

## **The Portrait of a Woman**

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“I don’t want to marry for money” was the first thing she said to her mother on the phone that day.

“I always told you, Agatka, that you have to be like a chameleon.” Her mother’s voice was definitive, as always. “You’re not a child anymore. You need to accept your new role, and play it well.”

Agata had read the e-mail over and over again. Then she called her mother, Barcelona to Opole. The e-mail said: “William adores you. I don’t want to ruin the surprise, but I thought you’d rather know ahead of time: he wants you to be his wife! Please come soon.” There was also a hint that he’d been unlucky in love before, and that Agata was his “chance for happiness.”

Agata had met William two months before. His mother said it was fate. They’d been vacationing in Europe, William and his parents, and they stopped in Barcelona for almost a week, on route from Paris to Milan. On their first night, after dinner, William took a walk. That he got lost was no surprise, given Barcelona’s windy sidewalks and endless corners. That Agata was the woman he finally asked for directions, after walking back and forth for many hours, in a panic, that didn’t make sense, because she was sitting on the steps of Santa Maria del Pi, the silver-gray gothic church on the Plaça del Pi, listening to Amalia Rodriguez on her mp3 player, maximum volume. First, she saw long legs in light blue jeans. She looked up. A tall man with red freckles standing in front of her, quickly moving his lips. She paused the music.

“I need help. Perdeedoh. My hotel is El Palace. Ingles?” His accent was American, his eyes were green, the color of grass in a Polish meadow. “Ingles?” he asked again, looking at the church. His hands were shaking.

“They give you the entire duck. And they give you a postcard with the number of the duck you eat since their opening in 1890. Ours was 1,124,596.” During their walk, William talked about a restaurant in Paris. He had a gentle voice, slim body. He still didn’t look at Agata when he spoke. At the entrance of El Palace Hotel, William’s mother, a blond woman in a silky golden dress up to her knees, greeted him as if he’d been lost for days, and she greeted Agata like she was the one who had saved him from a sure death in the hands of the Spanish mafia. “I’m Melanie,” she said. The lobby was dazzling. The burgundy curtains looked thick and heavy. The chandelier sparkled with diamonds. The ceiling was all gold. “Your father is exhausted after Paris, but we were both worried about you, sweetie,” Melanie patted William on his back, and gave Agata a charming smile. Agata admired her earrings, which glittered like the chandelier. “I also just got back from Paris,” Agata said, realizing that William’s story about the duck restaurant was from a recent trip. “Then we were there at the same time!” Melanie was thrilled.

Agata had gone to Paris for the weekend, with her boyfriend, Saulo. They walked along the Seine, holding hands. They drank a bottle of wine. At night, Saulo led her to a remote spot by the river. He then pushed her against a stone wall, pulled down her panties and his pants, and entered her. He’d always wanted to do that, his fantasy, he said. Agata was aroused, but her fantasy was candles in the bedroom, Fados in the background, a gentle man.

On their second day in Paris, Saulo wanted to go back to the Centre Pompidou, where they’d spent the entire morning the day before. Agata feigned tiredness. “But you don’t speak French, what if you get lost?” Saulo asked. It bothered Agata that he understood what people were saying on the street, and she didn’t. “I’ll manage.” Saulo returned to modern art, Agata walked by the Seine listening to Amalia Rodriguez, in Portuguese. “Meu Amor Meu Amor,” the singer’s deep and tragic voice reminded her of Saulo’s love-making from the night. “My grey

bird is crying because of the distance we are from each other.” In bed, and everywhere else, Saulo was the leader. It hadn’t bothered her before. She stopped in front of another museum, the Musee d’Orsay. She’d never been interested in art, except with Saulo, so she paced the rooms of the museum without paying much attention to the paintings. The building used to be a train station, and Agata thought about the trips she’d taken with her parents to Gdansk and the Baltic sea, her mother brushing her long auburn hair, her father chasing her into the water. In the Musee d’Orsay, Agata was looking for the way out when she saw her. It was a painting by Degas. A nude woman, also with auburn hair, her back facing Agata; she covered her legs and chest with a towel, but a part of her breast, and the crevice of her buttocks, were exposed. She looked strong, confident, she was beautiful. Her pose, seductive. Was she alone or with a man? Agata stared at the painting for a long time. She didn’t tell Saulo, or anyone else, about her, but when Saulo babbled on and on about the art works in Centre Pompidou later that day, she didn’t listen to him.

“Would you marry for money?” Agata asked Lily after she’d received Melanie’s e-mail.

The question lingered between them. They were walking through the skinny streets of Barcelona, and now they both stopped. Lily’s light blue eye shadow matched the color of her jeans. Agata’s outfit, a mini skirt, tank top, and cardigan, was a mess of colors: flashy blue, loud orange, bright green. That’s the style Saulo liked.

