



TRADE

by Lochlan Bloom



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Published: 2015

Tag(s): "science fiction" SciFi Contemporary houellebecq alternative transhumanism

Published by Radial Books 2013

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ISBN-13: 978-1484186398

ISBN-10: 1484186397

A CIP catalogue record is available for this book from the British Library

Trade
(a novelette)

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Chapter 1

Crunkl

Go in bold they said, throw in some sex, that will catch their attention. Great advice that was! It's the sort of thinking that led to all this shit, that led to all this relentless hustling. Back then, there were none of the constant fast-field transactions or this multi-billion dollar market. It was only a simple mobile app.

We can claim we didn't know but, ha, Goering probably said the same - "Ich wusste nichts über Auschwitz" - look what happened to him. It was never just an app, it was always something more. Throw in some sex - what good was that ever going to do? Nothing is ever *just as it appears* because everything we create is a representation of us, as human beings, when you boil it down.

So, where to begin this little story? Back at the start? As a boy? Childhood traumas? Of course not. Ok where? London? It was the trip to London I guess. When I first met Chet Bull, that's where the seeds of this horrible business were first sown. But you need a little context no doubt, so maybe I should go a little further back, to Germany. Yes, the end of the German summer let us start there.

I was working at a tech startup in Berlin - you know the sort of place, bean bags, foosball, and a little kooky shit on the wall. I worked in communications and there was plenty of money sloshing about. The CEO was this young guy called Svil Thorgeston, a Swede. He had managed to hoodwink a bunch of Angel investors to dump some Series A funding into his idea for a mobile app. They're all so canny, those Swedes, he'd convinced the investors to part with a cool €500,000 to build a photo-sharing network, as if there weren't enough of those floating around.

Now €500,000 is nothing compared with what the guys in Silicon Valley were raising, they'd easily see \$5mil or \$10mil Series A without breaking a sweat, in fact anything less than \$1mil was seen as a non-starter over there, but in Europe the market was less mature. In any case 500k was more than enough; there were only ten of us to begin with at Crunkl, which meant there was plenty of coke and stripper money. This was what we jokingly named the office expenses fund but I should point out that we never actually bought strippers - Svil being very Nordic and pro-equal rights.

The app was called Crunkl, as stupid a name as any that was doing the rounds then, thoroughly meaningless and inoffensive, perfect for a social photo sharing site. Now my job basically consisted of pestering people, either by phone or email, until they wrote an article about our website. My work was, essentially, a series of dull, repetitive actions but the atmosphere in the Crunkl office made it seem like I might actually be contributing to something.

My title was "Communications Designer". It was easy stuff, everyone wanted to write about cool startups out of Berlin, there was a buzz about the place, everybody who wrote about our start up, Berlin in general, mentioned it. The place had an energy to it, they would say, a real buzz, there was a lot of potential and talent in Berlin. Everyone agreed.

Svil called me into his office one day.

'I need to borrow you to talk strategy.'

I had been there about eighteen months at that point and he always spoke in that chummy way, like we had known each other since we were kids, his attention totally focused on me. I must confess that he really did make me warm to him as a human being, they are canny the Swedes, they learn little tricks

that the rest of us are too lazy to bother with.

‘Sure, what do you need?’ I ventured. ~~Something about Svil made me want to be a better person.~~

‘I’ve just been speaking to the guys in engineering.’ He always called the web developers “engineering” – something about how their work was integral to the whole operation and we were “engineering” a new web. To everyone else outside it was just confusing as it suggested our company built bridges or underground systems. ‘They’re really excited about the new feature set.’

‘It’s exciting stuff.’ I tried a smile.

‘We need to make sure everyone knows about it.’ I could see Svil’s head was swimming. ‘This is über-cool, we’re talking New York Times.’

‘They’re very picky.’ I felt I had to rein back Svil’s enthusiasm before I was faced with an impossible task. ‘When is it launching?’

‘Soon, man, very soon, believe me this will change everything.’

We didn’t have a clue back then. The feature set Svil showed me that afternoon was designed to make it easier for people to categorize and share pictures of their pets. I mean, how did we ever think there was a market in that? Why would anyone give a fuck about a picture of somebody else’s pet? I didn’t know what to say so I nodded my head in what I hoped looked like sage agreement.

Don’t get me wrong. I loved my job, working with Svil was amazing, we did very little that we didn’t want to do, but there was a limit to how enthusiastic I could get about functionality in a photo sharing app.

Personally I struggled to get excited about all this ‘buzz’, but then I am a great pretender. I’m sure nobody in those days could have suspected how utterly it bored me. We would organize massive ‘Arts’ parties in warehouses to promote the launch of a new feature, for weeks people would be talking about the preparation. Drugs fuelled everything, we would have ‘business meetings’ in gallery spaces that had been converted from Soviet era factories, people would fly in from San Francisco for investment talks or conferences, drink a lot of beer and leave. Everyone talked about changing the world, technology was going to save us all. We would enslave the machines to build a better humanity, or a photo sharing app at a time.

Svil talked on about people I should contact and what our media strategy should be. That’s how I first heard about Sympatico. I clearly remember Svil telling me about the startup, he was crouched on one of the monster beanbags, obviously uncomfortable, lolling on the floor but unwilling to break his image as the cool boss and sit at the table next to me like a straight. I admired him for that; he was willing to sacrifice his comfort for his own mental image of style, that takes something.

Sympatico was a startup from London, an online dating portal. Rather than having users sign up and create a profile, they integrated with existing social networks to find your best match. It was nothing special really, a couple of algorithms and a lot of design time. They had been putting along for the first few months, getting a bit of press here and there until they got some c-list celebrity using the site and then their stats had gone through the roof. They were getting a few million hits a month which was pretty good going considering they’d only launched eight months previously.

Anyway our new features would be an easy sell to them, all I had to do was make a trip to London and meet their CEO, Chet Bull. Svil would sort out all the technical details and tele-conference before I went, I just had to show up and press the flesh for two days and we were assured a slot in all the right London blogs.

I liked these little trips and took them pretty frequently; it gave me a chance to relax. A lot of people complain about business travel, shuttling from faceless hotel room to faceless office conference centre.

‘It’s draining,’ they say. ‘Non-stop.’

They will then go on to explain, in detail, the far flung locations they have been forced to visit

the name of work.

~~'I can't wait to have some time at home,' they sigh.~~

Well I never understood all that. For me, a little trip like this provided a fun diversion, checking into a hotel I always felt at ease, safe. The more non-descript or identikit the hotel the better. The Ibis chain was particularly good for this. All the rooms looked the same. They were completely soulless but clean and inexpensive.

Perhaps it was a tight streak, from growing up in Scotland, but I was always quite conscious of the price when checking into hotels. If it was a high end chain like the Hilton I felt a little out of place, nervous. That was before I had so much money. In the Ibis I felt justified, but in those fancier hotels I was worried at the cost. Was I a 'good value' employee?

