

50 shades of dating

3

El número 50

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CHEE WEBB

Trilogy

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

To all the men I loved before

We're only here for a short time.

Let's make it interesting.

- Nina Simone



It was February. The graceful branches of the immense jacarandas reached up into the bright blue sky. The originally subtropical shrubs and the pigeons flying from tree to tree were unaware of any discomfort and did not care about social distancing. Spring was all about new life, and radiated joy. Even the statue of Picasso on its bench would effortlessly stand the test of time, impervious to weather, wind and viruses. Julia took the requisite selfie for her collection.

As she stood up, she noticed the silhouette of another man, a real one, also on a bench. He hid his face in his hands, she saw. His posture radiated sadness and despondency. Her heart went out to him. Suddenly he raised his head, their gazes crossed. For a moment the world stood still. There was no world. The branches did not move in the wind, the birds stiffened in their flight, the sound of tourists on the crowded bar terraces fell away. *Collision course*, she remembered the term from her sailing years. For a moment she hesitated, then she turned and walked on. The magic was over.

Once more she looked back, the man staring blankly ahead. He must be a vagrant, she thought, or a drug addict. Pain, she had read in his eyes, pain and emptiness. *Solitaire*, she hummed along in her head the song by The Carpenters, *the only game in town*. But it wasn't just the sight of loneliness that had struck her, she couldn't put her finger on it, but something else had been there.

That night in her cottage in El Palo by the sea, Julia thought back to the lone man on the bench. The image had stayed with her. She had felt a kind of connection, recognition, something. She had let it go, the idea of finding a love in the city of her dreams. The culture was too different and the language barrier too unbridgeable. She shook off the dream and forgot the incident.



Two thousand and twenty-one had been a year of fear, pain, grief, misery, mistrust and uncertainty. A year of pandemic. The accursed Covid-19 had transformed the entire world into a nightmare of mouth masks, gloves and disinfectant gel. Everyone was afraid of this invisible but deadly enemy. We had to keep our distance and were not allowed to give the usual two kisses if we met an acquaintance. Even a handshake could turn fatal. That was hard to understand for a southern type like me. In Spain everyone embraced each other, at every opportunity.

After months of confinement, on the advice of scientists and epidemiologists, government authorities very cautiously allowed us to finally get back on the streets. But the compulsory isolation had taken its toll on thousands of families. All the feelings of tension, instability and fear of unemployment had accumulated during those months of isolation into a ticking time bomb that could lead to an explosion at any time. And I was one of the unfortunate ones in whom divorce was the inevitable consequence of this calamity.

Slowly but surely the spectre of hopelessness strangled the once close ties of my family until we nearly suffocated, finally exploding in an eruption of anger and recrimination. Each had their own reasons. After a difficult time of despair and desperation my wife finally came up with the solution: a mutual agreement to divorce, which meant leaving my house, the house where my children lived, my home of so many years.

Embittered, I gathered up my most intimate possessions and made my way to my sister's flat, who generously accommodated me. I was heartbroken, dejected and lonely. Alone in my room, in dead silence, I cried bitter tears for days.

Still no tourists had arrived at the hotels where I worked as a photographer, and it would remain that way for months, according to the forecast. After several long, cloistered weeks, the saddest of my existence, I decided to take to the streets every day to walk around my city for a while, trying doggedly not to think about everything that had happened to me. This did not always work out. I saw no light at the end of the tunnel. I had lost everything.

I sat down on the same bench over and over again in the Plaza de la

Merced, under the flowering jacarandas. I did not see the beauty of spring, nor the grandeur of my city. For me it was the heart of winter. Nasty thoughts haunted my mind. Thoughts of suicide. What was I still doing here? Life offered me no prospects.

Dejectedly I watched the daily struggle of the young, blonde street-cleaning lady in the square. Even her fight seemed pointless, as the wind blew the leaves to all corners of the square again and again.

