



LUISA

31 December

1

On New Year's Eve, under the influence of a triple Lumumba, Erhard decides to find a new girlfriend. New is probably not the right word. She doesn't need to be new or attractive or sweet or fun. Just a warm body. Just one of those kinds of women who potters about the house. Maybe she'll hum a song or curse at him because he's spilled cocoa on the floor. What can he ask of her? Not much. And what does he have to offer her? Not much. But it won't get any easier. In a few years she'll also need to empty his piss pot and shave him and pull off his shoes after an entire day in the car – if he can still drive, that is. In a few years.

The mountainside near the house is invisible; the darkness is complete. If he sits still long enough, he'll suddenly be able to see the stars. And if he sits even longer than that, he'll see a narrow band of shooting stars growing brighter and brighter. The silence grows, if one can put it that way. Grows like the sound of nothingness drowning out the heat of the day still whining in the rocks, and the wind's relentless C major, and the beat of the waves lashing against the coast, and the blood that's seeping through his body. A silence that makes him want to weep into the New Year. A silence that's so convincing, so satiating, that it blends with the night and his wide-open eyes which feel closed. This is what he loves about living out here. Out here where no one ever comes.



The Hermit

Just him. And Laurel and Hardy. And here come the stars. They've always been there, but now he can see them. First all the specks, then all the constellations and Orion's Belt and the galaxy like an old-fashioned punch card with messages from the Big Bang.

It's been seventeen years and nine months since the last time. He smells Beatriz's perfume, which practically clings to his shirt right where she'd touched him this afternoon as they parted. She suggested that he come along tonight. A half-hearted attempt, if even that. I've got plans, he'd said tartly, the way only an old man can. C'mon, she'd tried again, sweetly. No thanks, those people are too fancy for me. Which they were. She didn't say anything to that. Instead Raúl said: You are one of the finest people I know. But nothing more was said about it, and when they began arranging the champagne flutes, he gave Beatriz a Happy New Year's kiss and left. Raúl walked him out. *Buen viaje*, Erhard said, when they stood among the distinctive throng on the street. From the opposite pavement, the suitcase salesman, Silón, shouted Happy New Year! to them, though mostly to Raúl, whom everyone knows. Erhard headed to his car, feeling the same pang that struck him every New Year's Eve. Another year gone like all the rest, another year looming.

Cheers, my friend. It's good with cognac. It burns all the way down. The night is warm. His body is tingling hot now. Maybe because he's thinking of Beatriz, her dark place, right where her breasts part and vanish into her blouse, the very source of her aroma. Damn. He tries not to think about her. She's not the one he should be spending his time on.

The hairdresser's daughter. He can think about her. There's something about her.

He's never met her. He has seen her once, at a distance. He's often seen her image on the wall in the salon. He thinks about her. He thinks about simple events. Little scenes where she walks into the salon, the bell above the door chiming. He imagines her sitting across from him at the dinner table when he eats. Or standing in the kitchen, his kitchen, preparing steaming, sizzling food on the stove. In truth she's much too young, absorbed in things he doesn't understand. She's not exactly his type. What could he possibly say to impress a young woman? She



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probably doesn't even cook. She'd probably rather talk to her friends on the telephone, like all young people do. Maybe she eats noodles out of a small box while staring at her computer screen. In the image at the salon she's a teenager and the very picture of innocence, with thick curls and big, masculine glasses. Not beautiful, but unforgettable. She's got to be at least thirty now and apparently both sweet and quick-witted, according to her mother, whom he obviously doesn't trust. That time he'd spotted her down the street, he recognized her light, curly hair. She crossed the street with her back ramrod straight, a purse slung over her shoulder like a real woman, and she spurted forward running when a car raced towards her. She wasn't elegant, she was even a little clumsy. He doesn't know why he thinks about her so much. Maybe it's just the island eating its way into him. The whistling of the wind around the rocks and corners. Like a note of loneliness continuously rising from a piano.

It's Petra's fault. Her unnaturally high-pitched voice that pacifies her clients in the chair and rules out talk and counterarguments and reasonable thoughts as one thumbs through a magazine or reads an article about the island's football team. She has this firmness about her. For her, love is something to be squeezed out of others. She talks non-stop about the daughter, clawing at Erhard's scalp with her long nails as she tells him that she's moved to an apartment, that she's bought a little scooter, that she's got a new client, that she's broken things off with her boyfriend, that she – not the daughter – would like grandchildren, and so on. And then a few months ago she suddenly said: If only my daughter found someone like you. That's what she said as she stood gazing at him in the mirror. And afterward: She's not like most girls, but neither are you. They'd chuckled at that. Petra mostly.

