

Gentlemen

Patricia Jozef

An extract

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Translator Laura Vroomen

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Part I: I wish I were a man

Danny it is

Hello Olivia. One more day and the wait is over. I meant to ask if you smoke. Just so I can adapt, you know.

In the same email he asks what time she expects to be there and informs her that she can leave her vehicle in the underground car park.

May I ask you to simply be yourself? So you're as relaxed as you can possibly be. I'm going to be my usual self too and certainly not a man in a pinstripe suit. Lol... Cheers and see you on Friday. Danny.

At night, in the dark bedroom, the demons appear, and a vivid NO lights up.

What if he spikes her drink? What if he beats her to a pulp?

Best to let someone know. But who on earth isn't going to see this as weird, deviant, deceitful even? Buying a service isn't cheating though, is it?

How bad can it be to indulge in a bag of greasy chips with mayonnaise when your strict diet is driving you insane? If that's what it takes to get you back on track again.

She's torn. No. It's a terrible idea. No wait, yes.

A professional agency would have been an option. Safety guaranteed, but undeniably a business transaction. You buy something, you're on a list, a customer database. Someone in an office decants your pleasure into spreadsheets and an annual statement. Sitting at a modern, light-grey desk with a computer, a woman efficiently dispatches one of her men to you and afterwards enquires whether everything was to your liking and satisfaction.

The search bar of the website she visited earlier contained a small cube, a square box. A present or a model kit to build your ideal man? The first page showed six black-and-white images, portraits in roughly the same style.

Each one of them faced the camera, fearless and self-assured, reminding her of models: perfect hair, strong forehead, square sculpted jaw, muscular torso, smooth skin with bulging veins and pecs they can probably bounce by flexing their arm muscles.

Do these men really exist? Immaculate in their smart attire, with perfect white teeth, a big watch. Or is it a cut-and-paste job?

Further clicking revealed other specimens, slightly more average, less beefy, a bit more crumpled.

Visible waistbands appear to be the norm; Calvin Klein is doing big business.

They all look as if they're less than loquacious, even though the reviews speak of lively evenings and lots of fun.

A list of personal data includes info on height and weight, hair and eye colour, education and interests, whether they're a smoker or non-smoker and culinary preferences. So if you were to book Maurice from Rotterdam to go out for dinner, you'd know that he eats anything, except fish. Kenzo, on the other hand, loves Italian food and chocolate.

The vast majority are L to XL, with the odd one describing his manhood as a modest M.

The rates are eye-watering. Nick, Jack, Marcus, Rick, Max, Mike, Lars, they all charge 500, 600 or more for two hours. Each additional hour will set you back another 150 or 200 euros. At a minimum. Plus travel expenses. And hotel accommodation.

Then again, you do get to exchange one free message with a man of your choosing.

There are other options, too. An hour-long intimate date will cost you 300 euros. One hour in which it has to happen.

Those without sexual needs can purchase the Listening Ear package. An evening of laughter, conversation and gentle touch. Listed under 'gentle touch'. The comprehensive package is yours from 800 euros. In other words, taking things slowly will cost you. Subsequent hours come at a 20% discount. Somebody in that office has a calculator.

It doesn't exactly spark a desire to get to know any of them. Does she want to share a bed with one of these muscle men? One of these moving slabs of male flesh.

Regular guys can be so handsome in their imperfection, and usually have no sense of their own beauty. But they're not on offer here.

While surfing, other, unsought images appeared on the edge of the screen. Of women. Not vulgar, but tasteful in lingerie. Provocative poses and racy bits of fabric. Never blatantly fleshy and repulsive. Dreamy, many of them pretty and attractive.

A man has plenty of choice if he wants to share his arousal with one of these gentle creatures. Everywhere you look there are lovely ladies offering their voluptuous breasts, their secret depth and their unending softness.

Danny had his own profile. She felt discouraged and was about to close the page when she spotted his photo. A regular guy with a head and a face. He posed with his arms crossed and looked as if he was enjoying it. Not horny, not too serious. Sympathetic. And affordable. In his entry he wrote how friends and family would describe him: caring, honest, spontaneous and playful. Then there was some basic information:

1.75m.

Shaved: yes.

Cunnilingus: yes.

A Hotmail address.

She'd sent a mail to see what would happen. A bit of harmless fun. His response came quickly. A few messages went back and forth and then suddenly he proposed a time and a place.