Don't get me wrong, Svil never checked these sort of things or asked for any kind of justification from us. Remember we were a startup, we didn't make any money, we just frittered away the big pot of cash that had already been invested in Crunkl, in the hope that we would one day scale out. Still, Svil wasn't the only one who related my self-worth to my take home pay.

It may have been less obvious in those days but everybody, if they thought about it, attached a market value to their time. The value of a person's time is the basis of a market economy after all. Generally speaking, the time of a barrister is worth a lot more than, say, a Burger King assistant.

What worried me, at least at some sub-conscious level, was the niggling feeling that someone might 'find out'. There might be some celestial claw-back mechanism, an equation, whereby expenditure on an employee X was normalized? Could somebody, somewhere, look into my behaviour and work out what I was 'worth'?

But this is getting ahead of myself, at that point all I knew was that I was going to London for a few days and on balance I was pretty pleased about this diversion. True, I had to leave Lis but we had a very easy relationship. She was my girlfriend back then. You probably know her more intimately now, you probably know her as LisbetA, but back then she was just Lis, an ordinary girl. We had been dating for eight months or so.

Not that long after I moved to Berlin we met at a mutual friend's party. It was one of those aching, trendy affairs on the east side of the city, a bunch of rich kids slumming it out in the sticks. They had probably spent more doing up the squat than the building was worth. We hung close to each other, neither of us knowing many of the other guests. We left the party with a drunken kiss at and she invited me back to her place.

I can't even remember if we had sex then or not. I presume we did. That's generally what happens if you kissed a girl drunkenly at a party and then went back to hers, but my recollection is hazy. Certainly we shagged pretty frequently after that but, on that first night, I can't remember for sure. Maybe there's something wrong with my memory, I tend to remember pointless things – the corner of a plastic shop hoarding on Oxford St that was slightly cracked, the way a rock near Loch Duntelcha looked covered in moss, a pine needle I trod on near Chambéry - information that isn't going to be worth anything to anyone, and yet I have trouble recalling the first time I had sex with Lis.

'I've got to go to London' I said. We were having a coffee near Winterfeldplatz.

'That's cool.' she was genuinely excited for me. 'Will you have time to do any shopping?'

'Yeah... I don't know yet.'

I didn't want to spend all my time in London with a shopping list for hair products and table mats. We lived near each other but had not taken the leap to move in together. It had just kind of worked out like that. Her flatmate was a friend from her time studying a Masters in Salamanca and I had signed a lease on a small one bedroom place.

We both knew we would get a nice place together at some point and add the sort of touches that you never bother with in a rented place. It didn't seem like a big thing, we got on, we quickly got used

each other's company, we had plenty of time.

'I'll probably be pretty busy,' I lied.

'Are you staying with friends when you get there?'

I had never lived in London but Lis often assumed I had. I eventually found out that it was because her ex, Steven who was also British, had lived somewhere in Kensal Rise. I tried not to let her mix-up get to me. She did genuinely seem to confuse the two of us on this issue, so I felt that making a deal out of it would be looking for an argument where there wasn't any need of one.

Nonetheless it irked me, not least because Lis's knowledge of the UK was otherwise encyclopaedic. Her English was flawless and when we talked I often forgot she was speaking a second language. She knew Geordie slang I'd never heard of and referenced kids TV programmes, like Rainbow, that I'm sure never even aired in Germany.

She could easily correct me on points of grammar and once, I remember, we argued all the way back from Szczecin about the correct spelling of the word 'assent'. Both our phones had died so we had to wait till we got back to Berlin to look it up. At which point, regretfully, I had to concede that she was right.

'No. I'm staying at the Ibis, in Shoreditch' I said. In fact the Ibis was closer to Whitechapel but Shoreditch was the trendy area. It sounded better if you said Shoreditch.

'Oh, Ok,' she said, touching my arm, perhaps because she had just remembered that it was not me who had lived in London. 'Will you be gone long?'

'No, a few days, no more than that. The deal's all been decided already, I've just got to meet the guy from a startup over there.'

'I'll miss you,' she smiled and a fleeting hunger passed through her eyes as she squeezed my arm again. I knew what this meant. It meant sex. I smiled back in what I hoped was an equally salubrious manner.

I guess I should explain a bit more about Lis and our sexual relations, as you no doubt feel it relevant to this little story. We had what I would call a pretty healthy sex life, fairly frequent, energetic, perhaps a little dull. We both enjoyed sex. I would say we were fairly adventurous though we had never gotten into anything kinky, like whips and chains or BDSM stuff. We tried various positions and I knew that Lis had a vibrator, although she never used it in front of me.

All in all, I felt we were pretty normal. We had both watched our share of porn and would laugh about hardcore stuff like schizoid movies. We were happy with each other. I think. We both had busy jobs so sex was very much a recreational activity, something we enjoyed but not something we pretended we were professional at.

I guess, if I am being honest, I had an inkling that Lis wanted sex more frequently than I did. It was obvious, I suppose, that two people won't always want sex at the same time. There will always be one half of a partnership that is more eager.

Occasionally it was me who was horny - the only thing I could think of to rip Lis's clothes off and spread the lips of her pussy - but more often than not it was Lis that wanted to fuck. Put it this way, I can't remember Lis ever complaining when I seized her and slid her pants off, but on some occasions a contrary part of me would resist, would want to punish her in some obscure way.

She was almost shy in those days; certainly she never just came out and said she wanted sex.

'I'm feeling tired,' she might say at ten o'clock. 'Why don't we go to bed?'

I knew this was a signal. Her face gleamed with conspiratorial energy. It was plainly a cue to go and fuck. It was not that I was tired or didn't want sex, but somehow this imagined pressure would rankle me. Make me want to rebuke her.

'I just want to watch the end of this programme,' I'd say, keeping my eyes fixed on the television.

'Oh ok,' I'd sense her hesitation, her disappointment, out of the corner of my eye and this ju

provoked me more.

‘You go on to bed if you want.’

‘No,’ she would snuggle closer to me, ‘I prefer to stay here with you.’

I would sip my drink in silence.

What gave me this perverse streak I don’t know, as I say I enjoyed sex, but I would sometimes feel it was something I was expected to do, a chore rather than a reward.

That’s not to say I didn’t think about it. I was fairly predictable in my fantasies, I imagine. On my lunch break or in an idle moment at work I would often fantasize about a wet pussy or a pert pair of tits. In a general way sex was a constant, background noise, something always there, half-realised, split-second from turning into a full thought.

Men, apparently, think about sex every six seconds but that’s a lot of rubbish. Thoughts and impressions swirl around your head all day long but that’s not the same as thinking about something. If, when you arrive at lunch, you realise that you’ve been vaguely hungry for the last hour that doesn’t necessarily mean you’ve been thinking about food.

There were a few hot girls at work and if, for example, Sandra bent over to plug in a USB then you would get an eyeful, along with every other male in the office, but it was a momentary sort of thing. By the time she stood up I would be thinking about the email I was in the middle of sending or the new ad campaign. I guess, as with physical prowess, sustaining a prolonged sexual fantasy is a struggle for some men, yet another pointer that the human race is heading into an evolutionary cul-de-sac.