‘Everything passes,’ my sister consoled me every evening. ‘Everything has its time. You will see, your struggle too will come to an end.’

I didn’t believe her. I didn’t see it.

Slowly but surely I regained my emotional composure. I was fortunate to maintain a very good relationship with my ex-wife. But above all the show of love I experienced from my children, over breakfast or lunch on a restaurant terrace, did me good. Still I often had nostalgic relapses. I felt the need to talk to someone, but that did not prove easy. I had many acquaintances but much beyond ‘hello, good morning, good afternoon or good evening’ the chat usually did not progress.

Occasionally I was having a coffee on a terrace and saw a woman sitting alone at a small table with her mobile phone in her hand. Or another with a book. Sometimes they would look in my direction for a moment. In their eyes too I saw the spectre of loneliness. How often I asked myself if it wouldn’t be a bad idea to break the ice, stand up and politely suggest taking a seat at their little table and starting a conversation. But no, the image of possible rejection creates a barrier, an invisible wall you can’t cross. I paid the bill and continued on my solitary path.

One day during my daily, aimless walks I saw a poster hanging behind the window of a bar called El Imperdible. A weekly language exchange would take place here, I read. My curiosity was piqued. My parents were Spanish but I had been born in France and had spent the first nine years of my childhood in Toulon. Except sporadically with my elder sister Esperanza, I did not speak the language with anyone. Maybe this was the chance to boost my knowledge of French and, who knows, meet new people.

A bit hesitantly the next Tuesday evening I made my way to the bar in question in the Soho district and asked the owner about the *intercambio*. He directed me to the terrace. Because of the pandemic, the meeting could

only take place outside for the time being. The group consisted mostly of young people, I saw. Not entirely at ease I introduced myself. I explained that I wanted to meet people to practise French with. I was kindly invited to take a seat on one of the chairs around the large table.

Animated, the people around me were engaged in conversation. They were mostly Spaniards who wanted to learn English or foreigners who wanted to improve their Spanish. The more the evening progressed, the more it became clear to me that French would have little or no place here.

One afternoon I had another difficult day. I felt lonely and sat in the square with my head in my hands, mourning. The umpteenth tourist took a seat on the bench next to Picasso. The umpteenth selfie was taken. Then the woman turned her head towards the statue; she seemed to be talking to it. When she stood up, our gazes crossed. Green eyes, *guiri* eyes, held my gaze for just one moment. Then she turned and walked on.

A little out of sorts I looked after her. What had happened? It seemed like something had touched my heart. It gave me a new touch of hope, a glimpse of a future I had given up on. Maybe this wasn't the end, maybe something else lay ahead of me. *Ojalá*. Hopefully. A little less melancholic than usual I went on my way to my sister's house.

My sister's son advised me to go on Tinder. According to him it was a more effective way to find people my age. I had to buy a smartphone though. At first I hesitated. I had heard of the dating app of course, and the rumours were not all positive. It was said to be an efficient way to find a sex partner. I was also a bit embarrassed for my children. What would they think of their dad looking for another partner right after his divorce? Under no circumstances should they find out.

My nephew assured me that decent and honest people used the app as well. He suggested giving it a shot and helped me install the app and create a profile. Timidly I began the adventure. Immediately I had a few matches. That went fast. After getting acquainted via chat, I suggested to some of the contacts to have a coffee together in the afternoon. Almost all of them took the bait. That went easily.

A few days later I had several new friends. A sympathetic English teacher, an intelligent North American and a *malaqueña* who spoke French. With each of them individually I occasionally met up to have a

nice cup of coffee on a bar terrace. All were around my age, divorced, with grown-up children. With some I noticed the occasional timid attempt at more closeness, I never went into it. I was content with the friendships and the new opportunity life offered me. After my depressive period I had started to revive, I could not expect more. I did not count on finding a new love, that was not my plan. I didn't want to fall in love and I was pretty sure within myself that I would never fall into Cupid's hands again.

