

## Puzzled

### Daniel:

I guess you could compare it to the weather. You know that feeling when you see those skyscrapers against a black-grey sky from your office cubicle and for a moment you're convinced that you'll be stuck in this day forever? Yet somehow, later that day, your mind turns to other things, you make phone calls that pull you out of your funk, you're talking to Mike or Randall about the odds of winning the lottery or something and just as you're going to the men's room, you happen to glance outside to see, to your amazement, a sun-drenched parking lot that suddenly looks like it's midsummer. The breeze that blows in through the windows takes you back to a timelessness you only know from your childhood. Now I'm not talking about 'after the rain comes the sun' or any of those other clichés that Eileen from Research & Development likes to hand out all the time. What I mean is how unreal it can be that two states of mind that are so opposed to each other, and that both feel so profane and permanent, not only seem to fit into one and the same life, but even into one and the same day. And yet, that's exactly how it was today: between this morning's fight and now, hardly ninety minutes have passed, but it feels like a memory of years ago.

So anyway, this morning I woke up with this splitting headache. Annie keeps telling me we should get better pillows, but

we both know that I've been staying up too late to work on that new song. An ode to her, by the way, which ironically sees no progress exactly because of her. Yesterday she kept interrupting me during my writing session, nagging about practical shit like the bill for cleaning our boiler and dinner plans with friends we hadn't seen in a long time. I mean, Jesus Christ, the rule we'd installed that Tuesday nights are for me and my music didn't even seem to exist anymore. When we were just living together, it was enough for the two of us to lie on the couch every night while I tried out some ideas on the guitar. But somewhere along the way a flat screen HD television came along, and a car, and a boiler that had to be maintained, and a job that could pay for my share of the mortgage without keeping me away from my music in my spare time. That's how life goes, we knew that, but only yesterday it got through to me how far Annie had drifted away from me in the meantime. And if I couldn't even get her interested in my music anymore then why did I torture myself at the age of 37 by trying to write my own material?

When I finally crawled into bed next to her, she was already fast asleep. For an hour or so, I just stared at two black swipe marks on the ceiling. Neither of us knew how they had gotten there. Then I tried to calm down by adjusting my breathing

to hers. But where she seemed to be able to dream a whole dream on a single breath, I breathed in and out as if I had just run for my life.

In the end it took until this morning, when she was in the shower and I was preparing my packed lunch in the kitchen, for me to finally give in to the terrible sadness of it all. The direct cause was rather trivial; she had made her trademark home-made peanut butter which I always thought tasted too sharp, almost nauseating to be honest, although I had never dared telling her that. My silence on the subject was well-intentioned, I mean, I didn't want to hurt her feelings, you know? How should I have known that she'd make a habit of doing me a favour with it? And after a while it was simply too late to speak up and I had to make a habit of tacitly enduring the ordeal time and again. But over the last few weeks, this routine has brought with it a miserable new insight: what if she too had been pretending all this time that she loved my songs, while secretly, well... finding them nauseating?

By the time she entered the kitchen with her damp hair wrapped in a towel, so much was going on in my mind that I finally broke. I wanted to ask her if she still loved me, what had happened to the fire in our relationship, and if she had plans to leave me, but instead the only thing that escaped my mouth was:

don't you like my new song?

My voice broke halfway through the miserable utterance, making me sound all the more fragile. But instead of taking advantage of this sudden display of vulnerability to comfort me, she only made it worse by looking at me with a startled look on her face, saying nothing at all. The infinity of the moment that followed, in which the buzzing of the fridge seemed to underline the painful silence even more, caused me to storm out in shame and flee into the grey morning traffic with screeching tires.

When I arrived at the office, the rain had turned into a heavy storm and the branches of the willows in the parking lot were loudly hitting the side of the aluminium exterior of the building. In my head I kept hearing how ridiculous the crack in my voice had sounded:

don't you like my new song?

