

LIGHT by Barbara Salardi

(Translated by Dana Rinaldi and Barbara Salardi)

Daniel slipped off his skull-shaped ring from his right middle finger.

He twisted it around in his hands, it was pure silver and as big as a nut. He put it back on and off many times, then wore it again and tapped his fingers on his knee. Kenneth was sitting in front of him in the minivan, staring at him in silence.

“Are you ok?” he asked.

“I’m very well,” answered Daniel calmly without moving his eyes from the window.

The dark looming London sky clouds threatened storms; rain droplets were already on the glass.

“With all due respect, you seem as if on another planet right from the start of the tour. Are you sure you’re fine?”

Daniel turned around towards him. “I understand that you are worried, but, with all due respect, I don’t feel like talking about it. I’m telling you again, I’m very well.”

Kenneth sighed; he touched his chin and greyed moustache.

The minivan stopped in front of the hotel’s main entrance. A group of fans crowding around and waiting anxiously were kept under control by two employees in uniform. From behind the screened windows, Daniel noticed that some had objects to be autographed: in front of the group a lanky man had a vinyl, a little girl with a crew cut standing next to him held a T-shirt, a woman with a blue jacket, a CD. Others looked curiously towards the minivan.

The hotel usher came up to the car, he wore a long black coat and a top hat, and as soon as he opened the door a handful of people raised their cell phones and cameras, the fans greeted Daniel calling out his name. Kenneth stepped out first followed by the bodyguard who was sitting in front and the last to leave the van was Daniel who moved towards the small crowd.

The air was cold and filled with humidity. Daniel fastened his leather jacket.

“One autograph each,” said the bodyguard to the fans.

Daniel pulled out a black marking pen from the bag, approached the little girl with a crew cut and autographed the T-shirt. She smiled shyly and thanked him in a thready voice.

“I meet you at last,” said the lanky man with a break in his voice, handing him the vinyl. The other members of the band had already autographed it, and Daniel was the only one missing. The edges were consumed and the colours had faded, but it was still in good condition. He signed it and gave it back to him. “I am an early fan, I was thirteen when I bought this vinyl thirty years ago and tomorrow will be my twenty-fifth concert,” said the man proudly.

“That’s amazing, thank you very much,” said Daniel. He smiled flattered and shook his hand.

The woman with the blue jacket gave him the CD and said: “Congratulations Daniel, you’re in great shape”. He autographed and thanked her.

He signed many other objects: T-shirts, calendars, CDs, vinyl records and books, and would have carried on if the bodyguard had not told him to go inside. He waved towards the fans and they continued to acclaim him until he crossed the hotel’s entrance. Daniel kept his head down while the bodyguard led the way.

Inside, a tearoom was on the right separated only by a wall and a glass door. Along the corridor there was a piece of antique furniture in shiny dark wood with a crystal vase full of purple and white delicate scented flowers. Further ahead, a hall opened up with white walls, a square grey modern sofa in the centre, a window on the ceiling and a sparkling fireplace opposite the reception. Kenneth was waiting standing against the desk.

“The radio interview is at five,” he said while handing him an electronic card. “Go upstairs for a moment and we will meet here in half an hour. You’re in the usual suite.”

Daniel took the card without looking up. The bodyguard followed to accompany him but he stopped him. Daniel left the reception hall and saw Kenneth’s look of disapproval; he continued along the corridor and turned right where the stairs and lifts to the rooms were.

He pressed the button and waited looking at his own distorted image reflected on the closed metal doors. He opened his leather jacket and rubbed his shoulder and nape. He felt a sharp pain on his head, he massaged his temples for some ease and luckily it stopped immediately. He rubbed his eyes without removing his sunglasses and snorted.

‘Congratulations Daniel, you’re in great shape.’ *I wish it were true. I’ll end the tour on a stretcher if I reach the end of the tour, that is. I need a miracle.*

He entered the lift, but the sound of heels arriving hastily distracted him from his thoughts.

“Wait! Wait! Wait! Let me in!”

Caught by surprise, he placed his hand on the sensor keeping the doors open. Facing him was a black-haired girl out of breath. She did not look older than twenty.

“Thank you very much, very kind of you. I thought I couldn’t make it,” she laughed. A heady scent of jasmine entered the lift with her.

“What floor?” Daniel asked.

“Second, and where are you going?”

“Fourth.”

The girl reached the button before him; she pressed the second floor, then the fourth, and smiled at him. Daniel smiled back.

The doors of the lift closed. Protected by the dark sunglasses, Daniel gave a good look at her being very discreet. Three colours stood out: the black of the eyes, of the hair that fell on her

shoulders in soft curls, of the close-fitting dress, the stockings above her knees, low-heeled shoes with an ankle strap, and then the deep red of the lips, the cardigan tied around the waist, the two satin bows on the side of the stockings and lastly the white of her skin and of her smile. She was petite and just reached his chin, her tight waist emphasised her rounded hips while her breasts... *They're just the right size for my hands.*

“Anyway, nice to meet you, I’m Lucy.”

“Daniel.”

