

Dream Lover

He used to have an imaginary lover, until she left him.

Carlo hadn't seen her since he was fifteen, but on the vast sandy beach, she was up ahead - her long black hair and red dress caught in the sea breeze. Carlo couldn't see her face, but he knew it was Mona. It was no use calling out. His words wouldn't be heard above the sound of the waves. He had to reach her.

As Carlo ran after Mona, his feet sank in the sand, slowing him down. He glanced up. Mona was further away. Carlo stumbled through the sand, fell to his knees. He looked up. Mona was a distant figure. Carlo got to his feet, but stayed motionless. Mona had vanished.

With his shoulders slumped, Carlo heard several female voices call his name:

'Car-lo...'

Carlo turned to the voices. He blinked in the early morning sunlight, unsure of what he saw. On the shoreline, an aerobics class of naked women were working out, feet planted firmly in the sand as the sea lapped at their ankles. In unison, the women beckoned Carlo with outstretched hands. Without moving their lips, the women's voices called him again:

'Car-lo...'

Carlo looked around. There was no-one else on the beach, just him and the women. He stepped forward as the women smiled at him. He smiled back. This would make him forget about Mona.

The women stepped backwards, luring him into the water. Transfixed, Carlo followed them into the sea. Waist-deep, he felt the women encircle him, their hands on his shoulders and arms. Their caresses turned into a tight grip. Carlo's smile faded.

Before Carlo could react, the women submerged him underwater. He struggled to the surface, but the women overpowered him and pushed him back under.

His eyes and cheeks bulged as he tried not to lose his breath. He thrashed at the water, broke to the surface and gasped for air.

With his mouth dry, Carlo opened his eyes. And blinked. The blinds were open and sunlight poured into the bedroom. He could hear the shower running. His mind regained a waking state and he thought:

‘I’m alive.’

He pulled back the sheet and swung his legs off the double bed - knocking over an empty bottle of champagne.

Carlo picked up the bottle and placed it on the bedside table, next to a plate with half-eaten cake and three used condoms.

Perched on the edge of the bed, Carlo stared at a painting hung on the wall – three mermaids luring a curly-haired man into the sea. The painting no doubt influencing his dream. That and the night of champagne and sex, Carlo having turned thirty the day before.

Carlo’s contemplation was disrupted as Emma came in from the shower, naked apart from a towel wrapped around her blonde hair. Looking at Carlo’s morning erection, she smiled:

‘Morning big boy.’

She brushed a curl of unkempt hair away from his ear and whispered:

‘Wait until I get you tonight.’

‘I had another strange dream.’

‘Yea? Reaching thirty will do that to you. Now have a shower or you’ll be late for work.’

As Carlo bounced up, his mobile phone rang from his linen trousers, draped over a chair. Carlo answered it with a smile:

‘Ciao mama.’

Carlo’s mum had lived in Britain for thirty five years, but she still had an Italian lilt when she spoke:

‘Did you get your birthday present?’

‘Looking at it right now.’

Carlo looked across at the painting of three mermaids luring a man into the water. His mum explained:

‘I painted it especially. I had a dream the night before that you let all these women drown you.’

That was his mum – an artist who lived on her own in the woods and made obscure comments on her son’s life. She’d once sent him a drawing of a man growing out of a tree, his arms outstretched as branches. At the base of the tree, several women tended to the earth and roots. On the back, she’d written: *You’re like a tree that feeds off female attention*. Carlo could hear birds chirping on the other end of the line, so he asked:

‘Where are you?’

‘Outside. It’s a beautiful morning, so I set up the easel early.’

Carlo pictured his mum at her easel, grey-haired and in an unflattering art smock but still beautiful. Brush in hand, she would be catching the sunlight on the beach and birch trees that surrounded the cottage.

With her shirt and trousers on, Emma handed Carlo a towel and smacked his backside. She tapped her watch and pointed to the bathroom. Carlo nodded and spoke into the phone:

‘Mama, I’ve got to go to work, call you later... you too.’

When Carlo came back from the shower, he found Emma rummaging through a box of old postcards. He vaguely remembered getting the box out the night before. As he got pants from the drawer, Emma asked:

‘All these are from your mum?’

‘Uh huh.’

Emma picked up one of the cards, a black and white photo of Bridget Bardot on a bicycle as she rode through a park in Paris. Emma turned it over and read out loud:

‘I hope you meet a nice girl like this at university.’

Carlo put on his trousers as he said:

‘My mum wanted the best for me, what can I say?’

Emma picked up another card, this one a drawing of a little man holding onto a stem of a gigantic leaf as it got blown away. Emma read the message from Carlo’s mum:

‘This reminded me of you.’

Emma looked up at Carlo, asked:

‘What does that mean?’

Carlo shrugged as he buttoned his linen shirt:

‘How do I know?’

‘How did you ever become a psychology lecturer?’

‘Must be my first-hand experience of mother issues.’

Carlo smiled at Emma:

‘That, or I fucked the secretary in HR.’

Emma tried to slap Carlo on the arm, but he dodged and ran down the stairs.

Shutting the door of the terraced house he’d recently bought, Carlo should have felt great. It was a beautiful summer morning with a cloudless blue sky. He had a good job, an attractive girlfriend and his own home. But his dream had left him with an uneasy feeling. Emma hooked her arm through his and asked:

‘Yours or mine tonight? And what are we having for dinner?’

‘Don’t mind.’

‘Everything all right?’

‘Just thinking about something my mum said.’

Emma rolled her eyes.

As they strolled to the end of the street, a few other people left their houses for work. Turning into a main road, Carlo and Emma stopped at a crossing, the street busy with pedestrians and cars. Emma gave Carlo a quick kiss, said:

‘Pizza at yours then.’

Emma headed off with the other pedestrians, to the university where she worked as a secretary. It was true, Carlo had got the job by fucking her.

Carlo’s first class was at eleven so he had time for a swim. Escaping the morning rush, he turned into an alley - a short cut to the swimming pool. The alley came out in the middle of a steep street. Just as he reached the end of the alley, a pushchair with a baby inside sped past.

Instinctively, Carlo reached out an arm and grabbed the pushchair handle just in time. At the bottom of the street, cars drove by, oblivious to the near fatal accident. A few metres up the hill, the baby's young mother was prostrate on the pavement, having slipped and fallen, her broken shoe next to her foot – the look on her face changing from despair to relief.

The young woman picked herself up and took the pushchair from Carlo, the two of them without words. There wasn't anything to say. It was sheer chance that Carlo had walked past at that moment. A second later and the baby would have plunged down the hill to its death. Not that the baby was fussed, gurgling away as the mother bent down into the pushchair. Carlo left the woman to cradle her baby.

Reaching the swimming pool, Carlo smiled at the receptionist:

'Morning Gloria.'

Gloria returned a wide smile, said:

'Bit late today, no?'

Carlo shrugged as walked on towards the changing rooms:

'Had to save a baby on the way.'

Carlo paused, suddenly remembering his dream from a few nights before. He turned to Gloria:

'I had a dream about this place the other night. You were in it. Nothing erotic, don't worry.'

'Why should I worry?'

Gloria leant on the reception desk, the top button of her shirt undone – affording a glimpse of her breasts. With Carlo not offering a quick response, Gloria pressed:

‘So what was the dream?’

‘I came here to swim, but when I got in the pool, I realised I was the only one. At the other end, out of the pool some men were drilling into the wall, doing some repairs. I just ignored them and carried on. But when I turned to swim back the other way, the pool was suddenly full of people, mostly children, getting in the way. I still carried on, pushing my way to the end. Then when I turned for the next lap, the pool was empty again, only now my car was by the side of the pool and two men were breaking into it. You were there and you told me to stop them, but I just carried on swimming, determined to finish.’

Gloria smiled curiously, waiting for more, but Carlo didn’t say anything else. Gloria made fun of him:

‘So what does it mean professor?’

Carlo gave his standard reply:

‘Who knows.’

He smiled and walked off to the changing rooms.

In the near empty pool, Carlo swam breast stroke, smoothly making his way from one end to the other. After several lengths, he rested at one end of the four-laned, oblong pool. Light filtered in through the high windows, reflecting off the water onto the ceiling, and sent Carlo daydreaming.

He saw himself as a baby in a pushchair. It was drizzling and the pushchair had a plastic hood, enclosing Carlo. His small hand touched the plastic in wonder, raindrops on the outside. The pushchair was stationary, Carlo’s mum standing next to it, waiting in a queue at a bus stop. Carlo suddenly started giggling for no reason. His mum turned, puzzled, looking at Carlo in wonder.

It wasn't possible that he actually remembered the scene, but his mum had told him about it, how he just used to laugh for no reason and how it unnerved her.

He should visit his mum more often, out in the woods on her own – not that she was lonely. She was too wrapped up in her painting to notice loneliness. As a boy, he'd thought his mum was beautiful. As an adult, he'd seen photos from her youth and it was true. She was still an attractive woman, but had stopped looking after her appearance years ago.

