

ANNABEL

novel

Translated by Bistra Andreeva

To my sister

*For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee...*

Edgar Allan Poe, *Annabel Lee*

This story starts in my attic apartment in Brussels. My first apartment following multiple rooms of all sorts and sizes, but all in the attic (that part doesn't seem to change). Only my very first room, the one I had before all the others, was situated in a basement and had barred windows facing a wall, which made it impossible to open them fully. Only enough as to get some air in. That room had stairs leading up to another room – a nice, spacious one, with quite a lot of light coming in and windows opening up to a street that was large, loud, and very long. My favorite street in Brussels. It looked like a boulevard in one of its ends, and in the other end, where I lived, it narrowed down to become cozier. And when the sun set above it (because back then Brussels would get to see the sun relatively often), the fading light would

wonderize of the buildings, that I would think: "See, there is the whole world locked up in a street".

I lied.

It was "there is the whole world locked up in a *junction*," and it wasn't "locked up," it was "packed into." That's what I was thinking and it was actually about Place St. Gery that I would think it, with its four corner cafes, smoky and packed in the winter, all out in the summer, all busy and distinct, always the same, ever different, with the music invariably matching my mood. We'd meet there for years, always the same, ever different, and I can't believe we never tired of it, but then again, how could we—it was the world, packed in between four corners, four directions, St Gery.

But this story doesn't take place in Brussels. It doesn't start or end here. And I'm not the main character. In fact, I am not in it at all. But, apparently, I'm not too happy with that, because I seem to keep going back to myself here, changing even the beginning for that matter. Full stop. No. Just stop. Page break. This story starts on the next page.

Annabel pedaled persistently through the rain, the massive drops hitting her light

blue raincoat sideways, running down her face, sinking into her soaking wet jeans. She wasn't cold, but she somehow didn't enjoy the rain's coolness paired with the morning air's sharpness. She loved the rain once, but a different kind of it, the one falling in the scorching heat of the summer days like a huge jug of water that God spilled out on his earthly congregation. The wetness that other rain brought was of another kind as well—it was life-giving, joyful, call it even sensual. Consciously and willingly, Annabel would succumb to it, seeing herself as a maenad performing an ancient pagan ritual. The other rain also aroused in her a certain craving for the presence of a man, maybe familiar, maybe anonymous, but by all means explicit, vehement, overwhelming.

The only feeling, that instinctively governed her there, on her bike, was the urge not to stop, ever, because she couldn't let the chill that had a grip on her body get a grasp on her soul, too. So she kept pedaling through the flat fields. The whitish and vast expanse was occasionally violated by the boldness of the first emerging sprouts. The windmills completed the view.

The windmills of your mind, she recalled the old refrain.

Annabel

A brief biographical note

Annabel S., 32, was born in a small European town. She completed her secondary education at an art school and then acquired an M.A. degree in Public Administration in the capital. At the age of 25, she started working for the state authorities. Currently, she is Director of the International Relations at the Ministry of State Administration. She is unmarried and lives with her partner Nikola. The beginning of the narrative coincides with the end of her one-week stay in the Netherlands on account of a project that she coordinates.

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As soon as she got off the plane and stepped into the Amsterdam airport, she felt a few butterflies flutter in her stomach. For a short while there, she had the sense of déjà vu. Thirteen years later, she was back. Annabel took a breath, pulled together all of her will power and got down to business. Upon exiting the airport, she hailed a taxi to her hotel. It was a narrow five story building, squeezed between other narrow buildings, meaning a typical Amsterdam hotel. She handed her ID to the habitually polite reception woman, waited until she was checked-in and headed towards the elevator. She passed by an aging man and their eyes met for a moment. She noticed his were an intense gray.

A typical hotel suite, small, but nice – this was going to be her home for the following week. Yet another hotel home in the succession of trips and projects.

She pulled the curtains to let the day into the square living-room. After the whitish, rainish morning, the sky was clear, and the sun light was pouring unimpeded over the freshly wet city.

She had two hours and a half until her first project meeting. The hot shower stream was soothing. She put on her jeans and a shirt, and she left.

The hotel was in close proximity to the Van Gogh Museum and Rijksmuseum. She hesitated for a second and took the opposite direction, slowly and aimlessly. During the week, Amsterdam was, for the most part, like any other city. The tourist crowds were gone and the daily routine was in the air.

She found it revamped, but unaffected at its core. It was like she had left yesterday. She had expected to feel excited, but instead she was unruffled. Maybe it was the circumstances around her departure that had dulled her sensitivity. Or, maybe it was the circumstances in her life over the years that had detached her from her past in Amsterdam and before that, so much that it was now difficult to reconnect emotionally. Impassively and indifferently she walked against the backdrop of her early youth.

She saw cafe tables by the canal and sat down at one of them. She ordered cappuccino. On the table next to hers, a boy and a girl whispered to each other and laughed. To their side, an old lady was staring dreamily at the water.

Annabel took out her cell phone and switched it on. She had forgotten to do that right after she landed, which was unusual for her. She had a connection with her phone and her laptop that was stronger than the connection she had with most of her colleagues. Six missed calls. Two of them from Nikola, one from Erika. The rest were from unknown numbers. She finished her cappuccino and headed back to her hotel.

Cosmopolitans Cafe

The winners were going to be invited to Amsterdam. Maybe that was what drew me to participate in the essay competition on the topic of „The New Cosmopolitan“. I could swing by Amsterdam any time I wished, and I had done it more than once, but somehow I saw more than a mere coincidence in the chance to participate in this discussion in *that* very city. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I was cooking up my new novel and I envisaged the plot unwind in Amsterdam. Maybe my taking part in the competition was going to flush me with a new wave of inspiration.