Erhard had been completely alarmed at the suggestion. She couldn't just say something like that. Wave her daughter under his nose. Did that mean she wanted him to ask her daughter out? Didn't Petra know what they called him about town? Hadn't Petra noticed that he was missing a finger? And what about the age difference? Didn't Petra consider that? They are separated by at least thirty years; he's the same age as her mother, older even. But the symmetry appeals to him. Generations



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reaching back and pulling the next generation forward, Escher's drawings of the artist's hand sketching itself. Five fingers on one hand and five fingers on the other. Five + five.

If only my daughter found someone like you, she'd said. Someone like him.

Not him, but someone like him.

What was that all about? Was she saying there were many like him out there? Carbon copies of men who've done the same things over and over for nearly a generation, without deviation, without asking questions, someone like him, gas from the asshole of the earth, here today and gone tomorrow with only the memory of the stench remaining.

Down in the city it sounds like fireworks booming.

Maybe he should just do it now? Drive over there and invite her out? Right now? Then it'd be over with. He knows it's the Lumumba talking. He knows that his courage won't last more than two hours. Then reality will come crawling back. It's quarter past ten. Perhaps she's having dinner somewhere with all sorts of young men who know all sorts of things about computers. But what if she's sitting at home just like him – watching the terrible show they broadcast on TV every year. Her mother has told him multiple times where her flat is. It's in one of the new buildings on Calle Palangre. Right above the children's-wear shop. It couldn't hurt just to see whether she's home. Maybe he can see if there's a light on in the flat, or if there's a light from the television glowing in the darkness.

He braces himself against the wall of his house and finds a pair of stiff trousers on the clothesline, then jams his feet through the holes. The goats run off somewhere in the darkness.

2

He drives along Alejandro's Trail into the city.

He shouldn't drive on that track; it ruins the car. He's already had the axles repaired twice, and each time the mechanic, Anphil, warned



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him. You don't drive down the north road, do you? Or Alejandro's Trail? The car can't handle it. You'll have to get a Montero or one of the new Merceros; they can handle it, not this car. But Erhard doesn't want a Montero, and he doesn't have the money for a new Mercedes. Even if he had the money, he would keep his Mercedes from Morocco with its yellow seats and choppy acceleration. All the same, he takes Alejandro's Trail. Drives past Olivia's old house where the surfers have moved in with their boards lying on the roof, and in the darkness he can see their flags: a pair of pink knickers hanging from the end of a long stick that's jutting from the cabin. Two guys and their friends live there. Sometimes when he passes by, in the morning, they're sitting outside, smoking tobacco from large pipes; they wave at him, laughing hysterically. Whenever he stops the car, they're high as poisoned goats and unable to rise from their inflatable chairs. But there's no one home now, and the lights are out. They're probably on the beach or downtown.

He approaches the bend that hugs the coast, a fantastic bend – especially with Lumumba up to his Adam's apple and cheap cognac in every finger joint. It's a pebbly, potholey road, and the entire car vibrates. Swerving when he reaches 70 mph, he feels a tickling sensation that makes him grin. He breaks wind, too, which isn't as funny; he just can't help himself. He's had the problem the last few years. If he squeezes his stomach muscles even a little, a pocket of air lurches through his gut and into his underwear; it's both painful and liberating. From there the trail runs downhill, and he hits the final curve. Through the headlights he sees a goat standing in the centre of the road, and he veers around it before glancing in the rearview mirror; it looks like Hardy, but it can't be him, not here, not this far from the house. The goat has already disappeared in the darkness.

He's so preoccupied that he doesn't see the car driving towards him until it passes on the much-too-narrow road. Mostly it's just sound, a dry whooom. A metallic shadow along the car. The side mirror gets knocked flat against the glass.

– Goddamn amateurs! he shouts, to his surprise, in Danish. He apparently hasn't forgotten how to curse. He continues around the curve, the



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other car is out of sight, the red tail-lights vanished in the night. There's no point even stopping to inspect the damage. He rolls his window down and fixes his mirror. The glass has splintered into tributaries pointing downward in eight fine lines.

