Paradox

Tukula Da Silva

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For my father, Mário Rui Silva, and my aunt Lita.
For those who left us too soon…
For my son, Salvador Kyene.

Prologue

In the arena of the tennis court, Mathéo is at home. A place where adults face one another like modern gladiators. Nineteen, and already embarking on a professional career. A lifetime of ferocious discipline has brought him to this moment.

His family is there, in the stands.

Dark glasses, as always when they appear together. *'The Stevie Wonder family,'* some people joke, half fondly, half mockingly. Behind those opaque lenses, another match is being played. A silent game of poker: calculated gestures, prolonged silences, the slightest movements of the head.

As at those meals where one word too many can overturn the table, each keeps their cards hidden, yet lets a fleeting emotion slip through in spite of themselves.

Up there, the stands seem to be playing a game of their own. Down below, Mathéo sees only a net and a white line. He bounces the ball, setting the rhythm. His mouth is dry; his fingers tingle against the grip.

He takes a deep breath, clears the stray thoughts from his mind, imitates his father's perfect impassivity. His heart thuds heavily in his

chest, as it did when, as a child, he watched for their shadows at the edge of the court.

He knows that love alone does not hold this family together: pride, things left unsaid and victories bind it too. Here, as up there, it takes almost nothing for everything to tip. A ball catching the net.

A moment suspended.

He loves this complicated, excessive, secretive family. But he also knows that a victory here can draw them closer… or shatter what still holds. Today, he is playing as much for the match as for them.

One last bounce. He fixes his gaze on the line, a precise target. *'Aim for the T,'* he tells himself. As one might aim for the very heart of a sentence to break a heavy silence.

The serve shoots out, taut and powerful. The ball cuts through the air, rises, then drops towards the T. In the stands, behind the dark glasses, three bodies freeze.

This point, Mathéo knows, will decide far more than a set: it may be the last path along which they still move forward together. For some balls, like some stories, never come back.

T., Becks, the twins — all bound by invisible threads. It is time to discover what has brought them here.

FIRST PART

Them

In this hotel room, impersonal and luxurious, perched above the city's indifference, T. and S. allow themselves a moment of chosen seclusion. Their nakedness, at once uninhibited and fragile, is reflected in the imposing mirror mounted on the wall opposite the bed.

— I love being naked with you, S. You're irresistible. I could eat you up.

— Give me your mouth, T.

The whispered request hangs in the air for a moment before he brushes her lips with his fingertips, then captures them in a feverish kiss. Together, they gaze at the raw reality: two naked bodies, united in the same harmony. They burst into laughter together, a truce in their ceaseless search for meaning in an absurd world.

As he joins with her, time here seems to warp, drawing away from the frenzy outside. The suitcases lie neatly unpacked, banners of their transience. The phones, emblems of an oppressive connected world, remain silent, ignored.

The view from their retreat turns the city into a meaningless scale model, where cars, reduced to mere toys, move in an almost comical fashion. At night, a spectacle of lights adorns the horizon. An almost surreal ballet of headlights, a scene devoid of any deeper meaning: white and red lights in constant motion, back and forth.

Within this bubble, every amenity — from the king-size bed to the smart television — briefly soothes their existential ennui. Even the choice between room service and the rooftop becomes a futile dilemma, of no real consequence.

A simple pursuit of instant gratification.

In their ivory tower, T. and S. confront one another in silence, prisoners of an existence whose edges are blurred.

Sometimes, they no longer need words. Only glances, the smallest gestures, an instinctive choreography governed by a rule they never put into words. Forehead to forehead, they remain there, motionless, their breaths mingling, coming in gasps, as if to reassure themselves that they still exist.

For T., this is the quintessence of happiness. Today does not matter, and tomorrow seems to have no place in their thoughts.

After the singular, absurd heat of their embrace, S. is there, pressed against him, having just put on black pyjamas, offering her presence to his hungry eyes. He contemplates her, studies her, undresses her with his gaze. Rapture.

By her presence alone, S. makes T.'s life implode. She turns his everyday existence into a symphony of joy and laughter. T.'s hands, like those of Edward Scissorhands, touch her with an almost unreal delicacy. When they brush against S., it is as though reality itself were

transformed. T.'s buried smile comes to life again in her presence, bringing with it a sense of freedom regained. Instead of roaring with rage, he bursts into laughter; instead of shedding tears, he offers a smile. Rather than growing irritable, he awakens to other people, to time, to the beauty of everyday life.

T. becomes aware of the richness of the present, of the value of life when others have already gone too soon. Their bond illuminates every moment, giving their life together an intensity they have never known. It is in this mingling of emotions, laughter and discoveries that T. finds a kind of ecstasy, a revelation of life's radiance.

Aroused by so many sensations, he wraps his body around S., pressing himself against her back. His forearms tighten to hold her against him. His heart pounds against her shoulder blades. His beard brushes the curve of her neck, setting off a shiver he senses travelling up to her nape.

She whispers in his ear:

— I love the feel of your beard. It prickles. It's delicious.

He takes her hands, gently interlacing his fingers with hers. His chest presses against her back, his legs entwine with hers. They are one now, a perfect fusion, aware that it could all end at any moment, in a few days, a few months or even a few hours. A fleeting, unreal sensation that makes the moment more exquisite still.