It was approximately at that time that my boss at the Information and Communications European Commission Directorate General assigned me to work on a European citizenship report. So I started to think about Europe, citizenship, the national, the cosmopolitan and the connection between all of them. And the connection between all of them and Amsterdam.

Once, during a lunch break, that connection took on the image of a woman. Beautiful, composed, with a nationality that was hard to pinpoint, distant, magnetic, imperturbable. She was having lunch on her own, and although she was surrounded by many socializing people, she remained reclusive and she didn't seem to notice them. Her eyes glazed over me with indifference, which was in no way offensive or personal. There she was – my heroine. Annabel.

That same day, in the early evening, I created my first blog.

She arrived in Amsterdam after the entrance exams, with her boyfriend Chris and her friend Erika. It was her first trip as an independent individual. They stayed at a hostel, in a room for eight. After waiting on a long line to check-in, they dropped their luggage and went out in town. Annabel's eyes thirstily absorbed everything.

She felt connected to the city, to the canals, to the buildings and most of all, to the air of liberty and lightness.

The next day, while having breakfast at the hostel, she found out that they were hiring people to work during the summer months in return for accommodation and twenty Dutch guilders per day. She went to the manager and, after they talked, she called her mother and told her that she was in Amsterdam, where she was going to stay for the summer. She had to take the receiver away from her ear to protect it from the outpouring of words, teeming down from it. When it subsided, she put the receiver back on her ear and said "Thank you for your support and understanding, mom", and she hung up.

Erika tried to talk her out of it, but it was pointless.

"I just have to do it, you see. I need to experience freedom right here."

Chris tried to offer his company, but she gave him a kiss and purred out:

"No, baby. You need to accompany Erika. I'll give you a call when I get back."

She worked for four hours a day. She bought a sketchbook, paints and brushes, and she painted with an inspiration that turned into ferocity. In the beginning, she would spend hours sitting by the canals, in some garden or a park, and she would sketch the people, the view, a statue. Then she started scouting for models at the hostel. Before long, she was using her lovers as models – men who were passing by and who were easy to meet. After exhausting her senses, she would grab a sheet of paper

and a pencil, and she would sketch the outlines of their satisfied flesh. At the end of the two months she had about a dozen of those sketches. They showed skinny or chubby male behinds, shrunken or complacently erect penises, muscular or not that muscular body shapes, in profile or en face. Together, they represented a peculiar picture chronicle of her sexual life over these months. Later on, Annabel was going to call that summer "the season of proficiencies". She cut her hair short and she changed its color every week. She puffed marijuana in small smoky coffee shops, each time in the arms of yet another man, and then slept with him in her hostel or his hotel. Sometimes, dizzy with the weed and the alcohol, they would quickly satisfy the hunger of their bodies in a murky corner of the cafe, on the street, on a bench in the park.

Once she was with two men who invited her back to their apartment in an expensive, fancy hotel, much like the one she was staying at now. They smoked hashish and drank champagne, listening to sensual jazz. Their voices started to fade away, their eyes got bolder, their hands – searching. In a little while, one of them was casually unbuttoning her neckline... Then she didn't sketch.

It was then she had her short affair with a woman too. Jenny was a 21-year old with a deep voice, casual baggy clothes and violet eyes. They met at one of those bars. Annabel was kissing yet another man, when an attractive, mid-height girl interrupted them and whispered in her ear:

"Forget about that guy. You'll have a much better time with me."

Annabel gave her a stunned look, then realized that she wasn't joking, started laughing and left with her. Their relationship lasted one week. After her working hours were over, they spent all of their time together. Until the day Jenny had to leave. They hadn't exchanged contacts, they were in a love haze that didn't allow for such trivialities. Annabel promised to go see her off at the airport, but didn't. Instead, she shut herself in her room and spent a lot of time smoking.

Cosmopolitans Cafe

Coffee or tea?

This is my first blog. A virtual diary. Not good enough for me. A virtual cafe. Sounds better. Someone had said that "cafes are the cathedrals of cosmopolitanism". Is cosmopolitanism European? Does it belong anywhere geographically? What defines it? The Cosmopolitanism Accreditation Academy. Who knows, one might as well emerge some day. A competition for the more cosmopolitan and the most cosmopolitan.

In this cafe I will share my ideas about Europe, identity, citizenship and cosmopolitanism. I will do that without ceremony and without structure, as if we were in a cafe. You are my guests. Welcome to Cosmopolitans Cafe. For this cafe to exist, your opinions are exactly as important as mine. And to make it a real cafe – and not, God forbid, a cathedral with one single bishop – what would you like, coffee or tea?

Annabel went back to her room, changed again and went down to the hotel's conference hall. She was pleased to find that it was a small one. Big halls that made people look little and distances feel bigger gave her a peculiar feeling.

The representative of the Dutch project partners was to show up any minute now. She recognized him as soon as she saw him – the aging man whom she had met in the lobby. He approached her with a smile and extended his hand:

"Annabel S.? Vincent Van Gehen. I believe I saw you earlier today."

"Almost like the painter," Annabel took his hand and smiled. "Nice to meet you."

"Yes, almost. But my only connection to art is the fact that I appreciate it. The information packages for the participants are at the reception. Shall we go and collect them?"

Soon the project participants started to gather, taking their seats around the rectangular table set up.

