

# 50 shades of dating

## 2

*Sol y sombra*

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# 50 shades of dating

## 2

*Sol y sombra*



CHEE WEBB

## Trilogy

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*Salud, dinero y amor*

50 shades of dating - 2

*Sol y sombra*

50 shades of dating - 3

*El número 50*

*For Lief*

*The immense ocean has a unique taste, the taste of salt.  
Similarly, the true path has a unique taste, the taste of freedom.*

*- Khuddaka Nikaya*

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Hi Julia,

George died last Tuesday at 6:56 pm.

Peacefully, surrounded by his family.'



Julia had tried to be light-hearted in her further messages to George. It had taken her a long time to get a reply, a very long time, and it was a reply that, despite everything, came hard and unexpected. She felt defeated.

So his last message had been a goodbye, he had known it. She reread it, again and again.

*Hi doll. It hasn't been a good last few days but now I'm feeling better again. I hope you are well and I wish you all the best in life. I miss you terribly. I love you, forever.*

Someone had taken the trouble to let her know what had happened to him. She replied: 'My dear friend George, what a beautiful person he was. I don't know what to say, I am so sad. Thank you for informing me, I was afraid I would never know. Please give all my sympathy and condolences to the family. Are you his son or his brother?'

'Thank you for your kind words. I am Alex, his son.'

'Thank you again for contacting me, he was so proud of his children. I am very happy to have known him and I will never forget him. It's raining in Belgium, the world is mourning George. Where will he be buried?'

'He will be cremated, that was his request. We don't know the details yet.'

'If it is not inappropriate, I would like to learn where his ashes will be scattered. I would like to find a way to say goodbye to him.'

'I will let you know when we have a clear picture of what will happen.'

'Thanks, that means a lot to me.'

Stunned, Julia left for work. The same beggar sat in the same place as always. She gave him a coin as always, changed her mind and tipped her entire wallet out into the open hands of the astonished man.

'Thanks!' he called after her.

'Thank George,' she replied wordlessly. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Julia went to visit her friend Emma, who had just been discharged from hospital. All treatments had ceased, Emma had been sidelined. She had been offered one last, aggressive treatment, but the side effects were numerous, both physical and psychological. She had declined. Despite the bad news and the heavy burden hanging over her head, she was calm and serene. Finally she accepted her fate, she had no other choice. Relieved that she no longer had to take pills, she enjoyed her garden even more intensely, the last days of summer. She asked about George.

‘I can’t believe I’m never going to see him again, there’s something unreal about it. He was a simple construction worker but what a personality. And one of the few people who really loved me for who I am. Sorry to get emotional, Emma, I’m so sad.’

‘It’s never easy to say goodbye unexpectedly to someone close to your heart.’

‘Now I really know how close to my heart he was and how few people you meet in your life that are so close to your heart.’

‘Cherish the beautiful memories you have of him, Julia, I have no other words for it.’

A little aimlessly Julia walked home later. She put on her nightgown, once carelessly bought in a market. Now the inscription hit her like a knife, one word only, *LUCKY*. George’s luck had run out, this cormorant could fly no more. Death was irrevocable.

Time heals all wounds, they say. That was not entirely true, Julia would soon find out. The more time passed, the more she realised how dear George had been to her. You have to reduce everything to its essence, she had once read. In art, in music, in your life. George had got to the essence, she realised, he had touched her deeply. He had touched her heart, she literally felt it. Her heart ached, again.

She had not been able to reach his son afterwards, George’s account on WhatsApp had been deleted. She had made another attempt at his brother in Spain, she had sent him a letter with her details and asked for a funeral address. He too had never replied.

Regularly she opened Tinder to see if George’s profile was still on it, it would be for years to come. Then she would look at the endearing picture of him and his children in front of the huge rugby stadium, a proud, handsome, smiling father, and she would soften inside again. On Tinder he got older, each year the number changed with him. He was two hundred and sixty-four miles away from her. Someday she would go looking for him, she swore, she wanted to know where his final resting place was so she could say her final goodbyes.

Meanwhile George continued to accompany her on her way. When she heard English spoken by passers-by or in the bookstore, she was moved. Or when she heard The Verve on the radio. By chance she stumbled across

an old video on YouTube of a live concert by David Bowie in Berlin. Before he started the song *Heroes*, he was talking to the audience. Julia was struck as if by lightning, she closed her eyes and heard George. She replayed the fragment every time she missed him. It kept hurting but she could not help it, that way George was not completely gone. It felt like she had a long-distance relationship with him, just like before. He remained very present in her life, like a sweet, nagging certainty. She knew no-one as authentic as George, except Emma, who was also fading out.

Steve continued to follow her faithfully in her exploits.

‘Hi Belgium. How are things?’

‘Boring Belgium,’ she replied.

‘That sounds like you are back at work. How awful, I’m so sorry for you.’

‘I know you love me.’

‘I have to.’

‘No, seriously now. George has just died, the Scot in Málaga I told you about. They’re also giving up on Emma, they’re stopping all treatment.’

‘That’s intense, Julia, I’m sorry. How is she taking it?’

‘She’s the bravest person I know. She can even still laugh.’

‘Deathly ill and still having a sense of humour. That’s strong indeed.’

‘I can’t imagine she won’t be around anymore.’

‘It will be hard. Enjoy the time you have left with her as much as you can.’

‘There is not much left that will keep me here when she is gone. My son is grown up and independent. I would like to travel more.’

‘Search more?’

‘Live more. I read a saying the other day in Málaga: *May life forgive me for the times I haven’t lived it.* I thought of you.’

‘I don’t know how to live life.’

# Paul McCartney and other Beatles

Weeks passed. Weeks of grieving for George and licking wounds and caring for her friend. One day Julia remembered her Tinder match with Peter in Málaga, her ex-boyfriend from way back. She sent him several messages, he still did not respond. Had he not recognised her after all? There were several pictures on her profile, including in close-up. Had she changed so much then? She regretted it, she would have liked to see him again, even if the relationship had not exactly come to a serene end. Perhaps he had become less jealous with age, and she herself a little less emotional.