Judy, who has had her desk opposite mine for four years now, was wearing a frayed, ochre-coloured, worn-out sweater, an abomination that, in my opinion, one shouldn't even wear *at home*

in case someone rings the doorbell unexpectedly. When she got up and went for coffee, I noticed that part of the rim of her jeans was stuck in her left sock. My sensitivity to detail was triggered; in no time my outlook on everything in the office was poisoned by an overwhelming sadness: the soulless aquarium next to the coffee machine and the water dispenser, the framed, discoloured posters of the company's earlier advertising campaigns, or the way in which Geoffrey, our ten-year-younger boss, with his secretary Santana tailing him like a shadow, was shooting from one side of the room to the other as he squinted his left eye even more fiercely than usual. More than ever, this nervous tension caused me to feel a great deal of pity, a feeling of immense sadness at the thought that this mundane job, selling ink for photocopiers, had given him a permanent twitch, a scar from his service in the trenches of office life. I looked at Mike, Randall, Cathy, Steven and Eileen, and I saw the same, all-encompassing greyness everywhere. But the biggest horror I felt when I turned my gaze to myself and came to realise that I had made the exact same choices as everyone else here. The old sweater, the washed-out shirt, the good enough-for-work trousers, the flattened hat hair: it all stared at me from the reflection in my screen. That morning I too had put on my

uniform of mediocrity for yet another useless day of dull office work.

Of course, May 2017 came to my mind again. I should keep a permanent eye out for that, the shrink had warned me. I was taught some practices to calm myself down, but I knew how easy it was for me to funnel towards the dark. And if I were to embrace it, what would stop me from going all the way this time? I was gradually entering the danger zone and, bearing my past in mind, I knew that only a divine intervention could help me.

Right at that moment she came in.

When I saw her through the glass door standing in the entrance hall of the building, I thought I was daydreaming for a moment, but she was definitely there: Annie, soaked and helplessly looking around in search of someone who could receive her. She looked a bit like a feral person that people would label as 'confused': hair peaking in all directions, a frantic gaze she had seemingly fixed on something invisible to me, and in order to complete the surreal image, she was clasping my lunch box in her hands. I jumped up, hurried to her and when she saw me coming, her face broke into a cautious smile. "You forgot your sandwiches," she said, seemingly shy.

"I know how much you love that peanut butter" she stuttered after it.

The way she stood there grabbed me by the throat. In that one image, all the things I loved Annie for converged: her willingness to withstand such a downpour, the fragility of arriving at the office in that cheap raincoat of hers, completely drenched and the sandwiches with her peanut butter that – admittedly - tasted foul, but that she nevertheless had made especially for me assuming she was doing me a favour, with those big, hazel eyes which, certainly since May 2017, had the power to drag me through anything. Somewhat solemnly she handed me the lunch box and after a brief hesitation she finally saved me with the words I had been craving to hear all morning:

"I love your new song, Daniel." Then she kissed me, turned around and left just as suddenly as she had come.

*"I love your new song, Daniel."*

Just as unexpectedly as the sun could break through the cloud cover and reveal all the world's hidden beauty, one sentence had changed my outlook on life. When I walked back to my desk, I was hearing music. I seemed to be lighter - moving was easier and I

was breathing again (something I had somehow forgotten to do until then). Who was that man I had been upon my arrival in the office? The one who could no longer see the wonder of what? Of anything?

I joined Judy and Randall, who were having a chat with Geoffrey and Santana, and where just moments before I saw nothing but exhausted colleagues, I now saw the colourful and wonderful game which essentially makes up human contact. And in a voice that sounded lower, fuller and more relaxed than I had heard myself talking in ages, I said: "What a beautiful sweater you're wearing today, Judy."

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### **Annie:**

I've always seen myself as a simple woman just trying to be true to her feelings. Especially when those feelings manifest themselves in the form of music. That's also how I ended up with Daniel, you know. I was 22 and out with my girlfriends. Just when it appeared to become a boring night, I heard music coming from the Pollock, a somewhat grubby pub for older students at the time. A melody, sung by a warm, male voice took me by the hand and pulled me in. I could only convince my friends to enter such a bar

under the pretext of being out of the cold for a second and to make further plans for the evening. And that's where I first saw him. Him, on that stage with his guitar and his own music. It felt like time travel without any logical direction: as if I could see an unwritten future with him that at the same time felt like coming home to a distant, familiar memory.

That's almost 11 years ago today.

This morning, as soon as he got up, he complained about neck pain again. I wonder whether maybe our pillows offer too little support, but he ignores me when I offer my suggestions, so I'm like fine, Google it yourself, then.