Three. Eight. Ten. That's exactly how many they were supposed to be. Ten administrators at managerial positions in several European countries. Five days, three Dutch cities, five institutions.

They had already taken their seats, looking at her. It wasn't hard to establish that she was the youngest one in the group. She smiled professionally.

"My name is Annabel S. and I am the coordinator of the project that brought you here. You can call me Anna."

Annabel always resented pronouncing her name. She didn't like it. To her it seemed too literary and pretentious. Her mother had named her after her favorite writer Edgar Allan Poe's poem *Annabel Lee*.

Do I have to be scarred for life by my mother's poetic preferences, Annabel asked

herself. How could she name me after such a tragic heroine, who dies so young?! She believed that babies should be given temporary names they can change with something of their choice once they come of age. Of course, she could have changed her own name too, but she never did. Then again, she mostly used its shorter version, Anna.

"We will spend a few days together and we will learn about our Dutch colleagues' experience in the field of public administration employee training and motivation. You have the program in your folders, where you can also find the rest of the information regarding your training. And now allow me to introduce to you our Dutch host, Mr. Vincent Van Gehen."

Vincent made a short pause and his eyes went around the faces of everyone in the room.

"I am extremely pleased to welcome you all to the Netherlands. I hope that the meetings we have organized for you will be of use and will give you a clear idea about the employee motivation experience of your Dutch colleagues. I have worked as a Manager of Human Resources for thirty years myself. After that I got into consulting, which is what I still do today. And now, before I go on to an introduction of what's ahead of you in the next few days, I'd like to ask you to introduce yourselves with a few words."

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Annabel was five when her father got her her first sketchbook and pencils. They went out on a walk on a Saturday. The air smelled of blooming flowers and cinnamon, the latter coming from the puffing pastries baked in the red-hot ovens of the town's several bakeries. She was munching on one such raisin pastry when they got to the large window of an art supplies shop. She stopped in front of it and gazed at the boxes of color pencils and paints. Her father noticed her enthralled expression and opened

the door for her. A whole new world was revealed to the little girl with the two heavy black pony tails; she closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of turpentine, a smell that was later going to remind her every time about a certain period of her life.

"Do you want me to get you anything?" her father asked.

She looked at him in disbelief and nodded yes. Then pointed to a sketchbook with a print of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* on the cover, only Annabel didn't know that at the time. She liked those sunflowers, so heavy, full and radiant, like loafs of bread. Her father asked for the sketchbook, some watercolor paints and three pencils. The little girl squeezed her new treasures, impatient to start her first work. They went to the park where she drew a rather implausible portrait of her dad, however it could steal the spotlight from many postmodern works. That same portrait was later hung in a frame at his office. After this day, Annabel started painting for hours at a time. She spilled colors on the paper, mixed them up and got mesmerized by the result, and she preferred the sketchbook and the paints to playing with her peers. Despite her mother's insistence to go to a language school, in a secret alliance with her father she applied to the secondary art school in the neighboring town; she went to the entrance exams, and when she was accepted to study Fine Arts - Drawing and Paint, she enrolled. That was the first time she disobeyed her mother. To make it up to her and negotiate peace, she had to enroll in a language school and took up lessons with private tutors at home. She also had to promise that she was going to get good grades in the other two languages taught at her school.

At the age of fifteen, she left her home and went to live in a dormitory, with Erika who, for the next four years, was her roommate and partner in all crimes and pranks. –

"Motivation is a science. There are loads of books written about how we can ignite a sparkle in our employees' hearts to make them put their soul into their work, give their best, and feel personally responsible to fulfill their tasks. There are many approaches to the so-called team-building, and there are hundreds of companies and consultants, such as myself, that make a living out of that. But here is what I learned after forty years of experience in the field: motivation is not just a science. Motivation is an art. And finally, with the risk of sounding cheesy: motivation is love."

Annabel had that ability to turn off and set her thoughts free, while she still looked like she was listening carefully, registering occasionally only the keywords. She did that again at the beginning, but then the consultant's words caught up with her, and her dark eyes focused on his light face strewn with fine wrinkles.

When Vincent pronounced the word "love", his eyes met hers, and she felt vaguely distraught.

"Yes, love. Love is exactly what I am talking about. I keep repeating that cliched word, just to make sure it gets to the bottom of your minds. Love has many dimensions, but all too little and too rarely do we think about love in general, the love for all people and not just the few close to us, the love for the things we do, the love for our work. Because, how could we ignite the sparkle that I already mentioned at the start, unless we ourselves have a flame burning within. It would be impossible to motivate employees to work willingly if we have the attitude of a manager with subordinates, instead of an attitude based on the idea that all human beings are equal on a certain level. The people who work with you and for you have to feel that you are human and ready to empathize with their individual points of view, with their needs and issues. I am not saying that a manager has to serve as a shrink to his team, not at all. But he

does have to know his employees, to develop a sense of what is happening to them, and whenever he senses a sign of discontent, he has to react immediately. He has to react by posing a specific question, implying that he sincerely cares and giving the chance to the employee to say what bothers them. He has to be flexible and show involvement with each team member's situation. And again, more than anything, he has to be sincere.

As an experienced speaker, Vincent made another pause. The silence in the hall united all the participants, it allowed them to share their thoughts on what they had just heard much more eloquently than the liveliest discussion could.

