

THE 5 WOMAN THEORY

a novel by Fons Burger



HOW TO FIND THE COMPLETE WOMAN
What men should know about women and women about men

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Millionaire and bon vivant Al Robinson is determined to write a book. He has been studying the “woman” phenomenon all his life, but since his divorce he has finally seen the light. Al develops the Five-Woman Theory: he’s going to find five women who each have one of the traits a man normally looks for in one woman.

At the same time Al writes his book. It’s a novel about Donald, who discovers his sexuality in the turbulent 1960s. After a strict upbringing, Donald becomes entangled in the sexual revolution and the rising feminism of the seventies and eighties.

In the accompanying footnotes, Robinson underpins the conclusions he has drawn from his lifelong “field research” about love, sex and relationships.

Fons Burger lives in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His book has been enthusiastically received in the Netherlands.





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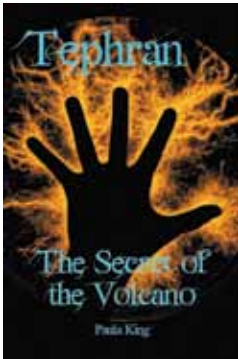
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Chapter 1

Present and 1965

Will I ever finish this book?

I must. Because I've finally discovered what it's all about and I'm sure this is the beginning of something extraordinary. Not just a book-book, but an Important Contribution to Humanity. I've been preparing it for forty years: preliminary studies, practical exercises, empirical field research—the lot. The subject engulfs my life. If I don't write this book, it will write me.

Finishing things is not my forte, so I will force myself to write every day for a year. Then I'll have enough pages to speak of a magisterial work. And I'll write everything down so incisively that people will speak of a masterpiece. *The* book about women. I'm absolutely convinced millions of people are just waiting for this book.

However, I'm not really in the mood for writing a book today. I'm in the mood for boozing with my friends, or with any random bunch of hazy individuals.

I walk back and forth between my computer and the balcony in the study of my townhouse. I've been living here alone of late. My wife left me. In hindsight it was the best thing that could have happened to me, only she took my kids. I'm going crazy about my kids, and extremely angry, but I'll return to that later because I have a tendency to bellyache on the topic.

My house has ten rooms. It is a brick and stone townhouse, built for someone with delusions of grandeur, and I prefer not to digress too much on the fact that I, of all people, happen to live here. The building has an immense stairwell, spacious high-ceilinged rooms and marble toilets. The first floor, where I entertain my guests, has a classic drawing room and a gigantic kitchen for sumptuous banquets. It's also where I have my office.

The second floor is more modern; it's where I really live. A cozy living room, a library, a playroom for the kids, a second kitchen and my study. Sleeping quarters are on the top floor.

Roberto lives in a small room by the front door. He's my chauffeur, gardener and handyman. He drinks too much when he has to drive, weeds the most expensive plants to their heavenly reward, and is usually too tired for chores. He's a decent actor, though. He plays butler, chauffeur and bodyguard. Sometimes he plays chef. He can cook up a reasonable steak and he has a way with Italian cuisine.

For the real thing I rely on Arnold, a professional chef and also a personal friend. I also have a housekeeper who takes very good care of me, and Makerita, who arranges my business affairs.

I don't miss my wife Karin at all. We hadn't had sex for eighteen months before she left me and there wasn't much else about her to enjoy. The above-mentioned team already took care of the day-to-day household responsibilities and I took care of the children, because in the mornings Karin was too tired and in the evenings she usually had an appointment for tennis, the sauna, or her physiotherapist, a dreadful womanizer who worshiped her.

Actually I'm grateful to Karin. If this book ends up with a foreword (and it is slowly beginning to look that way), she'll top my list of people to thank. Without you, sweetheart, I would never have been able to write this book.

Starting on a book like this is a bit of a pain. Fortunately Roberto bursts into the room. One of these days I'll teach him how to knock. We're very informal with each other, even though I pay his salary every month. This ambiguous situation regularly leads to complicated conversations.

Two days ago the weather was warm and muggy. The night air didn't cool things down much, so Roberto and I headed down to the Playhouse, one of the city's better strip clubs, where the women can engage in a decent conversation in addition to their usual favors. Besides the air conditioning and the chilled champagne, it's also possible to take a shower with one or other of the ladies. Roberto hitched up with a young Latin girl who had him round her finger in a flash. I was obliged to stay because Roberto's credit card gave up and I had to pay his bill with mine.

Today Roberto is serious. He has an important matter to discuss. He squares himself, empties his lungs, breathes in and says, "Can you believe it? I'm in love! And I know what you're going to say, Al. I know what you think. But..."

I respond at once. "Classic story. Man saves girl from a life in the game."

"Roberto saves Eva. *Roberto saves Eva*, man. If she doesn't get her visa before next week she'll have to leave the country."

“And so you want a quick wedding. Right. Tell her to pick some other idiot.”

“Hey. You know me. I made a deal. I gave her my word. I’m seeing her on Friday.”

“Nothing of the sort. You’re working Friday. We have to go to New York, or the Bahamas. Wherever, I’ll decide later.”

“Jesus, man, the girl’s really one in a million, a genuine angel. She can dance like you wouldn’t believe. I’ve never met anyone like her. So firm, so perfectly formed, so deep.”

I watch him dream away, lost for words. He traces the contours of her body with his hands, closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and sets about a good conversation in his imagination.

“Get out. I have a book to write and you’re disturbing my concentration.”

“You’re an asshole, Al.”

“I’m an ass *saver*. I’m saving yours.”

Men would describe Roberto as an ugly guy with rough features; his deep, black, beady eyes form the only light on an otherwise craggy face. He has a puffy hairdo and he walks like an ape. He calls it his “Al Pacino walk.” But women fall for him left and right. He only has to look at them and after some cheesy come-on, they’re on their backs.

But that isn’t what my book is about. There are enough senseless books out there about men and women.¹ My book is going to be a work of fiction in which I can really have fun without being sued. It starts somewhere in the sixties, before the sexual revolution.

This is incredible. Starting from scratch. Sitting in front of an empty computer screen ready to sketch a boy who will experience precisely whatever I dream up for him. A boy who can smell whatever I stick up his nose or into his cranium, feel whatever I place in his hands, see what I write on the page. I can have him get excited, suffer pain, laugh, cry, come. Whatever I want, whatever enters my head. However, it’s enough to give me a severe headache.

1. See Introduction to the footnotes associated with the novel *The Five-Woman Theory*.

Chapter 1

(1965)

Frankie had never been one of his best friends. But he could have told him earlier, nonetheless. Donald felt like a complete moron because he didn't know what happens when you play with yourself. The sensation was totally new and overwhelming.

Certain pictures had a strange, new effect on him. He became aware of it for the first time when he saw photos of a model called the Shrimp in a women's magazine. The photos were a bit out of focus, which was fashionable at the time. The Shrimp was as skinny as a rail. Her breasts weren't much to speak of and her expression was slightly vague.

She was sitting on a fence, draped over a horse's mane, leaning against a stable door, or playing with a kitten. That was all; nevertheless, the first time he saw those pictures something extraordinary happened to him. It was like being in love. Not the kind of love he experienced for the first time in his third year at primary school. No, it was different with Josephine.

She was short, chubby, with the sweetest face in the whole world. Her skin was lily-white and she had big, bright brown eyes that were slightly crossed. She also had incredible eyelashes, thick, long and black, clumped here and there as if she used mascara.

Josephine had a tendency to stare off, preoccupied, past him into the distance. If he moved back into her line of vision, bringing her back from a distant daydream, she would reward him with the most beautiful smile in the world. A little shyness, a little embarrassment, a little teasing, and plenty of innocent warmth, these were the ingredients of Josephine's smile.

His feelings for Josephine were pretty intense. He felt that writing cursive, which he was learning at that time, ought to be reserved for her name only. JOSEPHINE. Secret notes and secret places —Josephine loves Donald. Donald loves Josephine. Sometimes both names together on the pavement with a heart in between, since he didn't have a knife yet to carve the words into a tree.

No one could know there was anything going on between him and Josephine, because her mother was their teacher. Nevertheless, Josephine

took pleasure in his relentless attention. During playtime they were inseparable. Sometimes her girlfriends hung out with them, too; sometimes it was just the two of them.

He would talk up a storm about what he would do when he grew up. He wanted to be a missionary doctor in Africa. Josephine was extremely impressed. She was able to listen to him attentively, as her gaze drifted off toward the end of the playground where their male classmates planned their attacks.

