

THE MISSING LINK

A Novel by Erica Pensini

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If we knew what it was we were doing, it wouldn't be called 'research,' would it?

“They’re only missing, and sooner or later a person will come along who accidentally opens the door of the room where Alma hid them, and the story will start all over again. I live with that hope” – P. Auster

Disclaimer: This novel is a work of phantasy. All references to institutions, people and places are purely coincidental.

Chapter 1

The heat of this torrid summer is drenching the old bricks and stones which have seen the joy and the struggles of the best generations of students, the cream of our nation. Young people like me, privileged and clever and envied. Now that the graduation ceremony has ended and even the last proud parents and their kids are gone, the place is oddly immobile and silent. It feels like a calming spot, one where I could sit in quiet loneliness with an engrossing novel. Very soon I will not see this place - and this whole city as a matter of fact - for a fair amount of time. There's a big environmental project going on in Spain and I will be part of an international team based out in Barcelona for one year at least. Chances are that the project will last much longer, but for now the details are still blurry and I am not concerned with planning so much ahead anyways. For now what I want is simply to step out of the academia and buy myself some buffer time before getting organized for real life, whatever real life is. This city has started to fit too tight on my skin, and I am relieved at the idea of taking off to a different continent, to a city that inspires me based on pictures pulled off the internet and on some travel guides.

Tonight I should be happy. I just earned a degree from a top-notch university with top marks. I have a job already, it's temporary but that's no matter, so many of my class mates would pay to be in my place now.

But I am not happy. I am not sad in a proper sense either though. It's a sort of emptiness I feel within me all the time, in the background, and that - paradoxically - haunts me most intensely in those moments when I should feel most accomplished. I start wandering in the empty hallways, making my way to the cafeteria where I have been so many times. I want to know if I can recollect the emotions I've lived here, remember the moments, and it is so very odd that I feel absolutely nothing, as if this was my first time seeing this place. I move on, inspecting the classrooms, and for each one I visit a hollow echo reverberates within me. At last I give up, but right when I've decided to get out of here my eye gets captured by a flier. It is black and white and very plain, but I read, in capital letters, EXPERIMENTAL DREAM STUDY. I get closer to the board on which it is affixed, and this is what it says:

EXPERIMENTAL DREAM STUDY

Volunteers wanted for an experimental psychology and medical study in which dreams are analyzed, reproduced and used to trigger buried memories.

Duration of the study: 1 month minimum

Call the number below if interested!

I have a month and a half ahead of me before flying out to Barcelona. Why not call? I have enough time. Why call is perhaps a better question though. I am curious, that's all there is to it, or maybe there are more profound reasons that I choose not to investigate.

There's probably nobody to pick up the phone, it's late, but I pull out my cell and call anyways. The phone rings free for a while, and I am relieved, because I have already changed my mind and I don't really want to be part of the study anymore. I am about to hang up when a voice talks to me from the other end.

"Why don't you drop by tomorrow morning at 8 am, does this work?", asks the girl who introduced herself as Stephanie, and so I'm stuck.

I jump on the streetcar with fragmented images buzzing in my mind as inconsistent flies, thoughts of what tomorrow's dream session will be like, of Barcelona, of the last day of school and of other things forgotten as fast as they are remembered, things that are now buried memories.

Chapter 2

It's 8 am and I am sitting in a zone of the hospital labelled as "experimental psychiatry and psychology". I've spent the last half hour filling forms with my personal information and subscribing a number of clauses I haven't read too carefully. I suspect that this whole psychology business is a complete waste of time, and yet I am curious to see what will come next. I am swaying between these bipolar moods when Stephanie greets me flamboyantly.

"You must be Iris!", she says with a broad smile, ready to shake hands even before I get up from my chair, arching her brows just a bit instead of placing a question mark to her statement

Something in my face tells her that she is not mistaken, and before I have the time to reply she introduces herself, "Stephanie, good to meet you".

She takes the forms I filled out and leafs through them quickly before bringing me to another room. The room is bright, small, cozy, familiar with many personal objects, something very different from what I expected. I thought shrinks used rooms that were dimly lit and neutral, deprived of any reference to the doctor's personality to prevent the patient from analyzing the doctor. Instead I look around and note, "You like cats".

"Yes! I do", Stephanie replies enthusiastically

"So do I", I tell her, my eyes still inspecting the place

My defensive wall is creaking just slightly. This woman does not seem to want to play games or hide, or maybe she is such a good player that she plays and wins seamlessly. Let's wait and see.

She starts explaining what this is all about, and although each of her sentences is clear when she stops talking I am still not sure about what I am getting into. All I understand is that her research team wants to exhume memories that have been lost, especially traumatic memories. They somehow intend to use fragments of dreams to trigger other dreams until the lost episodes are reconstructed in their entirety and relived in a full length dream, following which the person becomes fully conscious of his or her past.

Have they done this with somebody already, I ask. They are recruiting volunteers now, I am the first one who showed up. Promising!, I think, and smirk.

Stephanie sees my skepticism. She becomes defensive – it's only for a flashing second, but I still notice.

"Well, if this is an experiment one has to start somewhere", I say, because for some reason all of a sudden I don't want to let Stephanie down.

Stephanie nods and smiles, amicable again, and continues her explanation. I will have to write down my dreams as soon as I wake up, recording as many details as I can. We'll meet every other day – if this is not too much for me – for sessions approximately three hours long.

"The ideal strategy is to keep a fast pace. Does this work for you?", Stephanie asks and I say it does.

"During each session we will induce controlled sleep, and we will monitor a number of parameters to try and understand your mental state during the sleep. We will also impart signals to your brain while you are sleeping to mimic part of the dreams you had the previous nights. We will pick whatever seems significant to you or whatever appears to us as a hint, something that is perhaps blurry but that we somehow perceive as a window to remembering a problematic memory that you chose to forget", Stephanie tells me

"What makes you believe that I choose to forget things?", I ask, with a tone sharper than intended

"What are your expectations?", Stephanie asks in return to my question, looking at me intensely

"My expectations with regard to what?", I say, taking time, because I don't have a real answer

"With regard to what you will be getting out of these sessions", she replies calmly, her eyes still transfixed into mine

Now the question is too well defined for me to elude it.

"I came here for no reason, out of curiosity or perhaps boredom. But if you need some motivation and want me to give you a better reason I've got one for you. Sometimes there is a face that resembles mine, I know it does but I can't see it. I want to reach towards it but I can't, ever. I've dreamed this since I can remember", I say – and there's challenge in my voice

The words have come out before I knew it, and I am suddenly feeling disarmed in the middle of an open battle field. I regret having given my dream away, while realizing for the first time that it has been haunting me for years. I wonder if I really want to know what it is about and if this dream has really been my reason to call Stephanie.

"Do you want to start a full session tomorrow at 8?", Stephanie asks, and I shrug

"Why not", I say

Chapter 3

I'm sitting on a streetcar heading home, and I think about what I told Stephanie. If I keep seeing a face in my dreams, and if that face resembles mine, could it be that I have a cousin or an aunt or someone I met once upon a time and then never again? I have a very large family, and we don't really see each other very often. Perhaps one day there was a family gathering and I found a remote relative that looked like me and from whom I had a hard time separating? Perhaps the explanation for the dream that haunts me is as simple as this.

Family pictures, that's where I should look.

The idea occurs to me suddenly, and I wonder why I didn't have it before. I still live with my parents, and all the family pictures are in the attic. I am sure they are there, even though I am not sure where this certainty comes from since I haven't taken the time to go through them in ages, if ever.

I realize that I have reached my stop just in time before the doors close, and it surprises me that time has gone by so fast.

As I exit the streetcar, as I cross the iron gates securing our estate and walk the path embraced by old trees shading away the summer heat, as I unlock the door and step in the luxury in which I grew up, at every step I take I perceive an uneven note in me. The idea of going through those pictures puts me ill at ease, as if I am about to disobey to some untold rule. But why?

The scene flashes back to my mind. I was a kid, I can't remember my age but I was still in elementary school and I had sneaked up in the attic. At the time I had liked to go there because it was a hidden private spot, from which I could see whatever happened outside while making myself barely noticeable. I was there, sitting on the floor with a photo album open on my legs, when my mother walked up. She started as she saw me. "You startled me, I didn't expect to find you here", she had said. It took my mother a few seconds to realize what I was doing, and when she did she bent and closed the album. "Why don't you go out and play, it's such a nice day!", she had told me with a high pitch in her tone and a nervous giggle. From that day my mother decided that I should stop spending time in the attic, and I never opened the album again. "Why would you want to spend time in the attic when there are so many better places in the house?", had been her argument. I had gone back only once, when she wasn't there, and I had noticed that she had boxed up the albums and placed them in a corner where she probably thought they'd be less noticeable. The episode had disturbed me, but I had pushed it in some remote corner of my mind and stopped thinking about it till now.

Are the pictures still in the attic?

As I head to the attic time rewinds and I become the tense kid disobeying mom's rules. I know there's nobody at home, but I landscape the rooms before dimbing the stairs, my heart beating fast. The attic's door squeaks as I push it, and I curse the unoiled hinges. I realize that things haven't changed much there, and the space has the odd flavour of spots where time has stopped. The box with the pictures is still there, but it has been taped close. I'm cooked, there's no way I can go through the pictures without

leaving traces, but I am not willing to give up now. After all there's no label on the box, nothing that can identify it unmistakably. Perhaps I can buy an identical box somewhere else? The risk is worth the candle, and I start to peel the tape off the box.

I take out the albums, making sure I don't get their order mixed. There are about twenty albums, I arrange them by columns and start to look at them one by one, suddenly focused, calm.

Column one. There are my parents, young, smiling, holding hands on a beach, on the porch of a villa, in a number of cities. I keep going, and I find shots of my relatives, people I hardly remember now. And then there's me, my father is holding me in his arms with a satisfied expression on his face. I pull out the picture from the album and check the date. 1983. I was two years old then. I move on, and find more bits of me: me at 3, 4 and 5, all the way to elementary school. My high school pictures are not here, they are downstairs, receiving for some reason a different treatment from these.

I move to a second column, and there are my parents again, somewhat different, young but not as cheerful. I can't get myself to place them in time, was this before me or after I was born? I flip some photos and start reading the dates. December 1980, February 1981, June 1981, October 1982, June – August 1982. Strange that I am not in any of these pictures.

Wait.

My head feels empty for a moment. Wait. I am not in these pictures and my mother is NEVER pregnant. Never. I was born on May 16, 1981. That's what they told me, that's what all the documents say. So why did my mother not have a huge belly on December 1980? Why not in February 1981? And why wasn't I on any of the pictures taken in 1982?

I close the box hastily, without care. Why would I care anyways? I get out of the attic, out of the house, out of the property and slam the fence behind me, hard, with all the anger I have in me.

I want to shatter the whole bloody place cluttered with its lies and fake order, but I run instead.

Chapter 4

I don't know where I am going, I am running just to get away from the place where I have lived till today.

When my cell phone rings it startles me. I suspect it's my mother, the person who calls herself my mother. She has the habit of calling me in the middle of the day for no real reason, making up a different excuse every time. I am tempted to smash the cell phone, but then I read "Joshua" on the display.

I stop running.

"Joshua. I'll come over", I say before he gets a chance to speak

"Sounds good. See you in a while then", Joshua replies, and hangs up

We don't need too many words to understand each other, Joshua and I. Joshua is the only real buddy I have. We love each other and we do so freely, we are lovers when and if we please. He never got offended when I went missing in action because school imposed its meat-grinding pace on me, and welcomed my return when I went back to I knock at his door. And I always went back as soon as I could. There are other people crossing my life, it happens all the time, but after a while they disappear because I don't have the patience and time to keep any of my relationships, except for the one I have with Joshua. Joshua lives in a half rundown place, he is an artist but what pays his bills are the small jobs he does – he is a pizza boy one day, a plumber another and a pet sitter the next. He takes any job and doesn't stick to any for too long.

I could take a streetcar but I decide to walk.

I keep going till my feet get sore and my hot skin grimy with the dust of the road. Then I jump on a streetcar, and let it carry me to the outcast street where Joshua lives, right behind a respectable community, like a prank in the middle of a good day.

"Hey", Joshua says after opening the door when I reach his flat, and disappears in the kitchen as I throw my bag in a corner and flip off my shoes.

He comes back with two lemonades and hands one to me.

"So?", he asks, plunging in the couch

"So I don't know who my mother is", I reply and Joshua bugs his eyes

"Ehm?", he goes, the hint of a smirk on his lips

"Not a joke", I say, and start to explain

Joshua listens to me, and I can tell that he is processing the information fast, that he has something in mind. He doesn't interrupt me though, and when I'm done with my story he remains silent for a while.

"Have you ever considered getting your DNA analyzed?", he then asks

"No, but...", I say, pondering the possibilities I would open up if I did

"Well, maybe you should. If your real family members did the same, for any reason, then you could find out who they are", Joshua tells me

"Well, if you want to know...", he adds, interpreting my silence as hesitation

But I am not hesitant, rather I am imagining what will happen. I picture my real mother and my father happily welcoming me back.

Would they?

Perhaps they are dead, perhaps they never wanted me. Why would they welcome me if they decided to give me away? Still, I want to know. I need to know.

