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"Sometimes, There's Love"

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Sometimes, There’s Love

“It is better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring.”

-Carl Sagan,
The Demon-Haunted World: "The Most Precious Thing" (1995)

I

That summer I broke my father’s heart. On the beach, girls my age started to appear, sunbathing over colorful towels. They shied me away of the traditions my father and I repeated on every beach trip. The girls were like the beautiful shells my father and I used to collect every morning, when I was a kid. But that was before, now times had changed. I decided I had enough, and that I would not play volleyball with mom and my brothers, nor accompany collecting shells. Later I realized that I missed the collecting part. He probably missed it too, the whole ritual of waking me up at the early morning so we could go and search for treasures. As I child, I never said no. With our eyes fixed on the ground, occasionally looking up towards a thunderous sea and a blazing purple sky, we would walk holding hands with our feet sinking into the wet brown sand, father and son. There was nothing more exciting to me than walking with my father, spotting moon snails, nerites, dozens of clams, pandoras, olives, and even half a dozen starfishes that laid in plain sight. Papá, Papá, look! I found another one there, look! I couldn’t believe—it was too amazing—the size of our treasure. Finding the shells made me feel like the luckiest boy alive.

We would later return to the house, as triumphant pirates offering the bounty to mom: we almost always returned with a bucket filled to the brim, our shorts packed with helmets-shells bigger than my hands and tremendous conches. For weeks after, I would show those shells to
whoever happened to visit the house back when we returned to our home. Some years later my father died, and those shells became the biggest reminder to me, of what *time well spent* meant.

I felt as a young man now. School had siphoned my friends and I back, as it always did. The summer had raised unexpected developments. Charlie had made out with his neighbor, Samantha. And Miguel was getting in on with his girlfriend, although we chiefly believed him. The absence of new girls at school made my options seemed dim, at best, especially after the whole Sally (oh Sally) controversy. We lunched on a table, my friends and I, under the shadow of old trees. It was our recess, and even animals seemed to stay in their cold nests, escaping from a blazing sun. Somebody told me, man, this is the worst heat ever. Yea, I said, but moments later realized we knew nothing. The worst heat ever was arriving late to school. She was being dropped at the school’s entrance by her mom. She got out of the car and headed towards us.

Our new uniforms, which our mothers so tenderly bought and tailored, felt too small when she walked past us. Why she had arrived late we didn’t know, nor cared. All that mattered was that she, whoever she was, had arrived at last. She glided into Tito’s office, who was our advisor.

No way. Out of our league, somebody said. Out of the league of anybody at this school, really. Even out of the league of your brother, Mike. She’ll end up with some rich fella. I don’t know, man. It might be that she comes from St. Marcellus, Miguel said. In that case there would be two options. Either she was aloof, as most catholic upscale girls were, or a total nut, desperate to get her hands on the boy. When they leave St. Marcellus some girls seemed as if they were caged, man. They are fucking crazy. Yea, some of them are wild. Then maybe, maybe, she could be mine, I thought. Dumbfounded we heard an alarm, perhaps there was a fire somewhere or the lunch break was over.
We ran to the classroom door and there she was, at the front of the room, standing next to Tito, our advisor. Hey guys, how are you doing? Take a seat, boys, don’t just stand there in the door, come on in. She looked at us. Unmarred skin. Long eyelashes. Blonde hair tight in a ballerina bun, and two pearl earrings that had dangled at the cadence of her thighs made our heart swing. She had a sharp nose, pretty small lips and a bump on the bridge of her nose. Getting to know her certainly couldn’t happen for free. It required some kind of sacrifice—something or somebody.

If you don’t mind I’d like to make an announcement, teacher, is that alright? Tito asked. Yes of course, please do. Well now, I hope you’re all enjoying your first day of classes. I want you all to greet Brittany Lambrick, who is new at school. You’ll find out that these boys and girls are not as hideous as they look. We all laughed. We liked Tito; he knew how to speak to us. Alright, so where was I? Yes. Brittany. Welcome, and if you need anything, my office is that the end of the hallway, next to... well, you know where it is! Okay, that’s it. Go and sit down. Thank you teacher, Tito said to the professor that older boys called Ms. Raisin. She was kind and short, her face full of wrinkles, her skin the color of soil. Alright, see you later, class. The door was shut.