That was the sacrifice he had to make for the love of his life. The boys would walk up and challenge him to a fight. And if there was a fight, it was usually three against one. From the moment Donald felt the first smack to his nose, his eyes blazed and he mowed down whoever came in sight.

The Shrimp generated a completely different sensation, a warm feeling in his groin. The first time it happened, he checked to see if he was peeing. Because that was what he associated with this combination of lack of control and heat around his pubic area. It reminded him of bed wetting, which he had continued to do long after he passed the established age for stopping. But he had never experienced this sensation before. Not even the first time Astrid gave him a lesson in frenching.

Astrid herself clearly enjoyed every moment. Two of his school friends got to take their turn French-kissing her every day. He was allowed to join on account of his, "Bah, I don't believe a word of it."

"So, what don't you believe a word of?" Astrid asked, and kissed him full on the mouth. Her tongue made its way between his lips and teeth into his mouth and once he was over the initial shock, a vague, warm and mysterious feeling washed through his chest and stomach. She took his head in both hands, withdrawing her tongue for a moment so she could speak. "You need to stick your tongue in my mouth, too, and play with the tip of my tongue like this."

Once again her warm, wet, juicy tongue darted into his mouth, slid around the inside of his cheeks, over his back teeth, and then pulled back to await his arrival. And in he went, with all the enthusiasm he had built up over the last hours, eager to discover what the inside of a girl's mouth felt like. He pushed forward carefully at first, circling her tongue, feeling the saliva, her teeth, and his movements became wilder by the minute.

He heard her groan gently, but after holding back for a moment, thinking he might be hurting or choking her, her tongue sprang back to life.

It was heaven. He could have kept going for hours if his two friends hadn't also had rights to Astrid's tongue.

Astrid —like the Shrimp— wasn't too fat, had no breasts and definitely had a vague expression; however, measuring downward, the warm sensation never got past his navel.

The Shrimp was something different altogether. She was one of a kind. Her gaze was as unavailable as her real self. The only way he could possess her was to cut out her pictures and glue them into his school planner. He wrote her name and nickname in large letters in between the photos with a blue felt-tip pen.

With Frankie's instructions in the back of his mind and the warning that parents didn't like this kind of thing one bit, he locked himself in his bedroom, planner in hand. The only person who could see him was God, and something told him God would turn a blind eye. Anyway, Donald's mother had never told him he could do anything other than pee with his willy; his father had told him nothing at all. If all those disaster warnings about going blind or deaf or getting spinal cancer or burning in purgatory for impurity had reached him at all, they would've come via Frankie, and he wasn't trustworthy.

Donald knew he had to get it up first. This had already happened once, while looking at Shrimp photos, but he had rubbed it back down because that strange feeling between his legs made him uncomfortable. Since then there had only been minimal erection, even though the photos had the same effect every time.

But tonight was the night. He told his mother he was turning in early and waited until he could hear the sports program on the radio below, a sign that no one was likely to come upstairs. He lay on his bed, slipped his pajama trousers down to his knees, puffed up his pillow and positioned it at an angle behind his back, all to be sure he had a good view of his tiny member, which had to perform something completely new tonight. The planner with his Shrimp was leaning against the wall, propped up by a sweater. Thus he had both hands free to carry out Frankie's instructions.

And off he went. It took a while before there was any sign of stiffening, and the moment he looked it disappeared again. So he closed his eyes, only opening them every once in a while to catch a glimpse of The Shrimp. He imagined he was sitting on the fence with her, that his hands were stroking the same kitten she was stroking. And that's when it happened. He opened his eyes to have a look. His member was proudly erect, tight, and slowly turning redder and redder from all his vigorous jerking. He closed his eyes again and slid closer to the Shrimp on their fence. Her thigh pressed against his; he could almost smell her, touch her. The sensation in his member slowly spilled over into the rest of his body, reaching the back of his skull via his backbone.

He opened his eyes at just the right moment. But his amazement at the phenomenon was completely swept aside by the colossal, overwhelming, all-embracing sensation, a sensation that would govern his entire life.

* * *

Before I know it, I'm in the car, headed for the Playhouse. I couldn't find Roberto so I left him behind, which is just as well. This way I can submit to this all-embracing sensation.

I park my car brazenly on the pavement at the entrance. I don't give a rat's ass if they tow it and I get an enormous ticket. The doorman makes a remark about my DIY valet parking, but he stops complaining when I tip him the equivalent of three days' parking.

They're not as friendly at the counter. The Nevada couple who has been running this club for the past fifteen years welcomes me. She with her familiar reluctance and he grumbling politely about the last time I was here and didn't behave according to the rules.

I'm not interested. I need to find July. She's not cynical and doesn't grumble. I can take a cold shower with her to bring me back to my senses. I don't have sex here. I've never paid for sex—which is a dumb remark, of course, because in fact I've never done it for free in my life. Other than that, they perform just about every other service here.

Anyway, at least I can say I've never done the deed here. In fact, I've only been here four times in total. I was initiated into the world of strip-club

crawling only recently and I must say I like it. July used to be a nurse, but she got fed up with the night shifts. Sounds like a bad joke, I know, but it's the truth.

July is a Scandinavian blonde. She looks a bit like a 25-year-old Brigitte Bardot. Her best quality is her ability to talk, which is particularly important to me, because I never have much to say in the Playhouse.

Lots of men come here to complain, but I can't stand the my-wife-doesn't-understand-me routine; after all, my wife has already left and even when we were still together I couldn't care less that she didn't understand me.

It's quiet in the bar. The place is approximately half the size of a single floor in my house, with a bar running the length of the room, various dimly lit, upholstered alcoves, a stage, and a screen showing reasonable quality adult movies.

Cynthia—or whatever her real name is—works behind the bar. She's actually the only pretty girl in the entire club. Twenty years old or thereabouts, with a cute, cheeky, clear look in her eye. Her innocence is a breath of fresh air around here. In the midst of all the ugliness and misery the male fraternity introduces into the club, she makes me feel like I've accidentally arrived at the boundary between heaven and hell.

The first time I came here, I planned to seduce her. Sadly, she's the managers' daughter and she absolutely doesn't intend to have the same career as her mother, who is known halfway across the continent as a madam and super whore.

Honestly, though, for Cynthia I'd happily play house for the rest of my days.

It's Monday, so the girls are scarce. Eva is talking to Luke. Luke is a fixture here. His very wealthy wife doesn't understand him. She refuses to give him money to go to the Playhouse, so Luke pretends to have a gambling addiction in order to worm pocket money out of her. It's not easy being misunderstood.

"Where is July?" I ask Eva.

She tosses her hair to one side as if to say, "I'm blond too," setting off Luke's nervous chatter. It's the same in the Playhouse as it is in the outside world. Rivalry and jealousy dribble from the corner of Luke's mouth. And I'm not even interested in Eva; I want July. July is totally cool.

She asks nothing, needs nothing and it's not an insult to her professional pride if I don't want to have sex. Most of the time we just hang out upstairs on a massive waterbed and watch TV. Sometimes she gives me a massage when I get out of the bath.

I met her in a restaurant when she was on her way to work in the club. She flirted with me and before I knew what happened I was sitting at her table. I simply had to follow her that night.

"July has the night off," says Eva in her heavy Latin accent. "Where is Roberto?"

"You should forget Roberto. He's gone and he's not coming back as long as you keep exploiting him. If you want a residence permit why not marry Luke, or the boss, or whoever." I get angry.

Cynthia arrives directly with my drink. A rum coke with brown rum—she remembered. She throws me an almost begging glance: can I keep the noise down and behave? But I'm bummed because July isn't here. Eva should keep her mitts off my friend. And I can't have Cynthia.

So what am I doing here? I'm psyched and I want to discuss it with someone, although talking isn't exactly essential, something else would do just fine. I didn't pay a hundred dollars just to listen to Luke's pathetic drivel. I slump against the bar.

"Do you have a light?" Black accent at six o'clock. How long since I stopped smoking? It seems an eternity.

Cynthia gives the lady beside me a light; the question wasn't even addressed to me. "Tea?" she asks.

"Please."

I'm taken aback and stammer almost automatically: "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No thanks, I've already ordered tea."

It's a game. Everything is a game in this place. She acts disinterested, hard to get. As if she figures I'm not a potential customer. Or maybe she doesn't find me attractive.