“I do”, I tell Joshua

“I can show you the lab where I got my DNA analyzed”, he says

“You got your DNA analyzed?”, I exclaim, because this is all but expected

“Yes, when my mom died. I wanted to know the odds that the same could happen to me, at some point in life”, he says, and bows his head

I am still standing with the lemonade in my hand, while Joshua is sprawled on the couch. I leave my glass on the floor, take Joshua’s and do the same with his. Then I cuddle on the couch, balling up against Joshua so that our lanky frames are one tight bunch of bones. It’s hot and we’re sweaty, but still it feels more comfortable to be tied up like this than to stay apart.

“Do you want to go to the DNA center now?”, he says after a while

I nod yes, and Joshua pulls me up gently.

“Let’s go then”, he says smiling

After being squeezed against the couch Joshua’s head is a blond mess. I laugh, running my fingers through his hair. He shakes his head, like a dog after taking a swim in a lake, wild and carefree.

The ride on the streetcar is long, and for a stretch of time we sit without speaking. Then Joshua looks at me, and I can tell from his face that he has been thinking all along, but that the thoughts struggle to translate themselves into words.

I look back at him and wait for him to phrase his thoughts.

“Your dream, the one you keep having. You always tell me the face you see resembles yours. But it’s not yours”, he starts

“It’s not mine...no”, I say

“So it’s your mom? Your real mom, I mean...”, he asks

I think about it for a moment.

“No...there’s a small face, a face as small as mine”, I continue

“Small? Is the dream about your childhood?”, Joshua asks

“There are two faces. Yes! Yes, there are two faces! The small one and another one, a big one”, I exclaim, my voice rising

People eye me for a short instant, before going back to their business

“You’re right, it’s a dream about my childhood!”, I exclaim again, my tone rising into a joyful pitch
I’ve realized something which was always there in front of me and yet invisible.

“Where are you in the dream?”, asks Joshua

“I don’t know...”, I say

“What do you see?”, he asks again

“Colours. Bright colours”, I start to remember

“Which colours?”

“It’s like a mosaic. It’s a mosaic sprawled through my tears”

“Why are you crying?”

“Because they are taking me away”

“From whom?”

“From the faces”

“Who are the faces?”

“It’s a big face and a small face, like mine”, I repeat

“Your mom and your sibling”

I start crying

“What do you see through your tears? The mosaic, what it is like?”, Joshua insists

“It’s hot. The mosaic is hot when a big hands holds mine and I touch it”

“It’s summer. What’s the mosaic like?”

“Like a lizard”

“You see a mosaic coated lizard?”

“Yes”

“Describe it”

“I don’t know...”

“Try”

“It’s blue”

“What else?”

“It’s climbing”

“On what?”

“On a rock”

“A big rock?”

“I don’t know...”

I grab my head and cover my ears

“No!”, I scream and the crowd turns again

Joshua hugs me as if I were a kid

“Let’s paint when we go back”, he says

We often do. I don’t paint in the place where I live, where my parents live. The flawed perfection of my family’s luxury is uninspiring. It inhibits me.

But I didn’t expect him to come up with this now.

“Paint?”, I ask, wiping off my tears

“Yeah. Lizards are nice to paint”, he says, and I understand his plan.

Chapter 5

The tubes of colour are spread out all over the floor and a blank canvas is waiting for me, rested against the wall. Joshua never puts anything away, it kills the inspiration – he says – and I think he’s right.

“I’ll be working at the night club tonight, I’ll get off at 5 a.m.”, Joshua tell me

I nod.

“In a week they’ll tell you something about your DNA...you never know what you’ll discover. But the real key is here”, he says, pointing at his forehead

“You know what happened”, he continues

I shrug

“I am not sure...”, I say

“Well, I’ve got to go now. Will I find you when I get back?”, he asks

“I’ll be here”, I tell him

Joshua smiles, blows a balloon with his bubble gum and pops it. I can tell he’s happy that I’ll stay.

“Yeah good”, he says and walks out, still smiling

The door clicks close and I am alone with the blank canvas.

The image was clear in my head, but now that I am trying to get it out of me on the canvas it seems to fade away. When I close my eyes it comes back, but as soon as I try to define the details, the whole image becomes evanescent.

The whiteness of the canvas is unnerving. I look at my watch, it’s 5.33. I close my eyes, I reopen them and it’s 5.35. I do this over and over again.

It’s 6 and the light in the room has gradually changed. The canvas is still blank and I start to panic.

I close my eyes once more and when I open them I stop caring. The painting doesn’t have to be my dream. It can be anything. I just have to get the colour on there, the image that will form doesn’t matter.

Dots of light blue. Dots of yellow. Other dots of blue, darker. The colours add up, and it doesn’t seem like I am controlling them. My hand moves from the palette to the canvas, it dips in the water, in the colour, in the rag to cleanse itself and get ready for the next tint. It simply happens. I am starting to see a lizard, its blue and yellow and white and there’s a bit of brown too in there. It’s a dotted lizard. Its skin is a mosaic. The dots add up, and now...

...now I recognize it. Yes, I actually recognize it! It’s shiny and its gloss reflects the brightness of the day. Light blue. My hand fills the space around the lizard with it. That’s the sky, I remember this joyful sky.

I am peaceful watching the lizard.

My eyes close again.

I see a face. Someone places a hand on me, it is a warm protecting hand that presses against my head. And there’s a face. That face is like mine, and when it cries I cry.

When I open my eyes I see the lizard through my tears as if it were streaked, somehow deformed.

The brush dips into the colours, still wet on the canvas, and drags them into long stripes. The sky is blurred too now.

“No! No! Help, help!”. This is what the voice yells as I am being pulled away from the protecting hand.

The face like mine disappears.

I open my eyes and I am terrified, I gasp for air, I can't breathe. I run to the bathroom and vomit, it is so painful to cry and vomit, I feel like I will suffocate and die.

A protecting hand starts to caress my head.

"Iris, what happened to you?", I hear Joshua say as he bends beside me

"You're back", I whisper and realize that I can breathe after all.

"Come", he says, pulling me up and washing my face in the sink

I rinse off my mouth

"Joshua...I am sorry", I say when I manage to speak

"What happened?"

I don't know what happened.

"I'm happy you're back", I reply instead

"Have you been sick for long?", he asks

"I don't know..."

"Did you sleep at all? Let me bring you on the couch", Joshua says, slipping an arm around me

But as we head to the living room Joshua catches a sight of the canvas lying on the wall and stops short. He remains silent and his face tells me that he is stunned by what he is seeing

"WOW!", he exclaims

"The dream is real...", I tell Joshua

He looks at me and nods

"Do you know what you just painted?", he asks me

"My dream"

"That lizard...I think it really exists. I've seen something in a picture that somehow reminds me of it", Joshua says

"Which picture?"

"A picture of some place...it was on a website"

"What was the place?"

Joshua bugs his eyes, trying to fetch the memory.

"I don't remember", he says at last

"Oh come on! Yes you do!", I exclaim

"It was long ago..."

"But can't we find it again?", I insist

"We must try", Joshua says

"What time is it?", I ask

"6 am", he says, taking my arm and reading the time from my watch

"I have to see the dream shrink at 8, you know?"

"Well, let's have a shower and some breakfast since you have some time", Joshua tells me

I love how easy life is with him.

We slip under the shower together and I wish I never had to see Stephanie or step out of this place again.

Chapter 6

I'm getting out of the streetcar and heading to see Stephanie for our session. The shower with Joshua had cleansed the nausea and the anguish off me for a while, but now all of a sudden the lack of sleep and the turmoil of the last emotions weights on me.

When I step in Stephanie's office I feel tired beyond exhaustion and wish I were elsewhere. I simply don't want to talk.

The feeling must be stamped on my face, because Stephanie looks at me for a moment before asking me if I am all right.

"I suppose I am", I say

"So do you feel ready for today's session?", she asks me and I say sure, we can do it.

She seems to buy my answer, but once we reach the room where the session should take place she becomes inquisitive again.

"Are you sure you're fine? We can postpone the meeting if you want", she insists

"I've painted for the whole night and things have somehow come back to my mind", I tell her and stop, not sure about how much I want to give away

"What did you paint?", she asks

I delay the answer for a moment

"A lizard", I say at last

"What's the lizard to you?", she asks

"The lizard is about something that happened when I was a kid", I say

Stephanie waits for me to continue. It is too late to stop, I should have kept my mouth shut in the first place if I didn't want her to know. So I tell her about whichever shreds of my past I could retrieve during tonight's excursion into lost memories.

"Did you see who dragged you away?", Stephanie asks after I finish the story

"No...all I know is that somebody was taking the face away from me", I tell her

"Do you have any other memories?", she asks

"No, not really...do you think we can just start the session? I'm tired, you know, so it won't be hard to sleep and dream for you to do whatever you need to do", I say with unintended aggressiveness in my tone

"Ok...so what we're going to do now is have you lie and sleep. We can give you some sedatives to help. We're going to hook up electrodes on you to get some indication of how strong your emotions are while you sleep. We will link whatever we can record to what you remember. You need to tell me what you see during the dream, it matters that you do not omit details because that will help us understand what was going on. During each session we will try to *continue* the episode you remembered the previous time, to add up another bit to it till the whole puzzle is complete", Stephanie explains, repeating what she had already told me the day before

The room is spinning and my head hurts. Perhaps it's the fact that I am tired, but I am irritated at this place, at Stephanie, at her pretense of understanding who I am and of the freedom she is taking of nosing into my life. I am allowing her to, but that's no matter.

What can she know? Even I don't know.

But she's intuitive, I give her that.

"Oh...I forgot to ask", Stephanie says suddenly, "Do you want to remember? And do you trust me to go through the process with you?"

"What do you mean?", I say

"I have the impression that you want to keep some details to yourself, and that's understandable. These sessions make sense only if you are willing to open up and tell me what you know, otherwise it will be very hard to progress", she tells me.

I don't really know how much I want Stephanie to be with me on this, and I shrug.

"Can we move on? At least give this a try?", I decide at last

"You're the main actor in this. We can move on if you want to"

I lay on the bed and I feel the sleep dribble on me a drop at a time.

Blackness.

There is somebody behind me, he is dragging the face similar to mine away from mine, I know it without seeing him. I know it's a man.

There's some noise, I hear the movements rather than seeing them, and there are hurried voices. Somebody tells me to be quiet, that everything will be ok. The voice is odd, the words are pronounced in a way that is foreign to me, but still I understand their meaning. I feel the person does not care about me, and yet it keeps telling me that I will be fine, and to be quiet. I sense that if I cry something will happen, I perceive that the man is scared. Then suddenly I hear cries, they are familiar cries and I understand that it's the face that has been taken away from me that it is crying. I know the face is somewhere close although I cannot see it, I can just hear the cries and the voice telling it to be quiet. I can hear the noise of the street and the noise of the car's engine, and then there's blackness again.

And there light's again.

I am back in Stephanie's room.

I figure there are tears rolling down my eyes, my face is moist and I'm sweaty.

I'm incredibly sad.

Stephanie is right, do I want to remember?

It seems like memories are not helping me at all, maybe I should stop. All of a sudden the void that was with in me seems to be elated indefinitely. Now that this window on the past has opened and I can't say who I am, I don't know what to do with myself anymore. Not that I really did before, and now it's too late to turn back anyways.

"Are you ok?", Stephanie asks me.

I don't reply. I do not want Stephanie to know about my pain, about my emptiness. She feels me, and gives me a moment of quiet.

"If you want we can stop here", she tells me

"No I want to go on...", I say

"When you were dreaming I recorded the signals. They were intense, very intense. You cried and at a point you were screaming", Stephanie told me

“In the car...it wasn’t me screaming...”, I say and all of a sudden the realization dawns on me

“It was my sister...my mother was with us, outside, somewhere, and there was that lizard...and we must have been kidnapped. But why?”, I say, talking to myself

“My mom...my real mom...they took us away from her...mama...”, I whisper

The wonder at the absurd idea that my mother can perceive me somehow, somewhere, wherever she is. She must be somewhere...

And I want my sister back.

I don’t know how long I have been abstracted in my memories, and only now I realize that Stephanie is there, listening to me.

She keeps quiet, she doesn't say a word and just wants to let me speak but I stop, because this is really all I can recollect, because I am exhausted.

I stay on my bed for a moment longer, not really sure about what I want to say or do next. But then I decide, suddenly, that I *need* my DNA results now. I will go and ask if they can rush the analyses. I will pay anything, anything. I’ll beg, cry. Anything. If my sister is there, if my mother is there and they have thought of playing the same card, then there is no time to lose.

“I have to go, right away”, I say

A question mark appears on Stephanie’s face, but she doesn’t ask.

“I went to a place to have my DNA tested because I suspected that my mother, or well, the person who calls herself my mother, wasn't my mother...”, I start, the disarrayed wording mirroring my state of mind

“And so you’re trying to find you real mother”, Stephanie says, concluding my sentence

“I don’t know what I’ll find...knowledge could be worse than ignorance, but I can’t stop just now”

Stephanie nods.

“Once you start telling the truth, there is no ending¹...I read this somewhere, I can’t remember anymore”, Stephanie tells me, pensively

“Next time we should have *you* take a nap”, I say, and I giggle for the first time I have stepped in here

Stephanie laughs too, but then her laughter dims into a smile and I notice a shade of sadness in her.

“Sorry...”, I say

¹ The Chymical Wedding, Lindsay Clarke

“Why?”, she asks and then adds, before I can answer the first question, “do you want to come back tomorrow? Always at 8?”

I feel I might make a bit more time for self-indulgence tomorrow morning since my parents are not even around. There has been a sudden emergency in the Korean subsidiary of my father’s firm and I have the whole place to myself. My father had to pack in great rush, and my hyper-loyal mother followed. That’s why they missed out on my graduation ceremony. This is why they are not around now. Crap hit the fan when I need to get rid of my adoptive parents the most – right on, I think.

