

18% GRAY
by Zachary Karabashliev

translated from the Bulgarian by Zachary Karabashliev;
edited by Maya Sloan

For man does not know his time. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, and like birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

Ecclesiastes 9:12

She's been gone nine mornings.

The blinds in the bedroom are pulled shut, but the day still finds a way to penetrate with a roar – the garbage truck. That means it's Wednesday. That means it's eight-fifteen. Is there a noisier noise than the noise of a garbage truck at eight-fifteen?

I crawl out of bed, move to the living room, and crash on the couch. The cool leather doesn't help me fall back asleep, and the garbage truck rumbles closer. I get up, push aside one of the blinds, and a bright ray burns my face. I collect my powers and attempt to dismember the roaring green monster with a gaze. The effort only wakes me further.

I look at the flowers in the vase on the coffee table. Dead freesias in murky water, she left behind.

I open a kitchen drawer and, from the stash of candy, pull out a Toblerone. I pick up yesterday's white shirt from the floor and plug in the iron. With one hand I iron, with the other I break off triangles and gobble them down. I put on the shirt, a blue tie; I make

instant coffee, drip some on my sleeve while I fumble for the car keys, throw on a gray coat, and slam the door shut.

Another scorching Southern California day. I turn on the Corolla. I make a right onto Jefferson and get on the highway. Five lanes of cars in one direction and five lanes in the other. Exhausts roar, engines tremble, fenders shine – as if preparing for battle.

At the morning meeting, Scott the manager announces the latest structural changes in the department and showcases data concerning the new clinical trial. There are doughnuts on the table.

“...to monitor the progress of this clinical investigation...” Glazed, powdered, sprinkled...

“...since we are still in phase one of production...” Chocolate frosting, red frosting, pink frosting...

“...and how much attention should be given to each activity...” I stir milk in my coffee. I can't stop talking to her in my head—this somehow won't stop simply because one of us is not there.

“...strict adherence to the procedures by the treating physicians.”

Stella. I have to stop thinking about her. I will *not* think about her. I *will* not think about her. I will do yoga, open my charkas, recite mantras, repeat *Aum*, eat rice with my hands, grow a beard, will do headstands. *Au-m-m-m-m*. I will not think about her. *Au-m-m-m-m* tired of thinking about Stella.

Scott finishes. He hands out personal agendas for the upcoming quarter – this liveliness in his eyes, this liveliness. He shakes our hands the way only short people do –

but mine, he holds longer. Then everyone heads to their cubicles while Scott gestures for me to follow him into his dark gray office down the hallway. Office minimalism—a desk, a computer, a personal coffee maker, and a water cooler underneath a poster of a long row boat (kayak? canoe?) propelled by a row of rowers. Below the picture – *Teamwork*. Scott is talking to me with a concerned voice. He is looking at me with *that* look. I don't hear what he is saying; I just nod and I want to puke. *That* look. I don't remember how the rest of the day goes. Horrible, I imagine.

On the way back from work, during rush hour at the traffic light on 11th and Broadway, the stream of cars slows down. Somewhere ahead, I notice light reflective vests holding stop signs and redirecting the traffic. I see the fallen white corpse of a semi rolled on its side in the middle of the road. It's hot. I try to change lanes at the last second and cleverly take Cedar Street, but I don't make it—the douche on my right is not letting me. Fine, I'll sit in traffic like everyone else then. I look to the left: a guy around fifty, crow's feet, dry California tan, picks his nose and follows a small plane in the sky flying a giant red air banner. I also try to see what is written in the sky behind the aircraft and catch myself picking my nose, too. I look at the plane overhead, I look at the man. His left elbow – resting in the rolled down window, his right index finger – in his nose, his hair – gray. That's how I'm going to look in about twenty years.

A honking from behind startles me and I press the clutch pedal to shift to first. It suddenly sinks. I press it harder, I push and pull the stick to shift into gear, but the stick doesn't move. I watch the gray-haired man pull away. The light is still green, but it won't be this green forever. I start shoving the stick harder (damn – yellow), I hear the honking

grow more impatient behind me. Intolerably hot day (it's red now) and longer than any other (scarlet red). I feel how the anger of those accountants, lawyers, software engineers, waiters, real estate agents, and the entire work force on this street focuses on my tiny tan car. Had there been someone to coordinate their thoughts they would have thrown me down by the docks where the bums hang out. Where I belong.

