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# **SHE, THE ISLAND**

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*Plato created, I believe, and did not discover Atlantis, and Don Quijote created, I believe, and did not discover, for Sancho, the island Baratia. And I too hope, with the intercession of Plato and Don Quixote or with the help of both, to invent, to create, and not to discover the island of Fuerteventura*

(...)

*This is my Atlantis. This is my island Baratia!*<sup>1</sup>

Miguel de Unamuno

The same vision came upon Tibiabín. A woman her daughter's age wanders around the island, searching for something. She walks among the sands with empty eyes and empty heart, and searches, and searches. All of a sudden the whole island becomes a desert. The woman walks tirelessly, without direction and purpose, walks, walks, walks... The woman reaches Tibiabín's round stone-built house. Tibiabín hears a knock on her door. She opens the door, the woman is there, Tibiabín holds her face in her hands and looks into her eyes, which are bleary from staring into nothingness.

"What are you looking for, daughter?"

"The meaning, Great Mother."

"You won't find it in these sands, daughter."

"Then where, Great Mother?"

"Stop seeking it. Look the past in the eye, embrace it and let it go where it belongs. In the sands. It's time for you to conceive the present and to give life to it."

The woman kneels, weeps and kisses the back of her hand.

Tibiabín came out of her trance. She moved her hands as if rinsing them. She took a comb made of bone and started brushing her long silver hair. She entered the other small room where a young-looking woman was sitting and trying to light a fire in a clay pot.

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<sup>1</sup> Unamuno: Artículos y Discursos sobre Canarias, Cabillo Insular de Fuerteventura, Puerto del Rosario, 1980, La Atlantida (p. 66)

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There was a knocking at the door. The younger woman jumped up and opened it. A sinewy man of medium height stood outside. His black eyes stared at her.

"I am looking for Tamonante."

"That's me."

"Ayoce wants to see you."

"When?"

"Immediately."

"Give me a moment."

Tamonante went back inside. The man stayed outside waiting.

"They are calling me, mother."

"Who is it this time?"

"Ayoce."

A shadow crossed the face of Tibiabín.

"Take care, daughter."

Tamonante embraced her mother before she left.

"What's the argument about? – she asked."

"Earth."

### **A year before**

They sat on the stone floor in a circle, their eyes full of anticipation, fixed on the dark figure who was rocking gently in the middle. A monotonous, unintelligible sound came from her. It gradually turned into a prayer to the God of the Sun and the God of the Moon. A prayer for a sign, which would prepare them for what was about to come. Her voice soared upward, as if it wanted to escape the cave, to reach the heavenly deities and fill the space above the island. Suddenly it lowered and words rushed in, hushed and secretive. They seemed not to come from the dark figure, but from somewhere in the bowels of the earth.

"Ships are coming. Foreign invaders. Many, many of them. Attacking. The wall does not divide us any more. Shoulder by shoulder, we fight. It's too late. Rout. The foreign invaders rule the island."

The figure became silent and covered her face with her palms.

Silence reigned in the cave.

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Tibiabín had foreseen that they would lose their home in the near future. All their efforts were to end buried in the darkness of time. Tomorrow they would not be. There would be no tomorrow.

They slowly got up and left the cave. They didn't look at one another and didn't talk.

But a young woman stood to one side and patiently waited for Tibiabín to emerge from her trance. Tibiabín got up, shook herself, saw her. She approached her.

"What's the matter, daughter?"

"I want to have a child... Can you help me?"

"Didn't you hear the portent the gods sent us, daughter?"

"I heard it, mother. What will be will be."

Tibiabín sighed.

"The child comes from the Sun and the Moon and from their union, daughter. Pray."

"I've prayed."

"Pray more."

"I have been praying for two years now."

"Is your man aware of your prayers?"

"He is. He sent me to you."

"When was the last time you bled?"

"A week ago."

"Come next Wednesday. After sunset."

"Thank you, mother."

"Be blessed, daughter."

The sunset bathed the mountain in pink-orange. The clouds glowed, then gradually their colour faded. When the night had swallowed the last glimmer, there was a knocking at Tibiabín's door. The young woman was standing in front of her, looking at her with expectation.

They walked towards the mountain. Tibiabín carried a white bundle.

"This is a secret ritual, daughter. For it to be successful, you mustn't talk to anyone about it, not even your husband."

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"Okay, mother."

"You will wear a blindfold."

"Okay, Mother."

They reached the cave and squeezed inside through a narrow opening. Tibiabín untied the bundle, arranged some stone figurines in a circle, spread a cloth in the middle and sprinkled it with tiny yellow flowers. The woman watched in silence. Was this the Sun? Or the Moon?

"Take your clothes off, daughter."

The woman hesitated a little, then did what was asked.

Tibiabín pulled out a thick cloth and tied it around the woman's eyes. She took her hand and pulled her into the middle of the circle.

"Repeat after me, daughter: I, Sinayadin, call on the forces of the Sun and the forces of the Moon to give me a child. I am giving myself to their fertile energy. I am opening myself to accept it."

Then Tibiabín gestured towards the rocks. A male figure emerged. The figure approached them, entered the circle and embraced the woman. She screamed, frightened, and stepped away.

"Fear not, daughter. The gods are sending you the power of their fertility. Surrender yourself to it."

The woman stopped struggling. The man laid her down on the canvas and took her. Some of the flowers were pressed flat by the weight of their bodies. Those which remained fluttered like yellow butterflies that could fly away at any moment beneath the expressionless gaze of the stone figures.

### **Thirty five years earlier**

Tibiabín was performing a ritual to summon rain at the same part of the island. The tribe had gathered at the wide, long beach. She dipped her hands in a bowl of water and shook them above the sand, while murmuring in an unbroken monotone. Her eyes were closed, her face turned skywards, her palms upturned. She was shivering. People sitting on the beach with their eyes closed also had their faces and hands turned to the sky. They were singing softly. The wind became stronger. The clouds thickened and darkened. The colour of the ocean became ink. Large drops of rain wet their faces, their hair, their hands and the sand, and formed thousands of dancing circles on the water. With their eyes still closed, they opened their mouths and drank the drops with gratitude. Their faces were blissful. Tibiabín's voice faded

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away, and the people's singing stopped. Eyes opened and bodies moved; the people rose from the sand and moved away. Tibiabín stood up.