Since most of the seats were already taken, Brittany Lambrick went right past me looking for a place to sit in the back. When she walked by me, with her tight golden hair, I felt as if somebody had stopped the sun in mid-flight. A hint of a hint of sweat was on her forehead—she probably knew the tradition that, I’d been told, abides in all classrooms; the worst fellas always sit in the back, where they avoid being targets of others’ spitballs. She sat next to Jose Salamanca, almost in the last row. It was as if all water around us escaped. Our mouths broken, our eyes sore. It was like being in the presence of a sun.
First day introductions came about. Sofia Agapi, Lucio Armendáriz, next came poor Gonzalo Arriaga, Bruno Aster, then my friend Charlie. He went, my name is Charlie Beltrán, I have three brothers and I am in the soccer team. You mean the sucker team? Miguel asked with that funny voice I hadn’t heard since last year. Those around him, including me, laughed. What’s most important, she laughed as well. Now Charlie looked so small, not a catch at all. The competition had begun, it seems. Poor Charlie, I didn't mean to laugh but the voice was hilarious. Charlie my friend, I have failed you. She has seen you burn. Worst of all, she probably thinks that Miguel is so funny.

Armando Dominguez, Berenice Engel, Lorena Fiore. Then me, Garcia. Don't say you like soccer, in case push comes to shove. I stood up and said, my name is Esteban Garcia, I am on the swimming team and I like boxing—the last part wasn’t true, but I thought it would impress her, to no avail. Jose Hernández, Jimena Huerta, and then Brittany Lambrick came up. All eyes fixed on her. She was notably uncomfortable when she stood up. Well, hi. My name is Brittany Lambrick, I like tennis and, as many of you may not know, I come from Cananda. How far had she come! Ms. Raisin said, oh, how nice, and asked, where in Canada? Brittany said, I’m originally from a place called Halifax on Nova Scotia. That only added to the mystery. To tell the truth I didn’t believe her; she didn't seem to have been born at all. Yes, she had a place of birth, but that didn’t prove anything. One day, there is no baby, next day and long after, there she is—makes no sense. Do you have any sisters? asked Julian, who’d always been one of the smart guys. Yes, and that was all she said. Had she one or several, it was imperative to know. There was enough excitement for a year.

After three classes the school day was over. We rushed outside like monkeys who had been trapped in a cave, howling, throwing things around—except she, who gracefully exited last. She put on a pair of sunglasses. Like armor. I’d never seen a girl my age using them at school.
Now she has the vanguard. Behind the tinted shields her eyes could see mine—if I’d dare stand too close. I was afraid of seeing myself reflected in her sunglasses, nervous and scrawny, belittled to a role that was mine but I’d long rejected: a young boy in love. I did not approach her. In fact, I tried my best to evade her.

Tossed around like pennies, at classrooms, streets, movie theaters, hot girls our age had started to appear. Perhaps they had always been there— and we just hadn’t noticed. Most women struck us as odd. This one has no ass, that one uses braces, this one’s head is too big, that one only talks about animals, this one has a manly jaw, this one, that one, this, those. But she was different. She was the jewel of the crown and the crown itself. She was not made up, like those women in porn, who were not the real deal—as Miguel’s brother had already told us. I understood then that some days, to very few people in the world, a woman appears, and she is sex as pure as sex can be.

II

Brittany Lambrick had a cold the next day, a Tuesday. She sneezed the same way as she laughed, covering her mouth. Does anybody have a paper tissue? she asked. Silence. It seems nobody had. Perhaps if I run to the bathroom and return with toilet paper she’ll greet me triumphantly, I thought. No. What a stupid idea, Esteban. And yet. God. I hope nobody beats me to the punch. Keep seated. Keep seated. Nobody has gotten up, everything’s fine. Oh boy. Here we go—Lorenzo is looking for something in his backpack. That fucker, he better not...ah, it’s fine, he was looking for something else, a pack of gum. After a while she asked permission to go to the bathroom to blow her nose. The scores were still tied at zeros, for all of us—except Charlie, for obvious reasons. He had tried to redeem himself from Miguel’s joke, but failed. Charlie trampled all himself while trying to talk to her. She had to ask several times, what? I’m sorry, can you say that again? As if Charlie was speaking in another language. And he, who had never
been very patient—or eloquent, for that matter—ended the conversation saying: Fuck it! Just forget it, okay? Before getting back to where we were watching him, almost pissing ourselves with laughter. Charlie was definitely out. That afternoon I asked my mom to stop in a convenience store on the way home. I bought a pack of soft paper tissues and prepared to bring them to school the next day, in case she sneezed again and needed them. Brittany Lambrick, fire of my heart.

