

Franco Troiano

Glocal

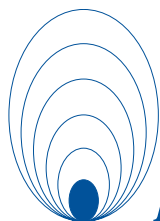


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Tres novelas de empresa
Tre racconti d'impresa

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Cover illustration:
“Saint Jerome”

Georges De La Tour,
El Prado (Madrid)

This painting of the patron saint of translation has been exhibited at the Prado since 2005. It was transferred to the famous museum immediately after it was “discovered” by the director of Madrid’s Cervantes Institute, who looked at it every day in his office, under a different name. A member of the Real Patronato del Museo Nacional del Prado was able to use intuition to recognize the work as a painting of Saint Jerome, which could be incontestably attributed it to Georges de la Tour (1593-1652).

Franco Troiano

Glocal

Three short stories

Tapas (written in 2006 in French)

The Work Shirker and

Turandot (written in Italian in 1994)

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“Glocal”, a contraction of global and local: the defining synthesis of our current economic and cultural era! Californians of the 1990s coined this neologism, which I would have liked to invent myself.

David F. Dekynen New York, 2001

Glocal

Summary

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Introduction

Three short stories about identity to celebrate our 30th anniversary

Marketing truth in the “literary lie”

Ten years ago, it was only a trend. Today, in Europe, there are even entire publishing houses that specialize in corporate literary works. The publication of novels and short stories centered on corporate life has become a constant in industrial marketing. Henceforth, we must also have fictional means at our disposal in order to give our clients, and the professional world, a true picture of so-called “corporate culture”. Moreover, literature and cinema have always found inspiration in themes of professional experience and technological projects. As we know, it is the stuff of plausible, everyday experience that best expresses the highly complex reality of life. Why should it be any different for business? The people, roles, scope of expertise, productive attitudes, economic choices, qualitative strategies, human relations, sexuality, professional positioning, and marketing cannot be presented and explained in a really masterful way without the eternal “literary lie”. Especially in today’s so-called post-industrial world, and in this era of multiculturalism and globalization.

The impact of corporate life and reality on the existence and culture of modern peoples is at least as significant as the impact of cultural and political factors on the economic world. Thus, it was foreseeable that a corporate literary genre would assert itself on the cultural market beyond that of industry marketing.

Furthermore, for decades now, much literary criticism has decried the appalling psychologizing tendencies and the dreadful neglect of context, in much of the published work cluttering the shelves of bookstores in our modern cities.

On the other hand, the fictionalization of corporate life – regardless of the intrinsic quality of the writing – puts psychology back in its place and pertinently takes on context.

A glocal, global, and local context

The Eurologos Group can then modestly claim that it was ahead of its time in 1997, when we published a book, in seven languages, containing a short story, “Jerome”, in honor of Saint Jerome, the patron saint of our main occupation: translation. This was on the occasion of our company’s twentieth anniversary.

And now, to celebrate our thirtieth birthday, we would like to humbly continue this experiment, with the publication of three short stories revolving around the careers and productive structure of the Eurologos Group. The current trilogy aims to tell three stories of protagonists from the group, employees and managers from various Eurologos agencies, in the context of their multinational activities.

Beyond the question of their literary value (a subject that may always be debated, especially in our time), the three stories gathered in this book, in six languages, describe the universe and cultural horizons surrounding our activities, as well as their operating methods and goals. And since these are youthful activities undertaken primarily by a multinational group of young people, personal plans, involvement in relationships, and existential passions are all presented in a context that is inevitably social, economic, and historical. And, of course, glocal – global and international, as well as local and closely linked to identity.

Happy reading.

Frederik Vercruyse

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Preface

Tapas

In 1997, for the 20th anniversary of his linguistic services agency, Eurologos' founder and CEO, Franco Troiano, published a company novel under the almost predictable title of *Jerome*. With his *Vulgate*, the Bible's first transposition from Greek and Hebrew into Latin, Saint Jerome, indeed, incarnates the archetypical traditional translator. In several paintings, this saintly man is depicted as a hermit tormented by translation and adaptation problems. Unfortunately, the contemporary translator is still too often associated with this somewhat simplistic image of a recluse. Jerome was nevertheless much more than a hermit-translator. Being a cosmopolitan individual – he traveled all over Europe, Asia Minor and the Middle East, as the secretary of Pope Damasus I in Rome, as a monk in the Holy Land, in short, as a citizen of the world of that era – he studied and penetrated his own origins as much as those of his target public. Without any exaggeration, Jerome can be considered to be the first “glocal” individual, the word that now constitutes the central concept underlying the Eurologos Group's activities.

In *Tapas*, F. Troiano's latest company short story, two fictional “Eurologos” characters retrace Saint Jerome's footsteps. Hannelore, who is Dutch, and Peter, who is Scottish, are sent on a mission to Madrid and Barcelona, finally ending up in Saint Jerome's monastery in Montserrat. In this story, the author deliberately chooses two characters that go up against the classic image of a translator. Hannelore is responsible for developing and localizing a website in Spanish, whereas Peter's goal is to close a franchising contract in Spain. Both of them incarnate the modern translator as well as Eurologos' increasingly expanding network. Their conversations and subtle points of view illustrate that these linguists observe the world without taboos and embrace it as a global village. Their erudition, their love of travel, history, local cultures, religion and of course languages emphasize once again the importance of the local dimension in connection with worldwide developments. Are not these the essential conditions and skills for assuming the post of a modern and “glocal” translator?

During their travels, the protagonists unrestrainedly make the most of the local gastronomy: tapas. This title was indeed not chosen at random. These “Tapas” do not only represent a “glimpse”, or a “hint” of Eurologos' atmosphere and activities. They are also one of the world's most glocalized culinary delicacies: while their origins are strictly Iberian, they are now enjoyed

from Madrid to New York. The fact that their preparation is adapted to the local tastes and preferences can only confirm the need for (g)localization felt by the consumer in every sector, just like in the sphere of translation.

“Tapas”, a derivative of the Spanish word “*tapar*”: “to cover”, leads you on a voyage of “dis”covery through the world of contemporary thinking about translation in this short story. A truly crowning achievement for Eurologos’ thirtieth anniversary.

Patrick Beeken

Professor of English and Head of the Corporate Translation and Interpreting Department
Limburg Catholic Institute of Higher Education

Preface

Tapas

I take pleasure in contributing to the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the creation of the Eurologos Agency with these words, which will serve as a preamble to the Spanish version of the novel – translated into several languages – written by its CEO, Mr. Troiano. I would also like to take this opportunity to express my recognition of the work accomplished by such a worthy institution in the translation and terminology sector within the academic and professional environments. I would also like to thank its managers for the warm welcome they give our students when doing their work placement. Thanks to these placements they come into contact with a rich and attractive professional reality. Furthermore, this immersion takes place in Brussels, the modern Babel and home of many international organizations and multinational companies. By associating these experiences with the opportunities offered to them by the Socrates and Erasmus programs, our students, who are translators in the making, are gaining experience far from their home university, far from their homes and strict, routine habits. Now it is about personal experiences, the brave steps taken in this internal, academic, pacifist and human revolution. It is to understand this different reality, adapt to it and in this way learn to deal with it using their own initiatives. There is no doubt that these cultural and university exchanges contribute to consolidating a common Europe, which banishes the bloody battles experienced by our ancestors to an irreversible past. In this way a history of which we will no longer be ashamed can be written.

This said, we go on to *Tapas*. This tale is without a doubt inspired by the pleasant reality experienced by a young working couple immersed in the world of IT and translation. Nothing at the beginning of the story leads us to think that soon this couple will surround us with life, spontaneity and naturalness. The here and now in which they live. We extract pleasure and enjoyment from the pages of *Tapas* in the splendid happiness stemming from the immediate physical encounter. Our two protagonists literally share each others feelings, communicate and share in the generous, free and bare responsibility of two beings free from any kind of ties, living the only option available to two healthy beings: the pure pleasure of offering yourself generously and freely and the enjoyment of an absolute, unique and both physically and mentally inseparable meeting. The pleasure giving and receiving yield, the reciprocation of gifts of two beings exercising this right and this duty of freedom, this vital, conscious and aroused intoxication which is provided, on the one hand, by the five senses and, on the other hand, by words and silence.

They do not reveal anything because this happiness belongs to them, it flows freely from their being as it should from any human being who has not been crippled by a hostile environment. Once the weekend is over, they go back to their daily routines leaving their image behind them, the proof that fulfilling their obligations spans all aspects of their lives, their work and their relationships with others.

Regarding the translation of *Tapas*, there is little – or rather nothing – to be said. It is fluid and truly reflects the words that translate reality and feelings. Translators immerse themselves in the work and put themselves in the place of the author and their characters: they are the voice of the other in the target language. If one speaks of the “misery and grandeur” of the translator, with good reason, how can we not recognize how big this faculty is, this privilege of being able to submerge oneself in an unknown universe, in this “false reality” described by the French poet Louis Aragon when defining fiction? The translator of *Tapas* has given us the opportunity to get to know Hannelore and Peter during this weekend in Barcelona, to enjoy these tapas with them, these earthly fruit – never prohibited, to confirm their joy of living, to be liberated and to liberate ourselves from chains and demons, to bestow them and to bestow ourselves with the gift of Prometheus, supreme grace, freedom and above all freedom shared with the other, with others.

Roberto DENGLER GASSIN

Professor at the University of Salamanca.

Preface

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Translating is a complex activity and the translator is constantly confronted with questions of all kinds that largely overflow the strict border of the profession to cunningly worm their way into the personal and secret universe of the artist. As if they were true temptations or even deep aspirations sometimes held back, sometimes privileged, but always alive and visible on the front stage of communication.

However, one of these temptations more specifically concerns editing, editorial freedom, the “quill” of the translator. And indeed, the computer and a specific mechanistic terminology mainly tend to want to take up the whole space and transform translation into a construction and replacement game with the more or less admitted aim of imposing or substituting a tradition of translation which has been going on forever... One could almost forget that on the other end of the ladder we find the magic of writing, the resourcefulness of speech and the divertissement of the artist. Do we not say that the translation sometimes surpasses the original in correction, but also in linguistic quality? Is it not the dream of each editing translator to produce a value superior to that of the original?

One understands that for a linguist, the temptation is strong. And sometimes translators do not resist... but to say that they are committing a sin by going beyond limits whatever they may be, is to be fundamentally unaware of the riches, or even the entirety of translation as a global activity. The “quill” does not exclude the formal, professional, technical and other aspects which make translating a very specialized job, and more and more a team job. In the same way, the profession requires talented, mature, initiative taking, university-level human competence.

Thus, the author of “Glocal” needs not be forgiven. On the contrary, when one is at work, one needs from time to time to open the windows... at the very least because we need fresh air to live.

Hugo Marquant
Marie Haps Free Institute
(For Translators and interpreters)
Brussels

Preface

Tapas

Today, translating above all means mediating between languages, cultures and identities. The translator is an intercultural mediator who assumes the task of making a text accessible in another language. Indeed, translators must have ample linguistic and cultural baggage in the two languages they work with. They have to be very familiar with the language in which the original text is written. They also have to be very familiar with the target language in which they rewrite the text. It is a question, naturally, of a rewriting procedure, that is to say decoding and adapting the linguistic and cultural structures in the target language. In this metaphorical journey from one language to another and between one culture and the other, something is inevitably lost and yet something is gained as well.

In Europe there are numerous centers and researchers that work on translation theory, among which the Centre for Translation Studies of the University of Warwick (UK), run by Susan Bassnett, for example, has to be noted. One of the most interesting and stimulating aspects of translation is represented by the importance attributed to culture-bound concepts and terms, that is to say those concepts and lexemes intrinsically linked to a specific national identity and designating a cultural diversity reflected in the language.

For example, the very title of the short story under scrutiny – Tapas – immediately evokes a Hispanic reality. Furthermore, a series of words migrates beyond national and linguistic frontiers, and spreads into the new linguistic tissue. In the short story *Tapas*, whose protagonists are young people moving within this multilingual European context, the author makes ample use of (predominantly) English, French and Spanish terms: *direct marketing*, *head office*, *freelance*, *copywriter*, *affaire*, *débâcle*, *chic*, *movida*, *tapas* and others.

Translation theories have a long history, above all linked to translating literary texts into one's mother tongue. However, today, translation is indispensable to the markets' demands, which are ever more dynamic and international. Specialized language is characterized by its synthetic quality, its monoreferential nature, its transparency and its precision. Translating specialized languages requires solid skills in the specific domain, regardless of whether the text concerns business, tourism, medicine, law, etc. In practice, translators have to know a sector's language as if it were their own specific sector. In practice, to be able to aptly translate a commercial text, it is not enough to know two languages: sector-based languages also have to be familiar. Therefore, if

several skills are truly necessary, it is not understandable why technical translations are not signed by their translators. Their invisibility no longer makes sense.

Translating the short story *Tapas*, where the young main characters travel with ease among places, languages and translations within the advertising sector, reconciling techno-scientific knowledge (creating a multilingual website) with humanistic knowledge, also means having an enriching experience for one's career and identity, similar to the one Peter has personally.

Oriana Palusci
Professor of English
University of Trento, Italy.

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What makes a good professional translation? Accuracy, completeness, acceptability, presentation, timeliness, price – the list of qualities expected by the client is long, but it includes one that is widely assumed rather than discussed: anonymity. By the time a text has been team-translated, revised, reviewed, re-engineered and QA'd, often as just part of one branch of a large multilingual project, little if any trace of the personality or style of the individual translator will remain. And that is no doubt as it should be: when the client's worldwide corporate image is at stake, the end user of the translated text must not be distracted by quirks of vocabulary or metaphorical fancies. But behind the translator's commercial invisibility lies the human reality of an individual who is much more than a linguistic technician. Equally, behind the normalised acceptability of the translated text lies a complex process of *localisation* by which it has been adapted to fit the linguistic, social and cultural expectations of the target audience – a process which relies on the intercultural expertise of the 'invisible' translator.

So who are the translators, and what cultural knowledge, skills, and life experience go into making a professionally localised document? In real life and from the outside the question is hard to answer, and indeed is rarely asked. Fiction, however, offers the opportunity to explore from the inside the personalities, histories and interactions of 'typical' actors in this fast-moving profession. The *littérature d'entreprise* genre came to prominence with Douglas Coupland's 1995 novel (originally short story) *Microserfs*, a saga of the life and work of young programmers at the Microsoft corporation. Like Coupland's characters, the Eurologos translators and localisers in Franco Troiano's three stories are articulate, self-confident, well educated and technologically sophisticated. Unlike the Seattle-based microserfs, however, they are also multilingual and highly culturally aware, have very diverse geographical and psycho-sexual backgrounds, and relish travel and the prospect of working with other cosmopolitan language professionals from around the world. Discreetly underpinning this existential freedom is the company philosophy of 'glocalisation', the apparently paradoxical idea that quality translation for a global market requires local knowledge and cultural rootedness and must therefore be done 'at home', in the target culture. Combining in their individual identities an outlook that is both global and authentically local, Troiano's liberated young logoserfs embody glocalisation in action.

Andrew Rothwell
Professor of French and Head of Translation
Swansea University, Wales, UK

Preface

Tapas

Translating means observing linguistic and communication objects in order to distinguish the decisive mechanisms that make them what they are in the context in which they are produced. Translating means possessing the curiosity to dismantle, which leads to evaluating the various parts, understanding their function, managing to understand how even a small gear can contribute to the functioning of the totality.

Translating means, therefore, first of all understanding that the treated objects are not only a pure linguistic interface interpretable with the exclusive help from dictionaries, grammar books and a generic knowledge of the language, but “places” in which the totality of the language is accomplished in all of its complexity.

Complexity is the fruit of linguistic conclusions and spurts distinctive of a specific culture – holders of socially shared conventions – characterized by their pragmatic value and, also, by the silences a language chooses to respect. To translate is, in the end, to recompose and deliver to the one who requested it an object with a gifted linguistic, cultural and pragmatic meaning which respects even what the target language has decided not to mention.

Thus the task of the supervisors, beyond the consolidation of linguistic competencies considered in depth and amplitude, is to render students precisely conscious of what speaking a language means. Especially, from the reflection relative to the signification of speaking one’s own language. And this, by underlining, on every occasion, the effect each statement produces in its own cultural dynamics. It is indeed presupposed that only an in-depth knowledge of oneself, as an active enunciator, may allow for a true understanding of interlocutors, themselves enunciators in another language.

This task can only be considered accomplished when neo-translators, once their studies are finished, activate the capacity to observe and cumulate data, the facts that allow them to keep their own linguistic competence up to date. This is nothing other than their own active participation in the constant and progressive development of life.

This is exactly what the characters of “Tapas” reveal. They are competent translation professionals because they are deep observers of reality, who keep up to date with what surrounds them, ready to seize all the visual, auditory and relational modulations offered by the unfolding of time, and by the geography of internal and external connections in their own language.