“Can we see each other at 10?”, I propose

“Sure, why not”

“Right, why not?”, I say, getting up from the bed

“So long”, I add, raising my hand in a last theatrical farewell before leaving the room

Chapter 7

I’ve taken some decisions – the DNA, the sessions with Stephanie – and I should perhaps feel reassured by the fact that at least I have set my mind on what to do. And yet, as I walk out of Stephanie’s office, I feel lost and lonely beyond remedy.

I head towards the DNA center at first walking fast, then running, unable to control my anxiousness. At some point I realize I should give up the idea of making it there by foot because the place is way too far from here, but nonetheless I run till all the energy has drained away from me.

When I can run no more I slow down, pressing against my aching spleen. There’s a bench, and I let myself drop on it.

I pull out my cell phone and call Joshua. The phone rings and rings, but on the other end nobody picks up. I am tempted to call again, but then I drop the idea. It’s a matter of style, not calling people twice. If you got the wrong moment you should pull back, no matter what. No matter how much you need someone.

I end the call and stand there for a moment holding the cell in my hand, when I see a streetcar heading where I want to go. I jump in and drop on a seat so heavily that people turn around and stare at me.

I ride for a while, and finally I’m in front of the DNA center.

When I step in it’s about lunchtime, and the guy at the front desk is engrossed in his book while nibbling on a sandwich. The guy hasn’t even raised his eyes and for some reason I like him already. Just like that.

He notices my presence and looks up.

“Hey hi”, I say, trying to put up an easy smile

A flash of recognition flashes on the guy's face, and he is happy, stunned, silenced by the 100s of things he has to say – or so it seems from the way his lips move just slightly without producing sounds. I cannot understand his overreaction, so I pretend not to notice.

“The other day I came here to have my DNA tested...I was told it I should wait for about 2 weeks but I would need to have my results earlier...it's an urgent matter, you know”, I start

The guys is drinking my words and taking in every detail of me.

“I was wondering if this is possible, and if I can pay an extra fee to accelerate the process”, I conclude

“I've been waiting this moment for so long”, he tells me

“What do you mean?”, I ask defensively, confused about where all this is going

He doesn't reply, and so I iterate that I am here because I want to have my DNA tested as soon as possible.

“Let me see”, he says, and starts scrolling down his screen.

I wait impatiently, shifting on my feet.

“You know, we have your results already, although they haven't been sent to you yet. I can print them out for you if you want, I would just need a piece of ID”, he says

My hands have started shaking and I struggle to pull out the driver's licence from my wallet, but at last I manage and hand it to the guy. He looks at it attentively, and it seems that he is looking for an answer to some unspoken question rather than trying to verify my identity.

Then he tells me, “Your DNA test says that another client's DNA closely matches yours. Do you want me to proceed and disclose the person's identity to you?”

My heart pounds and I can't get myself to speak. *Yes, I want to know!*, I nod.

“Ok”, he says, and a moment later he hands me some papers fresh from the printer

I grab them with febrile fingers and leaf through them. And finally I read it.

Veronica Spencer

Is that my mother? My sister?

I stare at the name, as if it could reveal something about the identity of its owner.

I don't know how much time I spent abstracted in my thoughts, and when the guy talks to me I start because I had completely forgotten his presence.

“Listen, there's something I need to tell you”, he says and pauses

I wait for him to continue.

"I finish here at 6. Can you see me then?", he asks

"Where are we meeting?"

"Here?", he proposes

"Ok", I reply

I'm about to leave, but then I cannot get myself to do so. I need to know now.

The guy senses my thoughts, "I can't tell you just now. It's a long story..."

"I'll see you at 6 then. Here"

"Yes. By the way, I'm Lee, Lee Brooks", he introduces himself, reaching out to shake my hands

"Iris Meyers", I tell him

"At 6 then, here", I repeat, walking backwards and turning away only when I am so close to the exit I almost hit it.

Chapter 8

There's time till 6, plenty of it. I still don't know what to do with it, so I start to walk hoping for some inspiration to fill me in. I am strained, but the warmth of the sun revives me a bit at a time and I begin to be optimistic, perhaps even happy. Maybe I've found a lead, that guy – Lee – he seems to know something.

I decide to head towards the ocean. When I reach it after about a good hour walk I find myself a bench and sit there, my gaze melting away into the waves. I smell the salt. I listen to the seagulls. I feel the mild breeze on my face. I just let myself live, drenched by the primitive sensorial joy of the moment. I tilt my head backwards, dosing my eyes. The rays leak through my closed eyelids, sending a myriad of red dots through my optical nerves, before all goes black, slowly, seamlessly...

"Damn me if I am wrong! You're back all right, aren't you?", I hear a voice say, hovering somewhere above my head

I open my eyes halfway and realize I've been sleeping a dreamless sleep for who knows how long. My vision is blurred, but I get a feeling for the scrubby face of the man who's speaking to me and who looks like a homeless.

"What?", I mumble

"Jesus!", he exclaims

I'm fully awake now, and I stare at the man questioningly. I sure don't know him.

“Well, if you are not Veronica you’re pretty damn similar to her”, he says

I jump up, suddenly.

“What did you just say about Veronica?”, I ask, trying to sound chill

“Do you know her?”, he asks in return

“No...who is Veronica?”, I insist, my heart pounding

“She came here often. She was nice, she asked what I needed and brought it to me. She listened to my old stories...my old, old stories...”, the man says, almost talking to himself now, shaking his head and laughing sadly

Then a fit of cough shakes him, turning his face red and bending his body.

“We should get you some cough syrup”, I say, my words echoing as an inane attempt to heal the man’s life

He can’t speak for a moment, but when the fit ceases, “You’re like your sister”, he tell me

“My sister?”, I repeat

“Veronica”, he says

“Is she not your sister?”, he adds after a pause

“I don’t know...I don’t know anything anymore”, I whisper

“That’s what she said before leaving”, the man tells me

“Leaving for where?”, I want to know

“She didn’t say. One day she just told me her world had changed, that she discovered facts she could not understand. She said she needed to understand, and the next day she was gone”, the man tells me, shaking his balding head every now and then.

“So Veronica lived in this city...”, I say, talking to myself

“Not for long. I met her one year ago, it was fall, and when summer came she left”

“Because she needed to find her answers somewhere else...”, I say hesitantly

The man nods

“But what was she doing here?”, I ask

“She was an engineer. She told me so”, he says

I am speechless, and the man continues.

“She was here to monitor the levels of pollution in the water”

“And I am an environmental engineer...”, I whisper

“Ah really?”, the man exclaims, brightening up abruptly, “I said you and your sister you’re the same, didn’t I?”

The fact makes him happy for some reason, and he laughs before his laughter breaks into a second fit of cough

“What’s your name by the way?”, the man asks when he recovers

“Iris. What’s yours?”

“Jonathan”

“Do you come here often?”, I ask

“I go everywhere”, he laughs

Then he turns serious

“Would you trust me if I told you that I was an engineer too?”, he asks anxiously, as if his identity depended on my answer

“Yes”, I reply.

Why wouldn’t I? The world is so shifty

“You’re good, I can tell. I haven’t been very good to myself, you know, so here I am”, he shrugs

“Do you think Veronica is my sister?”, I ask, diverting the conversation

“I bet you”, he says

“I’ve lost my real family when I was young, too young to recall what happened”, I say, and find myself stunned to be telling all this to someone I just met.

And yet I trust Jonathan, instinctively.

“Well, I wish you the best of luck in finding what you’ve lost”, he tells me with a sad smile

“Thank you, I need it”

“I must get going now, but if you come here in the morning perhaps we’ll meet again”, Jonathan says, before carrying his crumpled frail body away, slowly, as if it were an enormous burden

"I'll come again", I promise

Jonathan turns for a short moment and raises his hand in farewell as he limps away.

Chapter 9

I have no clue about what time it is. When I check my watch I figure it's 3.30 already and it doesn't make much sense to go back home at this point.

I'm hungry and I realize I haven't even had lunch today.

I dig the streets to find an eatery that can inspire me, and after some search I step in an easygoing place that sells ice cream and coffee. I get myself a cone, which I devour in no time at a table outside, before going back in to order a coffee that I lap up just as quickly as the ice cream.

"Hungry?", the waitress laughs, winking

"Not any more", I smile

Life looks better with a full stomach, and I stroll around for a while to use up the extra time, till it's about time to head back to the DNA clinic.

I get there few minutes early. Lee is still at the front desk, his eyes avidly taking in the words from a book hidden behind the counter.

"Hey, what are you reading?", I ask, intrigued

"Beckett", he says, lifting a photocopy of the play

"I love 'Waiting for Godot'!", I exclaim

"I'm Godot", he smiles

"You mean...", I start

"I am an actor, but I work here a couple of days a week to round up my stipend", Lee says

The guy is interesting, no doubt.

"When is the play?", I ask

"In two weeks", Lee says

"I'll come watch you", I tell him

He smiles, then looks at his watch

"I think we can go now", he says, getting up. As he does so I realize he is even taller than I thought, a sort of human willow with a flexible body and slick dark hair.

“Awesome, let’s go”, I say

Chapter 10

“What do you want for dinner?”, he asks as we head out of the DNA center

“Pizza”, I say, the word coming out instinctively although after the cone and the supersized cappuccino I am not even that hungry anymore

Lee smiles, entertained at the eagerness in my tone

“Ah, how good it is to be outside again!”, he says, stretching, head turned upwards to drink in the sunrays still pouring from the sky

“It is”, I say, and we walk in silence for a moment

“How did you meet Veronica?”, I then ask abruptly

“She came to watch a play one night. It was October, I still remember that day. When the play finished it was pouring, and she was trying to get a cab. For some reason nobody would stop, and when I walked out she was still out there, drenched and with a desolate look on her face. I couldn’t tell exactly what, but there was something touching about her. I was glad she was still there, wet and miserable, awful as this may sound”

I laugh

“She had been sitting in the front row, staring at me the full time the same way you did before”, Lee says

“You’re tall”, I reply incoherently, feeling the blood reddening my cheeks

And now it’s Lee who laughs

“I asked her if she needed a ride, and she said ‘Oh yes!’, her face so happy all of a sudden. It was odd, we didn’t know each other but there was this trust from the start. We spent hours talking that first night”, Lee says

The memories bring a smile to his face, brushed away at once by a wave of melancholy

“And then?”, I asked

“We became lovers”, he replied, as if that were the only logical conclusion

“Did she ever tell you that she suspected...”, I start, without getting myself to complete the sentence

“Yes, one day she went back home for the holidays and figured out that her parents weren’t really her parents. Deep down she had always known that something was missing from her life, she had nightmares”

"Which nightmares?", I want to know

"Of being kidnapped"

I nod. Of course, how could she not know?

"Where was home for Veronica?"

"Montana"

"So why did she leave from San Fran? Do you know where she is now?"

"I don't. When she found out that her family had lied to her she decided to find out the truth for herself, but she didn't know where to start from. Then she recalled a detail, she knew that the day she was kidnapped it was sunny..."

"Yes! And we were in a park! This is my dream...", I interrupt

"That's what Veronica said. And she told me about the statue of a dragon"

"A lizard?"

"She called it a dragon, and she said it was yellow"

"Yes!", I exclaim, my heart pounding

"And she remembered a building, it was ancient, she said, and she looked at hundreds of images from places around the world to get some inspiration. After all she found a dragon, or a lizard, that could be the one she saw in her dream"

"And...and where is the lizard?", I ask, my voice hoarse and barely audible

"In Barcelona. She thinks the statue is a Gaudi"

"Really?!", I exclaim, the voice springing out of my in a shriek

"Did you come to the same conclusion?", Lee asks me

"No...but I am going to Barcelona", I say, stunned at the coincidence

But is it a coincidence or did my subconscious make this happen?

Lee bugs his eyes

"I'm supposed to start a temporary job there in a month", I say, and explain about my one year project there

Then, "Is she there now", I ask again, although Lee already told me he is clueless about my sister's whereabouts

"In one of her last emails Veronica told me she had found a good lead, and that she had found out something but that she couldn't tell me about it. She sounded scared, she felt someone was monitoring her moves. She wrote again after a while to tell me she was leaving Spain, but when I asked where she was heading she replied that someone was probably keeping track of all her communications, and that giving me information would put both of us at risk. That's the last thing I've heard from her. I wrote again, so many times, hoping for a line from her but all my emails went unanswered, and then I gave up"

"Did you really?", I want to know

"No...not really. At a point I thought I'd call the embassies, the consulates, the police, the papers, but then I refrained. I don't want to give her away, you understand...", Lee starts, dropping the sentence in mid-air.

"No, not completely"

"Veronica believes that the authorities might be involved in what happened, although she never went into much detail. She was even planning on changing name, to be safe and to make a statement, you know. Veronica isn't the name she was born with after all, and she wanted to rid herself of it"

"How did she want to call herself?"

"She never told me, and I don't even know if she changed her name after all"

We are in front of the pizzeria now, and I figure at this moment that I have been following Lee without knowing where he was leading me.

"What do you think, is this place ok?", Lee asks

"I like it", I approve

"It's one of my favorites. Ever been here before?", he smiles

"Nope, and I want to try it", I reply, and I realize the flirtatious twist in my tone just after speaking out the sentence

"It strikes me how *similar* you are to Veronica, and you two don't even know each other..."

