears she saw her diary lying open on the garden table, the pen on top of it. She had been writing, that morning, she had completely forgotten it. She had to rescue the notebook from the rain, save what could be saved, but she couldn't move. Dazed, she watched the thick drops fall heavily and inevitably onto the pages. The words would fade, as would the memories. The sweet, bitter, heavenly, painful, rainy memories. She never wanted to forget them.

The Foreplay

‘Tinder? Isn’t that for sex?’ Emma looked at her significantly. Julia saw the disapproving look in her friend’s eyes and felt embarrassed. And wondered if it was true. Emma was always right, she knew. She was very wise, keeping up with current events, even though she no longer participated in them. Julia already regretted bringing it up.

‘I know couples who found each other like this and are still together,’ she said apologetically.

‘Julia, whatever you decide to do, promise me you’ll always be careful.’

‘Rest assured,’ she replied, ‘I’m not searching. I’m still enjoying my freedom too much.’

She had briefly considered it because of her young colleague in the bookshop. He had a new girlfriend every so often, Julia had noticed, they came from all over the country. She had found it rather contrived. Actually, she would never dare to use Tinder.

Tell me who you walk with and I will tell you who you are, Julia read during her break in a Belgian magazine for readers. It was a saying by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, the author of *Don Quixote*. Who was she walking with, she wondered, as she placed the magazine back on the rack. She needed new friends, she realised, interesting, adventurous ones. Travellers, artists. She needed new places.

Julia booked a hotel by the sea. Ostend of course, the queen of the coastal resorts. She wasn’t quite sure why the city charmed her so much. It felt a bit like faded glory, the old, majestic buildings, the decaying galleries, the almost extinct bar district. Yet she loved it, the colours of the city by the sea, the raw side, the friendly people.

She took a walk along the promenade. It was January, the wind blew cold in her face. She pulled her green, woollen hat deep over her ears. Enraptured, she inhaled the salty sea air. She was forty. Forty and single. She was free.

After years of doubts and arguments the divorce was a fact, finally. Her marriage had been a failure, a mistake whose consequences she had

underestimated. Her son was eighteen and had a room in Ghent where he was studying computer science. Her new life could begin. She felt like celebrating. But how? With whom? Jan, her ex, had been away from home a lot. Most people had a romanticised idea of a pilot's life, she knew, but it was duller than it seemed. The only adventurous part of their relationship had been the beginning.

Julia had given up her studies. She had chosen social studies, but internships during her final year had made her realise she had made a bad choice. She found it difficult to empathise with other people's behaviour or feelings, she lacked the compassion it required. She had applied for a job that seemed more interesting to her: a saleswoman in a bookshop. To her surprise, she got the job. They asked her to start the following month. She booked a trip to Egypt, she wanted to enjoy her free time before starting her working career.

On the day of her return severe weather had been announced. A hurricane was expected to move along the coast. As a precaution the plane was grounded. At the hotel bar that evening she had started talking to the pilot. He looked like Patrick Riguelle, she thought, the Belgian singer she had always had a fondness for. Later he was standing at the door of her hotel room with a chilled bottle of champagne. She could hardly refuse, she felt. After all, she had to fly back with him.

Looking back she had no regrets. Jan turned out to be a sweet, decent man who valued her and had never for a moment doubted her or aroused suspicion. She was good at keeping things quiet. Besides, he earned a good salary, and later turned out to be a devoted father to their son.

As usually happens when you choose a partner for the wrong reasons, the relationship soon came to fizzle out. After far too long an impasse, much doubt and hesitation, she had finally dared to take the plunge. Jan was hurt and angry at first, but eventually he had agreed to a divorce and let her go. Once again he did not put any obstacle in her way. Their son, Tony, wasn't surprised. He would henceforth divide weekends between the two parents. Julia hoped she had made the right choice and would not regret her decision.

A little uncertain, she looked around. In the distance, Arne Quinze's huge red cubes lit up in the late evening sun. *Rock Strangers*, the artwork that had caused a stir in the city. Some local residents had asked in court for

the removal of the work but the request had not been granted. Fortunately, Julia thought; it was for the good of Ostend. As far as she was concerned, more art should appear in the streets.

At the Sailors' Square she turned back. She remembered a local pub, the Zeegeuzen, not far from the dyke. Years ago she had strolled in there by chance with Jan during a pub crawl and they had met the owners who, like themselves, were sailors. Nicole recognised her immediately.

'Are you alone?' she asked.

'My sailing career is over,' Julia said, a little melancholic. Nicole looked at her intently and knew enough.

'With us, there is always a place free on board. We don't have many holidays so we sail day and night to get to our destination as quickly as possible. Boarders we can always use. Our next trip is to the Scilly Isles southwest of England.'

Julia thanked Nicole and said she would think about it. Perhaps there were indeed other options. Maybe she had been floating in the same water for too long. She drank the local beer, a Zeegeuze, and had a chat with the regulars at the bar, although she had a bit of trouble with their West Flemish dialect. Then she made her way to the Lafayette music bar on the Langestraat, which had been a famous entertainment street in the past.

At the bar she ordered a beer. It was still early, there were only a few people. The disc jockey on duty came in and winked at her, she hadn't realised she was sitting right in front of the disco bar. He immediately launched into *Sexual Healing*, the hit from the album Marvin Gaye had written while staying in Ostend, Julia had once read. And also, that he loved rain and wind and the sincerity of the North Sea. A huge picture of the singer adorned the wall, proud as they were of this colourful figure, the Ostend people. Julia felt a mixture of excitement and freedom.

'*Sexual healing is good for me*,' she sang along. Whether sex healed she did not know. But what she did know was that she was ready for it. It had been so long since she had felt loving arms around her.

The place began to fill up. Every now and then, someone would come and have a chat with her. Man, woman, young, old, everyone was convivial and friendly. Every time her glass was empty, the waiter put a new beer in front of her. The pub owner, whom she recognised from past visits to the establishment, came and sat next to her. Perhaps he was the generous donor. She didn't know and she didn't care. She felt invincible, that night.

The DJ was rocking the house. The music was infectious, left and right of her people started dancing. Suddenly someone took her hand, pulled her off the bar stool and swayed her around to the music. Smoothly Julia let herself be guided by this tall, blonde thirty-something, she estimated. A little dizzy she took a seat back on her barstool.

‘That guy over there fancies you,’ the café owner said in her ear. She thought she heard something of disappointment in his voice. By ‘that guy over there’ he meant the dancer, and indeed, the guy continued to stare at her somewhat shyly from his seat at the bar. She smiled encouragingly at him. He approached her and introduced himself as Marc. He had a pleasant voice.

They danced all night, passionately, sensually. He showed her every corner of the café. He stroked his fingers through her hair. They kissed. They were heavenly kisses. Later, it was quite natural that she allowed herself to be taken to his flat in Bredene.

‘Would you like a drink?’ he asked.

‘Do you have wine?’

‘Name it,’ he said, ‘white, red or rosé?’