It has to be said that Tinder entertained me quite a bit. Occasionally among the contacts there was a lady I didn't like for one reason or another. Then we would have a coffee and I would politely say goodbye. But that rarely happened, most of the time we had a pleasant conversation.

I was surprised that I was so well liked by women, despite my forty-four years of age. Perhaps it was because of my friendly, cordial manner. Since I never became pushy or hands-on, a few of them wondered if I maybe had gay tendencies. They had had other experiences, they said, with men who were usually not so patient or respectful.

And so, little by little, my dejection disappeared and I regained my zest for life.

One fine day I had a match with a woman with the look of a real *guiri*. A foreign one, that was for sure. She could be English, I judged from her profile pictures, or American. She had long dark blonde hair, green eyes and pale skin that was a bit tanned by the sun. I suggested we meet up at the Roman Theatre and she agreed.

About an hour before our date I received a message via Tinder, it was from her, Julia was her name. She's going to call it off, I thought worriedly. I had been looking forward to a Friday night in company. Fortunately she just wanted to make sure I kept the appointment. A little nervous, I set off, not suspecting what the night and fate had in store for me.

In the Calle Alcazabilla I waited as agreed at the glass pyramid. I dreamed away to the romantic music of a flamenco guitarist set up in the square. A stylish woman in a long black dress and with loose hair approached me by surprise from behind. I had not seen her coming. I took her to the Plaza de la Merced where we took a seat on the terrace of the Bar Picasso. There I asked for a *mitad*, a coffee with lots of milk. Julia ordered a white wine. This was the first difference between us that struck me.

At first glance Julia seemed a serious woman, self-assured, aloof. She didn't say much. I asked her questions to which she replied only affirmatively or negatively. The more time went on, the more relaxed she became, I had the impression. She became more confident and laughed spontaneously at my jokes. I suggested a walk to Soho and showed her the place where the language exchange took place every Tuesday; it was closed. She in turn took me to a terrace on top of a hotel in the Plaza de la Marina.

During the fabulous sunset in a pleasant temperature she told me she was writing a book. My surprise was enormous. Me? With a writer? A cultured foreigner who had made countless trips? A sailor? An interesting woman who spoke several languages? And who, what most of all appealed to me, exhibited an insatiable urge to learn? Julia turned out to be hugely interested in everything to do with Spain: the language, the culture, the gastronomy. Moreover, even though she had visited much of the peninsula and the islands, she had a distinct fondness for Málaga. Why? I wondered.

I asked her about the title of her book. It was a secret, she said. That triggered my curiosity even more. I insisted until she gave in.

'50 shades of Tinder.'

I was stunned. The title seemed ingenious and captured my imagination. I felt myself getting smaller and smaller in the presence of this well-travelled, well-read and wise lady.

As we parted at the hotel door downstairs, I realised she was a special woman, far from ordinary. A Belgian Viking woman. On the one hand this pleased me, on the other I was afraid it was too much for me. I should expect nothing more than friendship from such a great woman. A writer moreover, I had never met one before. Grateful for this acquaintance I humbly made my way home.



In the dark Julia walked back to the bus stop. She did not see the darkness. She saw two eyes lighting up in front of her. She shouldn't expect too much from it. Fernando was a likeable Spaniard, younger than herself and an adonis. A man in a thousand. He would have plenty of choice.

Julia had noted down his mobile phone number. As promised, she sent him a message later on the bus, so they could leave the Tinder app and continue chatting via Whatsapp. Immediately she saw the word *typing...* pop up. Eagerly she waited for his message. She melted when she read it. *'Buenas noches, mi escritora favorita.'* *Good night, my favourite writer.*

I fall in love too easily, she hummed later in her bed, following the sultry voice of Chet Baker. *I fall in love with words,* she continued in her mind. She felt like a silly teenager. She should know better.



