

Sleep!

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An extract

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My nights were longer than my days, because at night I was alone. I watched Remco snoring at my side. Thanks to him I managed to cling to the last shreds of my sanity, but then he could sleep and that made a world of difference. He slid from the warm inside of my belly straight into Dreamland, a place I remembered increasingly vaguely.

During the first few weeks of my insomnia I had consulted innumerable doctors and friends. I had followed their advice religiously. Jogging before bed. Hot milk with honey. Breathing exercises. A sleeping tablet. Five sleeping tablets. A joint. A bottle of wine. Stacks of books.

But at night I felt my body niggling me and my nerves tensing. My mind assumed a clarity it seldom possessed during the day. I was powerless to do otherwise than submerge myself in the flow of my thoughts. They generally started off positive and ended in pot psychology and self-doubt. It's good not to have any clearly mapped-out vision of the future. A relationship doesn't have to promise eternity. Kids? No thanks. A job? Shouldn't be a problem. With my qualifications. With my sense of humour. With my talent. With my secrets. With my anxiety. Did I really love anyone? Hadn't I actually been focused on myself all these years, obstinate and crabby more often than not?

Towards morning I sometimes managed to slip away briefly into a state somewhere between sleeping and waking, but that was still a long way from Dreamland.

No matter how ghastly the condition, you can be sure there's a video on it. Remco considered it necessary to confront me with the story of Roger, a headmaster who had not slept for six months. His family had painstakingly filmed everything, from his first restless nights to the last rolling of his wild eyes in the hospital. The doctors were at a loss. After days of observation they finally diagnosed him as a switch you could no longer turn off. They gave him sleeping pills in irresponsible quantities, enough to knock out a herd of oxen. But Roger's switch stayed on. The oxen bellowed in his head and pissed dribble out of the corner of his mouth. Everyone agreed that his passing away represented a long-deserved rest.

It certainly shut us up. Remco laid his eyes in the palm of my hand, which was in my lap, and stroked my thighs. I stroked his hair, mechanically, like every movement I made in those days.

“How many hours last night?” asked the lump in his throat.

“Four,” I lied. It had been one. And as with every white lie, I got an irrepressible fit of the giggles. In the beginning, Remco had laughed along with me, because at least I was happy. Now, all he heard was my uncontrollable shaking, all he saw was the bitterness of my tears. He knew, but he didn’t understand. Neither did I, but that was the funny part. Like that guy who got struck twice by lightning. Or when that dwarf slipped on a mini banana skin in town. Or when that businessman put his foot in my bucket of water on one of my cleaning jobs. That was funny, too.

“That was funny, too,” I said and kept repeating it the whole night. Remco sobbed himself to sleep. It was just before midnight on the eve of destruction, high time for a nightlife.

I rode through the dark streets on my bike in search of life, full of energy. It was three in the morning. Empty squares, black avenues, here and there a wakeful pigeon. Those creatures were completely out of synch since the arrival of street lamps. Would it break easily, a pigeon’s neck? Probably not. Tough little buggers those airborne vermin.

I did occasionally spot the odd human, of course. The city never sleeps, as they say. I found it highly unpleasant to have to establish that they were not colleagues. They had already had a night’s sleep, or forty winks at least. If not then they were going to. The bastards. I’d teach them.

My outrage was not directed at the stopouts or the early birds. Even less at the owners of the odd lighted window I saw. Like the prostitutes. When did the prostitutes sleep? I cycled over to the red light district and wandered along, wheeling my bike. Most of the ladies of the night seemed to take little pleasure in my presence. A few regarded me with an arrogant, but pitying look. Don’t dare? Haven’t got the nerve?

I stopped in front of a glass enclosure where a pale, plump woman was sitting. She was too ample for her fluorescent top, too lacking in confidence for her black latex skirt. She had to be wearing a wig; no one has that much hair. Her eyes were the colour of dirty seawater and protruded in my direction. My sleepless brain mischievously returned her look and I tapped on the window. Help me; help me in my need before the hunter shoots me dead.