The words escape her lips in a whisper.

— T., hold me tight against you.

He rests his left hand on the curve of one of her breasts. He feels her breathing quicken. S.'s curly hair forms a captivating tangle around her face, a perfect image of T.'s inner chaos. There is a tragic beauty in

this confusion… A beauty that reflects the chaotic nature of their relationship.

Together, they form a discordant whole. Their embrace is not an act of love but a secret language, woven from skin and silence, that speaks their loneliness better than words. In this unspoken tension, S. slides her hips over T.'s knee, as if to ward off the spectre of separation, mingling instinct with calculation.

Amid this surge of romance, the apocalypse creeps in silently, muted and insidious.

T. feels it rising to the surface. Vicious, dark, unbridled. He senses that this skin, so soft, will turn to bramble. But the adrenaline is too strong. It takes possession of every cell until it invades his consciousness.

He is done for. He knows it.

No more control, no more limits. He knows this vertigo will sweep away everything in its path, like a rogue wave.

S. disentangles herself from the embrace. She studies the silhouette from every angle, her lips parted as though she might say something else. But nothing comes.

— I'm going to shower. Come with me. Afterwards, I'd like to walk a little, wander through the city by your side, and have you hold me in your arms.

T. accepts the invitation without hesitation.

Ready to offer his heart to pain, to suffering, to the play of emotions, he knows he is a willing participant. As in BDSM, he invents — or does not — a safeword, his only means of escape. But did he

really want it? Carried away by pleasure, they become illiterate, unable to remember even what that word means.

From the outset, the hypnotic power of their unexpected encounter has drawn him in, without his understanding why or how. He strives to conceal its inevitable consequences, pleading madness and ignorance as the perfect defence for retaining a semblance of reason. For a few moments, S. offers him the astonishing possibility, rare and precious, of living intensely: an improbable, extraordinary, intoxicating experience.

T. feels that, with S., his hidden side will no longer hold him back. All his life, he has fought this shadowy part of himself, polished this dark facet to fit in with others. S., with her heightened sensuality, draws him towards her. Attracted like metal to a magnet, he moves towards her, powerless to resist. A pebble sliding inexorably towards the precipice.

'In the immediate present,' he tells himself. *'You and me. Here and now.'*

T. allows himself this illusion of freedom. Not yet knowing that his heart will soon be caught in a vice.

T. tastes every inch of her skin. Hungrily. Like a crack addict.

This moment is a migratory bird: it may never return.

He holds it with his gaze, grasps it by the skin, gathers its warmth as one stores up light before nightfall.

Their embrace remains an enigma. Yet he is struck by this harmony, this score without a single false note.

Their union is destined to fade away. They know it.

This fault line makes happiness more vivid, rarer, like the pure air of the peaks.

It is ironic. Painful. Life distilled: absurd, ephemeral, splendid. With S., incoherence becomes grace. Their intimacy becomes a living tableau, a feast for the eyes.

For T., S. is magnetic chaos, the promise of a storm. He moves towards her as one walks towards a thunderstorm, determined to defy the future, whatever it may hold.

He surrenders to sleep in the gentle vice of S.'s arms, drifting to the muffled rhythm of an invisible sea, as though the entire Atlantic were rumbling beneath his skin.

He calculates nothing. He needs only to rest and savour the taste of her lips. They are beautiful. Alone in the world in this hotel room, anonymous among the anonymous.

Enveloped in a heap of cushions, S. has already closed her eyes.

S. squeezes T.'s hand hard, then holds on to it, as though reluctant to let go.

At last, she lays it on her flat stomach without a word.

The silence thickens, as though the city itself were holding its breath. Then, without warning, the opening notes of *I Want Your Love* enter his mind.

The brass trades phrases with deep bass lines, cut through by restless guitar riffs. The strings whistle in unison, weaving a vibrant, almost carnal exchange. This track is life: it swings, it sways, it makes you want to dance. Soothed by its pulse, T. sighs, lets himself drift… and falls asleep.

Life

The night was gentle, almost unreal. Morning, though, pulls no punches.

A screen lights up. A notification. A familiar voice — his nephew's — tells him what sleep had held in abeyance.

— You know, Heng's dead.

He reads the message again. Twice. Three times. Heng. His chiropractor. The only one who knew how to straighten out both his back and his thoughts. The world forgives nothing.

T. calls him back, careful not to wake S.

— What?! That's impossible. He wasn't even forty-five.

— I know… A heart attack, at work. The paramedics couldn't revive him.

T. cannot take it in. Their chiropractor. An extraordinary human being, full of kindness.

The man who had pulled him through so many physical problems… and mental ones. He had just crossed into the other world. The one you do not come back from.

Heng always said that the planet did not need more agitation, but more attention. T. thinks of those words as he considers what has surrounded us these past few years.

Losing Heng meant losing a point of reference in a universe already far too unstable. He had taught him that standing straight was not merely a matter of aligning vertebrae: it also meant facing the shocks of existence without letting them bend you.

Those shocks seemed to be growing stronger. And, as if to prove him right, the planet underwent its own session of *'forced manipulation'*: it stopped at the station called *'Covid'*, like a body compelled to keep still.