III

I made a deal with Lorenzo, whom I disliked but knew from the swimming team, so he could lend me his desk, the one next to her, in exchange of allowing him to share my swimming-gear locker with him—his mother didn’t give him money for one. Wednesday came and I conveniently placed the tissues somewhere at hand. There I sat, thinking how I would impress her, materializing out of thin air a tissue that she so badly needed.

Aaatcha. Ta-da! Here. Wow, thanks! No worries. My name is Esteban, by the way.

Thanks, Esteban. Yea, glad to help, so, how do you like it here? It’s rather nice. Cool, where did you went to school before? Oh well, I don’t think you’ve ever heard about it. Yea maybe, I guess not, I am not that familiar with places in...Canada, I guess? Well, no I eventually went to school in California, I kinda miss it (the whole thing with a low voice) school was different there. How so? Well, for starters it was an all girls academy and we didn’t use uniforms. Really? That's awesome. You went to school with regular clothes? No, you don’t understand. She whispered, we didn’t use clothes at all. I couldn’t believe what she just told me. As if it was nothing, going naked to school! You’re kidding, I said. No I’m not; it was a New Age type of school, all indoors, very secretively. So you went to school naked? Yes. Couldn’t be, I thought, but a part of me said let it go. Let her go on. And classes were always outside; she said nostalgically, where we could sunbathe. I... I’m sorry, am I making you uncomfortable? I kept quiet for a while,
didn't want to stutter. I whispered, no, no I'm fine, don't mind me, carry on, this is very interesting. Let me tell you about our gymnastics class, it was really something. She started to fade. Esteban don't let me go, said my fantasy before disappearing. I love you! I heard, but it was too late, for the real girl had entered the classroom. My imagined sweetheart, my ethereal Brittany, was already gone the moment the actual Brittany, the one who couldn't have gone to school naked, walked towards her seat.

She had just arrived with sunglasses on the top of her head, even though it was morning and no sunlight shined through our classroom windows yet. Her nose seemed a little red. Wouldn't it be great to see her sunbathe? Focus now. She might still need the tissues. The first class that day was math, it was taught by a teacher whose receding hairline gave in to two bald gaps on his forehead. He had some kind of prominent widow's peak—I would later find out that the older students called him "M" amongst themselves, and it was true, he seemed to have an "M" on his forehead.

This is called Algebra, boys. I know you are all familiar with the basic mathematical operations, but I would ask you to bear with me for a second. She lays on a hill, where the wind caresses the soft grass, her arms, her breasts. In this course we are about to see a topic that you will use the rest of your lives. How could the wind touch her navel, if she has none? It doesn't matter if you plan to be an nurse, a lawyer or a painter, you will use these operations in your daily life. She blushes, the same way the flowers bloom. Jesus! Get a hold of yourself. Just focus on giving her the paper tissue. Please tell me if you can’t hear me in the back, boys. Wait for her to sneeze. Do you all hear me well? Come on now, you must be sick! Imagine her doing gymnastics without clothes. This I have written in the board is called an equation. Stay focused, don't think of her naked. Do I have the tissues with me? Yes. An equation is a mathematical statement that two expressions are equal. She doesn’t seem that unreachable, you know. The
word comes from astrology and means small action, between small equals. I know you are familiar—with sex—to working with numbers. Today you’ll see something new. See how this equation has numbers and letters? He laughed. Come on now, don’t be scared, he said. She is just a girl.

The tissue plan failed. I decided to act as a man, and concluded that I should approach her at recess, like a true champion would do. Father who art in heaven, give your son a hand. Some girls were interested in knowing how she disrupted the delicate equilibrium of power around the school and approached her before I could. Brittany was having lunch on the picnic table and they came to her. Bars of light fell over them from a leafy roof. I had to get rid of them, but I couldn’t do it alone, so I asked Charlie. We improvised a plan—it was the work of geniuses. We went to the court where some younger kids were playing soccer and stole the ball from them—it was more or less expected of us, since we were kind of the bad guys of the grounds.