Prof. Giuliana Schiavi
Superior School for Linguistics Mediators
Vicenza (IT)

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The challenge and satisfaction of translation...

The craving for adventure, the spirit of discovery and conquest, the attraction of traveling, without concealing commercial exchange and interest, characterize mankind. The tonicity of this curiosity responds to the need to broaden one's intellectual horizon and to enrich mutual understanding. Civilized humans have always been aware of the existence of the foreigner. Consequently, they have always been translating. Their incessant need for interactivity – a partial guarantee for social recognition – has always led them to “*the experience of the foreign*”, to borrow Antoine Berman's brilliant expression^{*}. The act of translating is effectively seen in the method of meetings, exchanges and the intense circulation of people. They pass through this recognition of the foreigner whose revealed finality is given to be read as an opening to a new world, which without the looks and “crossed” words of the translator would remain incomplete, vague and closed off.

We can see that the task of the translator – an enthusiast and champion of cerebral discipline – is broad.

The work of the translator is not only an intellectual endeavor limited to strictly respecting the given succession of words. The translator must also be an interpreter and (re)creator. They do not simply go from word to sentence and sentence to text to finally understanding the cultural entirety. Their journey takes exactly the opposite course by firstly integrating a culture, then the mind and operational method. The skills of a translator effectively span psychology, listening and knowledge of the habits and customs of the countries using languages they work in. *In other words*, the act of translating is less the mastering of a linguistic code than the development of a message to be delivered with a network of perceptions. Translating is also understanding a cultural world.

It is precisely this plurality that puts Eurologos Group CEO Franco Troiano on the map with his latest short story “Tapas” which is being issued as a crown to 30 years of activities. Under the symbolic aegis of Saint Jerome, two “Eurologossians”, made in the image of two of our young

^{*} Berman, A. *L'Épreuve de l'étranger*. Paris: Gallimard 1984 [translated as *The Experience of the Foreign*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1992]

academics, illustrate the challenges and satisfactions of translation, savoring the pleasure of integrating the language of the other as much as the joy of receiving the foreign person's words. If it is true that globalization unifies culture and images, then the "Eurologossians" also reveal how much the field of translation, rooted in all four corners of the globe, benefits from the development of modern technology. Nowadays, the fluidity of textual information allows geographical distances and borders to be eluded and the speed of Information Technology associated with the Internet revolution are so many factors underlining the modern way of managing translations.

Nevertheless, is there the need to be reminded here that the approach and the understanding of the world's cultures and of foreignness only come to the attention of the reader because of the human factor? Translators, these conveyors of cultures, have become so entrenched in our routine that we hardly ever pay them attention any more. Their function also finally allows it to be understood that languages are not different because of how they represent reality and divide it up, but via the way in which they reconstruct reality on the level of its enunciation. The complexity of the act of translation rests precisely on the ability to (re)create the symphony of a reconstructed world.

Dr J-F Tonard
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of the Mainz Johannes Gutenberg University in Germersheim (Germany)

Tapas

“I’m going to send them another e-mail. All right, I’ll start work in February, but I want to be sure that my contract is permanent. If I have to move to Brussels for a precarious first-time job, the kind the whole of France is fighting to stop, then I won’t budge. Why should I move to the continent without an attractive, stable job? In that case, I might as well stay here in Glasgow and agree to work, for example, in this advertising and direct marketing company. It’s true, this one is a bit shabby, very provincial and monolingual. Three reasons to keep well away from it – and the boss, at last Thursday’s meeting, looked pretty much like a candidate for bankruptcy. He was too interested in my French and Spanish. He dreams of going global, the poor guy. But his little agency, and he himself, seem rather at the point of contradicting the performance of the pretentiously neo-globalizable Scottish. Actually, that could even work in my favor. But I can’t hope for any miracle cures: I’m not any kind of prodigy, or a *deus ex machina* for an exclusively local company in inevitable decline. If I receive a written guarantee for the Belgian contract, then I’m leaving for London to catch my Eurostar. It’s true that in the European capital, it rains as much as it does here, and the gray skies are just as depressing. But nonetheless, I’ll be in a real cosmopolitan metropolis. And about a thousand kilometers closer to the sun. But most importantly, this “global and multilingual solutions” company (that’s the slogan of this Eurologos firm) can offer me a great international career. I’ll be placed in a department at the top of the organization (which spans four continents, no less), and I may even take charge of it. The current boss is a wily old fox, highly cultured and brilliant from a marketing point of view, but he’s well into his sixties and dreams only of being obeyed, without having to travel at all. As for me, on the other hand – besides the fact that I speak English, which the speakers from the various offices of the Brussels-based company have only learned as a lingua franca – I also love to travel. Especially during my university years: I spent one year in Paris and eight months in Barcelona. And for a bisexual, there’s nothing better than hunting for young flesh in the international capitals of ‘depravity’. It was my father who called them that. While we were eating at the table I used to listen to him talk, mostly to my mother, about his many ‘perverted’ diplomatic colleagues, as he called them. He even

suspected that they had started on their diplomatic careers because it perfectly complemented the forever globetrotting and structurally anomalous lifestyle of gays, or ‘pederasts’, as he preferred to name them. I remember, his work took us to the Commercial Delegation of the Hong Kong embassy, and I was still going to high school. I was unsure about my sexuality: girls attracted me and bored me in equal measure, while boys scared me, but I found them so interesting!

Starting with my first sexual experiences with a young student of Chinese origin, older than me, even my relationships with girls changed. They didn’t chase after me anymore (I’ve always known I was a good-looking guy), but just thought of me as their friend. By now I know that we gays enjoy special relations with modern women, who have integrated us into their eternal gynaeceum, far from the battle of the sexes. So I only become really interested in a girl when she is beautiful and, above all, intelligent. It’s such an incredibly rare thing, whatever one says in accordance with the stupid laws of ‘political correctness’. Incidentally, during my three-month internship over a year ago in the terminology department of the Eurologos-Brussels Head Office, where they had already offered me this job contract, I spotted two gay translators, and a third one who had just set himself up as a freelancer. He was perhaps the most reserved. He was in a monogamous relationship with a guy from Anvers who worked as an IT specialist at Philips. The other two criticized him viciously, because they said that real gays should never use heterosexual relationship structures. “It’s ridiculous for two gays,” repeated Sascha, the more intelligent of the two, “to dream of getting married. It’s like non-religious people who mimic the formal communions organized for Catholic kids with pathetic ‘confirmation’ celebrations for their unbaptized children.”

It was he, Sascha, who made me discover Michel Tournier, a proudly gay French writer, unanimously considered to be perhaps the greatest novelist of our era in the Central European tradition. I was elated by the vision of homosexuality described in his book *Les Météores* (The Meteors), which I devoured in a week. For Tournier (who is even a member of the French Academy, among other things), gay people are spiritual aristocrats, devoted to a life focused on Pleasure and Art. Accordingly, they are free from the necessary drudgery of Human Reproduction (the forced family life

and career of heterosexuals). Recipient of the 1970 Goncourt Prize, with a magnificent novel turned into a great film, *Le roi des aulnes* (The Ogre), Tournier has more or less become my intellectual guide: I think I've read all his books and I consider his writing to be the most crystalline in the world."

It was with a simple and laconic reply that the Eurologos CEO answered him, three minutes after he'd sent the e-mail: "I'm in agreement with everything, of course – on condition that you begin no later than Monday 6 February 2006. Best wishes."

"I'll start packing."

"He's very cute, that Scottish guy. What was his name again, Fientje?"

"Peter. But you're in for a disappointment: he doesn't like girls. It's true that I don't have your blue eyes and shiny black hair, but I couldn't get anywhere with him during the three months of his internship. Antje, that German copywriter now working in our Leipzig office, quickly lost hope. And you know her – she never lost a bet."

"No, I didn't know her; she left just before I was hired. But I've already heard about her conquests."

"Well you'd never guess it: he doesn't seem gay." Caroline, the IT localizer, who was beginning to clear up the kitchen (it was her turn), interrupted and, without waiting for an answer, continued, "You even get this irresistible feeling that he is subtly trying to seduce you. And then you find out that he goes out several times a week with one of his friends from the Commission."

"We'll see," I answer, to cut short the conversation. But Fientje, an indomitable Flemish girl beneath her head of naturally blond hair, didn't spare me the last word, as if she was finishing up a base line layout on her Mac: "You, Hannelore, as a Dutch girl, must be stimulated by impossible challenges."

"I didn't reply, as I quickly went back to my desk. Luckily, my phone was ringing."

The webmaster has to respond quickly to clients, who are always in a rush and anxious about their deadlines. But maybe Fientje wasn't wrong. "I've never believed there are 100% gay people. Myself, as a straight girl practically incapable of

imagining myself or living without guys, I always enjoyed my handful of sexual experiences with girlfriends at high school. Although I didn't seek them out intentionally, I never regretted them. Why should it be any different for men?" Hannelore, confident of her indisputable heterosexual attractiveness, had, indeed, always considered homosexuality, and especially the feminine variety, to be a secondary and circumstantial pathology, or, in any case, a *treatable* one. When it came to men, she had always had the problem of knowing how to disarm them gently or get rid of them brusquely.

Her spontaneous openness to relationships with men, which had existed since her earliest adolescence, and her tranquil beauty, which did not require any particular care in fashion or makeup, had given her a certain paradoxical simplicity. This is what often happens to those who have been loved too much, even if they are intelligent and talented.

Hannelore had sometimes been forced to pay the price for that. Ever since her classes in graphic design and computer programming, and long before she became the multilingual localizer-webmaster at Eurologos-Brussels, she had occasionally found herself caught in dead-end relationships where her cursed simplicity caused her to underestimate the situation.

Peter, meanwhile, was just too cute. Even though he worked in the public relations department – mostly following up on the other offices in the group, and sometimes setting up new ones, even outside of Europe – and she ran into him several times a day, he seemed unaffected by the dusky beauty of her blue eyes, which never ceased to search him out, although discreetly, of course.

In the meantime, her interest in the Scotsman, who had been in his job for nearly two months, had not bypassed some of her colleagues. Caroline and Fientje, especially, had noticed that her ploys went far beyond the level of a strong liking.

The only thing that seemed to interest Peter was his database of contacts in the United States, the pre-contractual information that he sent to franchise candidates, and his relationships with national partnership associations. He seemed completely absorbed in the meticulous follow-up and maintenance of his relations.

With spring already underway, however, an event occurred that changed the situation for him radically. The Eurologos office in Madrid, which did not yet have a full department for multilingual website translation, had just received a large order for the localization of a website in ten languages. The Madrid webmaster felt a little lost: it was necessary for a developer-webmaster from Brussels to go to Madrid for at least three or four weeks to create a dynamic website by modernizing the current static one in Spanish. Peter would also go for at least two weeks, not only to prepare and monitor the management of the project, but also to discuss (even in Spanish) the subject of the master franchise contract for the whole of Spain with the Eurologos-Madrid chiefs. Their office had been planning that for two years now. Two further offices were in the pipeline, in Barcelona and Valencia. The Eurologos agencies in Paris, Leipzig, Toronto, São Paulo, Tokyo, Moscow, Tel Aviv and Milan had already begun to translate the site into French, German, American, Brazilian, Japanese, Russian, Arabic, and Italian. Eurologos-Milan also handled the Chinese version because the two heads of the office, Luca and Silvio, were in the process of setting up the new Eurologos-Shanghai office and had, among other things, already localized the website of their Italian client Costa Crociere in Chinese.

Needless to say, Hannelore made sure she was included in the party, in order not to miss a possible tête-à-tête with Peter during the unexpected *movida* taking place in Madrid.

Hannelore's attentions had not been lost on Peter, who noticed that they became more insistent in the case of the Madrid affair. He was not unaffected by it, but his homosexuality had taken on a cultural, even ideological resolution with his reading of Tournier's books. His love for boys had led him progressively toward a very noble and lofty lifestyle, or rather an idea of life, in which the strange naturalness of the eternal feminine had become confined to the peripheries of his existence. However, he still saw in girls an erotic beauty that he found strangely attractive. Hannelore's skillfully applied make-up and her breasts, especially her breasts, full of promise,

never ceased to arouse him and sometimes excite him. Of course, if he had to choose, the complicity and culturally accomplished relationships that existed between young men would absorb him much more. He would never fall out with a girl because of an intellectual dispute. With a boy, on the other hand, he would have ended a good relationship because of a difference in opinion. That was exactly what had just happened (although in this case, in spite of himself) with François, a student of political science at the Free University of Brussels, and someone he considered perfect in terms of sex and romantic reciprocity. The problematic issue had been the death penalty. It was François himself who told him that a Belgian law, barely fifteen years old, had abolished (fortunately, in his opinion) the former law, which had automatically transformed the death penalty to life in prison. That one had been in force for over sixty years, with no exceptions. Just before the abolishment, a couple had been condemned to death for having cruelly tortured and killed two of their own children. The death sentence had done justice to public opinion, which had excluded the perverse and diabolical couple from the human community, and perhaps definitively at the moral level. But the law prevented the addition, to this particularly hideous crime, of the still more unacceptable crime of execution by the State. The monstrous parents received an irreducible punishment of hard labor for life.

Peter, intrigued from the start by the brilliant ambiguity of this law containing both the death penalty and the prohibition of its realization, then uttered some very harsh judgments against Belgians, who had eliminated a law that resolved, perhaps thanks to circumstances, one of the most serious moral issues of our time. The death penalty could still be pronounced by the human community when faced with vile criminals, but it nonetheless acknowledged that it had no right to kill a person, even if that person were loathsome and responsible for the most revolting of crimes. All opponents to the death penalty should have adopted this law, which the Belgians had just abolished, as a moral and legal reference point for all countries opposed to the abolition of capital punishment.

“For once,” said Peter to François, “you Belgians, accused by the French of mediocrity, had an incredibly intelligent and entirely just law, and you abolished it for no reason. But do you realize? The Americans, for example, or at least a proportion of

them, still turn down the proposals of abolitionists for reasons that this law, so human (the natural right to condemn) and also very religious (the transcendent duty not to kill) had resolved brilliantly.”

François, who earlier had already expressed his republican leanings against the Belgian monarchy, rebelled at the first words, “For once, you Belgians...” Forgetting that Peter was no fan of the French, he responded with the phrase usually addressed to French-speaking neighbors from across the border: “Belgians don’t take lessons from anyone...”

François didn’t even catch or take note of the whole debate about the right to condemn to death or the moral injunction against the most abominable crimes. He seemed only to be interested in answering an arrogant Frenchman on the near automatic hunt for his Belgian scapegoat. Coluche, the French comedian from the 1980s, ferocious when it came to Belgians, had already touched on that. While ideological disputes with girls always seem to roll off the curves of their hips, discussions among men express the radical antagonism inherent in combative virility. Even if Peter had wanted to carry on the dialog, François, extremely vexed in his patriotism, decided to break off all contact in a manner as abrupt as it was dramatic. The Scotsman tried to come up with a reason for it. He had already known and experienced such break-ups, even if this one had a particularly surreal and childish element to it. It was from this puerile aspect, typical of many homosexual relationships, that Peter was trying to separate himself. This rational and anti-neurotic attitude earned him the romantic appreciation of girls. His vigorous resolution lent his style of being a discreet assurance that was highly admired by females: even if they had often given up on the money factor, they hadn’t abandoned the idea of the novelty and excitement of so-called hard sex.

In any case, the fact that he was homosexual often put him in the awkward situation of having to enter into arrangements of complicity, usually embarrassing for him, with partners whose behavior was universally judged to be bizarre and irrational: one more reason (and not the least of them) to sometimes have doubts about his sexual tendencies. Although a ‘manly’ gay, Peter had to put up with the ‘frilly’ behavior of his friends. Yet these little debacles did nothing to distance him from the charm of

girls, whose beauty and natural grace he appreciated unconditionally. That was exactly how it was in Hannelore's case.

Caroline, the IT engineer, and especially Fientje, her blond Flemish colleague from the pre-press department, tended to underestimate Hannelore. They certainly acknowledged her superiority in terms of beauty. Her navy blue eyes, her perfect white skin and her black hair formed, as they knew only too well, the basic triad of her incomparable physical charm. Moreover, they were also a little jealous of her full and well-proportioned figure: two very long legs and breasts that one couldn't help but admire. What was more, it seemed she didn't really show off: the lovely volume of her strong and shiny hair, which any other girl would have flaunted, Hannelore had simply lopped off, with a very short cut that could be naturally managed with the stroke of a brush. "When you work in an office," she would even say publicly, "you don't wear your hair long like a movie star."

Her colleagues couldn't work out the source of her tranquil state as a beautiful girl who never entered into competition. Even her clothes were nothing special: she dressed simply, and her spontaneous elegance even permitted her to be a bit more economical (typically Dutch!) in her little purchases.