Governments, like hesitant chiropractors, tried to straighten a stooped system by injecting billions into its tired muscles, without ever easing its real points of tension.

T. saw in this the confirmation of a principle Heng repeated to him tirelessly: before making an adjustment, you have to understand where things are stuck. This idea had guided every decisive stage of his career, sometimes without his knowing it.

This pause, seemingly insignificant, became a powerful symbol before his eyes. A reminder that logic and order are sometimes no more than fleeting illusions.

T. could already picture Heng's calm half-smile, the one he wore when he thought people were making things needlessly complicated. He would have found the exact point where everything was seized up and, with a sure movement, restored suppleness to the whole. But now that hand, capable of restoring balance, was gone, and the collective spine bowed a little further each day.

His chiropractor's unexpected death left a brutal void.

Heng did more than fix his back: between adjustments, he talked about posture — not merely physical, but existential. Early in his career, he had encouraged him to observe before acting. That advice had changed far more than the way he worked: it had shaped the way he stood in relation to others.

Turning his gaze to the news, T. feels that same vertigo again. The world seems to be fighting itself: one conflict at the gates of the old continent, another in the heart of Africa, just as deadly but almost invisible. Between forgotten wars and influencers proclaiming themselves prophets, the planet gives itself over to a loud, hollow nihilism, unable to find its axis again.

Heng often told him that *'sometimes you must be prepared to bend, but never to break'*. That phrase, seemingly unremarkable, returns to him like a universal diagnosis. The world, too, sways like a tired body: conflicts, crises, imbalances… The shocks no longer come only from nerves or muscles, but from entire peoples and nations. The vertigo is the same, whether it is an ailing back or a planet out of breath.

And while bombs fall somewhere, elsewhere people's eyes are fixed on screens. Attention turns away from reality to lose itself in a theatre where drama is no more than interchangeable scenery.

The cult of celebrity then takes over the media, giving birth to monsters like TikTok — a name T. still finds utterly *'stupid'*. In these worlds, appearances are enough to turn the ignorant into arbiters of taste, and people follow the pronouncements of know-nothings who have become famous.

The age of the new apostles has arrived.

The shift towards instant consumption takes place openly, without apology. The pursuit of immediate satisfaction comes first; how long it lasts matters little, so long as it is intense. But following an idiot never makes anyone intelligent.

Today, some inhabitants of our beautiful planet, this dying globe, no longer look like anything at all. While access to information seems limitless, our memory rivals that of goldfish. The faces of mature women become the cosmetic industry's playground. Fighting the effects of time in vain, they end up looking like groupers: swollen lips, skin pulled tight into oblivion. The myth of being identically different. Always going further, whatever the cost.

Does hating this age necessarily mean being depressed? T. does not think so. His chiropractor's words still resonate within him like a mantra: *'We are complex beings. You are complex. Accept your flaws so that your strengths can grow.'*

Standing upright in this world — literally or figuratively — requires learning to observe before acting. And this is the lesson that has guided T., not only in his personal choices but also in his professional life.

For the past few years, T. has followed this advice to the letter. He enjoys his everyday life. From a very young age, he wanted to leave secondary school and plunge into working life. He wanted to feel whatever made adults doubt and come alive, the excitement of taking on responsibilities, earning a salary and doing whatever he pleased with his money.

Approaching fifty, a vintage Rolex on his wrist, he has *'made it'*, as Jacques Séguéla would say. He holds an enviable position in consulting. Before becoming a junior consultant, T. starts out serving coffee, lacking the required educational qualifications.

For twelve months, he deciphers the codes of this hushed, secretive world. He listens closely to exchanges between employees and team managers, patiently unpicking their quirks, their habits. Fluent in two languages, he can easily observe the most senior foreign managers, coming to understand the subtleties of the profession. Nothing particularly difficult, really: everything rests on a precise knowledge of the cases, built through intensive preparation. With the internet, all useful information — and useless information — remains close at hand; you only have to learn to sift through it.

With no technical or academic grounding, T. sets out to conquer this Everest, scrolling through screen after screen, day after day — a Herculean task. Quick-witted and responsive, T. wastes no time. Between photocopies, he teaches himself, collects data in Excel files, deciphers and analyses it. He pays meticulous attention to methods. He scrutinises candidates during interviews: their posture, their clothes. Most have no presence at all: faces still adolescent, ill-fitting suits, dull ties. When the HR director sees them, they look like a flock of sheep ready for slaughter. Those who stand out become immediately recognisable.

T.'s idea is to accept the rules so that he can better circumvent them, stand out, break free and take his chance. In a savage, deregulated labour market, education alone no longer necessarily opens doors. Besides an excellent education, candidates are now asked to speak about their hobbies, their passions, what they want from life. But for all those applicants who spend their lives studying and working themselves to the bone in miserable jobs just to pay the bills, having a passion is far from easy.

T. knows his unconventional background will cause him problems, but he thinks that by drawing attention to it he can spark something in the HR director's mind. He passes her every morning; she, too, has a shit life. From her tone alone, from the way she says hello, he can tell whether she has had a good night or a bad one. Sometimes he catches fragments of her telephone conversations. Is it her husband at the other end of the line? He does not know, but he studies the forty-something woman's voice closely enough to recognise her mood. He knows that a restructuring could throw her out on the street, leave her signing on at Pôle Emploi. She recruits people, but at her age she knows she is sitting in an ejector seat.