I want to be good company, first and foremost, the rest is up to you. I want to be someone else for you, fulfil your every wish and, first and foremost, make you forget your everyday troubles. Cheers, Danny.

She wasn't thankful because he wanted to make her forget her everyday troubles. She needed him for something else.

His last mail came from an address with two surnames. That was a let-down. A little googling unearthed a photo on a public Facebook profile. Danny's wife seemed modern and in possession of a healthy dose of optimism. They posed together in sunglasses and leisure wear at a holiday resort.

Did they discuss the emails and the women among themselves? Was this meant to boost their savings? Were customers contributing to a new fridge?

At the same time it was reassuring. A psycho wouldn't have a shared email account.

Danny it is, Friday.

Marieke and Vik

The city is Marieke's friend. The kind who gives you a lot of space, who doesn't get in your way or smother you with expectations. The city lives alongside you, but it's also there when you need it.

On her daily bike ride she carefully manoeuvres her bicycle among the tram tracks and does the exercise that her loved one has asked her to do. What does she smell? Not greenery. A whiff of fried onion and garlic from a vent, a hint of motor oil and stale air. The old city centre as an unventilated room. You can't smell that autumn has started, but you can tell from the new collection of winter coats in the shop windows. From the row of trees en route to Urban Life, the not-for-profit where she works. And from the moribund shrub on the square, which always hides at least a flattened can or a bit of paper.

Her loved one is not a city person. Never has been. He dreams of a life far from here, wonders what it might be like, out in the country perhaps. 'As soon as spring arrives,' he says, 'we go and sit at an outdoor terrace here, while over there seeds burst open and everything starts to grow and flower.' He goes on to talk about sunglasses, which he claims are worn more in cities than anywhere else. A shield against the excess, a filter against ugliness. We have to look up, from this trench called street, to see the sky. He says there's no natural life underneath paving slabs and asphalt except that of ants, who are undermining the city with a network of miles and miles of corridors. 'Is a vacuum-tarmacked city something to love?'

Yes, she loves this toxic piece of land, the city. Marieke's roots are here. Born on dry, acidic, hard soil and cast onto the rocks.

This is where they met. Fourteen they were, in school. Marieke and Vik, Cookie and Donut, together for almost a quarter-century now. They found each other and never let go.

The renovated bell tower of the town hall launches sounds into the air, across the square. The rumble of tyres on cobblestones. The siren of a police car mingling with the music of the carillon. Musical partners in a polyphonic piece. Multiple voices from different registers. That's what the city is like. A place where strangers meet.

The aroma of freshly ground beans in the coffee shop, frothed milk, hushed voices, open laptops. Strangers in close proximity.

It feels good to be part of this complex ensemble. It creates room for manoeuvre, freedom, endless options.

All together, yet alone.

'Fifty miles per hour. They ought to have the doors of their sports cars welded shut, with them in it.'

Vik tosses vegetarian meatballs into hot oil. Since he began working at the health food shop and they started buying almost all their groceries there, their kitchen has acquired a different, spicier aroma.

She shares his anger over cars. Low-mounted, souped-up killing machines whizzing dangerously close past young children on bikes every day. It's just a matter of time before the first kid is catapulted into the air.

She wraps her arms around him. 'My dear activist, it's time to put your money where your mouth is.' The most familiar body in the world. She has known him longer than not.

The Cyclists' Union is going out campaigning on Friday, he tells her. 'Are you coming?' 'Friday?' she says. 'I have an appointment.'

There are four empty glasses on the table. And a large paper bag with clothes on the chair. Marieke has a sneaking suspicion that her mother-in-law was here but doesn't mention it.

In the hallway, she places the helmets on the shoe rack and squeezes past the twins' bikes to the stairs. When the girls pull the hoods of their coats over their helmets they look like space aliens from the back. Hasse and Lotte.

She hears the soft splashing of water in the bathroom, and the whinnying of horses.

'You were a sad child, because you didn't get any cookies. And I was a happy child because I was given a horse by Mamino.'

The everyday and the dream world blend into one when they play.

A shriek of surprise from her daughters on seeing their mother. As if she doesn't always pop in after work.

She adds some fresh warm water to the bath, although acutely aware that it's wasteful.

Lotte moans.

'Too hot?'

'No, feels nice on my bits.'

So she adds some more and scoops it towards the open legs.

'I take it Mamino was here.'