"Tibiabín" a strong, stocky man approached her.

She looked up at him.

"Tonight. In the cave. When the Moon rises."

The man nodded slightly. He glanced at her, turned and walked away.

Another man, stood to one side, watched them darkly. Tibiabín went to him.

"What did he want?"

"He thanked me for the ritual."

The man grunted.

"I'll come to you later."

"Tonight the Moon is good. I'll perform a ritual. For a child..."

She ran her fingertips through the man's dark hair. He looked away and said nothing.

The moon had risen. It was high, huge, full and shining.

Tibiabín combed her hair for a long time. She gathered her stone figures in a cloth bag, put on a white robe and left. She took the path that curved steeply to the top of the mountain, seemingly into the starry sky. She walked rhythmically; her white figure with the white bundle in her hands glowed in the night. She climbed without a break until she reached a cave. She squeezed inside. The cave tapered upward to a hole that revealed the fathomless sky over Fuerteventura. A male figure emerged from the shadows inside, approached and pulled her towards him powerfully.

"Wait" whispered Tibiabín.

She put the bundle on the ground, untied it and took out the stone figures. There were six of them with sculpted faces and distinct sexual organs. She arranged them in a circle facing inward, unfurled the canvas in the middle and strewed it with small yellow flowers. She stepped over the figures into the circle. The man followed her. He pulled off her robe and took her on the canvas. She moved with his rhythm as if with wings. She began to moan. Some of the flowers were pressed flat by the weight of their bodies. The others fluttered like yellow butterflies that could fly away at any moment. All this beneath the expressionless gaze of the stone figures. In the volcanic funnel of Malpais de la Arena, the Creation was happening.

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An hour later Tibiabín and the man came out of the cave and began walking downhill. They were walking along the ridge of the mountain when a shadowy and powerful body moved towards them. They stopped.

"Are these your rituals for a child? Is this how the gods help you?"

The man's voice was hoarse, low, menacing.

"What are you doing here?"

"Everyone in the tribe will learn about your lies, shameless woman! You'll be tied up and stoned publicly for your sins!"

Tibiabín stepped towards him.

"Please calm down. I am doing this for us. You wanted a child, didn't you?"

The man raised his hand and slapped her. Her head snapped back. Her lover pounced on the man with the agility of a wild animal. They exchanged several blows, before Tibiabín's husband overpowered the other and gripped his throat. Tibiabín sat sideways, her hands clasped, whispering to herself. At that moment a large dog sprang out of the darkness. It bared its teeth and leapt onto her husband, digging its teeth into his flesh. He rolled away with the dog above him. Her lover stood up, went to her, embraced her and tried to take her away. She stood frozen, staring terrified at the moving pile from which the moans of her husband came. Her lover, almost against her will, pulled her away towards the village.

The next day, some of the tribesmen brought her the mutilated body of her husband. The dog, which belonged to her lover, was captured, bound and killed with stones. His dog had been Ayoce's only family.

At that time, two influential men determined the fate of Mahos: Guise and Ayoce. Each had his own circle. Tibiabín's husband was a relative of Guise. His death, followed by the murder of Ayoce's dog, made it impossible for the two to share the same territory. Ayoce left and his people followed him. That year, two kingdoms led by Guise and Ayoce arose on the island. A wall was built between them.

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They had been walking for three hours – silently, focused upon themselves. The merciless sun perched high in the sky. Herds of goats grazed the vegetation and at places they had stripped the land bare. Tamonante listened. She made a sign to the man. They turned off the path and reached a place where water gurgled from the earth. She knelt and drank thirstily. The man stood to one side and observed her.

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His eyes ran over her slender figure. Tamonante turned, held his gaze for a moment and let it go. She stood up and made room for him to pass, (her eyelids down. When he slid past her, she felt his breath and it seemed to her more sultry than the sunrays. Small beads of sweat covered her neck.

It was not long before they saw the wall. They walked along it until they reached a gate, guarded by two men. Her companion greeted them and they let them pass through the gate into the territory of Handia.

About fifteen men stood in two groups, speaking softly in the space between the windowless stone roundhouses.

An elderly man broke off from one of the groups and welcomed them.

"Are you Tamonante, the daughter of Tibiabín?"

"Yes. And you must be Ayoce?"

The man carefully studied her features.

"I called you to help us in resolving a dispute."

"Who are the ones arguing?"

The man went to the groups and returned with two men.

Tamonante introduced herself respectfully. The four went to sit in the shade of the nearby palm trees.

"I am listening to you" said Tamonante quietly.

Two hours later, an agreement had been reached. The sky was darkening and a storm was forming in its womb. Tamonante was preparing to leave.

"It will rain. Do you want to spend the night here?" - asked Ayoce.

"My mother is waiting for me."

"She knows you're here, right?"

"Yes."

"So she won't be worried. I can't let you go in this rain."

His deep grey eyes looked at her earnestly. Inexplicably, his power didn't intimidate her, but gave her a sense of calm and security. Tamonante shifted her gaze and met that of her companion, who was staring at her from a distance. A young woman stood to his right and stared at her as well.



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Tamonante heard a faint knocking on the door. She got up and opened it slightly. In the moonlight, she recognised her companion. She stepped back inside. He entered, took her in his arms, pulled her white robe down and they collapsed onto the bed.

At dawn, they started on the road back. The same young woman who had stood with him the previous day followed them from the window of her house with darkened eyes and tight lips.

When they arrived, there was commotion in the village. Men scurried to and fro with grim faces. They heard a woman crying.

"What has happened?" - asked Tamonante.

"This morning, pirates attacked the coast and abducted several women" answered an older man.

"My mother?"

The man looked down in silence.

Tamonante screamed and fell to the ground. Her crying rose to the sky, and neither the embrace of her companion nor the tribe sharing her grief could comfort her.

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Tamonante walked along a cliff overhanging the ocean. Her legs were scratched, her mouth dry, her hair matted, no light in her eyes. In just one day she had changed beyond recognition. Since learning that her mother had been kidnapped she had not stopped walking, as if exhaustion could lull the pain that gripped her heart. Nothing in this world could soothe that pain. She neared the edge of the cliff. Below, the roiling, angry waves, as if the ocean was also grieving for Tibiabín. Tamonante looked about her, captured her world with one last look, and then threw herself into the abyss.