I'm guessing she's about twenty-seven. A head smaller than me. She's good looking, has a magnificent braided hairdo, a cleavage you could get lost in, and, as far as I can tell from where I'm sitting, a superb set of buttocks. She looks a bit like a young Diana Ross, but without the Afro. I've never had a black woman before, although I've dreamt about it often enough. I'm also not interested in starting anything with her tonight,

although I'm not ready to leave just yet. Too much hassle, my intuition tells me.

"You're one of July's clients, right?" she says absently.

"Oh, nice! You girls have rules about first dibs?"

"Not at all, honey. Why, did you want to go upstairs with me?" And she sneers.

I'm surprised she gets it. I had expected a "what do you mean?" and certainly not this kind of directness. "You're only asking because you know I'll say no," I say, unsure. "Or you don't want me to." She smiles and I realize I misunderstood her. "Or what?"

"Relax, man. Have a drink on me," she says, which is bull, since the booze is free once you've paid admission. You only have to pay extra if you want to offer the girls something.

She rests her hand with long fingers and even longer fingernails on my arm. I shiver. Not unpleasant. I search for words, remember July, young Donald with his tongue invading Astrid's mouth, or playing with himself while looking at pictures of the Shrimp.

"You know, I've just started. It's always a bit boring on a Monday night, but I don't have anything better to do, so I came down here to drink some tea and check out the crowd." She speaks with such intimacy that I begin to unwind a little. This place can be pretty scary without Roberto and without July. "Robin," she says, and holds out an elegant hand.

I'm Batman, I think. I say, "I'm Al."

The rum colas must be flowing fast and furious, because the big hand on my watch jumps ahead ten minutes every time I look at it. I'm not sure if I'm drunk from the stuff Cynthia persistently shoves under my nose or from my first steps along the writer's path. That was what I came to share with July, and, of course, with this stranger Robin, it isn't such a good idea.

"I know you're not going upstairs with me so I have to look around a bit to see if I can earn something tonight. I'm sure you don't mind. It would be nice to see you again sometime. You seem like a nice guy, Al." Smart. Although she's already slipping down from her barstool, she hesitates when I take her hands.

"Come on! What makes you so sure? A good judge of character? What do you take me for? You think I can't afford it? Or do you assume I don't like you because you refused a drink? Am I too white for you? Or what?"

“Okay. I didn’t want to offend you,” she says sugar sweet. She settles back on her stool, crosses her legs, takes my hand and places it on her beautiful, bare thigh. It feels nice; I caress it.

“And what does July have that I don’t?”

That’s a good question, but not so easy to answer. July is a bit older, although in fact she’s still a child. This Robin is a real woman, I realize right away. She’s smart and she’s playing with me.

“You’re nice. July’s nice, too, but different. More laid-back nice. I wouldn’t mind going upstairs with you, but not to make love. What I’d really like to do is kiss you. With my tongue. But I’m aware that’s uncommon around here.”

“Is that so?” she asks teasingly.

“I know nothing. All I desperately want is to kiss you. I never actually kissed July. Maybe it’s because I wrote about someone’s first French kiss today. And when I look at your lips and your pearly white teeth, I get a tremendous urge to do it with you, kissing, that is.” The words spew out like a stream of warm water. I can’t hold them back. My tongue is swollen. I try to hide it, imagining Robin won’t fancy the idea of taking a thick tongue.

“I’d be happy to read what you wrote. Come, let’s go upstairs. Then I’ll decide whether I will let you kiss me or not.”

Yeah, right, I think. And when we’re upstairs I can forget it, or pay extra, and there’s no way I’m doing that. I hesitate and she stares at me. She leans forward and a moment later her warm, moist tongue slips carefully between my lips.

I’m moved by such an excess of beauty.

* * *

It won’t go away. It won’t ever go away. He realized this at that solitary moment, and in the minutes and hours that followed, not to mention the days and weeks.

After his very first orgasm, he experienced an unusual relaxation. It wasn’t just muscle relaxation; it was a total relief. As if the entire world fell from his shoulders and no one could hurt him anymore. It was mysterious,

naughty, beautiful, and it was freedom. Yes, he felt free. He was free of the Shrimp, free of Astrid. He needed no one. But it was also empty, and lonely.

It didn't take long for the torment to start. He was confronted with an extremely important question he had forgotten to ask Frankie. How many times a week, a day, an hour could you do this? Was there a way to stretch out that moment? And how soon could you start over? One thing Frankie did warn him about was the stains. Stains on the sheets, stains in your underpants, stains on the wallpaper. Mothers notice such things right away and then the game would be up.

In the following days he figured out how often he could do it. It was summer vacation and he had opportunity enough for privacy. The Shrimp was always available. However, after a week, The Shrimp wasn't enough to get him excited three or four times a day. One of his mother's women's magazines had plenty of stylish models, though, which offered the solution.

The biggest problem was his increasingly red member, which was worn out after four times a day. He didn't know whom to ask if doing it so much could cause any permanent damage. Meanwhile he had already had a second lesson from Frankie. It was about what Donald's and Frankie's older brothers got up to with their girlfriends on Saturday nights in the back of the car or in the dunes near the beach. The real thing! Donald had a problem though. Frankie had asked him if he'd ever seen one dog mount another and hump it furiously across the grass, thrusting with its groin. Of course he had, but what did that have to do with the overwhelming sensation in his own lower torso? Or with the Shrimp for that matter, draped across a horse's back, gazing at him through the camera lens?

Well, everything. Donald's brother, Fred, and Tillie, the greengrocer's daughter, knew all about it, said Frankie. Tillie wasn't exactly the hottest thing around. She reached no further than Fred's nipples, had extremely broad hips, her breasts were much too big, and her mouth was lopsided. Her beautiful hair, which ended just above her protruding backside, was her only redeeming feature. Her backside stuck out because she wore high heels to disguise her lack of height.

Frankie sort of explained how "the thing" was done. Donald blushed when Frankie mentioned the subject. He had never drawn a link between

the practice session with Astrid and all the stuff he got up later on. “It starts with a kiss, a French kiss, of course. Then Fred puts his hand inside Tillie’s blouse or under her sweater and massages her breasts.” And you had to fiddle with the nipples until they got hard.

Donald had only seen his mother’s nipples and they looked hard all the time. “Then the real work starts. Fred’s hand disappears beneath Tillie’s skirt in search of her slit.” Jesus, Donald thought, couldn’t he have chosen another girl for that purpose? Then at least he wouldn’t be saddled with images of dogs and nipples every time he saw Fred or Tillie.

The worst was yet to come.

“Then they take off their pants and your brother sticks his boner in Tillie’s slit. Then they hump up and down, like those dogs.”

Frankie’s tongue hung from the corner of his mouth. His descriptions clearly aroused him more than they did Donald. He was processing thoughts of Astrid and French kisses and the Shrimp. He had a hard time imagining them having some kind of slit and that men would put their willies in it. It was all very confusing. He went straight home and locked himself up in his room.

* * *

I only realize how tired I am and how much I’ve drunk when we get upstairs. For two hundred bucks I get to count myself lucky for an hour with Robin. I take a seat on the luxury sofa and watch how she glides across the room.

She fishes a tape from her handbag and shoves it in the cassette recorder built into the wall. “I need my own music. The shit they play here isn’t exactly my taste. Do you mind if I smoke a joint?”

“No. Make yourself at home,” I say amiably.

She doesn’t laugh at my little joke. She busies herself back and forth, fills the bubble bath and rummages around in the bathroom. The music is agreeable. Jazzy rap music.

“Do you want to get into the bath?”

Of course I don’t want to get into the bath. All I want to do is kiss, look into her eyes, run my tongue over her beautiful white teeth, lick those big

kissable lips until they're soft and tender. "Okay, sure," I say and I kick off my shoes.

She's already in the water and I miss another ten minutes. Are they manipulating my watch? Moving it forward with radio waves to get more out of the hourly rate? I realize my time with Robin is actually not that expensive. My accountant bills me twenty percent more and he doesn't even take his pants off.

The bath is in the same room, a hop away from the bed. Copper-colored mirror tiles surround it; even the ceiling is mirrored. The rest is carpeted. Red carpet.

All the lather prevents me from seeing much of Robin. I lower myself slowly into the hot water. I had arranged the drinks I brought with me from the bar (a glass of champagne and a Bacardi and Coke) on the edge of the bath and I instantly relax as the bubbles reach up to my ears.