Fientje, too, who thought she knew her inside out, assimilated her to a culture very similar to her own. After all, her native village in Flanders was only around a hundred kilometers from Hannelore's, just over the border with the Netherlands. The young Flemish woman did not really remember (or fully understand) the stories Hannelore told about her Dutch family: her parents were both militants of the extreme left, even before '68. They belonged to the Provos, a movement in the Netherlands that had anticipated the European protests by a couple of years. Her mother was a leading Dutch feminist, and had founded a revue about women's issues that was a political reference point throughout the '70s. She was a freelance translator from French and English, and had played a very important role in the movement, especially with the

Dolle Minas, by maintaining the linguistic and cultural link between Anglo-Saxon feminists and those of her own country.

Fientje, who knew almost nothing – like nearly all of her girlfriends – about the history of feminism (not to mention European or world history) did not even retain, from Hannelore’s speeches, the name of Germaine Greer, the beautiful Australian leader, who had already written several best-selling books by the 1960s. She barely remembered Simone de Beauvoir, and perhaps only then because she was the companion of Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher-writer, whose name she only recalled hearing on TV. Hannelore, on the other hand, had read the “The Second Sex”, by the French writer, at the encouragement of her mother. Fientje didn’t even realize that the work had three sections and two volumes of almost one thousand pages, and that Hannelore had spoken of it often, with her mother as well as her father, by the end of the 1990s.

Her parents had separated in 1974 when they became deeply involved in sexual communes that sought to transcend “the patriarchal and obsolete family structure”, as they called it. After a few years, among the ruins of the feminist movement and the “co-sexuality” communities, Hannelore’s parents found each other again and got married, even with Catholic rites, although they came from a Protestant cultural background. Hannelore was the first of three children, which her parents tried for quickly since they were already in their forties.

Hannelore’s father worked in a publishing house as an editor and translator of publications. He had also written three books of criticism or rather, culturally speaking, appreciations, of the works of Huizinga, one of the Netherlands’ greatest writers.

It was, therefore, difficult for Hannelore to introduce or explain her family’s cultural background and origins, in any opportune way, to her colleagues in the Brussels firm. She had noticed that, while in her family’s home there were at least five thousand books in every room, in the houses of her colleagues (especially if they were graphic designers) one only found a few volumes, often mixed with old school books. However, despite the long-standing intellectual and extremely bourgeois tradition of her family, or perhaps thanks to that tradition (her great grandfather was even a

Protestant pastor), Hannelore had received an education that was at once simple and culturally vast. In reality, she had enjoyed two basic advantages: the first, to have been born to mature parents, that is, parents who had reached full human maturity; the second was the broad and highly structured level of culture accumulated over several generations of financial well-being that was hardly ever threatened. In short, she benefited from psychological equilibrium and the complex solidity of a completely metabolized cultural education. This was the complete opposite of the superficial mass neo-culture, anecdotal and ideological, the permanent weakness of which inevitably coexists with psychological instability.

Since Hannelore had no need to flaunt her ideas, which were very solid and clear in her mind, her attitude was simple and open, without mannerisms. A certain personal generosity also made her quite popular, especially among girls.

But there was still something about her mind that was hard to grasp, something important that was not understood by her friends and colleagues, who were incapable of pinning down the basis for her actions. At best, they perceived the outline of the result of her movements. But there always remained in her behavior an intrinsically perplexing quality for those people who did not have the right knowledge, or the critical skills for decrypting her words and intrigues, although they were rather transparent. So-called mass popular culture had become rather psychologizing. As confirmation that all of Hannelore's actions were governed by a vision that was ultimately very accessible and perfectly simple, there was her highly technical professional training, which her parents not only accepted, as the good liberals that they had become even before she was born, but even actively encouraged. Her computer science studies and Internet training were also recommended by her father, who was confronted daily in his work as an editor with multilingual pre-press and editing problems on the Web. Her mother's contribution could be found in Hannelore's participation in translation, globalization and localization companies, especially since these were located abroad; in this case, in the essentially francophone city of Brussels. Hannelore's polyglot mother was very attached to that idea, and counted herself happy to have a daughter working in a hi-tech role for one of the few multinational companies in the multilingual sector.

It was primarily Pablo who organized the outing of the Eurologos-Madrid office, to which the *bruselenses* had been invited. The evening's program: *Feria de toros* at the bullring from 17:00, and dinner at 21:30 in a little restaurant on the Plaza Mayor, Madrid's most historic square. One might think that the Spanish lived their whole lives outdoors. Everyone seems to live in the city more than in their own homes. And the months of May and June are the most auspicious: the summer is not yet too scorching but already in full swing, and the streets, cafés, parks and squares are full of people of all ages, simply enjoying what other European peoples would consider to be a street party – a rare event in the North.

Hannelore accepted the invitation despite her radical aversion to bullfighting. She hoped that the occasion would also tear Peter away from his work. And besides, she was curious to get a close look at those 'barbaric' matadors that had conquered Hemingway and the beautiful Ava Gardner.

But the Eurologos staff from Madrid hardly seemed to bother with the five bullfighters that found the courage to stand up to five bulls, which were really just as black as the Miura symbol from the Spanish advertisement. Peter had been dragged there by Mercedes, the rather mischievous coordinator with whom he had mostly worked on organizing translations into foreign languages. Actually, it was mainly the courage and style of these *toreros* that the public didn't seem to like. Mercedes explained to Peter that the *verónicas* were not of good quality, and the matadors were moving without any hieratic distinction and without the air of noble detachment that a matador must adopt. Hannelore noticed that the *toreros* were not offered a bull's ear, although the bulls were indeed laboriously slain.

The only truly memorable moment of the afternoon came when a beast of 582 kilos succeeded in goring a rather untalented matador four times over before the quadrille of *banderilleros* could intervene. Although lacking aristocratic courage, the *torero* was very lucky. Despite the violence of the bull's *cornadas*, the very young and slender matador had only his superb costume torn, and received but a few scratches

that were treated in the infirmary. The incident served as a reminder of the basic stakes of the *feria*: a combat to the death, but a balanced one between man and animal. The matador may even be killed!

“Would you like to come with me to Barcelona this weekend, to have dinner on Las Ramblas?”

“Only if it’s *tapas*” was the laconic answer on Peter’s mobile.

The two text messages came only a few seconds apart: the condition posed by Hannelore was obviously rhetorical. She had been waiting for this invitation for over a week. Peter worked every evening, both with the company’s management on master franchising, and with the project management department for the web localization. Hannelore was left to do likewise with Pablo, the young Webmaster from Madrid, who appeared to go out much more than one would have imagined, with his Dreamweaver 8 and his Flash animation. Hannelore had been able to work in parallel with him, and the web localization project was already at an advanced stage. They spoke in English and Peter was not at all necessary as an interpreter, which meant that she had spent almost no time with him since their arrival in the Spanish capital. As Hannelore was connected via her Mac laptop to the internal network of the worldwide Eurologos Intranet, she also received this e-mail: “Arrange to start work again on Monday around noon. I have an *ecclesiastic* surprise for you this Sunday. We will leave tomorrow (Friday) at 18:00 from the airport. We’ll have our first *tapas* at the Iberian dinner hour: very late. Tonight, I still have to finish the provisional master franchise plan with Enrique and Ramón. See you tomorrow!”

Hannelore reread the message five or six times at the desk almost beside the one where Peter was working: she didn’t want to miss anything, and the ‘religious’ riddle began to perturb her. What surprise? And why, in Barcelona, should the surprise be ‘ecclesiastic’? It was too serious to be personal...Unless...But no! She could think about practically nothing else all evening. She even bought herself a Dutch-language tourist guide to Spain: she learned everything about the cathedral in the Gothic

Quarter, dedicated to the Holy Cross – about its style, which was recent Catalanian but based on drawings by a master from Rouen. Then she studied Las Ramblas on the map several times, looking for something that might resemble the surprise that had been announced. But nothing – from the Plaça de Catalunya to the Portal de la Pau with its monument to Christopher Columbus, she didn't find anything that might anticipate her future stupefaction. Perhaps Gaudi, with his Sagrada Familia? No, she had already told Peter that the whole project had disappointed her: the impression that remained with her from her brief visit as a schoolgirl was that it was just an enormous and somewhat disappointing construction zone. As she read about the sights in the Passeig de Gràcia and, especially, about the restaurants typical of the Barceloneta quarter near the port, she drifted off to sleep.

Peter wanted to take Hannelore to a place he knew well. The meeting, now inevitable and also sought after on his part, had to take place in a context where he mastered the terrain and the behavior. His eight-month internship in Barcelona and his three years of Catalan studies would make his first weekend with Hannelore a new twist in a relationship dynamic that had, at least previously, been characterized by the initiative of the curvaceous Dutch girl. He intended to mark the beginning of the relationship with a very high level of intimacy, and without any reservations on his part. He even wanted to assume the initiative by re-establishing his proactivity as much as possible, and, at the same time, the maximum level of expectation in Hannelore. Don Juan had to resurface and reverse their roles, as was proper.

He was very satisfied by the idea of this Catalanian weekend, and by the spontaneous and vaguely mysterious way in which he had carried it out.

And then, he realized he was scared. Yes, he was romantically frightened of this girl: beautiful, determined and intelligent. She had laid her cards on the table with him.

Whereas he, in a somewhat cowardly way, had been the mouse playing with its cat, which took all the risks.

Peter had just come in and put his bag in the hotel room he had reserved in Barcelona. He went to open the door to see who was ringing: Hannelore, with a red cushion from her little sofa in her arms, had already slipped inside and, without saying a word, locked the door. Then she put the cushion on the ground just in front of Peter and, still in mysterious silence, knelt in front of him. Without giving him the time to recover from his astonishment, she opened his fly and did not release his testicles until she had drunk all his juice to the last drop.

Hannelore had never touched Peter, even accidentally. She wanted it to take on a symbolic, sacred significance. It was a gesture of romantic strategy that was completely perfect from the beginning. This idea came to her while she was listening to the account of a girlfriend of her mother's, who had visited a Tuareg tribe in the desert: the women over there, she said, perform fellatio on their young husbands every morning, for a high protein breakfast, and as a sort of all-risk insurance for their conjugal fidelity. They did this while waiting to copulate with them in the evening, when they came back and before sleeping, in all conceivable erotic positions.

Actually, her mother and the friend spoke of this with a critical severity of a feminist kind. It seemed they were accusing the beautiful Tuareg women of deplorable "ancestral and patriarchal submission" to males. But Hannelore, who was only an adolescent, secretly saw things differently. She had never really stopped thinking about the esthetic beauty and the ethical consistency of this sexual act: the woman as creator and arranger of an eroticism that could only engender gratitude and sensual reciprocity from the man. What, incidentally, could be more noble and ontologically significant for a woman than to lead the man to the gift of oneself?

"If you do that for love, then it is all transformed," Hannelore had tried to convince two high school friends during a heated conversation about the hetairas, the Greek masseuses of the cult of love. "And then, how do we free ourselves from this aberration that feminism has produced at the expense of the modern man, who has been reduced to his weak and confused 'self'? And that's not even to mention the self-mutilation of women who inflict on themselves a needless solitude or a false sexuality totally lacking in satisfaction!"

Hannelore gently watched Peter's exalted eyes, and said to him quickly, while savoring the slightly salty residue of his sperm, "And now, I'm ready to taste all the other *tapas*."

Peter didn't know what else to do but kiss her on the mouth, lost in an embrace that searched out her soul unconditionally.

As soon as Hannelore had softly but firmly touched his genitals, he became excited in spite of himself. Caught in an inexorable and primal whirlwind, he could not help but assist in the supreme uncovered pleasure, which was completely familiar. But yes, that's what needed to be done. This was the intelligence of beauty in action. This was the real spirit of Athena, the beautiful goddess born directly from the head of Zeus, supposedly from the violence of a hammer strike. No need to go looking for the secrets of eroticism in the intrinsic obtuseness of males. It is enough for women to be truly free. They know how to go about things. They are alternately Venus and Minerva, the Roman understanding of the eternal feminine. Virility is fundamentally nothing other than being amazed while accepting the unforeseeable permutations of female genius. The man who tries to resist will only make himself ridiculous.

Peter's whole being was already moving to reciprocate Hannelore's erotic act. He tried to communicate this promise in their embrace. Homosexual satisfaction basically has a narcissistic and autoerotic value. It is something of the eternal adolescent who never stops playing, and not by accident, in inevitable sterility.

"Female fertility," Peter thought, "was performed in a clever way, from the entry with the red cushion to the only words spoken, about the 'other' *tapas*. The dramatic beginning and the light-hearted ending. Perfectly brilliant."

On Las Ramblas, everything was lit up. Night had just fallen, and after 22:00, there was intense activity. The mimes, every thirty-four meters, and the hawkers, selling all kinds of rubbish, surged all over the place. A crowd of young students mixed with the tourists and old Catalonians on their way, like our lovers, to the restaurant: here in southern Europe, no one minds not dining before ten o'clock in the evening.

“We felt like walking, seeing, smelling, listening. And having *tapas*, of course. But most of all, we were just there. Together. We had just arrived in Barcelona separately, so to speak. But thanks to Hannelore’s initiative, we were happy and animated by the harmony of our intentions. Like two children caught on a ramble. The beautiful Dutch girl seemed even more seductive to me: her eyes were shining. And my fear of her had disappeared.

From the hotel, located opposite the cathedral, we ran across nearly the whole Gothic Quarter. Except for stopping to observe a strange group dancing the Sardana in the street, this typically Catalan dance into which one can rather easily be co-opted. To the sound of a small group of musicians playing strange wind instruments, which are only heard at these dances (a sort of clarinet that bears more resemblance to an oboe or an English horn), a circle of around ten people, holding each other’s arms, jump in rhythm. The girls wore espadrilles and seem to be enjoying themselves in keeping with the very popular cheerfulness of the music.

But, at the first bar announcing a bill of *tapas*, we were overtaken by a wolfish hunger: after having devoured, standing at the bench, three *tapas* and a glass of very red and full-bodied *vino tinto*, we went out looking for a little restaurant, still on Las Ramblas. We chose one that had a beautiful free table on the street. And then, finally, three more *tapas* among the benches of a sort of bistro on the Plaça Real, just next to a beautiful cloister.

Before we went back to the hotel, around two in the morning, we went to see the sea. We calculated that we were at the latitude of Naples and Istanbul: the night was hot, and we were even hotter. Right on the Mediterranean, at the latitude of Vesuvius, the Neapolitan volcano.

We woke up at the hotel at around noon, after having made multiple attempts to devour each other sexually until around four o’clock in the morning. The *vino tinto* and the *chipirones*, the stuffed squid, had given us fuel for the disheveling of our vital fibers beneath a scent, Hannelore’s perfume, that surprised me with its delicious composition. We did not even have the time to undress completely, but we must have furiously practiced a good section of the Kama Sutra repertoire. As its name says, this

means ‘Aphorism on Love’ and all of our nocturnal lovemaking was centered on physical lust. And our passionate hunger for each other.”

It was the penetrating and high-pitched music of the Sardana that woke Hannelore first. Curious about a background noise that had joined the sound of the dance, she went to the window and saw that almost the entire square of the cathedral was filled with a flea market. There remained only a small section of the square for the Sardana group. She wanted, immediately, a copious brunch in the ground floor of the hotel opposite the Sardana, and then to go hunting around in the market. She had awoken in a good mood, and happy to have managed a first full and flawless day with Peter. “Wake up, we’re in Barcelona. The weather is beautiful. Let’s go quick and have brunch. Then there is the flea market to look over. Then we’ll go to the beach. Then to dinner: a truly gargantuan *paella!*”

The Scotsman’s level of vitality was obviously not up to that of the beautiful brunette, already in sync with the temptations of what is perhaps the most lively city in Europe, featuring an unparalleled level of economic, touristic and cultural development. The post-Franco period had thrown Barcelona into a frenzy that combined irrepressible Catalan pride (they consider themselves the jewel in the Spanish crown!) with the benefits of a metropolis with a large port and a wonderful beach.

“Hurry, get up...” Peter looked at her with admiration, dressed as she was only in cotton socks. A boy can be beautiful, very beautiful in his strength and the powerful harmony of his young muscles. But a girl, who is not aware of being watched or who forgets it while she is naked, can take your breath away. Peter was as if hypnotized by the curves of her breasts, perfect in their proportions and in their slight swollenness: neither too small and immature, nor with mammalian and milk-giving areolas.

Reluctantly, after having played a little with her nudity, he resigned himself to getting dressed to follow her.

In the market, which was closing, he bought himself a little silver statue portraying a dancing Sardana circle (which he immediately gave to Hannelore) and, for himself, a small bell in order to...wake up easily in the morning.