His dad had been a semi well-known painter. Fifteen years older than Carlo's mum, he had wooed her while teaching in Rome and she had ran away to be his assistant and model. Leaving Italy behind at the age of twenty, she happily set up home with Carlo's dad in his fairytale cottage in the woods. She loved him so much, she never cared about the isolation.

Carlo's dad died when he was fifteen. His mum was devastated and drunk herself into a stupor after the funeral. Carlo hugging her tight while she cried into his shoulders – for that night only, parent and child roles reversed. Carlo kept his emotions in check. But when Holly, the family dog, died a year later, Carlo was distraught. The collie had been with Carlo for as long as he could remember and all the repressed sadness about his dad's death just poured out.

Carlo had always hated death. When he was ten years old, he'd been staring out the window at the beach tree that loomed over the house. He watched a sycamore helicopter leaf spindle downwards, down to the roots of the tree that bulged out of the earth.

He started to wonder how long the tree had been there, and how long it would continue to be there. It had grown from a seedling, branched out, become a sturdy tree. In time, it

would not only lose its leaves, but decay and die – the branches would snap off and the base would rot. His mind wandered to thinking about his own mortality – one day he would die, simply not exist any more.

Fear crept all over him, his skin tingling as he tried to grasp the concept of non-existence – the fact that when he died he wouldn't even be able to know that he didn't exist because he wouldn't have a mind to think the thought.

Unable to comprehend this idea, Carlo burst into tears - terrible, uncontrollable tears. Coming into the room, his mum instantly hugged him tight - demanding to know what was wrong.

His jaw paralysed, Carlo couldn't respond, but even if he'd been able to, he knew then that there was no point - there was no solution she could provide. So he just sobbed, inconsolable.

Strangely, his dad's death gave his mum a new lease of life. Finally doing her own work, she painted non-stop, gaining her own renown. Carlo visited when he could, but he never seemed to have time – travelling around Europe after university, a series of girlfriends as he worked abroad for the adventure rather than any career. His mum at one point sending the drawing of a small man holding onto a huge leaf twice his size as he was carried by the wind - apparently a metaphor for Carlo's life.

He couldn't seem to stop the stream of girlfriends. It wasn't that it was deliberate. With brown eyes from his mum and athletic build from his dad, he naturally attracted women - they asked him out and he didn't know how to say no. His mum said he'd never have a serious relationship because he was never serious.

His mum's words probably had more effect than he realised. At the age of twenty-nine, he returned to Britain, moving to a city near his mum. He'd done various teaching jobs abroad, but he didn't really have the credentials to work as a psychology lecturer at the university. He just walked in and asked if they had any vacancies. Emma was at the desk. He charmed her and she basically got him the job.

A year later, he had a full time contract and a mortgage. He guessed it was called settling down. He didn't live with Emma but she came around almost every night. He should have been happy and yet he couldn't help asking himself: was this it?

Carlo shook himself from his reveries, quickly swam another length and got out. He had to plan his first seminar.

Carlo grabbed his bag from the locker and opened the door of the nearest cubicle. A fat, naked woman grabbed a towel to cover herself up. Carlo instantly apologised and backed out of the cubicle. It was embarrassing but it wasn't his fault the woman hadn't locked the door. Carlo went to the next cubicle, carefully checking there was no-one inside.

His hair still wet, Carlo waved at Gloria as he strode past reception:

'See you next week.'

Gloria stopped him:

'Or before?'

Carlo looked at her questioningly. Gloria made it clear:

'Why don't you ask me out?'

Taken aback, Carlo didn't know what to say, not wanting to hurt her:

'I'd like to, but...'

Carlo left his sentence unfinished. Gloria finished it for him:

‘But you have a girlfriend.’

Carlo nodded. Gloria snapped at him:

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Carlo didn’t answer. Gloria continued:

‘You can’t tell me it’s normal, the way we talk to each other?’

Carlo still didn’t reply, frowning. Gloria pleaded:

‘Do you really love her? I thought you liked me.’

‘I’ve got to go.’

Carlo turned away. Gloria leaned over the reception desk, her voice trailing after him:

‘You don’t know what you’re missing...’

Carlo got through two seminars without event. A popular lecturer, his students all turned up - Carlo well aware that this was more to do with his humorous approach rather than any academic standing. As someone who avoided any in-depth analysis of his own psyche, he really shouldn’t have been teaching psychology.

In the last seminar of the day, he sat facing a semi-circle of seven female students. On the board behind him he’d written “*Things that we forget scream out for help in our dreams – Elias Canetti*”. They had covered Freud’s and Jung’s dream analysis, but at the end of each seminar they had a more light-hearted look – someone telling the class a dream they’d had while one of the students explained what it meant from a dream interpretation book.

Laura, an initially shy young woman who sometimes hid behind her brown-haired fringe, got out her book. Carlo clapped his hands:

‘Ok, let’s see if the local bookstore can match Carl and Sigmund.’

He looked around at the group of students:

‘Whose turn is it? Clare?’

A pretty twenty-year-old in jean cut-offs, Clare was animated:

‘Ok, I had a really strange dream. I was pregnant. Part of me was thinking I can’t be – I mean I don’t even have a boyfriend. But I was also really happy.’

Carlo turned to Laura, who turned the pages of her book. She read out loud:

‘Giving birth is about life changes. You are about to go through a new stage in your life.’

Carlo turned back to Clare:

‘That right Clare?’

‘It’s true. Last month I split up with my boyfriend and I spent time thinking about who I really was.’

Carlo put on a mock-serious expression:

‘And did you find the real you?’

Clare stuck her tongue out at him. She tried to get her revenge:

‘What about you? You always make us tell our dreams. Why don’t you tell us yours?’

Carlo exhaled:

‘I’ve been having strange dreams all week.’

He wasn’t going to tell them the dream about the women on the beach as it was too sexual and personal. He’d already told Gloria about the swimming pool dream. Instead, he remembered one from the start of the week:

‘The other night I dreamt that I was going to be shot by a firing squad. There were several of us – all being lined up in a yard, with our hands tied behind our backs. Others were singled out before me. Some tried to escape, some pleaded - but all of them were killed. When it was my turn, I was terrified, but I just stood there calmly - waiting for the shot.’

Laura looked up from her book which she’d been quickly flicking through:

‘It’s some type of sexual conflict.’

The other students giggled as Laura continued:

‘It’s important what type of gun it is.’

‘Rifles, there were four of them with rifles.’

‘Either you desire someone who doesn’t want you or someone desires you but you don’t want them.’

Carlo laughed it off:

‘Well, guess it must be the latter. Right, you’ve all got your projects to do – see you next week.’

Carlo turned to clean the board. As the students packed their notes away, Clare said:

‘We’re going for a drink if you fancy joining us.’

‘Thanks, but I can’t make it today. Another time.’

Clare pouted and filed out with the other students. Carlo picked up his bag and turned to leave. Laura stood awkwardly in the doorway. She fiddled with her fringe as she asked:

‘Do you mind if I tell you something?’

Wary of being left alone with a female student, Carlo made for the door as he replied:

‘Sure, let’s walk and talk.’

Walking alongside him to the front of the university, Laura hesitated before starting:

‘I, er, had a dream about you last night...’

Carlo raised his eyebrows. Laura scowled at him:

‘Not the kind you’re thinking of.’

Carlo wiped away imaginary sweat and Laura continued:

‘You were being chased by loads of women. It was like The Beatles or something, hundreds of women chasing you down the streets - all of them desperate to have you, but you were desperate to get away. With nowhere to hide, you knocked on my door and I hid you inside my flat – the women running on by.’

They came to a standstill by the steps outside the university. Laura looked up from under her fringe:

‘Just thought I should tell you.’

Carlo humoured her:

‘So what do you think it means?’

Laura shrugged:

‘That you’re hiding from something. Are you afraid of death?’

‘I try not to think about it.’

‘You don’t take anything seriously.’

‘That’s what my mum says.’

‘Maybe you should listen to her.’

Laura dug into her pocket, taking out a business card that she offered to Carlo:

‘I wanted to give you this as a birthday present.’

Carlo looked at the card. In black writing on the white card was “Fantasy Palace”. Underneath, in italics was “*Find the truth of your desires*”. Hoping it wasn’t an invitation to a fetish club, Carlo laughed:

‘What is this?’

‘You should go. It’s one day only – on Saturday.’

‘Hey thanks, it’s really nice of you, but I don’t think this is for me.’

‘Keep it in case you change your mind.’

Carlo looked at Laura. She seemed sincere. Whatever the place was, she didn’t seem to be suggesting it was some kind of secret S&M party. He’d never really worked Laura out, but he trusted her:

‘Ok, I’ll think about it.’

The day just didn’t stop being bizarre. He’d dreamt of being drowned by several women, been told to have a check up for testicular cancer and now was being invited to a ‘Fantasy Palace’, whatever the hell that was. Carlo pocketed the card as Emma appeared on the steps.