Anyway, the sun was getting low in Winterfeldplatz, it was late September and we had only braved the outdoor seats so we could smoke.

‘I’ll miss you too,’ I said, placing my hand on top of hers, around my forearm. ‘It’s only a few days.’

‘I’ll have to keep myself company,’ she said, insinuating some secret pleasure, ‘Send me some photos.’

Chapter 2

London

London is a jungle.

A cold grey jungle.

It had snowed unusually early and when I arrived the city was a dull, overcast ball of slush. I met Chet Bull in Sympatico's Old St office. It was on the top floor of an ugly concrete tower. Despite the evident expense lavished on the furnishings the place felt decrepit. Chet himself was sharply dressed and clean shaven but beyond that it was hard to describe his appearance. Something about his manner deflected your attention. He was energetic but his personality was hard to nail down, as if he moulded himself around you, chameleon-like, changing himself to suit your responses.

'Very promising,' he said, his eye darting across the projections on the screen. 'Once the dev guys get stuck into this... we're talking rapid scale out.'

I tried to look keen.

'We're expecting a Series B you know. Hong Kong's on-board. That's where the money is now. China. That's the future.'

He straightened up from the screen and took a step towards me, making a gesture with his left hand that I didn't quite understand.

'What do you think about the future?'

'Oh, I don't know really,' I wasn't sure what he was getting at. 'We just, you know, it's all about getting a quality product out.' I smiled weakly hoping this was what he was after.

He stopped and looked me up and down as if considering something.

'The deals all set. Svil and I, we thrashed things out,' He looked at me strangely. 'You don't need to sell me...' again he waved his left hand.

'Oh no, I... I just meant, you know, we're right behind this.'

Again that strange look.

'Why don't we take a wander?' He put his hand on the crook of my elbow.

'You don't want to look at the projections?' I pointed at the screen, quite aware that we had barely skimmed the surface of the material I had prepared.

'No need for that,' I thought he winked at me.

The area around Old St was referred to as *up and coming*. As far as I could gather that simply meant overpriced, optimistically overpriced, with the hope that one day that unrealistic, inflated price would become the normal price and business and property owners would make a nice profit. Everyone in London has an underlying interest in profits.

Chet took me down in the lift to the underground car park.

'I bought the Corvette as a present for myself,' he said, evidently pleased with the purchase. 'After I sold my first business, you know, I thought I had all the money I would ever need. I thought I would never work again.'

He looked at me and grinned.

'I took some time off, maybe too much time, travelling, backpacking...' He looked pensive. 'I was a little wild then, you know. Until that point I'd worked every hour I could get and then suddenly.'

nothing.'

'Anyway, I had been travelling around Tanzania. I don't know if you've been there, but it is real. a beautiful country, beautiful, beautiful people, you can buy everything you want there for \$100 a day. Honestly no more than \$100 and you can get anything you want - a meal, a blow job, two girls, two boys, two girls and two boys - everything that you can imagine is available there, and cheap.

I had no intentions of going back to the States. I had millions in the bank at that point but I barely touched it, didn't need to. Then, I arrived in Johannesburg and one day this magnificent Corvette passes me in the street and right there, on the pavement, I had a revelation, a what do you call it ... an epiphany and decided I wanted one. I had been living on next to nothing for so long, partying and travelling. It took me a long time to convince the bank clerks to authorize the transaction.'

We had reached the bay where his car was parked. It looked ludicrously out of place, a gross American concoction, huge and gleaming. The outer edge of the chassis was a good 10 centimetres wider than the parking space. The battered Nissan Micra in the space next to his looked like a toy car in comparison.

'As soon as I got behind the wheel I realized something: There is no other force on earth as powerful as Money.'

I looked at him quizzically, searching for some sign of irony. He appeared to be entirely serious.

He put the key into the driver's door and stopped, speaking to me across the roof of the car.

'I left Johannesburg a week later and flew to New York. I started my next business the week after that. There was no point in staying in Africa. It was all a waste of time I realized, the travelling. New experiences are great, it's true, but what use are they? There are no indigenous people in this world. There is no such thing as free choice, every person, every action is shaped by Money.'

We roared along the street, the engine thundering even in first gear as we crawled around Silicon Roundabout.

'If I really wanted to *be* alive,' Chet continued, 'I decided I had to go to the source. Only money can shift whole populations, destroy mountains. Nothing else comes close, nothing moves the imagination in the same way. This city is where it springs; where money comes out of the ground.'

He pointed out buildings and landmarks that belonged, or had belonged, to wealthy individuals. I couldn't really hear much of what he said.

'I had the Corvette shipped after me and the shipping cost as much as the car itself. There is no sense in being on the edge of life after all.'

I sensed that he wasn't expecting an answer so I just laughed in agreement. I hoped my tone left enough room for interpretation should it transpire that he was, after all, playing some dry joke.

'I've never been back to Africa since.'

We arrived at a preposterous hotel somewhere behind Kings Cross.

'They sent me a bill for one point two million yesterday, and that's just for the windows.'

It dawned on me that this was his hotel. He had talked about investing in hotels earlier in the day.

'Expensive windows.'

'The cheapest we could get away with.'

We walked up to the reception area. A triple height roof covered half of the expansive floor. A bar, a café and dining area all merged together seamlessly. I had to admit the architects or interior designers or whoever was responsible for the layout had been extremely skilful in creating *mood*.

It was hard to tell if it was the lighting or the subtle changes in the flooring and décor but each section felt quite distinct. There were no walls but the bar area was dim and snug while the café was light and breezy. None of it felt in any way personal but there was no denying that it was stunningly well designed.

'I've always loved hotels,' he said. I got the impression he wanted to share something with me.

wasn't sure if he was doing this consciously to charm me. 'They are so ultimately anonymous, don't you agree?'

This thought did in fact chime with my own thinking on hotels but coming out of his lips it sounded perverse.

'There is nothing personal in a hotel, beyond perhaps the room number. People can forget all the little edges that make everyday life difficult. In my hotels people can relax knowing every experience has already been analysed and priced.'

We were on the twelfth floor. Chet was showing me an architectural quirk, an exposed heating pipe that ran across the passageway unsupported. It had apparently cost an extra hundred thousand pounds.

He stopped where the corridor narrowed before a small balcony.

'I hope you're not taking me seriously.' He smiled.

I had little doubt that he was entirely serious. Chet clearly seemed to be trying to impress me. I wondered if he could be planning on hitting on me. Was he already hitting on me?

'You've done a great job with this place,' I said.

It was hard to be sure what age he was. Initially I had taken him to be ten or fifteen years older than me but now I suspected he may be older still. I looked more closely at his face. I wondered if he had Botox.

'Let's get a drink.'

I didn't say anything but followed him down to the bar. They treated us like royalty. The bar manager fawned over us both. He insisted on demonstrating his mixology skills by preparing extravagant cocktails.