**The Call of the Ocean**  
**or**  
**The Beginning of Freedom**

Marina

She saw him standing a short distance ahead, tall, bright-haired, bright-eyed. He was waiting for someone. For her. She was walking towards him, calm and contained, but also with an inner elan, such as she had not experienced for... an immeasurable time. The hairs on her skin prickled in the cool breeze of the air conditioner. That increased the tension which suddenly gripped her as she looked at the features of his face, which became clearer as she got closer. A broad forehead, fine nose, chiselled lips, the upper lip slightly thinner with a mole above the left corner. He was holding a light blue surfboard. As he saw her, his eyes laughed, the mole lifted with his smile. Marina felt a throbbing low in her stomach, as if the smile had penetrated her womb and shifted something inside. Without taking her eyes off his bright eyes, Marina smiled back, but with slightly more restraint. Only then did she look down. Another step and they were level. One more, and she passed him.

Desert in the middle of the ocean: this was her first thought when they came out. She felt the breath of the ocean on her face. Breath, different to the cool breeze of the air conditioners, in the middle of the rocky desert.

Gerard has encircled her waist with his hand and leads her somewhere. She doesn't ask where because she knows. She walks with him, surrendering herself to the hand that gently but powerfully pushes her farther and farther away from the airport and from the blue (or maybe green? maybe grey?) eyes of the boy.

Carla

Gerd looked deep in thought. It was as if, in the minutes she had left him to go to the toilet, he had managed to travel far, far away... She followed his gaze. A couple was walking away from them towards the exit of the airport. The woman's dark hair fell in waves on her back, just below her shoulders. She was dressed in a blue linen dress that outlined a slender body and revealed shapely legs. The man's hand rested on her waist. He was taller than her, with silver hair. Nothing to explain the slight wrinkle between Gerd's eyebrows, his motionless gaze. What attracted his attention?

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It happened sometimes that he briefly drifted away. At such moments she had no idea what was going on in his head. Not that she knew much better the rest of the time, but then she didn't wonder. In these moments, however, she had the feeling she did not know him at all, didn't know anything about him, a feeling that one morning she would wake up and see his side of the bed empty without the imprint of his body. And then she would realise that she had made everything up. Everything: their cohabitation, waking up together, early morning love making, the flat, furnished with such enthusiasm (more hers than his), the long walks by the river, the journeys, the surfing, even Fuerteventura... Such crazy thoughts. What would a therapist make of this? Not that she needed one. The analysis she could do herself.

His exquisite profile turned towards her. The fog lifted from his eyes and his mole twisted into a smile. She felt like covering this mole with kisses. Every time she felt like doing it, but this time more than ever.

But she restrained herself. Such public displays were not for her. He grabbed the handle of the suitcase and the two of them continued to the exit where Enrique was waiting.

He and Gerd embraced joyfully. In his English with its strong Italian accent, Enrique regaled them with excited tales of waves and surfing, and with plans for the coming days... They were like children, excited and anxious.

Half an hour later, in the flat. This was their third time on the island, and it felt as if the last time had been just yesterday. Enrique made coffee while they put their luggage in his bedroom. He slept in the small living room-kitchen when they were there.

"How are you, hombre?" Gerd patted him on the shoulder.

"Not too bad. Now I work in a bar. Mostly in the evenings. In the mornings, I sleep late and then – the surf."

"This I call a life!" Gerd laughed.

Did she hear envy in his voice? If he could live such a life, would he prefer it to their orderly existence in Freiburg? She didn't want to know. But why these thoughts again? She had probably overstretched herself. The island will bring back her balance, she was sure of that.

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The Writer

Salida de emergencia. ( Emergency exit. The transparent sticker on the window of the minibus made the inscription look like it was carved in the sky, an emergency exit to heaven.

Three days before departing she had bought a second return ticket with an earlier date. She had become anxious. What if she couldn't leave the island? If she found herself in a self-inflicted exile? All the photos she'd seen of Corralejo showed the ocean, the dunes, surfers, a few commercial hotels and restaurants, and a couple of streets. With the exception of the ocean, it didn't look like a place she would like. And her memories were similar – a promenade, a restaurant where they'd had lunch. Nothing else. They got onto the bus and headed for the dunes. A second return ticket. Was this her emergency exit?

"What are you going to do on the island? There is only sand there," a Spanish acquaintance had asked when he heard she was leaving for Fuerteventura.

Unamuno had spent four months here and his exile, unlike hers, was not imaginary. What did the island do for him? Did it help him face his demons? And how had he mastered those demons, while not knowing the date of his departure?

She didn't want to step into this territory. The second ticket was her warranty for peace of mind.

Before she left, she had read most of Unamuno's philosophical books with a pencil in hand. She had underlined some of the sentences and taken notes. During her flight she started reading "The Agony of Christianity". On page 28 she circled the following passage, adding an exclamation mark:

*When Lev Shestov, for example, discusses the thoughts of Pascal, it seems he does not want to understand that being a Pascalian does not mean accepting his thoughts, but to be Pascal, to become a Pascal. From my side, again, it has happened many times that, when I've met a person in some writing, not a philosopher nor a wise man but a thinker, when I've met a soul, not a doctrine, I've said, "But it was me!" And again, I lived with Pascal, with his century and in his ideals, and again, I lived with Kierkegaard in Copenhagen, and in the same way with others. And isn't this*

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*the highest proof of the immortality of the soul? Would they not feel in me, as I feel in them? After I die, I'll know if I am to be revived like this in others. Although, even today, don't some of those outside me feel inside me, without me feeling inside them? And what peace there is in all this!*

Would she be able to become an Unamuno while on the island? Would Unamuno truly live in her, and in her novel? To connect in the space, tricking time?

The bus drifted along the road through the dunes. Everything was the same. Everything was different. The volcanic mountains. The golden sands. The people who climbed the sand hills, strangers in the desert. The vastness of the ocean. A joyful ease filled her. She had returned.