"That sincerity is not something you could act out or practice. Unless you are able to develop a genuine sensitivity towards the others, everything you do or say will ring untrue. Then your words and actions will not attract and stimulate, on the contrary. Don't think about the people working in your unit as a group that has to do a certain amount of work to guarantee your success, rather think of them as individuals, with the kind of respect you should have for every human being, no matter what their social status is. This respect is at the bottom of it all. It is the foundation of the love that I am talking about. The attitude towards people is the first key element. The other key element is your own vision, and how you share it with your subordinates. If they are given isolated tasks and don't get the chance to grasp the overall picture, it is very probable that they will find these tasks boring and will perform them without any interest. However, if you regularly make meetings with the team you are managing and explain to them, with all of the inner faith that you have in your common efforts, what steps lie ahead and what they will lead to, then there is a big chance that your employees will feel engaged and motivated, and they will look at the routine from another angle. This is why my advice to you, department and directorate managers in different European state administrations, is to first look within. Search for the love in

your hearts. And when you find it, turn to the people that you lead, but let love lead *you*. Thank you for your attention."

Vincent's last words had echoed away in the ongoing silence. And only then came the applause.

Annabel took the floor.

"I'd like to thank Vincent for that genuinely intriguing introduction. Let me give you some practical information now. As you may have seen, the program is quite intense and you only have one free afternoon tomorrow. Those of you who would like to visit Van Gogh's Museum can come with me. In a little while, at seven o'clock, we will all have dinner at the hotel restaurant, and tomorrow morning at nine, I will meet you all back here, and we will head to our first visit."

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The next time she seriously clashed with her mother was when it was time to apply to university. She had brought up the matter once, months before that, while they were having dinner at home, stressing on her hope that her daughter was "done already with her absurd ideas and ready to think about her life seriously and in perspective".

"I do think about my life in perspective and I plan to become an artist. I want to go to the capital for a one-month course to prepare for the Arts Academy entrance exams," Annabel firmly said.

"Is this why we paid for all the private language tutoring?! For you to become an artist? Is that what you want to do with your life? To be miserable, like I was, when I was young? To be dependent all your life on your talent and your clients' whims? Is that what you want?!"

Annabel jumped out of her chair and left. She headed towards the small park nearby, illuminated by small electrical suns, and sat on a bench near the fountain. She wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't well up. She felt her mother's will was a stone that kept her down and wouldn't let her fly away. She imagined escaping that gravity and being free to go her way. Her own way.

The noise of the water gradually soothed her.

When she got back home, she found her father sitting in the living room, smoking a pipe. She went on to her room, but his voice caught up with her:

"Anna!"

Annabel took two steps backwards and stood in the door frame.

"I'll give you the money to go. When does the course start?" His voice was quiet.

"Next week."

"You can sign up."

Annabel hesitated, she half-opened her mouth to say something, but then she just bit her lips and walked on. A few days later she was at the station. Only her father came to see her off; after that evening daughter and mother passed by each other in tense and hostile silence.

She gave him a big hug and whispered with a muffled voice:

"Thanks, Dad!"

The train departed. Annabel stuck her head out of the window, waved and kept looking his way until her dad's tall figure turned into a tiny, blurry dot.

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The next morning Vincent was waiting for them in the hotel lobby. When they were all there, he walked the group to the Amsterdam City Hall, where their first

meeting was going to take place. The city was morningly crisp and the sun was pouring out light over it.

"Two days in a row without rain, that's really remarkable for Amsterdam," Vincent turned to Annabel.

"Yes, that's not how I remember it," she smiled.

Her first time in Amsterdam. It was so spontaneous. After her father had seen her off at the train station, Erika picked her up in the capital. She had arrived earlier and rented an attic room near the Academy. The course started the next day. For a month, they painted models, still lifes and landscapes for five hours a day. They would continue painting back at home, and in the evenings, together with some of the other course attendants, they roamed about the many pubs. What was his name... Chris. He was quite older, had long, matted hair, wore torn and worn out jeans and talked languidly about modern art. But Annabel had fun. Erika had this platonic love interest back in the town where they went to high school, so she spent the evenings alone in their room, writing long sentimental letters.

The night before the exam Annabel also stayed home. They opened a bottle of wine and stretched out on the wooden floor, glasses in their hands. The small attic window was open and the curious stars peeked in from afar.

"Nervous about the exam?" Erika asked.

"I don't know. Yes and no. You?"

"Terribly. I can't imagine what I will do if I don't paint."

"Lots of other things, for sure. You just have to let your imagination loose."

"I can't. I don't want to."

Annabel started painting her nails crimson red.

"You know, when we're through with the exams, I really wish we'd do something crazy, something to remember. But before the results come out. People celebrate if

they are admitted, I want us to celebrate before that. Even if we are not admitted, we still deserve a reward for all our efforts. Don't you think?"

"Yeeeah, you sound pretty convincing. Something nice, but what? A party? A trip?"

Erika stretched her arms out and gathered her soft auburn hair in a ponytail.

"A trip. Where can we go? Where did you always want to go? What's the first place that comes to mind?"

"Amsterdam," Erika said almost mechanically.

"Amsterdam. Yes. That's the place." Then she thought: "Van Gogh".

The exams took place over three consecutive days – still life, portrait and painting.

Annabel and Erika made it to the third round. Chris failed the second round. The day after the last round, the three got on Chris' shabby Opel and drove away to Amsterdam.

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After the tall blond lady who was the Director of the Human Resources Directorate had told them about Amsterdam municipality's experience with the implementation of European projects, Annabel repeated her invitation for a visit of the Van Gogh Museum at lunch, in the City Hall restaurant. However, most of the people opted for a walk around town or shopping. Finally, the art lovers group narrowed down to Vincent and an elderly lady, whose face had retained its beauty, despite the traces that the years had left.