He was prepared for anything. Probably she was not the first one here, she concluded. He opened a bottle of rosé and poured a glass. She sipped at her glass and pulled a dirty face.

‘Too sweet? I’m sorry, I never actually drink wine, I don’t know much about it. Would you like something else?’

‘You?’

They made love. It was very spontaneous, without words. Julia enjoyed it.

Marc was from Antwerp, just like her, he told her afterwards. He had a flat here because he often did business on the coast. He was married.

It didn’t matter at that moment. Julia felt liberated. The sun had started shining through the clouds again, even though it was night. Marc took her back to her hotel. One last kiss. No exchange of details or phone numbers, it did not occur to her.

‘Sorry for the rosé,’ he called after her as she got out. She smiled and waved.

She didn’t feel like going to bed. With a blanket she settled on the sofa in front of the window. The sea sparkled in the glowing morning light. The

first seagulls flew screaming along the balustrade of her balcony. A lone shrimp boat headed towards the harbour.

Constantly, Julia let the scene rewind in her mind, reliving the night over and over again. The rest of the day she seemed intoxicated, a smile playing around her lips. She couldn't find her hat anywhere, maybe it was still in his car.

'What's his name?' Emma asked when Julia was back home.

'Marc.'

'That's prettier than Jan.'

Julia laughed.

'Was he handsome?'

'Handsome I wouldn't really call him. He was tall, blond and well-dressed.'

'Well-dressed? That's important. And the rest?'

'Just a wild night.' Julia's face spoke volumes.

'Life can be beautiful,' her friend sighed.

Emma was ill. For years, a stubborn cancer had held her in its grip. In all likelihood she would never hold a man in her arms again herself. Yet she could very well see the sun shining in other people's eyes.

'That's right, Emma. And now I am sure I have made the right decision with Jan, and I can put this chapter in my life behind me. Marc has done me a favour, my holiday lover. I will be eternally grateful to him, even if I never see him again.'

She had seen him again, her sympathetic younger lover. Every time she went on holiday to Ostend she managed to find him in the Lafayette. To dance, to feel young, to feel beautiful.

'Are you coming with me?' he asked, as they left the bar in the early morning.

'No, I'm going on foot to my hotel.' She was determined.

'Why? We had a good time together, didn't we?'

'Yes, it was good. It was exactly as it should be. For once.'

Then he walked her to her hotel and they kissed at the door in farewell. Sweet, divine, married Marc.

Speedy Gonzales

After the Ostend incident Julia was in a strange, blissful stupor for weeks. She wanted to hold on to that warm feeling. She was aware that it would fade, it was only a matter of time. How could she avoid it? Seeing Marc again was not an option. She had to find another way to get some joy back into her life.

When she was eighteen, she had often gone out alone. She had been a wanderer. She went where fate took her, or the car driver who gave her a lift. Now she was no longer that young and carefree. Most of her contemporaries were at home with their families. Occasionally she could tempt a friend to go out for a meal together or taste a new Belgian beer, but mostly she was on her own. There was plenty of choice in Antwerp, yet she didn't really have a favourite pub. She sometimes sat on the patio of a café on the cosy Ossenmarkt which was near the idyllic beguinage where, miraculously, she had managed to rent a little house. But to sit alone in the pub feeling sorry for herself she had no need.

It was time to seek other horizons, she decided. A solo trip. In Spain the sun was shining, that's what she needed. Awakening after a far too long hibernation. February was a calm period in the business where she worked, a bookstore in a large shopping centre. She had worked a lot of extra days in December and decided to take her overtime.

Flights to Málaga were very cheap, she noticed. Would she dare? Yes, she nodded briskly, it was now or never, it was time to deal with her past. Through Airbnb she booked a room for two days, after that she would plan further. Meanwhile she started practising Spanish daily through the Duolingo app. Now her mind was made up, she was getting more and more excited.

'Of all places you choose Málaga?' Emma looked at her meaningfully. Julia blushed.

'It was the cheapest flight to the sun I could find,' she said as airily as possible. 'And besides, my plan is to travel around Andalusia, I'm only staying in Málaga for two days.'

'Two days may be enough,' Emma winked.

Julia did not elaborate. She decided to let the subject rest. They had always done that so far, as if it were an unspoken agreement. A little troubled she walked home that evening. She realised that she knew, Emma, that she had known it all along, but had respected Julia's wish to keep it quiet. She had not confronted her about it so as not to embarrass her, Julia supposed. For that she was immeasurably grateful to her friend.

The sliding doors of Málaga airport opened, the sun and palm trees seemed to smile at her. It was like coming home for Julia. Excited, she took the metro to the city. Using the GPS on her mobile phone, she effortlessly found the apartment building, where her room was situated on the eighth floor. It was near the big María Zambrano bus and train station. The huge station with its accompanying shopping centre was named after a philosopher from Vélez-Málaga, she read in her travel guide. This Maria had lived in exile for years under Franco and later received several awards for her work.

The host was a funny, charming little man but the room was dark and uninviting. Teodoro and his wife walked around the antique flat like ghosts so as not to disturb the guests. Julia settled in and hurried off to explore the city. Enraptured, she wandered through Málaga's fairy-tale, marble streets. Much had changed in almost two decades. The city had taken on a modern feel. She no longer knew her way around and did not remember the names of the locations of yesteryear. Maybe they didn't even exist anymore.

How could she get to know people here? She ordered a glass of wine on a busy café patio in the Calle Granada, the well-known pedestrian street. No-one took any notice of her. No-one was alone. She returned to her dark room and was suddenly not that sure about her decision to travel alone. She could not fall asleep.

Tinder, it played through her mind, would she dare? Not in Belgium, she had decided earlier. She had no desire to commit again and enter into a steady relationship; she couldn't think of giving up her newly acquired freedom. In Spain things were different, no-one knew her here, she had nothing to lose. She encouraged herself and downloaded the app.

She was asked to create a profile: *Are you interested in men or women?* Men, of course. *Maximum distance?* She didn't know, anything was possible. She had three weeks off and nothing booked yet, just her return flight. The maximum then, one hundred miles. *Age range?* Jan had been eleven years older, that wasn't necessary, but next to a young Adonis she

would just feel old and ugly. She wanted to get to know people around her age bracket, between thirty-six and forty-six. Now she had to upload pictures and fill in a profile text. She didn't feel like revealing much personal information. She chose a saying she had recently read and that had stayed in her mind: *The only power that can free us from the weight and pain of life is love*, by Sophocles. Not to impress, more to keep superficial types at bay, she hoped. Now she could start. Swiping left was *nope* and right was *like*, that was all she had to remember.

Nervously she scrolled through the countless male faces that revealed themselves to her. What monstrosities. What had she got herself into? Occasionally there was someone among them who seemed somewhat normal. Carefully she swiped to the right. Nothing happened, phew. And again, nothing. Was this actually working? She became a little more reckless, less fussy, kept going on for a while and then switched off her mobile phone. A little disappointed she went to sleep. She had expected more from it.