I start scouting the dashboard for the red triangular button; I have no idea where it is. Behind me, more and more of the morons, safe in their anonymous vehicles, start honking. I only see their expressionless faces in the rearview mirror, but I know that a little bit lower, down where I can't see, they are pressing car horns. I'm sweating. Can't they see that I'm stuck, that I'm miserable? The more intelligent ones signal left and pass my motionless vehicle. The rest refuse to accept my misfortune. I start sweating abundantly and it smells like French onion soup. If they continue getting on my nerves, I'll get out of my car, spread my arms like the statue over Rio, and blow them away with the stench. I'll blow them away! They'll be jumping out of their cars in a panic, hands clamped over mouths and noses, and running frantically as if in a Godzilla movie. Finally, at the corner of 11th and Broadway, there'll be only me and countless abandoned vehicles with open, beeping doors. They'll peep-peep-peep-peep like chickens. Peep-peep-peep-peep. And I will stride down the street like a conqueror and laugh a loud, ominous laugh.

I finally find the hazard light button; I push it and jump out, half suffocated by my own smell. The air is hot and dry. I make apologetic gestures to those behind me, my shirt soaking with sweat. I loosen my tie, grin guiltily, and shrug (it could happen to

anyone), while in my mind I mercilessly rape to death every single loved one of those fucking slimeballs that now avoid making eye contact with me.

I use a public phone to call a tow company.

Half an hour later a tow truck rumbles up and a guy with a Vietnamese face jumps down. He'll be towing my car to the body shop. He wants 80 bucks. I ask him who to make the check out to.

He shakes his head, "Cass, cass!"

"Cass?" I say. "I don't have any *cass*." I write a check for 80 dollars and hand it to him.

"No!" The Vietnamese repeats. "Cass, cass!"

"Cass, my ass!" I say.

"Huh?" He frowns, he doesn't get it. Well, I don't get why Stella's gone either.

"I don't have any cash." I say. "No credit card too." The Vietnamese and I negotiate, he decides to accept the check, but now he wants more money. I write a check for hundred and twenty dollars. To whom should I make it?

"Howah." He says.

"Howah?"

"Howah."

"Oh, Howard? Okay Howard." Look at them Asians and the noble names they appropriate! I've yet to see one named Bill or Bob. I write "*Howard Stern*" and hand him the check.

"No! No!" He screams "no Howard Stern!", and rips the check. "Howah!"

"Howard what!?" I snap.

He grabs the checkbook and writes the name himself, *Hau Ua*.

"Oh!" I pat him on the shoulder. "I know lots of Vietnamese guys, Hau. Good people." Hau stares at me with no expression. "Good people!" I say. "The Vietnamese."

"I from Lao." Says Hau, gives me a mean look, and turns his back on me. Now they'll skin me at the garage. Let them. Fuck it.

I spot a taxi and wave.

It's quiet and dark in our house now. I water the plants in the back yard – it's not their fault, she's gone. The neighbors' orange cat shows up. "Do you miss Stella?" I ask. He meows, which means, of course he does. Stella used to buy him canned food. She insisted that ocean white fish was his favorite. I find some of it under the sink and open one. I take it out and put it under the easel where her last abandoned painting sits. A sheet spattered with blue paint covers it. For couple of minutes I watch the cat eat. I gave Stella this easel five years ago as a Christmas present. I lift one corner of the sheet and look at the canvas. I can't understand it. This is the only painting of hers in this house – the rest are either in her studio or in storage – and it's unfinished. Why don't I throw it in the garbage?

I'm hungry. I turn around and accidentally knock over one of the jars with undried paint and brushes sticking out. It rolls through the grass, leaving a trail of disgusting muddy grayish paint. I kick the jar in anger and it bursts into pieces.

The only things left in the fridge are some spoiled vegetables from before she left, and some beer, which I stashed after. Lately, my life has been divided into *before* and *after* she left. There are nine days of loneliness in the latter half. Loneliness I feel the

strongest at dusk. The world sighs with relief after a workday, and I choke up with her absence. Alone like a Sasquatch, I wander through my thoughts, and there's no shelter, there's absolutely none.

"You need to be alone. And decide what to do with your life." I can hear her words in the room now. I didn't say a thing then. I watched CNN and didn't say one thing. What was on the news then?

I find half a dry baguette in the breadbox. I take out a can with a colorful sombrero and an "El Cowboy" label and pour its contents into a small pot to heat it up. I stir it from time to time. The smell of beans with Mexican spices fills the room. She doesn't like beans. She doesn't like Mexican spices either. I go pick something to listen to. While I sift through CD's and LP's, I hear a "puf-f-f-f"—the beans are boiling over and spilling onto the burner. I get up, and start sponging away the mess before it's dried up. Suddenly, my wrist sticks to the hot pot. The sizzling sound, the smell of burnt flesh, the pain. God, my hand, God, fuck my stupid hand! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck! Fuck? All of a sudden, the idea of porn doesn't seem as pathetic as it has for the last week and a half. I will reward myself with a calm hand job after my spicy bean dinner.

I put a tablecloth on the table. I arrange the silverware over a linen napkin. I take out a jar of hot chilly pepers and place it properly on the table. I light a candle. I serve the bowl of beans in the middle and position two beers next to it. I take the remote and turn on the stereo.