Then they headed to the sea.

“On the way, I’ll show you the shipyard where I worked for eight months as a translator. It’s on the edge of the Gothic Quarter, next to the long beach.”

It was very hot (29 degrees) although it was only late May.

“In the meantime, we’ll buy some swimsuits” answered Hannelore, who was much more interested in getting a little tan than in the company where Peter had done his internship.

As soon as they got close to the Palau de la Generalitat, they noticed a gathering of people having a party. Approaching out of curiosity, they discovered that, in the center, the wedding of two gay people was taking place. Hannelore kept a cautious silence. Peter, on the other hand, began to snigger at the two homosexuals, considering them stupid and involuntarily ridiculous.

“Zapatero, with the new, relativistic Spanish law on gay marriage has made it possible for them to mimic Catholic marriages.”

“Well, Spain is very Christian,” added Hannelore, briefly.

“Not at all. One could say, as a great hispanophile Frenchman once wrote, that it is Catholic, but not Christian.”

“But I don’t understand: how can you be Catholic but not Christian?”

“Think again. I didn’t believe it either. But I’ve had the chance and the time to understand. To make it simple, Spanish people are quite strong believers, but are not very religious. They have a certain *faith* in the Church. But this is often anarchical, superstitious and primitive. Even the hundreds of years of domination by Muslims have had their effect. Notice the passion, and even the sort of violence, in their religious demonstrations.”

“You’re thinking of the hooded processions and the scourgings...”

“For example. But you can also add bullfighting, and even the violence of the ETA. In short, the basic nature, still a little untamed, in the – may I say – pagan religiosity of

Southern peoples. And, indeed, this earthy religiosity tends to vanish utterly as soon as society becomes secular.”

“You mean to say that the Spanish are eternal pagans?”

“Not really, but since totalitarian fascism disappeared, and socialism arrived, for example with Zapatero, the new ruling classes have made short work of the great Spanish religious traditions. One would say that we are worse off here in Barcelona than in Amsterdam, with this so-called gay marriage.”

“Well I would have thought you would have quite a different opinion on the matter...”

“You see, Hannelore, the fact that I’m bisexual doesn’t mean that I have to relativize and trivialize relationships as if they all belonged to the same categories.”

“But this couple doesn’t think that way. They are happy to be getting married for life...”

“I know them well. Their feelings are so weak that they don’t even differentiate between vice and natural virtue: for them, a contract for two people of the same sex, verified by the municipality, is the equivalent of a universal and eternal marriage between a man and a woman. To put it another way, gay sexual pleasure versus the project of love between husband and wife. Planned sterility versus mysterious and transcendent fertility. If they want to have their union certified for their social security and pensions, fine. But that can’t be compared in any possible or imaginable way with the relationship of marriage. And especially with Christian marriage!”

“You rather seem to be accusing Catholics of having yielded to this base assimilation between civil union and marriage.”

“Exactly. Here in Spain, it’s flagrant. I like this Pope because it seems to me he has typically philosophical and German common sense in his head. He’s a great theologian and intellectual of our times, and he has attacked this dull and pernicious idea according to which all cats are sexually grey after the sunset.”

“And why, then, do you talk about the Spanish being Catholic but not religious?”

“Of course, there is also a long mystical and religious tradition in Spain. Just think of Cervantes, Unamuno, Santa Teresa de Avila, Ignace de Loyola... But the overall tradition is that of a people who are fundamentally believers. So, in this case they are

Catholics, but so unchristian! To be a real Christian, that means being religious. To be *Catholic*, obviously in this superficial sense, it is enough to believe.”

In Peter’s words, Hannelore found an echo of her own arguments with her mother, who had nonetheless become Catholic in order to (re)marry her father: he had converted quite seriously after having lost his head in the most materialistic and sex-centered experiences of the ‘60s and ‘70s. It was no longer enough for him to reconcile himself with Protestantism, especially since it was entrenched in his family. Henceforth, he considered the entire Reformation era, of half a millennium, to be obsolete. Catholicism had invalidated all the criticisms and objections of Luther’s schism while still retaining its unity. Protestants, on the other hand, had only produced a long chain of successions. Hannelore would have liked to have faith, but was simply not much of a believer. Like Peter, she felt very close to religious themes. And this, paradoxically, much more than many faithful or even practicing religious followers who seemed not to care at all about problems concerning the sacred aspect of life.

The night engulfed them in a refreshing sleep after a long Saturday spent at the beach and the restaurant. There had been a storm that made the air chilly. After they had made love twice, Peter slipped quietly into gentle slumber in the arms of his Hannelore. She was satisfied, because she had once again had multiple orgasms. In general, she knew that it was only after her second one that her stomach drained of tension and moved her center of gravity to the revived well-being of her whole body. She had not forgotten the surprise that was planned for her. She remembered that it was supposed to take place on Sunday, the last day, which they had not even talked about. When love is enough for itself, then one lives in a universe of total blissful immanence. It is in this state of grace and happiness that one can become genuinely passionate about existential and spiritual subjects.

Hannelore no longer recalled the chain of events, but eventually she found herself speaking to Peter about the Gothic, and about the historical significance of Protestantism. The conversations between her parents and with their three children, especially at the dinner table, had stayed with her forever. The distinctly defined

concept of the “person”, and the person’s irreducible responsibility; the person’s direct relationship with God or with the semantic entity that represents Him: these were the arguments with which she never ceased to speak, or to answer Peter, that day. Between a swim and a barefoot walk in the sand, she told him about the visits her parents made, with her and her brothers, to the Gothic cathedrals across northern Europe in the ‘90s. Chartres, Mont-Saint-Michel, Rouen, Reims, Amiens, Strasbourg, Brussels, Cologne and all the Gothic churches of Amsterdam, both Catholic and Protestant. The important thing was the vertical style, which made man look toward the sky. All the basic forms of the Gothic style had this transcendental function of tearing the faithful and counter-reformist Catholic, as the case may be, from the horizontality of his purely internal religion to the hierarchy of the Roman church, inevitably rather baroque. The Northern Gothic style, on the other hand, was drenched, even architecturally, in this modern aspect, which Hannelore loved whether the rite was Catholic or Protestant. And often enough, incidentally, the two forms of Christianity had alternated in several of the cathedrals, such as in Cologne or Strasbourg.

Peter hardly noticed time passing as he listened to Hannelore. This girl was devilishly beautiful, determined and truly cultured. How could he resist her?

The bus for the Monastery of Montserrat leaves just before noon. About fifty kilometers to the northwest of Barcelona, climbing to a height of over seven hundred meters, it is nestled amid a breathtaking landscape of sharp cliffs covered in jagged crests of naked rock. It seems that when Wagner first saw them above the abbey, he immediately imagined the setting of his Parsifal in Bayreuth.

“But our destination,” said Peter to Hannelore, “is not really the Monastery, which is of rather colossal dimensions and an artistic conglomeration, having been constructed over the course of more than five centuries.”

“Ah, the surprise...”

“Yes, it’s still higher up. We’d have to walk and climb for two hours. But don’t worry, we’ll use the cable-car. I was crazy climbing up two years ago, but no one can make me go again.”

“Thank goodness, because the beach is fine, but when it comes to mountain boulders, I am just *plain* Dutch like my country’s salty plains.”

“Now that we’re almost there, I can tell you the surprise. Our destination today is Sant Jeroni. Yes, Saint Jerome, the patron saint of translation. The Doctor of the Church, who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into Latin: the Vulgate.”

“Saint Jerome, here? My mother did actually speak to me of him as a diplomat and ambassador of the Pope Damase. What was he doing on top of a mountain?”

“He didn’t limit himself to translation, writing essays on what one today calls translatology, performing the role of Vatican secretary, and traveling the entire known world of that time (over fifteen hundred years ago) as a Papal delegate. The latter part of his life was spent in contemplation, anchorite prayer. Your mother must surely have told you that he ended his life as a hermit in Palestine...”

“I don’t really remember. I recall that she considered him a great modern intellectual and politician of the highest degree. She even said that he would only have needed the Gutenberg press to become a best-selling author. But the German printer was born over a thousand years later!”

“As you will see, he was also great man of religion, meditative and solitary, retreating into the desert itself. In fact, you won’t see anything, because there’s not much left of his grotto at the summit of Montserrat, at over 1200 meters. But, on the other hand, we’ll be able to enjoy Spain’s most beautiful panorama: on this beautiful day, we’ll be able to see from the Pyrenees to the sea, beyond Barcelona. A real delight, if we are lucky, as the storm should have cleaned the air all the way to the horizon.”

It was true. Hannelore had never seen such a magnificent panorama. Peter was happy to have given his beloved the same little case of apnea she had given him on his awakening, by involuntarily taking his breath away with her nakedness.

“You see, the anchorite wasn’t stupid: the site of his contemplation wasn’t banal. Soon, when we go back down, after we have also seen la Moreneta, the black wooden

virgin displayed above the high altar of the church, we'll go look at the Caravaggio in the art gallery just below the square.”

“La Moreneta? The Caravaggio?”

“Yes, the black Madonna receives a line of visitors, even close up, that has been practically uninterrupted for nine centuries. But we will look at her from the church pews. No use standing in that long line. And as for the Caravaggio, he painted the cultivated, cosmopolitan and worldly intelligence of Saint Jerome in his last moments: his final hermitage.”

Between the two visits, Hannelore asked if they could take a long break in the cafeteria, since after having breakfasted on *tapas* again when the cable car reached the Sierra, they now simply needed a tea with a good slice of tart.

Peter took advantage of the break to buy a CD of Gregorian chant from the Monastery to give to his beautiful religious non-believer: the abbey's eighty monks were famous for their chants.

The devotion of the faithful to the Black Virgin was such that the line extended into the depths of the basilica. Very impressive.

“We looked at the statue from rather far away. Just for the sake of measuring the distance separating us from the simple and passionate faith of this long procession of Christians trying to get as close as possible, even within a few centimeters, to the little, highly decorated statue. I looked at Peter and couldn't help thinking of the huge polemic on the role of women in the Church that the novel *The Da Vinci Code* had provoked with its fifty millions copies sold world-wide.

I had to smile, since I knew very well the influence of women in Protestant churches, as opposed to what they called the ‘censure’ or the ‘repression’ of femininity by Catholicism. I even thought of my mother who, on converting to Catholicism, had in no way given up her ideological diversions towards modernism and relativism, which had infiltrated progressives, and especially those that had actively adhered to Vatican II. Her eternally rebellious spirit had led her, more than my father, to be at the disposal of Rome's internal revolt. Without any proof, and with only pseudo-historical reconstructions, she seemed to have uncritically accepted the idea that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalen, had emigrated to France, and had a daughter with her,

following the scenario described in Dan Brown's extremely shrewd and fortunate book. In any case, if there was any dissidence within the Church, my mother didn't hesitate to subscribe to it. That was the case with Hans Küng, the Swiss man waging a theological battle with the hierarchy of Rome since the 1970s. My father, on the other hand, had ideas that were falsely called conservative: he was enthusiastic about the theological rigor of Pope Ratzinger and was not worried, like my mother, that I was a non-believer. Both he and I, and my brothers, all loved Mom. My parents never tired of their polemical argument, providing the greatest daily spectacle for our delighted family, all gathered together. That continues to this day, by the way."

Hannelore talked to Peter about her family during their visit to the art gallery and all the way back to Barcelona. In a grocery store in the Gothic Quarter, they bought a half-kilo of cherries, which Peter couldn't resist. They enjoyed them gluttonously, until there wasn't a single one left, while sitting on a bench in the Plaça de Catalunya. "*Happiness is a pound of cherries...*", went the refrain of a popular old Spanish hit.

The time had come to start looking for more tapas. Quite naturally, they started again on Las Ramblas, where they had not been disappointed. These little portions of authentic dishes, which could have been main dishes, fascinated them with their almost constantly surprising variety.

"So let me get this right, in your family there were two sides: (your mother's) liberal, in the American sense of the term, progressive and rather left-wing and (your father's) conservative, liberal in the European sense, that is, rather right-wing..."

"It's true, I also became aware of this opposition, which grew progressively more explicit. When I was an adolescent, around the middle of the 1990s, I was more on my mother's side. It must be said that my parents were both Reaganites and Thatcherites, liberal in the European sense of the term, as you say, from the beginning of the 1980s. My parents always claimed to be among the minority of the European intelligentsia that did not consider Reagan and Mrs Thatcher as two uncultivated and reactionary idiots. On the contrary, they were pretty much in agreement that these two great

politicians – the greatest of the twentieth century, they said – were creating a new liberal revolution in the Western world, to tear it away from the inevitable decline of the statism of interventionist social democracy.

The two leaders, one in the United States and the other in Great Britain, restarted their economies and created a GDP not only double, but triple the European average. And for almost twenty-five years! Continental Europe, supposedly highly intelligent, cultivated and socially generous, has continued to be anti-American and anti-English (even against the socialist ‘Tory’ Blair) this whole time. And that goes on, regardless of the general economic and cultural climate of failure.”

“You can say that again. Me, I have the task of creating other Eurologos offices in Europe (and throughout the world), and I can confirm the new candidates’ lack of enthusiasm for associating at an international level. The referendum “no” votes against the European Constitution in France and your country have had consequences.”

“I admire the Eurologos management for going ahead with its project, which you in marketing call glocalization (your work to set up new offices) but I think that the results will be limited and disproportionate to your efforts. Are you at least aware of that?”

“Yes, the Eurologos management told me that immediately when I was hired: today, any company presenting itself as multinational or global has small chances of success. At least during this regressive phase. But since we are convinced that our strategy is well founded and shouldn’t be altered, we must press on until the end of this political decline incarnated (in continental Europe) essentially by France and Germany. By the way, it appears that a come-back is in the offing.”

“Finish your last *tapa*, so we can go get at least a couple different ones right by the Christopher Columbus monument. You didn’t seem to like that one.”

“Yes, it’s true. It reminds me of Glasgow sardines: sparse and salty. I’ll pay and let’s go.”

“You see, it’s now my father I feel closer to. Yes, my mother is still adorable and she’s still my Mom. I am even grateful to her for her refined and faultless good taste: for instance, she made me discover Chanel 5, the best of perfumes, which lent its

fragrance to the most luxurious sheets of the most beautiful actresses... Marilyn Monroe, the icon of her generation, said that in bed she only wore a drop of Chanel 5. But culturally and politically, I agree with my papa, who is a very effective director and a truly revolutionary thinker.”

“A revolutionary conservative!” he replied, as he understood the source of the olfactory happiness into which he had drifted off.

“You’re right, that’s exactly what has happened in the past twenty-five years. Right across our generation, *grosso modo*. Those whom we believed to be revolutionary (those on the left) have turned out to be the real reactionaries and history’s losers. On the other hand, those on the right whom were always categorized as conservative have revealed themselves to be great revolutionaries in their liberal and anti-statist policies.”

Peter was enchanted by Hannelore’s political dialectic capacities. A girl that could even speak clearly about current cultural trends!

Hannelore did not pause for breath as she continued to speak about her father: a real intellectual passion!

“You see, to ‘conserve’ today, on the political level, just means freezing the welfare state and all its corporatist privileges accumulated over more than forty years of left-wing demands. ‘Conservation’ is therefore a sort of economic and cultural paralysis, since everything is bureaucratized. The true anti-statist liberalism of the right thus inevitably becomes revolutionary, since it restores the primacy of civil society and meritocracy. That’s what my father stands for.”

They needed to be thousands of kilometers away from the offices in which they worked, and they needed to be next to Las Ramblas in Barcelona, in front of their sixth portion of *tapas* of the evening, in order to be able to speak about things that were highly pertinent even to work, but which were nearly impossible to deal with back at Head Office. In the half-light of the evening, Hannelore seemed even more fascinating. Her eyes accompanied her comments, which were so intelligent and simple. And rare. She expressed concepts that seemed to Peter correct and synthetic. And the very soft light showed him how charm can speak conceptually. All his

certainty about the dialogical virility and the aristocracy of sensual homosexuality were becoming blurry.

Sticking his hand into the pocket of his sweater, Peter also realized that his iPod had remained inactive since he had arrived in Barcelona: three days of silence and no headphones – that had never happened to him with any guy!

“I can well imagine, then, the arguments between your parents,” Peter managed to reply, “on the subject of multicultural communitarianism and the assassination of Theo van Gogh.”