You'll understand that, at all costs, I wanted to avoid an argument so as not to break the daily routine. Pretty sneaky, I know. Go ahead and judge me for that if you want. But if you think you know yourself, try being unfaithful to your loved one. Anyone who has to hide deception in love from his or her partner has to become a sophisticated mimic of his or her own daily behaviour to be able to hide the fact that something is going on. I'd had to learn to realistically impersonate myself and believe me: you have no idea who you are until you've seen your own body language in the mirror screaming out: 'Is this a good portrayal of who I am and what I do every day?'

I stepped out of the shower, wrapped my hair in a towel and only then I realised that Daniel might find it strange that I washed my hair on my day off. Maybe that's why I walked into the kitchen a little too briskly, who knows. Anyway, the way I found him in there kind of petrified me. He looked cornered, like a wild animal in danger, so in a split second I was convinced that I was found out and I'd get thrown everything at me: the affair, how long it had been going on, why it had to be Dendrick, someone he looked up to, etc. For one very dark and heavy moment, the inevitability of disaster was in the air and I saw everything we had built together come down to a pile of rubble. But to my great relief he finally broke the silence by simply asking... if I liked his song. I must have looked surprised and relieved at the same time, and to make matters worse I felt my face go red - which, as Daniel will tell you, only happens when I'm caught lying. Fear had me paralyzed and I completely stopped, rendered speechless. Hurt by my inability to answer, he stormed out of the house.

The minutes that followed went by in a haze of panic and despair; my heart was racing, and for a brief moment I couldn't breathe and I can't remember for sure, but I think I even sat on my hands for a moment to stop them from trembling. Where did this outburst come from so suddenly? Had I been noticeably less

enthusiastic about his song yesterday? Had I not given him the validation he was craving because my date with Dendrick was already occupying too much space in my head? Had Dendrick spoken to anyone and had the rumour reached him like that? Or was everything a misunderstanding and did I run the risk of exposing myself when he was just having a bad day?

Then I saw something that suddenly brought me to my senses, however mundane the image was; on the counter was still his lunchbox with his peanut butter sandwiches.

*My* peanut butter.

The importance I attached to this may seem absurd to an outsider, but if you knew him as I know him, you would know how crazy he was about that peanut butter and how real the chance was that he would come home to get it once he had calmed down, perhaps during his lunch break. Before my mind's eye, a disastrous scenario unfolded: Daniel's key turning the lock around noon. Calling my name, he hears stumbling in the bedroom, comes in and finds me naked in bed while Dendrick is hiding in the closet. (Not that I understand how lovers in cartoons always hide in closets: what kind of closet just lets you just step inside for a moment, with all those suits and shirts? Not ours, anyway). I

couldn't even imagine what Daniel would do if he caught me with Dendrick. Needless to say, May 2017 came to my mind again.

I grabbed the lunch box, put on my coat, and left for Daniel's work.

On the bus ride through town I kept hearing him asking: "Don't you like my new song?" There had been a fragility in his voice that I found particularly painful - which I somehow even seemed to *blame him for*. Who the hell had he become since 2017? Was I supposed to just say goodbye to the Daniel I moved into the apartment with years ago? The version of him that wasn't so goddamn dependant on my opinion of him and could survive for five seconds without that persistent plea for appreciation that I've been feeling so goddamn responsible for lately? I became annoyed and agitated as I realized how his behaviour pressured me into endless overthinking, calculating, anticipating. Until then, I had been able to organise my treachery in such a way that it could just happen without much effort. But because of Daniel's fifteen minutes of drama, one simple act of adultery now meant I had to make the choice to be rained upon, to let myself be rushed on public transport, and later to sweet talk the office receptionist into letting me in. The whole thing made me obstinate like a sullen child, but at the same time more combative and determined; it was

only then that I noticed that I had been pressing the lunch box tightly against my chest the whole time, which made me look like a young mother in a black-and-white war movie who was holding her baby close to her during her escape from soldiers.

I guessed which stop would be closest to Daniel's work and got off, struggled a long way through the storm, via a narrow strip of footpath next to the main road before arriving at the office complex fifteen minutes later, completely soaked, (and noticing to my great annoyance that there was a bus stop in front of the building).

In the high entrance hall, my steps echoed with an iron resonance. The counter was abandoned. Only when I stood there, did I realize how much I wanted to disappear - fall apart, break into smaller units, disintegrate into millions of particles that each went their own way and would forever forget what inhumanity they were once part of. But a noise startled me out of my musings, and then I suddenly saw Daniel standing in front of me.