In the morning Julia tiptoed to the kitchen. She found a coffee pot but no coffee. She obviously hadn't had time to go shopping yet. Off she went then. Near the train station she ordered a coffee and a *pan con tomate y aceite* at a stall, a toast with tomato pulp and olive oil. She enjoyed the bustle around the station and the mild weather.

She switched on her mobile phone. At the top of the screen, the Tinder icon flashed: *You have a new match!* Finally, the moment of truth had arrived. A little nervously she studied the profile of the man in question. Mateo, thirty-eight years old, a real adonis, a bit too good to be true. He had already sent her a message in English.

'Good morning, beautiful. Where are you?'

Now it was up to her. Onward then.

'On a café terrace at the Málaga train station.'

'Let me see your face, sweetheart.'

Wow, a man who knew his way around. She wouldn't be persuaded that easily. Besides, she had put pictures on her profile, wasn't that enough? She decided to prank him and sent a picture of a woman's head in clay that she had recently modelled at the art studio in Antwerp, where she was a member. Fortunately, he was able to laugh about it.

'You look a bit pale, are you feeling all right?'

He sent two new photos of himself, one dressed in a suit, stylish, the second with his upper body bare. He asked her to send a picture like the second one. She replied with a selfie with her sunglasses on and a cup of coffee in her hand, to which he responded: ‘You don’t show much of yourself. Aren’t you impressed by my photo?’

‘I am cautious. You look handsome but young.’

‘I’m thirty-eight, that’s not young! Do you have a sexier photo?’

Slowly it began to dawn on her where he was heading.

‘Are you that desperate, stranger?’

‘No, but you have a nice body and that makes me hot.’

This message came accompanied by a picture of himself at the beach, naked, with only a scarf around his penis. So much for her first experience on Tinder. She had learnt her first lesson.

The second match went by the name of Oscar. Communication was difficult, Julia barely spoke a word of Spanish, Oscar only spoke Spanish. She copied and pasted his sentences into the translation app and vice versa. That’s how they managed in the end to make an appointment. Through her travel guide she had found a Belgian café not far from the centre of Málaga, the Cervecería Mapamundi in the Calle Trinidad, which seemed suitable. She made sure she got there early so she wouldn’t have to search for the person who looked like the Tinder pictures. That seemed more comfortable to her.

The café was virtually deserted, the café owner as Spanish as could be. The only Belgian things about the place were the beers on the menu, but she hadn’t exactly come to Spain for that. She took a seat on the terrace and ordered a Verdejo, a dry white wine from the region. Suddenly she became a little nervous. She didn’t know what to expect.

Oscar came around the corner lively and with a quick stride. She recognised him at once, though he seemed a bit more padded than in the photo.

‘Julia?’

In Spanish her name sounded like *Houlya*. It felt strange to hear it again, after such a long time. She nodded and stood up. He gave her two kisses on the cheeks, as is customary in Spain, and went to order something inside at the bar. Smiling broadly he took a seat next to her. He asked a question in Spanish and appeared disappointed that she didn’t understand him, even though she had warned him that she didn’t speak the language

and translated everything via Google. He spoke a sentence into his mobile and let her hear the English translation. He asked her to reply in English so he could listen to the Spanish version. That way, even if it wasn't perfect, they could have some kind of conversation. He had a nice, deep voice.

'How many dates have you had?' Oscar asked curiously.

'You're the first,' she confessed. He was honoured, and gloated, and immediately put a hand on her knee. She pulled her leg away, to which he responded a little indignantly: 'You do know what Tinder stands for, don't you?'

'Are you just looking for sex?'

He was startled by her direct question and stammered some words unintelligible to her. He stood up and walked inside to pay.

'I have to leave,' he said when he came out of the bar.

Julia stood up to say goodbye. He grabbed her and tried to kiss her on the mouth. She was bewildered and fended him off. He left. Dazed, she was left behind. Did it all happen so fast here? Was it because of Tinder or the Spaniards?

Oscar had only paid for his own coffee, she noticed when she asked for the bill. Not even an exception for a drink for his date. A little disappointed she walked through the city. In her head she hummed an Eric Clapton song that she now found quite appropriate: *Walkin' Blues. People tell me walking blues ain't bad, worst old feeling I most ever had.*

Without really knowing where to go, she wandered through the picturesque streets of Málaga. On the Calle Santa María she passed a small bar. The large open door, faint light and moody music seemed to invite her in. Here and there couples sat at a long, narrow bar. Julia took a seat on a bar stool and ordered a *vino tinto. Rode wijn, rode wijn, kom laat ons vrolijk zijn.* She quoted from a song of Bram Vermeulen, a Belgian singer who died far too early. *Red wine, red wine, come let us be merry.*

'Rioja or Ribera del Duero?' the young waiter asked in English. Did it perhaps show on her face that she didn't speak Spanish?

'What do you suggest?' she asked, happy to have a conversation partner.

'Well, they are two nice Spanish wines but very different in taste. I suggest you try them both.' He placed a glass of Rioja in front of her.

He introduced himself as Davud from Israel, he had moved to Málaga a few months ago to work and save some money. He shared a small flat with a fellow *camarero*, a waiter, he clarified. Julia enjoyed the atmosphere,

watching Davud's activities. He not only provided drinks but also served all kinds of tapas displayed on the counter under glass. Skillfully he sliced wafer-thin slices of a huge, smoked ham that stood in a wooden holder behind the bar.

'*Pata negra,*' he clarified, 'the best the south has to offer.' He let her taste a slice. She couldn't help but agree. She paid and promised him that she would return the next day to taste the Ribera. She meant it. In Davud's hands she had felt less lonely.

The next morning she got a message from Oscar.

'I enjoyed your kiss and embrace and I want more.'

The arrogance, she thought angrily. She replied with a line from a Bob Dylan song: '*It ain't me, babe, it ain't me you're looking for, babe,*' and added in Spanish: 'and you're definitely not the one I'm looking for.' Resolutely she pressed *block contact* in the Tinder menu, something she would do more often in the future.

After Oscar Julia had a few more matches with whom she had brief chats. American Jackson, among others.

'Hello beautiful.'

'Hello Jackson. I'm a fan of Jackson Browne.'

'Who was that?'

'He's still alive, he's a compatriot of yours.'

'Do you want to be my girl?'

'Why?' she asked.

'Because I like our conversation. Do you want to be my girl?'

'I think not.'

Next was a tall man with glasses. He seemed to her a serious candidate, a professor of sorts.

'Hi. My name is Manuel and I live in Jaén. Where are you from?'

'I am from Belgium, on holiday in Spain. I like Málaga.'

'You like sex too?'

Oscar had been right, Julia thought. So had Emma. The men on Tinder apparently wanted only one thing. Like-minded people she would probably not encounter here, she supposed, nor meaningful conversations. This was a waste of time. Julia called it a day. She would get to know people some other way.

The Jack of Hearts

Relieved to leave the gloomy flat, Julia took the bus to Pedregalejo, a few kilometres further on the Costa del Sol. There she had booked another Airbnb room, fifty metres from the beach. On the internet the room looked clean and bright, and indeed, the flat of Lola, a dark, proud Spanish *señora*, left nothing to be desired. Julia had a spacious room with a nice view of the mountains, the Montes de Málaga. Lola spoke almost no English. Her friendly daughter took care of all communication. Two English students were also staying in the apartment while they were taking a Spanish language course in the city.