Agata wondered if the woman with the auburn hair, from the Degas painting, was someone’s wife.

“Would I marry Prince Charming and move to Manhattan?” Lily rephrased the question. Yes, of course she would. “He’s your Richard Gere from ‘Pretty Woman,’ the charming millionaire who will save you from misery, like in a fairytale. You are so lucky.”

Agata glanced at her friend, then looked away. “I may be a poor waitress but I’d never be a prostitute.” She sounded confident, she’d hoped, even though her face, she felt, flushed. She’d watched “Pretty Woman” with Lily a few months ago; they both cried at the end.

Lily grabbed her hand and started walking. Agata followed. “Besides, the Julia Roberts character was really in love with the guy,” she felt inclined to add. “He was also crazy about her, and William barely even kissed me!” Agata almost bumped into a woman with a map, surely a tourist. “And Barcelona is no Hollywood.”

Barcelona was where they both lived, Agata since recently, Lily since forever. Agata had moved to Spain with a master’s degree in Romance Languages, and a heart broken by a man who’d convinced her to major in Romance Languages. After graduation, instead of an engagement ring, Agata received a speech from Pawel: he wasn’t ready to commit. When Kasia, a daughter of a family friend, bragged about her life in Barcelona, Agata’s mother encouraged her to emigrate. “There’s nothing here for you,” she said, and reminded Agata of Poland’s high unemployment rate. Agata’s father had just then broken the news that the family’s restaurant business was in financial ruin, and so was the family. “Our life is over, you have a chance in Spain,” Agata’s mother said, and wouldn’t listen to Agata when she informed her that most Poles went to Ireland or England, not Spain, ever since Poland had joined the European Union. “Be different,” her mother responded. At least Agata spoke Spanish, and she could legally live and work anywhere in the West, Barcelona included.

“PIGS or NYC is a simple choice.” Lily continued. PIGS was the acronym for the four countries in Western Europe that either were bankrupt or on the brink of collapse: Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain. The media and the politicians were, for once, in agreement: it would get

worse until it'd get better, and the worse might last for a while. NYC was the acronym for her Hollywood-like fairytale. Who in their right mind would say no to that?

“If this is PIGS, then Poland is the pigs’ shit.” They were speaking Spanish, and Agata thought about the similarity between the Spanish “la mierda” and the Portuguese “la merda.” This is what she could do best: compare Spanish and Portuguese semantics. When she first arrived in Barcelona, she had many freelance translation gigs, and that, combined with waitressing, made her feel successful and rich. She even sent her parents money once, for Christmas. Two hundred euro converted into eight hundred zloty, an amount that Agata’s mother called “the perfect gift from the perfect Agatka,” despite her father’s reluctance to accept it. Now the waitressing was all Agata had, and it wasn’t enough.

“So you go from Polska to Barcelona to America. I’d go too if anyone asked me.”

Lily often referred to Barcelona as if it were a country, independent of Spain. At home and with her other friends, she spoke Catalan.

“Your parents would never let you leave the city, not to mention the country.”

Lily’s parents lived in the outskirts of Barcelona. Lily visited them at least once per week, and Agata joined her occasionally. Lily’s mother had recently been laid off, and her father’s salary had been cut by fifteen percent. And yet, the parents insisted on continuing to give Lily one hundred euro each month.

“True. And I would never leave them.” Lily laughed.

Agata was the same age as Lily, twenty seven, but she now felt older. She didn’t need her parents.

“But you wouldn’t move anywhere either if you couldn’t call your mother from there,” Lily added.

Agata had met Lily at the Portuguese restaurant where they both worked. They compared their stories. Lily had been a freelance graphic designer. When the economy crashed, she, too, was reduced to serving tables on a part-time basis. Agata was grateful Lily offered her to move in into her one-bedroom apartment and split the rent, even if that meant sleeping in the living room.

“By the way, what happened to Kuba?”

Lily had been seeing one of their co-workers recently, a serious Czech with blond hair and blue eyes.

“He’s too sentimental.” Lily looked away. “I told him it’s over.”

They walked into a park, it was sunny and green.

Agata admired Lily’s ability to leave men and move on. She’d wanted to break up with Saulo but she also didn’t feel like she had a good reason to end the relationship. She’d never broken up with a man before; they all left her first. “No one’s ever good enough for you, Lily,” she now said to her friend. “You are looking for the perfect man and you’re telling me to settle for William because he has money?” Agata had been ready to settle with Pawel, but was now glad he’d dumped her. She wouldn’t have left Poland if he hadn’t.

Lily closed her eyes and shook her head. She then opened her eyes, and said that Agata was changing the subject.