She would find the keys in the Indy bar. Her landlord, a young Spaniard, had told her this in a text message. She got out at the stop at the top of the main street and walked down it. It was a long, busy street, with a shopping centre, rock bar, restaurants, shops for different brands, and Indy coffee. The blond woman behind the bar introduced herself as Alma, gave her a set of keys and told her how to get to the flat. It sounded easy. Straightforward. The square on the left.

"Come over for a drink later" she suggested.

"Sure."

The apartment was empty. A kitchen with a bar, high stools and a sea view. Two locked doors in the hallway and one that was open. This must be hers. It was a bright room with a king-size bed and a wardrobe. She arranged her clothes, took a shower and went out.

Miguel

*"For the Greeks, exile was heavier than death because those who are far from home cannot be sincere, and those who cannot be sincere in their homeland are not able to be, because they are not really in it."*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Unamuno: Artículos y discursos sobre Canarias, Francisco Navarro Artilles, 1980, Discurso de los juegos florales

## Marina

The beginning of any journey can be so predictable with its excitements and expectations, and its repetitive actions (finding rental cars or taxis; journeys to and searches for the hotel or flat or house; contemplating the landscape and getting to know it, taking it in, attempting to digest it and hold it – if possible forever – or forget it – if possible, forever; checking in, feeling satisfied – or not; noting the comfort or lack of comfort; looking for a place for breakfast or lunch or dinner; the end of the first day). It has just started and it's already over. The only space in which it can be kept and experienced again and again is the space of memories. Even the awareness of the current moment cannot keep it from slipping away because the moment we are trying to stop has already passed. But still, every time there is something new, something different that distinguishes it from all the previous beginning of all the previous trips.

This time it's the feeling, the special feeling that the meeting – no, not a meeting, because they haven't met yet – that the passing encounter with the boy has brought her. It is difficult to give it another name because it's so sudden and illogical, unreal but alive... the feeling. That's the word she used for it on that Saturday morning in January, shortly after she and Gerard got into the white Audi and took the road to Corralejo.

Gerard tells her something. She doesn't listen. She only catches occasional words as her eyes, behind sunglasses, scan the rocky landscape. Fuerteventura, Germans, World War II, Franco, Africa, asylum. Suddenly she becomes aware of silence. Gerard has stopped talking. She takes a look at him. His expressive profile is fixed on the road. Then he turns towards her, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, and he gently caresses her knee with his hand.

The hotel is surrounded by tall palm trees. "White, tidy cottage, two linden trees in front." How ridiculously your memory can surprise you. It strikes suddenly. Before you know it, it has already sucked you in. In this space on the remote island in the ocean, a child's voice has started tinkling in an attempt to recite Ran Bosilek's poem "White, neat hut".

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She banishes the memory. It doesn't belong here. The only similarity lies in the whiteness, nothing else. The hotel has eight storeys, a palm garden, a swimming pool, jacuzzi and dozens of sunbeds. No linden trees at all. The room is spacious, with a view of the ocean, the sands and the mountain ridge behind them.

And the ocean... The ocean has the colour of a postcard: blue-green, azure overflowing into the yellow of the island. Yellow like the dress she bought before they left, which now lies in her suitcase with her other dresses, her underwear, sandals and jerseys, patiently waiting to be worn for the first time. It's as if it had been a presentiment of the island, a hint of what was ahead of them. A sign, but of what? The island, the desert, the straw-coloured hair of the boy? Her eyes take in the ocean and draw her to it. Now she and it are one. Her lips open slightly and she gives herself to it.

Carla

Arrival... surfing immediately... no time to waste. Time-is-wind-is-wave-is-surfing. Three hours of breaking the waves, the wind, the time, the surf. The moment you are on the board, all doubts, fears and thoughts break and disappear like sea foam. Keeping yourself on the board takes your full concentration. It takes presence. Here and now. One hundred per cent. An uncoordinated thought and the board slips beneath your feet, the wave knocks you, swallows you and spits you out wherever it decides.

She remembers the beginning, the first lessons. Catch the wave. That's it. But how do you catch a wave? How? You learn. Gradually. It's a feeling. A feeling that you learn to have. To possess this wave, to make it obey you, to make it yours. Like taming a rebellious horse. The horse is a different thing, a being. You make contact. You make it obey. But the wave... How do you conquer an element?

Gerd slides with the coming wave, slightly crouched on the board. He carries himself on it gracefully. The wind stretches his bright hair. Blows in his tanned face. A winner. A master of the waves.

How long ago was that? How had she managed?

She takes the next wave and also stands up. Flying in the spray, the wind, infinity...



## The Writer

She had lunch on the square which was visible from her kitchen window. The restaurants were full. She had imagined January to be deserted in Corralejo. Instead, she was welcomed by a city flooded with sunshine and warmth, vibrant, joyful and hospitable. Quite different to the city in her memory.

The supermarket was around the corner. Everything here is around the corner. Comfortable, easy, calm – and slow. That's how she felt the rhythm of Corralejo in those first hours.

She did the chores for the next few days, then dropped in at the Indy. Alma was not there, but a big man was standing behind the bar: Kumar, the Indian owner, and reason for the name of the restaurant. They began to talk. When he discovered she was Bulgarian, he told her of another Bulgarian who cleans his house. That surprised her. She had expected to be the only one on the island, which had more or less turned its back on Europe. She asked him to put them in touch and he called her. They agreed to go and see her the next day at a Sunday market.

*"... opportunity, which is the beginning of freedom,"* said her Unamuno, with a wink.

She drank a small beer and met another member of the Indy's team. Enrique, an Italian, had moved here because of the surf. His friends, a German surfing couple, had also arrived yesterday from Freiburg.

She spent the afternoon walking on the promenade and lying on one of the wooden platforms there. Not far from her was a statue of a woman with a long dress and an elegant hat. She was staring at the ocean, shading her eyes with her hand. Next to her was another statue of a man, a woman and a child, embracing. This woman's face radiated bliss and gratitude. Next to them, a bucket of dead fish. The statues of the waiting woman and of the woman whose waiting has been fulfilled: that's what she called them on this first day.