Julia took a walk along the beautiful coastal promenade to the Baños del Carmen, a former luxurious bathhouse that had been turned into a restaurant. A bit of past glory but full of atmosphere, with a large terrace by the sea. She ordered a fresh *vino blanco*, white wine, and a plate of *calamaritos*, small deep-fried squid. There seemed to be no end to the sunset. The golden hour, she had read in her guidebook, the sea was turning golden yellow. Just above the shoreline hung a magical glow of red and purple hues. It was beautiful.

On a bench in front of her, a young couple were enjoying the spectacle and each other. The silhouette of their intertwined bodies drew darkly against the setting sun. It was a beautiful and romantic image. It gave her a feeling of longing. It made her realise how alone she was.

In the apartment Lola was chatting pleasantly with the female students. In Spanish. Julia was feeling a bit sick and crawled into bed. She was in no mood to read, let alone to learn Spanish. Never again would she travel alone, she decided a little pitifully. Never again would she book a room through Airbnb. She suddenly felt too old to adapt to other people's homes.

A new day. Everything looked different during the day, when the sun was shining. Julia couldn't remember what she had been fretting about so much. She was in Spain, she had to make the best of it. In the *supermercado* she bought cheese, bread, olives and a bottle of red wine. Lola's corkscrew and her own Opinel pocket knife were already in her backpack.

She took a long walk on the beach. It was February, yet it was sunny

and warm. The parakeets, high up in the palm trees, were chasing each other blaring. In front of the terraces of the numerous restaurants, the barbecues, shaped like fishing boats, were already lit. Various kinds of fish were skewered and grilled over the fire. It looked delicious. Julia was already regretting her shopping.

Around lunchtime she settled down in a sheltered spot behind the rocks and consumed her picnic. Greedily she put the bottle of wine to her mouth. As she watched various scenes on the beach, she sat drinking and contemplating. A muscular young man was taking a dip in the cold sea along with his dog. An old man in a swimming costume swam across a small bay, while his wife quietly followed him along the shore. Some boys made impressive somersaults from a small sand mountain.

In the distance she saw a yacht with full sails sailing towards Málaga harbour. Julia felt tears in her eyes. Was it from beauty or from melancholy? Or both? She thought of Jan. The sailing trips with him had been wonderful. She did miss him a little. She was tempted to send him a text message. She didn't. She had left that path. The safe path to a certain but predictable future. This was a new adventure, her adventure. She had to get through this, she knew; it just felt a bit weird.

Some distance away, a man about her own age was sunbathing. He was not handsome but he had a nice figure. She would have liked to chat with him, but he hadn't given her a glance the whole time. When two young girls in bikinis walked by, he could not take his eyes off them. She was packing her things. Whatever was she doing here?

On the modern terrace of the bar La Machina she watched the young Spanish people. Couples in love, some tough guys trying to impress a group of giggling girls, everyone was having fun. She opened her book, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. She had started reading it on the plane because she knew it was about Andalusia. After an hour she turned the last page with satisfaction, and with regret because it was finished.

It was quiet in the house. It was Friday night, everyone was out and about. Julia booked a new stay for the next week, in the middle of Málaga this time. She had had enough of silence and loneliness. She wanted to have fun, go out, meet people. Besides, she had some unfinished business in Málaga. Something from almost twenty years ago, when the city was not as popular and vibrant as it was today. It was time to do some research.

Booking rooms, checking bus schedules, answering emails, taking and sharing photos, it had all become so easy with a smartphone. Even dating. What was she supposed to do with Tinder now? She decided to scroll through the candidates one last time and then delete the app. One very last try. Again it wasn't much of a try. Only one face was slightly able to charm her. He was twenty miles away from her, she saw. Still it was not a Spaniard, he was too pale for that. Colin, that could be anything. Not in the mood for another disappointment, she was just about to swipe left when something in his text caught her eye: he was a fan of Bob Dylan. She clicked on him. It was a match. She decided to make work of it immediately, she had nothing else to do.

'I see we have a common link: Bob Dylan.'

He responded immediately.

'I love Bob Dylan, I could sing the twelve stanzas of *Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts* for you just like that.'

Bob Dylan fan and humour, that was promising.

'I don't know the song but I'd love to hear it,' she said.

'You say that now, without knowing how bad my voice is.'

'I'm willing to take the risk.'

'Do you feel like going out for a drink this weekend?'

That was what she was waiting for.

'Where do you live?'

'In Ayr in Scotland, but I'm on a golf weekend with friends in Fuengirola.'

'Can you come to Málaga?'

'Sure! Remember the words of the great man: *We are forever young!*'

Suddenly her trip looked completely different. This felt right, familiar. Outside it started pouring with rain.

'*It's a hard rain's a gonna fall* tonight in Málaga,' she continued in the same vein.

'And then you will need *shelter from the storm*,' he replied.

At that moment she could not have guessed that those last two sentences would come true and thoroughly affect her trip.

'I never could have dreamed Bob Dylan would help me on a date.'

'Well, Julia, life is full of surprises.'

'I'm glad of that. Will you promise to sing that song for me?'

'I'll try x'

'All twelve stanzas? I won't go for less.'

‘Okay, I’ll start rehearsing already xx’

‘You make me curious.’

They were on the same wavelength, that was clear. Julia was too excited to sleep, brimming with new energy. She realised she had to hold back. She couldn’t be too pushy. She wanted him to want to meet her himself.

The song he was talking about she had never heard before. She looked it up and listened to it on her mobile phone. It turned out to be a poetic ballad of fifteen stanzas on the 1975 CD *Blood on the Tracks*. It was a long story full of strange characters. The Jack of Hearts particularly intrigued her.

‘A mysterious man, that Jack of Hearts.’

‘It’s a great story, Julia. How is your evening going? X’

The x was already becoming an X, she saw with delight.

‘Quiet. Alone. And yours?’

‘A few beers and very relaxed. When do you fly home?’

‘I still have two weeks of holiday.’

‘Wonderful! Let’s have fun tomorrow!’

‘Why not? Do you know Málaga?’

‘Not at all. You’re in charge.’

‘Agreed. What time?’

‘I’ll have to check it out here on the golf course. I’ll message you tomorrow.’

Excited, Julia jumped out of her bed the next morning. Today she was moving into town, today she had a date. There was work to be done. She stepped into the shower and took extensive time to wax her legs and paint her toenails. Not too red, that was too challenging, she thought. Purple red was more her colour.

She said goodbye to Lola and her daughter and walked with her rolling suitcase down the beautiful *esplanada* along the coast towards Málaga. It was too early to go straight to her new room in the Calle Marqués. She wandered a bit through the streets of Málaga city centre. Somehow she felt comfortable in herself. Confident, free, happy, breezy. She had found her city again. She had better put the past to rest.