“At that time, I was already in Brussels. But I did have the chance to witness and even participate in many discussions about Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the director van Gogh’s former collaborator. The current Dutch parliamentarian has received death threats from the same Islamists who killed the filmmaker with unbelievable barbarity. She has to hide like Anne Frank was forced to hide from the Nazis. So my mother had to give in: the sharia in the land of tulips opened her eyes to the absurd and masochistic policies (so typical of continental Europe) on the communitarianism of immigrants. Incidentally, it’s the same problem that occurred in the UK. The Dutch are livid, and are starting to go back on the permissive and villainous laws that they had already conceded by the ‘60s and ‘70s. The Islamic terrorists are not rejoicing any more. But the game isn’t up: the supporters of what the famous Italian writer, Oriana Fallaci, who lives in New York, has called ‘Eurabia’ (this Europe dominated by Muslim Arabs) are always numerous and very active!”

The discussion brought them back to work. The next day they would be back in Madrid to take care of Eurologos business. Hannelore was already counting on an intense week, with work continuing even into the evening, in order to finish the website. She and Pablo had organized two localization languages: French and Japanese, which had translations that were already completely available. Pablo could then localize the other languages himself, whether in ideograms, Latin or Cyrillic

characters. Furthermore, after having worked together for almost three weeks, it would be easy to call each other to resolve any problems quickly.

Even Peter was planning on going back to Brussels. It was already time to prepare the Newsletter for the month of June and the articles from the Eurologos offices had all already arrived on his desk. The master franchise agreement had almost been finalized. And, from the point of view of the project management and localization of the website, he had already imparted the necessary knowledge to Pablo and Mercedes, the translator who had taken on the role of Project Executive for future localization projects in Madrid.

Hannelore finally arranged to go back to Brussels with Peter on Thursday evening, while still working very hard on the final testing of the localization of the first two languages. Pablo was struck by the totally free productive intensity of the two northerners from Head Office, and he admired their autonomous professionalism, without a trace of subordinacy. All the members of the Eurologos-Madrid team had accelerated their work agendas, almost by induction, putting themselves in sync with the rhythm of those from Brussels. The only sad note was that they arrived at the office on Monday at nearly 14:00 (due to a serious airplane departure delay). No one in the Madrid office imagined that the two Eurologos colleagues from Brussels, who arrived separately, had then left together. Not even their direct colleagues, who continued to work with great energy. Tuesday evening, however, the managing director invited everyone to a well-respected restaurant in the city center, the *Paradis*, to thank all who worked on the two projects. Although Peter had agreed to move into Hannelore's apartment since, in any case, the contract on his Brussels flat had just come to an end, they decided to hide their new relationship from the others for the sake of discretion.

Although their professional and romantic accomplishments went so far as to grant Hannelore a physical happiness, Peter remained secretly shattered and disarmed by his entrance into an unknown existential universe, but one that nonetheless made him

irreversibly radiant. Never before had he had the possibility of starting a relationship with a girl who had surprised him, and not only from a vital point of view, but who also amazed him sensationally at both a sexual and cultural level. For example, he had received a little lesson, quite involuntarily, from Hannelore, on the very occasion of the ‘surprise’ that he had announced to her.

“But I’ve already seen this painting,” she exclaimed when Peter showed her the canvas in the art gallery of Montserrat.

“Last year, my father offered the whole family a little trip of about a week to Rome, to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. We, the children, were able to stroll around just about everywhere for three days, among the fountains and through the huge center of Rome. My little brothers even took me to a mega rock concert in front of the San Giovanni basilica.

But on two days, we all went together to visit two museums. First, the Vatican museum, with its innumerable treasures, including the Sistine Chapel. And on the second day, they took us to the Villa Borghese, in the great park where the Villa Medici is also found. In spite of the name, a villa seems more like a residence. Villa Borghese, however, has managed to become a large museum stuffed with masterpieces. Among these, innumerable as they are everywhere over there, there were quite a few wonderful paintings by Caravaggio. And one of them just happened to be of Saint Jerome. I remember it well, because my father had spoken to us a lot about modernity and the extraordinary use of light in the works of the Italian painter, far more advanced than the great Dutch masters. Rembrandt had yet to pick up a paintbrush. My mother, who knew a lot of paintings of Saint Jerome, also talked to me about it. My two brothers, who were not very interested in saints, were hanging around on the ground floor, where there were a lot of mythological sculptures – naked ones, of course, and especially women, by Bernini and Canova.”

“No, Hannelore, that’s not possible: this painting has been here for over seventy years! Look at the sign.”

“That’s true. But then... You’re right, this painting is much more beautiful. Look at the light contrast. Also, in the one in Rome – now I remember – he had his coat on his shoulder and the right arm was writing. In this one he seems to be holding his chin in

meditation. But I swear to you, it's the same bald man, the same beard, the same clothes..."

"Maybe. When we get back to Brussels, we'll check it out on the Internet."

"That won't be necessary. The painting in Rome was used by Eurologos as an illustration on the book published for the twentieth anniversary of the company's creation, and dedicated to Saint Jerome. The published volume contains a novella written by the Eurologos CEO, entitled *Jerome*: it is available in seven languages as a tribute to the great Patron Saint of translation. Did you see it?"

"No, this is the first I've heard of it."

Peter, who had wanted to surprise her, was himself surprised by the professional and marketing culture of Eurologos, and by the breadth of Hannelore's cultural knowledge.

For forty-eight hours, she had not ceased to surprise him. And that continued quite naturally: everything had really started with her, and it was clear that they would always like *tapas*.

THE WORK SHIRKER

(IL QUADRETTINO)

“Why don’t you send me your CV via fax, however, I will only consider it if you add a cover letter starting as follows, take this down: *I have taken part in a competition for civil servants. There were more than 50,000 applicants for 120 theoretical positions. I will never do it again.*”

“Then you will be prepared to hire me?”

“As I said, I’m unable to give you any guarantees. But, in my opinion, today these are the three essential phrases to be able to apply for a job with dignity.”

The company CEO had only been speaking with the young applicant on the telephone for a couple of minutes. The conversation had become intense and oddly bizarre.

Then it was concluding in a purely conscious provocation. The three requested sentences were so explicitly inappropriate and extravagant to justify their impertinence or at least put them on the back burner. The candidate translator was calling for the ad published late by the EU intern news bulletin. Therefore her application arrived when the position was already filled by another young Friuli interpreter, who in addition to English and French, also had a fair knowledge of German. In addition she was able to translate from Dutch.

“From the lingua franca Dutch,” she had specified during her first interview pointing out that Dutch was only a dialect spoken in a region of the Netherlands. She had in fact, worked in a dubbing studio in Hilversum for a year and a half.

Marina Zanin had arrived in the multimedia city of Amsterdam following sound engineer Jan with the blond moustache. Two years earlier she had allowed him to discretely woo her on the golden beaches of Lignano. The young Dutchman had convinced her to get on his windsurfboard. In the beginning he had taught her how to pull the up-haul line to raise the sail and how to hold the boom. They spoke French sometimes slipping into English, which as far as he was concerned was barely correct. Marina felt privileged by the familiarity with which she expressed herself. With an Italian she would have never have indulged in such intense and rapid dialogic intimacy. Not even with her fellow students at the Trieste Interpreter’s College had she experienced such ease and immediate openness. With Jan, the systematic search for words enabled her to distract herself from the—in her opinion—always too imminent

physicality of their bodies. She felt so polarized by the vaguely old-fashioned eyes of her new companion, but she was appeased by the climate of near-professional translation continuity that was immediately established between them. The deep conversation based on the pleasure of translating everything had pervaded her, even unbeknownst to her, with something that resembled an old and fulfilling symbiosis. Words had rapidly made them a match. As often happens in respectable work relations, Marina felt desirable and desired without anxiety or embarrassment. Although it involved a typical holiday romance, she experienced a feeling of major personal emancipation, so wholly for the first time.

After a few days, they had also ended up nearly completely separating from their respective friends. Far from bars, discos, the world, one night they had surprised themselves strolling through the pine forest talking about the future. Their future. Marina had even imagined leaving for Amsterdam to swallow raw herrings together. She had pictured herself with her head held back and the herring hanging above her nose, with complacent gluttony, the same one with which they had eaten codfish *mantecato* in an old dairy store on the boulevard. Despite the fact that she had always attempted to conceptualize and rationally explain her own feelings, she continued to attach decisive importance to visionary prefigurations.

For that matter, it had been her acute intuitiveness that from high school had put her on the road to culture. In order to balance her tendency towards cognitive impulsiveness, towards granting the clarity of an analysis to a blinker, in order to therefore balance the inclination towards what could prove to be a tendency to “pre-judge”, Marina had thrown herself into her studies. With difficulty for that matter. Hers was not a natural and happy passion. She had studied for so many years, always struggling. With great results, but with difficulty. Therefore, she could not sensibly have done otherwise. Knowledge painstakingly acquired constituted in this way the gratifying reward to a thorny, but inescapable relationship, which she had always had with knowledge.

Whilst she attempted by all means possible not to trust her instinct, she had to admit that she had already seen herself fulfilled with Jan. Paradoxically, her fear of the happiness with which she felt good in his company, induced her to resist him and

limit their meetings. To her the effect was to heighten expectations. In turn, the Dutchman was nonplussed and wondered what on earth he had done to cool her off so unreasonably. She was perhaps the only one who had really taken his interests, his passions, his work to heart. To him it was as if she had already contributed to his future, to his vocation. He felt that she could have entered it, thus making it a reality. “An authentic encounter, he thought, cannot fail to produce a radical change in the life of others.” And when something similar is about to happen there is an unmistakable symptom that makes its appearance. One has the critical sensation that everything could vacillate and hang in the balance on the heads or tails determined by the other's freedom. “Decisive facts – he reflected with an electronic image familiar to him – always present themselves paired with a binary and absolute alternative.” Marina, he was certain, had at this time the power to etch his existence with the decisiveness of a yes or a no. That the matter depended on him was not up for discussion. The only concern he had was: “Have I been clear enough with her when I announced my “yes”?”

They had so many things to say to each other, so many projects to think through and so many pledges to seal that they ended up closing themselves up in the room to desire each other and consume them for the first time together.

They only left the hotel two days later, at night, to walk on the beach one last time. Surprisingly everything had already been decided. They were to leave the following day to stop by and announce their plans to Marina's family, in Cividale del Friuli. Subsequently they would have gone to Hilversum. To hell with their holidays and their friends. Marina felt that she had tackled a project that she perceived as solid, but with spontaneity and naturalness. She had the impression that everything had become clear. It had appeared apparent to her as if her first flush of youth had been exceeded, as she had tried to imagine it so many times. She had not thought, however, that everything could really change in so little time.

Two years earlier, reading Kierkegaard's “Either/Or” in German, she had presumed what she was now actually living with Jan: she was going through, or rather she had gone through, the stage defined as “esthetic”, which the Danish author made coincide

with the building of oneself with the “ethical” stage of the achievement of the first truly adult project.

From the incessant acknowledgement of knowing one’s own limitations and solidity, Marina now had the feeling of having transferred to a new self-assuredness and commitment. The meeting, the carnal persuasiveness of their nuptial unity, made her unwavering and reckless. Impatient to enter her new finality, she could leave. They had to leave.

Jan too felt reborn. In his beloved he had found a fulfillment in which everything merged. In the kisses of the exile from Giulia he had secured the predilection of a new activity. In this way, suddenly, he had realized the futility of holidays, of the gentle beach. He wanted to work. In a new dimension: unexpectedly he had realized that it would all be different. Perhaps he would start his own business. He did not know exactly how and when. But he knew now with whom, which is what is essential. Marina had catalyzed years of fond contemplation with a simplicity that was also miraculous to him. In his Protestant Holland, where youth is experienced as a recreational and light profligacy, maturity is conceived as a systematic and rational structure.

Jan, however, had wanted to stay longer in Cividale. Before leaving for his ultramodern country extracted from the sea, he would have liked to linger on amid the old buildings of a surprisingly Roman city. Marina felt, not without pride, that Jan wanted to take over her roots as well.

And then, why, in a city surrounded by mountains and built on a river excavated from the rocks, did Marina have such a Mediterranean name? Her brown eyes and brunette hair, more than the pale and azure blue colors of the sea, matched the already burnt shades of the yellow green corn of the Friuli plains.

On the Natisone’s exposed riverbed, covered with rocks polished by thousands of years of impetuous torrents, Jan savored the delay. The urgency of returning to Hilversum had been diluted in the river’s powerful waters where Marina too was floating. More than swimming, he enjoyed himself having the water from the small

waterfall, which the Carnia river creates right under the small Lombard temple, at the edge of the city, run down his moustache.

Jan lingered on. Despite the fact that he felt they had to leave for Hilversum soon, he simmered in the primitive totality of his being with Marina. He rejoiced consuming the twinkle in her eyes reflected in the red wine from the nearby vineyards. That in which he had discovered the fragrance of violets, which he believed to rediscover each time in her hair. The Dutch projects were mitigated. Their urgency was slowed down by the completeness of being together. For the time being, they were unable to want anything else more absolute or more fulfilling.

Even Marina had stopped talking about dubbing, casting and lip-synching. And she took increasing pleasure in the loving Batavian's hunger for her and for her small town. That is how she had ended up revisiting the usual places in her Cividale, seen through his astonished eyes, who, even though he had traveled a lot, seemed to have seen nothing else besides his country's canals and evergreen plains.

The whim of the hairpin turns in the hills towards what is now Slovenia were removed, quite removed, from the geometry of the North's electric fences enclosing perfectly cloned cows. Marina looked at the landscape with the eyes of someone who has never seen a border made up of mountains. Of someone who has never sat down under arcades to savor – in complete idleness – the excessive and provoking density of laced coffee.

“There, you see, beyond that hillside lies Slovenia” Marina had also taken him to Castelmonte, a few kilometers from the border. From the restaurant's terrace she had shown him the road followed by the Romans on their way to subjugate the peoples of Illyria and Pannonia. The same road subsequently taken by the Goths, the Lombards and the Huns, all attracted by Italian riches and eternal beauty.

“Here it is safe to say that we have seen them all pass through. From the Celts and the Venetians, before Rome, to the Alpine army unaware they would not return from their last (world) war, with their frozen Russian lunchboxes.”

Marina vivaciously explained to Jan the history of the buildings with the splendid Roman and Gothic architecture of her Cividale, of her remote *Civitas Austriae*. Of her *Forum Julii*, founded by Julius Cesar, which subsequently gave the name of Friuli to

the entire region. It was as if through the buildings' words the old and noble genesis of her enchanted soul unfolded.

Jan listened to her and never ceased to savor her. Every once in a while, he nibbled at her lips silencing her with pleasure. The 99 track recording system that awaited him in Hilversum was light-years away. This is when he realized that he had never really traveled in time before Marina. Despite the organized cultural excursions with so many guides from the University of Amsterdam, he had never physically gone back into history as he did in that border village, already of middle European aspect, where he had followed a girl with sweet polyglot lips.

Two Mondays had passed since their arrival. To Marina's parents Mondays were a holiday, as their restaurant had its weekly closing. They seemed to have willingly accepted Jan's intrusion into the family. It was as if they had been expecting him for a long time. For years, from when Marina had managed to register in Trieste at the School for Interpreters, they knew that one day she would permanently leave home with a *stranger*.

Of few words, they had wanted to know immediately what kind of work he and his family did. Not even Marina knew it, it had not even occurred to her to ask. That is why they were reassured when Jan had shown them a photo of his mother in front of their house, a kind of farm, alongside gleaming greenhouses.

"Druiven, druiven." Marina did not understand either.

"Raisins. Ma mère cultive des raisins..."

"Grapes, they grow vines in greenhouses. Heated with Dutch methane." Marina translated to the family seated at the table. Father, mother, Giuliano, her elder brother and Gabriella, her younger sister. They would never have imagined that vines could be produced in greenhouses and what's more, in Holland!

"And your father?" Giuliano turned directly to his virtual peer, having abandoned his dialect for the occasion, almost trying to be understood in a more familiar language.

"He has been retired for six months. He was a civil engineer, but he continues to work as a consultant and also helps out in the family business where a partner and two permanent workers are employed as well. Other workers are hired seasonally."

Marina often summarized the answers, which mysteriously seemed to be understood. It was enough to frame the image of the great big boy who had decidedly conquered all with the attitude with which he drank the Cabernet that Giuliano never forgot to pour.

Signs of approval had multiplied as days went by. Giuliano had taken Jan to visit his business, a small woodworking shop in which he only produced chairs. He had torn him away from Marina even if he knew that they would not have said a single phrase that the other would have been able to fully understand. The fact remains that he was able to explain to him that, after the 1976 earthquake, as soon as they had completed the renovation of the restaurant, he had himself raised the woodworking shop's shed. It had taken two years of work for him and his father: low-interest loan, prefab materials and sacrosanct under-the-counter work with three mason friends (evenings, holidays, vacations, borrowed concrete mixer and the miracles of making do). Jan had essentially understood everything.

His approval rating had increased even further.