There was a waiting line to get into the Van Gogh Museum, but it was going fast.

"Thankfully, it's early afternoon, so we won't have to wait too long," Vincent remarked.

"How did you like the first meeting?" Annabel addressed the woman.

"Very much. It gave me ideas for my own work. I believe that employee motivation

is extremely important, which is why I joined this project. Plus, communicating with a seasoned expert like you is a great opportunity," she turned her expressive eyes, surrounded with fine wrinkles, to the man and smiled coquettishly.

Their turn came and they entered the museum. They agreed to meet back at the entrance two hours later and Annabel left them.

She walked slowly from one painting to another and she took her time with each of them. To return to that museum was like a confession, so she preferred her privacy.

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One day she returned home to find the house completely quiet.

"Dad," she shouted out. "Dad, I'm home!"

She went around the house, but it was deserted. The silence seemed different, somehow heavy and thick.

There was an envelope torn open on the desk in her room. It was a letter from the Arts Academy. She took it out and read it. She read it again and while she was putting it back in the envelope, her mother came in. She had a black everyday dress on.

"I think I warned you," her first words were.

"I hope you're happy! That's what you wanted, isn't it?!" Annabel hissed in her face.

"And I hope that you'll come to your senses now and you'll cut that crap!"

"Where is Dad?"

"Your dad died. He had a stroke."

"Stop talking that bullshit! Where is Dad?"

"I told you. He's gone. All the better for him, at least he won't get to see what his daughter turned into!"

The room started spinning around Annabel. The letter, her mother's distorted face, the black of her dress...

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"It is a kind of painting that rather changes in character, and takes on a richness the longer you look at it. Besides, you know, Gauguin likes them extraordinarily. He said to me among other things - 'That...it's...the flower.'"

Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to Theo Van Gogh

When she faced one of the original *Sunflowers* paintings, back in that distant summer, at that same museum, she had felt a surge of inexplicable tender joy, mixed with sadness. It had a pale yellow background and it was a copy of one of the first four versions that Van Gogh had painted in the summer of 1888 in Arles. Annabel knew the originals and the "copies", all nine of them, all too well. Back then she lived and felt intensively, passionately, expressively, and there was something different to the state that the painting put her into now, something as sweet as a blissful nostalgia, a whiff of her childhood, something of her first sketchbook, out of which the same vangoghly sunflowers were laughing at her. She looked at the sunflowers and associated them with loafs of bread again, baked with gratitude like they were the artist's gift to nature, the artist's gift to her. Back in those days it had seemed to her that everything existed for her pleasure, like the Creator had made the world with one single purpose in mind – to grant Annabel delight. She had returned to them three times that day, she had gone around the museum, she had stood in front of the other paintings too, but something

had been pulling her back to the sunflowers all the time. Then she had entered a phone booth and dialed her home number. That was her second and last call home. „Daddy, please, pick up, please, please, please!”, she repeated in her head, while listening to the dial tone, and when she had heard her father's deep warm voice, she had almost cried out with relief.

"I saw the sunflowers!" her first words were.

"Anna, is that you?" She felt his joy.

"Yes, Dad. I saw the sunflowers. I was at the Van Gogh Museum, they're even prettier, even more intense, brighter, I am dazzled!"

"I am very happy for you. Are you okay, my girl?"

"Yes, Dad, very much, I paint a lot, I've never been happier."

"This makes me feel a little bit better, we worry about you, your mom is very concerned..."

"Mom just doesn't get it, Dad. I'm good, better than ever, I feel like a sunflower, and you're my sun, Dad, I love yooooouuu."

Annabel heard her father's subdued laughter on the other end of the line.

"I love you too, Anna. Look after yourself."

"Gotta go, Dad, I'm running out of coins, see you soon..."

The line went dead. That was the last time she heard his voice, the last one; ever, that cruel ever, that really means never. Never. What a gruesome, incomprehensible word...

"All of life's stages in a few sunflowers"

Annabel turned around abruptly and saw her father. The paintings blurred and the last image her mind managed to grasp was that of sunflowers burning like torches. The next image was of Vincent, leaning above her. Annabel realized she was lying on one of the museum benches, she flinched and tried to sit up. Five or six people had gathered,

she saw among them their lady companion's made up face.

"It's okay, calm down, no sudden moves," the man said.

She felt her breathing ease down so she slowly rose. People made sure she was fine and went on with their walks around the museum.

"What happened?" Annabel asked uncomprehending.

"I saw you study the *Sunflowers* and your complete concentration was so magnetic, that I felt like seeing them too. I started talking to you and apparently you were taken aback, because you turned abruptly and then you slumped down. Has this happened to you before?"

"Not for a while, it hadn't. It's probably due to low blood pressure. I am sorry."

"Would you like to go down to the Museum Cafe?" Vincent offered.

"I wouldn't want to bother you. I am fine," Annabel said in a voice still weak.

"No, please," Vincent insisted.

Their companion followed them.

The cafe was buzzing like a beehive, but they managed to find a table. Annabel asked for coffee. Vincent brought it along with a croissant and the words:

"You need a bite."

"Do you feel better now?" their companion asked her with concern.

"Much better, thank you. What did you say when you approached me? What were your exact words?" Annabel turned to Vincent.

"I said that all of life's stages are represented in a picture of a few sunflowers."

"What did you mean by that?"

"The *Sunflowers*. Birth, maturity and death, it's all in that sunflower vase."

"Right, of course...," she hesitantly replied and thought about it. She had never looked at the painting that way.