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A street musician was playing the guitar and singing his own arrangements of well known pop songs. A lyrical and heartfelt performance. She let the sun play on her face and felt the tension that had built up over the past months melting away. The heat, the caress of the breeze, the gentle sound of the ocean... She has arrived in different place. Different from the confident purposefulness of Brussels, from the crunch of the heavy European machine, the organised gaiety of the after-work parties, the easy communication and the difficult relationships, the shiny sport clubs, the smell of urine on the streets of the centre, the poverty of the homeless sleeping on cardboard; and different from the designer chic of the eurocrats, euro-consultants, euro-lobbyists, euro-successful-people, to whom it seems she now also belongs. It was... different. She wondered what she had wanted the second ticket for. She already knew she wouldn't use it, that she wouldn't leave Corralejo in a week, nor two weeks, nor even a month; she knew she may never wish to leave Corralejo... And this knowledge came to her not as a thought but as a feeling. A feeling of peace, freedom and profound harmony that was forming somewhere at the depths of her tired being.

Marina

Pleasure reached every cell of her body. She moaned. Gerard continued moving in her in a rhythmic and controlled way, faster and faster. She opened her hands wide and grabbed the sheet. The pulsing started from her finger tips and for endless seconds spread throughout her body together with her scream. She became still, relaxed and surrendered herself to the crescendo of his thrusting.

Later, as they lay side-by-side, she stared at the picture on the opposite wall. Square and yellow with shades of orange. In the upper left corner was a couple, seen from above, taking a selfie. The boy wore a backpack and embraced the girl. He held the camera with his other hand. Behind them, their shadow resembled an elephant.

Quite a simple composition, but there was something about it that wouldn't let her to look away. She gazed at it, mesmerised. Was it because of the predominant yellow colour, which reminded her of the dress she'd bought before leaving, or because of the tranquillity and intimacy of the couple? Splashed by sunlight, two young people save a happy moment of their life in a photo. And the moment is actually saved twice: once in their image and again on the canvas. The sequence does not matter. It wasn't only that, but the yellow, that yellow like the body of Fuerteventura.

She got up, dressed and followed Gerard onto the balcony. He was resting on a sunbed, smoking a cigarette. He pulled her towards him and kissed her belly through the cotton top. She looked at the ocean lapping at the shores of the desert. "The shores of the desert" sounded absurd. But it was true. Her gaze slid down the dunes. They seemed so inviting. Perhaps if she walked out to them it would take her from her own world and she would enter the happy world of the painting.

"I am going for a walk."

"Aren't you tired?"

"No."

The beach was long and wide, with light, fine sand. Half empty. Abandoned sunbeds, arranged in twos, faced the ocean. Above them were umbrellas, furled and useless. Here and there a family was sitting on the sand; children buried their hands in it; there were couples of all ages. To the left was a huge hotel, built in three parts. The central section was narrower than the two wings, and it looked like a large chicken with a doomed desire to fly. The ocean led to a mountain range whose wavy ridges were its stony continuation. To the right, the desert stretched as far as her gaze could reach. She went in that direction. The wind pulled her hair, so she took a ribbon from her little bag and tied it in a ponytail. She saw an empty, wood-built restaurant. The dunes stretched before her, pale yellow from the sunlight, rounded and inviting.

## The Writer

From the door a heavy smell of fried mince wafted into her face. The sound of sizzling meat came from the kitchen. A young man was cooking. Average height, with a lean, muscular body, he had his back to her. He was dressed in vest and shorts.

"Hola."

The man turned. Sharp dark brown hair, grey eyes, straight nose.

He stretched his hand towards her, but his face remained expressionless.

"Fabrizio, nice to meet you."

His voice was flat and uninterested.

"What are you doing here, Fabrizio?"

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"Cooking."

"On Fuerteventura?"

"I came for surfing. And I stayed."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Why?"

"I told you, because of surfing."

"Why here?"

"Because this is the place."

She had no idea yet how often she would hear these answers - paraphrased, but always the same: I came, I liked it, I stayed. She would come to see Fuerteventura as a place that enchants you, dooms you to itself and cannot be completely abandoned. But now, on the first day of her return to the island, this was no more than a vague intuition.

From their brief conversation she learned that Fabrizio was Italian and worked as a waiter. His flatmate, Juan, was Spanish. He worked erratic shifts at the hospital and travelled a lot, so his appearances in the flat were sporadic and unannounced.

The fatigue from the trip and the excitement overwhelmed her and she went to bed. When she awoke it was dark outside. Latin music filled the space in the open window. She looked at the square. A quartet was playing on a small stage. Two couples were dancing salsa. Children were running around them. A little girl in a white dress was spinning in circles, alone. The restaurants were full. She felt like going out and experiencing the Saturday night in this town with its poetic name, to celebrate her newfound freedom... Instead, she went back to bed and fell asleep again.

Gerd

They have been here for less than a day but it feels as if they'd never left. The ocean assimilates you and it seems like the only reality. The only true reality. Everything else is a dream. Carla had booked tickets for

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a play some time ago, Life is a Dream. That is the feeling: life is a dream. And surfing is life. The rest is in-between-surfing. In-between-living.

Everything was supposedly the same. But not quite. The feeling after the meeting with the woman at the airport. Her look, her light smile... He could still see them, hours after they had passed each other. This was something... new. Different. Not that he never looked at beautiful women. Of course he did. But they just passed by. A fleeting registration of features that pleased the eye. But this one... was still here. She was no magazine model. That is the weird thing. It's as if the island is playing tricks on him and he can not grasp it.

The ocean swell turns him around and the strength of his irrational desire to see the woman again gradually fades.

Exhausted, they drink beers at the *Buena Onda*. The sunset softens Carla's features and makes her face shine. Earlier he watched her lithe body resisting the element of water. He caresses her knee under the table. She throws him *that* look and gently smiles...

Marina

"New dress?" says Gerard, half-asking, his eyes laughing. "I like it."