Young Daniel.

Old Daniel. Tired Daniel. Handsome Daniel. Troubled Daniel. Pile-of-Misery Daniel.

I stammered that he had forgotten his sandwiches and that I knew how much he liked that peanut butter. He looked at me in silence and, to my surprise, looked simply happy.

But behind that smile I saw again crystal clear the helpless man I woke up next to, a shadow of the artist I'd once fallen for.

Talented Daniel.

This was what was left of him. That sweater, those pants, that hair, that face; a pile of pale features that could be made or broken by the approval he would or would not get from me. Little Annie. Insecure Annie. Strong Annie. Hopeless, horribly hopeless, hopeless Annie.

To avoid that, as I had let happen before, my silence would be the worst possible answer. I finally said, "I love your new song, Daniel", and something broke inside him on the spot, filling him up. But as a reflex, I turned on the moment, kept it short, blocked it. No tears.

Hopeless Annie had plans.

Only I didn't have plans anymore. On the way home, I knew I'd have to call off Dendrick. The discouraging nature of life overwhelmed me, combined with the realization of how little effort I had left for Daniel, a man who would do anything for me,

while I myself seemed willing and ready to waste everything I had and was for a tacky, momentaneous, superficial affair with Dendrick. Where Daniel seemed to be made up of elements that were under discussion until they received my definite 'yes' or 'no' (which, in a way, came down to my approval confirming or denying his whole existence), I had no interest in his approval anymore. On the contrary - I even noticed that I not only rejected his consent, but even felt a terrible urge to despise it, laugh at it, humiliate and hurt it, scare it off, and instead yearned for the blessing of something ordinary, something futile, something hopelessly superficial, like a child longing for a cheap trifle from the fairground display. I had sworn to always be true to my feelings, but in recent years, staying faithful to Daniel had increasingly become a daily betrayal of something bigger. What do you do if staying with your partner is tantamount to being disloyal to yourself?

Dendrick didn't answer. Not when I called from the bus, not when I tried again after I got off the bus. I knew he'd be on his way, and that it'd even be difficult to get to our apartment before he did. (The only thing I ever managed to get Dendrick on time for was a sex date. For the rest, being late was his thing; he boasted about time being currency; whoever had people willingly giving



them their time, waiting for them, owned time and was therefore rich. But when it came to sex, he was more like a junkie impatiently waiting next to you at the ATM until you threw your money at him.)

I had only just kicked off my shoes when he rang the door. I ruffled through my hair in the mirror next to the front door, took a deep breath and silently counted to three before I opened it. He was leaning into the vestibule, lurking at me from above his sunglasses that he had deliberately put low on his nose. There was a good chance that he was mimicking a scene from a film, as usual, but I didn't understand the reference. I tried not to start off too hard so as not to push him out - but I knew exactly what I would say to him once he gave me the chance; that this morning had perhaps been the special series of consecutive events we needed to see that this trivial thing had been claiming space where there was no room to be found. That we should count our blessings. That the chance that such a moment would never exist outside the two of us was rather small, but that we had made it, that we had experienced a story that had only taken place between two people, void of the rest of the world. And that we should therefore be thankful, and that fate should not continue to tes-

but instead he came in without saying a word, kissed me on the lips and pushed me into the hall, all fired up and aggressive. He cut off my words with his obtrusive kisses and chased me like I was his prey, which repelled a part of me, but an equally big part of me was hugely turned on by it.

The next moment we were in the bedroom. He threw me on the bed and got on top of me. I have no recollection of how we got there - our clothes scattered all over the room. I spread my legs, let him position himself between them, swung my head back and let him enter me; the one piece that was missing in a cheap and simple puzzle that only made sense to the two people in that room. I didn't think of anything anymore and only felt my body, a set of nerves and connections that seemed to be one with Dendrick. From my haze I looked up and focused on the mirror next to the bedroom door, which offered a view of Dendrick's ass going up and down between my legs, and I can't begin to explain how much the vulgarity of it excited me.

"Tell me how hot I am," I said, as always during our lovemaking.

"You're so hot", he panted back as always.

"Tell me you want me", I groaned.

"I want you so fucking hard..."

It was music to my ears, the melody and the rhythm of an exciting song that confidently took me by the hand and knew exactly where to lead me in this short - far too short - life.