I placed the ball on the floor where Charlie, who was better at kicking, could have a clear shot towards the girls. I was behind him, watching him from a safe distance, since if all things failed he would be the one to blame for kicking it. In return, I offered that, if my conversation with her became a success, I would introduce him to any friends Brittany might have, (the term actually was, to her hot, perhaps, French-Canadian friends). He backed a couple of feet away to gain some speed. I remember that Charlie gave a deep breath. This was it. While he was rushing towards the ball they where laughing about something else—they didn’t expect a thing. He kicked it and it flew like a cannonball towards their backs. The ball struck Sofia Agapi in such a way that it bounced unto a nearby tree, dropping a great amount of leaves—which gave a very dramatic effect to the scene. Deborah Prahmesi was next to Sofia. She glared at Charlie and at me, even when I was hiding. Sally (oh Sally) whom with I had a brief and sour romance last year, approached Sofia while she asked her: Are you okay? Oh my God, are you okay? Oh Sally, it
wasn’t as if we had shot her. Sofia was more or less the leader of the three and she was surely going to tell Tito on us, which meant that both Sally (oh Sally) and Deborah would accompany her as witnesses. Brittany didn’t seem that eager to join them and stayed at the table. Praise the Lord.

She was alone at last, a little frightened probably, and yet she seemed impassive with her sunglasses on, which were as obstructive as a folding screen divides a room. I ran towards her to get the ball. It had rolled under the picnic table where she was sitting—a merry accident. While she glared at me I crouched under the table, smiling nervously. What an unparalleled chance fate had given me: a chance to see her underwear! Under the table, I encountered fallen leaves, a new soccer ball and two small knees, closed together.

Although they fell from normal trees, the leaves behaved strangely, as if they timidly tried to defy gravity but repented just late enough. After standing upright I said, nice stockings. She didn’t say anything and I felt sweaty and small. Keep it calm, Esteban. Her silence was ominous. Say something, quick. Try to save what you’ve got left. My friend Charlie, there, I said, he isn’t that bad, you know? She raised her eyebrows, which were more or less thin and surprisingly severe. He didn’t aim at you, I said, so don’t be mad. We think you are cool. She had a pair of earrings on, perfect white pearls from the bottom of the sea. She sighed and looked at me. Thanks? she asked. Her voice! I had forgotten about it. Thanks? It resonated inside me, as if I was a multi-chambered cave. Her echo was full of sarcasm, wit. She must be way older than me, she must. Just, uh, sorry, really, we think you are cool though, I heard myself say. I’d already said that. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid. She slowly raised her delicate hand towards her glasses, she grabbed the frame and took them off.

Under those shades she had a pair of eyes that blazed. They were blue, clearing towards the center. Beautiful. Glued, I stared at them. I felt as in a forest—in a burning one. In that exact
moment in which all paths have been taken by fire and there is nowhere else to run, the only option is to burn, before her eyes. There was heat, and flames flowed at my side, like blankets. Forget the soccer ball at my hands! Forget the lunch at her table! What fell over us were not leaves, they were burned feathers. That moment I felt a long forgotten warmth. The ardor of an ineffable spark. There is only one joy in the world and its name is yours, Brittany. To make you mine, with those burning eyes, is to embrace that strange joy of the returning man. I wanted to kiss her until we couldn’t breathe. In its mortal flare, light surrounded me. Sweet heart of mine. From that second on, I was madly, shamelessly, intimately engulfed by her, hopelessly, I should add. Our eyes fixed on each other. Can I help you? she asked. What could I say? Can I help you? echoed. Yes, ye you can, I thought, come home with me tonight. Flames all around! I was speechless. So I did what anybody would have done. I ran. As fast I could. I ran from those eyes that blazed, boiling water straight to my soul. Esteban! Charlie shouted. I was already far. What are you doing, man? Charlie shouted. I was Gone. She was not amused.

We still had three more classes to go. And for a brief moment I contemplated not attending—perhaps I could hide somewhere. Thirteen long minutes passed before the unstoppable school bell rang, announcing the end of recess. At that point I had ran out of options, so I decided to go back into the classroom and try to remain as unnoticed as I could. I was the first to enter, and changed my place to the furthest one from her. When she entered she didn't even look for me. The shame. Charlie entered the classroom, he seemed to have been running and had the soccer ball at hand. He came and talked to me. Esteban, what the fuck man? Why did you run? I was looking for you, tell me what happened, bro. He was excited and was speaking loudly—no doubt she was seeing us. I tried to tell Charlie to sit down and shut up, that I’d tell him later, but he was adamant. Come on bro, tell me. I want to know. Luckily, he kept quiet when he saw Sofia Agapi entering; she was with Sally (oh Sally) and Debora Prahmesi.
When they came in, Charlie tried to hide behind a big guy called Pancho but to no use. They were followed by Tito, who when inside, greeted the teacher and proceeded to ask. Could I have a word with one of your students, please? Sure go ahead. Charlie Beltrán, come with me. But why? Charlie asked. You know why, come over. Deborah stood up and said, Tito, it was also Esteban. The class mumbled. Tito hesitated. Is that so? He asked Sally (oh Sally) and she kept quiet. But Sofia, who hadn’t even seen me at the grounds, nodded. Alright you both come with me, and don’t think I haven’t seen the soccer ball, Beltrán, bring it with you.