She let me in through a narrow door and into a stuffy room. Everything was pink, from the porcelain figurines to the dildo next to the – equally pink – bed. Did she sleep there?

“I just want to ask you a question,” I said.

She forced a smile and attempted to conceal the insecurity in her bulging eyes behind her false eyelashes.

“Not understand. Just arrive”.

“When do you sleep?”

I didn’t feel like hanging around here long. I had no room for detours, let alone understanding.

“Sleep?” She folded her chubby hands next to her cheek, closed her eyes and pursed her lips. “No sleep, Miss, only fuck”.

She was lying, the bitch. What was I doing here anyway? What an idea to doubt the fact that prostitutes sleep. Everyone sleeps. Sleep interweaves the past and the present. Sleep refreshes and heals. Sleep unites rich and poor, man and woman, Man and animal. Everyone, Everyman, expect me.

During my very first nocturnal roving I decided to direct my hate at the thousands and millions of men, women and children looking from the depths of dark, soft beds at the insides of their retinas, at the back side of their souls. Tomorrow they would have difficulty waking up. Still drowsy, they would install themselves at the breakfast table or on the loo. Grumpy from having got out of the wrong side of bed. Good for them. As if they had anything to complain about.

I took a last drag from my cigarette and flicked the butt down a drain. Wonder Woman’s action time. The door to the lobby of the block of flats made no noise. The light in the area where the doorbells were, however, came on with a soft buzzing. I looked at the labels on the letterboxes, applied with varying degrees of accuracy. De Baere, van Kielegheem, de Wachter, Zordana, Ahib, Mustapha, Clou. The combination of the last three names tickled my funnybone. Ahib Mustapha Clou. (Hahaha, okay it’s not that funny) Must have a clue? But poor old Ahib hasn’t got a clue (hahaha, come on now, that’s enough). Somebody give him a clue (Stop!). My laughter ricocheted between the glass doors. I subdued myself into silence and assumed my station in front of the bells. Let’s start with Ahib. I pressed his bell and waited, my ear next to the intercom. It took a long time. Fine. Drag yourself into the world. Reality!

“Hello?”

An anxious woman’s voice. I attempted to say nothing as alarmingly as possible.

“Hello? Who’s there?”

People really do say the most banal things.

Long silence. Had she dropped the receiver and was she on her way down?

“Look, do I have to be woken up for this? I need my sleep!” The sleepiness in her voice stopped her from actually yelling it. The objective achieved, I nipped outside and disappeared on my iron steed into a night that was mine alone, a night that wanted me alone.

During the day I rationalised it all. During the day I restricted my madness. During the day I reassured everyone. “Milk with honey,” sighed my mother, who considered her own problems far greater.

“How about a nice massage,” suggested a friend who had been looking for an opportunity to prove his prowess in that area for years.

“A psychiatrist,” said Remco, the only one who had any inkling of my nocturnal escapades.

I had originally thought his suggestion worth considering. When I looked at myself in his eyes, I could see there was little alternative. I had a problem. I could see that clearly during the day. At night, his eyes were closed and I no longer saw myself.

Remco called up psychiatrists, asked specific questions, compared prices. I winked at him from the couch and tried to look tired. He smiled back.

"I think we've found someone. A woman. She's got a nice voice. Tomorrow".

I nodded and wrapped my arms around him.

"Here or upstairs?" asked my sweet lover.

I led him by the hand to our bed with the perfect mattress and base. We entwined our bodies and he whispered that he loved me. I could feel his caresses better now than in the past few weeks. His heart nearer to mine. When he reached his climax I came, too, but already during our perfectly simultaneous spasms I knew they would bring his body rest. That he would sleep like a baby. And I wouldn't be able to bear to see it.