"It's about an eleven-year-old boy, and in addition to French-kissing, he learns how to masturbate."

"Is that something you need to learn?"

"Absolutely. Didn't you?"

She doesn't respond and keeps up the questions.

"And was he you, that boy?"

Jesus. I meet someone nice in a club and she turns out to be a psychotherapist.

"Do you do it a lot with yourself? Seems like a better way to come than with the average customer in this place." I picture Luke sweating and panting, his flabby belly slapping against Robin's thighs.

"I don't have much of a problem with the customers, you know. Most men are okay. And if I'm really not into it... No one's forcing me." She doesn't desert her clients. And she talks frankly about it too. Cool.

I look her deep in the eyes as I hold out her champagne. Extremely relaxed with her joint, she gives gently to the music, which, if her softly moving lips are anything to go by, she knows word for word. And, man, those lips can move. Did those lips touch mine only a moment ago? Did I press my tongue against those pearly whites until they parted and did I disappear into the yielding hollow of her mouth? Those eyes!

Staring at me more and more intensely with that naughty grin, she says, as if she can read my mind: "And...?"

And...? "I like you very much," I say.

“I like you too.” She takes another drag at her joint to avoid sounding too serious.

My hands stroke her legs, gently, very gently feeling their way upward. I feel her hips, her back, her belly, her breasts, up to her neck. I caress her lower jaw with foam and leave her with an ample white beard. I search for something original to say: “How old is your child?” I ask the question in passing, without approval or disapproval. Perhaps it sounds a little conspiratorial.

She looks surprised, questioning, and her hands disappear under the water. “Can you feel it?” she asks, with disappointment in her voice.

“Is it a girl or a boy? What age is it? Where is it now? Who is the father?” I take a sip at my Bacardi and Coke. Not too much, seeing as I’m drunk already. Drunk from the booze and drunk from Robin.

She rises up from the bubbles and stands before me swathed in a garment of white foam. I look her straight in the eye. She wipes the foam from her body and slowly becomes black through the white. The child thing was a guess; her tight belly gave nothing away. She gives me a stern look and holds out her hand. I can now see all of her; a full view of the front and, thanks to the mirror, back views as well. She pulls me up, grabs a towel from a rack behind her and starts to dry me. While she rubs she says: “You have an incredible body.”

I’m careful not to ask what she means. Incredibly big, incredibly tall, incredibly matured? Whatever. I’m aware such talk is part of the deal. She caresses me with the towel as if she means it and, who knows, perhaps she’s into tall, white, slightly overweight forty-year-olds.

She dries herself superficially, takes our drinks and lies down belly first on the bed. Drops of water glisten on her half wet skin in the light of the lamp on the side table. I sit beside her with the towel pressed into my lap. “These are amazing buns. Jesus, I’ve never seen such beautiful buns.” And I get to touch them. I outline them, cover them, and pull them apart. First with my fingers and hands, then with my tongue. And in the meantime my watch leaps ahead so fast I can no longer follow.

“Holy shit,” she shrieks as she comes. Or is she faking it? Perhaps she’s pretending to enjoy it? Maybe she enjoys it just a little?

I don’t care. I get up and look at her. She begins to caress me, my chest, and my belly. And when I don’t react she says: “Don’t you want me? I really want you inside me.”

“You truly do have the most beautiful ass I’ve ever seen,” is all I say.

She makes it obvious she doesn’t really believe my adoring rant. I detect a touch of derision: Sure, you must not have seen that many asses in your life. That’s not true, though. I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve seen enough asses in my life to be able to call this super-ass.

“At school they called me Daisy Duck.”

Such honesty makes me melt. Jesus, she’s sweet.

“What’s your real name?”

“Patty.”

“Hi Patty, I’m Al. I wanted to give my daughter a boy’s name, something like Robin. I suggested Charlie, but my wife wasn’t into it.”

“What did you end up calling her?”

“My daughter is five and she’s called Laura. My son, Stephan, is almost two.”

“My son is four and his name is Davey.”

We’re both quiet.

A strange sensation; the room has filled itself with her children and mine. I shake the thought from my head and try to send them from the room. I rinse my mouth with Bacardi and Coke. I want to kiss Robin again.

I lie on my back and she runs her sharp fingernails over my chest. “That eleven-year-old boy is somehow aware from the first moment of coming that he will be addicted to the feeling for the rest of his life. The excitement that in the long run can never be satisfied. It will govern his entire life; as it does with all men, whether they believe it or not.”

“All men have just one thing on their minds?”

“Sure, certainly if they visit this place,” I grin. “But that’s it. It’s no different. We just need to define that ‘thing’ better, because it isn’t as simple as sex.” I pause for a moment and then say: “Women have just one thing on their minds too.”

Robin says nothing. She knows, but she says nothing.² She’s saved by the bell. The telephone rings. Time’s up. Pay extra or pull up your pants. I opt for an extra half hour to get dressed on the condition I can have her cell phone number. I want to meet her elsewhere, away from here, for dinner, or at my place. Reluctantly she gives me her number, but she doesn’t want to have dinner. She doesn’t have dinner with customers, she says.

2. Men only want one thing, and it is not having sex.

We go back to the bar and try to solve this dilemma through a point-less discussion.

It doesn't work out.

* * *

Astrid would provide the answer.

Vacation was almost over and before he had to go back to school he was intent on finding the answer to a pressing question. He had to use Astrid in one way or another to help him solve the mystery.

The next time he found himself in the dark passageway beside Astrid's house he decided to give it a try. He was the last to go that day. He waited with Eddy, who kept his hands in his pockets a lot, though that didn't have to mean anything.

Couldn't he just ask straight out? After all, Eddy was two years older than Frankie and him. Surely he had to know all about that kind of thing. Maybe Eddy went a whole lot further with Astrid than he did. And Peter? Maybe he had his pants round his ankles and his hands under her sweater at this very moment.

Donald peeked around the corner. Peter was still wearing his pants. Astrid was leaning backward and Peter leaned against her. His hands were in a safe place, right and left above her head against the wall.

"Do you do it with other girls? French-kissing?" Donald asked Eddy. Eddy gave him a sleazy grin.

"Nope. Do you know other girls willing to do it?"

Donald couldn't think of any off the top of his head. "Do you get a hard-on when you kiss her?" he asked out of the blue. It was almost as if he couldn't help it, as if the question formed in his mouth independently and, without discussion, had been tossed out by his vocal cords. Oops.

"Of course I do," said Eddy with another sleazy grin.

Donald immediately took a serious dislike to Eddy's sleazy grins. In fact he also took a serious dislike to Eddy. He had probably stood here waiting with him ten times or more, but he had never before mentioned getting a hard-on when he French-kissed Astrid. Maybe he even came. He decided not to ask, since it probably wasn't considered cool to come with your trousers on.

Peter came and Peter went. It was Eddy's turn and that was fine, because Eddy couldn't wait. After him Donald would have Astrid all to himself.

It took an eternity before Eddy was done.

"I have to go inside in a minute," said Astrid, "I think my mother has dinner ready."

Just his luck. Now he'd have to hurry as well. He placed his hands against the wall and adopted the same position as Peter. Astrid understood and leaned backward as before. He felt her thigh between his legs and he gripped it gently. Something immediately started moving in his crotch. As he set about fulfilling his kissing obligations, his member swelled. He wondered whether Astrid could feel it as well. She didn't react as he ploughed through her teeth with his tongue. Donald was filled with contradictory feelings. Was Astrid his Shrimp? It was so hard to tell. When they were up close, he shut his eyes and when they were finished he looked away shyly. And Astrid wasn't as pretty and sweet as Josephine.

He now opened his eyes for the first time. Astrid's eyes were closed, but the expression on her face was pretty serious when she kissed, very serious in fact. The moment he took his distance and leaned backward for a second, she instantly leaned forward to restore the connection. If he leaned his head to one side while kissing it gave him some idea of what the rest of her body looked like. She braced herself as he pressed harder and harder against her, his now rock-hard member on her right thigh. She stuck out her breasts. They may not have been much, but they stood proud and upright in her thin nylon shirt.

Should he touch them or should he keep his hands against the wall? He sensed disaster on her right thigh. He had to put on the breaks because he was literally about to explode. Just as he tried to pull back she moved forward, closed her legs and let out a groan. That was enough encouragement for Donald. He placed his hand on her shoulder and let it slip down until it came to rest on her left breast. He felt the hard nipple through the soft fabric of her shirt. For a second she pushed her breasts forward and pressed her leg against his crotch. Then she opened her eyes. They stared at each other for a single moment. He came and released a series of throaty grunts.