Agata finally located an empty bench, and pointed towards it. It was late August, the tourist season and the flowers were in full bloom. Lily sat down on the bench, and placed her black purse on her lap. Agata loved Lily’s new look, the black hair instead of her natural light brown. She noticed her roots were showing already. Agata wore her long hair in pigtails. Was

she too old for them? She now sat down next to Lily, and squeezed her friend's hand. "Let's not make fun of William anymore, okay?"

"But he asked if his EZ-Pass would work in Spain," Lily said, and giggled. She said she'd heard about the EZ-Pass from an uncle who lived in America. It was like a ticket to go on the highway in the U.S. "That is funny." Together with Lily, Agata had made fun of William's gaffs like an older sister might make fun of her silly little brother, not in a spiteful way. Everyone in Barcelona, and in Poland, for that matter, made fun of Americans.

"It's the Asperger's, not him." That's what William's mother had told Agata. He was extremely smart but he missed social clues and made random comments and some people called him retarded. Agata wondered whether "retarded" and "dumb" were synonyms in English.

"What else do you want to see in Barcelona?" Agata had asked William during their first day together. They'd toured La Sagrada Familia, the church that Gaudi had designed but didn't complete; "it's always under construction," she explained to William. They then took a bus to Park Guell, from which the city's architecture and the ocean seemed to be one. William didn't comment on the view, but detailed the length of the Hudson River and height of the Empire State Building. He could see both from his apartment.

"We could visit the Spanish king, that's something you don't have in the US," Agata suggested.

They were standing in the shade, in an effort to protect William's face and neck, which were already sunburnt. "That'd be awesome!" he replied. A thirty-year-old man with a degree in business and a well-paid job in his father's company. Charming but clueless. Never travelled abroad by himself.

That week, Agata told Saulo that her cousin was visiting from Poland, and that she wouldn't be able to see him for a few days. He was busy with painting anyway. With William, she alternated between laughing at him and laughing with him. Every night, Agata picked a romantic restaurant in the tourist district, a choice that guaranteed they wouldn't bump into Saulo or any of his friends. Every night, she wondered if William would invite her over to his room afterwards. She wore shorter skirts and tighter tops, but nothing worked. William barely looked at her; he played with whatever was on the table instead: napkins, utensils, glasses. On their last night, in front of the restaurant where they'd had dinner, Agata reached for William's hand and stood facing him. She leaned towards him, and gently touched his lips. He didn't exactly return the kiss, but he didn't move away either. This shyness Agata classified as cute. She tried to imagine William kissing her with greed, the way Saulo did, but William's sudden comment on the distance between Barcelona and New York—3839 miles—erased that image.

Agata had told Lily that she wasn't attracted to William but she admitted that her ego suffered because William didn't seem attracted to her.

"If you don't make a move on the chick, I will," a young man said in Spanish. William was walking Agata back to her place, after the kiss. Agata wore a petite black dress and red stilettos that she'd bought on sale especially for the occasion. The man blocked William's way. He had a ponytail and muscular arms.

Agata translated the words into English. She needed proof that William wanted her. But William trotted around the man, and said that the flight from Barcelona to Milan was only an hour long.

"Why didn't you fight back?" Agata caught up with him.



“I will always be kind to people. You accomplish nothing by being mean,” William said. He sounded calm. Who the hell was this guy, Jesus or a fool?

William’s parents invited Agata to Moments, an expensive restaurant located in the posh Mandarin Oriental Hotel, for a goodbye lunch. Their flight to Milan was in the afternoon. Agata sat next to William and next to his mother. Across her was William’s father, George, whom Agata had met briefly earlier that week. He was a robust man with thin gray hair. Melanie wanted traditional Spanish food, the best Spanish wine. Agata recommended tapas: foamed tiger’s milk with vegetables, shrimp and herbs, crunchy crayfish tail with raisins and grapes, Iberian pork, Mediterranean sea cucumbers. George, whom Melanie called a wine connoisseur, ordered a bottle of red wine.

Once the wine was served, Melanie, dressed all in white, raised her glass. “To Agata and William.” Agata blushed, William laughed without opening his mouth, and rolled his napkin into a pancake. “You’ll break our hearts if you don’t fly to New York as soon as possible,” Melanie said. She had long blond hair, straight as a ruler. Her make-up was impeccable, visible just enough to add color to her face.

Agata wore a conservative black dress, the only one she had that reached slightly below her knees. She felt cheap in the gold-painted ceiling of the restaurant, among the glowing Johnsons. “I’ll try,” she said, even though she didn’t think she would. The ticket itself would be more than her monthly rent.