"Everything will be alright," he consoled himself. "Don't let the bedbugs bite". It didn't take much for him. I woke him up with such a roar that I shocked even myself. What did he think he was up to? Sleeping at this time of day? Did he have any idea how badly I wanted to? But I couldn't sleep. No, not me. Not at night, either. I had to watch people sleeping for hours on end. Why did he think I wandered off in the middle of the night? It's not exactly scintillating, you know! What? Oh, I shouldn't take my anger out on him? I shouldn't blame other people? I needed help? That sounded a bit heavy, did it? Oh, I had to get it into my head, did I? Well, he could shove his psychiatrist with the nice voice up his arse. And he could get out, too. I didn't need him. What, where was he going? What was he doing with that holdall? Oh, come on, you can't be serious? Come right back, now! Please?

In the days that followed I broke all my records. I hardly slept two hours in seventy-two. I woke up forty-eight people. Three hours long I stood in the garden singing the same song, the unexpurgated version.

'Mister Sandman, bring me a dream / Make her complexion like peaches and cream / give her two lips, like roses and clover /and tell me that my lonely nights are over!'

The neighbours on the right called the police, those on the left an ambulance. I gave the policemen and the ambulance crew something to drink and apologised for the nuisance. It wasn't always easy for a professional opera singer – mostly luxury cruises, yes that does mean you're away a lot – to find the right neighbourhood. Of course, you're right, it would be rather less disturbing during the day. I would bear that in mind. The ambulance driver's wife liked opera, too, wonderful. No, there was nothing else I needed. Thank you very much. And goodnight.

That night: Mustapha. He turned out to be a furious Arab who - judging by the noise in the background – was blessed with an inordinately large family. It was his wife who had sleepily picked up the receiver. But he had immediately snatched it rather roughly from her paws and screamed, "We're not paying anything!"

Evidently not everyone was able to enjoy a carefree night's rest. You could almost feel quite cheerful about it, cycling through the still of the dark.

But I was tired. Dead tired. World-weary. Except that time I was able to play guardian angel for a young man on a bridge.

Earlier that night I had already called three bar owners every name under the sun when, one after another, they had maintained it was time to go to sleep. Following which I'd found that my bike had been nicked. My attempts to appropriate another had been to no avail.

Swearing under my breath, I crossed the road to the other side of the bridge. I could see him standing there, out of the corner my eye, Speed Kills written on the back of his sleeveless jacket. He was sniffing snot and tears, hitting the rusty railing until his hands bled.

"I'm going to top myself". It came from deep in his throat, but I had heard it. (A pitiful twit. No time for that. Don't feel like it). I walked on. Four steps. (I. Must. Do. Something). I turned round.

"What's the matter?"

"She's a fucking whore".

"What makes you say that?"

"She fucks everybody!"

"Ah".

He hid his face in his hands and started to cry. He looked like a mentally deficient troll. Night people are seldom happy. After a few moments he regarded me with the expression of a lord of the manor. By the look of his pupils he was busy demonstrating the motto on his jacket.

I put my hand out. He shook it suspiciously but heartily.

"Angelica," I introduced myself.

"Carlos," he said. The symbolism of my invented name went right over his head. Okay, a worldly question, then.

"What's in the bag?" I pointed to a full bin bag leaning up against the parapet.

"Her clothes," he said.

He scattered them onto the water. We watched. A colourful streamer of silk and lace fanned out over the black mirror. Danced with dirt and dead wood. Disappeared as rapidly as a snake out to sea. The river heaved three rippling sighs before withdrawing into a stately silence. He couldn't have known what that meant to me. Only I could feel it. Stirrings. Sweat evaporating from the coat of young horses in gallop. Drops of water on freshly washed babies' feet. Sand in the morning sun. Longing.

I looked in astonishment at the tears running over the back of my hand. Then at Carlos, the king of poets. Who was no longer there. Probably gone home to sleep. Sleep heals.

The TRIP course (Total Relax/Inner Positivity) promised even more than that. Cynthia, a blond in pinks tights, who claimed to lead a hectic life, proudly revealed that she no longer took the everyday worries to bed with her. And that was important, because she knew what sleeplessness meant.