“Don’t!” she said, and shot bolt upright, straightened her clothing and called an unfriendly “goodbye” as she legged it toward her back door.

Had he ruined it forever? Had he gotten it all wrong? He raced home through the dunes.

* * *

My bed has a spacious eight-by-eight-foot mattress developed by NASA, encased in a hand-made, bleached walnut frame and decked with magnificent, creamy white sheets and heavenly pillows. I’ve not always been wealthy, but as far as beds are concerned, I’ve only ever had the very best. King size, with just the right give and, most importantly, the perfect pillow. I can still be found from time to time at the reception desk of a five-star hotel with my own pillow under my arm.

My bedroom has all the facilities of a fallout shelter. I have a desk with every possible electrical and digital connection to the outside world; a sitting area with minibar, coffee machine and home theatre; a walk-in closet and a display cabinet full of knickknacks that are valuable to me. My bathroom, with Jacuzzi, sauna and massage shower, is not that big for all the stuff it accommodates. All I need is a kitchen to turn the place into a complete apartment.

This is how it goes. If you live in a big house with a staff, lots of guests, plenty of friends and visitors, the inclination is to search for a space in which you can be totally private, where no one is allowed without explicit permission, where no one would dare to knock on the door unless the adjacent properties were on fire. If you ask me, that’s the sadness of riches. In the final analysis you just want everyone to leave you alone, and so you withdraw into a corner that’s smaller than the average family home. I bet the president in the White House also only lives in a living room and a bedroom.

It’s past twelve when I wake up. It must have been five-thirty when they kicked me out of the Playhouse. Robin and I couldn’t agree on an arrangement. She finally disappeared upstairs with another client. When she came downstairs an hour later she wasn’t in the mood for further discussion. I took it badly. As the evening progressed I got a lit-

tle crazy about her. She fits perfectly into The Five-Woman Theory.³

There's a rank smell in the room, mainly due to my own breath and the cigarette smell from the clothes in which I fell asleep on the bed in all my grandeur. I'll let myself be abused later by one or the other shower-program setting, and find some clean underwear.

The Five-Woman Theory is the perfect solution for divorced men. Perfect theories are always simple. Every man looks for several different things in a woman, the basic terms and conditions as it were, and they don't differ much from one man to the other. In a long-term relationship, a woman tends —over time— to conform more or less to the various required characteristics. If a man is divorced, it can be difficult for him to find a new partner with all the expected characteristics. Therefore he shouldn't look for everything in one single woman. He should divide the things he seeks over five individuals who replace the ex-partner in every respect, reduce the pain of separation to a minimum, and multiply the prospects of finding the right partner by five.

It all sounds very theoretical, but we can make it simple: what does someone like me look for in a woman? Five things: dazzling, all-encompassing blinding love; an intimate mate/friend to keep the loneliness at bay; a mother for my children; the perfect caretaker; and an exhilarating sex partner. Some things appear to be mutually exclusive. Not everyone will be inclined to list the same characteristics, and priorities will differ. The fact is, however, that a man of average intelligence isn't likely to get beyond five basic conditions without repeating himself. Less intelligent men have a tendency to leave it at two or three. Odd ideas such as finding a wealthy woman, or a woman who can bring calm and security into your life, or just a warm body with a hole in it, I dismiss as brainless man talk. No one wants to be dependent on a rich woman; no man finds calm and secure attractive.

I get undressed and get into the Jacuzzi. As my body is pushed back and forth by the jet streams and my neck slowly relaxes, my thoughts turn to Robin. I picture her voluptuous open lips, her teeth white as snow and her baby-pink tongue in between. I see her magnificent well-defined buttocks in sharp relief against the white sheets, quivering at my touch. It's as if I dreamt it all, that Robin doesn't exist, that I drank myself delirious looking for July and someone brought me home and put me to bed.

3. Remedy for divorced men: The Five-Woman Theory.

I'm seriously agitated all of a sudden, my temperature soars, a hot-flash. I jump out of the water and dry myself off. I have to write, I have to write it all down, otherwise I'll forget. Robin shall be one of my five women. I need to see her again, and kiss her until my tongue is raw.

* * *

Donald had a major problem. The day after his adventure with Astrid he bumped into Eddy, who asked, "What did you do to Astrid?"

"Nothing," said Donald immediately, giving himself away at the same time. Apparently Astrid had been so shocked that not only Donald but also Eddy and Peter were no longer welcome in the lane between the garage and her house.

"She won't do it with you and now she won't do it with us either. What the hell did you do?" Seeing how furious Eddy was, Donald didn't believe it would be wise to say, "I grabbed her tits and came on her leg." Instead he said, "Man, that stupid tart, who cares about her anyway?"

Apparently Eddy cared. He hit Donald right above the nose and in a fraction of a second a red haze appeared before Donald's eyes and he set about his counterattack with both arms flailing. Although Eddy was older and stronger, Donald was head and shoulders bigger, and he managed to score a few direct hits. When the fishmonger finally pulled them apart, both were bleeding, Donald from his nose and Eddy from the corner of his mouth.

Donald's father was a butcher. His family lived above the shop in a narrow shopping street. After the scrap with Eddy, Donald snuck upstairs through the back. He watched the passersby from the windowsill in his little room. He stopped his nosebleed with toilet paper.

What had he done in reality? Nothing, surely. He had accidentally touched her breast, she had said "don't" and he immediately let go. Should he have said, "Sorry, it was an accident"? Would that have made a difference? The expression on Astrid's face as he came told no lies. If he replayed the film he could see a whole range of emotions: from astonishment to fear, from disgust to rage.

In any case, it looked as if his practice sessions were over and that Donald would have to resign himself to fantasy and other resources. Frankie was lucky in that respect. His brother had a collection of porn magazines stashed in a top-secret location. And although Donald hadn't seen them, he figured the pictures they contained would be a heck of a lot more exciting than those of *The Shrimp* and his mother's women's magazines.

Donald began with going through his father's bookcase. Very few books with pictures. An outsized photo book entitled *Africa: Tribes and Rituals* offered masses of bare breasted women and men with penis gourds but not enough to give Donald much satisfaction.

His search for something to turn him on in books without pictures took much longer. He realized pretty quickly that the older hardbacks had little of interest to offer while the paperbacks contained more recent and more comprehensible stories. Luck would have it that his father had purchased a black and white TV, and he had heard a preacher speak about an author whose name Donald recognized from the top shelf of the bookcase, well out of the reach of children's prying hands. The preacher spoke about the sinfulness of the young author, which appealed to Donald.

A couple of lines in the book got him particularly excited. For example, "He shoved his left hand into her slip and pushed slightly to get underneath her. She stretched out her legs and arched her back. Then she rested her buttocks on his hand." Or 'You're wet between your thighs,' he said, gliding gently to and fro." But especially, "He pulled her slip between her legs to one side and with a forward thrust he sank into her."

He could read and reread those lines, over and over. "He slowly disappeared inside her." He sat there on the windowsill with his bloody nose and thought of Astrid. Instead of humping her scrawny leg he slowly disappeared inside her.

He quickly looked away when his mother marched into the room.

"What happened to you?" she asked, somewhat concerned. She was the practical type. She was worried about his bloody nose, of course, but also about his bloodstained shirt that had just been washed. And she noticed that he sat on the windowsill even though she had told him so many times not to.

“I got into a fight with another boy.”

“A fight?” asked mother, as if he were speaking a foreign language.

“Over a girl,” said Donald, figuring that was the most logical thing to say.

“Over a girl?” asked his mother. She parked herself on a chair and started to talk about the womb, fallopian tubes, seeds that swim toward an egg in the womb, attach themselves together to the uterus lining and start to divide. “One of these days,” she said, “you’ll hear your older friends talk in a certain manner about the way girls look. That girl’s got a *cute ass*, for example. But that’s not the way to speak about girls, Donald. Boys like that are *vulgar*.” That was it. A *cute ass* and *vulgar* boys. She stood up, turned and left the room.

Lucky she didn’t ask if he still had any questions. Did she know about his brother and Tillie? He could work out for himself that it was forbidden to play with yourself. The burning question: is it bad for your health if you do it more than four times a day?