"Will I find her?", I suddenly ask, with the hopefulness of kid who needs to believe in something

"We will find her", Lee tells me, his eyes locked into mine, comforting and thrilling me at once

"The idea of testing Veronica's DNA was your, wasn't it?", I ask him

"It was. She took the test right before leaving. I was hoping she could get her answers that way, because I wanted her happiness – of course - but also because I hated to see her leave to find her answers"

"You could have gone with her", I say

It's not a reproach, and not even a statement. It's more a question than anything else.

Lee lowers his eyes and hunches his back, just lightly, as if trying to support a huge weight without showing the effort, and I hate myself for what I just said.

"I couldn't afford it", he admits after a pause

"I'm sorry...", I say, bending just slightly, my posture mirroring Lee's body

We order our pizzas and remain quiet for a moment.

"What about you? How did you come to realize you had been kidnapped?"

And so I tell Lee about my dream, and as I unravel details about myself I realize I want to know about him. When I ask he draws sketches of lines, leaving my curiosity unfulfilled. I sense I could fall for this man, the way my sister did.

By the time we finish our food I am tired to the point where it's hard for me to speak, but I don't want to go home.

"Where did Veronica live?", I want to know

I'm thinking that I could go there now, just walk in front of her house, before heading to mine, or to Joshua's if he's there.

"She lived with me. If you have time I can show you what she has left behind", Lee tells me

"And her picture", he adds after a pause

Chapter 11

We're in front of a three storey building. The building might be approaching its hundredth birthday and it slopes a bit. It must have been rich during its good times, but the streaks of time and the Pisa's tower look only make it better.

"This is it", Lee says and something in his voice tells me that he's wavering between opposite tensions

He wants me to walk upstairs with him, but there's something that holds him back. Is it my resemblance to Veronica that troubles him?

"Nice", I tell him, trying to sound chill

He smiles, but I can sense him shiver as he does so

"Right. I live under the roof and there's no elevator", he tells me

"So?", I shrug

"So let's go", he says

The stairwell smells of old wood and moisture, and I love the feel of it.

When we're in front of the door he fiddles with the lock awhile, and after all I tell him.

"You don't want to like your lover's sister, but that's ok. If we're so alike...are we so alike? I mean, is the resemblance only physical or is it the behaviour too?"

"You look like her and your voice is hers...your ways...yes, those too are similar, although you seem more disenchanted, harsher", he tells me

I stay silent for a moment.

We've been standing in front of the door for few moments, but instead of opening the door Lee observes my reactions.

Now I am the one who smiles and shivers.

"Will you let us in at some point?", I say

Lee giggles and opens the door.

I smell patchouli and coffee, and I catch a glimpse of the living room, of a red couch with white and orange pillows thrown on it.

I like the choice of colors.

I walk in and see that behind the couch there's a painting that matches its flavor. It's strangely familiar, as if I had painted it at some point in the past. It's a simple painting, with no subject in it, just colors: red and yellow. There's red on top and yellow on the bottom, with small blots of yellow in the red and small blots of red in the yellow.

I stare at it so intensely that I don't notice that Lee is standing at my back.

"She painted it", he says and I start, realizing his presence

"I could have painted this, you know?", I tell him

"You paint?", he asks

"Only at my friend's place. I can't do it in my goddamn house"

"Why?", Lee asks

"It's too perfect. You know what I mean?", I say, without taking my eyes of the painting

Then I turn around

“You know what I mean?”, I repeat, “Everything looks perfect there. You can’t move a single comma without the feeling that the walls will tell you to place it back where it was. I suppose that that’s a way to keep an appearance of sanity when there’s so much crap hidden in your closets”

“You mean your presence in the house?”

“For instance”

There’s a pause during which Lee and I simply look at each other without speaking. It feels good this way.

“Does it unsettle you to know there’s someone so similar to you?”, he asks after a moment

The question hadn’t occurred to me before. Does it?

“I don’t know...it’s just weird. But deep down I have always known...I just wonder about my parents. Who are they? Did they give up on us? Are they still looking for us?”, I say, almost talking to myself

“Do you want to see Veronica? I only have one picture...I never thought...”, he starts

“Show me”, I say

Then I add, “Please...”

My heart is pounding.

Lee walks to his bedroom and I follow.

In the dim light of the room, over the red sheets of the undone bed, a face that could be my own is squeezed against Lee’s cheek, amplified in a 6 ftx3 ft black and white photograph.

Veronica.

My eyes locked into my twin’s eyes, I smile at Veronica’s smile, her happiness is mine.

Then Lee says, “I wish she were here”, and the spell breaks.

My smile melts away into tears, breaks into sobs that shatter my body. I’ve never felt so lonely.

Lee comes closer and he hugs me. He holds me tight, and cries with me. His tears wet my shirt and mine his, they glue our faces together.

Then through my tears I see Veronica’s face glued onto Lee’s. I see their smile.

I pull back just enough to look Lee straight in the eyes and say, “It’s good to be here”

“Jeez...”, he says, his voice choked

We’re silent for a moment.

"You know", he tells me, "now that you're here I know I'll find her"

"I never thought I could...", I start saying and the phone rings on his bed table

A strange expression crosses Lee's face as he's about to pick up the phone

"Yes?", he says

Nothing on the other end

"Hello?", he asks again

Someone finally

"Veronica...", he whispers

Chapter 12

"Where are you?", Lee asks but before Veronica can answer something happens. Something loud, so loud that even I can hear it through the receiver.

"Veronica!", Lee yells into the phone, his voice rushed and panicked

There's a loud thump on the back, and some voices. I can't understand what they are saying, the language is foreign and the voices aggressive.

And then there's just the regular blipping of the cut line, its sound so piercing I have to cover my ears.

I shiver, the summer's hot but I feel cold from the inside, the lump in my throat is so tight it hurts. I can't cry and I can't speak, and I stare at Lee who stares at the wall, holding the phone in his hand with a dumbstruck expression.

I can't measure the time, but at some point I pull myself together.

"Did you see the number she was calling from?", I ask

"No...", Lee tells me as he punches some buttons on the phone

"Wait, yes...but where is this number from?", he says showing me the display

"Can we google it up?", I say

The computer is right next to phone, and Lee presses the on button. The PC seems to take forever to start, Lee nibbles at his lips anxiously.

"Come on buddy!", he says thumping his fingers on the table, exasperated

Thoughts race in my head. Find where she was calling from. Find out and...

Find out and reach her.

The question is how. What were they doing to her when the line fell? She can't be dead, not now. No, not now. But if someone took her, kidnapped her again, how do I find her?

"Ah finally!", Lee exclaims when he manages to open the search engine

He types in the number.

"Bingo!", he says, "Amsterdam?", I say

"Seems like that's it", he says, his voice regaining life

"I need to buy a ticket", I realize at the same time I'm telling Lee

He looks at me for a moment and I see what he's thinking.

"Let me go first, you can't come with me now", I tell him, and I don't know why I say so

But why is what he asks.

"Because you can't afford hanging out there without an income", I say, not really knowing if this is the real reason

"Can you?", he asks

As a student I received funding that is still there for the most part because I never had to pay for my living. My adoptive parents have been generous with me, I give them that. They've loved me only for themselves, I know, but still.

"Yes", I say

I have enough to survive for a while, certainly till the start of the job in Barcelona. Will I ever even get to Barcelona though? I have no clue about where this lead will bring me.

Lee frowns, he's thinking, planning.

"I need to do this alone, you understand?", I continue

"I do. But we need to Veronica alive", Lee insists

"Yes, but if we go there together and they get us *both* then we blow up our chances. Let me go there first. I promise I'll reach out for help if I need it, and if I stop contacting you all of a sudden then you'll know I'm in trouble", I tell him

Lee thinks this over for a moment.

"Ok", he agrees at last

I smile, trying to look as if everything were under control, as if I weren't the mess it is.

"So we're buying your ticket?", Lee asks, bringing me back on track

"Right", I say, pulling out my credit card

"When do you want to leave?", he asks

"Tomorrow?", I say, echoing back his question

"Tomorrow?", he repeats, eyebrows arched

"I suppose so"

Lee doesn't look too convinced.

"We don't have time", I insist

"It's about you going there alone...", he starts

Patience is not one of my key qualities, and being exhausted doesn't make things any better. I take the mouse off his hand and start browsing.

Deciding you want to fly out somewhere the evening before you're on the plane generally won't buy you a cheap seat, and when I enter my credit card info and accept the purchase I figure I have eaten away a good slice of my savings in no more than 5 minutes.

Lee hasn't spoken a word since I grabbed the mouse off his hand. It is only when I complete the purchase and lean against the wall, exhausted, that he tells me, "If you take off at 3 pm tomorrow I can give you a ride to the airport around noon".

I have a night and a morning to pack up my life and go.

Chapter 13

Packing didn't take me long, it never does, but still I had no sleep. I spent the night talking with Joshua and by the time I hit the bed it was dawn.

I don't know if I will see my adoptive parents again, or if I will take any of their calls, reply to any of their emails. I need time to understand, and I left behind a note saying so.

It's time for me to understand what you never told me – Iris

I told Joshua I'll be fine, but now that I am alone on this plane I know the lie is bigger than I thought it would be when I said it. I'm leaving all I have behind to look for a sister who might be dead. Who might be somewhere where I'll never find her. I have objective reasons to feel lonely, and being as physically drained as I am just makes the emotional chaos worse.

Sleep, Iris, sleep. My eyes closed, I try to sleep.

But I can't, because I have the feeling that a guy is observing me. I noticed him when I was lining up at the gate, his eyes somehow constantly brushing on me. His gaze was not blunt enough for me to stand up and say, "hey stop it", it was rather the more subtle sideways type of gaze you can't argue against. This man is the type you hope won't be sitting close to you, because if he does you'll never be able to push him away. At first it seems like our seats are not close, but then he somehow manages to find his way to a spot not too far from where I'm sitting. I wonder what he told the hostess to convince her to let him take a seat so bloody close to me.

As I sit with my eyes closed, I can't see the guy's eyes but I bet they're still slyly landscaping me. Perhaps I'm being paranoid.

I sense that exhaustion is taking over...

"I thought you wouldn't come anymore", says Stephanie

"How late am I?"

"About a month, but don't worry, we all know that last minutes accidents happen", she says and laughs

"I can't believe the flight took so long. I'm sorry..."

"Don't mention it. Tell me about your dreams, rather", she tells me, her voice strangely soft

"I didn't sleep, sorry", I say, realizing that I am apologizing at every sentence

"You're sleeping now"

I don't understand

"Who are you seeing?", she asks

"You..."

"And whom else?"

Somebody bumps against my arm and I open my eyes. The joys of having an aisle seat. I hear myself moan and I raise my eyes to figure out who just woke me up.

And there he is.

This time there's no doubt, the guy's looking at me with meaning, straight in the eyes.

He slips his hand in the back pocket of his kakis pants and grabs a small something, seamlessly. I feel the goosebumps on my back, but all he is holding is a folded piece of paper. He drops it on my lap, casually, and walks away.

What is this?

I am tempted to brush it off my lap, just as casually as he dropped it there, and pretend nothing ever happened. But then I unfold the note. The writing is all pointy and slanted. A nervous, hasty print, written in fine black ink.

REALITY CAN EXCEED YOUR DREAMS. WATCH OUT FOR EVERYTHING AND EXCLUDE NOTHING. THEY'LL BE WATCHING YOU. DON'T TRY TO LOOK FOR ME – FOR YOUR OWN SAKE AND MINE.

When I take my eyes off the note the guy is gone from the seat where he was, and the hallway is empty.

Chapter 14

I slept a dreamless sleep in the cheapest hostel room I managed to find in Amsterdam. I was too exhausted to be scared or to realize that I hadn't eaten for over 12 hours, all I knew was that I needed to collapse on a bed.

But now it's all coming back to me: the man on the plane, the note. And I am hungry, so hungry my head spins when I stand. I slip back into my jeans and feel my pockets. The note is still there. Something tells me it would be safer to destroy it than to keep it, but I can't get myself to tear it apart because I wonder if it contains hints, leads that would be forever lost if I did.

I tuck the note into my luggage anyways and head out, heavily leaning onto the handrail as I teeter down the stairs. The girl at the front-desk sees me and smiles casually, casting an appearance of normality to the oddness of the scene. I stare back at her blankly for few instants before pulling together some sort of crooked smile.

There's a mirthful café right across the street, with flowers on the windows and on the tables outside, and that's where I stop. I am in dire need for food, but in my current state of mind the colored flowers are almost as important as filling up my stomach. I have to keep the morale high, I can't afford letting slip even for an instant without running the risk of breaking down completely.

I order a cappuccino and pastry with sophisticated names I can hardly pronounce. Sitting outside in the warm air filled with the smells of food and flowers, surrounded by the laughs and voices of people, one bite of almond pastry after the next I feel the hope flicker within me. I look at the street and smile, imagining the day I will sit here just like everyone else would, at peace with myself. Will this be possible, ever?

I don't know, but I will try. I will be fine, one way or the other.

"Hey, I can't believe we're meeting here!", I hear behind my back

I feel a pinch of irritation, sudden and acute, and when I turn around it must show on my face.

"Did I startle you?", asks the blond who seems so enthusiastic about meeting me

I have a vague recollection of her face, but I cannot really place it anywhere. When people don't strike me in any particular way I blank them out within minutes. This must show on my face too, because the blond tells me, "You remember me from school, don't you?"