I have to see it again," she thought. Apparently, it'll never be enough, there will

always be more to discover, and that "more" will reflect the stage we are at, our current state of mind.

"Do you know the myth of the sunflower origin? A water-nymph named Clytie was in love with Apollo, but someone else had won over his affection. For nine days she sat without flinching, and gazed at Apollo traveling in his golden chariot across the sky. Finally, she turned into a flower, but kept looking at him by turning her face on her stem, always gazing in the sun's direction. That's why a sunflower is a symbol of devotion in love, of faithfulness that never questions, and of gratitude for that feeling, even if it is unrequited." the elderly lady recited dramatically, looking at Vincent more than she was looking at Annabel.

"I didn't know that," Annabel uttered. "But I do know that for Van Gogh a sunflower was a symbol of gratitude and friendship."

"Apparently, you love the arts?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, Van Gogh is my favorite artist."

"Do you paint yourself?"

"I did. Once. In fact, so long ago, that it seems like it was in another lifetime. What about you?"

"Too bad you've stopped. I am just an appreciator."

"As someone who was involved in the arts all her life, I know best how important it is to have appreciators," the lady cut in and looked at the consultant with a big smile and squinting eyes.

"You paint?" he asked.

"No, I'm a poet. I have several collections of poems published."

After finishing their drinks they went back to the paintings. This time they walked around together, they stopped in front of some paintings and quietly discussed them. Annabel was silent and hardly listened to them. Eventually, they ended up in front of

the *Sunflowers* again.

"Here is why this painting is so mysterious," Vincent drew her attention. "Because it's much more than just a still life. Look, some of the sunflowers are like little suns just come up, others are like suns in their zenith, and these over here are declining into the sunsets of their short lives."

Annabel carefully absorbs his words while watching the painting, and it seems to her that she really sees it for the first time. All of life's stages in one. That summer she had gone back to the museum to copy it. She had spent the whole day with her tripod in front of it, making dozens of sketches to finally crush them all and throw them out. It was impossible for me to copy it, because I didn't grasp its essence, its soul escaped me, she thought.

She feels someone touching her hand lightly, the man is next to her and keeps observing her with eyes that are still as calm and careful.

"You are a sunflower yourself, that's why you like them so much. A sunflower in its loveliest stage."

Annabel looks around. The poet lady is at a safe distance. She doesn't know how to respond. She leaves her eyes in his for a moment. Then she heads for the exit. The weather is still as hot. She relaxes on a shady bench. Her cell sounds a popular hit. She takes it out of her bag. She sees the name Nikola written on the display and puts it away. The song continues a little longer, gets to the middle and abruptly stops. Her companions show up and she starts towards them.

Cosmopolitans Cafe

Homeland, non-homeland...

"It is not possible to live always away from the motherland and the motherland is not only the nature but also the human hearts, who search and feel like us."

Vincent Van Gogh in a letter to Theo Van Gogh

I was in Bulgaria. I was on a bus and it was a long trip across the country, so to kill some time, I started making lists. Two of them. I tried to break into pieces each of the two worlds that I inhabited geographically, so as to create two new non-geographical entities: one by invisibly sewing up some select pieces into a patchwork that I would call "homeland", and another that would automatically become the non-homeland.

Homeland

The rounded landscape

The comfort of the ever-strained family relations

The old friendships

A few Sofia bars

The Black Sea

My dear mother tongue

Red wine

Bulgarian taverns

Sofia in October

Gela village in the summer

The chaotic, yet distinctive Brussels architecture

My little street

My apartment

The smart-casual Brussels cafes

Art in Bulgaria

Art in Belgium

The way the sun colors the buildings in a very warm yellow-orange shade after a dark day

Beer

Transport

The station city

The airport city

Multilingualism

Politeness

The evening news

The feeling of freedom

Jazz

The flea market on Place du Jeu de Balle

Non-homeland

Chalga* music

Preventive hostility

Rudeness

Public transport

Grey apartment buildings

Madness on the road

Elbowing your way up

The evening news

The coarse side of my mother tongue

A certain bus driver in Brussels

Brussels district registration

Corruption

Heartless doctors

Cynical doctors in the emergency ward

Prejudice towards Eastern Europe

Fawning on Western Europe

Homeland is the space your soul occupies.

From Brussels, Sofia looks very, very near

From Sofia, Brussels looks so much further

The distance is not only in our heads

but in our cultural predispositions too

In the sense of proximity and accessibility

In imaginability

Annabel has no roots.

Is the lack of roots a commitment?

Free – is she?

She travels spaces, where my mind is not allowed

my soul cannot reach

Thus, Annabel is born

And with her, with her bike

A longing flies away in space

for the impossible

-11-

She had left without saying goodbye to Nikola, although he did keep calling persistently until she finally switched off her phone on the plane. What had happened the previous night called into question their whole future together.

"You never loved me!" she screamed opposite him. "I thought that your coldness was just part of your temper, but apparently I didn't know you well enough. Apparently, you can be truly warm and affectionate, even more than I dared dream of, just not with me."

She was yelling and waving a print out of an e-mail in his face. An e-mail sent by him to another woman.

"Oh, look who's talking?! Are you capable at all of giving a damn about anything other than your career and your freaking perfection!"

Slamming the door, Annabel left the room and started nervously packing for her pending trip. She called a cab and gave the driver Erika's address. It was only when she had pretty much arrived that it occurred to her she should have warned her. She dialed her number and heard her soft alto on the other side.

"I had a fight with Nikola, I'll be over in a minute. Are you there?"