Always keeping abreast of changes in the labour market, she struggles to hold back the competition pounding at her door: young people armed with insolence, a thirst for conquest and audacity, with neither scruples nor respect for rules.

Cruel and merciless, the corporate world distils doubts, pressures and constraints. She knows its direct and indirect consequences better than anyone. Too young to retire, but too old for her job, she knows she is in danger. Already a devotee of hyaluronic acid, she is even considering a facelift, convinced that she, at least, will avoid the frozen faces of some of her colleagues. T. senses that fear in her eyes.

He keeps serving coffee and keeping his gob shut: the best vantage point. Until he discovers on the company intranet that a position is being advertised. He seizes the opportunity and gets the job, beating every other candidate, a cohort of morons fed on the dogmas of the grandes écoles. T. turns his flaws into strengths, meeting management's expectations with flair and thoughtfulness. His work of observation pays off. He feels adrenaline flood through him as he sits at his desk for the first time. His direct line, his business card, his secretary: at twenty-

three, he feels ready to conquer everything and rake in the money. When T. stands straight in the meeting room, he thinks of Heng: it was not merely a matter of his back; it was a way of inhabiting space.

Twelve months after being hired, T. is working wonders in the lair of capitalism. His company piles up profits; his pockets swell as fast as he rises. He spends freely, never forgetting to invest part of his earnings. His equation is simple: one euro spent, one euro stashed away. He knows everything can turn. As in a game of Russian roulette between two alcoholics, nothing protects him.

He makes the most of every moment, plunging with open arms into the winding channels of social success. He knows he will soon be playing for higher stakes: an important international position awaits him. The fight will be bloody, but he feels ready to smash everything, even if his fall could be as swift as his rise. His ambition has teeth that scrape the parquet; his heart pulses to the rhythm of his frantic runs on gym treadmills.

When management's decision comes, T. makes no fuss. He is passed over; they choose an heir who fits more naturally, a son of a good family with a less divisive pedigree. Does T. take offence? He does not give a fuck. His accumulated capital guarantees him an excellent return. His shrewd investments allow him to make money even without working. *'You can all go fuck yourselves,'* he thinks. *'I'll offer my services on a freelance basis, to you and to others, and I won't have to look at your dustbin faces every day.'*

This rejection is the best thing that happens to him. No longer confined to a single consultancy, he becomes a company unto himself. He works with whom he wants, when he wants and how he wants. As he writes his last email to his team and deletes his professional profile,

he thinks of the winding ways of fate. On the winning side of the game, his pockets full of stock options, he already has almost no need to work.

Nevertheless, his former HR director comes back to mind, summarily thrown out with statutory compensation as her only golden parachute. The excesses of cosmetic surgery have transformed her face, now frozen and misshapen, preventing any expression. T. has his whole life ahead of him. But her? It is hard for her to turn her failures into victories as he has just done. Yet he knows that, within this system, the boundary between his success and his downfall remains narrow, as fine as the one she crossed.

T. looks ahead. She looks into a distorting mirror. Two destinies, one system. And time, everyone's final HR director, delivers a verdict with no right of appeal.

He catches himself wanting to write to Heng, to tell him about this ironic victory. But the message would go unanswered. T. would have liked to tell him that he had followed his advice to the very end: observe, then act.

So he says nothing, leaving the void to answer in his place.

CEO

He has left everything behind, conquered everything — and yet a sense of something missing lingers, quiet, tenacious. That emptiness you sometimes feel once the battle is won, when the adrenaline subsides and the trophies stand in a row, silent.

Then September arrives. Mild. Sunlit. An Indian summer, soothing as a balm. In the living room, The Weeknd spills from the speakers, his voice warm and troubled. T. loves the guy: the brilliant bastard child of Prince and Michael Jackson, as he sees it.

Outside, the light shades subtly from violet to emerald to Klein blue. Life is good in southern Europe. The day begins like any other, calm and golden, until he notices a magazine lying on the kitchen counter. Becks is on the cover. Another one. A serious management journal with an international circulation.

He stares at the photograph for a moment, hypnotised by that predatory gaze he knows by heart. Then, almost despite himself, a smile comes. No ostentatious pride — more a wordless acknowledgement. He had loved her for that, too: the way she never lowered her eyes.

As he puts down the magazine, he remembers the very first time he saw her — not frozen in a photograph, but in motion, in that meeting room where the air already hummed with tension.

Their house has rung hollow since the twins left to study in the United States. Years ago now. The echo of their voices has died away, but their departure has made room. Room for something else. For revisiting the beginning.

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* *

For several years now, T. had been steering his own course as a freelancer, flourishing in this new life he had chosen for himself. As he approached thirty, he had climbed the ranks with disconcerting ease, encountered a multitude of new faces along the way, forged fleeting but significant bonds. This freelance existence had become his masterpiece, orchestrated with the precision of a symphony.

Given the road he had travelled, winding, strewn with successes as well as failures, he never complained about the outcome. Around him, a handful of young hotheads, quick and brilliant, ready to throw themselves at a problem as they would into water. With good people around him, he had won new clients, opened up markets and secured the future of his business. Recently, he had accepted a well-paid, highly interesting assignment: it was to last six months and fell squarely within his field. The task was to bring different minds into dialogue, chart a clear course through the fog, put the right tools in place so that everyone moved in the same direction. Work that straddled several worlds — complex, demanding, and therefore fascinating.