Yes, now I do. We took courses together, me and this blond whose name I've forgotten, and she has always been like that with me, always so eager to interact. How comes she's here?

"Sure I do", I say, doing my best to be civil

"Can I join you?", she asks, and starts pulling up a chair for herself before I get the chance to reply

She talks for a while, about places to see and about her plans here in Amsterdam and about school. A bunch of words I don't really listen to, but to which I nod every now and then while wondering how I can get rid of the woman.

"You know I forgot your name, though?", she says at a point, and so I tell her

"Mine is Melissa...just in case", she says and winks

I smile and nod. When is she going to leave?

"What are you up to today?", she asks, and then, without pausing, "A friend of mine has been here before and she told me about this place, the drinks they make and their beer are awesome. I think we *must* try it out"

"Well...", I start

"Do you have plans already?", she interrupts

"Sort of", I say

"The place is not far from here, you know", she insists and starts describing all the wonderful things she's been told about it. After chatting away for a while she tells me the name of the pub.

And the pub is the one I should go to, the one from where Veronica called.

"The black Lion, you said?", I ask

"Yes! Do you know about it?", she wants to know, her excitement bubbling out, unstoppable

"Never heard about it, I just find the name curious", I say

"Are you in then?", Melissa insists

If I go there with someone like Melissa my reasons for being there are going to be less obvious, she'll be a good element of distraction because she just doesn't seem to know how to shut up. Finding this chatter-box here in Amsterdam might have not been bad luck after all. I'll have to get rid of her at some point, but I'll deal with that later.

“Ok”, I tell her, shrugging

Chapter 15

As we walk the streets I start feeling grateful to Melissa for her presence. She has a map and she does all the work to figure out where to go. The enthusiasm she gives out gives me the illusion I am here for fun, as if I were nothing but a tourist with a home somewhere else and a normal life.

After about an hour we reach the pub. The three storey building which hosts it is old and it slopes a bit towards the right, the windows on the upper floors are crowded with flowers and statuettes and vases, all very exotic.

The pub itself is one of a kind. It's dark inside, and it is only after a few minutes that my eyes adjust to the dim light and I get a taste for the pub's atmosphere. The place is an improbable pastiche of styles, with stools from the 50's, liberty style faint lights, flags of hokey and football teams draped all over the ceiling.

“Groovy!”, Melissa exclaims

Even in my current state of mind I appreciate the craziness of this half organized chaos. What was my sister doing here? Was this a place she simply liked and from where she decided to place the phone call, or is there something behind the scenes?

Suddenly I decide I want to check out the bathroom. I ask Melissa to order a coke for me as I start to get up.

“A coke?”, she echoes back surprised

“Thank you”, I reply, and disappear to where the arrow with the TOILET sign is pointing before she can raise further objections.

The narrow hallway that leads to the bathroom reveals nothing in particular, and the bathroom itself is nothing but a tiny well-kept bathroom with no useful clues. What did I expect anyways?

And yet I can't give up.

I look around for a while longer and then flush the toilet for the sake of the show. Am I being tracked down just now?

Perhaps even Melissa is there for a reason, perhaps she is not who she says she is. This thought seems a bit far-fetched, but at this point nothing is making full sense anyways.

When I walk back Melissa is sitting at the bar, talking to a guy. She introduces him to me, before shifting her interest back to him and cutting me off the scene. I sit with my coke, landscaping the place, while the two of them chat and flirt. The temptation to ask the barista if she has ever seen a girl who looks like me is strong, but it doesn't seem wise to make myself noticeable. Not that I am not, someone who knows my sister will take no time at all to recognize me.

And after a few moments I start to suspect the barista does.

Her side glances are not conspicuous, and yet something tells me she is not unaware of my identity. I take a peak, she takes a peak, and we continue for a while till I get fed up with the game.

“Do we know each other?”, I ask

She doesn't reply, and looks down at the counter she is wiping over and again, then turns to take some glasses from the dishwasher.

Melissa's friend looks up at me for a moment, but Melissa is all over him and his attention gets quickly diverted. The two of them seem innocent enough, but I sense that the barista won't talk while they're there.

I place a bill under my glass and push it on the table, then get up and start walking out. Melissa is so taken with the guy she doesn't seem to notice, and he gives no sign of noticing either.

The sky is starting to cloud, and after taking a few steps away from the bar I stop, disheartened. The bar is where I should have found some clues, and I know the woman at the counter has seen my sister. But even then, how can I get her to talk? Perhaps I must go back again, if I'm lucky I'll find her there alone.

I am still standing in the street when I hear, *wait*. I turn and see the barista. Her footsteps are so light and swift I hardly heard her approach me.

“This way”, she tells me pointing to a side street. I hesitate, unsure if I am about to fall into a trap.

“Hurry, I have no time. I've sneaked out the bathroom window, but it won't be long before he notices what I'm up to”, she urges me

“Who is 'he'?", I ask, following her

“The guy who hooked up your friend”, she says

So he is not that innocent after all.

“Have you seen my sister?”

“Yes. Go to the museum district tomorrow at 12.30 sharp. There's a bench in front of the large fountain right where the Van Gogh and the contemporary art museums are. The bench is white, it says “Amsterdam” on it. The place is full of people, we'll be less noticeable in the crowd. Sit on that bench and wait for me”, the woman tells me

“Who is the guy?”, I insist

“Tomorrow at 12.30, where the bench is”, she repeats, and walks away with the same silent swiftness that surprised me earlier.

Chapter 16

I got here five minutes ago, carrying a cone in my hand to look as nonchalant as possible, but I am burning with impatience and I know I can't hide it. I nonetheless try to keep my composure, to act as a tourist while I scan the place for the barista.

She should be here anytime, if she'll really come. When I landscape the crowd it doesn't feel like someone's watching me, but would a professional give himself away so easily?

I decide that if my woman is not there in 5 minutes I'll beat it. I'm not even sure I have the guts to meet her.

Don't be stupid, what are you here for?, I whisper to myself

But wait...is that her?

Yes, I'm sure, she's walking fast, eyes to the ground. She looks my way, furtively, before bowing her head again. When she's no more than few feet from me I stand up and stretch, before shoving down the last remnants of my cone and putting up an expression that I intend to be a smile.

But the woman's face is so dark that my half smile cringes within seconds.

She pretends to trip, and being almost in contact with my body she whispers, *"Go, they're after me"*.

I don't know if she's playing games with me, and with which purpose. For a moment I am not even scared anymore, just angry, damn angry at the nonsense of this all. But then, as I am starting to head off and the barista is already several meters away from me, the tail of my eye catches her fall on the ground.

I don't know what happened but I know I must run. Just run, Iris run, don't think! Run! The ice cream makes its way up to my throat, and I swallow it back while my feet prop me forward, fast as they've never done before. My throat burns and my spleen hurts and I feel I'll collapse any moment. There's a street, and the traffic light is red but there's nobody.

PAS OP!

The shout comes from my back, loud. Then a horn, pressed hard, even louder. I feel myself fall hard, I moan, my head throbs, I hurt so bad I can't move, and the moan goes dead in my mouth.

It's black now, and I am so at peace with myself now that it's over.

Joshua, please hold my hand, Joshua...

Chapter 17

I open my eyes to the sound of screaming sirens, lying in what I reckon is an ambulance. A young girl is sitting beside my stretcher, she smiles and says something I don't understand.

“Sorry, I don’t speak Dutch...”, I tell her, and my voice echoes oddly in my ears

“My name is Anne”, she starts, “You are ok”

“My shoulder hurts”, I say in return to her comment

“Don’t worry, we will help you. What is your name?”, she asks

“Iris Meyers”, I say without lying, and bite my tongue right after

But then if these people are legitimate paramedics I must disclose my real identity, no?

All of a sudden it strikes me that I will have to pay for whatever medical care I receive. I curse myself for not seeing the bloody car come my way.

“Are you American?”, she asks

“Yes”, I say, and close my eyes

I don’t want to think now, although I know I can’t afford lowering my guard.

“What will you do to me when we reach the hospital?”, I ask without opening my eyes

“X-rays will be the first thing. A man was there when you fell, you crossed with a red light. Then you saw a car was coming, you saved yourself when the driver was at the throw of a stone”, she said

I open my eyes, smiling at the way she phrased the sentence. It feels good to smile.

“So I didn’t actually get hit. I think I remember, I just tripped on a pole and passed out”, I tell myself out loud, relieved at the realization that I’ll probably be able to walk out of the hospital soon

“Yes, I think you lost conscience because you were scared. The man said you were running very fast”, the girl says

“Yes, I was running very fast...”

“Were you late?”, she asks

I am not sure if she just wants to keep me talking to prevent me from falling asleep or if her questions have meaning for her, but before I can reply the ambulance slows down and comes to a halt.

“We bring you out”, Anne tells me with her Dutch accent, as two big blonds open the door and jump up the van to carry my stretcher inside the hospital.

A fine rain is starting to fall, I am just realizing this as I stare at the sky from my stretcher, face up.

Strange as it might seem, I feel suddenly at ease, grateful to be here, grateful that someone’s pushing me somewhere while I lie under a blanket and a wet sky.

I'm good for now, and good for now seems as great as it can ever get.

Chapter 18

"The good news is that you've got nothing broken...", the doctor tells me, holding my x-rays in a folder

"And what are the bad news?", I ask, expecting some from the way she just spoke

"It's not really bad news...", she starts

I wait for her to continue

"It's something I don't fully understand now, and which requires a bit more investigation", she concludes

"Ok, but *what* are you referring to, exactly?", I insist

If she's being so convoluted there must be something wrong.

She pulls out my x-rays and holds up one that shows part of my shoulder and part of my arm.

"Do you see, here?", she asks, pointing at a small dot that I wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't pointed it out

I nod

"You said you're not sure about what it is, but what is your guess?", I ask

And I am thinking, cancer.

"I think we should extract it and analyze it", is the diplomatic reply I get

"Ok", I say

"We can do this tomorrow", she states, although her tone makes the statement sound more like a question

I nod

"Tomorrow morning at 8", she tells me

"What is the time now?", I want to know

"It's 5.30, we'll bring you dinner in a moment", she says

And sure enough few moments later I am lapping up a soup and realizing I am hungry, here and now, even though I could be dying of cancer tomorrow.

Chapter 19

“Did a kid ever push a sharp object into your back when you were young? Or did you perhaps have a car accident?”, the doctor asks

I shake my head no

“This is very odd...”, she comments pensively

“Odd or not I am happy it’s a piece of metal. I don’t know how it got there, but I tell you, I am relieved to know that’s it. At first I thought I had cancer...”, I tell the doctor

“Yes, for a moment I thought so too, but the way it looked made cancer an unlikely option...it wasn’t making sense to me”, she tells me

I know there’s something more she wants to tell me. She’s debated if she should voice her thoughts out loud, but at last she does

“The shape of the object appears extremely regular under the microscope”, she explains, showing me a magnified picture of the object stuck on my shoulder

It looks like a perfect little pill, and I observe it closely, fascinated.

What *is* it?

“I can’t place it, you see...it’s not the typical object that accidentally finds its way in a person’s shoulder”, she tells me

“What do you know?”, I ask abruptly

“I sectioned it and conducted further analyses. It looks like a...device. Almost like the microchips people use for Fido to find it in case it gets lost”, she tells me, studying my face as she speaks

“A microchip? Are you sure?”, I blurt, knowing she is

She pulls out other images of the sectioned objects and a microchip is what I would call ‘the thing’ too.

“But why would I have had a microchip implanted on my shoulder?”, I ask, not expecting an answer

“This is what I am really confused about”, she replies, her eyes scanning the images

Chapter 20

The doctor has a strange look on her face as she is about to let me go, as if she wanted to ask something or knew something she hasn’t told me yet.

I am clueless about what any of this means or what I will do next. All of a sudden I feel overwhelmingly lonely, and I realize I haven't spoken to Joshua for way too long. What is it, one, two days? He must be wondering what is happening to me.

"Is there WI-FI here?", I ask anxiously

"Yes, in the waiting rooms and in the lobby", she tells me, observing my hands as I run my fingers along the sides of my smartphone

"Will I have to pay when I sign out?", I want to know, hoping the bill is reasonable

She shakes her head no.

"The nurse told me a relative of yours already paid", she tells me

"A relative?", I repeat, bugging my eyes

"Do you not have relatives here?", she says, observing me closely

Instead of answering her question I want to know if my relative is still here, but he's gone.

"You are scared", she tells me, and I am surprised because I don't feel this way, not now, although if I paused to analyze myself I would likely reckon I am.

"I'm fine", I lie

"If you need help, please call me", she says and scribbles her name and phone number on a piece of paper she hands me

I attempt to produce a smile.

"Thank you", I say, already on my way to the door, pierced by her inquiring gaze.

I walk to the elevator, it takes forever to reach my floor but at last I am in the lobby with WIFI access. It's an open network and who knows how safe it is to open my emails there, but this is what I have now. I read Joshua, he's concise, almost curt, the tone is ostensibly chill but because this is Joshua's writing I know its meaning beyond the words - staying calm is what he's trying to do. I've just replied and pressed "send", and I am still staring at my phone's screen to make sure my message is going through when I sense someone's presence on my back.

I freeze, and I feel someone slip something in my pocket, while I keep staring at my phone. When I turn around I see the guy who did it, and I can swear it's the same one I've met on the plane. My mouth drops open for the briefest instant, but then I catch myself and smile to the receptionist who has probably followed the scene while pretending to leaf through some paperwork on her desk.