The girl had a strong hand grip and boiling skin. Daniel let her hand go and expected her to do the same instead Lucy just loosened the grip a little and turned his wrist. She raised a brow and bent her head to the side: she noticed the skull-shaped ring, the chain bracelet, the necklace with a bird’s skull and then turned to him.

“Who are you?” she asked. She bit her lip and squeezed her eyes, puzzled.

He did not like this kind of curiosity and it would have bothered him, but not this time. This girl was different and he wanted to play along. There was something in her that revealed she was likeable and trustworthy.

“Who do you think I am?” he asked. “Have you already seen me somewhere?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Lucy left his hand and touched her chin. “For me you’re an eccentric art teacher on a school trip.”

Daniel burst out laughing. Lucy was unflustered.

“I guessed right then,” she pressed on.

“Well, actually I am a...”

“Don’t tell me,” she interrupted raising her hand. “I want to guess on my own.”

The doors of the lift opened and Lucy went out, Daniel followed her. They moved slowly along the corridor, side by side, the noise of the shoes muffled by the carpet. Lucy was looking ahead and tapping her mouth with her finger, pensively. Daniel took off his sunglasses. He could not stop looking at her.

“But your job has something to do with art, right? Because it’s impossible you’re a bank clerk or a lawyer.”

Lucy had a deep voice, a foreign accent and rolled the “r” more than necessary. He was charmed.

“Yes, it has to do with art,” said Daniel. “I used to dabble in painting, I loved it.”

Lucy stopped next to a door facing him.

“You loved it? And now? You don’t like it anymore?”

“No, I still do, I love it, but it is just that now I don’t...” he opened his arms and shook his head.

Daniel made an effort to find the right words to explain, but he added no more. Anyhow, Lucy seemed to understand all the same.

“Yes, I know. I am an artist too,” she said. “It’s no good if you’re not motivated.”

Daniel stared at her eyes. *They’re black like two obsidian buttons.*

“I can show it to you, if you want,” said Lucy, touching her lips.

Daniel smiled uneasily and turned away.

“What would you like to show me, precisely?”

“My art of course,” replied Lucy, with an air of innocence. “My works.”

“Ah, right,” said Daniel, giggling. Lucy laughed with him. “I’d really like to, but I can’t now. They are waiting for me downstairs and I must rush. Maybe another time, more than gladly.”

*If only I didn’t have that radio interview...*

“As you wish,” Lucy seemed disappointed. She turned toward the door, but then turned back smiling. “Sorry, but weren’t you going to the fourth floor?”

Daniel opened his eyes wide, and realised that Lucy was right. *Well done, Daniel, what an idiot.*

He waved at her, went back along the corridor with his head bowed, and reached the stairs leading to the upper floors. He looked back quickly to see if Lucy was still there, but the hallway was deserted and she had already entered the room.

Daniel glanced at his watch. He had been away just over an hour for the interview.

He pulled the electronic card out of his jacket’s pocket, inserted into the door slot and opened with a click. As soon as he entered the lights came on and he felt something slippery under the shoes. He looked down and on the floor saw a piece of paper. It was a card fragment ripped off the hotel spa’s pricelist. He picked it up and turned it over and read a message in black rounded and swirling cursive handwriting: “Come and see it. 209”. The note emanated an intense fragrance of jasmine. Daniel smiled to himself.

He took off the leather jacket wet with rain and placed it on the entrance coat hook; he crossed the living room and went in the bedroom, took off the T-shirt and put on a long-sleeved one. He went in the bathroom, and stood in front of the mirror fixing his hair. There were some white roots on the temples, and the spotlights marked the wrinkles on the forehead and around the eyes, ageing him. He massaged the neck and shoulders, his muscles were stiff and he still had the pain on his temples. *Not even a month since the beginning of the tour and I am already a wreck.*

He closed the door and went down the stairs to the second floor; he walked along the corridor up to room 209 and knocked. Lucy opened immediately.

“It seems you have something to show me,” said Daniel showing her the note.

“Oh, the art teacher,” she laughed. “Please come in and make yourself comfortable.”

On the right of the entrance he saw the bathroom with the door left ajar and then entered the actual bedroom. The bed was intact, full of green and yellow soft elaborately embroidered cushions

and covered with a plain quilt. The lampshades on the desk diffused a dim light, the air smelled of jasmine, and the small size of the room made it cosy and snug.

“I’m preparing an aperitif, want to keep me company?” asked Lucy, with her marked foreign inflection, handing him a glass of prosecco wine.

Her hair was gathered in a high ponytail but some rebel curls fell on the sides of her face. She wore a black silk gown down to her ankles and was barefoot. Without shoes she reached his shoulder. *She’s so petite that I could lift her with a finger.*

“Thank you,” he took the glass but did not feel like drinking. “So, what about the works of art?”

“Sit down.” Lucy placed her hand on his shoulder moved him backwards for a few steps until he was sitting on the bed, she finished the prosecco wine and put the empty glass on the desk. She rubbed her hands and smiled, and Daniel smiled back. He had a feeling that he could expect anything from her and was devoured by curiosity.