"Aria of Salome" from the opera *Herodiade*. I pump up the volume, as I'd never done when she was here. I drop pieces of the dry baguette in the bowl, stir, and slurp the

hot chunks, turning them in my mouth. Beans are an experience. You have to devour them hot and spicy, otherwise it's nothing.

The first part of the aria lasts five minutes and nine seconds. Two minutes in, I see the bottom of my bowl and spend the next three listening with my eyes closed. The telephone rings right at the last note. I don't pick up. I haven't picked up the phone since Stella left.

Leave a message!

"Zack, are you there?" It's the annoying voice of a Tony, who's been calling me three times a day lately.

"I've been calling you three times a day. Where are you, Zack? We need to talk, man. Pick up the phone. Zack?!"

Thirty-three messages blink on the machine. Not one from her. I look around. Every single thing in this house is in its place because she put it there. Every square inch bears her fingerprints. And I try to get used to the fact that she's gone.

The porn is lame, pink bodies moving on the screen for a while, and then everything finishes in a napkin.

I get ready for bed. I brush my teeth meticulously and wash my face. I turn the lights off everywhere. I lie down at the right side of the bed. The left side – her side – feels like a wound. I'm suffocating with sadness. I stare at the dark ceiling for a long time, then roll over to where she slept until nine nights ago. I crumple into a six-foot long embryo and press my heart with the weight of my body. The heart is like the neighbors' cat – it doesn't get it. It doesn't understand that she's gone. The heart is an animal.

+

1988, Bulgaria

Stella.

I met her in Varna – the Black Sea town where I was stationed – just before I was discharged from the military. I had the day off, it was late May, blooming linden everywhere. I had read in the newspaper that, ancient ruins were discovered during construction of a mega-department store. Excavations followed to reveal the remains of a Roman arena, and a third of the central part of the town had turned into an archeological site. It was worth checking out, I thought.

It wasn't. It was a big hole in the city filled with bored students brushing stone. It was either my hideous buzz cut or my starving stare, still not sure what, but the local girls would move out of the way to the opposite side of the street. I was tired of wandering around, when I decided to grab a bite to eat. I walked in a pastry shop and I saw her. Her lips? No. First her eyes, then her lips. Then her breasts – her round full breasts stretching the uniform blouse. Then the curl of light brown hair falling down to the dimple of her cheek. And then the dread came that whatever I'd do was useless. She was the most beautiful girl in this town – there was no way she didn't belong to some lucky bastard counting the minutes to the end of the work day. Miracles don't happen, I decided, and walked out.

+

Something punches my stomach and my insides fold up into a small, hard ball. I sit up in bed and stare into the silvery threads of darkness. I listen. Someone in the house? I hold my breath and try to figure out if there's someone in the living room. I swear there is someone. THERE IS someone. I can hear the blinds move. I get up cautiously. I reach for the bedside lamp, unplug the wire, roll it up and grab it by its metal stand. Then I realize I am naked. I can't just burst out of the bedroom and start chasing criminals as if in a Swedish flick. In the dark, I manage to make out the three white lines of my running pants. I put them on very carefully, without dropping the lamp stand, and move toward the door. I press my ear to it, struggling to make out a sound.

I hear the ticking of the clock. I hear the hum of the fridge. I hear the blood in my head like a distant freeway. I also hear another, barely perceptible noise.

I take a deep breath, burst through the door and leap into the living room with a scream.

No one. Then something on the patio clanks, and I fly in that direction. A raccoon, paw stuck in the cat food can, frantically scrambles to climb over the fence outside. I lower my improvised weapon and start laughing.

You felt like eating some cat food, huh, fatso? I kind of want to try helping him push his chubby butt up but I know that I'll scare him even more. The can slips off his leg and rolls under a chair. The raccoon manages to go over the fence. Then he stops for a second and throws one last glance at me. "Hey," I yell. "You know you look like a bandit with that funny black mask on your eyes. You scared the shit out of me, Zorro! Now go away! Go!"

I doubt I could go back to sleep after this. I stay on the patio for a while. The canyon beneath the house rustles. The palm tree in the back yard is bending. There is a wind. One of those winds that slide down from the cold mountains in the fall, whoosh through the sizzling hot desert, and, within days, dry up everything on their way to the Pacific. One of those sick, dry winds named after a saint.* (*footnote – Santa Ana wind)

I put a jacket over my shoulders and leave the house. I turn left at the traffic light, then right – I don't know where I'm going, I don't care. I come to my senses somewhere near the freeway, walking in one of those newly built neighborhoods with artificial lakes and cute tiny waterfalls, powered petite streams and little bridges decorated with street gas lamps *Made in China*. I walk the winding trail along the houses, trying to peek into other people's windows where I can. In some, through the blinds, I see bluish light flickering, framed family pictures on the walls, posters of movie stars in children's rooms, pianos with the lids down, unlit candle holders, a calendar of Manhattan in sepia, a Thomas Kincaid print.