He was mad when we entered his office. I don’t want to have you boys in here all year, he said. Today is Wednesday, the first week hasn’t even finished and you are already about to go into detention. Hadn’t we made a deal, Charlie? Listen, I will call your grandma, do you want me to do that? No, Tito, please don’t. Tito, please! Me neither, I don’t want to call her at all. And Esteban, what’s the matter with you? You know Sofia Agapi has an older brother? He is two years older than you, and trust me, this fella doesn’t fool around. He almost got himself expelled last year. I don’t want you to get into any trouble, outside the school either. You’ve got to be smart. I can only take care of you so much. Also, that ball belongs to Santiago Sanchez, and I want you Charlie to go to his classroom where you will give it back. You will apologize to him, do you understand? Oh no, Tito, come on, at least wait for the classes to end. No, you will do so in front of his class, and feel grateful that I am not putting you in detention. If I ever hear any other type of complaint about you two don’t doubt I’ll call your homes. Consider this the first and only warning. He was disappointed—we had finished last year so peacefully. He said, Charlie, go to Sanchez’ classroom and wait for me at the door. Charlie stood up from his chair and left.

Tito looked at me and while he opened his drawer he said, I heard you tricked Charlie into kicking the soccer ball because you wanted to talk to that new girl Beverly. I hesitated
whether to correct him or not. Brittany, I said, but I didn’t trick him. Yes whatever, said Tito taking out a pack of cigarettes, Brittany then, is that so, you tricked him so you could speak to her? I stood quietly for a moment. He took a smoke from the box. I nodded. Let me give you a piece of advice, Esteban, if you want to talk to somebody do it openly. Girls tend to value those things. Yes, sir. Okay, that’s all. Get back to class. He lit his cigarette. When I entered the classroom, Brittany gave me a quick glance and I was assailed by concoction of guilt and shame. I got home with my pockets full of paper tissues. How stupid I felt, but I moved them to my backpack, just in case.

III

That night I dreamt about her. She had invited me to have dinner at her house. Her family was there as well as mine. We were seated together, strangely close in the same side of the table, as much as for our knees to touch. Waiting for dinner to be served, the table felt small and uncomfortable. We were being watched by our respective families. I didn't know what they expected. All I knew was that I wanted Brittany. Slowly, with that fatality so present in dreams, I looked at her. I approached my lips to her cheeks and kissed them with infinite love; I felt her warm and blushing. I felt the mountain bloom. Bloom. Bloom. Bloom. She had a heart for me and so I did for her. She turned her head, closed her eyes and her lips traveled to mine, hungry for kisses. At first I was dubious, since our families were still there at the table, quietly looking at us. But we continued. Wouldn't miss this chance for anything in the world. It felt natural, right, like Jupiter or a violet sky. We were alone now, all else faded. She thrust her tongue into my mouth. And it felt unusual. Wet. Sexual. Alive. We started our juvenile dance back and forth. I’d forgotten what a kiss was like, I’d might as well never known. Frugal. Intimate. Ours. Invasive but not annoying. A direct attack on grace, or perhaps precisely the opposite. Bite her lip, slow. Let go. Rewind. Come close. There. Kiss. I remembered I owned a pair of hands. Kiss. Kiss.
Don’t fail me now. Caressed her fervently, till kingdom come. Her short hair, lean strings of air in a golden hurricane. Aggressive. Lust. Don’t let me go. Stay, love. Yes. I dived my hand into her cleavage, how warm she was. She didn’t complain. It’s a go, Esteban. Go! First were the tips of my fingers. And later my hands went deeper, where the cozy depths embraced my knuckles and the interior of my fingers. She opened her mouth, and breath heavily. Moans. And my palms were there. Here. All over. Now. I softly touched until I could no longer, then I squeezed, pulsed, pulled, pushed, and like a man at sea drowned in her. Desperately drowned. Hands in places where they never before existed. And slowly, very slowly, the capricious dream went where dreams often go to die—to the margins of slumber.