Now it was Gabriella's turn to invite the couple to the restaurant, to her family restaurant. The father ruled in the kitchen, with her mother exclusively dealing with the hors d'oeuvres. She, with her loose jet-black hair, waited tables assisted by an even younger girl. Two-thirds of patrons were soldiers, there were 6,000 of them in the area, an old legacy from the strategic relocation of the military barracks near the communist border. In the meantime, from the 70s, the enemy had developed within, especially in the South. The armies of the CNM and co. (organized crime, *n'drangheta*, mafia and political favoritism) had already occupied nearly five regions with the criminal control of territory and activities.

At least two Alpine soldiers were more or less in love with Gabriella, a cavalry officer and a radio operator in the seventy-first regiment. Like an unattainable princess, she sashayed between tables sporadically mocking them in true Friulano to escape the excessively cumbersome and clumsy courtship of the men in uniform with proud politeness. At 20 she already had the devastating scowl of the Goldonian publican.

A girl who feels beautiful and wanted always becomes irresistible. And the impetuous grace she uses as a shield makes her immune to any excessively persistent or vulgar assault.

Gabriella had a sunny and mocking disposition asserting herself in a deliciously harsh way. Her apron ruffles made her glide through the dining room with theatrical speed whose effects did not escape the spectators in her sumptuously prepped audience. With the vitality of her witticism, that evening she was very eager to seduce her cultured and studious sister “fiancé’s” reservedness. Not that she was envious of her. She had always admired Marina's diligent intelligence. She bragged about it to her girlfriends and she always considered her to be her confidante and advisor. But never had she thought of herself as inferior or subordinate. From a very young age she had thought that her life would be different from that of her elder sister undoubtedly destined for success and professional leading roles. She had only feared being less beautiful. That is why, when her legs had become long and slim, she was sure that she would be happy. She liked herself and nothing could have saddened her.

In the morning, even before anyone saw her, she was already in a good mood, all she had to do was make up her eyes, and always in the same way. A single model, slightly outdated, but of decisive and classic style: Mina. When she saw and heard her for the first time in a program recorded for TV, she had no doubts, she had become her goddess. While her girlfriends worshiped actors, soccer players, all gorgeous and taken for granted, she adored Mina, in other words herself. It would never have occurred to any of her girlfriends to choose a single woman and what’s more, not usually on TV as a prototype to identify with. All the more so since Mina had been retired for a while – in Lugano it appears – and her records had also become rare. Gabriella did not even know her songs well. She was not really able to learn them. Contrary to her sister, she did not stick to the precision of the lyrics. She heard them sung, but she didn't listen to them very attentively. She listened to the voice, especially the voice. As if it involved a foreign song. Mina’s vocal acrobatics made her quiver with pleasure. She could stay for hours becoming intoxicated with her musical arabesques, her high notes that irresistibly pulled her from the depth of her

lowest and telluric registers. She wanted, she had to be like Mina or at least have that resonant surprising and wide-ranging voice of a virtuoso.

Marina looked at her with pride and amusement whilst she stormed through the dining room under Jan's subjugated eyes. That evening, it was for him, especially for him, that Gabriella danced.

The *polenta* was brought by the father. With skill he attracted general attention to the large – nearly one meter – solid wood serving tray, which he theatrically placed on a table in full view. Then he came back with the fuming copper pot mumbling an old and suggestive litany in Friulano. Very few in the room had understood its meaning. All, however, knew that the most intense moment was yet to come, immediately afterwards, dishing up the grainy yellow *polenta*.

“At least they won't take this one away from us. May Rome and the politicians be inflicted with disease!” Applause roared. Even a table full of Neapolitan mortar launchers applauded loudly. Yes, Altiero Zanin, Marina's father, had been a member of a workers' association from the very start. He had never been a militant extremist as in the five years that he had worked in Verviers, in Belgium, he had seen how the emigrants from Ragua and Cantanzaro worked themselves to death.

“There – said Altiero – we were all equals, from Veneto or Abruzzi. In the morning you punched in at 7:15, but to be sure to arrive on time, they left home even before 6. Those who arrived at the last minute were frowned upon. Before punching in, there must be time to greet everyone – Belgians and foreigners – shaking their hands one by one, yes, that's right, one by one. And hopefully one would also have time to smoke a cigarette. Then there wasn't even time: afterwards the welding machine would not stop. There you had to be happy to be from Calabria and not from Morocco or Zaire. Arabs and blacks were treated even worse than we were. And down there all were working within pretense. But those who knew how to work without being asked were always respected. The bosses were Flemings. People who didn't say much and who worked hard to set the example. To me they seemed to have the disposition of people from Brescia or Bergamo. Germanics are very different from the locals, the

Francophone Walloons, who are chatterboxes and more like union men than workers. Everyone has their “southerners”.

When Zanin began to talk about himself, he could easily get carried away by his own loquaciousness. “After having arrived in Belgium less than a month ago, an old worker from Maddaloni – Carboni was his name – pulled me aside and said: “*Hey, Altiero, why don't you come too, they are looking for two more welders at the stove factory.*” Zanin tried to imitate the Neapolitan accent with an irresistibly comical effect.

“Understood? He, for 11 years, had gone every day and worked from five to eight, plus Saturday mornings for soldering. A total of some 60 hours a week. Anything but southerners. And, when his fellow villager called him on Saturday afternoons, without even going home he joined him on the construction site to lay tiles until late at night. Sundays, on the other hand, were sacred. Everyone got dressed up to have a good time at the party.”

“But then why are you a league member?” Someone always ended up asking him.

“Because a true league member is not against the southerners. He is against the South of Italy – against the mentality – which does not want to work. And above all he is against Rome that steals money from those who work to pay politicians and all their parasite clients.”

Simple and direct, he commanded respect, Altiero. He was straightforward. Marina adored him. With the nest egg earned in Belgium, he had bought the restaurant and a house with some land just outside of Cividale. After the earthquake, while the house had remained erect, the restaurant had to be renovated completely. Without help and without taking into account that for more than a year no money would come in.

Thankfully Giuliano, albeit very young at 16, covered the chairs with straw and Mother Delia was able to sell the apartment inherited from grandma Marina in Udine. The old lady has only survived the earthquake for three months.

Father Zanin, without being too obvious, never stopped scrutinizing Jan. The little French that he had learned in Verviers and that he still remembered, helped him above all to listen to his future son-in-law when he didn't speak English.

Before graduation, Marina had brought home a “dear schoolmate” who had made him break out in a cold sweat. He was from Latina and spoke of nothing else besides “entering competitions” to find a “position”. He never uttered the word “work”. It never even crossed his lips. The idea that Marina could get involved with a future paper pusher upset him. The “work shirker”, as Altiero had christened him, did not last for more than two days.

His daughter did not follow him. She could not leave with a “work shirker”. Especially when she found out that the first one to call him that was her mother Delia. “That one, I don’t have room for him in my house,” she had decided.

Gabriella had also left quickly, humming sarcastically, with the usual incisive irony and with Mina’s drawl “I don’t want any more candy”. The applicant had offered her a bag of candy.

As to Giuliano, he could not have been more eloquent: he had never said or even acknowledged one word from the insignificant Latina translator. Ugh!

Marina was aware of the inconsistency of her crush, of the ease with which she had accepted its death penalty. Then only after having questioned herself at length on the reason why, was she able to bring her little translator along to Cividale. How did she come up with the idea of introducing him to her family with whom, a month earlier, she had commented seriously and conclusively on a Monday-night program shown on the second broadcast channel. In it they showed the ever-lamenting Belize earthquake victims permanently settled for more than a generation in temporary emergency sheds!

How did she dare to drag home this eternal student who had been kept for 27 years learning to speak about career grades and dreaming up endless multilingual coffee breaks?

Jan felt the unanimous approval like the final liberation of his truly unforgiveable error. In reality, whilst at home they had all forgotten, Marina had never totally freed herself of a subtle behavioral shame. The trust in everyone’s self-discipline was the first rule of family relations.

The mother, for example, when by chance she had seen her take a pill from her bag, feigned to be only interested in its brand and estrogen level. An ethic of freedom and responsibility had been hovering about the house for ever. More than a believer, Delia was religious. In the sense that she constrained, tried to constrain everything to everything and everyone. To her, dignity, industriousness and purity had to be the binding values for everyone and everything. In the sense that she despised riches without work; culture without simplicity irritated her; virginity without freedom did not interest her. Furthermore she abhorred shrewdness without honesty. She was the one to have chosen Altiero.

That was what Altiero was all about: 95 kg of ethically sensible muscles. She had immediately fallen in love with him because he gave her the solid impression that she would never have a reason to be ashamed of him. “A man that is not respected cannot be loved,” she always said.

The thought that she may have had, even for a short time, a weakness for a young man not deemed worthy by her mother, had mortified Marina for a long time. She had wondered if it was not the prevailing culture in universities, which she had inhaled in the very famous Trieste, that of the weeklies she used to read such as *l'Espresso* and *Panorama*, to have led her to the unforgiveable error in taste to have encouraged a mediocre suitor and wooing little civil servant. As seen from Cividale and by the Zanins, even his Armani coats had appeared vain and inappropriate more than unstructured. Him dressed in designer clothes even before having earned the money, in more than a quarter century, and a single drop of his aftershave, had suddenly disgusted her to a certain degree.

Gabriella had as always, quickly calculated, how many dozens of servings of overcooked pasta with mushrooms she would have to dish up to pay for the bill for the beautiful Missoni separates, which the young man with the virtual success had donned on the morning of his second and final day in Friuli.

Marina had had the opportunity to reflect on the matter, once again, during her trip to Paris where she had attended an international convention on the topic of “La liberté en traduction” (*Freedom in Translation*). As she knew that she would find Danica

Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer there, the two greatest traductology experts, she had done everything possible to be sent by the Trieste School for Interpreters. It was attended by more than 300 translators and linguists from some 60 universities in 25 countries. The few Italians present (not one of them had contributed in any way in the three days of communication and debates!), were the most elegant. Marina could not help but notice that the abundance of designer labels on the Italians' clothes was inversely related to the number of signatures on their contributions to linguistics and the "interpretative theory of translation". She had never had a clearer example of culture... of appearance of which Italy is also too indulgently accused abroad. In any case, before attending the debates' afternoon session, Marina bought a 70-francs T-shirt to replace her flashy silk blouse and attempted to perfectly blend in with the certainly not shabby representatives from other countries. Among them she recognized an English interpreter who had stayed in Trieste for six months to perfect her Italian. She did everything possible to speak to her in French breaking away from her group of boutique dressers.

What's more, observing that no one paid much attention to their stylistic refinement, Marina thought of Gabriella. Her judgment of her recently acquired polyglot suitor's trendy suit appeared to her to be even more correct and final. What then was the common theme that united a simple waitress from a small village in Friuli, with this congress of the most learned international researchers on multilingualism gathered in the world's most cultured metropolis?

In those days, more than of the complexity between interpretation and transcodification, between signifier and signified, Marina thought of the ethics of culture and of common sense. Besides, she knew that she did not have the character for a theoretical approach to problems. Even if they involved translation.

Barely a month after the convention, in July of 1990, Marina was touched by Jan's busy modesty around his windsurfboard. His gestures were measured and essential. All functional for the purpose of the efficient and rational use of his toy. There was something authentically childish and playful, and therefore of mature and serious in his technical maneuvering to master the board and to keep the balance of the wind in check. Therefore, when she was invited to get on his board, she did not have that

feeling of impatience that she always felt in characters that behave as if they were spectators of their own actions. Those who are more concerned with the effect they have than with what they are actually achieving. By now Marina was tired of the vacuous theatricality of the gestures with the caption “did you see, eh?”, of the “all eyes on the designer” clothes. If this is what Italy is all about, welcome to foreigners! Jan did not know, but to Marina having met him was a lot more than a love encounter. She needed to distance herself, if not from Italy, at least from the Italians. Or from those who rave on the stage of modernity and public places. Places where the “mass cretin” – especially the Italian one – was always prevalent, as F. & L. said in a book that Marina had really loved. She needed to look at Italy in its upside-down position, leg up in the air, from across the Alps. From the same perspective as it is viewed for that matter by all other Northern Europeans.

How many times had she thought of it from when, in high school, she had decided to become an interpreter! To flee from consumer pushiness and to be cured from boorish modernism, there was the way chosen spontaneously by her family or that predetermined by her education. The Zanins remained very active in Cividale speaking dialect and she was preparing to take a leap across the Alps speaking four languages.

Two postmodern methods, she thought, of escaping from the devastating approval of a frantically hedonist designer Italy. The flashy one, the rowdy and proudly superficial one. The narcissistic and arrogant one of the social language on TV. In fact, Marina only used to be truly happy at home. Only among the Zanins, in Friulano, on a bicycle with her shopping bag filled with bread and fruit. Only in Cividale did she feel at peace. At least until she was a student. From when she had returned from Edinburgh, however, where she had worked under a nine-month contract, contributing to the fine-tuning of two multilingual dictionaries, she had felt restless and transitory. She had to leave again. Making her get on his windsurfboard, Jan poetically enabled her.

They left Cividale with the same plans with which they had arrived.

As anticipated, after three months of freelance work, Marina found a full-time job in one of the Hilversum studios. In the meantime, she intensely studied Dutch, made a lot easier thanks to her German and, above all, thanks to Jan. By Christmas she managed quite well, cornering conversation partners, to ask them further details on whatever she had not understood.

After the first summer vacation during which they had gone back to Cividale as newlyweds, Marina had also started translating from Dutch into Italian, in addition to English, French and German.

Every once in a while she also worked as a cabin interpreter. The private interpretation market is very limited: the practice of simultaneous or consecutive interpretation was almost always exclusively limited to public or international institutions. As they worked a lot, the couple earned good money. They had already saved 30,000 guilders. If they doubled this they could become self-employed in partnership with a friend of Jan's.

In order to set up a recording studio, in order to at least begin to equip it, position it for marketing purposes and launch it on the market properly, they needed at least the equivalent of some one billion lire. The project had been fine-tuned nearly into the finest details. The technical and production aspect by Jan, translation and multilingual dubbing by Marina and the commercial and administrative aspect by their partner. An in-house secretary and a number of freelancers would have completed the structure of the first operational team.

The opening reception was scheduled for early September of the following year. In the meantime, all had to be prepared in the greatest secrecy. From the administrative system to the financial set-up, from logo to documentation and advertising, from the technical procedures manual to the production control forms, from logistics and equipment to the first master franchises. Enough to fill every weekend until the following summer.

Marina was enthusiastic. Very much in love and tireless. She felt settled down in her life. Holland, the world consisted of her, Jan and their partner. And their next Echo Digital Mastering. It was their child, her child. It took less than 12 months to give birth to it. How can those who do not have a financial task to achieve live? What

could be the meaning of their life without projects? To Marina every moment, every word, every gesture was marked by the implementation of their undertaking. In this way, she was so far from Cividale and yet she felt so in tune with the Zanins, with Giuliano's chairs, her father's *polenta*, Gabriella's bill receipts. Her mother would have been proud of her had she seen her. She called her often from the studio to tell her everything and, above all, to let her know how happy she was.

That evening of May 12, 1992, in the ambulance that took him to the Amsterdam hospital, Jan was already dead. His partner, his future partner, had called him to ask him to bring him a tire for the car as he had also punctured the spare one. Within a half hour Jan had reached him on the shoulder of the county road.

While he was changing the tire kneeling next to the jack, a skidding truck hurled him through the air for more than 20 meters under his partner's horrified eyes.

Jan's mother was the only one to have the courage to tell Marina. They despaired together for one week.

Then Giuliano took her back to Cividale to cry with Gabriella and mother Delia. He was the one who moved all her belongings, Marina could no longer live in Holland. In September, Marina went to the Brussels translation agency having responded to the newspaper ad. She delivered the reply in person. Why mail it? She was hired on the spot.

Almost immediately the dispatching department's secretary took the fax from the Italian candidate in which he referred to the strange telephone conversation they had a little earlier to the CEO. The CEO, who was also Italian and who had lived in Brussels for more than 20 years, had deliberately chosen to provoke the peevisish applicant translator with the unusual oath request. He had made it up right there on the spot. A fan of paradoxes and logical experiments, the CEO had immediately declared that the position had just been filled, but that one never knows. Curious as to the outcome of his tease he immediately wanted to read the letter and the attached CV.

One week earlier, he had read in an article in an Italian newspaper, about a competition held in Cagliari for a handful of positions in the region. More than 30,000 young people had shown up masochistically subjected to an impossible and humiliating selection. Not to mention their chances, so to speak, of success. That 30,000 youngsters from the island had felt that it was worthwhile to follow the announcement of the competition, read its instructions, buy the administrative books and study them diligently, prepare all the documents and questions, leave for the city (including hotel for many) to then answer a set of multiple choice questions, which are inevitably arbitrary and irrelevant, well, all this seemed absolutely surreal and despicable to the CEO.