I started to wonder what strings Chet pulled behind the scenes. There was something intoxicating about the power that he seemed to wield. A thick cold fog had built up outside the giant double glazed walls and somehow that seemed to exaggerate the enormity of the city.

I had been to London fairly frequently but had never quite got my head around the place. It was a difficult creature, unbroken, wild. There were always more parts, and layers of pretence. The expensive parts, on the slide, trying to show they still had money when they didn't; the poor areas thriving on ill-gotten gains, trying to hide the money they were making from prying eyes.

Several of Chet's business associates came passed the bar. Mainly they said no more than a few words and disappeared into the bowels of the hotel. They all resembled Chet in their smooth faces and easy going appearance. Everything sculpted, prepared and styled to look expensive and simple.

One associate, Darven, arrived and took a seat. He seemed to know Chet well. I guessed he was in his sixties but it was next to impossible to say for sure. His face was entirely unnatural, the work of some highly paid surgeon, his clothes spotless and trendy. He wore blue trainers.

He was telling a story about an incident at some place called Sunset's, several days previously.

'Thankfully he changed his mind when he saw the money.'

'It would cost you less if you listened to Trainer.'

'You make me out to be such a terrible person. In front of your friend as well. As if I would play something like that. The poor boy was getting paid to do a job. You've been at Sunset's, you know how it can get out of control. It's a shame. He looked sweet. Anyway, my insurance paid for him to go to the most expensive hospital he's ever going to visit. Not to mention the dentist...his teeth are the envy of all the other boys now.'

Chet smiled and shot me a conspiratorial look.

'Apart from the ones that are missing.'

'Oh you exaggerate. I am not Dorian Gray darling.'

Darven stopped and regarded me for a moment and squeezed Chet's shoulder.

'Who is your friend? Are you not going to introduce us?'

'He's Scottish,' Chet said looking directly at me. 'From Berlin.'

~~'Oh Scottish, from Berlin, how wonderful,'~~ the old man turned to me and I had a sudden sense of revulsion. I could only imagine what he had done to the "poor boy". 'You will come with us to Sunset's won't you?' he leered.

'No, I'm not sure, I have a lot of work to do,' the cocktails were starting to work on me.

I tried to picture my father, before he had died, could he have been about the same age as this guy? There was not one fibre of similarity between the two. My father wheezing greyly in his dirty duffel coat, visiting the hospital, the nurses patronizing him, the way they spoke to my sister in that dull patient tone, the greyness that day in the crematorium, the greyness of his house as we cleared it out, there was nothing to hang on to. I felt profoundly disrespectful sitting there sipping expensive cocktails with these two aging millionaires.

The car pounded along the dark streets of North London, everything flew off the ground, whirling about me, vomited up into the air, flung passed us with violence. I was wedged in the back, forgotten, the Corvette wasn't designed to have passengers in the rear seats, to have any more than two. Chet drove illegally but without the slightest error. He had a precision that I couldn't put my finger on.

I could tell we had got out of the wholesome neighbourhoods, we stopped, Darven spoke to someone, he returned after a long time, they laughed in the front seats. We took the Westway to Kensington, a fancy bar, champagne arrived, and girls. Darven enjoyed talking to the girls, he spoke earnestly, I was drunk I remember thinking, drunk and spinning.

The girls racked up lines of coke, then more lines, then MDMA, I swallowed a pill. Everything tasted bitter but I was excited, I felt a tingling just above my crotch, as if my balls were being drawn up inside my belly. I talked to a girl and then we were kissing, she was gorgeous, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, I didn't get her name.

She was gone, we were back on the road, we had ditched the Corvette somewhere, we were in a taxi. I struggled to remember if I had done something in the toilets with the girl, Chet smiled and laughed and slapped me on the back.

'Plenty where we're going,' he said. 'Plenty.' I felt sick with the motion of the taxi. Did he mean plenty of girls or something else?

We arrived in a dark place. The taxi bumped on uneven, gravelly ground. Large floodlights, Warehouses. A panic rose in the back of my neck. What were they planning to do to me out here? What the hell was I doing with them? Who, after all, were they? I didn't know them. They talked but I couldn't understand a word. Everything was muffled and distorted.

'Cripwa ruddem eggttt Mishazzo,' Darven spat out, looking at me with a terrifying glare.

They laughed some more.

'Yggetee poi sugur,' sniffed Chet. His face came close to mine, melting.

We had stopped, it was dark outside. A warehouse.

This was it. They would do it here.

I was out of the taxi. The cold air shook me. They started speaking normally again.

'You were out of it,' Chet smiled, half supporting me with his arm, 'back there in the taxi. Fresh air will do you good. We'll get another line inside.'

'Inside?' I was confused. It appeared they were not going to kill me.

'Sunset's,' Darven beamed, motioning towards the warehouse.

We stumbled a short distance to a small door cut in the corrugated exterior wall. I heard a distant beat, a drum beat tugging far away, the Drum Taps of Sorgie. It revitalized me. We were at Sunset's evidently.

We entered curtains. Thick, layer after layer. My heart grew excited in that giant house of curtain

pulled in deeper by the steady drumming. Darven slipped me another pill. It was warm and sumptuous. ~~Inside there was no dirt or discomfort. The mud and gravel and security cameras and wasteland and perimeter fences and disorder and cold and confusion and inadequacy and persistence and everything outside faded away.~~

There were boys and there were girls. They laughed with each other. They played tricks on each other. Filthy tricks. Filthy but innocent. I watched. My cock was hard, I realized. A girl had her hand on it and then her mouth. I was a rock.

I turned her over, she squealed, a look of sham pain on her face, I did not care. I entered her from behind, we were an engine, oiled. I forced my finger into her mouth and she sucked on it. She had my cock in her mouth and I kept it there until she gagged. It was not enough, she wanted more. Insatiably she splayed herself. I was dragged away.

We moved in a sea. Hours must have passed. Others came. We joined together. They sucked and pulled at me, heightening my pleasure. I became filled with a power. I was invincible. I think I slept and woke. There was no time, there was only the sea. I came. And then again. And then I couldn't come any more but I carried on. I couldn't remember. I forgot.

Eventually it was later. They were gone. The light was drab and the drums had turned to a drone. Darven stood there in the dirty warehouse.

'It's time to go,' he said gently. Beside him stood a young girl, a swelling bruise spreading from her cheek down her neck.

'To go?' I asked confused.

'Yes we've been here too long,' Darven looked worried, his face ashen in the weak light of the place. 'We need to leave.'

'How long?' I couldn't get my head to work.

'It's Tuesday,' he said hurriedly.

They took me to a taxi.

Chapter 3

Potsdamer Platz

It was a week later and I was back in Berlin. I had returned feeling slightly rough after my adventure but otherwise in good spirits. Chet was exceedingly rich. He had sunk a good deal of money into the joint venture with Crunkl. Svil was pleased.

I talked to Lis. She asked me about the trip and, without specifically planning to, I told her all about my experiences at Sunset's. I'm not sure what I was expecting but in that moment, as I told her about my trip - the two of us in bed, having just fucked - her eyes dilated with excitement. It seemed right to tell her the whole thing. I could see she was getting off on my story.