IV

Thursday was the fourth day of classes. On the way to school I prayed. Lord, give her to me. Give me Brittany, father. Please, give her to me. Please, God, please. If so, this will be the last time, that I’ll ask you anything. Instead, I got something very different. We were seated in the cafeteria where the gossips got to me. At the table were Julian, Miguel, Charlie and myself. According to Julian they had been going on since Tuesday. Rumors: they are the worst. Even when they are proven false, they insidiously remain, forever archived in our mental libraries. Julian broke it out to us, people were saying that she had been around with the older boys.

That’s impossible, I said while I bit into a sandwich my mother prepared for me, she is new here. Everybody looked at Julian, who said, not quite. He opened his bag of chips and continued, you see, she spent the summer here. Manuel Agapi, do you know him? asked Julian. He is two years older, I said. Well, Manuel has been saying around that the new girl, Brittany, is fucking easy. I was starting to get nervous. But wait, I said, how easy? Fucking easy, said Julian, she went all the way with him and with Alfonso Bagre. I felt as an icicle had been dangling in
my throat and had just fallen deep into my guts. God, no. They did her at the same time? I asked. Of course not, jackass, first she was Agapi’s girlfriend and a month later Bagre had his go. I knew Agapi, an idiot, if there ever was one. But I didn’t know Bagre. Couldn’t be, I said to myself. Are you sure? I asked Julian. Yep. But how much is all the way? You mean like, all the way, all the way? I asked. Well, see Esteban, that is where we, Miguel and I, differ, said Julian, our definitions of all the way are much too different. What do you think? I asked Julian. Well, he said, I think Agapi fingered her. We all groaned. No way. Shut up! Come on, Julian. It was horrible. Not only because of the act itself, but because it meant that she was already on-the-go while most of us hadn’t even started. The only one who was impassive was Miguel who said, I’m sure she gave Bagre a blowjob. We were louder this time. Jesus fuck! Couldn’t be. Come on! Had we gotten that far in life?

Worried, I talked to Charlie after recess to ease my mind. I don't know man, Charlie said with sadness, it might be true, chicks in Britain are different. It was like a nightmare. How could I ever kiss her if she had—I don't care how long ago—had that son of a bitch’s cock in her mouth. Oh God. Make it stop. And yet there was something compelling about her. It didn’t matter. No need to kid anyone—we all wanted the same. We wanted Brittany. Who really cared if she had sucked Bagre off? Well, truth be told, I cared. I cared terribly. But then again, chances were that she didn’t. Gods be good.

In class, she sat on the front row. And I surprised myself looking at her, wounded, bitter. I was displeased with myself. How could I have fallen so fast? And with her, without ever questioning who she was or where she came from. Being with her was coexisting with a cruelty that surpassed reason. There she is. The most beautiful girl that I’ve put my eyes on. Sleeping around with I don't know who and where. Most important, why? Look now, she smiles to Tobias, she’s probably fucks him too. Daughter of all maladies. Cross of nails. Brittany Lambrick, you
have missed the best boy you would ever meet. Someone who adores you. Someone who would
die to make love to you every day for the rest of your life. You are beautiful, yet, you are a slut.
That’s what you are! Please. Look at that neck. Look at the fine hairs that escape the ballerina
bun. Impossible. Beautiful pearls shine under your ears, as if they were compliments that you’ve
heard and believed. Wear them like trophies, hang them...she turns around, like a swan. I looked
away, didn't want her see me watching her. She took a notebook from her backpack. Those eyes.
Those lips. I adore you. You are the smell of rain that falls over the earth. Brittany, seeing you is
as listening to soft Spanish guitars. How could anybody be gracious enough to have you. How
could I be strong enough to save you? What divine right do you bestow on the men you choose?
I don’t even know Bagre, I don’t. What makes him so special? I don't know if he grows
archangel’s wings on his back while you blow him. I don't fucking care. You go on, find your
thing, turn your head to the front and lose yourself. ....kneels down, in front of a bed, where
Alfonso is sitting lowering his pants. That neck, that mouth, that tongue falls like mist over the
foreign mountains. And I feel like I am going mad. Mad I say!