"Thank you", I say with a positively controlled voice

She smiles back at me

“Enjoy your day”, I add, pushing the door with deliberate resolution, with the note burning in my pocket.

Chapter 21

I turn a couple of corners and I find a small park. A fine rain is dribbling on Amsterdam, and there’s nobody around but an old lady walking an old dog. I like the couple, their slow pace appeases me and I wish I could follow the lady where she lives. My head is pounding, I would do anything to muffle the noise resounding within it. I picture her cozy house, the quiet of which I so desperately long for. The lady must sense my presence, and perhaps my sympathy, because she turns my way and smiles. I smile back, and try to find my courage in this exchange of solidarity as I pull out the note from my pocket with shivering fingers. And as I do so something else falls from my pocket. I bend to pick it up, it’s a one way train ticket for a place called Sittard.

When I stand up again the lady is already walking away, head slightly bowed and back a bit hunched. Alone again, I start reading.

Take the 4 p.m. train for Sittard. You’ll reach Sittard at 6.10. I will be in front of the obelisk in the square you’ll find when exiting the underpass.

From there I will drive you somewhere safe. With your microchip removed it will take them longer to find you. I will help you find your sister, but you cannot stay in Amsterdam now.

Do not go back to your hostel. You must avoid meeting Melissa, she is one of them.

So what was on my shoulder *was* a microchip. This is sci-fi, what’s happening is nightmarish and intriguing at once in its total absurdity. If my mystery man knows about the microchip somebody must have been monitoring me all along. Have they influenced my choices and my thoughts? I don’t even know who I am anymore, or if anything at all is real.

The thought makes me laugh. It’s a mirthless laughter, but nonetheless I feel better.

I reread the note.

Should I go to Sittard? Why Sittard by the way?

I’ll go.

After all does it even make a difference if I make one decision or the other? If I stay here they’ll find me anyways, whoever “they” are.

I cannot figure out how to reach the station without going back to the hospital and connecting to the wi-fi there but I want to avoid the lady at front desk at all costs.

I start walking out of the park without the faintest sense of direction. I’m not worried, I’ll find someone at some point and I will ask how to reach the station.

I have plenty of time and even if I lost the train it would be fine. I can stay here in Amsterdam and decide what to do next or stay still and wait for the next event to find me.

My calm has no rational foundation, but I have faith. No matter what will happen next, I will be just fine.

Chapter 22

Crop fields, meadows, cows and houses of a long gone past flowing by in a slow gloomy continuum have plunged me in a half dormant state from which I wonder if I will ever awaken.

As I walk out the train my perceptions are muffled in the grey silence of the station, there's not a soul around, it's summer and yet I am cold in the wet air of this late afternoon. I feel as if I were under a spell, so distant from the past. San Fran, and even Amsterdam, seem more like places I've dreamed about than cities where I've actually been.

I walk out of Sittard's station as if my body did not belong to me, as if it were walking out of its own will. When I exit the door I see the obelisk mentioned in the note.

Obelisk is probably an overstatement for the poor thing in the middle of the tiny square, but my mystery man is there, smoking a cigarette with almost voluptuous pleasure, I can't tell if real or feigned. I stand in front of the door, and he turns towards me for a brief instant, then diverts his eyes and continues smoking. I start to wonder how things are going to play out when he looks at me again and walks away, casually and slowly. I follow him, not too closely, trying to look just as casual as he does. The streets are small, strangely lonely. The stores are closed. There are no cars, no passer-byes. We take some turns and end up in front of a three storey condo, where an old lady is sitting on the balcony. She eyes us with great curiosity, and given the complete stillness of the surroundings I am not surprised.

My man opens a car, completely inconspicuous, and I step in. I buckle up without looking at him. He starts the car without looking at me.

For a while we drive in silence, in places that seem all alike to me. Same small houses, same empty small streets.

Then I ask, "Who are you?"

"I work for them. The people who are after you. I was supposed to follow you and make sure you didn't take any...undesirable action, so to say", he tells me

I ask his name.

"Ronny", he tells me

"Is this your real name?", I ask, not hoping for a real answer

"There's nothing real in my life – or yours", he says

"Ok Ronny, so you work for them. And I've been so stupid to follow you. Seriously, who are you?", I snap

I don't know why I've decided I can talk to this man the way I am doing – I am acting more than thinking. I'm impatient now, I am vulnerable but I don't care.

"I decided I'm not on their side anymore", he tells me

"Who are 'they'?"

Ronny is silent for a moment. I look at him for the first time, I mean really look at him, at the details of his face, at the way he's dressed, at his hands. I realize for the first time that the guy is handsome, or at least likeable, but he hasn't shaved and the lack of sleep has traced dark circles around his eyes.

"You and I are experiments"

"Experiments?", I repeat, unable to understand

"Ever heard about the World Medical Organization?", Ronny asks

"Well yes..."

"In theory the WMO collaborates with research institutes all over the world to find cures for major plagues: AIDS, cancer and so forth. It conducts its own independent research and is funded by the governments of 15 countries all over the globe", Ronny tells me

"So?"

"So in theory the WMO is a respectable, legal organization. It is so well recognized, and so well protected that nobody questions it. I don't know about all their activities, but I know what's happening to us. They are studying our behaviour, we are case studies. They've been monitoring us since we were toddlers, perhaps even before we were born"

I struggle to process the information. Ronny is cruising slowly, and I look out the window. We are surrounded by crops now, and the street is so it can hardly fit a car.

After a pause Ronny continues.

"They've taken me away from my natural parents. My adoptive mother works for the organization. At first I think she simply wanted to study my behaviour, but then she started to perceive me as her son. Regardless of her feelings I am fairly sure I'm still treated as a case study, I am still in the organization's stats. The organization is stronger than the individuals who are part of it, and I doubt my adoptive mother could completely stop the fact that I am being monitored even if she wanted to. She worked to shift my role slightly though, and I got hired to check on other case studies, make statistics, do some sort of mathematical modelling of their behaviour"

This is too much to believe

"I don't know what you're saying", I say

But Ronny just looks at the street and drives.

"I'll bring you to a farm in Belgium. We'll spend the night there. I hope my contact will call me by tomorrow", he tells me

"How did you get to know you were a case study? And how do you know you are not being watched now?", I insist, "And who is your contact?"

"My adoptive mother tried to hide from me the fact I had been adopted. By now she must know that I've learned much too much. I had my microchip removed when I reached Amsterdam", Ronny tells me

I look at him.

"Check if you want. The stitches are covered by a band aid"

"They don't tell us that we've been adopted and they place microchips on our shoulders...", I whisper

So that's what they do with all of us, their test cases.

"Yes, they microchip us and induce us to believe our adoptive parents are our natural ones. The idea is that we shouldn't suspect we have another identity. They want to understand the role of people's genetic patrimony on their behaviour. I suspect they are even trying to create predefined types in vitro, but I can't say for sure. We'll have to find out...I need to find out...", Ronny says, and leaves the sentence in mid-air.

"Ok, one thing at a time. Your mother tried to hide the fact that you had been adopted, because?"

"Because if you suspect your roots are elsewhere you'll try to find them. It's human nature. They want to avoid that. The idea is to disconnect you as much as possible from your cultural background and evaluate how much your genetic patrimony will dominate your behaviour regardless of your life experiences. If your parents are drunkards, will you be a drunkard? If they are successful, will you be successful? How much of what your parents are sticks to you? How much of what your grandparents are sticks to you? Their projects run through multiple generations. They prefer to take brothers and sisters, and twins are even better, it's easier to compare their behaviour and make statistics. But then there are also case studies who are single children"

My veins are throbbing so hard I can hear them.

"You have a twin?", I ask

"No, I don't think so"

"Am I the only one you are supposed to monitor?"

"No"

"And did you tell the other people you monitor what you're telling me?"

“No”

“Why?”

“Because you are different”

“How so?”, I want to know

“I broke into the system because I was interested in a specific person, I wanted to know more about her. And then I found out about myself, and you...”

He pauses for a moment.

“My twin?”, I ask, my heartbeat accelerating further

“No”

“Then what is the connection between this person you were interested in and me?”, I ask

“None”

“So what about this person?”, I insist

“They made her disappear”

My blood freezes

“I don’t get it...how did you get to find me among all case studies? Will I disappear too?”, I ask after a moment

“You and I were in the same folder”, Ronny tells me, leaving the second question unanswered

“Explain”

“The system classified us as potential rebels based on our DNA type and our natural parents history. They knew we would probably not accept what was told to us and find a way to dig further, to question appearances. That’s why I was assigned directly to a person who is a part of the system, a doctor who could monitor me closely. That’s what my adoptive mother is: a doctor at WMO”

“And what about me?”

“The same is true for you. Your adoptive parents also work for the system. Considered you and I are here trying to find a way out, I suppose the system has pretty good predictive tools, I must give them that”

I am so stunned I cannot speak and when we reach the farm few moments later Ronny has to shake me awake from my thoughts for me to realize the car has stopped.

Chapter 23

A mellow light seeps out of the farmhouse's windows, filtered by old fashioned curtains.

"Who's in there?", I ask and all of a sudden the greyness of the sky closes in on us with unexpected heaviness.

The door opens before we ring the bell.

"Right on time", says the man who opened the door with a slight accent I cannot place, and a voice calm and penetrating at once.

He can be about 50, but I am not too sure. Tall and supple, with dark slick hair and charcoal eyes, beard unshaved from two weeks.

"Did the trip go smoothly?", he asks Ronny, and then, addressing me, "I've been expecting you, Iris"

"All went as planned", Ronny replies

I stare at the man a moment longer, trying to define him.

"You must wonder who I am", he says

I nod, without taking my eyes off him.

"I'm Antonio", he tells me and gives me his hand, looking at me just as intensely as I look at him

"Let me get you a cup of tea", he adds after a moment, and disappears into a room I assume is the kitchen

I look around. In a corner there's a stove I've only seen in museums, and that seems the only heating device around here. The place is almost cold now that it's summer, and I wonder how this house could be inhabited during the winter. The paint has puffed in different spots, and yet there's no feeling of shabbiness. There are large beams on the ceiling, who knows how many generations the nodulous wood has seen. Such an old place...

Ronny puts down his bags in a corner and follows Antonio.

"Come", he tells me, swinging himself as he clings onto the kitchen door, and all of a sudden it all feels so homely and familiar, for that one gest I did not expect.

I smile and head to the kitchen, letting myself fall on a chair.

Antonio sets a red mug in front of me, and I automatically cup my hands around it, bending slightly, as I inhale the sweet rose-smelling flavours exuding from tea.

"When you and your sister were kidnapped the relationship between your father and your mother Laura fell apart. Your mother was with you when you were kidnapped and your father could never forgive her

for letting this happen. Your mother blamed the loss on your father, accused him of being absent all the time”, Antonio tells me

I hold on to the cup, as if its warmth could heal me.

“Your father was a businessman, he travelled all the time leaving your mother alone for extended time periods during her pregnancy and when you and your sister were born his presence remained elusive. Your mother felt abandoned. I never understood how she fell in love with your father, the two of them were so different...”, Antonio continues, and then pauses again

There are so many questions burning on my tongue, and yet I don’t speak a word. Antonio’s account is painful to follow, it’s not even what he says but the way he says it, the hesitation in his voice, his expression. I feel that if I interrupted him now he would not be able to continue.

“But then I too am different from your mother, and I loved her. We knew each other since we were born, you know? Our houses were close, in Barcelona...I always felt for her, but she was unobtainable, cheerfully elusive, in part on purpose in part without even noticing. I found her lightness irresistible. But I digress. Laura was an independent woman, but after your birth we became quite close...”, Antonio tells me, and stops again

“You were her lover”, I say

“Yes. I wished you were my kid”, he admits, laying the words plain in front of me

“But I am not”, I reply, suddenly defensive

Antonio smiles sadly.

“I am not trying to lay claims on you”, Antonio replies, his eyes clinging onto mine

Then he bows his head, plunging back in his own personal memories, and continues, “Laura withdrew too when she felt trapped...I suppose she loved your father because of the same reasons that hurt her. It was his elusiveness that charmed her”

“What happened to my father?”, I ask, realizing that at this moment it is him I want to know about the most

“He disappeared and, I am sorry to say, I never cared to investigate where he ended up”, Antonio tells me

I nod.

“I am a journalist and when you and your sister were kidnapped I tried to do what I could to run my own investigations in parallel with the official ones. I discovered...”, he starts, but then his face goes blank, before twisting into a startled expression

I'm about to turn around when a noise, incredibly loud, stops me short. The lights go off and something falls on me. It's awfully heavy, and it hurts, but then...

Chapter 24

I don't know what happened, but the lights are on now. My head still hurts, but overall I am more confused about what happened than in pain.

Antonio is still staring with a blank expression at something behind my back.

"Wilhelm...", he whispers

When I turn around I see my own traits reflected into those of a man of about 50 standing on the door, a revolver in his hand.

"So you never cared to know where I ended up? That was a mistake, Mr. Journalist", he says

Words choke in my throat, and I stare at my father, my heart thumping wildly.

"Come with me, Iris", he tells me, "I will bring you where your mom and sister are"

I get up slowly. I have a skewed perception of my movements, but I move towards my father as he keeps holding his gun towards Ronny and Antonio.

"And you, don't move!", he commands. He's not yelling, but his voice resounds strangely loud in my ears.

"Why are you back just now? Where have you been?", asks Ronny, and his voice is calm.

Right. Where has he been? But instead of answering my father looks at me and says, "Let's go home, Iris".