Was it out of boredom or was she really on the run? Against her better judgment Julia kept on tundering. Sporadically, but still. She had conversations with men of all kinds, short conversations mostly.

Henry was a sailor, she saw on his profile, she could only try.

‘Hi, sailor man.’

‘Hi, Julia. Do you like sailing?’

‘Sure, I did it for years. I miss it.’

‘Wow, a sailing woman! Most women are not so keen on adventure, preferring not to go beyond Friesland. With you I’d like to drop anchor one day.’

‘When?’

‘You can’t leave the boat then, though.’

‘I’m not that scared. Besides, I can swim.’

‘I’d make sure you didn’t want to leave.’

‘How would you handle that?’

‘Imagine: we’re anchored and looking at the stars on the deck. You crawl against me.’

‘How romantic.’

‘Just assuming we like each other, would you like to sail long trips with me?’

‘Sure, but we’d have to find out whether we like each other first.’

‘Shall we have a drink somewhere then? I should warn you, though.’

‘What about?’

‘I have long sailing stories.’

‘Me too.’

‘Good, then there won’t be any awkward silences. When was the last time you sailed?’

‘A long trip? That was two summers ago, the boat belonged to my ex. These days I spend a lot of time in Spain, I fell in love there. After one weekend the affair was over, but I keep returning there.’

‘You are impulsive, a one-weekend affair?’

‘That was not my choice.’

‘It’s better to fall in love with a Dutchman.’

‘A Dutch sailor?’

‘Something like that. I’m going to sail in Croatia this summer, my boat is there. Will you come along?’

‘Who knows. When?’

‘You can check all the dates and prices on my website.’

She did and she was shocked by the prices. So Tinder could also be a tool to sell your business. She thanked him for it.

‘Hi Frank.’

‘You’re fast!’

‘You have to be fast in life.’

‘At what time is the forest walk?’

‘Speaking of fast.’

‘Can you make it tonight? Shall I come over?’

‘If you come over, I just want to have a drink somewhere, at the Café Zeezicht in Berchem or something.’

‘If you tell me what time, I’ll be there. And if it’s a joke I’d rather you tell me honestly, otherwise I’ll make the whole trip for nothing.’

‘It’s already late. Maybe we can arrange something tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow I can’t stay.’

‘Who says you can stay?’

‘Don’t worry, if there’s no click I’ll drive home again. I am a grown man and I am not going to demean myself by making scenes. I’m not doing anything against my will and I hope neither are you.’

‘Fine, but today I’d rather not.’

‘Are you free tomorrow?’

‘After six o’clock I am.’

Julia continued modelling her heads in clay in the studio the next morning. By noon, Don Juan was trying again.

‘Until what time do you have to work?’

‘I’m not working today.’

‘You said you had to work.’

‘I said I wasn’t free.’

Half an hour later he sent a selfie, sitting on the terrace of the Café Zeezicht. She was shocked. He was getting too pushy, coming too close. She had experienced that before.

‘You’re crazy,’ she said quickly.

‘About you?’

‘Goodbye.’

‘Hello Julia. Have you found the truth yet?’

‘Hi, Kurt. Everyone has their own truth.’

‘I mean, THE truth. I’ve found Jesus.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘I mean it. I led a life full of addictions: drugs, sex, gambling, etc. One night the Holy Spirit appeared to me, it was a revelation.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘I have never been so serious. I fell down on the sofa, as if struck by lightning. I literally saw the light.’

‘Pretty convenient there was a sofa just at that spot.’

‘You don’t mock something like that. I got down on my knees and wept and asked for forgiveness. Jesus has taken away all my addictions, I don’t touch a drop of alcohol anymore.’

‘Strange man, your Jesus. Why did he turn water into wine if you can’t drink it?’

The man had no answer to that. He started talking about something else.

‘The earth is not round, as they have always made us believe. The earth is flat and stands on pillars, with a dome over it. That is the sky we see. And up there is water.’

‘What nonsense.’

‘It is true. And if you don’t ask for forgiveness in time, you’ll burn in hell for eternity.’

‘You don’t believe that yourself, do you?’

'I'm going to heaven.'

'Where you're not allowed to drink.'

'Heaven is paradise, everything is there.'

'This is my paradise, here and now. I don't have to wait until I die.'

'In heaven there is no strife, only peace.'

'And rice pudding with golden spoons? How boring is that.'

'Thanks for the chat, I learned a lot.'

'Give my regards to Jesus. I hope I haven't converted you.'

'Good afternoon, Julia, Arie here.'

Arie, what a very Dutch name. Julia imagined Emma's face if she introduced him to her. She would probably burst out laughing, just like she used to do. Painfully Julia thought back to the weekends with Emma. How many times they had had a good laugh together.

'Good afternoon, Arie. I'm working in my studio today, making a sculpture of all my dates. When would you like to model?'

'Whenever you like. Nude? I don't mind being naked, I am naked now. Is that bad?'

'Do what you can't resist.'

'When are you going to play with clay again?'

'Tomorrow.'

'I'm going to have to check some diaries.'

'Do you have more than one? Busy man.'

'One for work and one private. How much time do you need to look at a model?'

'Posing does take several hours.'

'Sitting still for hours?'

'Occasionally you get breaks and drinks.'

'Nice that you take care of everything. And naked besides!'

'In your dreams.'

'Hi Julia, it's Dave from Borgerhout. Do you have any plans for tomorrow?'

'Not really. Do you?'

'Will we go for a ride to the sea? I feel like getting a breath of fresh air.'

'Why not? I love Ostend.'

'I don't like long chats, I'm more for real life. We're grown-ups, aren't we? If it doesn't click, then so be it.'