“And all that, thanks to the unique symbiosis of Japanese wisdom and Kenyan dance. TRIP has taught me what rest is. TRIP saved me”.

And then, in her best Flemish, in the pushy, American-tinged accent of a male voice-over, Cynthia added, “Order the TRIP video from the number next to your country’s flag”.

For a few seconds her mouth continued to move soundlessly, to conclude with an indulgent wink. Funny girl. I could still laugh at it, even after the seventeenth time.

“Shop Channel, for when you have fuck all else to do”. I watched it all night for nights on end, hoping to doze off under hypnosis. I knew them all: a cordless food processor that could boil eggs, ideal for young and old (Cut and Boil 2004), a plastic extension rod to eliminate from your life for good all those paint spatters your wife is always moaning about (Galaxy Spot Control), a chest in the shape of a beetle, containing no less than forty-two different kinds of charming thimbles (Beetle Box Utopia, mixed version).

So now it was getting personal. I struck a deal with Cynthia: if I slept, tonight, than I would try it. Then I would, at least, find out if there was a TRIP centre in the area.

I closed my eyes and opened them an hour and a half later. It was a borderline case. I hadn’t heard Cynthia’s voice, but I had felt the cat snuggling up under my arm and the rain starting to fall outside.

“TRIP saved me.”

She was still awake, too.

“Total Relax Inner Positivity”.

Okay, a promise is a promise.

“As do the trees

and birds in their nests

so will you also find your rest”

It was the ninth haiku already and it was just for me. Mama Miriam – as the therapist with the amazingly long hair under her arms called herself – had come and crouched down next to me. I was the only one it hadn't worked with. The others – a load of nervous teenagers and bored early retirement victims – were lying shamelessly snoring away on the floor of the chilly church hall. I glowered at the copper crucifix on the wall, quietly fuming.

The first half-hour the emphasis had been on Freeing Your Most Inner Self. Utterly flabbergasted by the willingness of the others to openly humiliate themselves, I had joined in. It was unforgettable.

The series of exercises started with five minutes of deliberate hyperventilation, immediately followed by a forward roll, during which we were supposed to shout the name of the person who had wreaked the most havoc in your important life.

"Theo!" cried Irene, a fat, middle-aged housewife, submitting fully. She rolled out of her trajectory and slammed with a powerful kick into the collarbone of a skinny guy who, ironically enough, also turned out to be called Theo. Inconsolable, the pair of them.

I got a fit of the giggles, which I attempted, due to the cross looks I received, to camouflage with a sob. People prefer that. I was a hero in a Hollywood film, seeing his life flash past him during his last breath. I might not have been dying, but Remco had left me. In a trail of memories we cheerfully made love, strolled over a foreign beach and went out to dinner. He was more handsome and more attentive than ever. My tears fell in torrents. Mama Miriam was overjoyed. She made a big show of taking me comfortingly in her arms. It was no sinecure to try and avoid both the smell of her armpits and her bad breath.

I was still trying when she sat down next to me on the ground. She endeavoured to conceal the impatience in her eyes with her singsong timbre.

"When the eagle flies

through the still of the night

then the mountainside rests"

What could possess anyone to shroud herself in a white sheet and banish all attractiveness from her life for good? A more pertinent question: Why was I still lying here, actually? I sat up and looked at her. The arrogant stolidity of her regard spurred my Most Inner Self into action.

"You know what you can do?

Shove your course up your arse

and then clean your teeth".

That night: Clou. I looked forward to the disturbed voices of my victims as a lioness does to the blood of her prey. The back office of my brain knew I was losing it, had most likely already lost it. That only a madwoman consumed by hate could resent people their rest, resent their happiness because it was something she didn't have.

During daylight hours I was ashamed of my nocturnal stalking. But by night I followed myself, every more astonished at the independence of my mind. "Walk!" a neural impulse signalled to my legs. "Press the bell!" to my finger.