“The fact that young people, he opined, accept such a test without batting an eye, does not bode well. Sooner shovel snow in Greenland.”

That is why, when he had one of them on the phone, he was unable to resist the temptation to provoke him and also to give him a bit of a rough time morally. He wanted to test his fiber, peel the skin to see the color of a possible capillary, a small vein of pride, a nerve of respectability or decorum. No, not that he expected a political or economical conscience to their actions. And yet, it appeared abnormal to him that it apparently escaped all the political value of a negative demonstration by 30,000 well-combed sheep, subjected to psychotechnical dim-witted intelligence and useless general-knowledge tests.

Brussels, September 14, 1992

Dear Sir:

Despite my inability to satisfy you with the promise to never again take part in competitions (to be honest, I may have two further ones next month in Rome, one for the foreign ministry and one for the European Union), I attach my CV.

P.S.: I will remain here in Brussels until the end of next week for a possible interview and language test before returning to Latina.

The CEO shook his head. He held in his hands the letter from a serious and respectable fool of nearly 30 years old and still vainly in search of his first job. At this age, he already had two children and he had worked since he was 13. He had completed all secondary education in evening classes.

But, before filing away the CV of the uselessly super-educated unemployed young man, he wanted the new translator to take a look at it. All the more so since they had studied at the same school in Trieste.

As soon as Marina saw the name she feigned disinterest.

“No, when I signed up, he was already in his third year”. With an expeditious tone, she cut the conversation short taking the CV. “I will take it to the filing cabinet myself”.

And she entered the administration department.

However, before throwing it into the “to be filed” tray she felt a sad desire, like a burial. Thinking of Jan and of her mother Delia, she quickly wrote a couple of simple words on the letter, right under the *Sincerely Yours*: work shirker.

TURANDOT

She had witnessed them grow with regretful helplessness. Since she attended Mirror College her breasts had rapidly become enormous and by age 13 she started to abhor them. On the body of a teenager with its narrow hips, they stood out like a double outgrowth, which made her feel disfigured.

Sally realized that the slow gaze of the boys rose to her face with an expression that was sometimes embarrassed sometimes knowing. She felt naked and caught unaware in her privacy. And her girlfriends' envy of her precociously feminine good looks did nothing to change her mind. The more her charms were appreciated the greater became her desire to hide them. She felt unfairly endowed by a senselessly generous nature.

More than ten years later, not even habit enabled her to see herself through the admiring eyes with which even women looked at her. With her red hair and green eyes, Sally looked like her mother, Irish for many generations. Perhaps she owed, what she had considered to be the first anomaly in her life, to her father, a broad-shouldered Welshman. More than once she had noticed, not without vague physical horror, how many women in Wales were also "afflicted with her deformity". Paradoxically, her unhappiness made her even more beautiful and desirable. Her concern for that which she believed to be her excessive defect, added an element of attractive melancholy to her beauty.

From the bed Carlo looked at her with admiration while she was getting dressed. In the shadowy light, naked and from the back, he had watched her quickly put herself back together: firstly with her bra's embroidered "harness" trimmings; then her stockings, her garter belt, and lastly, her skirt and sweater. All that was missing was running the brush through her hair to restore the intact image of herself with which she aroused the admiration of all.

Sally had given herself to him but not truly with abandon. And now she was about to escape him. Hurriedly, she had slipped from the bed as if she feared further intimacy, avoiding his gaze, their bodies set free.

After having overwhelmingly found each other, their bodies could have been set free, satisfied and knowingly, to merge their unguarded adoration. To let themselves go without the original sin, without in any way separating from the fig leaf.

Sally, all straightened out and armored, was now able to turn around liberated from the angst of the oh-so-feared glance. She had managed to keep her secret even from Carlo.

But Carlo was watching her. She knew he had never stopped. He had warned her quite clearly as he had just attempted to find her between caresses that were too probing for her. Essentially triumphant, she was now able to talk and listen to him again. It was in this way that she was able to protect her true virginity. No man had ever crossed the threshold of her privacy. In a culture that is for the most part visual, no one had been able to photograph her full nudity, even if only mentally.

Sally had felt this curious glance on other occasions. She had allowed some boys to reach the desire to fall in love. They wondered why she unexpectedly imposed this sudden distance on their élan. She had left some lost in her arms. That is why her longest relationships were always with married men. She had also cultivated one with a confirmed bachelor: her French lit professor at the University of Brighton. With him, in fact, the tie had never been severed. One could wonder if they had really ever tied it. Each time, with rare frequency they brushed against each other not without intense pleasure. Also happily and lightly, but never mutually consumed.

Sally had understood that she could not free herself from Carlo's question not even with the ruse she had used in Heidelberg where she had studied for a year: she had left fellow students concerned and even doubting their manhood.

With Carlo it could not work. He was 34 years old, with a marriage behind him, an immense and mature culture to her, a rare control over his body and emotions. She felt in fact in his glance an inquisitive ability free from any self-doubt or uncertainty specific to the weak ego of the majority of men she had known.

Even though she was able to freely do whatever she liked with herself, Sally was never able to completely control him. Nor could she escape from him with the knowing ease with which she slipped away from her pleasure-seeking bachelor

professor. For that matter, she felt dangerously attracted to his quiet strength. If she had not torn herself away from his pillow, she could also have risked what she considered to be the worst.

Sally thought these things while she was driving her station wagon on Avenue de Tervueren towards the center of Brussels. Carlo had described it to her with such passion that it felt as if she saw it for the first time. Inside the car, she was happy she did not wash before leaving the house: she liked his perfume. She liked men particularly for their odor. She had had affairs that were immediately terminated as a result of an unpleasant scent.

“It is one of the most beautiful, perhaps THE most beautiful boulevard in Europe: ten kilometers with three/four lanes, a cycling path, a bridle path between thousands of horse-chestnuts, alongside forests and ponds, winding through villas and gardens where the art of living was carved in stone and defined by evergreen borders. A tram runs its entire length, enchanting passengers along the itinerary from Montgomery circle to the African Museum”. Carlo never stopped talking about it, recounting its history: “It was Leopold II, *the Builder King*, who had it erected it at the beginning of the 20th century, using his personal capital. He had plenty of it, Congo being owned by the royal family and not by the Belgian State. There was no room for politicians building promoters, back then”.

“Right, the people did not even have the time to realize it, given that they spent more than 12 hours per day in the mines,” Sally had replied sarcastically.

Upon reaching the Cinquantenaire, the imposing “Arch of Peace” dedicated to the Belgian provinces and located behind the park and the EU buildings, you have to admit that the *Builder King* was right and above all, had thought big.

“Sunny spells in the forecast for tomorrow...” In a country where rain or clouds prevail more than two hundred days a year, the news heard on the radio nearly brought a smile to Sally's face as she did not expect the day to be different from the rainy Saturday that was already getting dark.

Before going to the dinner appointment with her colleagues from the press agency, she wanted to stop at her house, to change clothes and move a little further away from Carlo.

She wanted to make tea and enjoy it alone in her apartment not far from the Grand' Place. Watching the gabled roofs, polished by misty rain, she started listening to Schubert's "Death and the maiden" quartet; she always did after putting on the tea kettle. It was an old LP she had bought in Cologne at a concert and that accompanied her tea ceremony nearly every day. It was the only record she regularly listened to and it had its permanent place on the turntable. Usually she listened to Pink Floyd, Dire Straits or old Beatles CDs.

Lady of her manor she had never allowed anyone to enter her fortress. Only her younger sister, passing through Brussels, had spent one night there. In her ivory tower, Sally straightened out. After having physically changed slipping into other clothes and escaping from Carlo, now she returned to Schubert's subdued melody. The residue of the physical or emotional "promiscuity" was duly purified by the aroma of the tea and the harmonious essentialness of the four string instruments. Schubert's "maiden" defeated the "death" of those who wanted to turn her into a married woman.

But Carlo was still watching her, she could feel him. Sally hurried and left her apartment while the record was still playing. The tune of the quartet, which she inaccurately called "The maiden against death" stayed with her into the *Galerie de la Reine*. It only faded when she entered the *Taverne du Passage*, the restaurant where her four colleagues were waiting for her at the central table.

Before running a few errands, Carlo was checking a long text translated by Rodolfo, the head of the Italian department at his multilingual translation and editing agency. Rodolfo was a good writer. He was also very meticulous. He would never skip a line in his adaptations or misspell a name. Carlo knew, however, that he was not always faithful to the source text. His stylistic compulsive perfection sometimes kept him from reproducing all the semantic connotations from the original. Carlo would perhaps have preferred that his writings be less beautiful but more faithful. When

checking it, he could have avoided being confronted, sentence by sentence, with the source text, just tweaking the style here and there, substituting a term with a synonym, splitting a long sentence into two clauses.

From the start of the third CD, which his stereo system automatically played in succession, he realized it was already past 7 p.m. In nearly two hours he had revised some twenty pages. He had to hurry if he wanted to make it to the stores before they closed. He would finish the revision of the last chapters after dinner. He also realized that after she left, he had continued to think of Sally. And it was unclear to him whether it was a lateral or central thought. He also caught himself in fact, rereading three times a line of the text he was revising. Even concentrating, Sally's words prevailed over those written by Rodolfo.

At the next cash register, a client of his, the marketing manager at a major sugar refinery located on Flemish territory, was emptying his shopping cart to have the prices scanned. In the meantime, his daughter, a preadolescent girl, was bagging the groceries. Every year Carlo's company produced the text and graphics in six languages for the major food-processing plant's annual report. But the German and Spanish departments had regularly been working for more than one year on the creation of new subsidiaries in Germany, Spain and Argentina. He knew they translated contracts, reports, advertising price lists and a variety of catalogues. "You're getting mozzarella too, Mr. Ronchetti?" the marketing man, Johan Vanderdriesse, asked Carlo who also had some in his cart. And, with an air of complicity, he reached to shake the other man's hand: "I just love it". Carlo Ronchetti, surprised, also extended his hand and in doing so, nearly hit the head of the cashier who was bending over speaking French to the girl. After having heard her speak Dutch to her father, the cashier continued in Flemish, for fear of being judged unilingual by the Flemish-speaker. Typically the Flemish only forgive foreigners for not speaking Dutch and barely put up with Belgian francophones who cannot speak the so-called language of Vondel – especially in public service. That was the reason why Vanderdriesse, knowing he was Italian, had spoken French to Carlo, as if almost to emphasize their common uninvolvedness in a world of which they spoke the

language perfectly and of which they appreciated the prestigious culture. The announcement of the supermarket's closing rushed them. But they still lingered a few minutes on the parking lot with their respective full shopping carts. In fact, translations was not the only thing they had in common. They knew that they were both divorced and Johan Vanderdriesse was ecstatic being able to show off, with loving ostentation, the splendid beauty of his young daughter who was already bilingual.

At home, Carlo made it in time to watch the final summary in which they announced further subpoenas for three MPs and some one hundred arrests in Naples on RAIUNO, the only Italian channel available on cable in Belgium.

"Excellent, two good news items that deserve to be celebrated," he thought opening a bottle of Dolcetto d'Alba that he had just taken out of the supermarket bag with bread from Puglia, goat cheese in oil, Parma ham and green melon from Israel. It was his dinner, which he ate in the living room in front of the TV watching the news and a top model fashion show broadcast on CNN.

He finished with some tidying up. He took his coffee into the library, his favorite room, where he often worked on weekends on his Macintosh, where he read and played music. He started again with the third CD, which he had interrupted two hours earlier. The player contained his favorite CDs: it started with Kempff, in his opinion Beethoven's best interpreter, followed by Pollini, Benedetti Michelangeli, Arrau, Barenboim and lastly, Richter.

They all played the 111 sonata. By now he recognized their way of playing nearly to perfection. From when, in the military, he had read the comment made by Thomas Mann in "Doktor Faustus" on Beethoven's last sonata, which he had listened to thousands of times. Carlo, whilst he did not live from music, lived in it. He worked listening to it and often went to concerts. Already back in 1976, when he was still in high school, he had attended a memorable evening in Rome in which the Italian Quartet had invited Pollini to play "The Trout". Kempff had religiously listened to it at the Brussels Conservatory in 1981 in a recital in which it was indeed put to the test

with the piano sonatas 109, 110 and 111: the most sublime program one could imagine.

Even more aristocratic and solitary than Kempff, Benedetti Michelangeli was also the only pianist out of the six whom he had never seen perform live: after his voluntary and paradoxical exile from Italy, his public appearances had become extremely rare. While he listened to his interpretation of the variations of the short aria, he remembered that it was exactly at a Beethoven quartet that he first met Sally. It was during a “Concert de Midi” a few months earlier. They met again in the refreshment area of some other concert and ended up discovering that, in addition to music, they also had the translation profession in common.

Since he had permanently relocated to Brussels three years ago and after his split from his Roman wife, it was the first time that he had looked at a woman beyond an inconsequential affair. He was attracted by her flamboyant beauty, which he, however, perceived as being kept under permanent control. More than warmth, her good looks emitted constant flashes of light, often gloomy, which had also intimidated him. He viewed her freedom from prejudice and her autonomy as inscrutable pride. For that matter he soon realized that she was the one who had chosen him and who had wanted to seduce him. He had been the blessed victim of similar conquests before. But he had never found himself in a position of being totally subservient in a relationship. It typically involved Roman feminists more formally mannerist in their aggressiveness than truly opposing and dominant. Sally, reserved and feminine to the extent of flirtatiousness, had immediately shown herself to be indomitable and unshakably free. Her amorous entrepreneurship was founded on a true culture of independent autonomy. It was certainly not by accident that for nearly a thousand years, no foreigner bearing arms had been able to humiliate the pride of Albion. It was the first time that Carlo experienced a relationship without easily determining its course. The roles were also somewhat reversed. He was the one waiting for a gesture on the part of Sally. What is more, contrary to her, he hated voice mail. He would never have turned it on and to avoid the unpleasant complication of leaving a message, he avoided calling her at home. He preferred to call her at the office, which

was less private and more pathetic. In this way he could always allow her to have the receptionist tell him that she was in a meeting.

He greedily drank the rest of the coffee, which, in the meantime, had become too tepid. He had never understood why, at times, he liked coffee so much, and at others, he could not even bear its odor. He had found himself, in his unthought thoughts, back listening to the exiled albeit still Italian pianist who, after the 111 sonata, nobly played Scarlatti with the usual lightness.

Then it was the turn of the Arrau CD. Carlo had been privileged to attend one of his concerts at the Brussels *Beaux Arts* before his death. He was one of the last giants who had masterly skimmed over at least three generations of great concert pianists, from Chile to Berlin and New York. Carlo had also come especially from Rome to listen to his 110 sonata, as he had been invited to Brussels by a pianist friend who had been his pupil, an Italian born in Buenos Aires. When you saw them hugging, master and former pupil in his forties, and you heard them tripping over their tongue uttering a few very emotional sentences in Spanish, you felt as if you were watching one of the last tokens of an educational and artistic relationship permanently on the endangered species list.

Reluctantly, Carlo went back to correcting the last pages remaining for that afternoon. And he found himself thinking of Sally again. Where was she and who was she with? Why was she not there with him?

The subdued chatter in the restaurant had immediately given Sally a feeling of pursued comfort, the warmth of culture in its most characteristic moment, that of conviviality. The desire for fulfillment, enjoyment, brilliant and cheerful conversation was in the air.

From when she had arrived in Brussels two years earlier, Sally had hung out at the *Taverne du Passage* even by herself. It was the only restaurant in which she did not feel alone. In the heart of the historic center, at the bottom of the most beautiful and busy gallery, the restaurant was always very crowded but never full, for two reasons that immediately appealed to her, i.e., its large size and this central table with some 40 places in which anyone could take a seat next to or opposite strangers. This must have

been the style of the cheerful popular bourgeoisie of the upper-middle class between the two wars, the ambience of a Paris bistro, with excellent cuisine and generous portions. The quintessence of the Brussels *good life* made up of eloquence, measured style but not tedious and of comforting immanence. Sally often enjoyed her favorite dish there, the waterzooi, a soup intended for Flemish farmers made of vegetables, chicken and cream with boiled potatoes, served in a copper pot. A truly unique dish to serenely face the grayness of the dreary evenings in the *Flat Country**.

She was the one to convince her friends to meet in this restaurant for the evening. Without actually being aware of it, she had brought them to this temple of convivial individualism with its trustworthy savor, far from the kitsch petty bourgeoisie of the small pretentious or tourist restaurants. She has therefore brought them to the table most representative of her conception of life.

“Congratulations, Sally, I myself did not know this place that is so typical, authentically typical,” said Erik, a translator and editor of proofs, welcoming her to the table among her other three colleagues.

“It is always a foreigner who ends up showing you, the Flemings of Brussels, the pearls in your city,” shouted the catty Odile, an Erasmus intern from the University of Nancy.