Classes ended and I eventually arrived home. I went straight to my room after greeting
mom and my brothers, so nobody would come and look for me. I dropped my things over my
bed and turned on the shower—hot. Brittany destroyed. She would exist in me no more. After
my shower I went to bed, hours before my regular bedtime. Naturally, because of my regular
sleep time, I woke up in the middle of the night. Tired, but unable to fall asleep. She came to me
again. If I ever was to take her out of my system I would have to do so properly, going through
every memory of her one at a time, only for later destroying it. Burn the film. Scorch my thought.
Erase all the memories she and I have together, like that time in which I went for the ball. Also
that other time in which I... didn't talked to her. We must have talked sometime. At any rate, I
know her better than she knows herself. Yes. It is true. Send a chill down my spine, actually,
send that chill to Hong Kong and back. The night was long and quiet, while I slowly accepted that *maybe* I didn't know the girl as well as I thought. Later I realized that maybe, I didn't know Brittany at all. And it was all my fault. Never took the time to talk to her, never to the time to hear her. Brittany Lambrick, daughter of the sun, bringer of heat, you don’t exist at all.

I kept turning the pillow to the other side, the colder side, while I felt my head tight as a boiler room. Yes she doesn't exist. There is a Brittany Lambrick, but she must be different to what I ever thought. She must be a whore. No. No. Not a whore. A girl, besides, who knows if what they say is true. What does it matter? It doesn't matter at all. Even if it’s true it doesn't fucking matter. I remembered her when she was sick, drowsy. She looked like a mess. Come on, man, I said to myself. Imagine her crying. God, what a horrible scene. She is a child, remember the questions she asked at history class. What an idiot. No. Not an idiot. Back off, Esteban, back off. Most of the class had the same question. What if she is normal? What if she is a girl? Perhaps she might even be younger than me, who knows. Yes, a date of birth! Everything starts to make sense now. Brittany Lambrick born in so and so. Look at her age. Look at her love. I understood then that Brittany was my treasure trove. Meeting her was like finding the shells of my childhood. She was a hidden treasure, beautiful, rich, generous, but half buried in the sand. Too good to be true, I fancied Brittany as my uncontested wealth. But in reality, if I ever was to get her, I’d have to walk my miles.

V

I want to apologize if I was rude before, my name is Esteban Garcia, I said to myself. Simple as that. I practiced only a couple of times, with the mirror of my house, and on the way to school. Here is where my Brittany Lambrick ends, let’s finish her already. I spent the first classes garrisoning courage to speak to her. She was seated in the front row, and although I told myself,
time and again, that si just a girl, a person who eats, suffers, ages and vomits. She still looked as stunning as ever, an impressive fortress, and I was lonely warrior. *I want to apologize if I was rude before, my name is Esteban Garcia,* would be his prayer, I decided that in the wee hours of the morning.

I had been awake for most of the night, and I feared that being funny or witty was out of my possibilities. The recess started and sheepishly I followed my friends into the cafeteria, where my eyes had seen her enter. We got a table and while my friends discussed if you would rather know or don’t know if the love of your life had a sex-change surgery before meeting you (but her sexual parts function perfectly and she is perfect in all other aspects) I found myself unable to follow the conversation. Then I saw her. Alone, at the line to get food from the cafeteria, surrounded by strangers. This is my chance. I have to do it now, before the weekend starts, and when she’ll regain her mythological stature, forever condemning me to strange myself from her.

I was sitting with my friends at a table, and without telling them anything I stood up. Blood shot up to my brain, and my temples starting to thump. I placed my right foot ahead and pushed myself forward. Here we go, there’s no going back. My right foot landed on the floor and made an unmistakable noise, a man in the making, coming through. Left foot it’s your go. She was on the line, minding her own business, looking ahead. Perhaps counting coins in her hand. Perhaps completely still. Perhaps she was checking her mobile phone. Perhaps she was talking to someone. I don’t know, it’s hard to remember. It doesn't matter. Focus Esteban. Land. Right. Clack. Left. Step aside here I come, what are you going to do if you frighten her. Walk. Don’t stop. She is looking my way. Oh boy. Oh boy. I’ve got to look back at her. Yes. Fierce look. No. Not that fierce. I will scare her. I ought to soften my eyebrows. There. Smile. Not that smile. The gentle smile. But all I could do was the nervous smile while I looked at her eyes, a thousand volts of electricity pointed my way, like a laser or a focused star. The fucking gentle smile. What
the fuck am I doing? Pray. *I want to apologize if I was rude before, my name is Esteban Garcia.* Whatever I do, I mustn’t stop. Go. People are looking at me. Oh lord. Who made this place *so* big?