Carlo introduced the two women. Laura smiled a hello – her melancholic face lighting up beautifully as she did so. In contrast, Emma looked sullen - her outwardly pretty features turning ugly. Carlo waved to Laura as he turned to go:

‘See you tomorrow.’

Leaving Laura to unchain her bicycle, Carlo walked with Emma - who was on his case straight away:

‘You’re seeing her tomorrow?’

‘What?’

‘You said “See you tomorrow.”’

‘I meant next week – I forgot it’s Friday.’

Sensing Emma was about to get jealous, Carlo tried to distract her:

‘Good day at work?’

‘It was alright.’

‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Something obviously is.’

‘Well maybe I’m fed up of your bloody fan club.’

‘What?’

‘Every time I meet you, you’re always with some girl.’

‘She’s my student.’

‘I saw the way she was looking at you.’

‘You’re imagining it.’

Emma stood still on the pavement, livid:

‘I’m not fucking imagining it – I know what I saw!’

Both of them retreated into sullen silence. They picked up a pizza and went back to Carlo’s house without saying a word. Carlo had wanted to tell her about the testicular cancer scan but had decided not to say anything. In the kitchen, Emma shared out the pizza. Carlo took his wallet out of his pocket and chucked it on a shelf, not noticing the ‘Fantasy Palace’ card fall to the floor.

They ate without talking until Emma pointed to the last piece of pizza:

‘You can have that.’

With the silence broken, Carlo asked:

‘Are you afraid of death?’

‘I’m afraid of flying, but not of dying.’

‘I am.’

‘Jesus, is this what happens when you turn thirty – you become all morbid?’

Carlo ignored her sarcasm:

‘Not of how or when I’ll die, but of actually not existing.’

‘Well there’s nothing you can do about it, so I don’t see why it should upset you.’

This time, Carlo reacted:

‘Nothing you can do once you’re up in a plane either, so I don’t know why that scares you.’

Emma binned the pizza boxes. She saw the ‘Fantasy Palace’ card on the floor and picked it up:

‘What’s this?’

Carlo glanced over and saw what she was holding. He waved it off:

‘One of my students gave it to me.’

‘Oh yea, a female student no doubt.’

Emma was full of disdain as she read out loud:

‘Fantasy Palace – find the truth of your desires.’

Carlo thought about it:

‘When I was a teenager, I used to have an imaginary lover.’

‘Are you having an affair?’

‘She used to come to me in the middle of the night – until she left me.’

Emma dropped the 'Fantasy Palace' card on the table and snorted:

'You should see a shrink.'

Emma grabbed her jacket:

'You can stay with your "imaginary lover" because I'm staying at mine tonight.'

Carlo stayed motionless as Emma stormed out of the house. Every relationship ended up the same. Was it his fault? He never cheated, but couldn't help wanting female attention. Maybe he just went with the wrong women all the time – that's what his mum told him, though always in retrospect. As he went back through his girlfriends, he smiled as he remembered the one woman no-one had ever known about. Mona, his imaginary lover.

Mona used to come to him in the middle of the night, conjured by his imagination. She would wake him up and it felt real – his hands rising up to touch her. But whenever he tried to pull her towards him she would slip out of his grasp and disappear. That last night though, he had followed her – the full moon lighting up a path through the deciduous woods.

Several metres ahead, Mona checked over her shoulder that he was following before flitting behind a tree. Carlo started to jog, catching a glimpse of her again - somehow further away. Again, she vanished.

Carlo ran into a clearing covered with ivy leaves and brambles. In front of him were the remains of a derelict old building, just three crumbling stone walls left – a beach tree having grown up inside. Turning around desperately, Carlo stumbled and fell to the ground – smelling the earth as he crawled forward. Sitting despondently against the tree, he listened to the river he couldn't see and knew that Mona had gone.

Shaking himself from his memory, Carlo wondered what he should do. He could drive over to Emma and try to make peace with her, but he was fed up of her constant jealousy. He could sit at home on his own and pretend his thoughts of Mona meant nothing. Or he could try and find her. He picked up the ‘Fantasy Palace’ card. Was it for real?

The address was out by the sea and would take him a couple of hours to get to. If he drove there now, he could sleep in the car and be there for first thing in the morning. The whole thing was probably some hoax, but what did he have to lose?

With the dreams and memories he was having, finding “the truth of his desires” was just what he needed. Maybe he’d find Mona. He hadn’t thought about her for so long. But now he wanted her more than ever. Carlo grabbed his car keys from a shelf.

Putting the Fiat in gear, Carlo sped off. He drove out of the centre, up onto a raised motorway – leaving the city streets behind. With night darkening, he sped past an industrial works – lit up by flames from the tall chimneys. He cruised over an estuary, the shape of hills just about made out beyond – and took the next turning off.

On a broad country road, he wound up and around – the sea occasionally glimpsed in the distance when his floodlights caught it. Reaching a parking bay on a bend near the top of the hill, Carlo pulled in for the night. Turning off the engine, he leant his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes.

Falling asleep almost instantly, Carlo dreamt that he woke on the ground of a wooded copse. Turning his head, he saw that Emma was lying next to him. He sat up in sudden panic and looked around. He shook Emma awake, demanding to know:

‘Where’s Holly?’

Emma shrugged. Frowning, Carlo stood and whistled. A small collie came dashing out from behind a tree and leapt up onto Carlo – the two of them overjoyed to see each other.

As he rubbed the dog's head, Carlo asked Emma:

‘Did you leave a note saying we'd brought her with us?’

Emma shook her head, which annoyed Carlo. Like little children, they had run away from home, but he hadn't wanted his parents to worry about the dog. Even stranger was that Holly the collie was long dead, but that didn't bother him.

After leaving the copse, Carlo, Emma and Holly walked along an empty road that ran alongside the sea – small fishing boats moored up on the pebbled beach between water and tarmac. With the outline of a town made out in the distance, a few cars and people began to appear - the day starting. Two small boys were sitting on the beach, playing with the pebbles. One of them looked up at Carlo as they passed and shouted:

‘Throw me in, throw me in!’

Carlo smiled, lifted the little boy up and threw him into the sea. But what he hadn't realised was that the seafloor dropped suddenly – within seconds the boy deep underwater. Carlo immediately dived in after the boy, but he was far out of reach. Swimming with all his might, Carlo finally grabbed hold of him – but too late, the boy already drowned. Desperately sad, Carlo turned to swim back up and saw that the surface was too far away. He also wouldn't make it.

Carlo woke up in the car with his head tilted at a strange angle. Stretching his neck and getting his breath back from his dream of drowning, he saw that a queue of people had formed outside - heading up the hill past his car.

Intrigued, he got out. The queue wound up the car-less road to a grand palace-like building on top of the hill. The building was made of yellow stone, golden from the morning sunlight it was bathed in, and was fronted with several archways – blue sky seen through them.

Curious, Carlo walked up alongside the queue. Someone from the queue called after him:

‘Hope you don’t think just because you parked all night you can jump the queue.’

‘Just having a look.’

As Carlo walked ahead to get a better view of the building, he overheard a conversation between two women – one woman asking another:

‘What are you here for?’

‘The perfect guy!’

Turning to look at the women, Carlo recognised the fat woman from the swimming pool changing cubicle and the young mother whose baby he’d saved. Neither of them paid him any attention as the fat woman scoffed:

‘He doesn’t exist.’

‘He might here.’

Further along the queue, three men were talking. A muscled-up guy said:

‘My fantasy’s to be a prince in a harem – different woman every hour for me.’

The second man was the opposite of the first, a skinny, nerdy guy with glasses. He blinked as he said what his fantasy was:

‘I’ve always wanted a young virgin.’

The third man was sharp-suited and wearing designer sunglasses. His fantasy was clear:

‘A huge woman with massive tits that wants to be fucked up the arse for me.’

The woman in front of the men looked over her shoulder disdainfully:

‘You don’t need to come here for that – use your imagination.’

Carlo saw that it was Clare. Not wanting to be spotted by his student, he quickly moved on. The queue led to stone steps that went up to the main entrance – a big arched door. Laura was standing there, waving to Carlo. Getting a few looks for queue jumping, Carlo walked up to her:

‘Hey, I’m so glad to see you – I had such a strange dream last night.’

‘Yea? Come on, I’ve been waiting for you.’

Seemingly not interested in his dream, Laura led Carlo into the building – shutting the big wooden door behind her. They were in a huge stone-floored, square yard – arched doorways on three sides. The archways to the left and right were all doored, but the ones opposite were open – sunlit grass glimpsed outside.

Not really taking in his surroundings, Carlo was determined to tell Laura about his dream. She waited impatiently while he finished then explained it to him:

‘It’s all very simple. Dead dog, ex-girlfriend, drowning – it’s the end of one part of your life. You’re going through a major change. Now, let me explain about this place.’

‘Yea, what is this place – and why are those people queuing outside?’

‘They all want their fantasies to come true. So what are you looking for?’

‘Mona.’

‘Who’s Mona?’

Carlo had said her name without hesitation, but now he laughed nervously:

‘She was my imaginary lover when I was younger.’