They spoke English as they usually did at the office. Anke, the German journalist in the group, nearly without accent due to her American father, an Air Force colonel in Berlin.

Geneviève, the other Francophone translator, had been Sally’s fellow student. They had graduated in Cologne to subsequently be hired together by the press agency in her native Brussels.

At neighboring tables French and Dutch was spoken whilst two waiters passed on the orders in Spanish.

“This is Brussels’ major feature, the cosmopolitanism of a population that is exceptionally multilingual. Four people out of ten are foreigners and of the six remaining ones two are Flemish,” stated Geneviève as if to statistically explain their group situation.

*reference to Jacques Brel’s “Plat Pays”, translator’s note.

“Well then, you Belgians must feel a little bit like strangers in your own home. In Berlin, although it is a metropolis, we Germans do not have this feeling.”

“But ours is the country of surrealism, it is a futuristic non-country and, above all, a prototype for cities that will become increasingly multicultural in the future,” continued Erik, obviously proud of presenting his Brussels in its most interesting light.

“Why is it, then, given that you are so intelligent – an ironic Odile interrupted again – they call you the *petits Belges* (*little Belgians*)?”

Sally felt obliged to step in to defend poor Erik who even in the restaurant was being put through the mill by the French student’s too-explicit, corrosive statements.

“It is a known fact that border populations are more intelligent than those who live far from any contact with other languages and cultures. You French are simply envious of the Belgians. And furthermore, I can assure you, you are more incestuous – culturally, of course – than even us English.”

“But if we are the host country par excellence!”

“That is what I have always envied in France and in Paris. Once my Berlin was the cultural capital of Europe.”

“Yes, before you felt like all going on vacation abroad with helmets and tanks,” answered Geneviève amid general laughter.

The conversation was continued at *La Brouette*, one of the meeting places on the Grand’ Place where they had moved for coffee and liqueur. Anke, the group’s intellectual, noted how this could be considered the only major square in which there is no religious reference, the town hall in its flamboyant gothic style, with opposite the splendid *Maison du Roi** and next to it – on four sides – all the guild houses, a true tribute to sovereign civil society and secularity.

“Even you French have acknowledged that this is the most beautiful town hall ever built,” Erik continued sarcastically turning to Odile. Their clash, too sharp not to be vaguely amorous, continued into the next 18th century style café in which they had settled.

* King’s house, translator’s note.

The short stroll had revived them all, but already each one of them prepared to return by themselves at the end of the evening. Sally knew it. She had noticed it in Geneviève and Anke. In spite of everything, they had never left their solitude. Cultured, polyglots and financially secure, as so many of their peers, they did not know how to use, or rather they did not manage to use all of their freedom. Evidently, their life was existentially poor compared to the cultural, professional and cosmopolitan riches of their activities and their conditions. Sally too would have been in their position of lonely romantic uselessness had she not decided, years ago, to unscrupulously use her charm and youth. She abhorred the thought of ending up as so many of her friends had in a solipsism without freedom from danger. How many, even if brilliant and successful on the job, faded and hardened due to an unconfessable lack of intimate relations. She always heard them ask what happened to the men and she observed their beauty still looked after and cultivated, but never shining with pleasure and passion. Perfect, attractive, but not fit for human consumption: lacking greediness, they ended up not being appetising. But Sally understood them. On the other hand, she had not really solved the problems, the same ones she had in common with their existential confusion: they were, in any case, of the same generation. Just like them, Sally sought female friendship knowing full well that even in the most harmonious sisterhood it always remains temporary and limited. She believed more in the inevitably eternal and unlimited woman. Despite the fact that she was aware that the vertical consistency of the male/female relationship and the even more vertiginous one of the mother/child relationship was inevitably stronger than any horizontal female/female relationship, Sally intensely cultivated the ties with her girlfriends. On the contrary, knowing how fragile they are, she took special care of them. She had never broken off with a girlfriend. Since she was a child she had always been the kindest in her class. And in boarding school, for that very reason, she ended up being the designated victim for other students in the usual and delicious teenage wickedness. She only managed to balance the handicap with the admiration of men who thought of her – in spite of herself – as a model for her classmates.

In the end, the fact that she did not like herself esthetically ended up reassuring her even of the conditioned good nature of her girlfriends. In turn undermined by the fickleness and the ephemeral nature of female sympathies, they had to at least acknowledge that she did not feed the oh-so hated vanity.

Sally looked at them laughing. While they contributed their wit, personality, humor. They were, like herself, bright and sharp. But she felt them to be as she was and even more so, restless and unsatisfied. Not that she thought of impossible and childish happiness. *Infelix felicitas*, her charming French professor had explained to her in one of his numerous philological and philosophical digressions.

Ah, if only she had known what they were missing out on!

But, looking at Erik who continued to childishly skirmish with the student despite the fact that he was about to turn thirty, she felt that perhaps the crux of their inconsistency lay exactly in the inconvenience of his behavior. From the four young women, he had chosen to respond to the girl's skittish cajolery. And he was not even aware, the fool, that they were very autoerotic or, at the most, destined to annoy the three older *sisters*. There it is, the inadequacy of men, their inability to connect to female complexity and equality. Perhaps this was the major factor in their angst.

Thinking, however, of the abrupt way in which she had dumped Carlo barely a few hours ago, she wondered to what extent it was not the very women, of her generation, who induce the regression into childhood in men.

Not that she didn't know fulfilled and happy young couples. But she almost always had to observe their limited vitality dimension or a mediocre, if not downright insignificant existential condition. In order not be considered snooty, she would never have dared to confide in anyone what to her was a simple observation. Sally greatly distrusted egalitarian ideology and the oh-so-heightened propensity to maximize problems. And she feared being judged as portentous.

It is a fact that everywhere she observed a multitude of sleeping beauties in their loneliness and lots of stupidly croaking toads. Where to find the knight in shining armor able to awaken with their loving breath the lost eyes of modern maidens? And, at the same time, how to convince post-modern princesses to courageously kiss the repellent croaking toads to transform them into brave and worthy knights?

To Sally, it now seemed that these questions were all implied in Carlo's glance from which she had also almost fled this afternoon.

"A telephone, yes, a telephone. Excuse me, I need a telephone." Sally surprised everyone to the point that they all became concerned with the sudden rhetorical request. She had in fact already gotten up and had run to the phone on the ground floor.

"Hello, Carlo? I need to see you."

And almost without listening to the answer, she continued: "Right now, I'm downtown, just give me time to get there."

"I apologize again, but I have to go. Nothing serious. I'm sorry. Thanks for the evening. You are essential to me. See you on Monday."

And before you know it she had already walked down the wooden staircase in her red raincoat with which they had seen her arrive.

Erik, unable to resist, wanted to break the dumbfounded silence: "Always the same story. She comes and goes and you never know where and from where..." Anke didn't let him finish: "There is more meaning in a single one of Sally's gestures than in all your poppycock in one evening." Her tone did not leave room for an answer and she had already gotten up with her bag in her hand.

Just as fast Odile concluded with a decisive and perfectly calibrated phrase:

"Geneviève, I'm coming too. Take us in your car. It's late."

Geneviève, who had not said anything, was immediately thankful to the intern for having associated her so authoritatively with Sally's and Anke's departure. And she too got up with her two girlfriends.

The sequence was so rapid that Erik did not even have time to feel offended. For that matter, he didn't realize that it was at his expense that the four women united like never before in a unit whose nature he could not even suspect. He did not even understand when he found himself alone to pay the bill to the waiter.

"Perfect, Odile, that was really cool to turn to Geneviève to leave together, the three of us," exploded Anke while they got into the car.

After having taken them home, Geneviève could only commend this fine female accomplishment. First with Anke. That set him straight, that jerk Erik. And also with Odile. It is true that she had been teasing the Flemish lounge lizard the entire evening, but what alertness! She had redeemed herself brilliantly, very much so. A sign that she was not all that stupid. Here, this was the kind of vital intelligence she always had wanted to have: Sally's courageous intuition, Anke's perceptive synthesis and Odile's witty speed. Oh, how she would have wanted to be the one to have determined what had happened! She had always felt praised for her common sense, for her balance. They were qualities she could also have done without as a woman. Her diligence, the predestined and orderly precision of her actions had never taken her to get on in life. All things considered, she lived just coasting along, in a golden mean of which she did not perceive the truly precious aspect. As to Sally – she had understood immediately – it had to involve a man. She would know soon.

It was Odile who was on Anke's mind while she was getting ready for bed. At 27 she had noticed that women often only love men who are loved by others. The quality of the young French girl consisted in not having chosen a partner not appreciated by the other three women. Even her impertinence could then be forgiven: under 20 you still have the right to be a bit of a brat.

As to Erik, she would have won him back on Monday at the office feigning to apologize and talking to him a little more about the quality of his translation correction and editing work. Nothing is more elementary and simple than male vanity.

Even the forest crossing at Tervueren's *Quatre Bras* was lit. Belgium is the world's best-lit country. The entire highway network was updated with powerful lights. Despite this fact, road mortality remains among the highest on the continent. The densest road network in the world, in the middle of the night, represented a blinding spectacle of foolishness of ten million sleeping people with the lights on. In addition, in 1993, the results of a survey showed that the Belgians distinguished themselves in Europe as sleeping the most. To do so, they are up to the hilt in debt, even more so than in Italy: more than 26,000 euros per sleeper and more than 130% of GDP. Nearly

one year and a half of all the earnings of the entire *Kingdom* already swallowed up by the voraciousness of the insatiable State. The annual interest just to reimburse it costs taxpayers nearly 30% of their taxes: much more than what was allocated for health care, unemployment and social security! It would have taken more than 30 years of morning wake-ups for the active ones – barely one third of the population – to be able to reimburse the continuously recurring notes of public debt. At least two further generations would have to pay for the unprecedented luxuries of the “enlightened” sleepers. Sally thought that if the Belgian State – still assuming to be rich – had ruined itself, other European States would not have wanted to do any less. Not even her falsely liberal Great Britain.

Her father, a heating installation technician, had always taught her – with particular caution – that one should never spend more than 90% of one’s earnings. This mere principle made him a conservative. To him, the rest was politicians’ chitchat in which he was only interested for the ensuing bill to pay.

He was as he was for his profession: “People – he said – waste too much money on heating. They needlessly heat up Wales.”

After work, at home, he could say so without fear of being contradicted by his own customers.

Sally, although she considered him to be a little too prudent and timid financially, respected him. The 10% piggy bank (or the heating that is too high) had stayed with her as a golden rule that could be applied under any circumstances in spite of everything. Save exceptions, of course. Albeit limited, the father also liked excesses. He considered them essential, especially since they are few and far between.

Sally had arrived at this last consideration thinking that the long evening started the night for her in the sign of exception, generosity and excess. She had let herself be distracted by lanterns, public debt and the unreasonable sleeping habits of Europeans almost in order to compose herself. In reality she was excited. She was going to an appointment with palpitations. She felt that something new had to happen. As a matter of fact it had already happened, within her. She needed Carlo and she had just told him so. She wanted him to see her, to look at her. She no longer feared him. She wanted him. Alright, she wanted to be wanted.

In the middle of the night, they were hungry. Sally had not uttered a word. Carlo, however, had understood her. Still drunk with kisses, they had ended up in the kitchen. After having refreshed themselves, Carlo uttered the first syntactically intelligible sentences.

“Listen, I have a story to tell you. Put on my robe, it’s chilly.”

They sat down together on the sofa in the study.

“Listen, it’s Maria Callas. Singing Liù. Liù was the slave who was hopelessly in love with a prince whose father had been ousted. That is why the young man went in search of fortune. He ended up introducing himself as a suitor for the hand of a princess who had devised a horrible scheme to select her suitors. She submitted three riddles to them and only he who was able to solve them in one night would become her spouse. Whoever even got a single one wrong, however, would be decapitated. Despite the horror and the requests for mercy on the part of the population, executions followed each other. Turandot, the beautiful princess acquired a reputation for being bloodthirsty. But Prince Calaf, managed to solve all three riddles. And do you know what happened? Turandot resisted.”

“What do you mean? She didn’t abide by the agreement?”

“Not really, the author of the theatrical fable, although in the mid-18th century, had an extraordinarily modern intuition. Listen. This is still Maria Callas interpreting Turandot when she sings *In questa reggia*: Puccini knew a lot about the female spirit.”

Maria Callas’ cavernous voice made her shiver. She didn’t understand everything, but no song had ever affected her this deeply. The human aspect, too human, of her strong and velvety-smooth voice moved her beyond any possibility. And then, she started to understand why Carlo was telling her this allusive story.

She saw all the bloody heads of the men who had also hoped to be crowned by her. For many she did not feel at all sorry: they were stupid, they had not even understood that they had to solve the enigma of her life. Ignorant of her solitude, they offended the mystery of her existence. Other heads, also severed, appeared to her full of

goodwill but unable to explain, to unravel the secret of her problems. She felt compassion, she felt to have been their loved one in a way but, like Calaf to Liù, she had to attend their unavoidable death.

And then there were the heads, a number of them, which she had not been able to answer. They had all sung *Tu che di gel sei cinta* *, as Callas was now doing passionately, in the role of Liù, to the cruel but undecided Callas-Turandot.

Vis-à-vis them, she felt guilty. In them she saw the cold that encircled her, the frigidity of her *noli me tangere*, of her *do not touch me* in actual fact. In them she measured the sterile arrogance of her unlimited sense of self.

Carlo stroke her hair and holding her close, he continued: “Whilst very interested in the brilliant and intelligent young man who had known how to penetrate the enigmatic labyrinths of her questions, Turandot did not surrender. She unleashed her ministers to test the nature and personality of the talented suitor. She had the justification if not actually the right, given that she was to become his wife. She offered him his life, money and beautiful slaves. And when she learned he had refused, she was secretly happy. She was dealing with a man, a real man.”

“Then she allowed herself to be married?”

“But he didn’t only want her to allow herself to be married. He also wanted her to marry him. And for that to happen, he chose to put his head on the line again. He wanted to become king, but he was not a common fortune hunter or a suitor to a marriage of petty bourgeois values.”

“Then what happened?” Sally was not aware that she had become an innocent little girl curled up in Carlo’s arms.

“And then, like a true man in love, he told her that she could again have his head if only she was able to discover his name...”

“His name? For so little?”

“If you think about it, no. He could see that she was gorgeous. That she was intelligent and cultured he had noted when he solved her complex riddles. He had deduced that she had character and a profound sense of life from the determination with which she had these heads severed, which were moreover already lost in their

* *You who are encircled in ice*, translator’s note.

unrelenting and tragic challenge. That she, in addition, had an superior sense of love he had understood from her extreme refusal to commercialize her married life offering the reward (the money and the slaves) to him. The prince was also anxious to be loved for himself, all of him. To him it was not enough to be married thanks to his skills in solving erudite riddles. Or for his courage to challenge the executioner. He wanted to be known and acknowledged for his full identity. That was the meaning of the discovery of his name.”

“But why did he put his life on the line?”

“And yet it’s simple, Sally, in order to truly give her the opportunity to choose him and therefore to love him. After all, his life without her would have been the squalid survival of his failure. Therefore his was a supreme gesture of love. In fact, Turandot will not discover his name, but she will discover much more, the essential part thanks to which the prince’s head will also be saved. The opera closes in this way, with the word Love.”

Sally had already understood in the restaurant, that the only things that are discovered are those that are already understood.

In the meantime Puccini’s melody was substituted, or rather superimposed, by that of Schubert’s “Death and the maiden” from that afternoon. The maiden was still winning, but paradoxically, only after having accepted to die, to have her splendid and drawn out adolescence killed.

Just like Turandot.

From the same author:

“Traduction, adaptation & editing multilingue”
with J. Permentiers and E. Springael,
TCG Edition, Brussels, 1994,
translated into five languages
(EN, DE, IT, SP and NL)

“Destra, sinistra o centro? Sopra”,
TCG Editions Brussels, 1994
(in Italian)

“Traduttori, Tre racconti”,
two editions in Italian,
TCG Edizioni, Milan, 1994 and 1996.

“Jérôme”
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30th Anniversary of the Eurologos Group

Glocal is a collection of three stories published in six languages to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of Eurologos. The trilogy of narratives allows us to travel through the cultural, existential, and professional realities of the offices in this group, located on four continents and centered on the Head Office in Brussels. The author, Eurologos founder and CEO, Franco Troiano (b. 1944), wrote the collection's last two stories in Italian (1994) and composed the first one in French (2006).

The publication of these stories was necessarily multilingual, serving as an emblem of the group's activities in translation, localization and globalization. But, above all, this work aims to portray the global context experienced by Eurologos employees and managers: that is, the human complexity of the company's identity, which could never be transmitted through marketing communications alone.