Meeting up at two in the afternoon on Sunday to go swimming? Only a *guiri* could come up with that idea. Sunday was family day and at two o'clock it was lunchtime, every Spaniard knew that. Anyway, Julia was due to fly back to Belgium the next day, so I suggested to my sister that for once we should have lunch a bit earlier.

'*Vikinga Belga!*' I called out to her as she jumped undaunted into the icy water. That was another thing no Spaniard imitated her for, swimming in the sea in winter. Shivering I wet my toes and waited safe and dry on my towel until she came and lay down next to me in the sun to dry off. The afternoon passed pleasantly as we chatted, laughed and established more than once how different our cultures really were.

Julia was a passionate, lively woman. She always seemed preoccupied with something: taking notes for her book, giving scores to the numerous *chiringuitos*. She had visited all the museums of Málaga. In short, I did not know anyone like her. She also seemed to me to be quite a complicated personality. I myself was much calmer by nature. I could stare at the sea for hours, the greatest masterpiece in existence for my part. When the sun shone on the water, it was as if millions of diamonds sparkled at once. It seemed no one else was paying attention to it.

Later, when I accompanied her to her flat, I slightly hoped Julia would ask me upstairs to have a last coffee in her room as a farewell. But she didn't ask anything. Of course, that only happened in films. We promised each other to keep in touch until she came back to Málaga, and said goodbye.

Drop by drop tourists began to make their way back south. Everyone hoped the worst was over, everyone was eager to travel again. And I was happy to have work again. At the Hotel Riviera I gratefully welcomed the British guests, who always paid correctly and were delighted with the outcome.

Exceptions confirmed the rule, of course. A few weeks before a Scot had stayed at the hotel, he was a bit of a nuisance. He was alone. He did not want his picture taken and got angry when I tried to coax him in my limited mishmash of English words that I had mastered. Most tourists found my attempts funny. This one looked at me angrily and almost knocked me over as he walked on to the dining room. I furrowed my brow and looked in the

direction of the porter who had also seen it. From him I learned that the man in question had arrived by taxi in the middle of the night, soaked and not particularly talkative. I shrugged and moved on to the next customers.

When I finished, I made my way to the lounge bar to have a coffee. Most of the hotel guests had already gone to bed, but my eye caught a sad figure at the bar, bent over a whisky. It was the rude Scot from earlier that day. You should always give people a second chance, is my motto, so I put myself next to him and introduced myself. Without looking at me for even a moment, he began to tell his story unasked. It was about a woman, of course, I should have known, a romance that had taken place years ago here in Málaga. Under the influence of the scotch, he told me the incoherent story.

‘Have you seen her again?’ I asked curiously. He ordered another whisky and nodded. A hard expression came into his eyes.

‘She threw me out on the street. In the middle of the night, during a cloudburst.’

‘Forget her. Don’t let your heart grow cold with hatred and resentment. Point your arrows at other women. There are plenty here in the hotel.’

The poor man didn’t listen anymore. He was too far gone. I said goodbye and went home.

That other *guiri*, Julia, I continued to follow from a distance. Frequently we sent each other messages of all kinds. Messages that captured the imagination, with a double meaning or a spicy undertone. I sent her videos of the sea she loved and missed so much. Little by little we became more confident and grew closer.

One evening I had a date with a new contact on Tinder. I had agreed to meet her at the same place by the pyramid. Before she arrived, I made a video which I sent to Julia.

‘Do you recognise this place?’

‘Of course, Fernando. I’m at work now, I have the late shift. Last week was more fun.’

‘I’m glad you had a good time with me. When you come back, we will improve it even more.’

‘I tried modelling your head but it doesn’t work. I need a live model.’

‘Count me in!’

‘You do have to sit still for a long time but I think you have no problem with that, with your quiet nature.’

‘Don’t worry. When I drink two glasses of white wine, I am very quiet. Not a dry Verdejo though but a *semidulce*.’

‘Semi-sweet? We don’t have that in Belgium.’