Laura looked slightly askance, but shrugged:

‘Well, you might find her. But as you can see, it’s a big place. And it’s not so simple. Good luck.’

And with that, Laura left Carlo and went back out the front entrance. Feeling a little daunted, Carlo looked around at all the doors and archways – not knowing if he was supposed to choose one. Saving him the dilemma, something caught his eye by one of the side doors. It had opened slightly and a hand was beckoning him to follow.

Carlo came out into an alley by the side of the building. Turning to his left he saw Mona at the end of the alley, looking over her shoulder to check he was following. Standing in the sunlight, she was as beautiful as ever – long black hair down over her high cheeks and red dress tight against her slim body.

Smiling at him, Mona danced away from the alley. Carlo ran after her, but when he reached the end of the alley he came to a busy shopping street. He spied Mona among the crowds so went after her – only to lose sight of her almost immediately amongst the shoppers. He desperately looked in every direction, but couldn’t see her anywhere. Frantically pushing past people, Carlo searched where he thought Mona had gone. But it was no good – she had vanished.

Sadly giving up, Carlo walked down a side street. He couldn’t believe it. After fifteen years he’d found her, and like that she was gone. As he walked despondently down the terraced street, a car pulled up in front of him. A couple got out, their hands all over each other – the woman saying to the man:

‘Wait until I get you inside...’

The couple rushed into their house, shutting the door just as Carlo reached it. Another car pulled up and a second couple got out – both without any enthusiasm, the woman saying:

‘Pizza?’

The man just shrugged and they went into their house – again shutting the door just before Carlo got there. A third car parked up. This time, the couple jumped out angrily – the woman shouting at the man:

‘I saw the way she was looking at you!’

With the man entering the house, the woman stormed after him – the front door slamming on Carlo. A few houses down, another door opened. Laura popped her head out and beckoned him. Dazed by what he had just witnessed, Carlo entered.

Finding himself back in the main square of the palace-like building, Carlo was sad:

‘I lost her.’

‘Is she the only one you want?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure she wants you? Maybe she’s with another man right now.’

‘What?’

‘Have you never felt jealous?’

‘No, not really. My last girlfriend was though, including of you.’

‘Can’t have been easy on her with you always surrounded by women.’

‘Hey, I never had an affair.’

‘No, but you have some perverse need for all women to like you. You’re like a tree that feeds off female attention.’

‘That’s what my mum said.’

‘Yea?’

Laura picked up a painting that was leaning against the wall and hung it up. She stood back and admired the painting - three mermaids luring a man into the sea. Carlo was puzzled:

‘That’s my mum’s painting.’

‘Uh huh, we had it delivered.’

Laura looked at him:

‘You know, I was thinking the other day that maybe the people we choose as our partners are the people who reflect us and our stage in life, an image of ourselves at that time and place.’

‘But what about the other person? Are we also a reflection of their stage in life? Are we just images of each others’ minds, occasionally the image matching each others?’

‘Why not? Maybe everything’s in our own minds. We project our feelings onto another person and assume they have the same feelings as us, when we might have completely deluded ourselves. And maybe even then it doesn’t matter. You can fancy someone, think they’re beautiful and sexy, so that when it comes to the actual act of making love, the other person only has to do their job as your fantasies have excited you enough already.’

‘Like all those girls with The Beatles when they started to become famous, screaming and fainting because they’d worked themselves into such an emotional state, it became physical. One of the Beatles only had to touch them and they’d probably have had an orgasm. And it wouldn’t have had anything to do with the prowess of the Beatle, simply all come from the girl’s mind.’

Laura smiled:

‘Anyway, I’ll leave you to it – I have to check the others.’

She pointed to the open arches:

‘Try outside.’

Carlo looked to where she was pointing. Through one of the arches, he glimpsed a set of swings. His face lit up:

‘Hey, that was near my friend’s house. I used to play there sometimes when I was a kid.’

Carlo turned to Emma but she had gone. He shrugged, walked through to the swings and was transported to when he was ten years old.

He was playing with his friend Liam, both swinging as high as they could. Four older, teenage girls were nearby, smoking. The leader stubbed out her cigarette and strutted over to the two boys:

‘Do you want to come with us?’

Carlo and Liam stopped swinging. The three other girls surrounded the two boys in a provocative way, a second one asking:

‘Into the woods?’

A third girl joined in:

‘To play a game?’

The two boys looked at each other, intrigued, but hesitant. The leader winked at Carlo and took him by the hand:

‘Come on.’

Carlo and his friend let themselves be led into the woods next to the park, along a narrow track. The leader gave the boys an order:

‘You have to hold both our hands.’

The boys now had a girl on both their sides, holding hands with both. Carlo’s friend started to get restless and whined:

‘I want to go back.’

‘No, not yet,’ said the leader. ‘In this game, you have to do everything we tell you.’

But Liam was scared:

‘No, I want to go back.’

Liam tried to let go of the girls’ hands, but they tightened their grip. Annoyed, the girls started to be aggressive. They pushed Carlo and Liam onto the ground and pinned them there. Carlo didn’t struggle, letting one of the girls sit astride him, in fact turned on by it. Liam kept struggling. The leader turned on him angrily:

‘Why don’t you be like your friend? If you do what we tell you, nothing bad will happen.’

But Carlo’s friend continued to struggle. The second girl was ready to give up:

‘Oh, come on, let’s forget it.’

The girls gave up trying to keep Carlo’s friend down, letting him get up. He immediately started to run off. The leader shouted after him:

‘Go on, run home to mummy.’

The girls on top of Carlo got off him as well. The leader dismissed him:

‘Go on, join your friend.’

Rather reluctantly, Carlo ran after his friend. He caught up with him as they got back into the park. They slowed down as they walked through the park to home. Carlo's friend was upset, but Carlo wanted to make an agreement:

'We don't tell anyone, ok?'

His friend whined:

'They hurt me.'

Carlo was insistent:

'Ok?'

'Ok.'

Carlo and Liam arrived at his friend's home, walking through the front door and into the living room where both their mums were sitting, talking. Carlo sat down as if everything was normal. His friend sat as well, but looked pale. Carlo's mum smiled at them:

'That was quick.'

Carlo shrugged but Liam burst into tears. His friend's mum asked:

'What's the matter?'

Carlo rolled his eyes as his friend clung to his mum, telling the story of what happened in the park through sobs:

'These girls, in the park, took us into the woods...'

Carlo and his friend were led back into the park by their mums, Carlo full of reluctance and embarrassment, the mums very serious as they asked:

'Who was it, are they still here?'

Carlo didn't answer but his friend pointed to the swings where the girls were standing smoking. The mums marched over to the girls, Carlo and Liam remaining, Carlo having nothing to do with his friend. By the swings, the mums gave the girls a good talking to.

When they went back to his friend's house once more, Carlo walked a few steps behind Liam and the two mums, not wanting to be part of them. The front door was left open for him. He scuffed inside and found himself back as an adult in the Palace's inner courtyard.

What was this place? It was far from any city, yet the first door had taken him to busy streets. The arch he'd just been through had transported him to his childhood as if he was actually there. He reminded himself that he had come to find Mona. Emma had told him to try outside. He peered through the next arch and was sure he saw his mum.

Carlo strode through the archway, out into an area of wild grass. His mum was at her easel, her back to him. Carlo couldn't believe it:

'Mama?'

Carlo's mum turned and beamed a smile at him. She put down her brush and kissed him on both cheeks:

'Carlo – you should have told me you were coming. I'll make coffee.'

Carlo nodded, bewildered at finding his mum in the Palace. He watched her walk off to the cottage, which had replaced the Palace façade. He guessed if he followed her inside, he would end up back in the courtyard, so he stayed where he was and looked at his mum's painting.

It was a vibrant depiction of the deciduous woods beyond, beach and birch trees lit up in the morning sunlight. Carlo looked closer. In-between the trees was a figure. A woman

with black hair and a red dress. Carlo shot a look over the top of the easel. All he could see was trees. But he could feel her silently calling his name.

Carlo strode towards the trees. Dead branches snapped underfoot as he went deeper into the woods. Birds chirped and the nearby river bubbled. There was no sign of Mona. Carlo scrambled over a bramble-covered fox track and came to the crumbling remains of the old stone house – a tree growing up through the middle. Carlo closed his eyes, remembering when Mona had left him there fifteen years earlier.

A branch snapped behind him. Carlo opened his eyes and whirled around.

Mona stood there, smiling at him. He was relieved to see her, but also upset:

‘I thought you’d left me again.’

Mona didn’t respond but smiled as if to say that wasn’t the case. Carlo continued:

‘When you left me in the woods last time, I was so alone. I sat there for hours, waiting for you to come back, but knowing you wouldn’t. I was there for so long, I became conscious of myself thinking. And then I thought, what if I couldn’t think that I was thinking? Then there is only nothingness – just “the unreasonable silence of the world”’

Carlo looked at Mona and smiled:

‘But it doesn’t matter - you’re here now.’