A single command could have drastic consequences. Laughing too loudly at a funeral. Cutting up a vegetable and deliberately sticking the knife into your finger while you're at it. Grinding your foot down on a newborn kitten. I didn't do it, but I was thinking about it when I pressed Clou's bell.

It was then that I turned not to be alone. It was as if his hand was poised on the intercom receiver his voice responded so promptly to my call. And that voice had a languid clarity that I recognised so immediately that it took my breath away. Above me, in the same building where my nocturnal empire was planning to expand, lived a second irredeemable chevalier of the night. One of the Sleepless, like me.

"At last. Stay there, I'm coming".

That was all he said. And I stayed there, my heart brimming over with hope without sleep.

4

I crawled through my life with the energy of a snail. Benoit the snail with a house like a ton of bricks on his back. Whole years have been forgotten. I've got pictures of me standing smiling amongst twenty-year-old friends, raising our glasses to each other's health. I can't remember their names and I don't remember where it was. My health has left much to be desired for some time now.

I spent my nights in the seediest bars I could find, amongst men who had their dogs' fleas and women attempting to drown a stillborn child. Sometimes they spoke to me. It's staggering how many people felt compelled to enlighten me on the quality of their bowel movements. But I listened and nodded and said that, in the end, it was all crap anyway. Some of them hugged me briefly then.

During the day I worked at the public baths. I couldn't actually call myself a lifeguard; it was supervisor or attendant. No other job could have provided me with such passivity. My boss and my colleagues left me alone. They asked no questions and were pleased with my invisible presence. As a gesture of gratitude I was never ill or late, I worked weekends and evenings. From eight 'til ten I read the paper. The hours that followed slipped away between the pages of novels. The first decade I devoted to French existentialists, after that it was the Russians. In between I glanced absently at the swimmers doing laps in the chemical blue.

On Tuesday mornings, pensioners heaved themselves from the edge of the pool. With feigned jollity they wriggled their old flesh and raked up old vendettas. On Thursdays there was a swimming club. They all wanted to be first. My lethargy felt exceptionally bearable as I watched their exertions. All the other days it was mostly kids. Once, a boy did an impression of a whale. I

couldn't read a word the rest of the day. I was kneeling in the rain and in my mother's blood again and I realised that I'd never got up.

Even that was something you could live with. I was the proof. Of course I had occasionally considered throwing myself under a train or slashing my wrists with a razorblade. But then it's not nice for the people who have to gather up your limbs or repaint the bathroom. My existence on the throne next to the water granted me the right to a slow death. Seventeen years I sat there. Until somebody drowned. Then they sacked me.

After the baths my nights became longer. My hours of sleep gradually dwindled. Until the alarm clock finally fell out of my head and I started finding it difficult to distinguish between light and dark. After that, others things started merging, like loud and soft, cold and hot, the important and the trivial. Three long days and nights I was overcome with a blind rage prompted by a curtain that wouldn't draw properly. When I finally ripped the damn thing from the wall it dawned on me that I hadn't eaten anything in all that time. I'd even forgotten my doughnut.

Going to buy my doughnut was my last attempt at a morning ritual. I attached a great deal of importance to it; after all morning rituals are a sign of a structured mind and my digestive system did have to have something to work on. So I walked to the same baker's every morning. The baker had grey hair and a pointy beard. At night he baked bread and old fashioned cakes; during the day he sold them himself with the faint smile of a magician. I found myself staring at his hands all the time. He had long, deft fingers that gave the impression he was about to conjure up a coin or a playing card. When I walked into the shop there were usually no other customers yet. He would be standing, contemplating a cake, or reading the newspaper. Then he turned to me with a look of recognition and waited. For years that man had been waiting to see what I would say. Our conversation always went the same way.

"Custard doughnut, please".

"A custard doughnut for Benoit. Bon appetit."

"Thank you".