A cute ass. Did The Shrimp have a cute ass? And Astrid? He had always judged a woman on her face, her eyes or her hair. Her ass must be important as well, he guessed. He looked down to the street below and studied the backsides of passing women. Wide loads, lumbering humps, almost invisible folds, pointed bumps under pleated skirts and wobbly buns in baggy pants. And then, atop a pair of high-heels and super slender legs, two perfect buttocks in tight, black, nylon pants.

“Wow, that bird has a *cute ass*,” Donald announced solemnly.

* * *

The doorbell rings and I check the video intercom to see who’s there. It’s Sandra. Shit. Am I in the mood for Sandra? Sandra is one of my Five Women. I’ve been wondering recently whether she still fits the bill. I sometimes get the feeling she would move in with me in an instant. Leave her husband and her home and start a new life with me.

Her husband, a good-hearted airline pilot with an Almost-Elvis hairdo, a hearty smile, a large mouth and flawless teeth, must have something I don’t. I took the opportunity to study him closely when we bumped into one another by accident, but —hair and teeth aside— I still

can't work it out. The only thing I can come up with is "security." Man, he looks reliable! He's a pilot on transatlantic flights, flying the same route hundreds, maybe thousands of times. Getting a Boeing 747 off the ground must be insanely exciting if you've never done it before, but after the tenth time I can only imagine the fun must be out of it.

Sandra entered my life as a journalist. She worked for a radio station and was doing a series on millionaires. I normally don't get involved with that nonsense, but her voice on the phone was so sensual. When I made a remark about it she hinted in response that her voice wasn't the only thing about her that was sensual and I said yes instead of no.

She's not incredibly beautiful, but she does indeed have a number of sensual qualities, such as dark brown eyes set against natural Scandinavian blond hair, and a very ample mouth with shapely lips. For the rest, she has a firm figure and she's much shorter than I am.

I planned to meet her at five in the evening. She literally exploded into the place, tripping over the steps at the front door and scattering her various bags all over the hall. She stumbled into the dining room, parked herself at the dining table and set up her tape recorder. I poured two glasses of red wine while she prepared her introduction. She described the house: "I entered the house via a hallway with a splendid stairwell with tons of classic details, a fireplace and a magnificent grand piano, a Steinway, of course. I'm now in the room Al refers to as the salon. A superb traditional dining room with a ten-foot mirror, a lounge area with an enormous art-deco suite, original photos by leading photographers on the walls, a miniature forest of bonsai trees, a thirty-foot-long bookcase extending the full twelve feet to the ceiling. It must cost a fortune to heat the place, Al."

She shoved the microphone under my nose and I responded to her dumb question with a dumb answer about using logs from the garden as firewood. All I can remember of the rest of the interview was that I elaborated my theory about possessing a lot of money: that it leads to a lot of restrictions, anxiety and mistrust. For people who struggle to make ends meet at the end of every month, that stuff is always hard to swallow. But, if you have enough money not to have to work for a living, so many people want a piece of the pie and the pie doesn't last forever. Taxes, lawyers, consultants, exes, and a lot of people who claim friendship without your consent.

And if you're forty-something and you have a 22-year-old girl on your lap, you naturally wonder whether it's your good looks she's after or something else.

Whatever, Sandra was already twenty-five and I figured it was time to have something to eat. I was slurring, which doesn't sound good on tape. In the restaurant she explained her stale theory that women have absolutely no need of men. Economically, perhaps, because that's the way society is put together, but for romance, sex or even just good company, men are pretty redundant. As soon as I could get a word in, I responded: a woman has nothing to compare with that rigid yet warm thing that enters her, that fuses with her inner recesses, and swells a little extra right before the climax.

She kept up her post-emancipatory rhetoric for quite a while, although I made her angry when I told her she was completely passionless. I explained that her bullshit probably scared off interesting men and as a result she had no right to talk. Or did I say real men? It's possible I only spoke about nice men, or reasonable men or special men. I can't remember, but whatever I said it worked.

"Look," I said. "You're completely right with all that drivel about men and women, of course you are. But what I thought when I spoke to you on the phone hasn't really changed. Talking is great but it's a shame you don't like sex, as well."

She fell silent for a while, although she occasionally burst out laughing—secret amusement she kept to herself. But she traced circles in her dessert with intense sensuality.

I stared at her deep brown eyes, her ample lips and her breasts as they swayed hypnotically over the edge of the table, up and down, back and forth.

Once we were back at my place she started interviewing herself. "My body's all wrong," she said, looking into the mirror at the end of the table. "My breasts are too big and my hips are too small. I'm too short and a little on the chubby side. And I'm married."

She made me nervous so I decided to make coffee. The espresso machine tends to calm me down. It groaned and rumbled and the display asked all sorts of questions, giving me time to ponder if I wanted more from her. A one-night stand? A short but intense affair? A platonic relationship with an erotic lapse here and there? Or maybe nothing at all?

That was also a possibility, of course. I took my coffee to the sofa and sat down, patting the place beside me with the flat of my hand. I wanted to make things a little less formal, but within thirty seconds this turned into heavy petting.

Now she stands at the front door and I sit half-naked at my computer, working on my masterpiece. Unfortunately, the door intercom makes a little click if you pick up the receiver inside and regular visitors know I'm watching them. "Hello," says the warm sensual voice as she peers temptingly into the wide-angle lens. I open the door.

* * *

She used to sit near the front on the window side. Claire. He knew from the first moment he saw her. This was the girl of his dreams. She had the same hair as the Shrimp, long and blond with a part in the middle. Her figure was fuller, and although she couldn't have been much older than thirteen, she already had breasts. She was slightly cross-eyed and she had an infectious laugh.

His school had originally been for boys only, run by a Catholic order. For one reason or another, the decision had been made to allow girls into the century-old boys' academy. Donald had to repeat a year, allowing him to enjoy the integration process to the fullest.

After the first morning he had to exchange his place at the back of the class with a place in the middle row near the front. "I can keep a closer eye on you there," the teacher said. Donald didn't see it as a punishment, because the change allowed him to gaze at Claire the whole day long. And Claire looked at him too. They stared at each other for hours on end. She with a smile on her lips, he with a wistful, slightly melancholic expression, as if he were looking at a photo of a love beyond his reach.

After a few lunch breaks, he was able to calculate how he could discretely make contact with her. He knew where she hung out with her girlfriends so he parked his bike in the same spot. The steering was loose. With the same pliers he had used to loosen it that morning, he set about repairing it, close to Claire and her friends.

“Bike broke?” she said.

“Steering loose,” he said, and they stared at one another in the usual manner. Much too long, he figured, because her two friends already started to giggle. *Bike broke, steering loose. Bike broke, steering loose* raged through his head and he couldn’t think of anything else to say. The giggling began to irritate him. He returned to his bike and the pliers.

Claire separated herself from her group of girlfriends, a little embarrassed. She stood behind him with her hand on his baggage rack. “Can I help? Hold something, maybe?”

In hindsight he wished he had said yes, but at that moment all he could say was that he could manage by himself. He started to sweat. He had to say something, give her an excuse to stay. “Do you like it here at school?” he asked, finally.

“Sure, it’s fine.”

And believe it or not, that started a conversation that lasted more than five minutes. He looked at her and wondered what kind of impression he made: a driveling idiot, a pockmarked dummy who couldn’t keep his eyes off her beautiful, round face, high cheekbones, her delicate long, blond hair and her slender lips.

She must have noticed how he blushed from time to time, or how beads of sweat formed on his forehead, or at least that he stammered or messed about bashfully with his pliers. He must have stood there for a full fifteen minutes, perhaps even a half hour. He spent the rest of the day, evening and next morning trying to reproduce what he had said, but without success.

Donald made an important discovery. At night, in bed, he found it impossible to fantasize Claire by his side. There was something not right about it. When he gently tried to stroke himself and pictured her sweet smiling lips, her firm body, the pinafore with two broad bands hanging over her shoulders like suspenders, her soft voice, *Bike broke? Bike broke? Bike broke?* nothing happened, not until he pictured Tillie instead. Tillie marched into the room, sent Claire packing and sat down on the edge of the bed. “You have a cute ass,” he said and flip, up it went. When she stuck her tongue in his mouth and the excitement was about to reach its climax, he quickly tried to substitute Tillie for Claire. Not a chance. The arousal went.