A black Montero. No doubt it was the gadabout Bill Haji, who lives up the road at a ranchlike villa with horses; he's known for taking Alejandro's Trail fast and furious, as if the sea was ablaze behind him. Erhard's heart should be sitting in his throat right now, but instead it's right where it's supposed to be, numbed by the Lumumba and agitated by the prospect of meeting the hairdresser's daughter.

He drives off the trail and into Corralejo. The heat rises from the asphalt. Young people in small cars honk and sing. He heads down the Avenida towards the harbour, then parks in Calle Palangre. He dumps the car when he finds a vacant spot.

He plans to walk to the hairdresser's daughter's place. He wants to knock on her door. He's already red-faced and embarrassed by the look she will give him when he's standing at her door. *Good evening*, he will say, and *Happy New Year*. He's seen her before. *I've seen you in the photograph at your mother's salon*. What if she's wearing one of those summer dresses with the lazy straps that are always falling to the side? Who gives a shit if she wears glasses? He's not picky.

But when he reaches the clothing shop and glances up at the flats above, he sees that the lights are off. On every storey of the building. She's probably watching TV. Drinking white wine and hoping someone will stop by. He needs to fortify himself with a drink. Something really strong. Just something to get his voice box going. It'll do him no good just standing there staring like some idiotic *extranjero*. He walks up the street and down Via Ropia. Towards Centro Atlantico. It's always buzzing there, mostly with tourists, people he doesn't know. He walks into Flicks and goes directly to the bar. He orders a Rusty Nail, and even buys a round for the two gentlemen in the corner. They're olive farmers out prowling for women and unaccustomed to city life, huddled close like mice behind a palm tree. They are practically invisible.



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Eighteen minutes to go. On the back wall of the bar the TV's showing images from Times Square, fireworks over Sydney Harbour, Big Ben's long hands approaching XII. The bartender shouts *Are you ready for the new year?* It sounds so promising, so simple. As if one leaves behind all the old, bringing only the new into the new year. But new means nothing to him. He's not new. He doesn't need new. He doesn't want new. He just wants the old to behave properly. Seventeen minutes. He can still ring the doorbell and wish her a Happy New Year. Maybe she's wearing a negligee or whatever it's called. She's been sitting there drinking white wine and watching reruns of *7 Vidas*, which everyone loves. Her hair is wet, she's taken a cool bath.

A crowd of people moves to exit onto the street. He's nearly pushed off his stool. He pays with a bill and remembers why he doesn't frequent tourist traps: it costs more than twenty euros for whisky and Drambuie. He follows the throng out and starts back towards Calle Palangre. He crosses the street and enters her building. It was built during the Franco years, and the stairwell is simple and cobalt-blue. On the first floor he reads the names on each of the three doors. Loud music is blaring inside, but there's no Louisa or L.

He walks up another flight. A couple stands kissing beneath the artificial light of the stairwell, but when he passes them they stop, shamefaced, and head down the stairs.

As he stands catching his breath a moment, he looks at the nameplates, then continues to the top floor. Three floors with doors equals nine doors.

On the third floor live one Federico Javier Panôs and one Sobrino. And in the centre, Luisa Muelas. The sign on her door is large and inlaid with gold, her name etched in thick, cursive letters. No doubt a gift from Petra and her husband. It's one of those traditional items parents give their children whenever they, as thirty-year-olds, move out of their childhood home.



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It seems quiet behind each of the doors. He puts his ear against Luisa Muelas's and almost wishes her not to be home. But there's a faint noise inside – clatters, creaks, mumbles – but perhaps it's just the TV.

He straightens up and raps his good hand, the right, against the flat chunk of wood above the peephole. It's four minutes to midnight. Maybe his knocks will fade into the raucous noise of New Year's Eve.

Suddenly he sees a face in the nameplate.

The face is indistinct. A pleading, confused face dominated by two eyes wedged between a stack of wrinkles and shabby skin, topped off with a tired beard. A desperate face. In it he can see love and sorrow, he can see decades of bewilderment and alcohol, and he can see the cynical observer, appraising and judgemental. It's an appallingly wretched face, difficult to penetrate, difficult to stomach, difficult to love. But worst of all it's his face. As seen only from the rearview mirror of his car, or in the distorted mirrors above the chipped sinks of public toilets, or in shop windows, but preferably not at all. There's only one thing to ask that face.

What have you got to offer?