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### **Geofrey:**

It's not easy to have your whole life centred around ink. It's not a party hit, nor does it generate any spicy anecdotes. So, as a boss, I try to ensure that I can motivate my employees in a different way. Since I've been at the helm here, we have something going on every day: sharing-is-caring Tuesdays, work-out Wednesdays, weekly happy hour on Fridays... Not to mention our theme days such as Halloween, Open Office day or the team weekend in December. Of course, I do know that some people prefer to just show up and do their job, I am very aware of that. People who are secretly nostalgic for the time my father ran this company. Marc, for example, has left the company; said he couldn't focus due to the many events I had set up. All right, candid feedback, I can live with that. It's just that, see, he wasn't being paid to see the bigger picture, and I was. Many people don't realise that their so-called "diligent work ethic" is installing a

pattern they will pay for later in their lives. Preventive unwinding, that's what it's all about. If not, you'll end up like my dad.

He died during working hours, you know. They found him with his head on his keyboard, in the middle of an order placed with the very company he and I disagreed on. Sustainable business practices, research into environment-friendlier ink... He didn't care about any of that. I came in a couple of times with my personal research, files on which I had been working for days, very well thought out, realistically calculated, to prove that things could be done differently, but he didn't even want to hear me out. Every day since I'm wondering if there was a direct cause for his heart attack and what his last thoughts must have been when he placed that order. I've never been able to tell him how I really felt, and I don't think I've ever adequately shown him, either. Every time I approached him, our conversation degenerated into an argument about which direction my life should take, that I should be more like my brother, and that he couldn't believe that one of his sons wanted to work in the "soft hearted social sector that revolved around people cultivating their problems". Sometimes I imagine him looking down on me from up there, knowing that in the end it was me who took over the firm. If you'd told me a few

years ago that I would be running this business I'd have laughed at you, but what can I say? Once the chance presented itself, everything fell into place. Rebecca encouraged me to go for it, although obviously she was also excited by the idea of being the girlfriend of the CEO of an actual company. Well then, maybe I didn't know the first thing about selling ink, but I sure as hell was going to bring some humanity back to the company!

Take my last initiative, for instance. Some time ago, we invited a speaker here to deliver a presentation on positive validation among employees. The lady was a bit of a star in the coaching world, which was also reflected in her fee, let me tell you that. She looked impressive, partly because of her somewhat experimental haircut that combined long strands of hair with a shaved undercut and a pair of glasses that could be considered quite exotic in these regions. The presentation spelled out in large letters:

*"the LAC principle:*

*Learning to*

*Appreciate*

*Communication."*

Be verbal when it comes to recognition! She made one valuable point after another, like the fact that for some reason we're used to pointing out what goes wrong, while we take the things that go well for granted. To my great disappointment I saw that none of the employees were taking notes, so I took it to Santina, who's officially my secretary, but who I see more as my partner in crime. (We click in a very special way, she and I.)

Together, we had to look for ways to put the theory of that lecture into practice. One idea after the other came up, but Santina never seemed to be completely convinced of my suggestions. To be honest, after a while I became a little despondent over her rejections. One of the things several management courses had taught me, was that less good ideas should also be accepted during brainstorming sessions, otherwise the creative flow would be blocked. Anyway, I couldn't blame Santina; she hadn't attended the same trainings and courses I had. Anyway, I wanted to put that LAC method into practice right away, hands-on. How could we encourage each other to express more positive endorsement on the work floor? "What if, for example, we were to work with rewards for those who apply the method?" I suggested.

Santina again didn't seem to be entirely convinced, but I didn't let her break my stride and suggested to install something

like a 'Compliments Day'. "So, like how?" she wondered, and I tried to hide my annoyance at her tone. In inspired brainstorm session style, I blurted out the first idea that came to me: what if she and I were to go undercover on said 'Compliments Day' in search of the first spontaneous compliment that one employee would give to another? "And then what?" she muttered. "Whatever, Santina!" I said, probably a little too short to sound friendly anymore. "Then we shoot the confetti canon, start the party music and make it known that this person was the first to give a compliment and win Compliments Day or something like that!" I saw that she went to great lengths to try to care. "What would they win?" she asked me in flat voice. "The title!" I said. "The honour. The recognition." It didn't really seem to impress her, and I started to doubt her good intentions. "No matter what they win, Santina, sweet Jesus. We'll give them a mug. Or the rest of the day off! It's about the idea."