It was during a working meeting, as tempers rose, ideas flew and every problem was laid on the table, that Becks entered the room. T.'s colleagues, so often light-hearted, joyful and boisterous, fell silent and abruptly changed their demeanour.

Their team leader, her time taken up almost entirely by meetings and strategic committees, had decided to stop by the room to see this famous consultant at work.

When he saw her come in, a line of rap came back to him, blunt and funny, as though written for her: *'I come in like a bullet, no epidural.'* She, too, he sensed, did not mess about. Her gaze, with its natural authority — not the feigned kind conferred by a pedigree — had caught him instantly.

— Hello, I'm Rebecca Santos, Head of Operations and Strategic Development.

— T., independent consultant, he said, looking the boss straight in the eye.

He had already heard plenty about her. An iron hand, dry humour, a minister's diary. The local Margaret Thatcher, or so people said.

He was eager to find out for himself. He had decided to go straight at her, the way a boxer goes at a punchbag. It was a test; after all, this assignment was merely one more challenge. Losing it would not endanger his finances. He provoked her to see what she was made of. Would she take the bait?

T.'s trap worked. The crush was instant. To his team's great astonishment, Becks burst out laughing. She took a seat at the table and the meeting continued. It ended in a shuffle of chairs. As he slipped his notes into his bag, he sensed a shadow drawing closer.

— Tell me, what number can I reach you on?

Her voice was lower than he had imagined, almost conspiratorial. She had that slight crease at the corner of her lips you glimpse before a kiss. Her relaxed shoulders, her suddenly easy manner, immediately lent her an extra charm. She was flirting with him openly, without inhibition.

He asked for her phone and saved his number in it as T. Consultant. He tried to avert his eyes from her body, sculpted by hours of Pilates, her slender figure, her piercing gaze, her velvet skin. Her subtle make-up made her look slightly older: a way of concealing her youth to assert her authority in her professional world. Who was hiding behind that mask?

Mysterious, secretive, dark, she let nothing of her vulnerability show. Did her sun-browned complexion betray African origins? Was she a bloody foreigner, like him? Yet T. already sensed that she concealed an old weariness, armour weathered by battles.

Their chemistry was immediate. That very evening, they sat down to dinner together, wine lengthening their sentences, their glances erasing the rest of the world. Later, in the darkness, their bodies came together as though they had always known one another. And yet, beneath this simplicity, something more complex was stirring.

He felt it from the first few minutes: she was not a fling, but a trajectory. Even if the idea that she might one day become the mother of his children seemed, in that moment, almost laughable, almost like something from a novel — he did not dismiss it.

With Becks, everything seemed possible. Above all, everything seemed urgent. She seemed unshakeable, and yet, in the warmth of this shared silence, T. sensed a faint weariness, worn smooth over the years — the kind you hide beneath perfect control.

It was not merely desire. It was a meeting of two formidable forces, two hungers for life that recognised one another.

Their story was soon etched into the groove: two years later, their non-identical twins were born. He still remembered his son's tiny hand gripping his finger on the maternity ward, and their daughter's high-pitched cry that had made Becks laugh despite her exhaustion. With skin the colour of coffee and cream and almond-shaped eyes, they came into the world bearing the same weapons as their parents. Their faces exuded mischief.

As teenagers, they chose to leave home together. Curious about everything and eager to discover the world and its noisy contradictions, the twins soon wanted to learn other languages, get to know other countries and cultures. They left the nest as one jumps from a plane: with excitement, instinct and blind faith in the family parachute.

Outside, the storm was already rumbling — but they wanted to fly.

Vertigo

T. needs S. as she needs him.

Consumed by intoxication, desire and vertigo, he feels himself stand taller in her dizzying gaze, desired and desirable. Everyone wants her, everyone devours her, everyone looks at her, but he does not give a shit. He thinks he recognises her. The same cracks, the same madness, the same dark humour.

An almost conspiratorial perversion.

To stop lying, to be honest: they know this is what binds them. Inventing an impossible relationship is their mission. Two liars together cancel each other out; they have nothing left to hide from one another. Even dressed, they are naked; even stark naked, they are dressed. We are swimming in absurdity. To top it all, they have always known, from the very first minute of their encounter. From the very instant their eyes met.

T. has always pretended, always played a part. Lying has become his armour. He navigates appearances, plays with them. He lies to protect himself from others, to preserve that remnant of innocence that gives

him the strength to breathe and carry on among the living. The smell of cold coffee comes back to him, the smell of mornings when he invented a smile to face the world. Living like animals would be so much simpler: being mammals, living in a clan, obeying the strongest. A relationship of dominance and submission, the strength of the group to face times of crisis. With S., it is that instinct he finds again. Raw, direct, without detours.

Our consciousness has thrown all our behaviour out of balance. We lose our tempers with family, we lose our tempers with friends, we lose our tempers in public. We cherish one another, we hate one another, and our inner dial has to find the right setting amid all this surrounding mess. So, with all this bullshit, it is hard to be honest, hard to be genuine, hard to be ourselves. We try to reach an arrangement so we can adapt to the other person, understand them, seduce them, marry, mate. Life is a symphonic composition.