Through the Calle Granada she walked to the beautiful Plaza de la Merced. In front of his birthplace the statue of Picasso sat invitingly on a bench. She took a seat next to the statue and asked a Chinese woman if

she would take her picture. She put an arm around the frozen artist's neck and smiled into the lens. The Chinese lady, in turn, also wanted a photo. Julia was not the only one travelling alone, she realised. She then visited the Mercado de la Merced, one of Málaga's covered market halls, and wandered past the well-stocked stalls selling vegetables, cheese, fish and other Spanish specialities. It made her hungry, so she ordered a portion of paella, freshly made and very cheap.

In the main square, the Plaza de la Constitución, she admired the beautiful fountain Fuente de Génova, then took a seat at a table in the sun on the terrace of the Café Central. The tiled wall depicted the different kinds of coffees they served there. She chose a *café Americano*, a large cup of black coffee without milk, and sat enjoying watching the people passing on the square.

On the corner with the Calle Granada was an old beggar, squatting, with a sleeping dog in his arms. Across the street, in the majestic main shopping street Calle Marqués de Larios, a garishly dressed man was trying his luck by shaping animals from elongated balloons. Meanwhile a limping tramp with a cane stumbled past Julia's little table, in his hand a cup for money, in his eyes a sad, empty look. Not all people were happy in Spain, she realised. What did strike her was that there was room for beggars. They were not chased away, like they were in Antwerp. They were greeted with respect by the waiters. Some even made small talk with them.

Julia continued her way along the Calle Nueva. In the distance she heard a kind of rattling, it sounded like drumming. As she got closer, she saw a man sitting on the window-sill of a shop. He had no arms. With his teeth he was rhythmically shaking a cup of change up and down. In a side street a hippy couple was playing guitar and singing, a tramp played air guitar with abandon. Discreetly Julia took a picture of the scene and sent it to Emma. Museums and cathedrals could not charm her, Julia knew. Emma loved people, humanity, purity. This show was beautiful and sad at the same time.

She feasted her eyes on the imposing building of the Mercado Central de Atarazanas. This covered market hall was even bigger and livelier than the previous one. There was a sultry, bustling atmosphere. Everyone was eating or drinking something, standing at one of the many bars. Merry market vendors were noisily trying to sell their wares with their warm, southern temperament. Julia crossed the hall and wandered on through

small alleys filled with pavement cafés. Here locals sat eating *churros en masse*: long, deep-fried dough sticks dipped in warm, thick chocolate sauce. She herself did not have a sweet tooth, but she decided to order it anyway on the terrace of the Casa Aranda bar. Everyone around her was cheerful and in company. You only notice that when you are alone. Even the food tasted better with two, she didn't like it one bit.

In the Plaza Enrique García-Herrera square she waited on the terrace of the bar El Mortal for a message from her new landlady. She heard nothing from the Scot. She sent him a text message.

'Buenos días!' It remained silent.

The new room on the fifth floor was everything Julia had expected of it: bright and spacious, with a view of the beautiful church tower of the Iglesia de San Juan. It was a studio with TV, a music system and a spacious sofa. She had to share the kitchen and bathroom with the owners of the flat, a likeable couple her own age.

'Shall I unfold the sofa?' Esther asked.

'No, it's fine,' Julia said. She was in a hurry. She had all sorts of things to do: find a nice bar for her date that night, shop, make herself pretty. She headed out. How wonderful it was to be able to shut the door behind you and find yourself in the middle of the city. Never again would she stay outside a city by herself, she decided. She wandered around a bit and ended up in the Plaza de las Flores. Sultry flamenco music echoed from an open door. Curious, Julia glanced inside the bar El Gallo Ronco. From the ceiling hung copper pots and pans of all shapes and sizes. A blue-purple glow shone on the whitewashed walls, which were covered with pictures of flamenco singers and dancers. Outside on the terrace some people sat, in the bar itself there were none. Julia seated herself inside at a large beer barrel and approvingly studied the space, feeling the atmosphere. This seemed to her a suitable place for a date.

'Is there live flamenco music being played tonight?' she asked the handsome young waiter behind the bar.

'Yes there is!' Excitedly he introduced himself as Javí, then he turned up the music and started singing along happily. Julia knew she had found her place.

She finally wanted to hear something about the Scotsman. She felt good and had nothing to lose. She decided to challenge him a bit.

‘Well, Jack of Hearts, tell me your plans.’

Fortunately he responded.

‘Hi, I’m still on the golf course. We’re going back to the hotel now, have something to eat with the group while we watch the Rugby International. I still have to figure out how to get to Málaga, I’ll ask at the hotel later and let you know. If you’re still keen.’

‘Very keen,’ she responded. ‘I couldn’t find a café where they play Bob Dylan but I did find a nice bar with flamenco music, the Gallo Ronco in the Plaza de las Flores. I’ll be there tonight. I would love to see you, Jack.’

‘Can you send me the name and address of the bar?’

‘I just did, El Gallo Ronco in the Plaza de las Flores.’

She sent him the picture of herself next to Picasso and asked: ‘Can I bring my friend?’

He no longer replied. She sent a message to her friend Emma.

‘I have a date this evening.’

‘With that air guitar guy?’

‘No, that was a beggar.’

‘It was a handsome beggar, though.’

‘With a Scotsman, in the Gallo Ronco. That means the hoarse rooster.’

‘You chicken,’ Emma replied, ‘all Scots are men with red hair and a beer belly!’

‘At least he doesn’t have red hair. I’m going to buy some black nylons to wear under my little black dress.’

‘Black nylons? For a first date? You’re crazy. Bare legs is what you need!’

It was the middle of winter, her legs were not really tanned yet. Nevertheless Julia followed her friend’s advice. On her way to the apartment she bought a black scarf and a handbag at the organic boutique Natura on the Calle Nueva. It would become her favourite shop. In one of the many shoe shops she found cheap high boots. They had to last at least one evening.

‘High heels? Make sure you don’t trip,’ Emma pressed her further.

On the way back to her flat she passed a hair salon called Retrolooks. It was busy, she saw through the tall windows. The hairdressers in polka-dot dresses were all busy with customers. Impulsively Julia pushed against the glass door. Why not? The staff looked at her somewhat strangely, no-one spoke English, but she managed to make it clear what she wanted.

‘*Cuatro?*’ the hairdresser with the long purple hair asked, holding her

hand horizontally in front of the mirror. Four fingers, in other words. Julia nodded, some could be taken off. Twenty minutes later and only twenty euros poorer she stood outside again, trimmed and brushed. This was a location to remember.

At eight o'clock Julia made her way to the bar where she strategically positioned herself facing the door. The lady in black. Her straight, dark blonde hair she wore loose.

'*Guapa!*' Javi said. He had recognised her and gave her two kisses. 'You look lovely!'

She smiled. She felt lovely too. Now all she could do was wait.

At nine o'clock she got a message from Colin: 'I'm on my way to the bar. You look great in the picture you sent me.'

At ten another message: 'I'm almost there, I'm on the train now.'