Without moving her eyes away from him, Lucy caressed the silk belt and untied it slowly, then took the gown off and threw it on the bed next to him. She stood with her hands on her hips.

Daniel remained in silence admiring the vision in front of him with eyes full of wonder and just a few seconds later he realised he was open mouthed. He swallowed and cleared his throat, lowered his eyes and tried to think of something to say.

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s amazing,” he said at last in a whisper.

Lucy was wearing French knickers and a vest with thin straps; just enough to leave her arms and legs bare which were decorated with the most beautiful tattoos he had ever seen. Daniel placed the glass on the bedside table and drew her closer by the hands so he could give a better look.

“The ivy goes around my entire right arm up to here,” she let go to indicate the spot, above her shoulder. “Can you see? There are also butterflies, ladybirds, and bees among the ivy. Instead on the other side there is a dragon-snake clinging to the arm with its coils, look, the head is here on the shoulder.”

She turned to the side and placed her right leg on the bed. “This is a wild plant of red roses, it starts from the ankle and moves up,” she giggled. “Here on the calf is an owl perched on a branch and above the knee, between the leaves, you can notice a gray wolf,” she put down the right leg and lifted the left one up. “This is a plant of white lilies, but they only go up to the knee,” while she said this she accompanied the gesture by caressing her leg slowly from the knee up to the hip.

Daniel listened to Lucy’s explanation with interest, even if it was impossible to stay focused for a long time. While she described the ivy tattoo, she pulled her elbow up and by doing so she lifted her vest revealing her navel. When she stretched her arm to indicate the rose on the ankle, she bent enough to allow him to get a good look of the roundness of her bare breasts under the vest. The skin

was white, her thighs were firm, the calves were petite, and the ankles were thin. And this without mentioning her perfume: at that distance it was so intense that it made him dizzy.

“These are my creatures,” said Lucy, with pride. “A friend of mine says that the body is like a blank canvas you can decorate as you like. So you create the work of art of your life.”

“Your friend is right.”

Lucy bit her lips and said: “You can touch them, if you want.”

Daniel’s heart skipped a beat. He stretched his arm out hesitantly and brushed her right hip. Lucy’s skin was boiling. To the touch, the tattoos were in relief; he moved the fingers behind the thigh, under the buttocks and held the firm flesh. He lifted his eyes up towards her, but she did not seem displeased, instead she looked down at him as if imploring him to continue.

And he continued.

He pulled down the hem of the French knickers with one hand and lifted the vest with the other hand: the rose plant tattoo continued on her tummy and a small thorny sprig went around the navel ending with a blooming bud. He placed his hands on her waist, covered the tummy with delicate kisses, brushed her skin with the lips, and put his tongue inside the navel.

Lucy jumped when the bristly stubble scratched her. She put her hands on his shoulder, caressed the nape, and run her fingers in his hair.

Daniel was about to slip the French knickers off when a noise broke the silence. It was his cell phone ringing in his trousers’ pockets. *Fuck, I had completely forgotten.*

Lucy stepped back crossing her arms.

Daniel answered the phone. It was Kenneth.

“Hope you haven’t forgotten that the dinner with the record company is tonight, be at the reception in half an hour. Well no, let’s make it fifteen minutes, better leave earlier to avoid getting stuck in traffic. I know that is a great bore but do not dare using the excuse that you’re unwell or have your own business to do because I no longer believe you and they don’t either. See you shortly,” he ended the phone call, then gave Lucy a disconsolate look.

“I have to go.”

Lucy smiled, took the glass of prosecco wine that Daniel had placed on the bedside table and handed it to him.

“A toast, at least.”

“Better not,” said Daniel. “If I start I can’t stop”.

“Ah, I understand,” said Lucy. “But, you know, it is not a bad thing to do in some cases. And certain situations never happen twice.”

*Damn it, I know that too well.*

Daniel said no more, he went away with a bowed head, hoping that Lucy did not notice the erection in his trousers. She opened the door and they were facing one another, Daniel in the corridor and Lucy in the doorway, eye to eye. *They are black like two obsidian buttons.*

She looked down and noticed what he was trying to hide and giggled covering her mouth with her hand. When Lucy turned around, Daniel saw another tattoo with black lines that seemed threatening covering a great part of her back but he did not make out what it was because she had already closed the door behind her.

Daniel left the gym slamming the door.

Panting with his fists tight he was walking at a brisk pace along the corridor, until he reached the lift and pressed the button with a sharp blow of the hand. A fierce pain on his forehead, so intense that his strength failed him, he leaned against the wall to not fall to the ground. His arms were numb and sore; he could not move them and barely managed to draw the cell phone from the pockets of his shorts to call Kenneth.

“Hey, is everything okay?”

He looked up and saw Lucy. She was dressed like the day before, with the red cardigan tied at her waist, the close-fitted black dress, and stockings above the knees. Without waiting for an answer, Lucy entered the lift with him, took him to the suite, she sat him down on the sofa with his arms stretched out and the head resting on the backrest.

“What’s up?” Lucy sat beside him, and took him by the hand.