In reality there's nothing more frightening than this. The encounter. The moment in a life when one takes a risk. When one says, *I want you*. The moment when chance ceases, when one makes a stand and asks another to accept. The moment when two soap bubbles burst the reflection, merging into one. It doesn't happen during a kiss, or during sex, and not even when one person loves another. It's in the terrifying second when one dares to make a mad claim that one has something to offer another by one's very presence.

He hears sounds behind the door now. Like stockinged feet.

– I'm coming, a soft voice says.

It's two minutes to twelve.

He can't do it, he just can't. He leans over the stairwell and starts down. Down, down. He hears the door opening on the top floor. *Hello?* the voice says. Past the doors with loud music and outside. Onto the street. He hobbles along the wall like a rat, then cuts across the street to his car. Calle Palangre is filled with people now. There's a group of



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cigar-smoking men standing beside his car, and girls astride scooters, champagne flutes in their hands.

Voices call out from the flats above. He fumbles his way into his car and wriggles it free of its parking spot. Following the one-way street, he parts the throng. A group wants to catch a ride, not seeing that his sign is turned off, but he's not interested. He pays no mind to their hands on his windscreen or their pleading eyes. Happy New Year, asshole!, a young girl wearing a silver-covered bowler shouts at him.

He drives away from the city's light and into darkness. The grey road ends and becomes a pale track. He presses down hard on the old Mercedes' creaky gas pedal. Gravel plinks against the undercarriage.

The image of the hairdresser's daughter opening the door returns to mock him. Now in socks – hair ruffled and a little glass of whisky in her hand. A fantasy only a horny man can imagine. That's something he hates about growing old. Going from the physicality of a youth lacking spirit to pure spirit lacking physicality. To the point where the best moments are comprised of thoughts, of conceptions of the future, of reminders from way back when. For almost eighteen years he's imagined intimacy with a woman. Imagined it. Even when he was with Annette, he imagined it. Back then it had just had a more concrete means of expression, back then it resembled intimacy with everyone else but her, right up until he was no longer near her.

His feet shift from the gas pedal to the brake. In the centre of his headlights' bright yellow cone he sees a giant object lying in the middle of the road.



THE LITTLE FINGER

1 January–3 January

4

At first he thinks it's a fallen satellite, then he sees that it's a car, an overturned car.

It's a bloody Montero, a black Montero like Bill Haji's.

It is Bill Haji's.

It's four or five hundred metres from the spot where they'd passed one another, but how long ago was that? An hour? He can't make any sense of time. Maybe the Rusty Nail went to his head after all.

He cuts his engine but leaves the headlights on, so he can see the car. He hears the ocean and the soft hum of the Montero's motor. The dust settles.

He's about to turn on his CB radio and contact dispatch; it's the best he can do. Then he hears some rapping sounds, as if someone's trying to communicate or get free. He gets out of his car. He calls Bill's name. He calls as though they know each other. Bill Haji. They hardly know each other. Everyone knows Bill Haji. A colourful, obnoxious person. Never at rest, always on his way to or fro. Erhard has driven him a few times. The first time was to the hospital. And after that – upon request: a couple of trips to the airport and home to Haji's villa some miles away. Haji arrived from Madrid with four or five suitcases and a young man who seemed tired. They were the same suitcases both times, but not the same guy. Erhard didn't care about the rumours, or how Haji lived



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his life. One shouldn't get involved in that kind of thing. As long as the boys are over eighteen and have made their own choices.

– Bill Haji, he repeats.

The car is smashed up. It must have rolled a good distance. Stupid Montero. No better than Japanese cardboard. There's a long trail of glass. Which suggests to him that the vehicle skidded along the road. He calls again as he walks around the car and peers through what might have been the windshield, but is probably a side window. There's no one inside. Neither Bill nor any of his boys. Erhard breathes easier. Even though he doesn't much care for Bill Haji, he feared seeing him mashed between the steering wheel and the seat like a blood-gorged tick. The vehicle is empty; one of the doors is open, hanging from its hinge. Maybe he's gone after help or was picked up by his sister, who's always close by Bill Haji, whenever he sees him downtown or at La Marquesina. He bends forward and touches the car. It's still warm.

For a moment the darkness and the car fade away, and the entire sky is lit up in shades of green and cyan and magenta, and it's as if hundreds of eyes are looking back at him.