The normality of this night insults me.

Soon they will all turn their TV's off, brush their teeth and fall asleep, then it will be dawn again, and a new day will come as if nothing ever happened, and that insults me. People will go to work at places like General Electric or AT&T; there will be truck drivers, florists, accountants, postal office workers, and receptionists, and that insults me. There are words like shingle, nugget, waffle, halibut, persnickety, boodle, dungarees, and that insults me. Tomorrow the sky over the neighborhood will be the same, as it was while Stella was here, the craters on the moon will be the same, the amount of salt in the

ocean – the same, the octane number of gasoline – the same, the calories in a Pepsi – the same. Some things just stay the same. It's insulting.

+

- look at me
- i'm thirsty
- look in the camera
- i'm cold
- please
- i need coffee...
- we're almost done
- ...i want to get dressed already...
- here... the last roll of film and I'll leave you alone
- the last one?
- yes, the very last one

+

I walk back to the house, find my passport, stick it in the jacket's inside pocket, grab the car keys for the new Mercedes I surprised her with for her last birthday, and enter the garage. I push the unlock button on the remote, the car lights flash softly. Before I turn on the ignition, I close my eyes and lean my head back. The interior of the car, unaired since

she left, still smells of her. I exhale loudly and start the car. The garage door lifts and I speed away, tires screeching in the night. I roll down all the windows to air out her presence. The cold canyon chill blasts in. At the ramp of I-5, I stop at the light. West Hollywood is an hour north. I know someone there. Tijuana is an hour south. I have no reason to go to Tijuana. In a moment the light will turn green.

It does and I press hard on the gas pedal.

+

Miracles don't happen, I repeated in my head as I was walking away. She was a beautiful blue-eyed girl with big, round breasts and smart face who would never pay attention to a buzzcut boy in a uniform. I hadn't been close to a girl for two years. Before I got drafted, I thought I was always fun to be around and had lots of friends and all, but I had no idea how to act around girls, and it seemed I'd never learn. I'd always try hard to come up with something clever and hilarious to say, but I would always end up going home alone while my boring friends made out with the girls under the linden trees. I was a tool, such a tool.

I was striding down toward the beaches, beating myself up, and I knew, mercilessly, clearly, I knew that I had seen and felt something different this time. Sure, I had the same major hard-on as I always did when I'd feed a pretty girl through my inflamed imagination, but this time there was something more. My thinking – as ridiculous as this might sound for a boy in a military uniform – my thinking had a major hard-on this time; my intellect was aroused.

I walked into the city park, called 'The Sea Garden', wandered around the cool alleys for a while, until I reached a row of benches overlooking the bay and scattered with old people. I found a vacant one and sat. The view was nice – the sea, the sky, the horizon. North was to my left, the old Gala Lighthouse to my right, Varna Bay in front of me, and the love of my life – in a small pastry shop just a few blocks away.

I took a deep breath, got up, and walked back toward her.

+

There's plenty of space in a small lot not far from the pedestrian crossing. I make the quarter-mile walk passing by a still-open McDonald's, the last joint on the American side.

I cross into the Third World on foot. Cab drivers eat sunflower seeds, and stare at the few passersby at this hour.

“Hola,” I say.

“Hola,” says the one in the front of the line. I get in. He asks where I'm going, Avenida Revolución? Every dickhead goes to Avenida Revolución, I know.

“Avenida Revolución,” I say.

The car radio plays Mexican rap backed up by an accordion. A gilded Jesus glued to a plastic crucifix and a pine tree air freshener swing from the rearview mirror.

The intersection of Avenida Revolución and Paseo de los Héroes blares music, smells of street grill, stares at me with the hungry eyes of every vendor that has ever had something for sale.

A mariachi band plays sloppily tuned guitars and sings their heads off. No one pays attention. Under a street lamp, a scrawny dog stretches a piece of chewing gum from the pavement. A guy dressed as Spiderman hangs by a rope from the roof of a nightclub called *Spiderman*. A donkey painted with black and white stripes pulls a Tijuana-themed cart, a hand-painted sign: *Foto con Zebra \$5! Viva Mexico!* Tijuana pulsates through every aorta – that’s why I’m here.

I go into the first bar I see. Thank God the bartender speaks English. I tell him I want a Vodka martini.

“Si, Señor.”

“You got olives?”

“Si, Señor.”

“Can you make a dirty martini?”

“Si, Señor.”

Three martinis later *Señor* finally looks around. If I had earlier, I probably would have left. It’s dirty, dark, and smells like a dump. A TV set on a wooden box in the corner plays the never-ending Mexican soccer game. A few customers in cowboy hats watch the wooden box and drink out of green bottles. Every commercial break the hats turn to look at me. I pay and get out.