The children start telling her excitedly about living among horses. She immediately recognises her mother-in-law's words. They talk about the pleasant school over there, which they can attend when they move over there.

'Over there?'

'At Mamino's.'

A shiver runs down Marieke's spine.

Why do their parents not have a smartphone, Hasse nags. Their longing for a smartphone has taken on such immense proportions that it has only strengthened Vik's convictions. He won't have such a thing in the house.

'No phone then,' Lotte says in response to her mother's sigh.

'And no horse either. Now let's get you out of the bath.'

After dinner Vik says: '1,137.'

'Our electricity bill.'

'Nope.'

'Four plane tickets to a warm country.'

'Insane.'

It's a game. Out of nowhere, one of them will say a number, and then the other has to guess what it's about. Numbers are exciting to Vik.

‘All the cyclists getting injured every year, right here in our town.’

One day his heart, his nerves will be shattered by the honking in his ear. And that’s not to mention the cancers that infiltrate via polluted air, that take hold and spread, in them and in the children.

‘It’s just one big, relentless scream for attention round here.’

He’s talking about the ride through town, saying that he was trying to look away, but that it was pointless, because there was a digital advertising screen on the left and a busy café on the right, the air ambulance was circling above him, and lights, lights and yet more lights everywhere as well as fliers for some unmissable event. And while he was trying to ignore all this, he had to be careful not to get his tyre stuck in the tram tracks. ‘Because that could spell the end on a bike path that people gleefully refer to as “murder strip”.’

He goes on like this for a while. Never naggingly, never aggressively. She understands him. She wants to support him. But how? Leave the city? Where would they transplant themselves? What would life there look like?

‘You can be surrounded by green space less than twenty kilometres from the city.’

That’s a new idea. Whose voice is speaking here?

‘Mamsie is prepared to shoulder all the costs for a new-build, energy-efficient, eco-friendly if we want, for us.’

This is followed by a silence. ‘For us?’

‘For all of us together,’ he replies. ‘A kangaroo home, a multigenerational home.’

The voice behind this voice is crafty.

A colleague once showed Marieke a video on social media. A man was presented with three dilemmas. The interviewer began to read out the first one: ‘The choice is yours: Under option A, your mother-in-law lives next door. Under B ...’

‘B,’ the man said quickly.

Most mothers are no different from other banal people. Until it’s your own mother we’re talking about.

Ventriloquist Mamino had been all too conspicuous. Do kangaroo young never suffocate inside their pouch? Shouldn’t all joeys leave their mother at some point? Stand on their own hind legs?

Marieke begins to unpack Mamino’s paper bag with Max Mara logo. Two jumpers, in reasonably good condition. Wool tends to retain its wearer’s scent. A pair of trousers with a crease. A long summer skirt, a leopard print dress. Good quality, that’s not the point, but it’s the kind of thing people buy in an overoptimistic mood, with the aim of being bolder, and it’s usually short-lived. The dress screams buyer’s remorse. Marieke keeps it back for the children’s dress-up trunk.

She never wears dresses. Silver sandals, they’re out too. Heels. Indirect messages from her mother-in-law, who’d have liked a more feminine daughter-in-law.

Marieke only ever wears Teva sandals and trainers.

The bag also contains a skirt suit made of a coarse woven fabric. A red blouse. Expensive items, each and every one of them. She puts everything into her panniers. The charity shop is open tomorrow.

Apparently it’s easier to part with expensive clothes once you’ve decided who’s going to wear them next. It shifts the burden of guilt, abundance and waste.

Every evening in bed Marieke and Vik review their day, sharing small worries, trivial and profound thoughts.

‘But we’ve got a good life, don’t we? We’re good together, aren’t we, Donut?’

‘Let it go,’ Vik says. ‘It was just an idea. We don’t have to leave. Just sharing the thought with you is enough. Leaving here would be destabilising, for you, for the children, and for me too. And you’re a little plant that’s sustained by urban stimuli.’

He wraps himself in his blanket, like a sausage, with his back to her. She never thought they were a good idea, the two separate duvets. Unlike Vik. ‘I need my sleep,’ he used to say every time her hands tried to find a way from her body to his.

He’ll fall asleep in no time. She won’t. In the dark the questions will blindly tumble over one another. There are no directions in the dark.

Do they have a good life? How do you know? And how do you know if you’re making the right choices in life? How many choices can you even make when everything’s already going in a certain direction?