“Migraine is killing me,” said Daniel. “It is a pain that starts in the head and moves down to the neck, shoulders, and even to the arms. Sometimes it is so fierce that I feel as if I’m falling to pieces. Not even yoga helps and before, at the gym, I was ready to kick someone.” He rubbed his eyes and puffed. “What were you doing near the gym?”

“The gym is on the second floor, I was going back to my room when I saw you.”

Daniel nodded. “I didn’t sleep a wink all night. I started to read a book thinking it would help me sleep and I ended up reading all of it.”

“Maybe the life of an art teacher is too stressful for you,” said Lucy.

He smiled. “By the way,” indicating the coffee table, “open that book”.

Lucy took it. She opened the hardcover and saw a drawing made with a black marker covering the first two white pages: an owl perched among the branches of a rosebush and a thorny sprig in the corner that ended with a blossoming bud.

“When I finished reading I thought about your tattoos and felt like drawing,” he looked at her sidelong, “but I only had a book and a marker,” he sighed. “It had been ages.”

“It’s a beautiful drawing, I’m happy for you,” she squeezed his hand, and then placed the book on the coffee table. “Now, stay still and close your eyes.”

She caressed his face with her boiling hands and massaged his neck, nape, and arms slowly. She repeated these gestures two more times and then put a hand on his forehead and pressed the tip of his nose with the other, between the eyes. Daniel felt as if the heat irradiating from her hands penetrated under the skin, inside the bones. It was as if a radio let out loud music non-stop in his head and then someone came at last and lowered the volume bringing silence, switching the pain off slowly. Daniel sat down with Lucy’s hands on his face for many minutes until he was invaded by numbness and a sense of relaxation, and fell asleep.

When he woke up, he was still sitting on the sofa in the same position. Lucy was laying next to him, with her head on the armrest, hands behind the nape and legs bent. She had taken the cardigan and stockings off and was wearing only the black dress.

“Hello, did you sleep well?” she asked with her deep voice. “I would say your answer is yes by the way you were snoring.”

Daniel laughed. He raised his head and moved his arms: the pain had disappeared, as if it had never been there. No numbness, no migraine, all gone. He looked at her surprised.

“I have made tea, if you want some,” she nodded towards the cup on the coffee table.

“Thanks,” he leaned over to take it. “How long did I sleep?”

“About an hour and a half,” she replied. “You needed it. By the way, your tattoos are beautiful. The dagger is wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Daniel lowered his eyes and looked at his tattoo on the left forearm. “Did you stay here all the time?” he turned toward her.

Lucy nodded and smiled.

“How did you do it?”

“I can’t tell you, it’s a secret,” she giggled. “All you need to know is that I have magic in my hands,” she lifted them and shook the fingers.

“You gave me a relaxing massage,” said Daniel.

“More or less.”

The green tea was warm and he drank it in a few sips. He leaned forward to place the empty cup on the coffee table just when Lucy stretched out her leg and rubbed her foot on his shoulder and nape. That unexpected contact made him shiver.

The pleasure was disturbed by a vibrating noise on the table, Daniel’s cell phone started to ring. Lucy was quicker than him; she switched it off and threw it on the sofa next to them. Daniel started to laugh.

“So you are feeling good?” Lucy moved the foot to the hip, touched his thigh, slipped it under the wide shorts, touched the groin with the toes, under the elastic of the briefs, and further down. “Yes, you’re just fine.”

Daniel was aroused as soon as the foot touched the groin’s skin. All he needed was to stroke her calf and inside the thigh to get a hard on. He kneeled down in front of her, touched her hips lightly, felt the embossed tattoos under his fingers, moved his hands under the dress, and removed her panties. He took her by the hips and moved up to her breasts, the nipples were turgid under the fabric.

Lucy beckoned him to get closer.

Daniel bent down and kissed her neck, behind the ear, the scent of jasmine mixed with that of her warm skin, he thrust his head into the jet-black hair and inhaled her smell. He rubbed his groin on the thigh to make her feel his erection, fixing his eyes on her. Lucy wrapped her thighs around his waist and lifted a leg placing the foot under the elastic of the shorts, trying to remove them with the help of her hands.

In that moment the door bell rang. First one ring, then more and more insistent ones. As no one opened, they started to knock too. *Fuck, just now?*

“Daniel, open please,” said Kenneth on the side of the door.

Daniel looked at Lucy and whispered: “Stay here lying down,” and he touched his lips with his index finger telling her to be silent. She nodded back.

Daniel stood up, pulled his shorts back up, and ran to the door. He fixed his hair and opened.

“You’re still wearing shorts?” Kenneth stretched his arms, and scrutinised him from head to toes. “You should have been ready by now for tonight.”

“I dozed off, I’m sorry,” Daniel turned away from him, and Kenneth entered.

“Why were you ignoring my phone calls? What’s up with you lately? You’re strange.”

“Nothing, you worry too much,” he turned toward him. “I’m getting ready now, it won’t take long.”

Kenneth started to leave but he turned around immediately.

“What is this smell,” he looked around, “are you wearing women’s perfume?”