Tijuana embraces me, pulling me to her sweaty bosom.

I dive into another bar. This time I look around. A TV set on a wooden box in the corner plays the same soccer game. The commercial begins, the hats turn toward me. I order.

On my way out, the stairs seem funnier.

Outside is the throbbing Tijuana night. I need *panocha* now. *Panocha!* A fat tattooed neck pulls me up fluorescent stairs. A whorehouse? No. A nightclub. The speakers slam Latin-Electro, the lights shifting with every beat. There are girls everywhere. A waitress shoves her huge tits under my drunken head. *What do I want to drink?*

“Martini,” I yell.

She brings me a margarita. I’ll drink margarita then. The crowd dances – American soldiers, Mexican homos, bleached blond whores, and losers like me.

An hour later I realize my biggest mistake of the night—*margarita*. In the bathroom an old man with a bowtie and pencil mustache offers toilet paper for pesos. I dig out crumpled bills, drop them in his bowl, stagger to the sink and splash water on my face. In the mirror, a gray man frowns at me. I frown back. His wife left him. *Boo-fucking-hoo. If I were her, I’d leave you too.*

Outside, Tits greets me with a new margarita. I didn’t order a new margarita.

“Si,” says Tits.

“No,” I say.

“Si, si.”

“No *si si*,” I say.

Tits is angry. She whirls around and heads to the bouncer. I pull out money and chase her. She doesn’t speak English, but she speaks *dollar*. I down the watery margarita and shove the glass in my pocket. I’m no *gringo!* I might be *boracho*, but I’m no *gringo!*

Clutching the rail, I stagger down the stairs into the arms of the tattooed neck. *Panocha*, I slur. I want *panocha* now. The world spins fiercely; I am going to die here.

But I have to have *panocha* before I die.

“*Panocha, si, si,*” the tattoo neck grins. “Fucky, fucky, huh, Señor?”

“Fucky, fucky, yes. Find me *panocha* before I perish. I need *panocha*.” He points to a man at the other side of the street. I set off in that direction, but the sidewalk has something else in mind, and I trip. A hunchback midget in a white sombrero appears out of nowhere.

“Donkey show,” he says, “donkey show, donkey show.”

Against a wall, a sailor French kisses a slut while tugging on her g-string. She smirks at me over his shoulder. A man with no legs reaches out a plastic cup – he wants *dolla*. A little girl sucking snot from her upper lip reaches out a plastic cup – she wants *dolla*. A one-eyed grandma holds a plastic cup too, wants *dolla* too. I duck at the last moment. Spiderman swings over my head.

“Donkey show, donkey show, donkey show,” says white sombrero, moving his ass back and forth. “You like the fuck? Donkey fucky señorita?”

A spectacle involving a donkey and a naked female seems strangely appropriate at this moment.

I follow the white sombrero as we cross Avenida Revolución and go down the steps of a side bazaar. He stops in front of a door lit with a dirty naked bulb and rings the bell. The door cracks open and a shaved head peeks out. Sombrero turns to me – he wants *dolla*. I give a dollar and he slinks away. I pay the entrance fee, and shaved head motions me down the steps.

Smoky bar, maroon booths, brown padding on the walls, columns painted in black enamel, Christmas lights. At one side of the room is a stage. In front of it are tables

loaded with smashed beer cans, ashtrays, leather jackets, Hawaiian shirts, and joyful navy uniforms. Neon signs of Corona, Dos Equis, and Tecate. There's nowhere to sit, so I have to stand on my toes to see over all the backs. All eyes are focused on the red velvet curtains. They draw open; a couple of Mexicans drag a gray donkey on the stage and then disappear.

Sounds of approval. The curtains close. Dollar bills reach toward the bartender, and beers reach back.

The curtains open and a naked brownish woman with short legs, a flabby stomach and floppy breasts enter. I picture her, laundry pins in her mouth, hanging clothes to dry. She wears white glossy high-heeled sandals, and her legs meet at a black bushy tuft. Her brows are waxed, drawn in with a brown pencil. Booing from the audience. Ungrateful bastards, what do you expect for five bucks—Shakira?

Foreplay—a few gentle strokes to his muzzle, and the woman shoves herself under the animal. It jerks away from her. She grabs for his dick; the donkey snorts and turns to bite her, but he only gets a bit of her hair. Cursing, she manages to escape. The two Mexicans hop out from behind the curtain. One grabs the donkey by the face and smacks him in the teeth. The audience groans for the donkey. The animal snorts louder and jumps back, but pair of mustached mariachi appear and roll him on the floor. One, guitar hanging from his back, traps the animal's head between his bow-legged *pantalones* and firmly grabs the front hooves, which are now pointing towards the ceiling. His pal, accordion strapped to his back, grabs his hind ones. Silence. Then someone claps. A drunken female tourist starts laughing hysterically.