'We should go to a place like that,' she said, 'here in Berlin.'

'Together?'

'Yes, it would be fun,' her pupils were black disks. 'It sounds exciting.'

'I didn't know you were into that sort of thing,' I tried to put an ironic tone into my voice but there was a genuine revelation. Some part of me expected Lis to be shocked, not animated by the idea of me attending a drug addled orgy.

My upbringing was too tame perhaps, too rural. I knew about these things, had spent far too much time watching them online but somewhere deep inside I didn't believe they took place, in the real world, that I could have been to one and that Lis would be so interested.

'Yes, let's find one.' She licked her lips and started to go down on me again.

'Ok,' I said.

Changes started to take place at Crunkl and time speeded up. Svil and Chet talked frequently. The tie up between the companies was progressing quickly. The *undisclosed sum* that Chet had sunk in Crunkl was evidently greasing the right wheels as we went from a promising little startup to a major challenger very quickly.

For the first time, we started getting serious traction beyond the tech press. We got a couple of features in the mainstream European dailies and our user numbers went through the roof. My job as a communications designer got more hectic but I enjoyed it, batting phone calls and emails back and forth. We had an internal share issue which basically promised us, the core team, a big wedge of cash a little further down the line, a bright carrot dangling ahead.

I started to buckle down, focused on reaching targets and worked late. It was worth it. Now that I had a good few shares in something semi-tangible, something that was growing, I wanted to make sure it grew as much as possible, as fast as possible. We all day-dreamed about cashing out and buying a Caribbean island. Thomas even had a printed out Google map of the West Indies on which he had circled two prospective rocks.

I got swept away with it all, I admit. I pushed myself. I enjoyed pushing myself. I had never really pushed myself before but now I grappled with any problem that popped up until it was fixed, tried to come up with better, smarter ideas than everyone else.

In truth, despite this positivity in the office we all knew we were facing the 'plateau' issue. We had

money to keep us going but there was not yet an underlying business model. Chet had taken a chance on us but we were still a long way from the home stretch. If we wanted to achieve a decent pivot and become a serious *Global Player* we all knew we had to do something to monetize our users.

I was sitting with Lis. She had cancelled on me the previous night, to spend some time alone with her girlfriend, Heidi, and she was now filling me in on the details. Heidi had just broken up and things were made a little awkward by the fact that it was me that had introduced her to Andre, the cologne-hearted lothario that had dumped her.

Their relationship had started when I swung passed a bar to meet Heidi and Lis earlier that year. I had been planning to pick up Lis and go home, I hadn't been up for a major bender, but as these things do one beer had led to another.

When Andre had phoned I had been outside having a cigarette and drunkenly I told him to get his arse down to Potsdamer Platz. The four of us had ended up getting shit-faced and we woke up the next morning to find Andre and Heidi snuggling together.

From then on the four of us hung out a lot. We were good friends, we went out for meals together, we got drunk together, all got on well. I guess I sensed that Andre wasn't as set on the relationship as Heidi but the more we went out together the more things got cemented.

Now that it had gone wrong it seemed, in Heidi's eyes at least, that I was in some sense responsible for her current heartache. I felt little guilt over the introduction as they were both adults.

Heidi had been distraught the whole day, called in sick to work then went in and had a minor breakdown. I could tell that Lis was disapproving of the way that Andre had handled it.

'He played her,' she said with a faint glower.

'Andre is hardly a player,' I laughed. Indeed he was one of the geekiest people I knew.

'In a sense he is,' Lis spoke, slowly precisely. 'He really broke her heart.'

I shrugged trying to diffuse the situation. I didn't really want to have this conversation; the implication that I was responsible for breaking Heidi's heart by proxy was something I didn't feel like defending.

'She'll get over it, I'm sure,' I tried to look sympathetic. 'She's a strong character.'

'Yes, of course she will.' Lis looked a little irritated. 'That's not the point.'

'I think he just realised that she wasn't the one. It's better to say these things sooner rather than later.'

'Yes.' Lis said this as if I had hit on a universal truth.

I reached across and touched her wrist but she shifted her position, annoyed.

'Do you believe in *The One*?' She asked, a little too directly for my liking.

'*The One*?' I leaned back, spreading my shoulders wide, trying to give the impression that this was a deep question that I would mull over. I could see a commitment chat looming and that was not what I had planned for the evening. 'No, that's just a Hollywood invention isn't it?'

We had an unspoken agreement that Hollywood films were bad, in fact we both had a sceptical view of American values in general. In a simple, dogmatic way we both decried the simplistic, dogmatic Americans.

'I suppose, but do you not believe there could be a few *Ones*? A few right *Ones*?'

'A few *Ones*? Surely that defeats the point of it? Either there is *The One* or not?'

'Maybe,' she looked at me steadily. 'Do you think there is any more than a part of us that connects? Do you think there can ever be a complete connection between two people?'

'And who says Germans are too serious!' I let out a little laugh and stood up trying to move the conversation off this topic.

'Oh you don't think this is a serious issue?' She was upset.

‘Yes it’s serious but that doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun.’

Lis caught herself. She made her expression soften. I saw for a moment her self-control, monolithic and standing outside her body, her face, her actions, were all outcomes of her steely Teutonic self-control. She could make herself be fun.

‘Let’s get a girl,’ she said, ‘That would be fun, wouldn’t it?’

‘A girl?’ I must confess I was a little thrown by this.

‘Online, from a website, we can get someone to come round for an hour or two.’

‘A call girl?’ It seemed a little unreal to me that Lis was suggesting this.

She broke out laughing. ‘A call girl, it’s not the eighties,’ Lis was teasing me now, ‘but yes, why not? A call girl. We can afford it, we can try it, if it’s weird at least we can say we tried it.’

‘Ok,’ I said.

If truth be told, the suggestion made me feel slightly uncomfortable but I felt it would be excessively prudish to raise any concerns after Lis had offered this. After all, was it not every male fantasy to have two women? Would I not kick myself if I turned down the opportunity?

Admittedly there was a certain amount of pressure to perform but that didn’t bother me, I had never had any issues in that regard anyway, except for a couple of times when I had been dead drunk. It wasn’t like anyone else would need to know.

Lis got her MacBook and we started surfing a few sites. I was amazed how much was on offer. Lis translated the ones that were in German but the majority were in English as well. Most of the sites were very professional and described exactly what the girl was like, what she would or wouldn’t do, a little bit about her. I had seen my fair share of pop ups and ‘get laid in your area tonight’ adverts online but I had never gone more than a few clicks before being distracted by actual porn.

We finally settled on a Polish girl called Ana. A blonde, she said she came from Wrocław and described herself as petite. There was a contact form on the site and she replied within five minutes and said she could meet us the following evening from eight at our place. She told us her rate per hour and included a template text about what she was prepared to do during the time she was with us. She seemed to like the fact that we were a couple. We agreed to three hours to be on the safe side and sent her the address.