Mona held out her hand. Carlo took it and the two of them ran back through the trees, laughing as they came out onto the wild grass area. His mum’s easel had gone and her cottage changed back into the Palace.

Mona led Carlo through an archway, back into the main building. Carlo hesitated. The inner courtyard had been replaced by a swimming pool. The water reflected on the walls,

a blue hue all around – Carlo sensing an atmosphere of sexuality and uneasiness at the same time.

Not waiting for him, Mona slipped off her shoes and dived into the pool - her splash the only sound in the whole place. Carlo watched in awe as she steadily swam the length of the pool. She pulled herself out at the other end, her wet dress sticking to her body – revealing the shape of her breasts. She looked over at Carlo, then disappeared into the changing rooms. Carlo picked up Mona’s slip-on shoes and quickly ran alongside the pool after her.

On one side of the tiled floor area was a row of changing cubicles, all with doors shut. It was quiet and there was no sign of Mona. In search of her, Carlo opened the door of the first cubicle.

Inside was a wide space with a huge bed. A naked young woman was lying on her back. Taken aback, Carlo didn’t recognise her at first, but then saw that it was the young mother whose baby he had saved. She was nervous, but tried to look sexy as she offered herself:

‘I’m yours...’

Carlo backed out of the cubicle and shut the door. He didn’t know what the young woman was doing there. He just wanted to find out where Mona had gone. He swiftly moved on to the next cubicle, taking a breath before opening the door.

Inside the second cubicle was another naked woman, the fat woman he’d walked in on before. She was knelt down on a rug with her arse facing Carlo and her huge breasts touching the floor. She looked over her shoulder at him and demanded:

‘Give it to me big boy!’

Again, Carlo quickly shut the door. He paused to regain his senses before opening the door of the next cubicle.

Several women's arms grabbed Carlo and hauled him down onto a floor of cushions. He just had time to recognise the women from his mum's painting. The three women fought over him, vying for his attention:

'He's mine...'

'Take me...'

'No, me...'

As the women struggled with each other, Carlo managed to crawl out of the cubicle, not noticing that he'd dropped Mona's shoes inside.

Outside the fourth and final cubicle, Carlo paused, composing himself. Cautiously, he opened the door. Inside was a small space, the floor tiled like the changing room - a simple, high-backed chair in the middle. Carlo stepped into the room. From behind him, two hands went over his eyes - Mona seductively giving him an order:

'Keep your eyes closed.'

Carlo did as he was told. Mona guided him to the chair and sat him down. She whipped out some rope and tied his hands to the back of the chair before saying:

'Alright, you can open them.'

Carlo opened his eyes. Mona was standing in front of him, smiling. Her dress was still slightly wet, her nipples visible. She undid her top button, seductively leaning towards him:

'Is this what you wanted?'

Carlo nodded, his eyes fixed on her. This was exactly what he wanted. Mona put one hand around his throat and pressed. Carlo gulped and got erect. He strained for breath but didn't want Mona to stop. It was as if she knew his secret sexual wishes, the desires he'd never asked another woman to carry out. With her free hand, Mona slowly undid another button - displaying more of her breasts. With Carlo breathing hard, Mona paused:

‘But what do I want?’

Mona's smile slowly disappeared. She touched Carlo on the lips with her finger and started to back away. Carlo looked at her pleadingly, unable to speak. But Mona continued out of the room, Carlo watching in desperation. Through the half open door, he could see Mona embracing with another man's arms.

Carlo felt a jealous rage surge through him. How could Mona go with another man? He wanted to kill the man, whoever he was. Unable to watch, Carlo frantically struggled with the rope – eventually undoing it.

He dashed out of the cubicle, but there was no-one else in the changing room. Mona and the other man had gone. Outside one of the cubicles were Mona's shoes. He bent down and picked them up.

As he straightened up, Carlo saw that one of the cubicle doors was slightly ajar with a light seeping around it. Cautiously, he put his head around the door. Inside was some kind of security room, one wall full of small screens. Laura was sitting in a swivel chair, looking at the screens - seemingly unaware that Carlo was there until he asked:

‘What is all this?’

Not acting surprised, Laura turned to Carlo - who was looking past her at the screens. Laura cast a bored glance back at the screens as well - men and women glimpsed in various sexual situations, acting out different fantasies. Laura explained:

‘Everyone has a different fantasy. One woman wants to be wanked over by several men. Another wants to have a male sex slave. Some want to give, others to take. Some to have power, others to be overpowered. Some even want to lick shoes and others to have their shoes licked.’

Carlo frowned:

‘Does licking shoes really turn someone on?’

‘Don’t know until you try. A man wanted to lick my shoes once. It was a fetish he had. At first I wasn’t really keen on the idea, thought it was a bit stupid, but then I thought why not, so I let him do it. And as he was doing it, I started to enjoy the power of the situation, told him to lick faster or slower, and when to stop. And I have to admit I was quite turned on.’

Carlo gestured to the screens:

‘But why are they being monitored?’

‘Not everyone can face the truth of their desires, so they have to be monitored in case they get out of hand.’

Carlo turned to Laura:

‘Like mine. I don’t understand what’s happening. I don’t want any other fantasy. I just want Mona.’

‘Do you think you could just come here and reclaim her? Look.’

Laura pointed to one of the screens where a man was sitting in some anonymous hotel room, joyfully watching two women have sex on the bed.

‘He likes to watch, but does he like to be watched?’ asked Laura.

On the screen, a smartly dressed woman entered the room – surprising the man. In one hand she had a gun, which she pointed at the man. In the other she had some popcorn, which she handed to the two naked women. Laura explained:

‘That’s his wife. Let’s listen in.’

Laura switched on the volume so that the people in the room became audible – the smart woman ordering her husband:

‘Take off your clothes.’

The man hesitated, but his wife aimed the gun at him:

‘I said, take them off.’

The man started to undress. The two women in the bed got under the covers and ate popcorn as they watched. With the man naked, his wife made her next demand:

‘Now wank.’

The man looked pitifully at his wife, his penis limp. His wife cocked the gun.

Laura turned to Carlo:

‘See – you’ve had it easy. Now come on - you shouldn’t even be in here.’

With Laura ushering him out, Carlo left the monitor room and found himself in a long all-white corridor without any other doors. Crouched against a wall was the young mother. The door behind him shut with a click. Carlo turned to look at it and saw there was no handle. He tried to push the door but it wouldn’t open. He turned back to face the corridor.

The young mother stood up, peeled away from the wall and skipped over to Carlo:

‘There you are. Thought I’d lost you.’

‘What are you talking about?’

The woman linked arms with Carlo:

‘I love you.’

‘You don’t know me.’

‘I’ll get to know you.’

Carlo unclasped her arm:

‘We’re not together. I don’t know you.’

The woman’s face fell:

‘Don’t say that.’

‘How did you get in here?’

The woman pointed to the door behind Carlo:

‘From there, but it’s self-locking so you can’t go back in.’

Carlo peered down the corridor. At the far end, there was a fire exit sign. He strode towards it, determined to get out of the corridor and away from the woman. She followed him, regaining her enthusiasm:

‘If we find a way out, we can drive into the sunset and be together forever.’

‘I don’t think so.’

Carlo stalked to the end of the corridor and pushed down hard on the fire exit handle. The door swung open. Carlo halted, hanging onto the handle. The door opened into nothingness. Below was a sheer drop at the side of a cliff, the sea miles below. The woman looked over his shoulder:

‘Or we can die together. Guess that’s also kind of romantic.’

Carlo shut the door. The woman snuggled into him, said:

‘Maybe we can hold each other to keep warm.’

Carlo held up his hand for her to be quiet. He could hear faint groans coming from somewhere. He took a few steps back down the corridor. He could just make out a thin line of black in the white wall. The door was ajar. He made a dash for it. The woman ran after him:

‘Wait for me.’

Carlo ran fast ahead, slid in through the doorway and closed it behind him.

With his back to the door, Carlo stood in semi-darkness. He pulled aside a drape and entered a dark, sexually-charged area. It was the low groans that Carl heard first – some kind of erotic soundtrack his initial thought, until his eyes made out the shapes. The place was alive with lithe bodies, intertwined in various sexual dances.

Set up around a semi circular stage, alcoves were dotted along the walls, tall mounted candles providing the glows of light. Up on stage, sat upright on a golden throne was Mona – looking regal despite her dress being split down her thigh.

Making his way towards the stage, Carlo passed the first alcove. In it, a man was sat on the end of a curved sofa, watching two women at the other end, one of them voluptuous, the other skinny, the two of them nipple to nipple as they kissed.

Girl on girl voyeurism, a fairly tame fantasy, thought Carlo. But the next alcove put paid to that idea. Facing inwards, a circle of men stood in various states of erection. At the foot of each man was a cushion. In the middle of the circle was a small nubile

woman, knelt on one of the cushions, slowly sucking the man's cock. Once he was fully erect, she moved onto the next man, whose penis had started to shrivel.