The moment the naked woman reaches for the donkey's schlong, I turn my back to the spectacle. I weave my way through the crowd, and climb up the steps so I can throw up the margarita and everything else I've ingested tonight. I wobble. I'm dizzy and I need to lie down. I lean against a wall. Breathing heavily, I force myself to eject the poison.

Then I see them. I cling to the wall and stagger towards them.

The body is sprawled on the ground. The two men kick it with silent dispassion. Dream-like, I hear the dry thumping sounds and see the head fling back and forth with each blow.

"Hey!" I shout. I can't stand violence. But this isn't even violence—it's worse. Nobody screams and nobody's angry. Just two men kicking a third, as if shaking mud off their shoes. I lean against the wall.

One of them turns my way and looks at me, standing motionless. The other one keeps kicking, but before long he stops as well. They are big; short leather jackets and sleek black hair. I make a few steps. They wait for me to get closer. The body on the ground stirs. They stare at me. I smile and wave.

"Hola amigos," I say before a fist to my forehead. The sidewalk meets my face. A kick to the ribs; I am lifted from the ground. I manage to half lift myself—another blow to my face. A flight of stairs. A railing. I grab the railing, trip, let go of the railing, fly down. I am rolling. I roll down for a long time. My head collides with a metal door, the margarita glass in my pocket shatters. Their silhouettes thump down the stairs. Their shoes flash towards me. Then, their kicks. They pull me up by the collar. One pulls out a lighter and examines my face. I try to speak. An uppercut silences me. They drag me up

the stairs. I'm on the sidewalk now. I stumble on a shoe. There was a body here a moment ago. I am dragged; gravel crunching under feet, barbed wire, car-carcasses under urine-colored light. I am pulled toward a beat-up van with California plates. One of them crack opens the door and there is beeping. The other struggles to push me inside. Hell no – they can beat the shit out of me, but I am not getting in their fucking van!

I spread my arms so they can't ram me inside like livestock. I am kicked in the stomach. I fold in two. Pair of hands seizes me by the hair and push me forward. The anticipation of another blow to my belly – a strong blow, a blow that will leave me as breathless as a sack of potatoes. I tighten my abdomen muscles. The seconds stretch on endlessly. I gather my strength, come what may, jerk my head away, pull out the broken glass and thrust it into the face of the one holding me. He screams. The other, busy with the end of a thick roll of duct tape – I get his throat. Something dark spurts geyser-like several feet in the air. I turn to the first one—now screaming in horror—his hands black with blood.

Somewhere in the dark a window slams shut.

The open van is still beeping. I slam the door behind me, turn on the ignition and stomp on the gas pedal. In the rearview mirror, I see one of the men rolling in the dirt, the shadow of the other one hovers over him.

I am in a narrow, unlit street. A dog starts barking. I realize I'm driving with no lights. I slow down, fumble to turn them on, and speed up, again.

It's before dawn when I pull up the beat up van in the line of cars along the border fence. The US/Mexico crossing is a few hundred yards away, but the line moves slowly. I take off my jacket, pull off my bloodstained t-shirt, wipe my face with it as well as I can,

and shove it under the seat. I put my jacket back, zip up, and try to finger-comb my hair. I can hardly keep my head up; I want to throw up and sleep at the same time.

+

- will you always take pictures of me?

- always

- what if I become a fatso?

- then too

- with a big booty?

- i'll have more to photograph

- really?

- really

- relax, i'm not going to become a fatso

- we'll see

- i'm not gonna become a fatso

+

“Tough night?” A voice is waking me.

“Uh-huh.”

“Sir, are you able to operate this vehicle?” Where is the voice coming from?

Border patrol booth, US border, young officer, kind eyes.

“Yes, sir,” I say, trying to sound fresh. I hand him my driver’s license and passport. “Must have dozed off while waiting.” He looks at the passport, then the license, then back at me, checking if the images match up.

“It’s your birthday today, huh, Zachary?”

“Yessir.”

“By yourself?”

I look straight ahead. “Yessir.”

“Anything to declare?” He says, scanning the inside of the van.

“No sir,” I say, glimpsing myself in the mirror.

“Why didn’t you take a cab, Zachary?”

“I ran out of money, sir.” I notice a smear of something on my right cheek.

“Where are you from, Zachary?”

“A small country far away-” An ugly dark smear.

“No, Zachary, I meant-”

“I’m sorry officer! Del Penasquitos.” Could be blood.

“Where’s that?”

“Just north of San Bernardino.” It could be mud. But then again, it could be blood.

“And where is the small country far away?”

“It’s...just north of Greece, sir.”

“I see. They don’t drink and drive just north of Greece, do they?”

“No they don’t, sir.”