‘I can’t believe it. But it doesn’t matter. Then I’ll just sit and watch you while you model me.’

‘No, I’ll find something. A model shouldn’t be lacking in anything.’

‘As always you are the best. How sad we met so late.’

‘Better late than never.’

Glad to have found her, I anxiously awaited the return of my new friend.



Julia moved into the familiar seaside cottage in El Palo. On Monday she would meet him again. Fernando had asked what she wanted to do, he was free all day. It was April and ideal beach weather so she suggested a picnic on the beach. He thought that was a great idea. They agreed to meet on the seafront by a modern monument erected in honour of a Spanish writer.

Fernando had sat down on a bench, she saw from afar, with a book open on his knees. Nervously she walked up to him and greeted him happily. The man looked up, took off his sunglasses and smiled expectantly. It wasn't him. Embarrassed, Julia walked on quickly, what a let-down. What would he think of her?

Did I come from the sea? The sea was born to me and the sun of the sea welcomes my loneliness, Julia read on the monument. A saying from the book: *The Mystery of Water* by Emilio Prados. She scanned the coastal promenade and saw Fernando approaching in the distance. This time it was the real one. She saw it in his enthusiasm, the open arms as he approached, the smile on his face. Delighted, he gave her a hug and two kisses on the cheeks.

As they walked along the beach, they lost their shyness and insecurity. They regained the humour and light-heartedness that connected them. Julia showed him her cottage, he thought it was cute. She took the ingredients for the picnic from the fridge: cheese, ham, chorizo, olives and bread. Fernando seemed to be perfectly at home. He looked for a knife and cutting board and began to cut everything expertly. Julia took a bottle of Verdejo, a corkscrew and two wine glasses from the shelf. She put everything in a bag along with a large towel, and pulled the door shut behind her.

Fernando was charming company. Again Julia felt comfortable with him; he was so easy to be with. Yet she still didn't know what he was looking for. Friendship? Or something more? It was guesswork for Julia.

After the picnic she invited him for coffee on her rooftop terrace. Cheerfully they continued the conversation, he confident and fluent in French, she with poor, laborious Spanish. He too seemed to be enjoying himself. She wanted to touch him all the time, but she didn't dare.

As they parted, she saw his eyes darken. A kind of tristesse came over him, she felt.

'Will we see each other again?'

'Si!' she said quickly.

He smiled happily. Two kisses and a hug. That was it again.

By herself that evening she enjoyed the endless sunset on her terrace. She didn't know what to think. She dared not expect anything. She had to be glad she had found him, even if it would remain friendship. She had a Spanish friend. She drank to that.



At the pyramid, the place of our first meeting, I waited once more for my *guiiri*. She sent me a message that she was going to be a bit late.

‘Don’t worry, that’s normal here,’ I reassured her.

‘That’s why I love Spain so much,’ she responded.

‘I am sitting on a bench overlooking the remains of Málaga’s history, with the happy prospect of seeing you again. What more can a person desire?’

‘Everything is a lot, for those who do not desire much. But I desire everything.’

‘You are not normal.’

‘Finally the bus is here.’

‘Tell the driver not to drive too fast.’

‘Not too fast? I thought you were happy to see me again?’

‘Of course, but I want you in one piece.’

I reflected on our previous meeting at the beach. Julia had been very hospitable. She had confidently given me *carte blanche* in her house in the room where I’m happiest to hang out: the kitchen. I carefully prepared a picnic for two while she quickly and skilfully uncorked the bottle.

Of course she immediately dived into the sea, my Viking woman, while I watched her admiringly. And it was not just her intrepidity I was in awe of. In swimming costume I saw her voluptuous body, with prominent breasts and long legs, all perfectly proportioned. As she sat wet and happy beside me, putting a piece of manchego into her mouth, I had to struggle to hide my desire. I found her more captivating every minute, but I had to be respectful and not risk this special friendship.