‘Indeed, pictures and words can be misleading. Will you pick me up tomorrow morning?’

‘At eight o’clock? Then we’ll be out before rush hour.’

‘That should work.’

‘We’ll take a rest lying on the beach.’

‘What do you want to do? Swim, walk, eat something? Matter of clothing.’

‘Make sure you’re prepared for everything.’

‘I’ll leave my high heels at home anyway.’

‘Those can go in the boot.’

Julia loved spontaneous actions and was looking forward to a day by the sea. Apparently it was too good to be true, the same evening the man called to cancel. He was working as a maître d’hôtel in a fancy restaurant in Antwerp. Someone had fallen ill and he had to fill in. He was furious with his boss, he told her.

‘Maybe we can go for a walk together on Sunday?’ Julia suggested. ‘Then you can show me your Antwerp. I’m just an immigrant.’

‘Agreed. In any case we’ll make a nice afternoon of it.’

‘Sure. I’ve met men on Tinder who later became friends, without anything more.’

‘That’s nice for you, but personally I go for the right woman.’

‘Working in the catering industry means clocking up a lot of hours, doesn’t it?’

‘Indeed, but I’m used to that. It’s annoying when you’re in a relationship though.’

‘Or not at all. You don’t have to do everything together, I think. That lasts the longest.’

‘Perhaps an inappropriate question: how important do you think sexuality is in a relationship, Julia?’

‘Go to sleep now Dave, you have to get up early tomorrow.’

‘I don’t start until eleven, but I do indeed get up early every morning.’

‘To walk the dog?’

‘To walk myself. Are you already in bed?’

‘In my king-size bed.’

‘I’m coming over! I can manage a night without sleep.’

‘Tight plan.’

‘You better start getting ready.’



‘Do you actually get more proposals like this?’  
‘It happens.’  
‘So you’re good on the Tinder market?’  
‘Quite good. I think you’re a pretty female. Are you open to us?’  
‘I agreed for a walk in town.’  
‘Shall I come over now?’  
‘Not too soon, stranger.’  
‘Do you like everything in sex?’  
‘I beg your pardon?’  
‘It was a joke.’  
‘You have a strange sense of humour, Dave. Goodbye.’

Julia had decided it was worth a try, and took the train to Leuven. Her date wanted to go for a walk with her in a nature reserve in Heverlee. He seemed to her a civilised man, fluent with the pen. Besides, she needed a walk and some company.

Danny picked her up at the Martelarenplein in his expensive BMW. He looked very ordinary, she observed. Neutral, devoid of charisma, a grey mouse. That’s why he needed the car, she thought as she got in, to transcend his ordinariness. The man was not only dull in appearance, he was also bleak in intercourse. Even the walk was boring, an endless, straight path through a newly planted forest. To make it even worse, it was starting to rain. Danny was anticipating everything, she had expected nothing else. He opened his umbrella and as if it was the most natural thing in the world, he put an arm around her shoulders.

‘That way you won’t get wet.’

Julia stiffened for a moment but she didn’t let it show.

The rain stopped as suddenly as it had started. Danny closed his umbrella and put his arm around her shoulder again.

‘This is more fun, isn’t it?’

Julia found his behaviour presumptuous and shook off the arm, making the pretence of rummaging a bit in her bag. Was it because she was on Tinder, she wondered, that all these men just assumed they could touch her? She shuddered at the thought of him trying again and suggested going for a drink. He took her to a brasserie.

Danny worked for television as an editor, but he had been fed up with his job for years, he complained with a pitiful, displeased face. Still, he

didn't want to leave his job; he would miss out on all the perks he had accrued.

When it came to paying, he meticulously divided the bill in two, leaving a tip was apparently not an option. The fancier the car, the more frugal the man, Julia concluded resignedly.

The grey mouse gave her a lift back to the station, speeding up. Did he want to get rid of her quickly, now that he felt there was no approach? He cursed loudly at a car that stayed in the left-hand lane for too long for his liking. Honking, he passed it on the right.

'A nigger! You see? It's a nigger again!'

Julia was silent in bewilderment. What a lout. As they drove into the city centre, she asked him to stop the car. He looked at her questioningly.

'I want to get out,' she said simply, 'now!'

He did as she asked. She got out and didn't give the arrogant jerk another glance.

'Hi Julia. I look at your pictures and I enjoy myself. You are a handsome woman. Fancy a drink tomorrow?'

'Hi Rudy. Why not?'

'I wish it was already tomorrow.'

'It will come soon enough. Time flies.'

The next evening she sent the man a message: 'I'm leaving in a moment for the Café Zeezicht.'

Once she took a seat at a table inside, she saw that she had mistakenly sent the message to Steve. That's what happened when you were involved with different men, she sighed.

'What does Zeezicht mean?' he asked.

'Sorry, the message was meant for a date.'

'A sex date?'

'Zeezicht means: sea view.'

'It sounds magnetic. Is it a sex date?'

'Who knows?'

'I thought you loved me, Julia.'

'Did you love me?'

'I could have. I cared about you a lot.'

'That's not enough.'

'You're greedy. What more do you want?'

‘I want everything.’

‘Everything from me?’

‘Everything from everything.’

At the little table behind Julia an older couple were arguing. She had seen them here before, after a few beers the discussion invariably became more heated until it turned into an argument and they scolded each other. Julia couldn’t help but overhear the conversation, they were talking in a loud tone.

‘I am quite satisfied. Still, there is one thing I would love to do one day, go on a trip. Even if it’s only for three days,’ the woman complained.

‘Surely not this year?’ the man replied, playing startled.

‘I am sick and tired of you!’ his spouse shouted venomously. She got up and disappeared outside to go for a smoke.

‘Julia?’