She saw it in the window of a small boutique in the Marolles, on a Sunday, in a sunny moment on an overcast day when Gerard was playing golf. She hadn't planned to go shopping, only to walk, listen to street musicians and walk around the flea market on Place de Jeu de Balle, with its pieces of hundreds of different words. She wanted to sink into the Sunday oblivion of the artistic heart of Brussels. She walked slowly down Rue Haute glancing carelessly in the shop windows and at the people passing by, her eyes dwelling long enough to catch one detail or another: the colour of a person's eyes, a smile, a restless lock of hair, the cut of someone's clothing, hands holding hands, some antique furniture, groceries, a dog, a yellow dress... a yellow dress. She stopped in front of the window and stared at it with slightly narrowed eyes, as if to see the future, to see herself in this dress and everything she would go through while wearing

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it; as if to judge what she would feel like as *the woman in the yellow dress* and what that woman might be capable of. She entered the shop. The saleswoman took the dress off its mannequin and handed it to her. She liked its touch on her body. One hundred per cent silk, the label said. The silk stroked her skin with all of its hundred per cent. She looked at herself wearing the dress, in a large antique mirror with a frame and wheels. The saleswoman was also looking at her.

"Yellow is the colour of happiness. It suits you."

There was no need to convince her. Marina took out her credit card and paid.

Marina and Gerard drove across the desert to Corralejo. They passed down the main street and parked in one of the side streets, then walked back to the main street. Shops, bars, restaurants. Sales signs everywhere. They reached the pedestrian area of the city and continued down to the pier. A statue of a woman in a long dress, with her hand to her forehead, stared at the ocean. She radiated hope and expectation. Beside her, another composition showed a woman hugging her returning sailor and their daughter. She looked at them. The woman who's waiting for her beloved has been fulfilled by her past. The eternally waiting woman, her present. She wanted it to be the other way around. But it wasn't. She was the woman, staring at the horizon of the past and hoping for... what... a miracle?

They sit in one of the waterside restaurants. In front, a man is playing his own arrangements of popular songs on a guitar. "Rooodooxaane..."

"I like Corralejo" says Marina. "It has... atmosphere."

Gerard smiles and presses her hand.

The sun sets, colouring the horizon in pink-orange: the orange light that makes so many tourists ask Boris if he has used photoshop on his photos, and he answers, briefly : "No". He does not want to explain to them, because he is tired of explaining. How can he convince them that everything in his photos is as it is, a saved moment of the reality of Fuerteventura, as God created it, and as he has learned to capture with his camera, gradually, consistently and flawlessly?

Marina sips the white wine that Gerard has chosen, and takes in the pinkish-orange sky with her eyes, while he tries to draw her into a conversation about plans for the coming days.

Gerard

Her tranquillity, the brightness of her eyes, her light smile: these were enough to make him feel happy. Happy and grateful, not for the cruel chance that brought them together, but to the providence which linked their fates. She was his beginning and end. Was such an experience of love only possible in maturity? He did not know. It happened like that. He had been in love with Viviane. He loved her and, with love and tenderness, they'd made two children. But obligations, fatigue, habit, demands, and her eternal dissatisfaction burned up the love. Their marriage resembled a field after a summer fire: the fire gone, only embers and smoke left.

With Marina it was different from the beginning. Not as elemental and sweeping, but deep. Conscious. Evoked not so much by her delicate beauty as by her air of gentle mystery; her dreaminess and sadness. It derived from her femininity, which manifested itself in everything, from her clothing to the way she spoke and behaved. She was reserved, exquisite and friendly in an unobtrusive way. He felt good with her. He felt himself.

That had not changed. Three years later she still lived encapsulated, following the same trajectories that maintained her apparent balance. At Christmas he thought that perhaps the time has come for a transition, for her gradual return to life and, who knows, maybe to joy. A colleague of his had spent his holiday on Fuerteventura and recommended the island as a great place – still not too touristy, with large beaches... Once he had been to Tenerife with Viviane and the children, but that had been too commercial for them. It quelled any desire to try the other Canary Islands. Besides, Viviane then developed a taste for the sort of islands and destinations that needed a ten or fifteen hour flight to reach. With two children, the Tenerife holiday had begun in such a stressful way that by the time they finally managed to relax it was time to go back.

He saw pictures of Fuerteventura online. The yellow of the island reminded him of the wheat fields of his childhood. The desert landscape exuded serenity and timelessness, different from the typical European landscape. Without leaving the continent geographically or exhausting themselves with endless flights and airport stop-overs, they would find themselves in *a different* place. A suitable place for the start of the transition he was hoping to inspire in Marina. So he proposed that this year, rather than the south of

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France, they should spend their holiday on Fuerteventura. Now, as he sees the beneficial effect on her already on this first day, he feels his decision was the right one.

### The Writer

In the morning, rested and refreshed, she returned to the promenade. Last night's liveliness had given way to the kind of calm Sunday you can find in any city, but especially in cities that suffer from mass insomnia on Saturdays – an insomnia, which she had slept through. *There will be other Saturday nights*, she told herself. The streets were half empty. Early-rising tourists were running along the promenade. The staff of the restaurants were preparing for another long day. Here and there someone was drinking coffee. On the upper beach, not far away from the platforms where she had lain yesterday, a man in a bathing costume and a peaked cap was sculpting a sandcastle. She stopped and stared. The man was shaping the castle down to the smallest detail, fabulously authentic. She saw herself building a sand tower on the beach. Hers would be far more abstract, purity of line completely absent, but compensated for by curling intricacy. Small roses like those that her mother piped onto the cakes of her childhood. Now the tower is erected, fragile and delicate. Along comes a wave and sweeps it away. Where did she go wrong? Perhaps the site wasn't suitable, or the density of its structure.

There was a box with some coins next to the man. After the usual long rummaging in her bag she took out a euro. The man thanked her, reached into the jar beside him and handed her a small glass ball in iridescent yellow and blue. She held it up to the sun and its colours shone. She turned it in her fingers and they moved animatedly, showing the birth of the cosmos out of primordial chaos. She dropped the germ of the cosmos into the chaos of her purse and went along the street. The tide had moved out and wet rocks glistened in the sun, uncovered and accessible. She reached the beach, where young people in surfing suits sat in a circle, looking at the teacher who was explaining the rules of windsurfing. After a while, they all stood up and started exercising. She turned and found herself in front of the Indy.

She drank a tea, talking with Alma and Kumar, then walked lazily up the main street, in the direction she had come from yesterday. She went to find the Bulgarian in El Campanario.