“I can’t smell anything,” Daniel looked down and laughed. “And it’s me who’s the strange one?”

Kenneth muttered something and then closed the door behind him.

Lucy sat up on the sofa, pulled her panties up, and was putting on her stockings and shoes in silence when Daniel returned to the living room. She disentangled her jet-black hair with the fingers so that they fell softly on a shoulder. Daniel stared at her with crossed arms.

“Better not make that man angry,” said Lucy rolling the “r”.

“He isn’t bad, he just worries about me.”

Lucy nodded in silence, he led her to the door, but she lingered on the threshold.

“You know, a friend of mine always says that a missed opportunity is a lost opportunity,” she looked down and indicated his crotch. “Instead I say it’s a waste.”

Daniel shook his head; he ran his hand through his hair and shrugged his shoulders sadly. Lucy left, once again he saw the black tattoo on the back, threatening and indecipherable, he did not ask any explanation, and he closed the door rushing to get ready.

An hour later the suite’s doorbell rang again. It was Lucy.

“I can’t find my cardigan, did I leave it here?” she said, entering. She opened her eyes in wonder and put her hand over the mouth. “But, what are you wearing?”

Daniel was wearing a pair of elegantly cut trousers, a pinstripe waistcoat and a black glittered jacket. Nothing under the waistcoat, around his neck, the pendant with the bird’s skull.

“You’re even wearing make up on your eyes,” said Lucy. “Don’t tell me that you teach art during the day and you’re a strip dancer at night,” she burst out laughing.

Daniel was not in the best mood. The migraine and the pain had returned haunting him as soon as Lucy had left and he had barely managed to get ready. He put his hands on his temples and leaning his back on the entrance wall he let himself slip to the ground.

Lucy ran to the living room and got a small cushion from the sofa and sat astride on his legs.

“Wow, your arms are glittered too,” she giggled while she took his jacket off. “You are a professional,” and put the cushion behind his head.

“Oh, I love my job, you know, it gives me so much satisfaction but I am shattered tonight, I can’t make it,” he said grimacing in pain.

“Of course you’ll make it,” she held his hands tight. “You don’t want to disappoint those women paying to see you naked.”

Daniel smiled. “Then it would be better if you do that magic thing with your hands, right?”

Lucy caressed his face, massaged his nape, shoulders and arms twice and then placed her hand on his forehead, and pressed the tip of his nose with the other. He was pervaded by a pleasant feeling of peace and stayed sitting in silence with his eyes closed. He fell asleep for about ten minutes, with Lucy still sitting on his lap. When he reopened the eyes, she was staring at him. Daniel smiled at her, the pain had gone and Lucy sighed relieved. He held her tight and she placed her head on his shoulder.

“You have a heady perfume,” said Lucy. “I swear I could eat you,” and bit him lightly on the neck and the tickling made him laugh. “A friend of mine says that migraine comes because you need an orgasm.”

“An orgasm?”

Lucy freed herself from the embrace.

“Yes, because you have too much blood here,” she patted him on the forehead, “and too little here,” she whispered, moving her hand to the crotch. She kissed all along his jaw up to the ear; she sucked the lobe and moved down, touching the neck lightly with half closed lips.

“Sorry if I tell you,” Daniel gave a cough, feeling slightly aroused, “this is a big nonsense”.

Lucy continued stroking him between the legs. “Oh yes, it is big.” She unfastened the waistcoat’s buttons one by one; she opened it slowly and placed her boiling hand on his bare chest.

Daniel stopped her and sighed. “I can’t,” and he shook his head.

Lucy removed her hands from his chest turned her head closing her eyes.

“Why not?” she asked. “No, don’t answer,” she turned again towards him. “I know why you can’t,” she sprang up.

Daniel placed the cushion on the ground and stood up; he fastened his waistcoat and crossed his arms.

“You can’t because there is always something more important to do, am I wrong?”

“Yes, that’s it,” said Daniel. “I have to go now. To tell the truth, I shouldn’t even be here now. I’m so late. Certain things have precedence over others.”

“What things? Those that matter to you, or those that matter to others?” Lucy spoke loudly, her cheeks flaming.

“It is not that simple,” even Daniel raised his voice. “I have responsibilities.”

“Instead, it couldn’t be easier. If you like something, you do it, if you don’t like it, you don’t. Responsibilities, commitments and deadlines can be arranged, nothing is irreparable, there’s always a remedy. Let yourself go, take your chances and just do what you love. Everything will fall into place. All you need is the will to do, but if that is missing... And this goes for anything, from sex to art.”

“Excuse me? What are you trying to say?” Daniel put his fists on his hips.

“Oh, you know that very well,” Lucy went to the door. “You’re just a man enslaved by fear and full of excuses.”

“No, that is not true, wait a minute,” Daniel took her wrist but Lucy wriggled away.

She pointed her finger in his face. “I don’t want to have anything to do with you.”

Lucy went out slamming the door. Daniel touched his hair; he saw the cushion on the ground and kicked it fiercely.