A rather young-looking man in a long, black coat introduced himself to her. He looked a bit like Paul McCartney. Julia had clicked on him mainly because she was interested in his job. He was a craftsman, a specialist in tile setting, authentic ceramic tiles. She asked about it and he started talking animatedly. He usually had rich customers, he boasted, they lived in expensive houses and wanted the very best. He bragged about the money he earned from them and flaunted famous names. Panamarenko had even become a friend of his.

‘Is he a fascinating man?’ Julia asked.

‘He himself thinks it’s unbelievable how much money they pay for his creations. They shouldn’t be so stupid, he keeps saying.’ Rudy went on about the subject, talking endlessly about castles and how good he was at his job. He thought himself highly interesting but he wasn’t, Julia thought. On the contrary. What a waste of time. She yawned. He saw it and changed the subject.

‘You’re forty-two, I’ve seen, I’m only thirty-eight. Can you handle that, a young foal?’ He winked delightedly.

‘You are getting older too.’

‘That’s true, but the years between us remain the same.’ He clearly took pleasure in it.

Behind her the altercation had restarted. Julia had had enough, of the bickering couple as well as of the chatterbox at her table. She stood up and turned to the couple.

‘Have you been married for a long time?’ she asked at random. Instantly the angry looks disappeared. Enthralled they looked at each other.

‘For twenty-five years and I haven’t regretted it for one moment,’ the man said, taking his wife’s hand. She began to blush.

‘Congratulations,’ Julia said evenly. She didn’t understand, what a strange world it was. She took her bag and waved at her date as a sign of goodbye. Surprised, he looked at her.

‘Have a good evening, Rudy.’

It became increasingly clear to Julia that her search was hopeless. Finding a suitable partner on Tinder was an illusion. Finding a steady partner was an illusion anyway. Why would you want to find a steady partner? she wondered. No matter how she turned it around, each time she came to the same answer: because of George. To find someone who loved and appreciated you for who you were.

Sometimes she thought he was watching her. She was thinking about him during a summer evening under her tree. A leaf fell on her lap.

‘Hi George,’ she whispered with emotion. If he saw her like this, he would laugh at her, she knew. He would laugh at her but he had never thought her silly. He had always made her feel good.

It seemed like the missing was getting even stronger. She scrolled back through the chat with him. Oscar Wilde was right when he wrote: *I never travel without my diary; a person should always have something sensational to read on the train.* Her exchange of words with George may not have been sensational, but it did show purity and tenderness. She considered herself lucky for his beautiful words.

For the umpteenth time she relived all the moments with him, enjoying, laughing, weeping. Her heart bled; this could have been a great love. Retrieving memories was harrowing and intense. She was glad she could feel, the feeling was pure. Sharp and clear she saw his face before her, the moment she had said goodbye to him the last time. His intense gaze, as if he knew it would be the last time. She considered herself lucky for that last image of him.

She resolved never to postpone anything again, to go for love before it was too late. If love would ever present itself again. She would also never again care about a man’s position in society, what studies he had done, what work he did, whether he had tattoos or smoked or drank. That was

not what mattered. George had been a simple roofer. It took him forever to type a sentence on his old-fashioned mobile phone, but how beautifully he had been able to put it into words. Julia felt guilty because she had doubted him for that reason at first. Only briefly, because he had quickly convinced her otherwise. She considered herself lucky to have known him. What an honour.

*Into my arms* was playing on the radio. Moved, she listened to the Australian bard's all-encompassing words. That was how he had looked at her, George, she became vividly aware of that once again. He had idolised her and if it were in his power, he would ask the angels to watch over her. He was inside her, forever. This love would never pass.

# The Gentleman

Sander was a lighting engineer, producing designs and quotations for companies and shops.

‘Good morning, Julia, how is your Saturday morning? I just got back from the bakery.’

Julia was in Ghent. Her son was going to friends on the coast for a long weekend and his student room was free, he had told her. She gratefully took advantage of that. In Ghent she felt at home, more than in Antwerp.

‘Very relaxed. I’m having breakfast with Jules.’

‘Jules?’

She sent a picture of the ginger tomcat, nestled next to the record player on the sofa.

‘A tiger in sheepskin?’

‘Indeed, he looks cuter than he is. He likes jazz. Every time I put on *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis, he crawls onto the sofa.’

‘A cat that knows its world. Have you tried other artists? Classical music?’

‘I don’t think my son has classical albums.’

‘So what are you going to do this weekend in the Artevelde City?’

‘Go for a walk through the city centre and have a drink at the Galgenhuisje.’

‘A Gentse strop? Or a Gruut?’

‘Maybe both. And afterwards there are two free concerts, I’m not sure which to choose.’

‘To choose is to lose.’

‘It’s a luxury problem.’

‘I don’t consider it that way.’

‘Have you had that problem also?’

‘That problem poses itself this week, Julia.’

‘And have you figured it out yet?’

‘Maybe tonight, or tomorrow. Maybe I won’t choose. Or I’ll postpone the choice a bit longer. Time brings counsel.’

‘You have to make choices in your life, Sander, otherwise they will be made for you.’

‘Wise words but it’s difficult. I don’t want to hurt or make anyone sad.’

‘You hurt even more if you are not honest. Do you have two relationships then?’

‘Two contacts through Tinder at a stage where deciding can’t be put off much longer.’

‘Have you met them yet?’

‘One of them. With the other I only had a chat.’

‘I don’t think the first one left enough of an impression, so you should give the other one a chance.’

Before the concert Julia had a drink at the Kiosko, a cosy open-air bar beside the river. She sent a picture of her amber beer with a piece of her bare knee, mindful of George.

‘You honour the god Bacchus. By the way, you’ve got lovely legs.’

‘I know.’

‘I’ve already received several legs, and occasionally a breast.’

‘Really?’

‘Do you have nice breasts?’

‘I knew that was coming. I don’t just expose them to every stranger.’

‘Have you had many dates?’

‘Not serious ones, not here anyway. In Spain I did.’

‘Then I guess we’ll never meet. Or do we meet up abroad?’