What part of us is it that makes us remember? What part decides that this event or another is worth remembering? Objectively, after all, every event is no more than an exchange of probabilities. No matter how important it may seem at first glance, when you boil it down everything is simply the aggregation of tiny energy fluctuations and as anybody knows that leaves no space for any grand significance.

The assassination of JFK or the moment you flushed your last shit down the toilet are both described by the same laws. If you reduce events down to their basic components all that’s left is a dense and inevitable web with no space for souls or romance or humour. Most people it seems, when faced with these issues, take the sensible path and ignore it. Was it not Camus that said, ‘people spend a great deal of energy every day trying to be normal’? Well too right, if not what’s the point in remembering anything?

Certainly I remember the evening we spent with Ana. There is something about fucking that lodges the event in your brain and at the same time renders it completely indistinct. It’s funny how I can remember the bodies of different lovers quite clearly but the individual encounters tend to blur into one. Perhaps it is because, more often than not, these encounters are in a bed and one bed looks much the same as another.

In any event, the addition of Ana that evening added something new to my sexual memory. She arrived and I poured her a glass of wine. Lis didn’t want to drink – so she could experience everything

more intensely she said – but I joined Ana in a glass of Bordeaux. The simple fact that it was only the two of us drinking wine gave the relationship a sort of symmetry – Ana and I were wine drinkers, Ana and Lis were girls and Lis and I were a couple – we each had a shared bond however tenuous.

As the evening progressed my inhibitions dissolved. I could describe what we did but to be honest it was all pretty much as you would expect. Lis and I enjoyed ourselves. I'm pretty sure Ana enjoyed herself too. If not she was a very good actress.

At around ten Ana said she should go. She asked if that was ok. We had stopped, exhausted, some ten minutes before.

'You booked another hour,' she said apologetically, 'but if you don't need me any more I should go.'

'Of course,' Lis was suddenly very business-like, 'thank you for a wonderful evening.'

This felt a little formal, especially after what Lis had been doing to Ana only twenty minutes before. They laughed and said something in German which I didn't catch. Ana got up and dressed quickly, her clothes evidently chosen for ease of dressing and undressing.

Lis went and found her purse while I lay on the bed watching them. Having finished dressing Ana gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and Lis handed her the cash we had agreed. If I remember clearly Lis looked a little uncomfortable with the transaction, uneasy with the power that the few crumpled fifty euro notes conveyed on her.

'It should all be there,' Lis said, 'perhaps we will see you again.'

'Of course,' Ana smiled.

She said something else in German and blew me a kiss as she went out. Exhausted, all I managed was to lift my head from the pillow in response.

I started reading more about the sex industry. The topic fascinated me. I was fairly literate on the themes of modern capitalism but somehow I had never taken prostitution seriously as a business. Other than leather jacketed pimps and thugs I had difficulty picturing it as a livelihood for anyone. It all seemed too seedy.

Lis and I talked about our experience and both agreed it was something we would do again. We both agreed it was a good thing that we lived in an enlightened society where people like Ana could make a living by providing pleasure. How guileless we were then.

I chatted to Andre and found out that he had frequented prostitutes several times, something I would never have suspected of him. He worked as a developer for a multinational IT firm and I had always presumed he was too shy to hand over hard cash for a blow job.

Once the topic was raised however he proved quite uninhibited. He talked at length about some of the prostitutes he had visited and waxed lyrical about one place he visited every year when he attended the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona.

'Those girls in Sitges,' he said, a look of fond remembrance on his face, 'are some of the fuckin' hottest on this planet.' He never normally swore.

He lent me a couple of Michel Houellebecq novels, *Platform* and *Atomised*. He told me I had to read the latter if I wanted to understand the sexual economy, telling me to read it and then return it to him. He said I could keep *Platform* as it was unmitigated rubbish.

I started on *Atomised*. I had not read anything by Michel Houellebecq before and initially I found his writing rather tiresome. There were some interesting points, certainly, but it was so badly written and edited I sometimes wondered if the author intended any of it to be taken seriously or not. I was slightly intrigued by Houellebecq as a character, I must admit. Was he really such a misanthrope? What sort of person spent their time writing this sort of thing? It was so depressive!

It wasn't until I got halfway through *Platform* that a certain idea started to crystallise in my mind.

Obviously the publisher had been as little bothered by the content of the novel as the author. The writing and editorial in this book was even worse than *Atomised* – there were blatant spelling and grammatical errors, all the characters were two dimensional and the plot in different sections of the novel clearly contradicted itself - but nonetheless I persevered.

There was, in there, the kernel of an idea. An idea which grew at the back of my mind. A sexual economy, a platform. In the startup world everybody talked about platforms. Facebook was the de facto social networking platform, Google the de facto search platform. I started to wonder - where was the sex platform?

Having seen what was available online, and having surfed my share of porn sites I presumed there were some startups working in this area but the more I looked into it the less I found. Everybody wanted sexual gratification but it seemed ethics prevented a great number of people taking advantage of the internet to get their kicks. Religious ideologies, peer pressure, societal pressure, all these things helped decide how far a particular individual would go.

The majority of male Westerners had no qualms about visiting porn sites to get gratification but many would stop short of the more graphic clips, many would draw a line at homoerotic porn, would be happy to masturbate alone to a clip of rough sex but hesitate before hiring someone perform the same acts for them. A platform had to distinguish these users but also include them all.

There was a huge demand but no market to serve it. The existing offerings were seriously fragmented. Some website owners and performers were getting very rich and becoming stars while others were forced to do acts against their will for no money. What was needed was a platform to connect people. What, I thought, if we could use our technology to create this future?

Chapter 4

The Rise of LisbetA

Initially I found it a little hard to broach the subject with Svil. He always maintained a certain Swedish cool. Explaining an idea like an online platform for sex was not something that I felt I could raise at our regular team meetings but, over a period of a couple of weeks, I refined the idea in my head and eventually we came to discuss it in detail.

‘All the way,’ Svil said.

We were having a coffee in the break out area.

‘It’s just an idea, you know, but maybe if we spoke to Chet there could be a tie up there?’

‘Yes,’ Svil slapped the back of his right hand off the palm of his left, turning the index finger into a pistol as he did so. He waved the impromptu gun at me. ‘I like it!’

‘We’ll have to speak to the guys in engineering but I think we’ve got a lot of the infrastructure in place already. It’s just a case of retooling the value proposition from social photo sharing to sex sharing.’

I was on fire. Svil actually leapt out of his seat.

‘Yes! This is it, this is the idea, I’m telling you. Genius!’

We talked to Chet that afternoon and he was excited but he also brought a dose of reality that suddenly made the whole prospect tangible. It was a good idea, no doubt about that, but there were plenty of obstacles to be dealt with, legal issues, implementation challenges. Had we considered there might be a potential backlash; political groups, women’s rights and so on. We would need to launch a new offering to create distance from our existing brand. Had we thought of a name?