“An amazing concert, eh?” Kenneth was speaking on his cell phone. “He is a force of nature, well said,” he looked at Daniel, puzzled, who was sitting in front of him with his head on the headrest and hands on his temples, eyes closed and a suffering expression. “Well, he has never been

so in shape, really irrepressible,” he mumbled something else, made a few compliments, spoke about future engagements, about the great expectations for the tour, then ended the call. “Tonight you were a tiger on stage, but now it seems that you have been beaten. Can you tell me what’s up?”

“I just need a shower and plenty of rest, tomorrow I will be like new,” said Daniel in a drawl, massaging his forehead and temples.

The rain was falling down incessantly, it was so cold one could see their breath. The hotel usher opened the minivan door sheltering Daniel with the umbrella accompanying him to the entrance. Daniel entered the lift hastily, Kenneth was behind him.

“Do you need anything? Would you like me to call a doctor?” asked Kenneth.

“No, I don’t need anything,” said Daniel slightly annoyed.

“Fine, then,” Kenneth opened his arms. “I’ll come later to see how you’re doing,” he patted him on the back and left.

Daniel entered the lift, ensured that Kenneth had gone, pressed the button for the second floor. He walked along the corridor and knocked many times on Lucy’s door. He put his ear to the door but there was no noise inside. He knocked again more insistently, no one opened. He went away snorting.

The hot shower calmed him down and he felt relaxed even if the arms and shoulders were still stiff and the migraine came and went with sharp pains. He wore the long trousers of a tracksuit and a black T-shirt, lowered the lights in the living room, and lit the fireplace. He sat on the sofa, and thought about the concert, his performance, the other members of the band, the audience in delirium. He smiled. Then he thought about Lucy and her fit of anger, and stopped smiling. ‘If you like something, you do it, if you don’t like it, you don’t.’ *Easy as that, you are right, Lucy. Everything else is just an excuse.*

He picked up the suite’s phone handset and dialled Lucy’s room but no one answered. He tried many times, to no avail.

He made some tea. Next to the mini bar there was a desk, he opened the first drawer and found pens, envelopes, and stationery with the hotel’s heading. He took all the sheets of paper and pens, put on his eyeglasses, returned to the sofa and started to draw. He could only think of Lucy’s tattoos. On one sheet he outlined the coils of a snake, the threatening head, on another he drew butterflies fluttering among the ivy, and on another sheet he traced lilies and roses framed by leaves. He was still drawing when the bell rang. He had not realised that an hour had gone by. He removed his glasses and got up from the sofa, unwillingly. *It must be Kenneth.*

Instead, he opened the door and saw Lucy with a beaming smile. She had a hand on her hip and the elbow of the other arm was resting against the door jamb. She was wearing the black dress, the stockings above the knees with red bows on the sides and the ankle-strapped shoes.

“Did you call room service?” she laughed.

Daniel felt relieved in seeing her so jolly and no longer angry, he took her by the hips and closed the door. He did not allow her to say anything else; he pushed her against the entrance wall and kissed her. He opened the dress and slipped it off; she put her hands under the T-shirt and pulled. The roses covered her side, reaching the breast and armpit. He squeezed her breasts lightly and, just as he had imagined, they were the right size for his hands. She had small pink nipples that hardened when he touched them, he kissed both and moved his lips on her tummy, and then he kneeled in front of her and removed her panties. He widened her legs just a little and filled her thighs with kisses and then caressed the tuft of black curls and discovered her rosy sex, he slipped his tongue between the labia and tasted her. Lucy groaned and stuck her fingers in his hair.

Daniel took her and lied down on her on the floor. She had not removed her stockings or shoes, he pulled the tracksuit trousers down just enough to be able to penetrate her, he was already hard, and she was excited, her languorous body under him. When he was inside, he was enwrapped by the warm wet sensation, she was tight and cosy. They began to move slowly, their faces were near and their mouths almost touching and then the rhythm increased a little at a time. Daniel took her ankles and put them on his shoulders, he closed her thighs to feel her more tightly. Then he changed position again, he opened her legs holding by the knees and penetrated her again, stronger. They drew pleasure from one another, their eyes always meeting.

Lucy climaxed and curved her back, she groaned and all of her body was shaking and when it was Daniel’s turn he embraced Lucy tight and moaned with pleasure, sinking his face in her hair. He remained inside her enjoying the warmth; he would have stayed there forever. He inhaled the perfume of her hair, the warm skin and kissed her mouth. They remained next to one another, cradled by the pleasure they had just experienced.

Then Lucy put her hand under the head and turned towards him.

“Do you always welcome room service attendants like this?”

They both burst out laughing.

They did not even stop laughing when they sat on the sofa and Daniel told her some funny schooldays’ stories. Lucy listened attentive and curious. Slowly Daniel added invented details to the tales until they were completely made up, forcing himself to stay serious. Lucy believed him for a while, but then they became unlikely and she realised and screamed: “You’re giving me a load of bullshit!”. She took a cushion and banged it on his head. Daniel protected himself with his hands and arms while Lucy attacked him with the cushion but he managed to disarm her and attacked in turn by tickling her. Shortly after, they were clung to one another making love on the sofa.