Both feet were on the ground now, in front her. *I* was standing in front of her. I saw her blink, and her eyelashes were long as spider webs. When she opened her eyes again they were different. Machinations occurred behind the western front. If I stood too long seeing her eyes, I’d see thunderstorms in Paraguay, magnetic pulses under the Artic, the lights of deep sea creatures that multico...Stop, I thought. It’s happening again. Pray. *I want to apologize if I was rude before, my name is Esteban Garcia,* I heard myself say. I extended my hand. Like a fool. *I want you to know I’ve got my mind all made up now, girl.* Oh yea, all made up. Here’s me extending my hand to you, breaking the electric field around you, Brittany Lambrick. Take this hand and die.

Like an astronaut, she extended her hand slowly and grabbed mine with queen fingertips, only letting me shake few digits. Well how do you do, sir, she said with an intentionally heavy English accent—she was making a joke! I laughed while she just smiled. Keep it cool. *Don’t laugh so hard, it isn’t *that* funny.* There was no electroshock when she touched me. She didn’t injected gold or poison into my system. She was just plain nice.

*I am very sorry for getting my friend to shoot the ball your way.* Yea, what’s up with that? Sorry, I chuckled, we just hate Sofia’s guts out. We both laughed. She isn’t very nice, is she? Nopy-dop, I said. *Nopy-dop,* what a fucking idiot I am. Oh here we go again. I hope you are having a good time in here. Thank you, I am—it’s very different though. Very different as in good, or as in bad? Just different, she said. Sometimes the devil plays your part, and while we stood in silence the math teacher walked past us. There goes M, I said. She looked perplexed, M? Yea M. *Look at his forehead, a perfect M!* She had a thunderous laughter, oh my god that’s
brilliant! she said. And for a moment I was the luckiest boy alive. Would you mind if I have lunch with you? No, not at all, please do. Dandy, I said. Where the fuck were this words coming from? Dandy. Who knows how much I could last this way.

LXXII

By God, it didn’t terribly matter. Yes, the guys were right. It was all true. She had been fingered by Agapi and she had given Bagre several blowjobs. And to that I said, so what? After getting to know her, things were easily put into perspective. What was supposed to happen, happened. And I was the last fella that could complain about it. She was flesh and bone, and heart, and head. A girl made of tsunamis, sea, and sun, who gave so much and asked for so little. See that mouth. Feel these hands. I am a fly, happily trapped, between the warmth of two inner blue suns. Her pearl earrings moved wherever I went and I moved wherever they took me. At nights, when our parents were distracted, her earrings, herself and I moved together, up and down, and down and up, touching hell, heaven, ceiling, floor.

Months later, when we had just gotten into the age in which the first of our friends started to drive their parent’s cars we decided to go to the beach with them. I proposed the only beach I knew, where I used to walk with my father, rest in peace. We slept together, Brittany and I. Under the blessing of heaven, I woke up by the sound of the waves. I gently asked her if she’d like to come with me, looking for the shells on the beach, as I used to do with my father when he was still alive. She got in her bikini, putted some shorts on and said, let’s go.

We found nothing. It was as if it all the shells I exultantly found as a kid were found in a dream, or as if the sea was mysteriously cruel to those who age—and I had just realized about it. There was not a single shell in the beach. Nothing. Somebody, or something, had taken from me one of the purest pleasures I remember experiencing. Sheer joy, don’t hide from this boy. Where
did all the shells go? To convince myself that it had actually happened, and to show Brittany that it was not all in vain, I called my mother that evening.

I explained to her how sad it was, that after years of finding these beautiful seashells, they somehow stopped appearing in the shore. Probably because of the whole global warming thing, I said. She laughed—hard. I’m sorry Esteban, I thought I’d already told you. Told me what? Esteban, you father always bought the shells in the market one day before, in all those tourist shops. He always found a time before he would wake you up, and would scattered them along the shore. And then he’d walked back home, grinning as if he’d developed the most brilliant scheme on earth—which to an extent he had! I’d see you boys by the window, and then I’d hear you yelling, Papá! Papá! so many times you just lit our hearts. He was the happiest man, holding your hand, feeling how you’d run, discovering all those beautiful shells he had planted an hour before. He’d returned with you on one hand and a bucket filled with them on the other. And I’d remember he would just wink at me and I’d know. Oh, I’d know, how much fun both of you had, and how for him that was one of those the happiest moments of the trip—and later he told me, of his life, she said. My mother was crying. Tears came down my cheeks, like pearls. I felt two arms that held me tight and filled me with warmth. Brittany kissed my neck while I filled the sand with pearls. Sometimes, there’s love—so hidden!