For some reason Julia was not worried at all, she was confident that he would come. And that he would stay. Besides, how would he get back at this hour?

'No Scot in sight yet,' she signalled to Emma.

'There are other men in the bar, aren't there?'

'All taken.'

'Take a good look around, maybe there is a handsome Spaniard alone at the bar somewhere.'

'All with a Spanish fury by their side.'

'Those are nothing compared to a Belgian fury like you.'

'That scares them.'

'I believe you. There's nothing wrong with you but they don't know that, I think. A full-blooded, confident, warm, Flemish fury with her heart in the right place.'

'The women here are all elegant, Spanish beauties.'

'You are also very presentable! And you have a charisma that no-one can match.'

The place was getting busier and busier. A man and a woman entered the bar and as there were no tables free, Julia invited them to take a seat at her barrel. But they did not understand English and the woman looked at Julia as if she had just made her husband a dishonourable proposal. Spanish women did not go to bars alone, she supposed. An Argentinian couple next

to her noticed it and the young man helped her by explaining in Spanish to the couple what she meant. To no avail. Sullenly they remained standing at the bar waiting for something to become available.

Julia struck up a conversation with the Argentinian couple and told them about her date. They thought it was exciting and followed along. Meanwhile, at the back of the bar, a guitarist had started playing. Passionately he strummed on his *guitarra flamenca*. She enjoyed the sultry atmosphere that hung in the bar, the temperament of the men, the stylish Spanish women. She ordered another *vino* and got into the mood.

At ten thirty she received the following message from the Scot: 'I'm in the street but I can't find the bar. Can you come outside so I can see you?'

Hurriedly she made her way to the door and scanned the square. It was pouring with rain. Not a living soul was to be seen.

'Where are you?' he almost begged.

'The Plaza de las Flores,' she replied again. 'El Gallo Ronco.'

She hadn't seen him come in. He was suddenly there. He stood in the doorway, as if petrified, soaked, coatless. He looked straight at her, she smiled. He came towards her; he was smaller and thinner than she had expected. He had a pretty mouth, sweet eyes.

'Hi, Jack,' she said.

'I need a drink,' he said, 'you too?'

She nodded. As he ordered two beers at the bar, the Argentine girl stuck her thumb in the air approvingly. Julia blushed, she felt herself glowing.

'The centre of Málaga is car-free, the taxi driver dropped me off somewhere just like that. I've been searching for hours,' Colin sighed. He was funny and open, relaxed and quite handsome. Julia was immediately attracted to him. Carefully he looked at her, with his beautiful dark gaze. As the evening progressed, she felt her body leaning more and more towards his. Your body doesn't lie, according to Emma. She was right.

They drank and talked until the chairs were on the tables. The bar was about to close. They left in the pouring rain. As a matter of course, they walked hand in hand. They got lost in the all-similar marble streets of Málaga, laughing, drunk, Julia stumbling on her cheap heels. She had just moved to her new address and couldn't find the alley anymore. All she knew was that from her room she looked out on the San Juan church tower. So they walked in circles around the church, again and again.

Finally they stood before the long-sought-after door. They kissed each other in the narrow lift and ended up on the sofa. They made love as if they were eighteen, *forever young*. His arm under her head, her back against his belly, that's how they fell asleep.

By morning Jack of her heart had to go to the toilet.

'The second door on the right,' Julia said. He was naked. In the bathroom he came face to face with the landlord in pants, they were both startled. Julia had rented the room for one person, it was only her first night's stay and she already had a guest. Hopefully they wouldn't make a fuss about this or raise the rent.

'It was a frozen moment,' Colin told her when he had snuggled back next to her on the sofa. Julia could vividly imagine the situation. She laughed out loud.

'Shhh!' he whispered laughing, 'think of your rental.'

'It's a bit too late for that, Jack. You've been noticed, by the sound of it.'

They made love again, slowly and languidly. He was sweet and thoughtful. She melted under his touch. Entwined on the sofa they watched the sky turn pink behind the steeple they had cursed during the night.

It was Sunday. Colin looked at his mobile phone. The battery was flat.

'What time are you going to play golf?' she asked.

'I guess there won't be much golfing today,' he said. Her heart made a jump. He stayed.

They heard the owners walking down the corridor. Julia held her breath. She heard the door fall into the lock. Then silence. They were gone. She went to take a shower, Colin came with her. She brushed her wet hair, and he did too. As she got dressed, she looked at the long painting above the sofa. It was a portrait of a reclining, nude, Picasso-style woman. Colin entered and embraced her from behind. Together they studied the strange woman. She was a bit stretched, misshapen, her arm was folded at an odd angle under her head. He didn't like it. In the kitchen Julia looked for something to make coffee. She found an Italian Bialetti pot. There was a drawer full of boxes of herbal teas. Only after a long search did she find a crumpled packet of coffee at the bottom of a drawer. He wanted milk but in the fridge there was only soy milk. He shuddered.

'I'll treat you to breakfast,' he said.

She took her lover to the Café Central in the main square. On the way, he turned around.

‘Look carefully at the street names this time.’

‘No need,’ she responded sturdily, ‘the way to the flat is forever etched in my memory.’

The Café Central was buzzing with activity. They sat down among the locals and enjoyed a sandwich and coffee. Julia could hardly get a bite through her throat out of infatuation. She told him what her friend said about the Scots.

‘Tell Emma I’m not red, I don’t have a beer belly and I’m treating you to breakfast,’ he laughed.

Julia needed fresh air. A little shyly they walked towards the upgraded port area Muelle Dos, past the modern Palmeral de las Sorpresas, with its white, undulating slats above them, a project by the architect Calatrava. They continued their way along Muelle Uno to La Farola, Málaga’s lighthouse, and further along to La Malagueta beach. Would she dare to take his hand? Put an arm around his shoulder? At a café, with a drink, everything came naturally. In the daylight she felt insecure and exposed.

A cool breeze was blowing. After all it was only February. February the twelfth two thousand and seventeen to be precise, a date she would never forget. Colin was shivering without a coat, his clothes still damp from the previous night. He looked cute and endearing. She guided him through the charming streets of the city. They found a table at the Casa Lola bar in the Calle Granada, there was an exuberant atmosphere. The whole family showed its best side on Sunday: well-groomed, well-dressed, made-up, colourful. From all sides there was cheerful Spanish chatter, busy and spirited.

Over a beer they briefly told each other their stories. Colin was divorced and had two children who were studying. He worked as a lawyer but did not enjoy his job. She saw his face darken as he talked about it. He had become a lawyer because his father was one. It had not been his own choice. Besides, the law firm he worked for did not treat him properly.

‘Then go and do something else,’ Julia said.

‘It’s not that simple,’ he replied dejectedly. ‘My children are studying, which is very expensive in Scotland. And I still have a mortgage on my house. I can’t stop now.’

His plan was to open his own office with a friend in a few years' time.

'That seems like a very good plan,' she said. 'Life is too short to do things you don't want to do.'

He too was curious about her.

'How many inhabitants does Belgium actually have?'