"I am, but, Anna, I'm not sure this is a good time. I'm not alone."

"I have nowhere to go, please, I can't go back home, I'm so mad at him."

"Alright then. I'll be here."

Annabel hugged her tightly at the door and came into the room. There, sitting a bit stiff on the dark blue sofa, was her assistant Maggie. **Cosmopolitans Cafe**

Cosmopolitanism and nationalism

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives the following definition of cosmopolitanism: "The word 'cosmopolitan', which derives from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* ('citizen of the world'), has been used to describe a wide variety of important views in moral and socio-political philosophy. The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated."

In his short story *A Cosmopolite In A Cafe*, O Henry's narrator shares his theory that "... since Adam, no true citizen of the world has existed" so he concludes that "we find travellers instead of cosmopolites". And right that minute, his cosmopolite shows up, tossing the planet on his palm like a ball.

In the story, Adam retains his exclusive status, but in his case that's easy – it's one thing to have the Earth as a permanent address in a united and apolitical world, and it's a whole different issue to have to overcome the identity you had predetermined at birth and locked into your language, location and nation. But could the "old world's" perspective of space, distance and destinations be applied also to the unlimited virtual

.com universe?

The world has changed and it has shrunk, the old boundaries have been removed. How does that affect our understanding of cosmopolitanism? Is our original identity nowadays trans- and post-nationalistic? And what does nationalism mean?

In *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* Michael Ignatieff describes the three aspects of nationalism.

He says that as a political doctrine "nationalism is the belief that the world's people's are divided into nations, and that each of these nations has the right of self-determination".

As a cultural ideal, it is "the claim that while men and women have many identities, it is the nation that provides them with their primary form of belonging."

As a moral ideal, nationalism is "an ethic of heroic sacrifice, justifying the use of violence in the defense of one's nation against enemies, internal or external".

Then, is the cosmopolite someone who has crossed the boundaries of the national to arrive at a place of absolute freedom and non-belonging? Is it possible to cut someone's roots without amputating a vital part of their identity/spirit/soul?

I don't have an answer to these questions. But I would like to create a free, unburdened and unattached heroine.

-12-

The next day she was having breakfast alone at the hotel restaurant, drinking her first coffee for the day with a croissant and a bowl of fruits.

The waiter approached her and refilled her coffee cup. She thanked without so much as looking up.

"C-c-c-can I have your breakfast coupon, please," he asked.

Only then she turned her face towards him. He was young, about 20, with pale pink cheeks, tender lips with peach fuzz over them, and intensely blue eyes that watched her abashedly.

"You forgot to submit your breakfast coupon when you came in. C-c-can I have it now?"

"Yes, of course, I am sorry."

She handed it to him, her eyes fixed on his. He looked back for a second and then he nervously looked away. Annabel felt pleased and gave him a little smile, touching his fingers while she was letting go of the little piece of cardboard. Her delight grew even stronger when she noticed the pink of his cheeks get pinkier. She barely managed to contain her laugh, but she didn't want to embarrass him even more. Her mood boosted, she watched him walk away. He was so cute, young and inexperienced, and his stutter made him all the more charming.

"Good morning, Anna. May I join you for breakfast?"

Vincent was standing by her table in a light suit and a blue-striped shirt. Despite his age, he looked elegant.

"Sure, have a seat," she invited him.

"Gladly. How are you today?"

"Very good. I guess I was just a bit exhausted lately and this fired back yesterday."

The waiter approached again, this time to pour Vincent some coffee.

"Thank you, but I'd rather have some tea" he stopped him and the boy went back, carefully avoiding Anna's eyes.

"Seriously now. Why not art, Anna? Why administration, it is almost the complete opposite?"

"The work of an administrator, as you said in your presentation, is an art too" Annabel tried to get away with her best administrative smile.

"That is undoubtedly true. But we are talking about a different type of art. You are not answering my question, but I won't insist."

Vincent spoke quietly, slowly and articulately, sipping off the tea that waiter had brought him in the meantime. Annabel looked up and saw his gray eyes looking back at her and into her, she felt like she was X-rayed down to her essence and there is nothing she could hide from these penetrating eyes, not even a thought, nothing. She felt hot and now she was the one to look away.

"Excuse me, I have to go up to my room before we go" she tried to smile and hurriedly left the table.

"See you soon, Anna"

-13-

She made up her mind the minute she came around on that surreal day of her return. It was a decision that she didn't have to arrive at, it rather felt like it had arrived to her. She opened her eyes and she already knew what she was supposed to do. She collected all of her art supplies and tools, her paintings, her paints, the cardboard waiting for her, and she ferociously threw it all out. Her father was dead. The person

closest to her, the one man who had had faith in her future as an artist, who had supported and understood her, had departed while she was sporting her artsy easy virtue around Amsterdam. And the verdict over her artistic talent had arrived in the form of a letter from the Academy. She didn't normally believe in destiny, but this here called for fatalism, it was a clear message: Apollo's domain is closed for you. She felt like there was a causal relationship binding together everything that had happened, and it got down to this: you chose art and your dad died. Her dad was the scapegoat in her little revolution. His death and the letter from the Academy condemned her choice like a long and ominous index finger pointing at her mistake. Her mother had survived, so now on the agenda was her plan for the future of her only daughter. A plan that had vitality on its side. A plan whose biggest argument was life.

Over the following months, Annabel refused to leave the house. She would sit on the floor of her room for hours on end, staring in space. She didn't call any of her friends, not even Erika. But one day there was a knock on the door, and before she could answer, Erika entered, slumped down next to her and hugged her in silence. This hug unleashed it all, it was a farewell to her dad, farewell to art, farewell to her life as she used to see it. She broke down in loud sobs. And this is how her voluntary exile came to an end.