When they went to bed, Daniel spoke about music and sung some of his favourite songs of when he was sixteen. Lucy listened in silence and said: “Why don’t you dedicate yourself to music? You

have a wonderful voice”. Daniel laughed and answered that he would have thought about it. They continued to chat until silence increased and words decreased, and then fell asleep.

Daniel was already awake half an hour later and went to the bathroom. The digital clock on the nightstand indicated twenty to four.

He went near the bedroom window, the curtains were open and the clouds were scattering, and the full moon stood out bright in the black sky. The light of the moon entered the room, illuminating Lucy’s bare back. He moved her hair slowly as he didn’t want to awaken her; he sat besides her on the edge of the bed to get a better look. The tattoo covered the whole back, right up to the loins. They were a couple of black wings with an irregular shape, swirls and soft curls alternated with straight and squared lines that seemed scratches. They could have been the wings of a bird, a butterfly, a dragonfly, or a bat. He could not figure them out. He stretched his hand and touched the tattoo delicately: it was in relief like the others.

But a loud ringing made him jump.

Lucy moved but she did not wake up. Daniel pulled up his tracksuit trousers, closed the bedroom door without making any noise and run to open. It was Kenneth.

“You come around at this hour?” asked Daniel.

“I know, I’m sorry, I wanted to come by earlier but I fell asleep,” Kenneth came in and Daniel closed the door. “So, how do you feel?”

“I’m very well,” said Daniel. “And I was sleeping beautifully.”

“I’m happy about that, I’ll let you go back to sleep then,” Kenneth touched his moustache. “Do you mind if I go to the bathroom first?”

Daniel opened his eyes wide and his mouth too, without saying a word. Kenneth interpreted the silence as a yes and went to the closed bedroom door. He grabbed the handle but Daniel stopped him.

“It’s messy in there, I don’t think you should go in,” stammered Daniel.

“I don’t want to see the room, I just want to go to the bathroom,” said Kenneth.

“No, wait, wait a moment...”

Kenneth entered and switched the light on. Daniel put his hands in his hair, and quickly tried to find the words to explain the presence of Lucy.

He gave a look at the bed, it was empty. Lucy had disappeared.

He leaned on the door jamb and moved his hand to his chest. A few moments later Kenneth came out of the bathroom and said: “I know you don’t want to say it but you wear women’s perfume.” He gave him a slap on his back and left. When the suite’s door was closed, Daniel saw Lucy peep out from the walk-in closet.

“Thank you,” said Daniel.

“Better not make that man angry.” Lucy smiled and turned around going back to bed.

Daniel saw the tattooed wings again. “Why didn’t you show me that beautiful tattoo on your back?”

Lucy turned around with a stern look on her face.

“It’s not beautiful,” she said. “It is a condemnation. A long and very painful story that will never end,” she sighed, and lowered her eyes. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Daniel drew her close and embraced her. He breathed in the perfume of her hair and moved his hand on her back feeling the tattoo in relief under his fingers, her naked body against him; he kissed her forehead and looked for her lips. They exchanged a long kiss until Daniel lifted her sitting her down on the dresser beside the bed. He was standing in front of her, thighs rubbing against the hips. Lucy put her hands on his shoulders and slipped her fingers on his chest, on his nipples, and then moved them down to the navel up to the elastic around the tracksuit trouser’s waist. Daniel was already aroused but Lucy pulled it out and caressed it until it became harder and then he removed the tracksuit trousers and penetrated her.

Lucy climaxed with intense and prolonged groans; she put her arms around him holding him tight and abandoned herself to him with her head resting on his shoulder. Daniel held her tight too and they remained embraced listening to each one’s breathing and feeling the smell of their warm bodies, in silence.

When they returned to bed they fell asleep hand in hand.

In the early afternoon Daniel closed the door of the suite, placed the bag on the shoulder, and called the lift. But he changed his mind, went down the stairs to the second floor, and knocked at Lucy’s door. Just like the previous night, there was no answer.

Only employees and no one else was in the reception area. He left the suite’s electronic card on the desk and went along the corridor towards the tearoom. A grey-haired man wearing a suit and tie was sitting on a red armchair reading a newspaper. Two forty something women were sipping tea seated on the sofa next to him. He continued walking and entered a small bar with grey couches and dark wood tables which was still empty at that hour. The walls were full of black and white photographs of celebrities and artistic glimpses of London in the Sixties. He found Lucy sitting on a stool at the counter with a glass in her hand. Her legs were crossed and she was not wearing stockings.

“Are you leaving too?” she asked.

“Yes, and I was hoping to say goodbye to you this morning, but you left while I was sleeping,” he kissed her lips that tasted of prosecco wine. He sat down on the stool next to her.

“You were sleeping so well, I did not want to disturb you.”

Daniel smiled. "You lost this," he gave her the red satin bow that was on her stockings.

"Keep it, maybe it will bring you luck," she laughed. "How are you?"

"Never felt any better, I slept eight hours in a row and I feel like new," he sighed. "Well, I could say I almost feel younger. The pain and migraine are gone; I swear I could start running up and down the hotel stairs all day without getting tired. A miracle."