‘I’m going back to Málaga soon, I have a double room.’

‘A double bed?’

‘*Si señor*. But maybe it’s best to meet up in Antwerp first.’

‘Good. H.A.N.D.’

‘?’

‘Have A Nice Day.’

The next morning Sander asked how she made coffee.

‘Surely not a Senseo? Or Nespresso?’

‘No, I swear by Italian Bialetti.’

‘Me too! I have three different models. For my part, it’s the tastiest coffee there is.’

‘I buy my coffee in the Oxfam shop, Bio Highland mostly.’

‘Highland? Isn’t that a whisky?’

‘Also tasty.’

‘Do you like whisky?’

‘Yes I do. I used to sail and after a hard trip I could easily knock one back.’

‘Do you have a preference for a particular whisky?’

‘Glenmorangie perhaps?’

‘A women’s whisky.’

‘Says who? Are you a connoisseur?’

‘I like Glenkinchie.’

‘I’ll stick to coffee today.’

Julia waited on the heated terrace of the familiar Café Zeezicht for her date. It was already October but under the lamp it was quite pleasant. She saw a stylish man approaching on a folding bicycle; he parked his bike and locked it. He searched her with his eyes, gave a token of recognition and walked towards her. On his way to her he was stopped by a woman sitting alone at a small table. They chatted for a minute, then he came further.

‘Good evening. That woman over there also had a date, she asked if I was the one she was waiting for.’

Julia laughed, happy that her date had turned up. They ordered a bottle of rosé and some vegetarian tapas. Sander began to talk animatedly in civilised Dutch. Julia meanwhile watched him; he was handsome, sophisticated and considerate. Not exactly her type, was her first impression. A bit too brushed-up.

Sander thought she was cool, he said, looking at her mischievously. He had something of the air of a playful child. While they were chatting, the hours flew by. They ordered another bottle and more tapas. Every now and then he stuck an olive in her mouth. His knee touched hers under the table, deliberately. She didn’t mind; he was pleasant company. Intelligent and interested.

She went home with him. He pushing his bike, she on foot, they walked towards the city centre. Sander was temporarily living in the studio of some acquaintances, he told her. He had not been alone for long and was looking for a permanent place to stay.

‘It’s not my furniture,’ he warned her, ‘and it’s certainly not my choice.’

From his car in the garage he retrieved a bottle of whisky. Then they took the lift to the fifth floor. The tiny studio was dominated by a huge, red leather bed.



‘A round bed? I’ve always dreamt of that!’ Julia dropped onto the bed laughing. Sander poured two whiskies and joined her.

Watching the sun rise over the rooftops of Antwerp in a round bed in the arms of an amiable stranger - there were worse things in life, Julia realised that morning after a wonderful night. Sander had turned out to be a considerate lover. Sweet, adept and virile.

‘Sex or coffee?’ he asked smiling, when he saw she was awake.

‘Coffee?’ she tried as she stretched.

‘Coffee, tea or me?’

Julia laughed and turned to him.

‘You can choose two things,’ he whispered in her ear. ‘Tea I don’t have.’

It was Sunday. Sander had an appointment with his children and had to leave. Julia walked home. She wasn’t sure what to make of it. He was a bit over the top, a bit too ideal-son-like. But one who lived mainly from his car, she had noticed. Maybe he was not divorced at all, maybe he had been up to something and was now waiting to be allowed back to his family. She found him a bit secretive, he did not reveal himself. They did have some things in common, she had found. Their fondness for sailing, whisky and black coffee, among other things. She decided to wait and see, rather than expect anything from him.

On the radio, later that day, she heard a conversation about Tinder. A hug would be at least as important as sex, was one of the conclusions of the study in question.

That night he was back.

‘Hello, Julia.’

‘Hello, Sander. How are things in the red round bed? It was a new experience for me.’

‘Last night it went very well. Today I’m keeping it sober, I have to get up early.’

‘Life is hard.’

‘It didn’t feel that way this weekend.’

‘I’m free tomorrow. I’ll turn over again in bed when your alarm clock goes off.’

‘I’d rather turn over with you.’

He sent her a link to an article on why morning sex would be better than coffee: it doesn't dehydrate you, it's free and it doesn't stress you out. On the contrary, it energises you and makes you happy.

'Are you convinced?' he asked teasingly.

'No, I go for both, sex and coffee. Women can do two things at the same time.'

'I prefer to concentrate and fully enjoy one single activity. Multitasking seems to be a fable. One thing at a time, that's the only way to do things well.'

'Man talk.'

'Just check on the internet.'

'You shouldn't believe everything on the internet.'

'Good morning, Julia. Still turning over or already on the coffee?'

'Craving a coffee, I'll make myself a pot.'

'I'm always craving, not just a coffee.'

'I noticed that in your red bed. I have a red sofa.'

'Have you tested it extensively?'

'Probably not as often as your red bed.'

'I've only been sleeping in that round bed for a year and I haven't shared it with many women. With far fewer than you probably think.'

'With men then?'

'I'm straight, or did you doubt that last Saturday?'

'You don't know what you're missing.'

'Tell me what I'm missing.'

'I didn't doubt you.'

'You were the third in the red bed, and as far as sex was concerned, you certainly didn't come third. Do you have a big bed?'

'Yes, but not a round one. One with four corners.'

'Have you seen all those corners?'

'Many times.'

'I've never seen the corners of my bed.'

'You can't pick a side on a round planet. Or in a round bed. I had a dream last night.'

'A nightmare?'

'I prefer a stallion.'

'A night stallion? Where do you find those?'

'It's a rare breed. Maybe somewhere in the wild.'

'Have you come across any in Belgium?'

'Are you fishing for compliments?'

'Have they run out?'

'It was a nice round bed.'

'That's not a compliment.'

'I'm going to cook for some friends today. They're coming to repair my table.'

'That seems right up my street. What kind of table is it?'