## Carla

Carla brushed her teeth thoroughly, in front of the mirror in her blue cotton nightgown. Yesterday's anxiety had dissipated and now it seemed funny. Just one day, but what a change. What an effect this island had had on Gerd. Last night they'd made love like at the beginning of their relationship: spontaneously, joyfully and breathlessly. Like being hungry. The sea, the sun, the waves: in a single day they'd given Gerd the stimulus he had been missing in the recent months. Fuerteventura was an inexhaustible reservoir of life-giving energy. Their home city was also a special place. The Black Forest is said to be an energy centre. It's not surprising that spiritual practices are so popular in the area. But on Fuerteventura the energy moved differently for them. Whereas in Freiburg its direction was closure, encirclement and centring in the home, on the island what was happening was expansion, dilution and connection to the natural elements, turning nature into a home. Carla needed both.

## Marina

They heard about the Sunday market in El Campanario from the receptionist. The many stalls in the narrow streets sell jewellery, souvenirs, photographs, paintings and such like. Alongside the stalls there are cafes as well as shops, attempting to attract customers with big signs offering seasonal discounts.

The plethora of objects in different sizes and colours disturb and hypnotise her simultaneously. She passes from booth to booth, holding one item after another in her hand as if to feel its energy but, unable to decide, returns it. She spends longer with the glass angels hanging on their transparent cords. Pale purple, pale pink, white angels, with elongated bodies and rounded wings. Angels of modernity. "Do you want to buy one?" Gerard asks. She is silent. She hesitates. "Which one do you like?" He takes a pale purple one. The woman wraps it and gives it to her with a smile. "We all need an angel. Perhaps this is yours." Mine flew away long ago... she thinks. Gerard pays and they continue their way.

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Around the corner, photographs of Fuerteventura attract her attention. In particular a triptych of flying birds. Such energy in their movement! Such coiled dynamic life.

"Do you like it?" asks her the man behind the stall, in Spanish.

"Are they yours?"

"Yes."

"They have... presence. Spirit..."

"Thank you very much" he says in a very expressive voice, emphasising each syllable.

He is attractive. Charismatic. Younger.

Behind him stands an older woman with blond hair, tied in a ponytail.

"This is only part of my work" the man says. "I can show you more, if you are interested."

Yes, she is interested. He turns to the woman and tells her in Bulgarian:

"Dari, could you give me the folder."

Marina isn't expecting to meet any compatriots! It catches her off her guard.

"You are Bulgarians" is the only thing she is able to say, as if it is not obvious.

"Obviously, you too! And we might not have found out until the end" the man smiles calmly.

"I didn't know there were Bulgarians here."

"Oh, there are, there are at least twenty of us."

"Today we're even expecting a writer" the woman joins in.

Marina looks inside the folder. She likes his other work but the triptych with the birds remains her favourite. Finally, he takes out a deck of photos and invites her to pick one. She takes one out carefully and turns it over. She sees a huge deserted beach, surrounded by cliffs, a dramatic sky with dark clouds, merging with the boiling ocean. And, in the midst of the abyss, a lonely white wave.

The photographer raises his eyebrows.

"Cofete. A special place."

## The Writer

In El Campanario there are streets, a circular space with a stage surrounded by restaurants, and many stalls offering paintings, jewellery, photographs and any number of products created by human hands and imagination.

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She follows a street along a line of restaurants and cafes. In one corner stands a blond woman of around fifty. This must be Darina. Having seen the Writer's quizzical look, she smiles and extends her hand. The Writer follows her to the stand with photographs, behind which a tall, dark-haired man stands speaking to a woman in Spanish. When their conversation is over, he approaches them.

"How happy you look! I rarely meet such Bulgarians - so smiling and radiant" he turns to the Writer

"Really?"

"This is Emiliyan" Darina introduces him.

"Are the photographs yours?"

"All of them."

She looks at them carefully. All the different conditions of the island are depicted: sunsets, rocks, waves, a triptych with the birds... The magic and true soul of Fuerteventura stares at her. She wants to have them all.

Emiliyan tells her he has lived here for eight years, but doesn't fully know the island yet. And she? What can she hope for in the short time that she's allowed herself? They agree to meet later in a restaurant on the promenade. Among themselves they call this place "the office", because of Emiliyan's refusal to sit anywhere else.

Marina

She walks on the beach. The fine cool sand caresses her feet. The clouds, which covered the sky in the morning, have scattered and the sun is now shining with its maximum force for January. There are people in swim suits or shorts, walking and lying here and there. Among them a woman, wearing jeans and a pink cardigan, exposing only her face and bare feet to the sun. She has a small laptop on her knee, on whose keyboard her fingers rattle rhythmically. She looks up, directing her dark sunglasses to her and smiles slightly. Marina also nods.

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A blond girl in an orange swimsuit runs along the beach. The upper part of her suit has ridden up her neck like a bow tie. Her hair is scattered over her shoulders and back. Marina moves her gaze from her and directs it towards the dunes. This model desert gives her a sense of timelessness.

Nothing

has ever  
been  
nor  
will be  
anything  
else but  
sand.

Where did this thought come from? From the sand? From the nothingness? She repeats it like a mantra. There is a rhythm to it as from a pounding drum. Noth-ing has ev-er be-en nor will be any-thing el-se but sand. Ta-Ta-tar-ta-ra. A child's drum. Sandy hair and a high little voice, which rhythmically recites: "I am mama's sun..." She shakes her head to banish the memory of it.

Nothing

has ever  
been  
nor  
will be  
anything  
else but  
sand.

She likes the dunes more than Corralejo, Brussels or Sofia. Especially more than Sofia. She walks and walks, and she feels like staying here forever, on this island, combining the timelessness of the desert and the vastness of the ocean. The whisper of the waves and the silence of the sand. In this nakedness one hears and sees oneself better.

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The sudden noise of an engine. Two small beach-buggies go past, two men driving but she cannot see their features from this distance. *The island is a mini-world, a playground, in the mini-desert grown up children drive buggies.* What nonsense goes through her mind, but how good it makes her feel. Easiness. Easi-ness. The buggies have disappeared behind the dunes and the sound of their engines gradually fades.