‘*Hola!*’

There she was. How elegant she was, with her long, silk skirt and a flower in her hair. Like a happy child I took her in my arms and gave her two kisses.

As a matter of course we walked towards the beach, talking amiably. At the *chiringuito* La Farola, over a coffee for me and a *Tinto de Verano* for her, I asked her interestedly about her book and the characters in it. She showed me a list of the chapters. Each chapter dealt with a character, a man she had met through the Tinder app.

‘The book has everything to be a success. You are going to triumph!’

Julia herself remained very calm and level-headed about it.

'We'll see, Fernando. But if it is a success, I'll treat you to champagne.'

'Champagne? Just you and me?'

She slammed her eyes down. God, that uncertainty. I needed to know how she felt about me. But how was I supposed to manage that? I decided to get to my goal with a diversion.

'In the beginning I was a bit scared of you.'

'Scared? Why?' She looked at me with big eyes.

'You come across very confident.'

'I didn't know men were afraid of me.'

'Not now that I know you better. But you're not average. You're more intelligent than me.'

'I don't know if that's true, Fernando.'

'It is. You surpass me in everything.'

'If that were the case, would you mind?'

'I think it's brilliant!'

I paid the bill and we continued our walk. I took my courage in both hands.

'What do you actually think of me?'

She searched for the translation on her mobile phone.

'*Vanidoso*,' she laughed. *Vain*.

'No, seriously, Julia. I want to know!'

She hesitated.

'I find you likeable, Fernando, charming too. You're a handsome man, a real gentleman.'

'I know that, everyone says so. But you can do better. Give me one word. You can do it.'

She laughed.

'Why are you laughing? Don't laugh at me, Julia!'

'I usually know after three seconds whether I want to see someone again, yes or no. With you it was clearly a yes.'

'Why me?'

'I don't know.'

'You do know. Come on, Julia!'

'I won't tell you because you'll get too vain then. Someday I'll tell you, or write you. And maybe it will be the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to you. Remember that you are dealing with a poetic soul.'

No matter how I insisted, she gave me nothing concrete, my writer. I could do nothing but wait and see.

Enthusiastically I showed her around my city. I was well acquainted with the historical events and showed her things she had not yet discovered for herself, thank God.

The place in the Plaza de la Merced where a church had once stood, that was burnt down during the war. Before there was a church, there was a Mercedarian monastery from which, incidentally, the square got its name.

The line on the wall above the door of house number fifteen in the Calle Carretería, as proof of where the water level had stood in September 1907 during the great flood.

On the same street a piece of the original rampart that had once walled the city. Julia eagerly absorbed all my information. It was incredible how she loved Málaga, how she seemed to suck in everything that was Spanish. She filled herself with the energy of my city, of all places. How privileged and proud I felt!

‘My Belgian *malagueña*. You should come and live here, Julia.’

‘My plan is to come and spend the winters here when I’m retired, to combine the best of two countries.’

‘Maybe we could do that together? Half a year Spain, half a year Belgium.’

‘No, Fernando, always together is too much. Come,’ she said. She opened the door of a bar with the poetic name *La Vida de la Gente* above the window. To my surprise the barman greeted her warmly by her name. We nestled into a cosy corner of the bar. Julia ordered a Pacharán, coolly I followed her example. I asked her further about her Tinder past. She sat up and started talking animatedly. I devoured her stories. How many adventures she had had. How well-travelled she was.

Thanks to two Pacharáns I dared to hook my arm in hers on the way back to the centre.

‘How well we get along, Julia. I don’t have many friends, the men here watch football and drink big glasses of beer. I’m not normal either.’

‘I know that, Fernando. That’s why we understand each other.’

I took her to the bus stop. In the distance the bus was already approaching. Quickly I gave her a hug.

‘See you later, my girl, *ma chérie*, my wonderful friend. Take care. Send

me a message when you get home.'

'*Oui, papa,*' she said smiling and got on the bus. I waited for the bus to leave and sent her another kiss after.