'A heavy, teak monastery table. It wobbles a bit.'

'I'm a wood lover. I certainly wouldn't put screws in it.'

'Do you think the table will scream 'ouch'?''

'Do you want to test the table thoroughly afterwards?'

'It's not a round table, though.'

'It's not a bed either.'

'And not red.'

'Have you done it on a table before?'

'Drinking coffee? Many times.'

'If I need to come and test, just give me a call.'

'Good morning, Julia. How long are you going to Málaga for?'

'Hi Sander. I'm staying for fifteen nights.'

'You count in nights, so it's also fifteen mornings. Will I see you before you leave?'

'That's fine. Shall I cook you something? What do you like?'

'An appetiser on the reinforced table?'

'What about my red sofa?'

'That's more for the main course.'

'A three-course meal? You are overconfident, aren't you?'

'Overconfident not, just greedy. Two courses then?'

'I'd better make you spinach.'

'Are you free next Friday night?'

'That's my regular night at my friend's place. Will you pick me up there? I showed her your picture, she thinks you're handsome.'

'Do you think I'm handsome?'

'I think you're quite suitable to come and sit as a model in the studio. Or lie.'

‘What do you prefer?’

‘I like variety.’

‘Don’t I have to audition to be a model? Or have I already done that without knowing?’

‘We are quite strict, but I put in a good word. You have been approved.’

‘You’re too good. How can I thank you?’

‘I’ll think of something.’

‘Is your friend also a member at the studio?’

‘What friend?’

‘The one who thinks I’m handsome.’

‘You’re vain.’

‘Shall I put on my suit on Friday?’

‘Just be yourself.’

‘Do you think men in suits are handsome?’

‘Yes, but I mostly like casual.’

‘I like variety.’

‘Also with women?’

‘Not really.’

‘Is that a yes or a no?’

‘No. And you? Are you a butterfly?’

‘I did some fluttering in Spain. They were lovely experiences.’

‘With Pablo?’

‘No Pablo.’

‘Pedro?’

‘Oscar, Jose, Alberto, Ricardo, Enrique, Lorenzo, Juan.’

‘A different Spaniard for every day of the week.’

Sander joined her for a glass of wine at Emma’s on Friday. Just like the first time he was gallant and obliging. Later he went home with Julia. It was the first time she had made love in her little house in the beguine, in her own bed.

Still somewhat sleepy she observed him that morning at her kitchen table as he sat working on his laptop. Good-humoured, stylishly dressed, a true gentleman. He admired her collection of ceramic statues and said goodbye. She crawled back into bed, seeing the imprint of his head still in the pillow. She pressed her nose into it and sniffed his scent, as George had done.

*When the demigods disappear, the real gods appear,* she had once read. Sander came close to a god, but a god you never had for yourself, Julia knew all too well. He loved beautiful things, that was clear, and beautiful women. *I hope that I don't fall in love with you,* she hummed. She waited for his messages and felt stupid. She didn't want to fall in love. Then her mood would depend on the messages she got or didn't get and Málaga would lose some of its lustre because he wouldn't be there.

'What do you keep looking for in Málaga?' Emma asked when Julia told her she had booked another flight. 'There are so many other places to visit.'

How could she put this feeling into words? The lack, the nostalgia, the sadness that overwhelmed her at times.

'I believe I am in love with the country, the city, the people.'

'Why can't you be content with what you have here? Your son, your job, your friends. You have a nice life here, don't you?'

'I do. I find it hard to explain. Málaga is my addiction.'

'I can't hear the word Málaga anymore,' Emma said, suddenly bitter. Julia was startled; she didn't know her friend like that.

'I love living here, Emma, but part of me is yonder. You have your roots in Antwerp, you were born here, your family lives here. I'm just an immigrant in the city. I don't really have a bond, I'm not attached here.'

'I think you're going to leave me soon.'

'Don't worry, I always come back. Shall I leave you? Maybe you'd rather be alone.'

'No, please stay. Sorry, don't mind me.'

'Maybe you're right. What am I searching for there?'

'What about that Sander from that round bed? He seemed quite suitable.'

'With him I could fall in love, I think, but I'd better not. I don't think he'll choose me.'

'You can't control that, can you? Falling in love? You either are or you are not.'

'Maybe you can stop it.'

'Who are you going to visit in Málaga this time? Didn't you have a match with a Belgian man in Spain last time?'

'With Peter, that's right but he didn't respond.'

'And you're sure it was him?'

‘Very sure, he has hardly changed at all. Of course he has aged, he is also a lot older than me, but essentially he has remained the same. He called himself Pedro on Tinder. It’s him.’

Julia showed Emma the pictures from his profile.

‘Maybe his photos are being abused on social media, you’ve seen that before, haven’t you? Maybe he’s dead, or something else is going on.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Julia said worriedly. ‘He used to claim he didn’t want to grow old. He was going to drink himself to death before he was sixty, he always said.’

‘You see? Didn’t he have any family or friends here you could consult?’

‘He had a brother who worked at the bookshop the Slegte in Antwerp, I could try there. Thanks for the tip, Emma.’

Emma gave Julia a kiss before she left. That was not her habit; they were both not huggers by nature.

‘Sorry,’ she said again.

Lost in thought, Julia walked home. Perhaps she was indeed too preoccupied with herself, with Spain. Maybe she didn’t have to look that far. Maybe she should just stop looking. What was she actually looking for?

‘Hi Julia. Have you forgotten me again? Are you too busy for me?’

‘Hi Steve. I was busy watching the sunrise from a red, round bed.’

‘Details?’

‘Of the sunrise? Beautiful red. The sheets were red too.’

‘That bed is your red thread?’

‘What is your thread?’

‘I lost the thread.’

‘Are you still working in Scotland?’

‘Indeed. I feel captivated by the melancholy of the rural environment. The wisdom of the cow has taught me a lot.’

‘Such as?’