I’m not sure if you can remember back then, to the time before Xchange existed? It probably seemed quite remarkable, especially for anyone who has never experienced sex another way, but before the beta launch party the world was a very different place. No one who was at that launch dreamed it would grow so fast, that it would take over the whole world.

The key, we realised, was that desire was simply another word for demand. The idea was simple, we would create a virtual economy for sex. People enjoyed watching and taking part in a variety of sexual activities and we would facilitate that with a technology platform.

There were plenty of people in the world who enjoyed posing for photos, plenty who already posted naked pictures and videos online. Meanwhile there were plenty of others that enjoyed looking at those pictures. Why not use the data, the analytics, we gathered to match them up? Why not join them together and let everyone make a little money too. Remove the stigma and suddenly you had an explosive money making scheme.

Until then, the problem had been how to monetize content. Other sites were user centric – if you wanted to see porn you logged on and watched professional actors, or amateurs, go at it for free. There was no shortage of content. A small minority handed over their credit card details to access hard-core content but the majority just watched for free.

We changed all that with two factors, firstly we took privacy very seriously and secondly we provided a way for your average user to make some credits themselves.

Our view was that everybody that used the app was a sexual being and had the potential to produce

erotic content. We were the first producer-centric site. Every time someone viewed your content you gained credits, every time you viewed someone else's content you spent credits. It was that simple and users got it straight away.

To begin with it was only images and short videos, we had already built the infrastructure to handle that, but before long a whole market grew up trading any and every sexual gratification that people wanted.

Blow jobs, hand jobs, spanking, anal, fisting, felching, phone sex, electrostimulation, mammography, intercourse, scrotal inflation you name it people were into it. We opened the way for third party developers to use our platform and they flocked to build more apps. We were not wildly original, we were just around at the right time.

Those that were truly hot, the sexy and the young, quickly found they could make good money. They were only too happy to post videos or offer their services through our apps. They took care of building their online profiles. Each view earned them credits and each credit could be turned into cash at the end of the month.

They told their friends and soon even ordinary-looking people were interested in posting a few pictures to see if they could make some credits too. A lot of people made some money, not a lot admittedly, maybe enough for a couple of beers a week, but it was the hope that drove it.

And that is what we didn't count on to begin with, the hope, the inherent self-delusion in every human being. No matter how ugly or obese someone was there was always the hope that they would be adored. The majority of people would upload a video, hoping that the credits would roll in but in most cases they ended up buying up more credits than they made.

It may seem strange, but back then, in those early days, we spent a lot of time worrying about the implications of underage users and how to limit access to the site. Prior to the changes at Crunkl we had operated in a world where people shared cute pictures of their pets or the holiday at the beach.

We imagined that a move into erotic content would cause a bunch of headaches - law suits, unwanted media attention, political campaigns - but in the end it was the kids that saved us. It was the kids that built this new world. It was the kids that took to our platform in droves, and for one simple reason, it was easier.

It's hard to remember but dating used to be a fraught experience, an activity that consumed a lot of energy. Imagine the effort required to meet a stranger, converse with them, develop a bond, however tenuous. To convince them to deliver the gratification that you are looking for from them.

There used to be an American saying "don't blame the player, blame the game", well the truth was that the game of finding a suitable sexual partner took up a lot of people's time. A good proportion of a person's life would be taken up playing that game. In reality very few wanted the awkward uncertainty. Relying on chance or existing social groups to find sexual partners and gratification was not efficient.

The institution of marriage flourished for centuries precisely because of its role in limiting the particular game. In the days before Xchange the majority of people cashed their chips out of the game around their late twenties. There were some winners admittedly, the truly happy married couples, but they were rare. The majority had simply had enough of playing a thoroughly tiring game and would settle for any life that was at least bearable.

Nobody wants to lie just to attract a partner, to invent a version of themselves that is better than reality. It is a draining effort, a stressful activity, but one which was the *status quo*. Xchange offered a careful, methodical system to stamp out some of the little lies that used to make up sexual relations. All we did was tighten up the rules of the game.

This new world we built it is the one that people wanted. Beneath it all it is what people are asking for; an end to the unknown, the doubts, the necessary lies that had been the basis of human

relationships for so long.

~~Things will never go back to the way they were because it was horribly inefficient. Money is the fairest master. We created a simple exchange based on desirability. The market tends to the most efficient equilibrium. The site was always going to be a success.~~

It was only the select few that reached super – stardom and at the top of that pyramid, at the very pinnacle of Xchange fame was LisbetA. Lis registered one of the first accounts, when we were still alpha, and chose the name LisbetA at random as far as I know.

Quite how she became the world wide celebrity that she now is I'm not sure. Certainly there was a major transformation. She had an advantage, it is true, being one of the first few people to use the platform, but other than that, there was nothing to indicate she would see so much success through the platform.

She loved the idea from the start but I think she started posting more as a response to my involvement in the project than anything else. We needed to test the concept and initially people were shy about posting intimate content. Lis was different, she got it straight away and was completely uninhibited.

You can still watch those initial clips of course and you can see how free she looks.

'I'm quitting my job,' she said to me one evening after filming a couple of clips. She often worked late into the night updating her profile, responding to her followers or creating more content.

'Quitting?' I remember I was shocked. I thought she'd had a run in with her boss. She worked in a design studio and was always telling horror stories about the bitchiness of the other employees there.

'Yes, there's no point going there just to earn money.'

Her job at that time paid pretty well I recall so the loss of her income was not inconsiderable but we were doing ok. Certainly it didn't cross my mind to worry about the fact we would only have one income. My job was paying well.

'Xchange made me more money this month than I make in two at the studio,' she said, a look of pride on her face.

That threw me, I must admit. I should have known the sort of money she was pulling in. I lived with her and worked at Crunkl after all. I knew she had spent a lot of her free time on her Xchange profile but I had always tried to keep a certain distance.

Initially she had wanted to film the two of us together but I had refused. Something about the idea worried me even then. I wasn't prudish, at least I didn't think so, I was happy enough being naked in front of other people and had already shared Lis with Ana.

It was more to do with the idea of recording these things for posterity. I couldn't articulate it then but I have since had plenty of time on my own to think it over and I guess I would put it something like this:

For me, sex was something ephemeral, passing, it was an enjoyable experience but it was meant to be lived and then largely forgotten. The problem with Xchange was that it made everything timeless when it should be transitory. There could be no nostalgia for sex, only lust for more sex. You could have nostalgia for a sexual partner or for the prowess of your youth, but not for the act itself.

'That's great,' I said, 'so you're going to buy me a yacht?'

'Maybe,' she smiled, 'if you're good.'

From that point on things really started taking off. First people at work started congratulating me, a sly wink from the dev guys, a slap on the back from Svil to show what a lucky old fellow I was to be going home to Lis each night.

Then as Xchange grew internationally the comments became more explicit, people would talk to me about specific clips of Lis, Svil would mention her in board meetings as he discussed monthly figures.

and slip me a congratulatory smile, I noticed the girls in the office were friendlier with me all of sudden.