Carlo himself was half mast, unsure whether he wanted out or was in fact excited by what he was seeing. In the third alcove, a tall woman had a shorter man on a leash that was tied to his scrotum. She would arch towards him, but as soon as he opened his mouth in an attempt to put his lips around her nipples, the woman would give the leash a tug, the man recoiling.

Someone whistled from behind Carlo. He turned and saw a long-limbed woman in the opposite alcove, sat in a swing, wearing nothing but high heels. As she swung forward, Carlo saw it was Clare. She teased him:

'Not going to join in?'

Uneasy at seeing his student naked, Carlo shrugged:

'Not for me'

Clare raised her eyebrows as she glanced at his bulging crotch:

'Really?'

Carlo shifted uneasily. Clare swung to him, clasped her legs around his neck, pressing her groin into his face. With Carlo in her grasp, Clare pulled him back into her alcove. He tried to struggle but Clare's grip was too strong. She made him an offer:

'Make me come and then I'll let you go.'

Carlo licked Clare's clitoris until his jaw ached and she shuddered. Satisfied, Clare unclasped her legs and pushed Carlo away with her feet - Carlo stumbling backwards out of the alcove. Humiliated but aroused, he turned to the stage guiltily. Had Mona seen him? Up on her throne, she didn't seem to be paying him any attention.

Before the stage, a crowd of men and women in various states of undress looked up expectantly at Mona. She beckoned a young man. Not believing his luck, the young man leapt onto the stage and bowed in front of Mona:

‘If I may have the honour?’

Mona nodded:

‘You may.’

The young man instantly got on all fours and started licking Mona’s toes, the man groaning in ecstasy while Mona watched him. After a few seconds, she gave an order:

‘Quicker.’

The man instantly licked quicker, rabid little flicks all over her feet. Mona gave her next order:

‘Slower.’

The man did as he was told, one long lick all up the side of her ankle. With a nudge of her foot, Mona dismissed the man:

‘Enough.’

The man crawled away backwards, grateful for what he’d been allowed.

The act Carlo had witnessed was far tamer than some of the other things going on, but Carlo felt aggrieved. Why was Mona taking part in it all? Remembering he had her shoes in his hand, he knew he had to get them to her – convinced this would stop anyone else licking her feet at least.

Carlo tried to push through the crowd, but the bodies in front of him didn’t want to give way. Frustrated, Carlo shouted:

‘Out of the way, I have to give Mona her shoes.’

This got people's attention, everyone turning to face Carlo. Seeing Mona's shoes in his hands, several cries went up:

'He's got her shoes!'

'Stop him.'

'Don't let him near her...'

One man tried to grab the shoes off Carlo so he smacked the shoes into his face, sending the man tumbling into the others. Spying Mona leave through a stage door at the back, Carlo forced himself through the scrambling mass of naked and semi-naked bodies. Using the fallen bodies as a springboard, Carlo jumped onto the stage and chased after Mona through the door she'd exited.

Hearing the door lock behind him, Carlo took in his latest surroundings. He was in a huge ballroom that was being prepared for a party. Jazz musicians were setting up their instruments. Decorators were painting the walls gold. Waiters were putting out trays of champagne. Carlo spied Mona at the bottom of a sweeping, spiral staircase. She was talking to two security guys.

Carlo made his way towards Mona. She pointed at him and the two security guys blocked Carlo's way. Carlo held up Mona's shoes:

'I've got her shoes.'

The security guys didn't care, one of them saying:

'She'd like you to leave.'

'What are you talking about?'

'You need to stop following her.'

Carlo tried to force his way past, but the two security guys held him tight. Mona fled up the stairs in fright. The security guys hauled Carlo towards the front entrance and threw him out of the building.

Carlo thudded down the steps. He was in the middle of a wasteland. The 'Palace' was now a boarded-up factory, long out of use. All the doorways were bricked in. The only sign of life was above head-height, where the windows were lit-up. A man's voice said:

'You too eh?'

Carlo turned to see a bearded man step forward. The man's once sharp suit was ripped and dirty. His hair was unbrushed and scraggly. The man asked:

'You get kicked out?'

Carlo rose to his feet and said:

'It's just a misunderstanding.'

Carlo strode up the steps and pounded on the boarded-up door. Nothing happened.

The man watched him and said:

'They won't let you back in. Believe me, I've tried.'

'There must be another way in.'

Carlo strode to the corner of the building. The side of the building was pure wall. Determined to get back in, Carlo went all the way around the building. There was no way in. He found the bearded man waiting on the steps. The man said:

'Once they kick you out, that's it. Only thing you can take heart from is that it means you got close to her.'

'I'll find a way back in.'

‘She’s got you by the short and curlies eh? Can happen to the best of us, though you’re only the second person to make it this far – my good self being the first. I’d leave while you can. You don’t want to end up like me.’

The bearded man gestured at his own sorry state. Carlo certainly didn’t want to end up like him. He didn’t even want to waste time talking to the guy. The bearded man stood and gestured for Carlo to follow him:

‘Come on, I want to show you something.’

Carlo didn’t want to see whatever the man wanted to show him, but until he found a way back in, he had nothing else to do. Reluctantly, he followed the man through the scrubland to an abandoned BMW, all rusted up and long undriven.

The bearded man sat in the driver’s seat and opened the passenger door for Carlo, who got in. The bearded man switched on a mobile phone, connected by wires to the car’s electronics. He explained:

‘Ran out of petrol, but the car still has some battery.’

Carlo started to pay attention to the man:

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Who knows. What I do know is how I got here. I had it all – money, cars, girls...’

The bearded man showed the mobile phone screen to Carlo. On it was a photo of the bearded man, minus the beard, in a sharp suit, standing next to shiny red BMW, a buxom blonde by his side. The man clicked up another photo. This time he was in the same pose, but with a silver BMW and a different blonde. He showed Carlo a third photo, the man again in the same pose, but with another car and girl. The man looked up at Carlo:

‘You get the idea. But one day I saw her...’

The man clicked up a video and displayed it for Carlo to watch. Seen from behind, a woman in a golden dress with long blonde hair strutted down a catwalk. She reached the end and looked over her shoulder. It was Mona. Carlo stared at the man:

‘That’s Mona.’

‘I called her Sabrina.’

‘She’s blonde.’

The bearded man laughed:

‘She appears how you want her to appear.’

The man switched off his mobile.

‘That clip is all I saw of her, but I became obsessed. I searched everywhere for this woman, spent all my money and gave up my job.’

The man gestured out of the car at the factory and scrubland:

‘Until eventually I found this place – or the Palace as I first saw it.’

‘And Mona, or Sabrina - did you find her?’

‘Didn’t stop until I did.’

The man shuddered:

‘Went through hell, was even raped and beaten by some girl gang. But I didn’t stop. And just when I thought she was within reach, she had me kicked out.’

‘If there’s no hope of getting back in, why don’t you leave?’

‘Got nothing waiting for me. If I stay here, maybe one day she will come out and see how dedicated I am.’

Carlo looked through the car window at the factory. The second floor windows were still lit up. Carlo wasn’t going to end up like the bearded man:

‘I’m going to get back in.’

‘Yea?’

The bearded man shook his head:

‘You’re even more stubborn than me.’

‘I’ll need your help.’

‘Sure, anything for a fellow devotee.’

A few minutes later, Carlo and the bearded man were pushing the BMW towards the factory walls. They rolled it to a stop under one of the windows. Carlo clambered up onto the car roof. The bearded man looked at him in admiration. He hadn’t taken Carlo seriously, but he was starting to now. Carlo reached up but could only touch the bottom of the window sill.

‘Can you give me a bunk up?’

The bearded man joined Carlo on the car roof and clasped his hands under Carlo’s foot. Carlo jumped up and grabbed the window sill. He heaved himself up.

‘Fuck.’

Carlo instantly dropped down onto the car roof. The bearded man wanted to know:

‘What did you see?’

Carlo shook his head:

‘It’s not that window.’

The Palace was playing tricks on him. He’d seen something he hadn’t wanted to see, something he’d tried to forget from when he was a boy.

Carlo had skipped school and hid in the woods. He’d seen the car leave, so thought both his parents were out. But as he sauntered up to the cottage, he froze. Through the

living room window he saw his dad, naked and bent over – whipping his arse with a cane. Knowing he had to move before he was seen, but rooted to the spot, Carlo jumped out of sight as his dad turned. Sneaking back into the woods, Carlo didn't know if his dad had seen him. Neither of them ever mentioned it, Carlo keeping his dad's secret.

Carlo jumped down from the car. He didn't want to remember any more. There were things that he'd spent his life trying to forget, like when he found his dad dead.

'Let's try the next window.'

The bearded man helped push the car along. The two of them got on the roof and the man gave Carlo a bunk up. Carlo raised himself above the window sill. He saw a golden ballroom with a party in full swing. He called down to the man:

'This is it.'

'Good luck man.'

Carlo eased up the window and heaved himself inside. He was in a richly decorated, gold coloured ballroom - a wide stairway with gold banisters up the middle and large golden framed paintings on the walls. A live band was playing swing jazz and the room was full of fair-haired women in golden dresses – dancing and drinking champagne.