He stood up and sat on the windowsill. A cool September breeze wafted through his thin pajamas and he composed a poem for Claire. It was a short poem, a boy's poem, a hopelessly adolescent poem not to be repeated. Donald was in love and it looked as if he had found the solution to his incessant urges. He no longer wanted to play with himself. Claire exceeded all his secret loves in one fell swoop. He could barely remember Josephine, The Shrimp could stick to the pages of his diary until the cows came home, Astrid could kiss Eddy and Peter until her lips got sour, but he had Claire. And he wasn't worthy of her if he spent his nights masturbating. He never wanted to masturbate again.

* * *

Sandra walks into the room. It took her a full ten minutes to find me here in my office. I still sit in my underpants at my computer. "Jesus, I've scoured the entire house. Here you are!" She sits at the end of my desk and breathes heavily through her nostrils. "But this makes up for a whole lot," she gasps, alluding to my naked torso.

The gasping has more to do with the stairs than my torso, I figure. "I'm working on my masterpiece," I tell her. She leans over and I push her back and switch off the screen at the same time. "No one is allowed to read it until it's finished, that's bad luck. I might lose my concentration or start having doubts, reservations if someone comments on it." I stand up and give her a kiss and a cuddle.

"Your memoirs? Already?"

"It's not my memoirs. It's an Important Contribution to Humanity." I need to keep saying that to myself, of course, because I often wonder whether what I have to say is so incredibly simple that it might come across as incredibly stupid that I have just realized it.

"But you can't say what it's about? Is it about sex?"

"You have a one-track mind. Enough about sex!"

"What do you mean? Don't you want me anymore?" It sounds as if she's angry but there's something desperate in her questions. "So you probably did it with one of the others last night, eh?" That sounds a little more positive. She can handle that. As long as it has nothing to do

with her. She's aware of the primary elements of the Five-Woman Theory. Primary elements in the sense that she knows what a man looks for in a woman and what I look for in my five girlfriends. On the whole, she tends to play her own part in the theory without much prompting.

Sandra isn't about sex. Actually, I would prefer to stop doing it with her altogether because I have an idea that sex with more than one woman is making me increasingly nervous. Men might give the appearance of being polygamists at heart, but nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps in ancient cultures in which the woman is considered to be little more than an inflatable doll, where they even remove the pleasure button from time to time for the sake of ease. But not here.

I would prefer to have intellectual conversations with her. But Sandra is a bit on the dominant side and always accuses me of male chauvinism. It's a man's world? Come off it! Sure, if it's about dropping bombs or sitting behind a desk in shirt and tie, shouldering responsibility for other people's problems. It is true that men are less capable when it comes to choosing a partner, mainly because their dick has little capacity to think. The word dickhead says it all. In addition, men tend to get horny when they encounter something new, something other than what they already have. They also know that newness wears off pretty quickly so they stick to doing it on the side or only dreaming about it.⁴

Women who've got what they need, like Sandra, like the idea that a man is polygamous, because all they want is something temporary. Women understand men better than men understand themselves. And a man's capacity to understand a woman—that's better left unsaid.

"As long as you're honest," says Sandra.

Of course I won't say "Sandra, honey, I spent last night in a strip club looking at the most beautiful ass in the western hemisphere." I say, "I met a woman yesterday and I sort of liked her."

"And now you're writing a book about it?" I sense a trace of jealousy in what she says but I also know she's teasing.

"No, I already started writing yesterday."

"Tell me again, how many women are there in that theory of yours?"

"Five, but the number isn't definitive. It might be more and it might be less. I'm not sure yet. The joke is, I picked it up from a friend but it came without instructions. That's what I'm working on."

4. Women are in charge in real life.

“So that’s what the book’s about?”

“No, the theory is a little insubstantial for a whole book.”

“Who will you drop if there’s one too many? Me?” says Sandra, who clearly isn’t interested in the book.

“You never know,” I jest, in an effort to round off this strange conversation.

She sits on my lap and tosses her sumptuous hair over my face. It tickles. She runs her sharp fingernails through my meager chest hair and presses her long lips against mine.

I think of Robin.

Chapter 2

Two months earlier and 1966

To be honest, this book should really begin somewhere else—in Venezuela, a year and a half ago, or perhaps only two months ago—because Cassandra has a crucial role to play in the story. Or is it just an important supporting role? Anyway, it explains a great deal if we begin the story here.

Cassandra is the flower of Punto Fijo, of Venezuela, perhaps even all of Latin America.

Once we pass the head of the island, the swell changes. The tropical ocean wind fills the sails and the eighty-foot yacht slices its way through the waves, which are much too high for my liking. Fortunately I don't have to navigate. Oscar, the Venezuelan sailor, assists my friend Jack with lashing down the sails and other such things that must be done on a boat like this. I'm not a fan of sailing, but the goal of our trip is enough to make me embark on this insane journey: Punto Fijo, our favorite godforsaken resort on the Venezuelan coast. Last time we traveled to the harbor town by plane, but this time Jack has managed to rustle up some paying passengers, so we can go by boat.

There aren't many millionaires who aren't extremely thrifty. Jack, who is worth at least five, sold his business six years back and dedicated himself to a pretty standard ideal: a sailboat in Caribbean waters. Freedom, not a care in the world, and nice women: those are the underlying thoughts behind such a dream. The freedom to go and lie at anchor where you want is limited, because not all the harbors are suitable, and dropping anchor wherever you feel like is frequently impossible on account of the roughness of the Caribbean. Above all, if you're tied up somewhere, you need to watch out your boat isn't plundered. The carefree life isn't exactly what it pretends to be either. You're a completely self-sustaining unit. Water-purification system, icemaker, generator, engine, water pumps, gas installation, washing machine, hull, winches, radio, GPS, autopilot and other on-board computers: it can all break down when you're in the middle of the ocean, requiring repair and maintenance all the time. If you don't have a ship big enough to allow you to take on a crew of three or four, you'll always be occupied in one way or another.

Okay, the nice women part is true. Sitting on a ship like this is bound to impress someone. If you're not too busy with repairs and maintenance, you can pick up a different woman every day. Jack is the male equivalent of a nymphomaniac. They don't tend to use the word nym-

phomaniac for men. Probably because it's just assumed that all men are cursed with an overactive sex drive.

Anyway, due to our misplaced frugality we're presently sharing the boat with two young police officers heading for a weekend on the town, and a young couple with less adventurous exploits in mind: "It's the South America of Gabriel García Márquez we're after." Sounds pretty uptight if you ask me, and that's the best way to describe them, but they're paying two-hundred dollars per person for a round trip, which pays Jack's diesel bill, the bribes at customs and the berthing fees. It also leaves him with several hundred dollars to finance hitting the town at night. In reality, of course, we'll spend a great deal more, but it's just the idea. Millionaires are either hardworking idiots or people who count themselves rich.

Jack belongs to the latter category and I'm in for the ride.

Jack knows I wouldn't have joined him if he had told me in advance how rough the ocean would be. He dismisses ten-foot waves as no big deal. The conversation about how high is "really high" disappears in a haze of rum and Dramamine, which I've taken as a precaution. My sense of balance and my stomach are having an argument about whether that was the right thing to do. I try not to think about breakfast. All I ate was a two-day-old chicken sandwich because there was nothing else available and I'm unaccustomed to setting out on an expedition like this on an empty stomach.

Oscar laughs when he sees me in the wheelhouse. It's at the ship's center, and apparently the best place to be in my condition.

Jack is at the wheel by my side, grinning at my colorless face. "The weather should pick up in three hours or so. Then we'll be sailing along the coast of the Paraguaná Peninsula. That's where we meet the continental coastline, as it were." He sounds almost poetic but that's not his true intention. Before I know it he's telling me nightmare stories about vomiting passengers, one more detailed than the other. I warn him, but he's doing it on purpose.

Jack and I are alike in many respects. We're both about six and a half feet tall, cultivating a belly, around the two-hundred-and-twenty-pound mark, somewhat stooped, hair originally blond but now salt-and-pepper, leaning toward gray, shoulder length, and a bit of a Germanic mug. He's a little younger than I am, but not much.

Jack invited me to join him because my divorce threatened to get the

better of me. He does his best to provide the necessary distractions. He met me at the airport with two beauties he picked up somewhere along the line and I got to choose between them. Turned out later that he'd tried both of them out himself first.

I didn't feel like it. I preferred to wallow in self-pity, vent my fury at the fact that my ex wants to keep the kids away from me. Jack's not into blubbering men. I figure the last time he cried was during puberty.