"How do you know my name?", I ask

"I've never left you baby", he says

"But then why was I not with you?", I insist

"You're with me now, just come with me", he tells me

"You're full of lies", I hear Ronny say, but his voice is somewhat distant

It's strange how I can't really define where it's coming from.

"Where is mom?", I want to know

"I will bring you to her", he repeats

"No! Tell me where she is!", I scream

"Iris...", I hear

This is my sister's voice. I don't see her, but I know it's her who is calling me even though I've never heard her voice before. I turn my head just slightly. The dizziness is overwhelming, I feel I will collapse on the floor at any moment.

"Veronica...", I hear myself say

"Iris...", her voice echoes

"We are together, again. After so long, we are together again", another voice tells me. It's mom.

I hear her sobs, and all of a sudden I break down on the floor, and I gasp, and the pain is in my throat, my ears, my head, so strong I cannot get even get myself to cry.

Finally the tears come, and when somebody picks me up I can no longer see, or hear, or speak, but I am relieved to let the world outside dissolve.

Nothing really matters anymore.

Chapter 25

I open my eyes to a dimly lit ceiling. I'm lying on a bed where I've never been before, and it smells of old fashioned soap, as if I have landed in a long gone past. I turn my head around and I see Antonio sitting on a chair besides me, clasping his head between his hands.

"What happened?", I whisper, my voice an odd sound I hardly recognize

Antonio starts. "Thanks God", he says

I wait for an explanation which doesn't come.

"We have to be very careful now and we couldn't call a doctor, but you...we didn't know what to do...", Antonio tells me

He looks so startled it scares me.

"But I am fine, I promise", I reassure him

"You were talking in your sleep...", Antonio begins

"So nobody knocked me on the head?", I want to know

"No...no, you just passed out for no reason. Probably it's the stress you are going through...but how do you know your father?", Antonio asks me

I look at him blankly, stunned at the question.

"What do you mean, how do I know my father? I don't know my father", I say

"But you were calling his name during your sleep", Antonio insists, and now he is looking at me intensely, as if determined to dig out the truth I am hiding

"I dreamed he was here...it was nothing but make-believe. My father looked like me, he said he had always been with me and other nonsense. So I just passed out like that? I thought someone knocked me on the head", I insist

Does Antonio believe me? I can't get myself to trust him either. Was my father nothing but a dream? But Antonio seems too frightened to lie.

So my father was nothing but a dream. Weighed down as I am on this bed I feel farther from finding Veronica than I've ever been.

"Ronny told me he would bring me here because it's safe. But I don't want to be safe. I want to find my sister. Did he get the phone call he was waiting for from...his contact?", I want to know

"His contact will try to bring your sister here, but we shouldn't rush things", Antonio tells me

"I've waited 24 years, isn't this enough?", I reply angrily

"We will find Veronica, I promise", Antonio almost whispers, taking my hand

I retract it defensively

"So did Ronny's contact call or did he not?", I insist

Antonio is about to say something when I hear a cellphone ring.

Chapter 26

"This cannot be. Your source is mistaken", Ronny replies to whatever is being told to him over the phone
Silence.

"You have a picture", he says, and I can't tell if it's a question or a statement

After a moment he says, "Will do. I am switching on the PC now", and walks somewhere close to my room

I hear him typing on the keyboard.

"What's going on?", I want to know

Antonio flips his palms in a gest of impotence to tell me he doesn't know

I stir in the bed, but Antonio gently pushes me down and brings a finger to his mouth

"No...", I protest, and yet I let myself drop on the pillow, eyes shut

“God...”, I hear from the other room

“What is happening?”, I ask again, without opening my eyes

Antonio gets up, I hear his steps and when I open my eyes he is no longer in the room. He and Ronny are right next door, and everything is silent for a moment.

“This is impossible...Laura had only two girls, Iris and Veronica...but this face...”, Antonio mumbles

My body is a dead weight now. Eyes closed, my body immobile, I picture myself walking out of bed.

Then I focus, I gather my strength.

The touch of the floor on my naked feet sends a shiver through my spine. I stand uncertainly, teeth clutched, my skin cringing into pointy goosebumps. I make my way into the next room, my hands pressed onto the wall to guide my teetering steps.

When I enter the room Ronny and Antonio are mesmerized by the computer screen, they ignore my presence, they ignore the voice resounding from the other end of the line.

“Do you believe me now?”, I hear it speak from a distance

A face looks at me from the screen. Same eyes as mine, same nose, perhaps a slightly different twist of the mouth, a smirk that is foreign to me.

It’s not me, and it’s not Veronica, but it’s as close to us as it can be.

“The picture was taken in New Orleans...”, the voice echoes from the phone

A sudden thunder shatters the sky and the rain breaks, slashing the windows. The light illuminates the face, and twists it into an evil grin.

You’re not alone, I hear it promise me.

Chapter 27

I lean on the door not to fall. The hinges squeak, Ronny and Antonio start at the noise.

“Iris”, Antonio tells me, and I don’t reply

There a pause, the silence of the night is covered by my breath resonating in my ears

“You are Laura’s kid, this I know without doubt”, Antonio says, as if this could somehow extinguish the presence of my duplicates

“What is the foundation of your certainty?”, I ask coolly

“I’ve never left you baby”, he says, as my father did – as whoever was playing the part of my father in my dream did – and I freeze

“Your mother never recovered from what happened to you. About one year after you and your sister disappeared she was diagnosed with cancer. I think she could have fought it, had she not been so desperate...”, he starts and his voice breaks

So my mother is dead. I cannot speak, I wait for him to continue.

“Right before she died she made me promise that I would find you and make sure you’d be fine. From that day I’ve had the mission to...”, he starts

“You’ve found me now, but how can you tell that I am Laura’s daughter? Why me and not the other ones?”, I interrupt him

“She gave me plenty of details...very intimate details that only a mother can know, and I’ve managed to match each one with you”, he explains

Which details?, I wonder.

“Ok, what about Veronica? Is she Laura’s daughter also?”, I ask instead

“That I cannot say...I was sure she was, until...until I saw the picture”, he says, glancing at the face on the screen

“Why did you investigate about me and not about Veronica?”, I insist

Whatever he says I know I won’t be able to trust him, but I still need to hear his answer

“Your mother explicitly wanted me to take care of you, not of Veronica”, he says and I ask why

“I asked her the same question, but I never got an answer. She cared about you, not about Veronica, as if you were her only real daughter. It was like that since the very first moment, the reasons for this have always been unknown me. I sensed she was hiding something, but she was too frail, too confused and in pain for me to push her”, he tells me

“Are you still there?”, I hear a voice ask on Ronny’s phone

The phone is on the table, Ronny’s pulls it up faintly and says, “I’ll call you back”

He grasps his face between his hands.

“You look upset buddy, what’s wrong apart from the fact that everything is a total mess?”, I ask ironically

“I already have Veronica’s DNA. What I need now is her DNA”, he says pointing at the screen

“Ok...”, I reply hesitantly, not knowing where this is going

“I think I understand what’s happening...I suspected it and now my suspicion seems to be right. It’s a nightmare”, he says

He stares at the walls as he talks, not at me.

“What’s happening, Ronny?”, I ask

“We’re taking off for NOLA tomorrow. You’re coming with me”, he tells me

“I want to find Veronica”, I object, collapsing myself into a seated position on the cold floor

“Stop considering Veronica your twin. She’s not”, he says

“What do you mean?”, I ask, my blood freezing, but Ronny sweeps the cell off the desk and walks out the room before I can get an answer.

Chapter 28

Murky ponds of water steam off the asphalt now that the rain is gone, and the multi-coloured variety of NOLA’s humanity permeates the street with its lazy pace. A fat butt sways in front me, a couple passes besides me and she laughs a loud hearty laugh, a lanky guy with a ragged shirt pushes a cart overloaded with carton boxes.

“Based on what my contact knows, Sarah never looked for you, she doesn’t expect to see anyone who resembles her”, Ronny tells me

Sarah is the smirking face I saw on a PC screen in a Dutch farm in a night that feels centuries away.

“Why can’t you tell me what’s happening? Why are there so many people who look like me? You can’t just drag me around like this without giving me a clue”, I protest

“I will tell you in due time, this is not the right moment”, he says

His steps are fast, his statements curt.

I suppose he must have a rationale for keeping me in the dark. And yet I need to know.

“If this is the case our paths are splitting here and now”, I retort, stopping

“This is not the best moment for scenes, come on”, Ronny sighs

“I don’t care what moment it is. It’s a freaking mess all the time anyways”, I say, raising my voice more than I intend

Ronny looks around nervously.

“Ok Iris, I will tell you. Now keep walking”, he says

“When will you tell me?”, I insist

“Now. I will tell you now. Let’s go”, he capitulates

I start walking again, smiling at Ronny innocently. There's a fleck of lightness in my mood, for the briefest instant.

"What I'm about to tell you is no more than an hypothesis for now", Ronny starts

"Tell me about it", I say

"Imagine one initial human being. Imagine selecting 70% of the traits of that human being, and making a new somebody with them – a twin of the original human being. Place these twins in very similar settings, families with the same social status...then make a new set of twins that are genetically similar by, say, 99%, and place them in different families – poor and rich, with alcoholic and caring mothers. The members of which group will be more similar to one another? What counts the most, the social setting or the DNA? To make good stats you need ten, twenty...a hundred twins. You see where I am getting?", he says

I do not want to see, and yet I do.

"So I am a clone", I say with a voice that has the cool feel of metal

"No. I think you are the initial human being, so to say", Ronny replies, studying my expression

I cough out a mirthlessly dry laugh.

"Right", I reply ironically

"I will show you the files. Your twins – or clones how you call them – are not classified the way you are and...", Ronny starts, then hesitates

"And they are after you, you specifically, not anybody else", he concludes

"What about Veronica?"

"Yes, Veronica. She was born from your same mother...", he says, and lets the sentence fade away somewhere in the thick air of NOLA

"Is she my natural twin then?", I ask, and I feel my heart race at the hope that at least one thing that counted for me, that still counts for me, is real – that not all has been manipulated in my life

"I don't think so, sorry...although I guess that her being born from your same mother, having been with you even if for the shortest time makes her somewhat different from the others"

"Yes...", I say

"And yet your mother wanted Antonio to keep an eye on you, not on her", Ronny tells me

"And...", he starts, but then his face goes pale

I turn around and I see him too. Our eyes lock into each other, uncaring of the crowd and the distance. My eyes are the flaming echo of his cool stare.

He knows I know.

And he knows I am in love before I do, because he is my father.

Chapter 29

“Don’t let him have you, Iris”, Ronny says, gripping my wrist

My father throws a disdainful glance at him, before turning towards me.

“We belong to each other, we always have”, he tells me

“It’s hard to believe it after 24 years on my own”, I retort, trying not to surrender

“You don’t have enough elements to understand, but I will tell you everything”, he says persuasively, slowly approaching me

“Stay away from her”, Ronny says slowly, his voice low, as my father keeps moving towards me, seamlessly, his steps slower than Ronny’s words

“Do as he says”, I hear a voice say behind my back

The voice is calm, matter of fact, the way mine sound is when I am most scared. The voice is mine and it isn’t, because of the rounded edges that my skeptical self has abraded off mine.

My father arches his brows just lightly before recomposing himself.

“Back off, Veronica”, he tells her, but she stands immobile pointing a gun at him

“Veronica”, I whisper, the words chocking in my throat

“You don’t know how to use a gun, what are you doing?”, my father continues, now speaking in a patronizing tone

“Perhaps she doesn’t, but I do”, I hear, and it’s Joshua who materializes from behind the corner of a building

“What are you doing here...”, I think or say, I do not know

People have started to take notice of what’s happening, at first nobody had realized but now the guns are drawing attention. I’m sure someone is going to make a phone call and the cops will be here any minute.

I don't want them to come and rescue me. Distorted as it may be, this is the first real family picture I have as an adult: my father trying to abduct me, my twin about to shoot him, me suspended in the middle not knowing who and what I stand for.

"I said back off", Veronica shouts now

And sirens go off at a distance, answering my fears. My father glances in the direction of the sirens.

"I will find you again", he tells me, before walking away with hasty steps.

I stare at the growing distance between us, tears puddling in my eyes. Then, unexpectedly, he turns around to look at me one last time, his eyes troubled, before running off and losing himself in the wild guts of NOLA.

I hate Veronica for spoiling it all for me. I eye her with burning anger, forgetting that she is the one I searched for in the first place.

She returns my stare with a worried glance, pinched between a corrugated pair of brows, and rapidly diverts her eyes from me

"Remember what I told you", she tells Joshua

He nods his assent

"Remember", she repeats, and walks away as my father had done

The sirens fall silent, and I see a policeman step out of his car somewhere at the end of the street, the buzz of the crowd between us

"Come on, let's get going", Ronny says

I shake my head no, but I let him guide me. Joshua is behind us, I believe, but is he?

For a moment I feel utterly lost, but then the realization dawns on me. The author of who I am, the authors of all the things that have happened and are happening now, is my father. I have no rational elements to say so, but I know in an irrational and absolute way. Antonio was wrong. I have not been kidnapped against my father's will, he is the one who planned it all.

Perhaps I am nothing but a scientific creation produced by his cold, beautiful mind. Perhaps he has envisioned each and every single move I will make when subject to a certain impulse. Whatever the truth is, Ronny can only guess at it. He'll never know the reasons behind my father's plan, he can know the appearance of facts, never see the full picture.

I must find my father to understand who I am, even if the answer is that I am hollow, nobody.