‘Sometimes ruminating is better than digesting, it’s truly a life lesson. Or this one: don’t let yourself be milked.’

‘Long live the cow! I’d propose to one if I were you.’

‘No way, I’ve made that mistake before.’

‘It didn’t work out?’

‘It was a cow that behaved like a calf. Her milk was also quite sour. She grazes on a different pasture now.’

‘A greener pasture?’

‘Definitely not red. How do you make love in a round bed?’

‘No details.’

‘Will that round bed get a second chance?’

‘Maybe. A question: what do you prefer in the morning, coffee or sex?’

‘First a cigarette, then sex, then another cigarette, then coffee. And you?’

‘First coffee.’

‘So I suppose the sex wasn’t great.’

‘Spicy, mild and aromatic.’

From Málaga Julia sent a picture of sun, sea and beach to Sander. He immediately called her.

‘That’s telepathy, I was just thinking about you.’

‘It’s not too late to come over.’

‘Unfortunately I don’t have holidays. Just send some rays of sunshine towards Belgium.’

‘I don’t know if my rays reach that far. Where are you on this Sunday?’

‘At the beach in Ostend. And you?’

‘I’m having breakfast in the Plaza de la Merced.’

‘No morning sex?’

‘That’s not on the programme.’

‘Who makes the programme?’

‘I do.’

‘Did you get your dose of oxytocin from the Spanish men yet?’

‘Oxytocin? What kind of a beast is that?’

‘It’s the cuddle hormone, a feeling of happiness which releases when you cuddle. You feel it when you hug your partner, for example, but also when you hold a child or pet a dog.’

‘What an erudite man you are. And you? Have you had your dose yet?’

‘I had mine this morning and it was delicious.’

Julia had expected something like this, yet for a moment she felt a stab of jealousy.

‘From whom? From a child or a dog?’

‘Pardon? There was a woman lying next to me and this morning she crawled extra close against me.’

‘I’m glad you’re successful.’

‘And you? How’s Tinder going?’

‘Not tonight, darling.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve had enough for a while.’

‘Of me?’

‘You are perhaps the most normal of all the men I’ve come across. Crooked, sick, dead, etc.’

‘When are you coming back?’

‘I’m staying here.’

‘Really?’

‘If only it were true.’

‘Maybe you could start a ceramics shop there.’

‘Then I need some starting capital.’

‘Give me three numbers, I’ll pick three too and I’ll play the lottery tonight.’

‘Thanks.’

Oxytocin, Julia mused, while she messaged him the numbers. She herself often had a feeling of happiness when she was alone. Doing her own thing, listening to music through her earphones, learning Spanish, looking up words, musing a bit.

‘I don’t think there always has to be another person around to have that feeling of happiness,’ she continued.

‘What you’re talking about is separate from this. Oxytocin is only released during cuddling.’

‘Anyway, I stop looking. *No busco, encuentro*, as Picasso said. *I don’t search, I find*. In Málaga everything comes naturally my way, from the very first time I was here. I constantly walk around with a feeling of happiness. Life is hard, but not in Málaga.’

‘Life in Belgium is not so hard at all.’

‘If you get enough oxytocin?’

‘For example.’

‘I’m going to take the bus to Torrox where a former friend of mine lives. See you later.’



# The Writer

Before Julia had left for Málaga, she had stopped by the bookstore De Slegte. Ludo, Peter's brother, had not worked there for years, she learned, but they still had his email address. Julia briefly wrote him her story and sent along pictures of his brother. A few days later she got an email back from Peter himself.

*Hello Julia,*

*I am indeed a retired Belgian who moved to Spain. And in May, on the advice of friends who were staying with me at the time, I went on Tinder for a few days. As I have been single for a long time, they had created a profile for me, but it was nothing for me. It is too fast and fleeting for me. I immediately cancelled my account and deleted the app. I remember having a few matches but I didn't realise at all that you were one of them. I can imagine it must have come across as rather odd.*

*How nice that you work in a bookshop, I'll definitely drop by when I'm in Belgium again. I'm still an avid reader, probably a dying breed.*

*Greetings, saludos, Pedro*

Julia was reassured and glad to have heard from Peter. Or Pedro, as he allowed himself to be called from now on. He lived in Torrox, he told her, about fifty kilometres east of Málaga, and invited her to visit whenever she was in the area. Meanwhile they told each other about their lives via WhatsApp.

'How did you end up in Spain?'

'I had been planning it for a long time. In recent years I always went on holiday to Andalusia and I felt at home here. I was able to retire early and I left immediately. Since February I've been renting a flat on an annual basis.'

'I have exactly the same dream. Last year in Málaga I fell in love with a Scot, then I fell in love with the city.'

'You still fall in love? That's wonderful! Málaga is a nice city. I first planned to live there, but then I decided to choose a more quiet place.'

'After the Scot it became a Spaniard. He doesn't say much, he doesn't drink, but he's a good listener.'

'Then you are going to see him again soon?'

‘I’ll go back in November, he’s waiting for me. Maybe you know him?’

Julia sent the latest selfie with Picasso.

‘Be careful! He’s a Don Juan.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘I like Modigliani better. *How do you make love with a cube?* Modigliani asked Picasso. Pablo didn’t find it funny.’

‘Modigliani drank himself to death, or almost anyway. You always liked those romantic figures.’

‘That’s true. I read Frida Kahlo’s diary quite often.’

‘Did you ever regret your move?’

‘Not one moment. I miss my daughter, but she comes to visit me in the holidays. And a chilled Stella Artois, sometimes I miss that too.’

‘Do you know Cervecería Mapamundi in Málaga? They serve Belgian beers.’

‘Let’s meet there in November.’

The next Saturday Julia sat with her son on the heated terrace of the bar Galgenhuisje in Ghent. She told him about Peter in Torrox and asked him to take a picture of herself holding a frothy Stella.