It alternates crescendos and decrescendos.

We play with yo-yos like little brats in a school playground.

A shutter slams in the distance. A sharp crack. Silence.

And in this endless game of adaptation, he wonders: has he been honest even once in his life? Has he always been honest in his relationships? Has he ever felt a shock like this? This need to blow everything apart, let everything out, like a lone athlete winning a competition after a hard-fought match? If he looks in the rear-view mirror, he knows he is lying to himself. But T. already wants to move forward. Despite the fracture of childhood, that sword of Damocles above his head. When will the sentence be passed? When will he accept his appetite for the abyss?

T. is pulled down like a freediver towards the seabed. And the ascent may be perilous — a blackout or pulmonary oedema is always a risk.

He is living through an emotional earthquake, a complete shipwreck.

S. has already dived into his fault lines, touched the roots of his torments with her fingertips. Perhaps one day she will decide to distance herself, to protect herself. If so, T. accepts it without resentment. Life is like that: a puzzle of moments that shatter and join, between deep scars and bursts of euphoria. The real challenge is to find that fragile balance, the one that sets us apart from the animal, that raises us to the human condition.

Sometimes a spark is enough: it sets everything ablaze, unleashes a storm or dies out in indifference. T. stands midway, tossed between two worlds, neither depressed nor at peace, but haunted by an inner drift, a poorly adjusted pendulum. Perhaps that is why this journey has unsettled everything: it set the pendulum creaking. This time alone together has acted as a catharsis. Talking to S. means letting go, laying down his truths without a filter or a detour. In her presence, lying becomes impossible, pointless.

This vertigo he feels with S. is not something he discovered with her. He has always carried it. Since the narrow corridors of his childhood, between an exhausted mother and an elusive father.

T. lays claim to being a man, with all the contradictions that definition contains: at once fragile and resilient, riddled with doubt yet borne along by a raw pride, the pride of a path wrested from adversity. There is no need to deny the feelings that pass through him; he welcomes them, watches them, decodes them.

Where he comes from, victory was never a given. His mother, a stooped figure in unfamiliar flats, cleaned up what others left behind. His father, a scratched guitar in his hands, played sad ballads in deserted bars. Those images inhabited his childhood, shaped his dreams, but T. never resigned himself to that life.

He stands there, vulnerable yet upright, aware of what he has conquered, of what he has lost. The weight of the past no longer stifles him; it lives within him.

T. recognises an echo of himself in S.

That flame he has spotted in her eyes, a vibrant spark, a fierce will to win that leaves no room for naivety. S. moves forward as he does, driven by a thirst for recognition, shaped by battles she has fought alone. She started early, put in the hours and took the insults. How many times has she had to grit her teeth under condescending looks, at inappropriate remarks, at doors slammed in her face? In this world, where women's ambitions cause unease, she has not bent.

T. admires her without reservation. She improvises, adjusts, slips through the cracks, a chameleon taking on the mood of the moment to better adapt to it. Everything in her breathes freedom and raw strength. He would like to thank her, tell her how profoundly her arrival has overturned his existence, blown apart his certainties, swept away his choices like a violent wind carrying off everything in its path. Thanks to her, he no longer drifts through his habits; he breathes, he dreams, he acts.

S. has calculated nothing, and it is precisely this spontaneity that shakes him. She offers him magnificent chaos, pure madness, free of masks or strategy. And if there were a price to pay, if his soul were to be eroded by it, what would it matter? All that counts is this fire burning

within, this energy that lifts him every morning, that sharpens his determination to forge a path true to his values while flirting with the unexpected.

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His plane flies over the Balearic archipelago, where he went in his youth. The urge to go back with her overwhelms him. Catch the clubs' end-of-season parties in October. He can already see himself on the beach with S., tourists' eyes fixed on her goddess-like body.

He dreams of it at night.

He wants her to know that the weeks since their encounter have been among the richest of these past few years. It was the end of lockdown. With the children and Becks gone, life had begun again. Yet he had felt alone and vulnerable. Then S. arrived. Despite his heart being in tatters, his soul emerged stronger, more powerful and more determined than ever. An inexhaustible energy now flows through his veins.

He would love to keep opening new chapters with her, on the shores of the Mediterranean or the Adriatic Sea. Wherever she wanted. To melt into the streets and the crowds, mingle with the anonymous.

He knows it can all stop in an instant.

So he closes his eyes.

He dives again. As at that first glance.
He is already running out of air, but he does not come back up.

Ping Pong

Their encounters have woven themselves into a secret, intermittent pattern. S., an intense, enigmatic presence, has become his unwitting confidante. She reads T.'s life like an open book. Their strange, ambivalent relationship now spans several years and fits seamlessly into their flexible schedules.

S. haunts him. Some nights, the memory of her takes the shape of a nightmare. The very kind that made us wet the bed as children, that sent us to our parents' bed. The same terror that made us jump as teenagers at the sight of Freddy Krueger and his striped jumper. The innocence of childhood, reawakened and magnified by S., takes an unpleasant turn: insidious, prickly, full of bumps.