I was Benoit and I liked custard doughnuts. My baker helped me start my mornings with structure, food and identity. Over the next few hours I could lose those three things again in the basements of the city. I sought out narrow streets to wander. It's impossible to say how long those walks took. Sometimes I came across crowds of people and I saw them talking to each other through me. I was a shade with a transparent body, without any noticeable body odour and in ordinary clothes.

I sat in bars, droning on to anybody who would listen. I laughed loudly at their feeble jokes and even louder at my own. I could conduct interminable conversations with dog lovers about cocker spaniels, with secretaries about paper. In the meantime I made furious attempts to develop a drink problem. My stomach continued heroically to resist.

Café Sport owed its name to the fact that the television only got switched on when there was football. Behind the bar stood Freda, an attractive middle-aged brunette. In her scarce free time she fabricated bead trees, which she placed on the bar with a price ticket in front. No one ever mentioned them, so I don't suppose she ever sold any. Except perhaps to Vicky, who did her best now and again to tear her eyes away from Freda's bosom and direct them at the screen.

"They're really great, Gallataseraï, aren't they Freda?" she would sometimes ask, quietly and hopefully.

Then Freda would reply with something like, "Yeah, those Greeks are pretty good. Or is that Palanitaikos?"

At which Vicky would nod, delighted, in agreement before retreating once more with a wistful smile behind her beer glass.

If someone corrected them by shouting, "It's the Turks!" then there was always someone else who shouted back, "Send them all back home. And be quick about it". There was usually little response to such remarks. As ignoring someone seemed to me the most powerful form of attack and it took no effort I didn't feel obliged to start kicking consciences. I just stood up and paid.

In and Franky's the jukebox still played the same old love songs.

"From the time when Jackie was still here," Franky would sigh. The name of his errant ladylove was still visible through the white plastering before the word 'and' on his facade.

"Well, I'm sure she regrets it," I said soothingly, as if that made everything all right.

"Oh, she will, she will!" he hissed, wagging his finger forcefully in my direction. "I told you who she fucked off with, didn't I?"

"With a twenty-five year old," I whispered almost guiltily.

"Jesus Christ, she's old enough to be his mother! Stinking piece of shit! Thinks it's all a game! Him with his convertible, throwing his dosh around. Hope he breaks his bleedin' neck!"

"Oh, come on now".

"Come on nothing! Dominic! What kind of a name is that? Be honest. Sounds more like a bleedin' poofter". After which Franky became absorbed in polishing the beer tap, grumbling away. "She was no fucking saint, either, mind. Not exactly pure as the driven snow, that's for sure".

Although his fury alarmed me at times – Franky always addressed me personally – I did my best to remain seated, because one time, when there were no other customers about, he said, very tenderly, "But I can still remember everything about her and I don't want to forget it, either".

After my mother there were other women. Some had her hands, others her voice, most of them her profession, too. I sought them out in run-down brothels with dark-red leather couches and paid them to let me sleep in their laps. There I lay, hoping that in the morning they would make a face

out of food for me. But it was always the same old doughnut and, if we got on too well, sometimes a smack in the teeth from a pimp. I wasn't intending to save anyone and for me any saving came too late. They could go.

My longest relationship lasted a year and a half. Her name was Klara and she was an infant teacher. I met her in group therapy. For two full hours we both stared as cynically as possible at the rest of the circle. All incest victims and lapsed priests. And that was supposed to make you feel better. Then our eyes met. Three days later we were living together.

When she was at work, Klara wove baskets, she admired drawings, tied shoelaces and sung things like, 'The wheels on the bus go round and round'. When she got home she drank half a bottle of whiskey, got on top of me and shouted, 'Harder, harder! Fuck me!' She couldn't cook, but it didn't matter. We went to the most expensive restaurants and walked out before the bill came. Once, we destroyed a hotel room together. When I saw Klara jumping in her underwear from the curtains to the crystal chandelier, just for a moment I felt perfectly happy.