5

The sky above explodes. Erhard stares across the vehicle. More booms follow in choppy rhythm, streaks and flashes of light. At first he thinks that they're emergency lights from a ship. Then he remembers that it's New Year's Eve and he spots the stream of fireworks down in the city. When his eyes adjust to the darkness again, he sees something moving right in front of him.

Sitting on top of what was once the car's exhaust is a dog.

Two dogs.

They're watching him like cute puppies heading out for a walk. They're wild dogs. No one knows where they come from. Maybe from Corralejo seven miles away. Whether they are sitting there or running



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along the edges of cliffs in the moonlight, they're handsome animals. In the daylight they appear emaciated and beaten, like old blankets. They're a plague to anyone who raises sheep and goats, and among bored young men they've become something one shoots as target practice from the bed of a lorry. And yet somehow there are more of them than ever. Erhard guesses that ten or fifteen of them are out there in the darkness. Maybe Bill Haji hit one of them, maybe that's why he crashed. One of the dogs is drooling. Erhard stares through its forelegs.

Even though most of his face is gone, he can still recognize Bill Haji's remains. There's nothing left to save. Maybe he was dead before the dogs got to him. His famous sideburns look like rabbit fur turned inside out.

Then he sees it.

6

It's lying right behind the left front wheel, in darkness. He only sees it because it sparkles a little each time the fireworks explode in the sky. At first he's not sure what it is. There's heat in the reflection, an amber radiance. He guesses that it's some copper or something embossed in gold, perhaps part of a pair of sunglasses or a cord sliced in half. For a moment he wonders if it's a gold filling, then he sees the fingernail and the small folds around the joint. He notices that the broad ring is surrounded by flesh.

It's Bill Haji's engagement ring. On Bill Haji's ring finger. Ten minus one.

He doesn't want to go around the vehicle, so he reaches for it; he doesn't even know if he can reach it. It's only a metre or two away from him on the other side of the car. He stretches across the undercarriage, but the two dogs glance up from their dinner. One bares its teeth and repositions its front paws, ready to spring. Erhard might be able to snatch the finger, but not without having a dog stuck to his arm.



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He walks slowly back to his own car and snaps on the high beams. He blinks the lights on and off a few times until the dogs glower at him in irritation. Then he lays his hand against the centre of the wheel and puts all his weight into it. The car emits a few shrill honks that most wouldn't believe belonged to a Mercedes. He presses the horn until the two dogs on the other car hop sluggishly down like junkies and slink off a few metres into the darkness.

He hurries to the Montero by the glow of his high beams. As fast as he can. It has been several months, maybe years, since he last ran. Although it's only a few metres, it feels like forever. As if the dogs have already seen him and are moving towards the vehicle again. As if his legs are unreliable and can't carry him all the way there and back again in a single evening. He doesn't get as close to the car as he wishes but leans across the overturned Montero to reach for the ring. A mere half-metre away.

He's splayed out just opposite what remains of Bill Haji's head and face, gazing through a red-blue clot at open but extinguished eyes.

Find the boy.

The sentence emerges so loud and clear through the noise of the fireworks that, for a moment, Erhard thinks it's coming from the radio that's still playing. Or maybe one of the dogs, as far as he fucking knows, is suddenly talking. He stares into Bill Haji's eyes and it's almost as if the voice is coming from them, from the dark circles slowly glossing over in death. He's heard the voice before. It's a voice he recognizes. Maybe it's Bill Haji's. Maybe it's just something he said out loud, for God knows what reason. He can't even remember what he said, only that the words were pleading.

Then he sees the finger again and hoists himself forward. The undercarriage is still warm. Not hot, but warm like a rock. The fireworks die out, the final salute blasting above the coast, a green network that sprays silver. Silence follows. Not quite silence. The engine groans. And the dogs' plaintive yips have become a supersonic whine, which must be the sound they make right before they turn vicious. Something rustles just below the car. Erhard crawls forward on his



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belly, stretches his arm, and clutches the finger. It's cold. Bristly. And incredible.

Nine + one, he thinks.

7

Erhard runs back to his car and hurls himself into the front seat, then slams the door. Since he discovered the overturned car, he's felt perfectly sober, almost hung-over, and now his drunkenness returns with a snap. Not only the dizzying sensation, but also a bizarre elation, a joy.