‘You haven’t changed one bit in those, say, twenty years,’ Peter responded.

‘There’s a group of Spaniards sitting next to us. Guess where they’re from?’

‘Málaga?’

‘Indeed, it’s a small world.’ She took a picture of the group.

‘The one on the left is my son,’ she wrote.

‘He looks like a *malagueño* too!’ She had better not respond to that. ‘How old is he?’

‘He turned twenty in April.’

‘*Buenos días, Spain!*’

‘Good afternoon, *Bélgica!*’

‘Shall we continue chatting in Spanish? I’d love to learn the language. You probably speak it fluently by now.’

‘*Vale! Vamonos!*’

They continued communication in Spanish, with much cutting and pasting on her part.

‘What do you do in Spain to fill your day?’

‘Today I went walking along the beach, swimming in the pool and then I took a siesta on the sofa. It was a busy day.’

‘What a life. Do you still read so much?’

‘That’s the thing I like best.’

‘Can I bring you something from the bookshop?’

‘Please do. *Kitchen Confessions* by Anthony Bourdain.’ He forwarded a link, Julia read the brief contents.

‘Rough lifestyle of sex, drugs and rock’n roll between the pans. That sounds interesting.’

‘I can order it here, but shipping costs from Belgium are more expensive than the book itself.’

‘Belgian private mail will come to you personally by plane, free of charge.’

‘In nice packaging.’

‘I have space enough. I don’t need to bring winter clothes.’

‘In November it can be cold here.’

‘I’ve been in Málaga in November. I went swimming in the sea every day.’

‘Wasn’t the water too cold?’

‘Not for a Belgian Viking woman.’

‘I’m an old Belgian, old but brave! *Valiente*. I had to look up that word.’

‘I have to look up every word.’

‘You do it very well, looking up.’

‘I can understand a lot of Spanish by now, if they don’t speak too fast. But speaking and writing are still difficult.’

‘That’s normal, we’re beginners. And they rattle like a machine gun here.’

‘You live there so you can practise every day. I’m counting on your help, *maestro*.’

‘After a few glasses of wine it gets easier.’

‘Are you speaking from experience?’

‘*Claro*. But of course then they won’t understand me.’

‘Do you talk to your neighbours sometimes?’

‘Certainly. A Brit, a German, a Basque and a Belgian. Next week a friend from Lier is coming over, he wants to move to here too. We’re going to look for a flat for him.’

‘If you happen to be in Málaga city centre, will you say hello to my friend Carmen in her bar Las Camborias?’

‘*Claro que si*. Of course.’

‘But be careful, the bar is full of strong, feminist women.’

‘Then it will be for another time.’

‘They are tired of being oppressed. They are fed up with Spanish machos, but I think Belgians are very much in demand. Las Camborias is my home in Málaga. I like the mentality there, relaxed and cheerful.’

‘And all problems are for *mañana*, tomorrow.’

‘Carmen is very picky, though. I had a friend, George, a Scot who lived most of his life in Australia. She was not fond of him.’

‘Ah, Scotland. I walked the Great Glen Way once. Beautiful country, beautiful people. My best trip ever.’

‘Lots of fog, though. I visited Glasgow and Edinburgh last year.’

‘A music band in every bar. And good whisky. And islands. And raaaaaain!’

‘That’s the reason they drink whisky, I think. I’ve also done it on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh.’

‘That’s Scotland all over: whisky, dark clouds and bagpipes.’

‘Travelling is wonderful, isn’t it?’

‘I always say: a man is not made to work but to travel and to play.’

‘You’re quite right to have fled grey Belgium.’

‘You bet. I’m retired and still running out of time.’

‘Let’s start with a walk around Málaga, I know my way around there.’

‘Me too, but after a few rounds ...’

‘I also did many laps around the church tower before I found my room again in the rain. When it rains in Málaga, it rains.’

‘In Torrox too. In March there was a deluge here, the streets were rivers.’

‘But you live high and dry?’

‘I live about fifty metres above sea level.’

‘Good for you. I’ve already seen bar terraces washed away.’

‘That’s right. They don’t know what a drain is here, the water just runs through the streets. A boat is more convenient than a car.’

‘I do like boating. I have a sailing licence.’

‘Have you sailed much?’

‘For about ten years. But the wind is constantly changing. This time it’s blowing me south.’

‘Good morning, Spain. Finally it’s weekend.’

‘For me it’s always weekend.’

Do you remember you used to say you didn’t want to grow old? You would drink yourself to death, you claimed, just like Nicolas Cage in the film *Leaving Las Vegas*. I’m glad you chose sunny Spain for your suicide.’

‘I intend to live some more. I am too busy to die, I still have at least a thousand books to read.’

‘Are you satisfied with your life in Spain?’

‘I am balanced, as they say.’

‘I’m glad to hear that. I don’t know many people who are happy.’

‘It’s a problem of this century. Life moves too fast, staying yourself is an art. Welcome to Spain, here everything goes much slower.’

‘Even for a restless nature like me?’

‘No, probably not for you.’

‘And for you?’

‘Maybe in ten years’ time?’

‘How do you fill your days?’

‘Reading, drinking, reading ...’

‘Are you still writing?’

Peter was a writer when they met. Not that he had ever published anything or had any intention of doing so, but he wrote.

‘Yes, but it’s one big mess.’

‘Fiction?’

‘I try to make fiction out of it. I still prefer to read a good book. If I don’t find one anymore, I’ll have to write one myself.’

‘Good strategy.’

‘There are too many good books. I’m too busy.’

‘With reading, drinking ...’

‘And walking and swimming and thinking.’

‘I wish I had more time too. I need a holiday, urgently.’

‘Patience, Julia.’

‘Waiting is not my strongest point.’

‘I remember that.’

‘Really? I remember your letters.’

‘I don’t.’

‘I kept them because I thought they were beautiful.’

‘They were written by a naive young man. Throw them away!’