Lying naked on her back, S. lets herself be carried along. T.'s warm, magnetic hands subdue her. She feels the pressure of each of his fingers as they glide over her body. With her eyes closed, she wonders how she has come to this, at T.'s mercy. She desires him here and now, ready to be possessed, repossessed, devoured. When T. slips his hands between her thighs, she wants him. Ready to be unleashed, to melt, to lose herself, to annihilate him.

S. knows the danger, but surrenders to it. She knows that T. has this rare power: to sense her fault lines and brush against them until they become desire. Lying on her stomach, her breasts pressed against the mattress, she gives herself over. But T. takes his time, his hands delicately tracing the curve of her breasts.

When T. whispers in her ear, *'I love your breasts. They're perfect,'* S. melts like ice in the desert. She wants all of him in her mouth, his powerful cock in her throat, to swallow him whole even if she chokes, right here, right now, this instant. *'I want you in my mouth, T. Now.'* Like the left and right cheeks of an arse, they are inseparable.

The touch of her nipples, taut and responsive beneath his fingers, sends a wild tension rising through T.

Nothing artificial: just flesh, blood, the truth of a woman's body that has already brought life into the world, every nerve vibrating with intensity. No intruders such as implants, just softness. Everything about S. is natural. Her amber skin is the colour of original sin. Soft as a baby's, it slides beneath T.'s hands. He feels every millimetre of it as the sight of her perfect buttocks seizes him. Lightning has just struck him; a jolt of seismic violence beyond anything he has known, the tidal wave of devastating passion. The one that will have you sending texts and WhatsApp messages at ungodly hours, writing that without the other person you are nothing, that will carry you into a universe where the rules have been abolished. The one that will take you into a world of pleasure rarely reached. The one that will make you feel unique. The one that will make you lose your mind. T. wants her with an innocent, almost childish desire; it becomes visceral and hypnotic.

So when she takes him into her mouth, their bodies catch fire. They fit together like animals in heat, for they both know that their rare,

precious affinity will be no more than a fleeting episode in their lives. He takes her as though they were alone on a desert island, where time no longer mattered, where they would be one.

But time always reasserts itself in the end.

A few hours later, alone at the wheel, T. feels the contemplative atmosphere of M83's *'Lower...'* seep through the car, setting the speakers vibrating and replaying their moments together. A salty tear slips gently from his right eye, trickling down to wet his lips. He hates this feeling of vulnerability, but loves as much as he curses the pleasure that takes root and grows deep inside him. Passion is felt all the more intensely when it leads nowhere.

His heart jolts. It tears free of his chest as ferociously as the creature in Alien. He sees it lying there, dying, beating faster than the pulse pounding from the speakers at a wild rave. Then, slowly, he imagines it fading like a terminally ill patient.

And yet there are thousands of women younger, more beautiful, more radiant than S. In an attempt to forget S. — or perhaps to sabotage his relationship with Becks once and for all — T. has ventured into the arms of other women. Perfect bodies, smooth and precisely proportioned, breasts rising like promises in the light, satin skin, delicate scents drifting through the air like confessions. They were flawless, down to the curve of their lips, down to the precision of their movements.

But something was missing.

That disquieting, almost unnerving something that burns in S.'s gaze. That subtle blend of distrust, irony and cruelty. A barely veiled gleam of malice, a hint of sadism in the pupil. T. sensed it at their very first meeting, like a silent warning. These traits, which might have

seemed so incongruous alongside her raw, natural beauty, held him in thrall. He felt drawn to her, inexorably, as though his whole soul were seeking that vertigo.

With S., it was not just a matter of flesh, or even of domination. It was that taut thread between them, that almost painful tension, that always brought him back to her.

Intoxicated by his senses, T. has plunged into vice and lust.

'Bite me. I love it, T. Feeling your teeth on my arse is even better. I like it to hurt. I want you to leave your marks on me, to have you under my skin.'

As soon as he fell for her, he knew it would hurt. There was no prospect of a happy outcome; they knew their story would not end well.

S. holds T. in the palm of her hand. He is vulnerable, at her mercy, out on his feet.

Family

And then came that interlude. That strange interlude when the whole world stopped, when bodies returned to what mattered. To home. To their roots.

'And I find that less absurd than the circus the family has become — at least my parents didn't rely on us to feel good about themselves, or to fill some vague void in their identity. These days, kids have been turned into essential accessories for their progenitors' image.'

Virginie Despentes | *Cher Connard*

As the whole world prepared to live in isolation, the twins took advantage of their holidays to visit their parents. Delighted to have them there, Becks and T. arranged to spend a few days at their beach house. They had managed to juggle their overloaded schedules. The news spoke of a flu that was devastating China. It seemed so far away, with the streets in a frenzy of activity day and night.

One February morning, T. drove Becks to the airport and began to imagine the city shut down, the restaurants closed, flights restricted,

while planes took off and landed every minute. It would be an economic disaster. This prospect seemed remote and unlikely to them, and yet… So when, in mid-March, they saw their city closing in on itself and restrictions being introduced, they could scarcely believe it. Glued to the television, they watched in disbelief. The children would be stuck in the house. As for their working lives, trips were cancelled one after another. For T., who made his living as a business consultant, things were becoming complicated. For Becks too.