We never talked about what had been or what was to come. We just had a lot of fun. Her laugh was memorable and pretty hysterical, her appetite for sex unparalleled. Once or twice she even managed to fuck me to sleep.

One night she said, 'I'm pregnant'.

We lay and stared at the ceiling in silence for a long time.

'I don't think it's such a good idea,' I said, finally, but I wasn't so sure.

'It's not a good idea at all.' That was her response.

After that, we had a good laugh about all kinds of disaster scenarios with us and that kid as protagonists. And about how she would get all fat and then that it would have to come out. No, she couldn't imagine that.

We were so touchingly in agreement over everything that we both started crying simultaneously on the way home from the hospital.

'Maybe it was a good idea, after all,' she said.

'I think it was,' I said.

We kissed each other's tears away and decided not to try and save each other. Later, I saw her again. She was tying her daughter's shoelaces and she smiled very politely.

As the bars had closing times and the rain often poured down in buckets onto the country I lived in I often found myself at the worst hours of the night between the four walls of my flat. I would lie on the bed and shut my eyes. Sometimes my brain sent little white explosions to the back of my eyelids. If I was lucky they changed into sunspots and slid from the palm of my hand through my fingers. Then I knew I was asleep and would bob up and down over the waves for a few moments on Frederick's back, soothed by a calm sense of the indefinable.

It was a recurring dream, which had accompanied my lucid moments of sleep for years. As I knew that I only returned to this state of bliss for such a short time I never attempted to talk to the whale. I was scared that words would wake me. So I lay with my back on his, staring at the sun through my hand. Our very own sea was calm; the seagulls showed not the slightest bit of interest and there was no coast in sight.

And then there always came the moment when I turned onto my side and seemed to fall asleep again. My mind lost all sense of consciousness. I could only feel feather-light arms nestling between mine, a warm belly that followed the pattern of my breathing and a skull that pressed against my forehead. A perfect embrace is hard to accomplish and, in waking hours, utterly unobtainable. But your body has enough memories to fashion you one in the last sigh of a dream, just before you are plunged once more into the humming of the world.

The night I met Maya started out strange. The preceding day crept by without nourishment. In keeping with my morning ritual I had gone down to the baker's but the door wouldn't open and there was a piece of cardboard hanging in the window, on which he had written in the cursive script he used for the top of the cakes, "Your baker is abroad temporarily enjoying life". I felt let down, but tried not to blame him. I would fry a couple of eggs, like I did on his compulsory weekly day of rest. But the prospect of spending the next few days without an identity killed my appetite and shackled me to the open window on the street side of my bunker.

I watched the passing cyclists with rucksacks, Turks pumping old Mercedes' full with tormented music, lost tourists showing their maps of the city to hurried parents at the school gate. My field of vision stretched from a snack bar to a chemist's. The two houses in the middle were in scaffolding. One was being sandblasted and the other was having its windows painted. The painter pointed enquiringly to the sandblaster's roll with his sandwich and he answered, "Liver sausage". There was nothing further to say to each other, so they drained their thermoses.

The parents found their children. If one of them glanced upwards, I raised my hand in greeting. They had no time to wave back. They were hastily dragged along by mothers for whom I was a potential Man With A Cellar. If the stupid cows had stopped to think about it, they might have realised that it was pretty illogical to assume a man living on the second floor possessed a cellar.

Underneath me was the Mauritanian consulate. No one ever called there.

Night fell and as there were no stars I looked at the moon. At three o'clock I had a cup of tea and ate half an egg. I dropped my cup and it smashed on the floor when my mother came riding up on a bike. She stood under my window and she had remained young. Nervously, she lit a cigarette and stole inside.

From behind the windowpane I watched her pressing the doorbells. As she was standing in the illuminated lobby she couldn't see she was being spied on. She continued unsuspectingly with her odd hobby. She had a feverish look about her, her hair was shorter and her smile was different. I quieted my turbulent stream of thoughts and stared in deep admiration at the girl who looked like my mother.