Gerd

A day without wind. A true rarity on Fuerteventura. You can count the days like this on the fingers of one hand. Well, perhaps both hands. What are we going to do? It's no good for surfing. The ocean has turned into a lake. No, no good at all... What to do... I have an idea. A funny one. Well, not as much fun as surfing, but cool. What? You'll see. Jump in the car. We'll go to the dunes.

They park near the one big hotel and walk towards the other one. The one that looks like a wardrobe in three sections. A wardrobe containing the luxurious lives of all its inhabitants, in rooms like drawers. Hop, one life here. Hey, another life there. And several lives together, as couples and families do not count as one life anyway... everyone has their own cloak of thoughts, emotions, feelings, secrets... For a couple of days now, he has been quite a philosopher. Carla looks at him and her eyes ask a question. He reads it. But he is tired of responding to her need for security and love. It seems to him that he's a party to an unspoken agreement obliging him never to leave her, and obliging her never to show a lack of understanding, of tolerance or of patience. Perfection, however, is more tiring than any flaw.

"We have arrived" Enrique says, pointing at some buggies.

Gerd looks at him with bewilderment.

"Are you serious?"

"Of course!"

Five minutes later, they're speeding away in two of them. Carla sits behind Gerd. When they reach the sunbeds she steps out. She strips to her swimsuit and relaxes on a sunbed. She takes out her sunscreen and gently applies it, first on her face then to her body.

"Well?" Enrique raises his eyebrows.

"Awesome!" exclaims Gerd.

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"Vamos?"

"Vamos! Hasta pronto, meine liebe" shouts Gerd towards Carla and sends her a kiss. She giggles and watches them until they drive out of sight. Then she rests her head and closes her eyes under the gentle caress of the sun.

As the speed increases, Gerd's scepticism disappears completely. This really is fun! Suddenly he is five again, riding the bumper cars in Freiburg. He drives around a square; the fifteen square metres become a whole world where he passes mountains, villages, cities, borders, seas and oceans. He turns in a circle, but in fact this is a spiral, and at every turn a new territory awaits him, a new country, a new continent, until he passes into this exact circle where he's driving through the desert of Fuerteventura with his fearless companion. Both are uncatchable and unbeatable. Yuhuuu! Yuhuuu, Enrique yells back and they spin along to the next dune-mountain-conquest-over-the-nine-mountains-and-across-the-eight-oceans. And so they continue to the end of the desert. They make a turn and drive back. At the foot of the highest dune he looks up and sees her. A thoughtful princess, sitting in the tower, where she waits to be rescued. Her face is directed towards the sky. This lasts only a moment. Disturbed by the noise of the engines, she bows her head towards them. He sees her dark wavy hair and the blue of the sky above them. Like an angel leaning over him. His eyes slide over the blue linen dress. And he remembers. The airport.

Carla

She did not know how much time had passed until she heard the growl of the engines again. The sun had been shining intensely and she could not move from such bliss. She only opened her eyes when he stopped. Then she turned and froze. A woman was sitting behind Gerd! Carla noticed she was pretty, older than them perhaps, wearing a blue dress.

Her gaze shifted from his companion to him – examining, questioning.

"Hola mi querida. Your sweetheart has just saved a princess. Let me introduce you, princess..."

"Marina."

"Marina, this is Carla. This Italian gigolo is Enrique. And the humble persona of your saviour – Gerd the German."

Marina curved the edges of her lips in an embarrassed half-smile.

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"In the fairytales, after rescuing the princess the hero marries her... right?" asked Carla, supposedly joking, though her voice did not sound like it.

"In our story, they all go together to drink a beer" Enrique said, pointing at the wooden restaurant among the dunes.

Marina looked in the direction of the hotel.

"Nooo, don't even think about leaving" Enrique insisted "you are obliged to have at least one beer with your saviours."

Marina hesitated, then walked with him. Carla and Gerd followed them.

Gerd

Enrique was lagging behind. Gerd boosted the motor to gain ground and reach her first.

"Buongiorno, Princhipesa!"

"Buongiorno..." she smiled, a little uncertain.

But her eyes! Her eyes looked at him without embarrassment. There was no uncertainty there, just deep tenderness.

"Apologies for being so late" Gerd switched to English.

"It's OK. I was waiting for you."

"Well, jump on the horse then" he showed her the empty seat behind him.

Enrique arrived and also stopped. A half-astonished half-asking smile that comes with the understanding that you have missed something, appeared on his face.

Marina hesitated, got up slowly and sat behind Gerd. Her hands embraced his waist .

"Off we goooo!"

He pressed the accelerator and the buggy shot down the dune as fast as it would go.

It would never usually have crossed his mind to invite a stranger into his car, even if that car was just a buggy. For one thing, he had a girlfriend, and for another, that girlfriend was waiting for him even now. But at that moment everything stopped. His whole rational, social and emotional experience disappeared,

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and his learned reactions to the familiar situations of life flew away with it. It was as if it was not him. Someone else spoke to the Bulgarian and invited her into his buggy, someone who had borrowed his body and his spirit. Yet at the same time it seemed to him that, in doing so, he was being his real self, more than he'd ever been before in his whole life.

Carla

Only one table was occupied. There was an older man with thinning hair sitting at it, as well as a younger woman. Enrique greeted them both and their group joined them. Introductions, beers, toasts... Both women were Bulgarians who lived in Brussels. It sounded like a joke. But it was true, and Carla did not find it funny at all.

It turned out that Gerd's Princess, Marina, was married to a Frenchman who was waiting for her in their hotel. He held a senior post in the institutions. She also worked for the EU, but as a freelance translator. The other woman, whose name she didn't catch, was a writer working on a book about a Spanish philosopher who stayed on the island. The Writer was calm and sociable. She asked them questions, listened and showed interest. Carla found her quite pleasant. But Marina bothered her. There was something vague and appealing about her locked-in, silent presence, which made Carla instinctively distrust her.

It seemed to her she was taking part in a show without being aware of her role in it; that everything she was saying were lines memorised from another play; that, in the space of just a few minutes, the decor, the characters and their positions had changed so radically that she wasn't sure she'd ever see the world again as she used to know it. Their world. Hers and Gerd's.