'Ten million,' she calculated hesitantly, 'or eleven by now?'

'A million more or less,' he laughed.

They rewound the film from the previous night. How he had searched endlessly for the bar, how they had walked countless laps around the church tower, the frozen moment with the landlord in the bathroom. Julia was a little anxious to face the landlords again. She wondered what their reaction would be, now that it appeared she had already had an adventure on the first night. Or would they think she had concealed the fact that an extra person was coming to stay to avoid paying the full price? Would she have to pay extra? Would she bring it up herself or wait for them to confront her about it?

'Maybe I should have shaken his hand in the bathroom,' Colin laughed. 'Hello Raoul, nice to meet you!'

'Laugh all you want, soon you'll be gone and I can sort it out. Maybe they will throw me out.'

'Ask him to buy some milk next time,' Colin joked.

They speculated further about the possibilities, laughing, drinking, enjoying each other.

He found her knowledge of the English language impressive. She, on the other hand, struggled with his Scottish accent. Sometimes he had to repeat his words up to three times.

The gruff, bald barman asked them to move to a smaller table, intimate in the corner of the room. Julia didn't mind, now they were even closer together. Colin was funny and witty, sweet and thoughtful. She was having the time of her life.

'You have beautiful eyes,' he said, looking at her intently. Shyly she looked back. He had a sensuous mouth. She gave him a kiss. He stroked her hair.

'Moments like these are temporary,' he said suddenly, 'you have to enjoy them when they happen.'

Julia was startled. Now he's going to leave me, she thought, I'll never see him again. A cold wave swept through her body. She didn't show it. A

second later he shouted enthusiastically, as if he had had an inspiration: 'I'm coming to Belgium!'

Had her feelings deceived her? Or had he sensed her disappointment? She shook off the turmoil and stammered happily that he was welcome in her home.

The hours of that lovely Sunday flew by as if in a daze. They were eating tapas in the Calle de Bruselas bar in the Plaza de la Merced. His hand was in hers, she caressed his finger knuckles. Then they danced at a café whose name she later couldn't remember in the Calle Beatas, Málaga's party street. Again they got lost on the way to her room. Again they got soaking wet. The rain was pouring down.

'Málaga must be just about the wettest place in Spain,' Colin said.

'It's nice weather in Málaga all year round,' she laughed, 'until the Scots come here for a weekend holiday. They just bring the rain with them.'

It didn't matter, nothing mattered, just lying in the Scotsman's arms mattered. She used what little sense she had left to ask a passer-by for directions to the shopping street Calle Larios. From there she knew the way. Once home they took off their wet clothes and gave themselves completely to each other for another night of passion and tenderness.

In the morning Julia was woken by a hand gently stroking her back.

'I have to go, Julia,' Colin whispered in her ear.

He asked for her charger to charge his smartphone. The messages poured in. He wore contact lenses and had kept them in for two days and nights, which meant he now saw everything blurred. He had her check his flight details.

'Your plane takes off at three o'clock this afternoon,' she read.

'Phew,' he said.

His friends from the golf course had tried to reach him in vain, she read to him. Colin had the key to the safe in his pocket, they couldn't get to their personal belongings and wallets.

'Coffee?' She looked at him questioningly.

He turned up his nose. No milk, no coffee. The moment of parting was here. Colin put on his damp clothes. Hand in hand they walked to the train station. Again she couldn't find her way.

'The train station?' she stammered awkwardly in poor Spanish. The

passer-by pointed decidedly in an easterly direction. Secretly she hoped he had misunderstood her, but no, in the distance the large María Zambrano building was already looming. Colin bought a ticket at a ticket office.

‘The train to Fuengirola is arriving in the station,’ the ticket office clerk said. Suddenly everything had to go quickly. One last embrace, one last kiss.

‘Bye honey, I’ll see you in Belgium!’ he called out, running towards the escalator. Then he disappeared into the depths. He was gone.

Stunned, Julia stood in the great hall. The emptiness was overwhelming. At a stall next to the station she ordered a coffee and sat down at a small table to come to herself. What had happened? Had she dreamt this? It was unreal. Two nights and a day the romance had lasted, thirty-three heavenly hours that had turned her life upside down. She could not stop smiling. She walked back to her room, singing a Dutch song:

‘Het is een nacht die je normaal alleen in films ziet ...’

It is a night you normally only see in movies ...

Her mobile phone had also been off for two days. Emma had missed her, she knew Julia had been on a date with a Scot and was curious and a little worried because she had not replied anymore.

‘Say something, Julia, even if it’s just one letter,’ her last message read.

‘A,’ she replied.

‘Finally! And?’

‘In love. Sigh.’

‘Really? Will you meet him again?’

‘He is flying back to Scotland today but soon he will visit me in Belgium.’

‘Good for you. Enjoy yourself to the fullest, here it’s grey and cold.’

‘My holiday can’t go wrong. I’m walking on clouds.’

‘It was a wonderful weekend, honey,’ was the first thing Colin wrote as he waited in the airport for his flight. He sent her a picture of an ugly, red-haired man with a fat belly.

‘Now that’s a redheaded Scot with a beer belly,’ he said. Julia laughed.

‘How are your friends? They’re not too mad at you, are they?’

‘No way, they were mostly worried. What about Raoul?’

‘He’s still not home, I think you gave him a scare. Although you don’t look that scary naked now. I thought you were rather cute.’

‘Well, at least you saw a lot of me. I’m going to check in now, Julia, enjoy the rest of your journey. I’m always going to remember this trip, I had so much fun with you.’

‘I wish you a safe flight, dear Scot.’

Esther came home. She asked nothing and Julia said nothing. Raoul she would not see for the whole week. Colin landed in Scotland.

‘Is it raining?’

‘No, but it’s freezing cold.’

‘No weather for parading naked in the bathroom. I’ve discovered the flights from Glasgow to Belgium are very cheap.’

‘I’ll check it out this week.’

Whistling, Julia walked to the Gallo Ronco that evening. Grinning, occasionally, as she thought back to the hilarious moments of the past weekend. She didn’t care about passers-by. She didn’t care what they thought of her, she was elated and everyone was allowed to see it. There was no-one who knew her here, for that matter. What freedom, what a blissful city it was.

‘*Hola Julia!*’ Javí had not forgotten her name. He gave her two kisses in welcome. She wondered if everyone in Málaga was that nice, or was she seeing life through rose-coloured glasses now? One day, one magical moment could change your life, she had discovered. She was drunk with happiness, and with life, the world was at her feet. It had been so long since she had been in love. She felt like she had been reborn.

‘Hi Colin, I’m at the bar where we met,’ she wrote.

‘The hard-to-find bar.’

‘For you it was. Javí, the waiter, asked if I wanted more beer. Apparently I already have a reputation here, thanks to a man who took three hours to get to his appointment. Normally I’m not that patient.’

‘Was it worth the wait?’

‘I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.’

‘That’s so sweet of you. We were really good together, not many first dates last two days.’

‘I don’t have much experience in dating but I didn’t get lost in the alleys because I wanted to get rid of you. On the contrary, I wanted you on my sofa!’