As soon as the women noticed Carlo, several of them surrounded him – two taking him by the hand while another took Mona's shoes from him. Against his initial hesitation, Carlo let himself be led on a swirling dance from one woman to the next - each one caressing and rubbing against him provocatively. Lost in the swirl of golden women, Carlo glimpsed necks and curves of breasts as blonde hair brushed against his face and fingers lingered on his chest.

Suddenly, Mona came running down the stairs - startling another woman who dropped her glass, which smashed on the floor. The music stopped and all the women grudgingly let Mona walk up to Carlo. Tear-stained and out of breath, she issued a warning:

‘You should leave. It’s dangerous if you stay.’

Carlo frowned as he got his bearings:

‘I don’t understand.’

Mona looked at Carlo with desperation in her eyes as she pleaded:

‘I can’t explain, but you should leave.’

Some of the other women moved closer to Carlo – one of them saying:

‘Come on, let’s go.’

A second blonde added:

‘She doesn’t want you.’

And a third said:

‘There’s plenty of other fish in the sea.’

Carlo looked straight at Mona:

‘I don’t want anyone else.’

‘Please go.’

Mona turned and walked back up the stairs. The other women put their arms through Carlo’s. He wanted to chase after Mona, but didn’t have the heart. It was one thing being kicked out by security, but if Mona herself didn’t want him, what was the point? Believing Mona’s sincerity, Carlo gave up and let the women lead him out of the main door – to a wide gravelled driveway where his car was parked. The day had darkened into

night and a lamp flickered on. Carlo got into the driver's seat while the women got in the back and passenger seats – Carlo asking:

‘Where to?’

The three women replied in unison:

‘Just drive!’

Pulling out, Carlo noticed in the wing mirror that the building he was leaving behind was a now a country mansion. Driving along the country lane, Carlo flicked on the car lights to full beam – night having fallen quickly. As he drove, the women fawned over him – one of them leaning over his seat and whispering in his ear:

‘You don't need her. We'll be yours, do whatever you want.’

The second woman joined in from the passenger seat, sliding her hand down the inside of his leg:

‘Why don't you stop and let us show you what we can do?’

‘With our tongues,’ added the third woman as she looked in the driver's mirror and ran her tongue around her lips. But Carlo was oblivious to their attempted seduction - caught up in his own thoughts, which he shared aloud:

‘This is so strange. I had a dream once that I was driving away like this. I was at a party in a country mansion with lots of people. Suddenly gunmen appeared and started shooting randomly. People fell to the floor. I huddled on the staircase, trying not to be noticed. But one of the gunmen saw me and hauled me outside.

‘There was a car with people in it and I was put in the driver's seat. We were told to drive, to see if we could be faster than them coming after us. I drove as fast as I could while they shot at us. We got away and I drove on for days and days. Eventually, some of

the passengers said we should stop - that maybe we had escaped. I felt the gunmen were still after us, but the rest got fed up - said they couldn't live always on the run, so I stopped and let them out. Then I carried on, forever thinking that the gunmen might be after me.'

Carlo finished his story, but the women were uninterested and bored - having tried to seduce him and it not working. The woman in the passenger seat was trying on Mona's shoes, but they didn't fit so she left them on the floor. Fed up, she said:

'Okay, how about letting us out.'

Carlo pulled over and the women got out - stumbling off in their high-heels. Carlo sat with the car idling for a few seconds. Something was wrong about just accepting Mona's plea to leave. Suddenly feeling that she had tricked him, Carlo swerved a U-turn and headed fast back the way he'd just come.

The car skidded into the driveway that was now sprouting weeds and Carlo saw that the mansion was desolate. He stormed inside. The previously golden room was now empty and bare - all signs of a party having been removed. There were marks on the walls where the paintings had been hanging – just one left, slightly askew. Not taking in the picture of three mermaids luring a young man into the sea, Carlo leapt up the stairs - now old and wooden.

He stopped dead on the landing at the sound of sobbing and turned. In a half open doorway, Mona was huddled up on the floor - crying. Her hair was a mess and her dress dirty. Carlo softened at the sight of her, but was still full of jealous rage and couldn't help himself:

'Who's the other man?'

Mona glanced up at him:

‘What other man?’

‘The one I saw you with in the changing rooms. You tried to get rid of me so you could be with him. I’m not in danger.’

‘I never said it was dangerous for you.’

Carlo stared at her, realizing the mistake he’d made:

‘Shit, I’m sorry - it’s dangerous for you, not me.’

Carlo knelt beside Mona and comforted her, holding her in his arms:

‘But who did this to you? Who’s making you do these things?’

Mona shook her head sadly, unable to say. Sensing there was no point in pushing it further, Carlo took control:

‘Come on, I’ll take you out of here.’

‘But where will we go? The mountains? The sea?’

‘I don’t know, it doesn’t matter.’

Letting Carlo lift her up, Mona gestured to the room they were outside:

‘I just need to rest first. Will you lie down with me?’

Carlo nodded and guided Mona into the room, lit up by a strip of moonlight through the window. There was a single bed in the corner of the room. On the wall next to it was a bookshelf. They sat on the bed and Mona rested her head against Carlo’s chest. He looked up at the books on the shelf and asked:

‘Are these all yours?’

Mona nodded. Carlo checked the titles. In no particular order, there was Lolita by Nabokov, White Nights by Dostoevsky, Auto De Fe by Elias Canetti. Carlo was surprised to see them:

‘I haven’t read these for years.’

‘Will you read to me?’

‘Which one?’

‘It’s bookmarked.’

Carlo reached up and took the bookmarked book – The Plague by Albert Camus. He’d read it when he was at University. Instead of reading the books he was supposed to for his psychology and philosophy degree, he’d spent his time reading Camus and Dostoevsky.

‘Bit heavy for bedtime reading, no?’

Mona closed her eyes and said:

‘I just love that particular passage.’

Carlo removed the bookmark and read the underlined passage out loud:

‘The sea was warm that night with the warmth of autumn seas that borrow from the shore the accumulated heat of summer days...’

Carlo looked down at Mona. She was almost asleep, but she smiled and murmured:

‘Carry on.’

Carlo read on:

‘For some minutes they swam side by side, with the same zest, in the same rhythm, isolated from the world...’

Carlo looked down at Mona again. She was asleep. He put the book aside and lowered Mona's head onto the bed. He curled up next to her and held her tight. He was so tired.

A quick rest to regain their energy and then they could leave.

He dreamt that he was swimming in the moonlit sea with Mona, the two of them in unison. They reached the shore, rose out of the water and jogged onto the beach. While Carlo got his breath, Mona carried on along the beach. Carlo tried to jog after her, but stumbled in the sand. He could hardly see Mona up ahead. He tripped and fell into the sand, looked up. Mona had vanished into the night.

Waking in sudden fear, Carlo snapped his head around - the other side of the bed was empty. Desperate, he shot up on his elbows. The terror drained away. Mona was standing in the middle of the room, combing her long black hair. Her face half-hidden, Mona's beauty still shone through as she frowned at him. Relieved, Carlo mumbled his anxiety:

'I thought you'd left me.'

Mona smiled quizzically at him. Smiling too, Carlo leant his head back against the pillow and let his eyelids close.

He opened his eyes slowly. Mona wasn't in the bed next to him. He could hear the shower running, so she had obviously gone to wash. Stretching, he sat on the edge of the bed in his crumpled clothes. The blinds were open and morning sunlight poured into the room. They must have been asleep for some time.

On the bedside table, Carlo saw a photograph album. Reaching for it, Carlo realised he knew nothing about Mona - didn't know what she read or was interested in. He opened the album. There was a photo of Mona in a forest, wearing practical clothes – looking

happy as she crouched beside the cut-off base of a tree. On the opposite page, a beach leaf was under the transparency - pressed against the paper.

As he put down the album, Carlo saw there was also a diary. He knew he shouldn't look. The last time he had read someone's diary was as a teenager. Back home after school, he found his dad's diary on the sofa, open. Curiosity getting the better of him, he picked it up. The first thing he read was '*Carlo went to school and we went back to bed. Sex really is a drug.*' He'd never looked in a diary since then.

With Mona's diary in his hands, Carlo couldn't resist. He flipped it to the last entry and read:

'Last night I dreamt that I was finally free of this place. I ran through the woods, over the dunes and down to the sea. I saw him lying in the sand, with his eyes closed, so I lay next to him and closed my eyes too. I could hear the waves lapping onto the beach. The sun was warm on our bodies. A slight sea breeze passed over us. Then I felt the warmth of the sun again. He gently kissed me on the neck, and I could feel his breath. I licked his skin, tasting the salt from the sea he'd been swimming in...but it was just a dream. He thinks he can save me, but he understands nothing.'

Carlo could hardly breathe. Was Mona writing about him or another man? He realised the shower had been on for a long time. He stood and strode across the room, only to suddenly halt as he stepped on something - a chill running up his spine. He looked down and saw a broken comb.