Loneliness has never wrapped around me thicker than this, but this feeling of emptiness is electrifying. I am no longer scared and I don't long for human love. I am simply curious about this game, thrilled to discover the pattern of the chessboard on which I am moving.

Tonight I will find a way to get away from Ronny, whatever that will take.

Chapter 30

Ronny has decided that we can't stay in the city anymore, he says it's too risky. I argue with him, I try to get away.

"Get in the car", he says when the argument gets heated, holding me against the car's side, gripping my wrists to the point where it's painful for me to fight.

I don't stand any chance to win now, so I relax, shrug and let Ronny slip me in the front seat of the car. Joshua is already on the back, and squeezes my shoulder – for a brief moment – as I sloppily sit in the position in which Ronny placed me, as if I were a puppet.

I turn around after a moment, and stare at him blankly. I have no clue about why he is there, but my ideas are too blurred for me to process the possibilities.

"Hey, we'll be all right, you know?", he says

I don't and Joshua doesn't either, but still the lie soothes me.

"I need to find my father", I whisper, not knowing if I am talking to myself or him

He nods yes, and then says, "Quiet now"

This is not his usual tone, and I wonder if he has a plan.

I sit without talking and my silence is loaded with constrained tension. But the speed is like a lullaby as we roll along Highway 46, and by the time we reach the swampy grounds around Poydras the landscape is no more than a green blot faintly filtering through my blurred senses.

"So how did you find Veronica?", Ronny's voice startles me awake

"Veronica is the one who found me, I had no clue about her existence", Joshua replies

"So Veronica shows up and knocks at your door, and then she tells you '*we've got to go to NOLA*', just like that?", Ronny asks with a skeptical edge to his voice

"No, she shadows me in a convenience shop and tells me Iris needs me. I have no money, but she does. Our time together was supposed to last longer, but then events precipitated and you know the rest", Joshua replies, returning Ronny's skepticism with an ironic twist in his tone

"So what was your role supposed to be?", Ronny insists

“To come here and gather information, find you two essentially”, Joshua explains

“Sounds like a pretty vague plan. You couldn’t possibly come here with nothing but this information, tell me the rest”, Ronny pushes

Joshua shrugs

“Veronica told you to trust nobody, but we’re on the same side. Do you think I don’t care to know who I am? I am not here for you or Iris, I am here for myself. But we’re a team, and if something happens to you guys we all lose. Understood?”, Ronny says

“Yessir”

“So now, tell me. How did you and Veronica find us?”, Ronny insists

“Veronica and I flew out to Amsterdam. She figured that Iris had been to a certain pub, don’t ask me how. Veronica tried to share as little as possible with me, for safety reasons she said. I wouldn’t have done any of the things I’ve done if she had not looked like Iris. I trust her just because of that”, Joshua says

An infinite tenderness floods me as I hear this, but the pride I feel to be loved this way fogs my eyes with tears

I sense a shift in Ronny’s perception, and I can tell he starts looking at Joshua from a different angle.

“Ok”, he says

“And what did you find out in the pub in Amsterdam?”, he continues after a pause

Joshua is silent for a moment

“A woman dying on the floor, and two guys trying to get information from her. It was night, the pub was closed. It should have been open, but it wasn’t. One could see nothing from the front, but some dim lights hinted at someone’s presence. I would have just left, but Veronica wanted to scratch the surface. She picked the lock on the back door, and we got in”, Joshua said

So someone shot the woman I had met. And she was dead now. I feel uncontrollably sick.

“Stop”, I whisper

Ronny ignores me, I wonder if he even heard me.

“Ronny STOP”, I repeat, loudly now, almost angrily, and when he pulls his car on the side of the street the food of the past two days gushes out painfully, burning my throat, filling my eyes with tears. I empty myself completely and collapse to the ground.

I feel a strange sense of fulfillment as I sit in contact with the dirt, as I drag myself to the base of a tree, grasping the humid grass and the mushy earth. I lose the perception of everything, except of the

primitive connection I feel for the earthy elements around me. I close my eyes, and for a moment I am at peace with myself.

"Here, drink some water", I hear Ronny say

I moan what is supposed to be a no.

Joshua comes closer, I sense his presence. He takes some leaves from the ground and rubs my face clean. Then he opens the bottle, and brings it to my mouth. I drink and unwillingly pull myself up.

"Thank you", I say, balancing myself, longing for past gone instant of ephemeral integrity I lost the moment I stood up

My jeans are wet and muddy now, they stick on me uncomfortably when I buckle up in the back seat.

"And what happened after you found the dead woman in the pub?", Ronny asks after steering the car back on the road

Ronny's lack of reaction when he learns about the dead woman in the pub makes me think he already knew about her. What else does he know? He is simply testing Joshua?

"Veronica tracked down Iris father and we found you through him. He left hints around, Veronica wasn't even sure it wasn't a trap. She loathes the man, but she respects his slyness and she knew that the hints were not a mistake. They had been left there for her to find them. She couldn't figure out his plan, she was scared. But then she decided to risk it, and I followed her to NOLA", Joshua says

"My father? Is my father not Veronica's father?", I really need to know

Joshua doesn't reply immediately, his silence draws me in like a black hole.

"Not in the same way", he says at last

"What do you mean?", I insist

"I don't know for sure. Veronica has her hypothesis about this, but...", Joshua starts and pauses

"Come on, tell me"

"You are your father's natural child, but Veronica is not. She has been engineered. Your father analyzed the characteristics of the seed from which you are born, and modified a second seed to be identical to it. He recreated your mother's ovule and produced an artificial womb, which hosted Veronica till the day you were born. You and Veronica were supposed to be identical, but you weren't. That was the first test", Joshua tells me

"And what is the second test?", I ask, my mouth dry

"Veronica #2, grown in an artificial womb, truly identical to Veronica but assigned to a different mother from day one", Joshua tells me

“Is there a third test?”

“I don’t know...”, Joshua tells me

“Of course there is. What is the third test, Ronny?”

“As I told you, the idea is to produce as many of you as possible with slight variations, to make a statistical analysis of the factors that count”, Ronny tells me

“So you told me, yes”, I reply drily

I bow my head, closing my eyes.

“What the...”, Ronny mumbles, as Joshua unbuckles and grasps my hand before I understand what is happening

I look up and there’s a truck blocking the road.

Chapter 31

It wasn’t there before, and it must have come out of a side street intersecting the road on which we are driving.

When we approach the truck doesn’t bulge. I know it’s not sitting there by chance.

Ronny growls a cascade of curses, he tries to turn the car. He manages to, he pushes hard on the gas and I almost think we’ll make it to get away when something pierces our window. Ronny’s head falls on the horn, our car races, the horn honking wildly as if the dead driver were running for his life. But then the car slows down gradually and finally comes to a halt, as if someone had suddenly taken control of it.

I am frozen on my seat.

A man with a baladava approaches us. This is it, I think.

But the man says, “We won’t hurt him”, taking Joshua by the arm and guiding him out of the car. I don’t see where they are bringing him, I don’t have the guts to look.

My thoughts are braced by fear. The plan is not to kill me – I sense it – at least not now. Not till the experiment is over. What if I killed myself? Would they let me?

But I am curious to know what’s in store for me, and for the briefest instant I find myself actually smiling. The remnants of the smile are still flickering on my lips when my car door opens.

“Hi Iris. How have you been?”, says Stephanie, her expression radiant, her voice emanating friendly confidence, as her well-groomed hands grip the car’s door.

Chapter 32

Stephanie's smile is undeterred as I stare at her without being able to produce a single sound.

"Come, I have something in store for you", she says, the positive timbre in her voice completely out of context

I am as roped down onto my seat, and I keep staring at her, motionless. I'm no longer scared and I'm not thinking, it is as if I've been knocked down so hard I can't feel or understand external inputs

"We don't intend to hurt anyone, you can trust me", she insists

The statement is hypocrite enough to shake me out of the hebetude. I look at Ronny's collapsed body, then turn my head back to Stephanie.

"Really. I'm sure I can trust you", I reply, dropping the words with slow irony

"He's not dead", Stephanie says, pointing at Ronny

I bug my eyes, I don't understand. I step out of the car and go to the driver's side. Stephanie just stands there, observing me. I am afraid to touch Ronny, but then I brush his arm just slightly. He doesn't move.

Of course he doesn't. What game are they playing with me?

"Cut it off!", I scream

"Use your intelligence, Iris. You know what I am talking about", Stephanie says, her voice calm but the smile blanked out from her face

I observe Stephanie, trying to grasp her meaning.

"Come with me and you'll understand", she says

"I don't have a choice anyways, so why put up this show?", I snap

"Things are much more complex than you imagine them. We're not simply amusing ourselves with you", Stephanie tells me

"You have a higher purpose, of course. I suggest that you become part of...of the experiment, how you call it, for the sake of your higher purpose. Sure, let's go, I don't want to take time away from the cause", I say, feeling abraded and abrasive

But I also want to know what lies beyond my imagination.

"I mean it, show me the things I need to understand", I say, my eyes defiantly transfixed into Stephanie's

"Come", she repeats, touching my hand ever so lightly

And a buzzing drizzle runs through me. It's settle and strong at once, it fills me completely. The light is blinding, I close my eyes but it filters through my eyelids and draws me in.

For an instant I am aware that there's a mask on my face.

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. I can hear myself doing so.

"Good, relax now", I hear Stephanie say

My eyes are wide open, and I am peaceful.

Chapter 33

I am sitting in a white room, facing my father. There are five items in the room: a table, the two chairs on which we are sitting and two books.

My father's eyes are locked on me so tight I can barely move mine around to make contact with the space in which I've just awakened.

"Do you understand now?", he says

"The logic of your experiment?", I ask

"Everything", he replies

When I hesitate he adds, "You may start from your understanding of the logic of this experiment"

The tone is that of a seemingly patient teacher whose patience you do not want to test.

"You wanted to understand yourself, but I know you've failed", I say, the bluntness of the words coming from a part of me that escapes my own control

"How do you know?", he asks

Father flinches, ever so slightly, and I can sense the shift in the mood. His presence is still dominating, but what I say counts for something.

My eyes take the freedom to landscape the empty room, and they pause on the books.

"What are those books about?", I want to know

"Which of the two?", he replies

"The top one", I say

Unexpectedly, he hands it to me, sliding it across the table.

I open it. My past is chapter one.

There's me, looking like an eerie wrinkled creature covered in blood, screaming my lungs off as a nurse holds me for my mother to see me.

There's me again, and my mother, and Veronica. My doned twin smiles and I smile, and we look like the happy family I've never had, as mother points to a lizard in a park in Barcelona. Gaudi's work, I know by now.

"Where's my mother?"

"She's dead, Antonio told you", my father says

"Is Antonio real?"

"Of course he is. A regular man with regular feelings. Don't worry about him", father says

I breathe in, I breathe out, and my worries are gone with the whiff of deoxygenated air I've puffed out.

Another picture. There's a relic of me, heartbroken, confounded, hiding in the attic of a perfect house, the house where I grew up and from which I've escaped. I look like a rag among the piled boxes, so helpless.

There's me holding hands with Joshua, smiling, and there's me walking alone in the streets of Frisco, an angry kid chewing one candy after the next while trying to hide in a black hoodie.

For a moment I want to cry, but the next moment I feel nothing – absolutely nothing – and I flip the pages to Chapter 2.

There's Veronica, so joyful in each shot, so hopeful and trustful, until picture 2500. Then things change. The woman from the bar is there, the one that has been shot down, and she's talking with Veronica. A frown and disbelief on Veronica's face. Veronica and the other woman in front of a PC screen, father's face on it.

"You sent the woman there", I state, my eyes so tight on my father he can't avert his

"Of course. Veronica is your good side and I wanted to assess if it could be poisoned, if given the circumstances the best part of you could be corrupted", he tells me, his tone assertive

"How could you doubt it would be corrupted", I retort, "It couldn't avoid corrupting itself at the same moment it was trying to preserve itself. It had to become aggressively dominating to survive, and in doing so it lost its integrity"

My father nods

"There is no need to test the obvious, you know?", I retort angrily

My father doesn't reply

“You tested what was obvious and then you couldn’t stop the barista when she took the initiative to talk to me and screw up your plans”, I insist

“She paid for that”, he replies calmly

I eye him coolly, before returning to the book.

Chapter 3 is Sarah, the smirk on her face alternating with a blank stare. Don’t ask me why, but I feel for her more than I do for Veronica, and father notices.

“Do you have a weak spot for fallen angles, darling?”, father says, smiling indulgently

I don’t reply, and flip the pages to chapter 4.

The images are blurry. A moment I seem to capture the face, the body features, the next moment they seem changed. I think I recognize Ronny, but do I?

“Is this a prank or did you just accidentally hire a bad photographer?”, I snap, unnerved

My father looks at me with a suspended gaze, as if he, and not I, had asked a question.

And the question comes after a pause

“Do you understand now?”, father says

“Do you?”, I ask in return

He slides the second book across the table. I open it from the last page.

The whiteness of the room is reflected on it with frightening clarity.

I flip the pages, one after the other, and all I encounter is an empty landscape. But that emptiness is exhilarating, it fills me with a plenitude I thought was no longer possible.

I raise my eyes towards my father, and there is love, violence and undeniable will in my gaze.

He tilts his head slightly, frowning with irony, as my mouth twists in a provocative smile.

“Of course”, I reply to his unspoken comment, producing a pen from my pocket

I flip the first page.

“The missing link”, the title goes