‘Well, you had me several times.

*And if I pass this way again, you can rest assured
I’ll always do my best for her, on that I give my word
In a world of steel-eyed death, and men who are fighting to be warm
Come in, she said I’ll give ya shelter from the storm*

I love this verse. This is actually our song, honey, you gave me shelter from the storm.’

‘How did it work out with your date yesterday?’ Javi asked. Julia blushing raised her thumb.

‘He’s a cutie,’ he said, ‘can’t I borrow him for a bit?’

She laughed, so that was the way things were. She forwarded the question to Colin.

‘No way,’ the latter responded quickly.

‘Tell him that once you’ve had a man, you never desire anything else,’ Javi winked. It remained silent on the other end for a moment. Julia melted as she read his reply.

‘Tell Javi that once you have loved a Belgian woman, you’ll never desire anything else again.’

She experienced the next few days as if in a daze. Repeatedly she let the film of the past weekend play in her mind. She drowned in his sweet eyes again, felt his soft, caressing hands everywhere. They kept chatting almost uninterruptedly, she comfortably on the beach or in her favourite café in Málaga, he between his busy pursuits. Regularly he sent her video clips or excerpts from songs by Bob Dylan. She was delighted. She wouldn’t see him often, she knew, although the flight from Belgium to Glasgow only took an hour and a half. Maybe she would move to Scotland, her son was big and independent, why not? It had to be a beautiful country. Very wet and grey though, Colin had told her, much worse than Belgium. She had chosen Spain for its sunshine.

Plans could change quickly, she realised. Life was change and love conquered everything. Her head snapped up. Suddenly there were new possibilities, new opportunities. Her future looked bright. For the second time her life had turned around in Málaga, that beautiful, sunny, magical city on the Mediterranean.

Colin wrote that he was curious about Antwerp. He did research, studying links and photos he found on the internet.

‘I’ll come to your city, together we’ll sing Bob Dylan late into the night,’ he said.

‘*That’s the best news that I’ve ever heard!*’ she quoted from Isis, a song on her favourite CD *Desire*. ‘Don’t wait too long, Colin, we’re not sixteen anymore.’

‘*Forever young*, remember? Let’s stay sixteen together.’

‘I felt sixteen last weekend thanks to you. For that reason alone I will always love you.’

‘Let’s have a sweet sixteen party! Belgium, here I come!’

‘I’m making a plan, for my Scottish man. Although we’ll probably stay in bed all weekend.’

‘I think so too.’

‘I think I could stay in bed with you for six weeks.’

‘We would need sustenance.’

‘We can do without, Jack, I have every confidence in you.’

‘I’m very keen.’

‘You are very keen and I will once again give you *shelter from the storm*, I promise.’

On the fourteenth of February Julia was woken up by Steve Earl’s song *Valentine’s Day*. Still languid from sleep she responded:

‘I wish I could grab you from my mobile phone for a moment, or two moments.’

‘Grab me, you’re very good at that.’

‘I feel your warm hands everywhere.’

‘Your hands were very impressive too.’

‘I hear Esther coming in. Raoul doesn’t live here anymore, I think.’

‘He disappeared after seeing me naked, I don’t know how I would react to that either.’

‘Memorable?’

‘Traumatic, it seems.’

‘You left your mark, Scot, and certainly not just on Raoul.’

‘I’m glad of that. But with him I’m not sure. I think Raoul and I should cherish that beautiful moment and move on.’

‘The frozen moment.’

‘That’s what it was.’

‘Not everything was frozen, I remember.’

‘That’s sweet of you.’

‘Esther looks a bit sad, I wonder why.’

‘Because her husband is missing.’

‘I’m beginning to wonder what you two were up to in the bathroom, though. Are you sure you told me everything?’

‘I was only gone for two minutes, I’m not that fast now.’

‘Maybe he was.’

‘Funny.’

Julia still had almost two weeks of holiday left. Málaga was the city where she had met love, once again. It was her city, everything fell into place here, everything was right. She radiated something, she had the impression. She lit people up with her enthusiasm, the *malagueños* loved her.

During the day she took long walks through the city or along the beach. Then she would take a dip in the sea, nestle on the fine sand and let the warm rays of the sun dry her. The sun was like a suitor, she willingly allowed herself to be embraced by it. Eagerly she consumed her picnic afterwards: bread, cheese and red wine. It tasted like a king’s meal. She opened and closed her book. Not a letter did she get to read, dreamily wandering off each time.

She became a regular customer in the Gallo Ronco. Her glass of wine was ready before she was well and truly seated on her bar stool. Unsolicited she was given snacks and every time she asked for the bill, her glass was additionally filled to the brim. Javí played flamenco music and noted the names of the singers in her notebook: Paco Peña, Lola Flores, Tomasito, etc. He gave her a quick course in flamenco and taught her about the legends whose pictures hung scattered in the bar.

Julia decided to buy a CD as a souvenir and made her way to El Corte Inglés shopping centre, across the dry river, the Guadalmedina. First she took the escalator all the way to the top to have a coffee on the modern terrace with its haunting lounge music.

In the music department she spoke to a young man.

‘Do you like flamenco music?’ he asked in that typically Spanish, deep, sensual voice. He looked at her incredulously. She nodded. Delighted, he took her to the relevant department. She asked him for the names from her

booklet. Patiently he retrieved the CDs from the racks and played them for her one by one. He also gave her tips on modern flamenco that he thought was worth listening to. Soon she had made her choice: a compilation box of traditional flamenco.

‘Where are you from?’ the salesman asked as she paid.

‘I am *Flamenca*,’ she winked, which literally meant Flemish.

‘That explains it!’ he laughed. ‘Enjoy your purchase!’

She turned around and found herself face to face with Bob Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks*, as if the devil had interfered. Without hesitation she took the CD from the rack. The flamenco would have to wait until she was back in Belgium. *Blood on the Tracks*, on the other hand, was on constant repeat in her room from then on, until she pretty much knew all songs by heart.

‘Look what I found!’ She sent Colin a picture of the CD cover.

‘You’re going to love it!’ he responded. ‘I play it every day in my car, on the way to my office.’

‘It suddenly appeared to me, I wasn’t even looking for it,’ she said.

‘Mystical man, Bob.’

‘I am listening to him now, together with the tall naked woman over the sofa.’

‘Shut up about her please, I’m trying to get that painting out of my head.’

She sent him a picture of the canvas.

‘Arghhhh!!!’

‘Sorry, you’ll get over her.’

‘Not soon or without therapy.’

‘I’ll give you some in Belgium.’

‘Promise? I’m in bed now.’

‘Tell me about your bed, Colin, how big is it?’

‘A regular king size, with just me in it.’

‘Like a king.’

‘Without a crown.’

There was no age on puppy love, Julia thought, carefree. She was in love and she believed in love again. She was dazzled. Maybe she should have seen it coming earlier. Maybe she should have seen a sign in the message he sent her the next morning. Maybe that was already a kind of goodbye. She didn’t see it.