Santina suddenly seemed somewhat taken by the idea of releasing someone for the rest of the day, but her enthusiasm visibly diminished when she realized that - as part of the undercover team - she would not be eligible to win the prize. In the end, she mumbled something about the fact that such a compliment contest would "send out the signal that we were

spying on the work floor" and, moreover, she wondered what we would do if no compliments were uttered in the course of that day, but I'd had it with her negativity. Her attitude reminded me of my father and was in fact part of the problem: never ever showing appreciation for new and fresh ideas! Now there's a fine line between employees thinking critically and straight up undermining authority so I decided, before she could block the idea any further, that the brainstorming session was over and that we had now switched to organisation mode. I told her to order a confetti canon and some bottles of bubbles that I could hide in the private fridge that Daddy had installed in his office - now mine.

So today was the day. We would work from the central table in the office space that was used for open meetings. Adjacent to the fish tank and the coffee machine, this was the place where we thought we would most easily overhear conversations which potentially included compliments. Hidden in a box that seemed to contain cleaning products for the fish tank, there were two confetti cannons; we had tested a third one the day before in the parking lot after everyone had left. The trick was to not be too cautious, but to just give a short and quick tug at the top of the tube. Santina subtly inserted a celebration CD into the portable CD player while

it was in radio mode and played classical music that seemed to be specifically selected to match the storm that was raging outside in all its intensity. Now that everything had been put in place, it was just a matter of waiting. Santina and I sat down and pretended to be quietly going through the reports of the past few months. We were prepared to do nothing more than that for a whole day if necessary, in anticipation of that magical moment, but the course of events exceeded our wildest expectations; not even twenty minutes had passed before a winner presented himself! And if that surprises you, wait till I tell you who it was!

Santina and I were just at the fish tank, filling up on coffee and talking to Judy about the cancellation of a series of orders, when Daniel joined us with a somewhat strange expression on his face; I couldn't immediately put my finger on the true nature of it, but it certainly tended towards happiness. And then, out of nowhere, Daniel interrupted the conversation and complimented Judy on her sweater. I jerked my head in the direction of Santina, who looked back at me with her eyes wide open in amazement. She nodded at me and we both knew what to do; I took the confetti canon out of the cardboard box, and Santina switched the player to CD mode. I popped the confetti cannon, on which it spat out a cloud of golden and silver strings and confetti with a loud bang.

After a moment of panic, reminiscent of those images where a mad shooter comes in, everyone finally understood that something was being celebrated. The music sounded festive and exciting so, on a whim, I used a chair to get on top of the filing cabinets and signed to Santina to turn down the music. I explained to everyone what had just happened; this was 'Compliments Day' and we had been waiting for the first spontaneous compliment to be given by one colleague to another. Maybe I was a little too straightforward when I joked that Daniel was probably the last on my list of potential winners, and I even mimicked the sullen impression he gave off when he had come in that morning, but as you may have understood by now, I have my own style. I then praised how his mood had completely turned around, and while Santina poured the bubbles for everyone, he in turn explained that this was mainly thanks to his beautiful wife who today had once again taught him the power of appreciation.

*Learning to*

*Appreciate*

*Communication.*

His "Annie", as he lovingly called her, was also free today, so maybe they could do something together. See, it's moments like

this that show you that you're really making a difference as a manager.

I asked the other colleagues to come stand by the window and say goodbye to him on his way home. In my mind's eye I could see him surprising his wife at home and how they would spend the rest of the day together. They deserved it, especially after what they went through in 2017. I looked up and saw that, quite unexpectedly, the sun broke through the clouds. I know it sounds corny, but I swear I saw my father looking straight at me between those clouds, and I got all warm inside when I heard his soft voice say:

"Well done, boy."