Half an hour later she sent me a message that she was home. She thanked me for the lovely evening.

'Thank you for how interesting you are, Julia. When will we see each other again? I have to work the next few days but on Thursday I'm free.'

'Thursday is fine.'

'Where shall we meet?'

'Come over here. Let's cook together. Sleep well, Fernando.'

'I will dream of you and let my imagination fly to wonderful moments together.'

The days passed and I yearned for our new meeting. I wanted more. What if we spent the night together? We were both adults, free, with no strings attached. Expectant but with no guarantee of success I took a few days off and already packed a backpack with toothbrush, comb and some clothes.



Cielito lindo, played through her loudspeaker, *cute little sky*. Now that her heart was wide open, the singer's fragile voice touched her even more than usual. At that moment Julia received a message.

'What a special day it was yesterday with you. You are an amazing woman.'

'Un par de ojitos negros,' she quoted from the song. *A pair of dark eyes.*

'Your love of music, of words and Spanish customs are immense. You are unique.'

'I'm not used to getting so many compliments, Fernando.'

'You deserve it. Are you looking at the sea?'

'And listening to the waves from my roof terrace. It's very romantic.'

'A nice moment to share together.'

'I like being alone, to reflect on beautiful moments. But to enjoy is best with two.'

'I'm glad you have enough on your own. Enjoy the happy moments you experience in your city, your Málaga.'

'My Málaga. If only it were true. How I would love to be a *malaqueña*, a Mediterranean woman.'

'You're not one by birth, but all the more by feeling and by heart. *Mi malaqueña* Julia.'

'Gracias, mi malaqueño favorito. You always know how to make me happy.'

'I am happy about that. I am greatly looking forward to Thursday.'

'Will you bring the *semidulce*?'

'You can count on that.'

Fernando seemed delighted to meet her again. Was he waiting for an opportunity? A sign from her? Julia decided the hesitation had lasted long enough. What did she have to lose? Humour could save her. She typed a message and hesitated to send it. She read it again and pressed *send*. Full of expectation and with just a little anxiety she awaited his answer. But whatever his response would be, she knew it would be perfect.



Troubled, I listened every day to the news reports about the war between Russia and Ukraine that had been going on for weeks now. I still couldn't believe it. War? In the twenty-first century? It was far from my mind, but it was getting closer. Closer to Belgium.

'One question, Fernando: that semi-sweet wine, do they drink it in Spain before sex or after sex?'

I read her message and smiled. And took my time until I found the perfect answer to respond to her ambiguous question.

'Here they drink the *semidulce* before, during and after sex,' I wrote decidedly. I understood. Full of confidence I prepared for our meeting.

When my sister saw me leaving with a backpack, she asked in surprise what my intention was. I told her I was going to ask Julia to spend the weekend together. She looked at me like I was crazy and shook her head.

'You poor soul.'

I took the bus to El Palo. The sea was wild. White and powerful, the waves pounded the beach. Once again meeting my beloved friend was warm and virtuous. I gave her the promised bottle of semi-sweet wine to put in the fridge and took heart. I had better get straight to the point. If she said no, I would take the bus back that night and there would be nothing to worry about.

'Look, Julia, I've taken time off. If it suits you, I can stay.'

Expectantly I looked at her. She accepted the bottle and lowered her eyes.

'Of course,' was her liberating reply.

The feeling of happiness was immense. I was allowed to stay. I was going to spend the night with a woman. I was going to spend the night with this great, unique, Belgian writer. I couldn't believe it.

'Come,' she said, 'we'll go shopping first.'

At the supermarket I bought fresh vegetables, a bowl of white beans and chorizo to make a stew. Julia picked out the wine. We were like a married couple, it all felt very familiar.

Afterwards she wanted to take a walk along the shore. Fearlessly she took off her shoes and walked towards the raging sea. A little worried, I followed her example. She wet her feet and quickly pulled up her skirt