At the same time, T. was delighted to have the twins with him: it had been ages since the four of them had spent any time together as a family. One evening he watched them, each behind a screen, talking to their friends while sharing the family meal. He thought this was the great paradox of the age: more connected than ever, yet seemingly further apart than they had ever been.

Duly armed with the necessary permits, they drove to their beach house, just in time before it became impossible to travel without being stopped and checked. The house had been completed a few months earlier. It was vast, secluded among pine woods, lavender and untamed nature. The heated swimming pool held pride of place among the acacias and pines, reflecting the sunlight in golden splashes. Spacious suites and an immense living room made up the main body of the house. They certainly wouldn't be getting under each other's feet! To stay in shape, they could use the treadmill and weight machines in the gym with a view. Below, the wild beach stretched for miles, with no other properties overlooking it, the crash of its waves audible all the way up at the house. An invitation to stroll with their feet in the waters of the temperamental ocean.

Confined together, the four of them would enjoy true luxury: space and silence, far from the cramped city flats. Life has this unfair way of dividing people. Perhaps the twins would bicker… as they did that morning when Aline accused Mathéo of hogging the connection for his lessons, while he was secretly watching match highlights. Ten minutes later, they were making a cake together, laughing as they had when they were children.

The days of innocence were far behind them, when they would come, hair tousled, to nestle against their parents' chests and share a dream, a nightmare, or simply be there. To share their joys, their sorrows, their doubts and their sadness, that pure love that asks for nothing in return. To protect them from the chaos outside. Despite their overbooked schedules, Becks and T. had always found time to be there for their children, to give them role models and points of reference. Arguments? Yes, from time to time they had to make them listen to the voice of reason, but also instil in them the values of family and sharing. *'You're privileged, but life isn't this easy for everyone.'* To teach them to be independent, never to depend on anyone, but also to give them the means to recognise the partner who would help them grow.

Video conferences followed one another at a frantic pace: school for the children, work for the parents. Each at a laptop or tablet, they kept up with life from a distance. In the evenings, they gathered around the dining table for long meals, debating this surreal situation. The wood fire warmed the dry chill of March, spreading warmth and comfort.

Humanity was living through one of its most intriguing and fascinating events.

Once again, humankind wanted to defy death, but was unprepared; governments confined their populations because they lacked the means to confront this invisible threat. T. shook his head. In the twenty-first

century, he thought, we should have done better. In some parts of the world, the most vulnerable were dropping like flies, people were losing loved ones without even being able to kiss them one last time. A lottery with neither rules nor values had the Grim Reaper working at full capacity.

T. savoured every minute of this parallel world, where the sky, freed of aircraft fumes, shone brilliantly, where the echo of silence rang through streets emptied of passers-by. He made the most of the twins' presence, drawing and redrawing the contours of this complex, ambiguous world. *'Becks, I'm happy when the four of us are together with nothing to distract us, just us, our family and the uncertainty of tomorrow.'* His words were truer than he knew: the children would leave the family home for good at the end of July.

The end of winter brought a scent of freedom. The children were counting the days. So was T., but for different reasons: he knew that every sunrise brought their departure closer.

The longer evenings coincided with the first easing of restrictions, making those last days all the sweeter. It had been an immense joy to share these moments as a family around the fireplace. Becks and T. had taken the opportunity to find each other again beneath the sheets.

Their skin had changed since they first met; the weight of age was making itself felt, but they took care of their bodies, ate healthily and exercised every day. When T. finished a conference call, he would take the opportunity to study his wife, whose eyes, too, were fixed on her computer all day. He found her beautiful, alluring, and she was there, available, close beside him. But opportunities to be alone were rare, so when they found themselves together in the shower or beneath the duvet, the fire never went out.

Quite the opposite! They loved making love. A little foreplay, but not too much. They knew what the other liked, how to reach that fountain of pleasure, that intensely private moment when you surrender for a few instants, trembling with pleasure and tenderness.

The end of lockdown was approaching, and silence would once again fill every corner of the house, for the children were preparing to return to their schools abroad.

Planes were taking off again, and the world was resuming its daily routine of global exchanges and instant communication. What had our generation learnt from this interlude? Would we be able to grasp its implications and learn its lessons? Would humanity repeat the same mistakes?

T. and Becks doubted it.

Experience had taught them that you could not change people. Group dynamics, however, did work: society gave birth to new phenomena that then found their way into the dictionary, such as MeToo or wokeism. T. watched the news feeds scroll past. Here, everyone had an opinion. Everything, right now. Social media had torn down the barriers, but patience too. He thought that now you had to walk a tightrope: speak without saying too much, or risk being labelled, pigeonholed, cancelled.

Our attention spans had shrunk to almost nothing, and our memories rivalled a goldfish's. The twins would now have to learn to navigate this *'world after'*, made even more digital by the invisible threat of the virus.

As for Becks and T., they would take to the road again, as far as Europe's borders to begin with. On the morning of their departure, with the suitcases packed, Aline and Mathéo turned back for one last look at the house. T. felt a pang: this silence already foreshadowed that of a nest soon to be empty.

At the end of April, the storm rumbled, bringing torrential, devastating rain and dark, low clouds. Amused by these new prospects, the couple looked at each other with love and tenderness, fully aware that the interlude had come to a definitive end.

The silence would return. But this time, it would no longer be the same.