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### Dendrick:

What do you want me to say, man? All these bitches are the same, you know. I mean, sure, you'll be getting it on differently with, say, some Russian in your bed than with a random chick you picked up here at the Pollock. But take it from someone who 's toured from the fucking UK to the most backward hole in Croatia; in the end, every girl is thinking the exact same thing when they see you on that stage. "That guy can get whoever he wants," they

think, "so if he chooses me tonight over all these other girls, what does that make me?" That's it, man. Beauty is a two-step motion; beauty can't just *be* on its own, it can't be like, a bit of beauty in itself. It's gotta be judged before it is real. I mean, some of those girls in the front rows of our shows are fucking goddesses man, they shine harder than the sun, walking around without a bra, their titties piercing through their shirts. But it's as if they don't have fucking eyes of their own in their heads - they only see their own hotness through my attention for them. Only then can they see how impressive their appearance is.

The problem with that validation, of course, is that once you've given it to them, they'll never stop talking about it, man. It's surreal. Take that girl I was with last night. Kenzy, a 21-year-old chick who 's been hanging around after our gigs for like the past two years now. By now, I see her like once or twice a month, maybe a little more. She insists on calling it a kind of relationship, which doesn't bother me, if she wants to fool herself into thinking that I'll just stick to one. But that broad is starting to act all girlfriend-like to me now. So yesterday she suddenly throws it in my face that I couldn't remember what I supposedly said about her eyes about a year ago. I was like wtf, dude?

This is my theory about how women deal with compliments: life is a constant stream, a race in which to swim or drown, right? In that race, a compliment is like a small island you can rest on and enjoy the sun for a second before plodding on to another stop; just a piece of fucking solid ground underneath your feet from where for a minute or two, you can see the flow that is the daily struggle for recognition, right? But women man, they're not just going to sit and rest on that island. Nah man, they're going to get comfortable. They are gonna lie there, claiming that fucking tiny island as legitimately acquired, inalienable and forever theirs. They treat it as fucking steady ground to build a fucking villa on, which they still live in years later, making plans for renovations here and there and everything! While you and I both know that island isn't equipped for all that! But who's gonna pay when they eventually lose all of their shit in the inevitable, unrelenting flood that is fucking time? That's right. It's you they're coming after, even though they were the crazy bitches who had invested everything they had in that one little thing that you once told them about, I don't know, nothing more than their beautiful legs or eyes!

Anyway, where was I? Oh, right. So, anyway, after last night I had to walk to my car with blue balls in the fucking rain, glad I had a date with Daniel's chick in the morning. She was

considerably older, but I didn't even think that was bad news given the circumstances. See, women over thirty aren't even letting you in on their personal problems, let alone throwing it in your face like that. Annie and I had an adult relationship, like healthy and grounded people; fucking with me, living and talking with the boyfriend. Those 21-year-olds could learn a thing or two from that.

Of course, the fact that it had to be Daniel's broad was kinda harsh, I know. Daniel and I, that was something special, man. We had experienced more together than my brain could keep up with, although even in our early touring years he was always off to bed before the crazy shit went down. At first, we thought he was sneaking out with some of the girls hanging around backstage, but then we found out he really was just going to sleep, alone, in his hotel room. I wouldn't even be surprised if it turned out that, out of loyalty to his girlfriend at home, he never even jerked off at those groupies when he was alone. Even back then, he was always very serious about everything. He'd say things like "being faithful not only makes me a better person, but also a better writer" - and that was really fucked, man. I resented that, that sick way of provoking me, not only to call my songs shit, but also to look down on who I was and how I lived my life in one smooth go. I fucking hated him for saying it like that, man.

I think that statement was still ringing when I first saw Annie last year.

He had sent me an invitation to come and watch his first gig with solo material. I thought whatever, why not? Stupid move, it turned out. I wish I never heard any of his songs and how fucking good they were, painfully good, from the first to the last. Song after song, chord after chord, word after word, I grew more and more despondent and angry. I don't have to take this, I thought, this unevenly distributed talent that life was mockingly displaying here. And just as I was about to leave unnoticed halfway through the set, I saw her.

His guardian angel.

His muse.

The walking miracle that made him write these things.

I don't even know if I was attracted to her for who she was or not.

After the first time we agreed it was going to be just the one time; the next time we agreed to just stick to these two times; the third time we didn't say anything anymore. Like I said before, I'm not one to sit with a broad and listen to ramblings about her love life, but when Annie talked about Daniel, it was different, of

course. She told of an episode he had gone through a few years before when she had openly admitted she sometimes thought of leaving him. He had disappeared without a trace for a long time and when they found him, the family agreed that it would be better to have him admitted to a mental hospital for a while. Serves him right, I thought at first, but after a while it just became a sad story. Last time I saw her, she even told me while getting dressed that Daniel looked up to me, to my stage persona. But fuck that. He could have told me that in the years that we were on the road together. Pretty bitter I have to fuck his girlfriend behind his back to find out stuff like that. Tell it to my face, dude. It shouldn't have come to this. Just flip the switch and tell me I've got some songs in me, too. That there's more to me than just being the face and the body and, honestly, the whole sex of the band.