* * *

Claire was his muse. Days on end they stared at each other in the front row in class, she on the window side, he in the middle. Much to the annoyance of the teacher, who had to face their turned heads day in day out. But separating them was out of the question. Since Donald's loving gaze was focused on Claire, his teachers found him much less of a bother. The previous year he acted up from September to July. His class was labeled notorious and Donald was one of the primary troublemakers. Now he was a pussycat. He tried to answer every question in history and geography, in particular, because he thought it would impress Claire. It gave him a degree of sophistication, panache, although he had no idea what that was.

He was pretty knowledgeable about the different continents because his father had given him a book about a trip around the world. His peak moment came during the class on maritime routes when he proudly announced that the quickest course by sea from New York to Japan was "through the Panama Canal!" He almost said Suez. Almost, Jesus, it was already impressive enough that he could name two different canals, but he was so happy he chose the right one. Because Claire hesitated for a moment, waiting for the teacher, then turned proudly to Donald and then proudly to the rest of the class. As if to say, "didn't my boyfriend do well?" "My boyfriend," he could see it in her eyes.

Her smile was permanently ingrained in his memory. As an aspiring poet he could describe it to the last detail. The lift of her magnificent cheekbones, her widening lips and her gleaming white teeth, radiant against the background of the window behind her. "My boyfriend."

The only way to get attention in math was to act out, but he never

managed to get one over on the teacher, who usually didn't waste any time ordering him into the corridor at the first sign of bad behavior. That meant one, sometimes two hours sweeping up the playground instead of gazing at Claire.

The worst moment was when Donald got involved in a scuffle with the math teacher. Mr. Steinway had written and published his own math book. It was also apparent that he had copied and bound the thing himself, because most pupils had to stick it together with tape and/or other forms of adhesive to stop it from falling apart. Not Donald. He treated it like a loose-leaf folder and wasn't always the best at keeping the pages in the right order. This annoyed Steinway and Donald dared to answer back. Steinway snapped. Leaning over Donald's desk, he roared and tossed the pages right and left into the air. The spray from Steinway's mouth soaked Donald and he made a remark about it.

Wham!

A firm slap round the ear!

Without thinking—he couldn't control himself—he punched Steinway square on the nose. Steinway grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him across his desk and into the corridor. He might have earned some points with his fellow pupils but with Claire it had the opposite effect. While she agreed that Steinway shouldn't have hit him, she felt that giving a teacher a bloody nose was going too far.

It would have been better, of course, if he had specialized in math and made friends with Mr. Steinway. It wasn't Claire's best subject and he could have helped her, given her extra lessons, perhaps at her place. At the dining table in the living room while her mother brought tea and biscuits. Not in her own room upstairs, no way. Otherwise her mother would suspect him of getting up to all sorts of things all boys dream of doing with Claire. But he didn't think of her this way.

Anyway math wasn't his forte. His marks for math would never get any better.

Claire lived in a house on the boulevard with a sea view. That's where the upper class lived. He had looked up her surname in the telephone book and discovered her father was the director of a major company. He spied on the house on a number of occasions. It was a white, detached residence with a large bay window with views of the entire coastline. It also offered excellent views of the interior.

His next milestone was to have the chance to cycle home with her. He waited until she disappeared from sight around the corner of his street and then he followed her. He cycled past the back of her house toward a nearby hollow in the dunes where he enjoyed an excellent view of the living room through the beach grass. He could see Claire's mother, Claire, her older sister and her younger brother drinking tea in the bay window. In the hollow in the dunes he imagined he could send telepathic messages to Claire, inviting her to come outside and look for him. She would find him immediately and lie down beside him without uttering a word. They would say beautiful things to one another as they looked out toward the sea. Of course, the very idea that she might find him, catch him spying on her, scared him witless. Sometimes the mere thought was so painful it made him cringe with shame.

Donald stepped up his poetic output. That was the solution to the class difference between them, that was why he wanted to be a poet. If you're born poor you'll stay poor all your life, but a poet you can be no matter what. He wrote in complete secrecy, although he was certain she would read his words one day because he was writing for her, to her.

*How I long to savor
The sweetness of your lips
Mingled with the salt of the sea
That covers my skin.*

And more such bullshit.

* * *

An indescribable sensation. After much cursing and swearing we manage to lash the ship to a twenty-foot high quay wall. I clamber up a rusty ladder only half bolted to the wall. Finally on solid ground. Never realized how fantastic that could be. A simple, colorless wharf, reassuringly sturdy. My sense of balance and my stomach immediately call a truce and I can take in the surroundings.

A portly, middle-aged man stands in front of a shiny Chevy Blazer; his high-heeled female companion approaches us elegantly. “Paula,” she says in passing, shaking my hand, although she only has eyes for Jack. She kisses him formally and with a slick movement of her hand she caresses the back of his neck. Unnoticed by her husband, John. The look in her eyes betrays immense passion for Jack.

Paula is about thirty years younger than John. A firm athletic body, tiny waist and —to use Donald’s mother’s expression— a cute ass. Short, dyed, blond hair and a pair of dark brown eyes that could bring any man on the wharf to his knees. Jack has a name for it: Third World Bitch, escaped from the slums or even a middle-class neighborhood by shaking her tits and ass, by making the best of her seductive smile and sizeable jaws, by driving men completely crazy. Not by playing the whore, no, absolutely not. TWBs are often good Catholics, seriously monogamous and very much into marriage. She married John in a civil ceremony in the U.S. and had a church wedding in Venezuela.

I would guess Paula is a hundred and fifty pounds lighter than John. I’m not sure if I’m the only one with an irresistible tendency to wonder what people look like when they have sex with one another, but anyone is guaranteed to have sympathy for Paula when he imagines a two-hundred-pound colossus like John getting on top of her.

Paula’s IQ is easily thirty points higher than John’s. He’s a nice guy. In a certain sense it’s also sad to watch him play the chauffeur to Paula’s barely secret lover by collecting him from the boat. He’s probably the masochistic type; he prefers to be confronted with the facts, allows himself to be humiliated, to lose the game.

Two hours later we’re in our hotel. I refused to sleep on the boat. It’s anchored somewhere in a bay not far from the harbor. Oscar remained on board to guard the ship. We took a rubber dinghy to the beach. Paula, John, Jack and I are enjoying some exquisite alcoholic snacks and making plans for the rest of the evening. It’s a problem, because Paula wants all four of us to hit the town together while we actually have a completely different goal in mind. Mission Cassandra. Cassandra is the most beautiful working girl in Punto Fijo. We’re here to find her and this hospitable couple is in our way.

But Paula is determined. She’s already reserved a table in the only

decent restaurant in town. A brilliant move on her part. By the time she's downed her third aperitif, her marital problems are on the table and whatever possibility there might have been to worm out of dinner is disappearing sip by sip. Jack is on the edge of his seat. He and Paula are exchanging all sorts of body language and my seasickness rears its ugly head again as I try to keep up.

"Do you plan to take her down tonight? What about our mission?" I ask in a language neither John nor Paula understand. Jack hesitates. He shakes his head and shifts back a little further into his seat.

The couple doesn't exactly mince their words. She wants a divorce and claims their marriage wasn't what she expected. John doesn't want to lose her. Several articles were attached to the marriage contract and if she leaves him she doesn't get a cent. Paula wasn't born yesterday, of course, and she's hired a lawyer who tells her John can't get off that easily.

"We still love each other very much," says Paula.

"I still love her very much," says John, "but she's only interested in my money."

So there we are, on the fourth aperitif and an intricate problem. Two solutions immediately spring to mind. She shoots him or he shoots her, then at least we can start to look for Cassandra. I realize I've had nothing to eat because my expert advice is getting more complicated by the minute.

We have some time to get ready. It takes me no time at all. I have a cold shower, brush my teeth, drink half a bottle of mineral water and put on some clean clothes. Jack indulges himself in the bubble bath in his hotel suite.

The hotel boasts a casino, although "boast" is not exactly the right word as it's not much to speak of. Anyway, I head for the casino, wander round a little and spot two pretty ladies who are clearly not here to spend money. Friendly smiles all around, but I'm unavailable. I do my best not to look at them or attract their attention. They approach me despite my efforts and I'm obliged to wave them off, "I was about to leave." One is good-looking, with her black beret, though her makeup is on the heavy side. I have to get back to Jack, to the marital problems, to our mission, to the quest for Cassandra. The woman who has haunted my dreams from the night we first met.

Cassandra.