-14-

Annabel went back to hotel alone. After spending the day in the Hague and visiting two institutions, the group decided to have a walk around town and stay there for dinner. And she decided to leave. She was aware her behavior was somewhat autistic for a project coordinator, but small talk was beyond her at this very moment. She gave as an excuse some work that she had to tick off, and she headed towards the train station.

Her thoughts kept going back to the day before her departure, and the weeks, months and years preceding it. She gazed out the train window into the surrounding planes, the neat houses with gardens, the green fields, the blooming white and pale pink trees. The setting sun shone in orange-pink, painting everything serene and idyllic. The order of the world around her interrupted the thoughts of the chaos in her life. She quickly recounted the day in her mind. There was a discussion, some ideas came up for future projects, the participants were all happy. And that Vincent guy, with the gray eyes....

She went straight to the hotel restaurant. The boy from the morning brought her the menu and his shyness amused her again. She ordered salmon with vegetables and sour cream, and some white wine. When she was done with dinner, she found herself in a strange predisposition. She didn't feel like staying alone. While she was paying the bill, she touched young guy's fingers and quietly asked:

"When is your shift over?"

"In an hour," he replied nervously.

"You know my room number. I'll be there."

He flushed bright red, didn't summon the strength to look her in the eyes and quickly walked away. In a little more than an hour, there was an insecure knock on her door. Annabel, who was just filling the bath in her robe, opened and saw the waiter. She smiled encouragingly and invited him in.

"Anything to drink? Whiskey?"

"Yeah, why not..."

She poured two glasses of whiskey and sat down next to him on the sofa. The guy didn't dare look at her.

"Cheers," Annabel turned to him.

"Cheers," he said, looking her timidly in the eyes.

"You know, when you knocked, I was filling the bath. What do you say we share it?" her voice was quiet and caressing.

Annabel didn't wait for his answer, she just headed for the bathroom, slipped out of her robe and relaxed in the warm water's thick foam. A minute later the boy showed up still in his clothes.

"Is this how you'll get into the tub?" Annabel gave him a playful look.

"I... No!"

He started undressing slowly and awkwardly, turning his back towards her only to face the big mirror above the sink which embarrassed him even more. His clothes fell down on the floor, he removed his boxers and, looking away, he dipped into the bath tub. They sat facing each other, their feet touching underwater. Annabel felt the stiffness of his body and saw how nervous he was. She felt sorry for him.

"Come here," she purred. "Come, lean back on me."

The young man clumsily turned around and Annabel embraced him from behind. She started carefully massaging his neck and his shoulders. She sensed him relax in her hands.

"You are such a cute boy," she whispered in his ear. "I bet all the girls are chasing you."

"No, I... "

"Shhht! Quiet. Relax."

He went quiet and she kept massaging him, her hands going further and further down. His breathing got faster. She started softly kissing his neck and ears, he turned towards her and feverishly kissed her back.

"Come," Annabel whispered and stepped out of the tub.

She absorbed the foam on their bodies with a towel and took him to the big bed in the room. Then she made him lie down, slipped a condom on him and slid over. She

started to move slowly and carefully, and she leaned over him, her hair and face touching his, her breasts rubbing against his soft skin with each and every move. Just a few thrusts on, the boy let out a loud groan. Annabel kept moving for a little while, then she lied down next to him.

"I'm sorry. It was my first," the guy mumbled.

"Don't worry, baby. How old are you?" Annabel rolled over to face him and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Nineteen."

"So how come the girls haven't eaten you alive by now? I can't believe they missed you, so cute and sexy."

"I have a speech problem. I get too nervous." His stutter was gone.

"You don't have any problems, darling. You've no idea how sweet this stutter makes you sound."

"You think?" his eyes widened.

"Would you be here if I didn't," Annabel laughed. "Do you want me to prove it to you?" her voice went husky again.

She started to guide his lips and his hands. His youth and lack of experience turned her on. Pleasure took over the pain of the last few days. It was as if their intercourse halted it and put it in stand-by mode, the only thing she felt was lust which flushed her whole body and made it moan and wriggle.

"Was it good?" the boy asked lying next to her.

"Really good, baby. That was the cutest sex I've ever had, thank you."

Shortly after, Annabel sent him off to get some sleep. At the door, she asked for his name.

"C-C-Carl," he replied.

"Carl, you'll make a great lover," and she kissed his lips again.

Carl walked down the corridor, his shoulders upright and his walk light and springy.

Cosmopolitans Cafe

Hotels

Hotels are a world in themselves. One that Annabel knows. She travels a lot and resides in it often. She likes the comfort. The ample space, the big beds, the bath tubs, the inexhaustible shampoo, the invisible hand that puts everything in order, the hearty breakfast in the morning, the almost motherly care, not from that mother she never had, but that anonymous one that thinks of everything.

During one of her trips she meets R. and spends the night with him. He works in the countries X and Y, while his wife lives with his two children in the country Z. Throughout the week R. lives in hotel rooms and apartments, and then on Friday he flies back home to stay with his family until Sunday. Is that the new cosmopolite? A successful and dynamic manager who uses hotels as a replica of his home? Does Annabel ponder this question? Does she think about cosmopolitanism at all? Does she wonder if this man has replica wives too, waiting for him here and there? Who knows...

For me hotel rooms are like sterilized needles. Intimately used and disinfected for whoever is to use them next.