“Well, we don’t drink and drive just north of Mexico either.”

“We certainly don’t, sir.” I wait for him to ask me to *step out of the vehicle*.

There is no point in trying to run. He looks at me hard. I look at him back. Then the radio on his shoulder buzzes.

“Ten-Four, sir,” he says to his shoulder, his eyes still locked on me. I breathe in my last moments of freedom.

“Happy birthday, Zachary,” he says, and hands me my license. “Go straight home, all right?” He says as he waves the next car over. “Straight home!”

I push on the gas and head back into civilization.

+

I go back to the pastry shop. My heart will explode! But what does the heart know? I get in line in front of her register and wait. Just before my turn though, I spin on my heels and leave. Why does my damn heart want to burst? Why does it give me away? I gather my courage and enter again, but a few people are before me. I start doing some breathing exercises. I have to act normal, damn it! I can't. If I only knew then that so many years later, I would still feel the same way every time I think of her!

"What can I get you?" Her voice. Her lips. Then she glances at me. The blue of her eyes glows and spills out like in a watercolor picture. And then, a miracle, I manage to stutter a few words. For the first time I speak to a girl without forcing myself to come up with the most clever sentence. She does not respond. She keeps looking at me. I don't sense that annoyance or boredom that I get from most of the girls I try to strike up a conversation with those days. It's more like curiosity. While she's probably wondering

how to send me off, I ask what time her shift ends. She calmly answers, and I head off immediately, before she regrets speaking to me.

+

The McDonald's, the parking lot where I left Stella's car, now deserted with only a few vehicles left. I want to kiss the pavement. I stop, jump out, and kiss the pavement. Then I realize—I might have killed somebody about an hour ago in Mexico. I have stolen a van and left a ton of fingerprints. One must think about these things. I open the trunk of the Stella's car to look for something—anything—to wipe the inside of the van. Nothing. I walk back to the van and open the passenger door. Nothing. I go to the back door and open it. I stifle a yell when I see the body, and I slam the door. I wait.

I open the door again slowly. I exhale. Not a body. A giant stretched-out plastic bag. It does look like a corpse. I reach out. It is dense, as if filled with bricks of straw. I look around the parking lot and untie the thing. The pungent smell hits me. I know what it is. I know what I should do. Instead, I pull out the huge bag of marijuana, drag it across the parking lot, and shove it in the trunk of the Mercedes.

I get behind the wheel, turn on the ignition, buckle up, cross myself, and head north into the bluish daybreak.

+

When I came back to meet her after work, she was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a tight light blue t-shirt. She wore high-heeled platform sandals and a bag across her shoulder. It's so easy to fall in love with a girl who wears everything with such ease.

Most likely, I had my hands tucked deep in my pockets.

Around us must have been a regular summertime crowd. We walked, I remember, toward the Sea Garden. Somewhere around the Museum of Art, I lose the thread of this memory. I can't remember what we did between six, when she finished work and the time it got dark. Did we sit anywhere? Did we just walk? Later, we went into a bar on the corner of First and the street she lived on, a small, dark place named "Impulse". We sat at one of those round tables with a black tablecloth pressed under a round piece of glass. We drank gin-tonics and munched on peanuts. And started talking. We talked over each other. We talked as if we'd talked forever and someone had just interrupted us. We talked as if we just pretended we didn't know each other. We finished each other's sentences, completed each other's thoughts, and reminded each other of where we stopped. We talked as if tomorrow we would have to separate forever.

+

A bag of marijuana in the trunk of the car, and my exit is just a few miles away. I roll the window down for some fresh air, so I can drive awake. The morning chill slaps my face. Along with it comes the unbearable thought that I am headed toward an empty house.

Who am I kidding? What am I going to do *at home* without her? Sleep? I already tried a few hours ago and almost ended up dead in Mexico. No more sleep, I've slept

enough. In the bag behind me, there are at least 70 pounds of marijuana. I haven't the slightest idea how many joints that makes and I suspect that if I start calculating right now, I'll get sick and throw up inside the car. The lousy margarita screwed me up, I know it did. One joint is about five bucks. Ten joints are about fifty. A hundred joints are five hundred. One pound has... there, fuck me, I get fucking sick to the stomach. There we go-o-o-o! I am already in the emergency lane, slowing down the car, and throwing up out the open window. I vomit for some time, painfully, while still trying to drive. I finally stop, get out of the car and bend over clutching my stomach. Just when I feel I've ejected everything I still throw up at the thought of throwing up. Painful, bitter, sour convulsions clench my stomach.

What a night, God! What a night!

Back in the car. There, I see the exit to our street. There is the street sign I'm so sick of, farther away, the traffic light I'm sick of. What am I doing? What am I doing, what am I doing, what am I doing?

I pass the exit sign, and press on the gas pedal.