‘You’re becoming famous,’ I said to her over dinner one evening.

‘Yes can you imagine! Svil wants me to fly to L.A next week to help promote a launch over there. She was full of energy, invigorated.

‘Svil asked you to go?’ I tried not to sound angry.

‘Yes, you know he’s been helping manage my profile, since I’ve started to get so much traction.’

‘Traction?’ Some of those phrases of Svil’s really annoyed me.

‘Yes, the traffic I’ve been getting on my profile,’ she said, her face crumpled in confusion at my antagonistic attitude.

‘That’s great,’ I managed. I knew Svil had been taking an interest in Lis’s profile but I had buried my head in the sand with work, pretending I didn’t have time to think about that. ‘Are you not worried about your privacy?’

‘We’ve had this discussion before.’ She seemed deflated. ‘I’m happy, this is good. I’ve got almost enough for a deposit on a place...’

I stared out the window. Whenever there was something important to talk about she always switched the topic. I wish I had talked to her then.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ I asked, eventually.

‘You know what it does. All you need to do is say something, just speak to me, once, let me know what you are feeling, but you never speak to me. You always seem to know just the right time to switch off.’

She left for L.A the following morning and, a few days later, we got news at the office that the launch party had been a tremendous success.

Lis was out there in L.A for a good few weeks and it was at that time that I really started using Xchange seriously. Up until then I had trialled some of the features, I had watched some clips and chatted with some of the users, but I had always seen it as work.

On those occasions when I had felt the need to have a wank I had made sure to go to other sites and use my own computer rather than the work laptop. It was not that I imagined anyone would spy on me but I had just become accustomed with being anonymous when I masturbated. It was the normal way to do things. I could watch but not participate.

With Lis gone for so many days it was natural that we would connect up.

‘Go on to Xchange.’ She wrote. We were chatting on Skype at the time.

‘Why???’ We can talk on here,’ I replied.

‘We can get kinky there.’

‘Well turn on your camera – let me see you.’

‘No, we won’t earn any credits. Chase me.’

Her profile status turned offline and so I signed into Xchange. I should have been pleased that she was so eager to use the tool that I was developing but it felt strange. We both masturbated and enjoyed it but there was something missing. I could sense that she was performing, in a way that was not so obvious when we were together. I liked it, don’t get me wrong it was different, but it made me miss the real Lis.

She told me she had a few hectic days ahead so we might not be able to catch up, what with the time difference. I smiled and wished her good night.

‘It’s Good Morning here,’ she giggled, as she blew me a kiss.

It was the next day that I started getting the first messages in my inbox. The image recognition and analytics in Xchange had found several matches based on my interaction the previous night. The

showed suggested partners and some potential scenarios. I was startled how accurate it seemed, how well it had pegged me. ~~Some of the fantasies were too outlandish but a few really got me going.~~

That evening I spent some credits. I watched a cute student in Chile shaving her pussy before making herself cum. We talked briefly but I can't say there was much of an intellectual connection, it was something deeper.

It was hard to explain what quality turned me on. I was hard as a rock watching her. I could have searched a thousand clips on other porn sites showing Latino girls masturbating but it was rare that I connected to them in the way I did with her. What's more she clearly enjoyed watching me as well.

It surprised me I guess. Not that I didn't have belief in Xchange but I had sub-consciously viewed it as something of a gimmick. Another way of making money but basically just another porn site. For the first time I saw the power of the technology to recognize desires that were hidden, even from ourselves.

It had a way to go at that point, nobody was going to give up real life encounters for the sake of mutual masturbation with someone on the other side of the world, but the principal was founded, I could see people, myself included, demanding more of this.

The next time I spoke to Lis, she was high. There had been a party after another launch event. I was a little annoyed as we had arranged to speak the previous night but she had not appeared online.

'I was out,' she said without a trace of apology.

'You could have texted,' I tried not to sound grumpy and share in her west coast enthusiasm.

Her eyes darted across the screen in front of her and the corner of her mouth crumpled in a pout.

'Oh,' she exclaimed, 'You are a pervert aren't you.'

I didn't know what she was talking about.

'Me? You're the star.' I wanted her there.

'I'm looking at your profile. I didn't know you were into those sort of things.'

I checked my profile, there had been some updates based on my recent activity. How it had gotten so accurately I don't know. There were things I had certainly never talked about.

'Oh yes, well that's what happens when you leave me alone for so long.'

Lis licked her lips.

'I'm back in three days. Just you wait when I get home.'

It was the best sex we had ever had.

Chapter 5

Separation

‘I’m leaving you,’ she said it so timidly, as if she wanted me to contradict her, to stop her speaking. ‘Chet has arranged a place for me in London.’

‘Oh, London.’ I did my best to look disinterested, as I felt some continental ice shelf wrench from inside me. ‘You’ll like it there.’

‘Yes, Chet says there are a lot of opportunities over there at the moment. The tabloids are all keen on Lisbet. He’s found me a lovely place overlooking the Thames.’

‘You’ll be a star.’

She looked sad, as if I had said something horrible. I wondered if I had pushed things too far.

‘You never gave me a chance did you?’

‘I can’t stop you from living your life.’

‘You need to learn how to start living your life,’ she leaned over and kissed me, ‘or it’s going to kill you.’

‘All I ever wanted,’ she continued, ‘was for you to be straight up with me. If you didn’t want me you just needed to tell me, I can handle it. I thought there was really a chance of something more between us. You know I don’t care about marriage, about any of that shit, I just wanted you, to be with you, but there comes a point, you’re right, yes, I do need to live my life and if you don’t want to be in it then I’ve got to go where people do.’

I stared at her. She had said all this before but never all in one go and never with such vehemence.

She talked on, about old conversations she claimed we’d had. I couldn’t remember half of them. The ones I did remember were filtered, different. She quoted things I had said but now they sounded weak, unreal, like I was making excuses.

The time we had been on King Charles Bridge. The time at the airport. The time she had begged me to move in together. My clinical responses. I struggled to remember what I had been thinking. I couldn’t remember those conversations. Had they taken place? Had I really pushed her away?

Even then as we talked, that final time, and it was clearer than ever to me that she was leaving, that she had reached a decision, that there was still space for me to do something. Even then, I did nothing. I don’t for the life of me know why.

‘Did you ever love me?’ she asked defiantly, a fire behind her eyes.

‘Of course,’ I answered hesitantly, ‘Of course, I’ve loved you.’

But the truth was that love had fallen between the cracks somewhere. At that moment I saw it clearly, a doomed vision of our species. It was a fantasy, love, the sweetest of dreams. To love was a story and we had all stopped listening.

It had nothing to do with sex or fidelity or the perfect match because those were all real and numerical and mundane. Love was ethereal and beautiful and totally unattainable, a figment that had been invented long ago, a tradition which no-one could imagine anymore never mind touch.

‘You say that.’ She was crying now. ‘You say that but it’s not true anymore. How could I carry on loving you when you are not there?’

Emotionally unavailable? Am I? What does that phrase mean? She was the one parading her mo-

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