With the broken comb in his hand, Carlo stormed into the shower and ripped the curtain aside. There was no-one inside. Carlo turned the shower off, went back into the bedroom and threw the broken comb onto the bed.

Outside the window, something caught Carlo's attention. In the distance, he saw a woman running away hand in hand with some man through the trees. He only caught a glimpse of them, but he knew it was Mona.

Feeling humiliated, Carlo furiously strode down the stairs and out of the front door - nearly bumping into Laura who was standing there. He brushed past her as she called after him:

'Hey, where are you going?'

'Away from here.'

'You're leaving?'

Carlo paused, turning to face Laura:

'I've had enough. Every time I find her, she deliberately runs off with another man.'

Laura had no time for his self-pity:

'There is no other man.'

'I saw her with him.'

'What did you see? Her room, had you seen that before?'

Carlo ignored Laura's questions, turned his back and walked towards his car, which was now down the hill where he had originally parked.

Sitting in the driver's seat, Carlo closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. His jealousy had blinded him, but was Laura right when she said there was no other man? He ran several images through his mind. He saw Mona running through the trees with another man. Then he remembered that she had run with him through the trees. He pictured her in another man's arms in the changing room. Then saw himself with his arms around her on the landing.

Carlo opened his eyes. Noticing Mona's shoes on the floor under the passenger seat, he picked them up and got out of the car.

A queue wound up to the remains of a circular castle. This time there were only men in the queue. Carlo recognised three of them – the muscled-bound, nerdy and rich guys. They were too excited to pay any attention to Carlo. He asked:

‘What are you queuing for?’

The muscle-bound guy held up a photo of Mona, a black and white head-shot, and said:

‘To see Mona of course.’

Carlo kept his jealousy in check. Mona was only supposed to be his, but he couldn't stop other men having the same fantasy. He could see that each man was holding a photo. He asked the other guys if he could see theirs. Every man had an identical photo of Mona. Carlo checked:

‘You're all here to see Mona?’

The nerdy guy replied:

‘If we ever get to meet her. Nobody ever has.’

The rich guy joined in:

‘She's like an elusive fantasy. I tried to buy my way through the queue, but that didn't work.’

The muscle-bound guy snorted:

‘Maybe you losers won't get to meet her. But I will.’

The nerdy guy couldn't understand the confidence:

‘What makes you think you'll get in and we won't?’

The muscle-bound guy looked down at the nerdy guy:

‘She’s not going to go for a guy like you. You’ve got to show her who the man is.’

The nerdy guy looked down-beaten. Carlo looked down at his own clothes. His linens were crumpled. He felt his face. He was unshaved. He shrugged and headed past the queue. Mona could see him as he was. The rich guy shouted after him:

‘Hey, we’ve been queuing here since last night. You think you can jump the queue just because you parked here?’

Carlo held up Mona’s shoes:

‘I’ve got her shoes.’

The muscle-bound guy didn’t care:

‘Yea, right, could belong to any woman.’

Carlo carried on up the hill towards the castle. He could see Laura by the arched entrance, her bicycle by the side. A security guy stepped forward to block Carlo’s way.

Carlo pointed to Laura:

‘I’m going to see my friend.’

Not seeing Carlo, Laura turned inside the derelict castle grounds. The security guy pointed him back down the hill:

‘Queue up like everyone else if you want to see her.’

Carlo started to argue, but saw it would be no use. He trudged back down the hill and joined the start of the queue.

As the queue slowly moved, the first man returned from the castle grounds, a huge smile on his face. The nerdy guy asked him:

‘Did you see her?’

‘Yes, she’s in there.’

The muscle-bound guy scoffed:

‘But you didn’t get in though.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Just seeing her in the flesh is enough for me. I’ll keep that image forever.’

The queue shuffled up and the next man returned from the castle, this one skulking down the hill. The nerdy guy asked:

‘No luck?’

‘I offered her everything – money, undying love, great sex – not interested.’

‘But did you get to see her?’

‘Saw her back, that was it.’

The man sloped off down the hill. The queue continued to move up, until there were just the three men in front of Carlo. He checked behind. More men had joined, stretching all the way down the hill.

At the castle entrance, Laura beckoned the rich guy forward. The security guy barred him from actually entering the castle grounds. The rich guy spoke to an unseen Mona:

‘If you leave here with me, you’ll have the best life you could dream of. You’ll never have to work, just relax on my yacht...’

Laura checked over her shoulder. She turned back to the rich guy and shook her head. He wasn’t ready to finish:

‘I just got started...’

The security guy stepped forward. The rich guy held up his hands:

‘Alright, I’m going. If she changes her mind, here’s my card.’

The rich guy held out his business card. Laura let it drop to the ground. The rich guy mustered his dignity and walked down the hill.

It was the muscle-bound guy's turn. He stepped to the entrance and made his pitch:

'Baby, I don't know what you've had, but I can guarantee after sex with me, you'll never want another man again...'

Laura checked with an unseen Mona and shook her head. The muscle-bound guy snorted:

'Your loss – you don't know what you're missing.'

The guy swaggered off.

The nerdy guy took his turn. He dropped to one knee and spoke with eloquence:

'I am neither rich nor full of muscles, but I can offer undying devotion...'

Laura shook her head. The nerdy guy left with head bowed. Carlo stepped forward. Laura smiled:

'Hey.'

Carlo held up Mona's shoes:

'I just came to give her these back.'

Laura nodded:

'She's been waiting for you.'

There were gasps from the queue behind Carlo. He was the first man to be let inside.

With no roof, the castle was just a crumbling circular stone wall with open archways - a deciduous woods seen in the distance, and beyond that the sea. Mona was standing in one of the archways, looking out - her back to Carlo. As he walked towards her, she turned

around. She was as beautiful as ever, but very sad. Her feet were bare and her dress was torn. Carlo looked directly at her:

‘Why are all those men waiting to see you?’

Mona shrugged:

‘They want me. But they don’t know why they want me. None of these men would be able to stay with me. They’d feel insecure that I was too beautiful for them. And then they’d have an affair, just to try and make me feel smaller. Still they all want me to be theirs. And as long as I’m desired in this way I’m bound to this place, unable to leave or love anyone.’

‘There is no-one else. It’s me, isn’t it?’

Mona didn’t reply, just gave the slightest nod. Carlo continued with the realisation that had dawned on him in the car:

‘You’re trapped here because you’re desired without reason. But as long as you’re here no-one can have you. The only way to set you free is to stop desiring you like the others. Is that right?’

‘And you’ll also be free – to love.’

‘Maybe one day we’ll meet.’

‘I don’t exist.’

‘But I saw your room – your books and photos.’

‘That’s what you imagined I read and looked like once you started thinking I was real.’

‘But if I leave, there’s nothing.’

‘I know.’

‘Doesn’t that scare you?’

‘It’s better than being imprisoned.’

‘I’m scared.’

‘Of what?’

‘Loneliness, death, not existing.’

Carlo and Mona looked at each other in silence. If he left, he would set her free – but never see her again. If he stayed, he could see her – but she would never be free. He stepped close to her. And handed her shoes over:

‘I believe these are yours Cinderella.’

Abruptly turning his back on Mona, Carlo strode out of the castle remains – Laura and her bicycle no longer there. The queue of men was dispersing, all of them discarding the pictures of Mona as they abandoned their pilgrimage.

Getting in the car, Carlo asked a couple of the men if they’d seen a woman of Laura’s description. They said she’d left before them.

Carlo drove down the hill – looking out for Laura, but not seeing her. As the road flattened out, he saw three blonde women in golden party dresses walking along the verge. Slowing down, Carlo asked them if they’d seen Laura. They weren’t sure but a woman had cycled past. Carlo carried on – the road running alongside the sea.

Spying two boys playing between moored-up fishing boats, Carlo pulled up. He shouted out to them, asking after Laura. They pointed down the beach – a silhouette visible in the vast expanse of sand.

Carlo jumped out of the car and ran towards the distant figure, but summer mist drifted in from the sea and enveloped him. Unable to see anything, Carlo heard his name called from the water:

‘Car-lo.’

Carlo stepped into the sea and peered through the mist. He called back:

‘Mona?’

He heard a splash and saw movement so ran and dived into the sea.

As he swam deeper, Carlo saw a female figure below. He swam towards the figure, who turned her head. It was Mona, her face both beautiful and sad. Her hair floated across her face. Carlo reached out to brush the hair away and Mona’s face vanished, his hands tangling with seaweed.

Carlo untangled himself and looked desperately in every direction, but Mona was nowhere. Carlo looked up. The surface was a long way away. He swam with all his strength, straining with his last breaths.

Carlo pushed through to the surface and thrashed out of the water. He gasped for air and staggered onto the sand. The mist had thinned out and evaporated. He was alone in the wide open seascape – orange-brown beach with sand blowing across it in waves, blue-green sea washing into the shore, light blue sky with thin clouds drifting across. Regaining his breath, Carlo thought:

‘I’m still alive.’