Farewell, street sign!

Farewell, traffic light!

Farewell canyon!

Farewell to you too, empty house!

+

I thought about her constantly the last days in the military. We saw each other a couple more times before my discharge. When I got off the train with a green army surplus bag slung across my shoulder, instead of going straight home to see Mom and my little sister, I grabbed a cab, and gave the driver her address. When the elevator came, I pressed number seven and rehearsed my opening lines. I rang the doorbell. She opened the door and smiled. I wondered whether I should hug her or shake hands. I forgot what I was planning to say. She kissed me on the cheek and invited me in. Her room was white, tidy and minimalistic. Stereo on the floor, bookshelves with lots of books, some paintings on the walls, low bed, little glass table, a vase with freesias. We sat on the floor sipping gin-tonics. We listened to music all night long. We did it for the first time at dawn, on the carpet in her room. We did nothing actually. I was so excited, tired, and crazy about her that I lasted only a few seconds. She understood. She understood everything. She passed me the t-shirt she had just taken off to wipe myself, and asked me to lay down for a while. Then I saw her open the window and, swift as a cat, climb on the windowsill. I leaned back on my elbows. She turned to me and calmly sat on the ledge as if there was something beautiful and safe on the other side. It was chilly out. Late September. The last thing I saw before I fall asleep was her silhouette against the light-bluish dawn background. Perked up breasts, the flash of a lighter, the cigarette. Why was this beautiful girl here with me? Wasn't she afraid of heights?

+

I stop in a surfer town between San Augustino and Los Angeles. I find a shabby beach hotel, check in, and lie down.

The sound of a vacuum next door wakes me. I look at my watch; I've slept for four entire hours. My head bursts in pain. I take a shower. I wash off the Tijuana filth but the hangover doesn't leave. I look at myself in the mirror. Indigo bruises have begun forming under my eyes. My scalp hurts. There's some missing hair, but it's alright – I'd rather be bald than dead and cold.

I decide to go out, get some fresh air and do some thinking. I haven't thought straight for ten days. I go down to the lobby, ask the girl at the front desk about the closest coffee shop. There's a Starbucks three blocks away. I find it and get in line behind several other customers. Then, it's my turn. At the register, a redhead with a tongue piercing asks me what I'd like. What? I turn around and look toward the door. Why doesn't Stella just appear right here, right now? Why doesn't she just come to this little town and have coffee with me like we used to, and we'd talk until...

"You waiting for someone?" The redhead with the pierced tongue asks calmly.

"Pardon?"

"Would you like anything, sir?" I don't respond. Behind my back, a neat line of men and women has formed. I look at the girl in the red strands of hair but there are no words in my throat.

"Sir?"

Stella, Stella, Stella, if you show up at the door right now, I promise:

I will take the garbage out without you reminding me, I will give you massages anytime you want, I will learn not to slam the doors, I will buy you flowers, fields of

flowers, I will be quiet when I get up in the middle of the night, I will make the bed on Sundays, I will water the plants, I will vacuum, I will lift the toilet seat before I pee (and then put it back down), I will stop being a jerk to your mom, I will take you on a water bicycle ride, I will teach you three guitar cords, I will explain what the F-stops mean on my Nikon without yelling, I will give up drinking two beers at dinner, I will quit being a small fish, I will leave my disgusting job and we'll still have money, money, money, fucking money, we will sell this house at last, we will go to... India?

Stella! I also promise:

I will not disrupt you when you tell jokes, I will not interrupt you when you are excited, I will not sing over your favorite songs, I will not be a smartass when we watch sentimental movies, I will not share my opinion about every single thing, we will not ever again have Josh and Katya over for dinner, we will not ever go to Vegas again, never, I will not rent Hitchcock films, I will not order Chinese, I will not leave the room when we fight (what am I saying, we won't ever fight), you will never see me picking my nose, I will not burp loudly (or force myself to fart on purpose), I will never be silent with you for so long, never, I will never watch CNN, I will never promise you the moon! You are a star, Stella!

"Long night?" The redhead tries one last time to get an order from me before turning to the next person in line. I rub my temples, shrug, take a deep breath, and try smiling.

"Triple espresso, please. Actually," I add "two triples." I sit outside and I gulped it. The caffeine kicks me in the heart. Good. I sum things up – I am an hour and a half away from home. It's still Thursday. It's still before noon. If I get immediately on the San

Diego freeway and drive south, I can show up at work just after lunch and make up an excuse. Because I've never done it before, Scott, the manager, will understand, and won't give me a hard time. I'll wait for nighttime and remove the dangerous load from my trunk. Then I'll go home. I'll return all my phone calls, will read a book until I fall asleep. The next day I'll go to work earlier, then go home again, pull the blinds open at last, and try to move on with my life without her.

I leave the coffee shop in a better mood. I get in the car and head north