"A friend of mine says that to solve the problems of life, you need a good laugh, an intense orgasm, and a long night's sleep. Maybe that was just what you needed."

"Well it is absolutely true," he put his elbow on the counter and held his head on the palm of his hand. "Do your friends have pearls of wisdom for everything?"

"Of course, I always surround myself with witty and inspiring people. It's good for art too."

"By the way, art," he scratched his temple, "it is since I woke up that I have so many ideas and had to write them down for fear of forgetting them. I'm eager to do, create, paint," he said, gesticulating, "I hadn't felt so inspired in years".

Lucy nodded and squeezed his hand. She had a dark ring around her eyes and the wrinkles on her forehead and sides of the mouth had deepened, she seemed ten years older and looked exhausted. Even if she gave him a beaming smile, her eyes were filled with melancholy.

"I was thinking about yesterday afternoon, I fell asleep and you were with me in the suite. And even last night, I felt immediately that I can trust you, but actually I don't know you."

"Don't worry, I didn't take anything," Lucy sipped the prosecco wine. "An art teacher does not have much that someone would want to steal."

Daniel laughed. "And you're so young, you could be my daughter."

"Oh, I'm much older than what I seem," she said, and Daniel looking at her understood that this was true. "But don't you think it's a bit too late to worry about this, Casanova," she sneered and gave him a slap on his back. "Anyhow you don't know me, and I don't know you," she lifted her glass and drank. "Besides I haven't guessed who you are. Surely you're not an art teacher. If you were, you couldn't afford such a luxurious suite."

"Do you want to know?"

"No, I don't," she shook her head. "I'll discover it another time."

"Another time," said Daniel. "This means we will see each other again?"

"I don't know," she finished the prosecco wine in one go and put the glass on the counter, then rose to her feet. "It only depends on you if we meet each other again."

She took his face between her hands and kissed him on the forehead.

"Bye," she whispered.

She left the bar briskly without looking back.

Daniel remained sitting at the bar, absorbed in his thoughts; he twisted the red bow between the fingers. He sighed and closed his eyes. *Fuck, I didn't ask for her phone number.*

He returned to the reception and saw an employee, a skinny boy with blond hair.

“Could you give me the address of the person that was staying in room 209? I think she forgot something and I would like to give it back to her.”

“Room 209? Are you sure it was that room?”

“Of course, why?”

“Because room 209 has been closed for two weeks for maintenance. We do not give it to guests because there are problems with the bathroom plumbing.”

Daniel was dumbfounded. “That is impossible, I was...” he stopped and said: “Could you tell me if you had a guest called Lucy in the last three days?”

“What is the surname?”

“I don't know,” Daniel scratched his forehead. “Can you just search by the name?”

“I can try, but can't assure you anything,” the young man typed something in the computer, then took a file and checked some sheets of paper reading them in silence one by one. “No, sorry, there is no guest with that name.”

Daniel thanked him and was assailed by doubt. He ran again to the tearoom and asked the man with grey hair who was reading the newspaper if he had seen a young girl with a red cardigan and a black dress leave the room, but he said he had not. He asked the same thing to the two ladies drinking tea and they also replied they had not seen her.

He returned to the reception and sat down on the square sofa.

*Did I dream about her?* He twisted the red bow between his fingers and immediately drove that thought away. *I can still see the tattoos and the obsidian black eyes, I have the perfume of her hair and skin still in my nose, I have her voice and foreign accent in my ears, I feel the relief of her tattoos and her soft thighs under my fingers, I have her taste on my lips.* He shook his head.

“Hello, did you sleep well?” Kenneth's voice took him by surprise. The bodyguard was with him. “Did I disturb you? You seem so pensive.”

“I was thinking,” he held the red bow tight and put it in his pocket before Kenneth saw it. “I feel like painting, creating, making art, I have come up with so many ideas I'd like to work on when the tour is over.”

Daniel stood up and walked towards the entrance with Kenneth, the bodyguard was a few steps ahead. The minivan was waiting outside.

“I am happy, good for you. What ideas are they?”

“I still don't know but I was thinking about painting some works with a common theme, for example a journey to the garden of Eden,” Daniel took the drawings he had done that night. Lucy's

tattoos. *Maybe they didn't see her leave the tearoom. And the boy at the reception was wrong. I'll call him again later.*

“They are beautiful, I have the feeling that something wonderful will come out from this,” said Kenneth.

“Anyway I have all the time I need to work on it, maybe I'll come up with more ideas during the tour.”

The sky was clear and deep blue, the sun was shining, the temperature was pleasant and spring was in the air. The usher wearing a coat and top hat opened the door of the minivan for them to get in.

“So this is why you were nervous? So much to think about.”

Daniel stuttered looking for words. “Oh yes, so much to think about.”

“It is good to have many thoughts but accept a piece of advice from a friend,” the bodyguard sat in front and Kenneth went in after Daniel. “Please, don't ever think about wearing women's perfume again.”

Daniel burst out laughing while the minivan left for the airport.