So anyway, I'm fucking Annie and we're looking each other in the eye, both of us thrusting heavily, my forehead pressed against hers, our eyes locked, and suddenly she turns into Kenzy, just like that, before my eyes, she turns into Kenzy! So I flip her over so I can take her from behind the way she likes it – Kenzy, I mean, not Annie - but while I'm doing that, she looks back and I see that she's now Samantha, so I have to take her off the bed to get



her upright, against the table with the mirror to which I imagine that she is doing her makeup, whereupon she suddenly turns into Naomi, so I have to put her back on the bed again, and so on. There's no Annie anymore, there's just a body, a shell, a female mould inhabited by several characters, one after the other, and I call upon all the girls I've fucked over the years and put them in the image that's going on in front of me, and when I can't imagine any more girls, I start over again with Kenzy, and Samantha, and so on. They're all there, one by one, all the girls I've fucked over all those years while Daniel was jerking off in his hotel room, and I'm screwing all of them in Daniel's fucking bedroom, all those girls converging in his little Annie, his unfulfilled muse who is deep down just as empty as all the chicks he looked down on. Annie is made up of all those girls and Annie herself is now completely gone until-

Until then.

The first pain I feel comes from Annie suddenly shouting - my eardrum in tatters - so I think I've made a wrong move - I swear to God, it takes forever until I even realise I'm being attacked, let alone understand that there's something sticking out of my back.

Annie calls out Daniel's name, again and again and again and again and finally I try to look at my back, at something I can't see for myself and from which I can only infer the seriousness through the horror that it causes on Annie's face. And then, yes, I'm aware of the blood, and when I see it, I feel the real sting cutting through my body. Pain, too, sometimes needs two motions; it's only through the image of white sheets soaked in blood that mine becomes reality. I reach at my back and feel something that I can only describe as a metal rod - a fucking machete is the first thing that comes to mind, absurd though it may be, causing me to see a flash of Daniel walking around his apartment, wearing a Dr. Livingstone hat, cleaving his way through the jungle until he finds us, two animals in the bedroom. Another image comes to mind, something I once saw in a documentary; a drawing of a Bushman who had taken a chopping knife from a colonist and was waving it around, upon which a voice-over, restrainedly ironically, said: "and anyone who gets to see a machete waved in his face like that, will not live to tell." This is how I'm going to die, I think to myself; slaughtered in an anthropological documentary about the dangers of cheating. But where would he have gotten a machete from?

Well, there's no point in going into this any further; I'll never find out what's stuck in my back, so what difference does it make? Trying to get up, I fall off the bed and end up on the floor with a hard smack, bleeding like an animal, a fucking pig in a slaughterhouse, man. I can see them arguing, but the sound of the scene is muted, so I understand that I'm about to lose consciousness. The last thing that happens to my knowledge is that Annie comes running at me, grabs my face and tries to keep me awake with all her might. And yeah, I think as I look at her face. Yeah, I do find her attractive, even apart from this whole fucking Daniel thing. She's a beautiful woman, Annie. Weird how I've never noticed that before, I guess.

And then everything turns black, pitch black. Just like that.

From above I can see myself swimming in the lanes between the islands from where the girls I was fucking just now are watching. They're calling me from their huts and gazebos, their post-modern rectangle villas and pompous castles, far too big and heavy for the ground on which they stand, crumbling. They're all on their own, with twisted faces, cursing, screaming. Calling me names, damning me, invoking the sea gods asking them to turn the

waves that surround me into a storm that will drown me in oblivion once and for all.

But I can't say that I care too much, really. As far as I can tell, I'll make it. My hope that there is something else waiting for me decreases with each stroke, but for some reason I keep on going, swimming, toiling, plowing ahead.

Just a little while later I leave the pieces of land behind me, which, from above, seem to be nothing more than flakes in an immeasurable sea and swim towards the open horizon, dissolving in the tranquillity of an endless blue plain.

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