It's as if his eyes, body, and mind are doing short-circuited mathematics. With his own nine fingers and Bill Haji's one that makes ten fingers. It stirs a pleasure all the way down in his belly, hell, down in his cock – as if having a new finger in his possession has strengthened his libido. He knows that it's wrong, knows he's imaging it, but even though it's not his finger, the sum total of fingers makes him whole in a way he's not felt in a long time. In the same way that losing his finger eighteen years before represented a repulsion, a conscious subtraction, this finger returns his balance to him.

He tosses his socks and plops in bed with a buzzing head. The generator has run dry, because he forgot to turn it off when he left. Tomorrow, tomorrow he'll have a look at it. Although the night is quiet, when the wind shifts direction it sounds like dogs snarling.

If they eat him there will be nothing to bury. If there's nothing to bury, he's not dead. Bill Haji's sister is one hard woman who looks like a man. She'll have to say her goodbyes to an empty coffin.

The finger on a hand, Bill Haji's hand, which once hailed Erhard on the high street. His boyfriend was sick. Bill Haji caressed him all the way to the hospital. What Erhard recalls most of all was the scent of watermelon and the stack of 500-euro notes Bill Haji wanted to pay



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with. To make change, Erhard had to run inside a kiosk. The finger. Bill Haji's hand. Bill Haji's sideburns. The most Irish thing about the man.

He fumbles in the dark of his bedroom to find the telephone. *There's been an accident. Hurry*, he says. It's like leaving a message. He gives the address, trying to alter his voice so that he sounds more Spanish. *Los perros se lo han comido*. The dogs have eaten him. The man on the other end of the line doesn't quite understand.

– Your name? May I ask who is calling?

A long silence. Erhard wants to hang up, but he can't find the off button in the dark. He runs his hand up the twisted cord until he locates it.

– Hello, the man says.

Erhard hangs up. Once again, the house is shockingly quiet. All that remains is the wind swooshing across the rocks. The new year has already come to the islands. The finger is tucked underneath his pillow like a lucky coin.

8

On Tuesday, he rises early and goes for a drive before reporting to dispatch and picking up his first fares. His first trip is always down to Alapaqa, the fisherman's village, where the seagulls scream and you can get the best coffee on the island. Aristide and his wife Miza brew it themselves, grinding it with Miza's father's old Arabic grinder, which covers the length of a desk. The sweet coffee is practically purple. The island's best. Even though he can't say that he's tried every place that offers coffee, he's probably tried most of them.

– You look chipper today, Erhard, Miza says. Erhard gives her cousin a terse hello. She's staying with Miza temporarily and enters the cafe in her bare feet. She's a motorcycle-girl with a filthy mouth. He doesn't care for that, but he likes her hair. When she's standing with her back to him, he can see it. Dark and long, all the way to her thighs. As Erhard drinks his coffee, the cousin talks about a bodybuilder called Stefano. Not a



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nice guy, Erhard would say if she asked, but she doesn't. She doesn't ask anything. Instead she prattles on about the bodybuilder's chicken brain and a TV he smashed and all the money he spent on some skanky bitches at a bar in Puerto. Miza cleans the cafe while listening, giving Erhard a glance. Maybe women aren't always worth it, her glance says.

Maybe men aren't, either.

There's also a shower at Miza's that he uses. It's in a small shed where the fishermen clean and dry large fish. Through the years it has become a kind of public shower for surfers, fishermen, and one particular taxi driver who doesn't have his own. On a good day there won't be any fish hanging in the room. Today a huge swordfish dangles from a hook jammed in its mouth.

9

He hauls in a meagre 120 euros. He falls into a good rhythm, with customers turning up just as quickly as he drops them off. He keeps the finger in his pocket, not daring to remove it. He's tried to slide the ring off, but it's stuck, wedged all the way to the bone. Bill Haji wasn't fat, but his finger is either swollen or so fleshy that the ring's now tight. He imagines a young Bill putting it on. When the finger has dried a bit, maybe he'll be able to pry the ring free. As long as the finger doesn't snap in two or crumble like dry clay.

After siesta he heads down to Villaverde. He parks on a quiet road behind the Aritzas' white mansion. Each year, always a few days after New Year, the Aritzas host visitors from the mainland, and their little niece Ainhoa plays Gershwin's 'Concerto in F'.

He arrives half an hour early and tunes the piano while the women drink champagne on the terrace and the men stare into the Steinway, offering commentary. Not to Erhard, but to each other. André Aritza is a friendly man in his late forties with unusually thick glasses. Ever since Erhard blurted out that he knows nothing about computers, nor