“William told us about your hardships,” Melanie spoke again. Her voice was kind and soothing, the way mothers’ voices should sound. “You are so well educated, you make this admirable decision to move to a foreign country, and now you’re reduced to a few waitressing shifts. We would, of course, take care of your plane ticket and expenses.”

Agata nodded her head and sipped her wine. She was so shocked to discover that William had actually listened to her when she told him bits and pieces of her life story that she didn't even realize Melanie was offering her money, and that she, Agata, had just agreed to take it.

"William told us you speak five languages. A polyglot!" Melanie touched Agata on the shoulder.

Agata didn't dare contradict her, although she technically didn't speak Latin, which she'd studied in college, and she was not as proficient in English as she was in Spanish and Portuguese, or her native Polish. The discovery of her talent for languages Agata owed to Pawel, even if he dumped her.

George nodded and opened his eyes wide. His face and neck were red, like William's. He was eighteen years older than his wife, that Agata knew from William, but he looked younger than Agata's father, who must have been at least ten years his junior.

"This looks awesome," William exclaimed when two waiters displayed several different tapas on the table. He reached for the Iberian pork. Agata thought that he was going to take a bite, but William offered it to her, then to her mother, then to his father.

"I've only known you for a few days, but I'm never wrong about people," George said, after he complemented the dish. "I'm a businessman, trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

By the time they reached dessert—Melanie and George ordered the Tender Almond Kiss for themselves and the Chocolate Passion for "the young couple—they were like family.

"I just can't be with him and make fun of him," Agata, back in the park with Lily, was close to tears. She let go of her friend's hand and stared at the fountain in front of her, tourists posing for pictures with their smiles that lasted only as long as it did to snap a photo.

She'd been skyping with William over the past two months. He was, Agata admitted, better online than in real life. They were slowly becoming friends, but the romance was questionable. William's confessions were not "You are beautiful" or "I miss you," but rather, "I wish I could show you my coffee maker" and "You'll love New York City." Then the e-mails from Melanie followed. First, she told Agata about William's Asperger's. Then, a few days ago, came the e-mail about the marriage proposal.

Everyone said she should do it: Agata's mother, Lily, William's parents. She felt like she'd already said yes, before he even asked her.

"I have to see Saulo." Agata looked at her watch.

"You mean you haven't told him yet?"

Agata reminded Lily of her rule. "I always said I'd break up with him once I started sleeping with William. Now I'm actually breaking up with him before I go to bed with William. If that ever happens."

Lily said that William was being shy, that's all.

Agata nodded.

"Still, you look cute in all those colors," Lily pointed to Agata's clothes. She reminded Agata: when they'd met, Agata wore all black. Did she remember? Lily stood up kissed Agata on both cheeks. "Good luck then. And I promise not to make fun of your groom anymore!" she laughed.

When Agata arrived at the outdoor café, Saulo was already there. He'd ordered a pitcher of Sangria, as usual. He kissed her on both cheeks, and told her she looked pretty.

"I can't be with you anymore." Agata said, then collapsed on her chair.

“You are breaking up with me?” Saulo pronounced each of the words slowly. He sat facing her across a wooden table. At another table there was a couple, also drinking Sangria. Agata couldn’t see the woman’s face but the lower part of her back was exposed, and her panties. The man had a charming smile.

“Is this a joke?” Saulo demanded. He was handsome in the way Spanish men are supposed to be, tan, dark-haired, long-nosed, charming and macho all at once. He asked Agata the question and put his drink down. They were at their favorite café, on Plaça de Catalunya. The square, surrounded by colorful buildings, managed to be both lively and peaceful, at least in the afternoon. At night it would transform into a party feast. “Is there someone else or is it because your mother doesn’t like me?”

Agata wasn’t sure if she was going to go to New York, if she was going to marry William. She needed a reason to break up with Saulo.

He stared at her. He was wearing his light blue jeans. Agata knew there was a red stain at the inside seam of the pants, between his waist and knee. It was from the new painting he’d been working on, modern art a la Jackson Pollock. Saulo said it was of Agata. When she saw the painting a few days before, it was all chaos, no resemblance to herself or to anything else she knew. She said it was beautiful.

“You never complained.” Saulo grabbed her wrist.

She certainly wouldn’t miss Saulo’s art friends and their egos and their parties at which they glorified Pollock and Mark Rothko. She didn’t understand them.

“I don’t like modern art,” she said quietly. It just came to her. She freed her wrist from Saulo’s touch.

“Lame excuse. You love my work.”

Saulo's paintings, large splashes of pigment. He painted aggressively, squirting colors all over the canvas, like gun bullets from his favorite movies.

"Let's go back to my place. I'll make you change your mind."

Agata tried to imagine sex with William.

She was glad she'd refused to move in with Saulo when he'd asked her two months ago, the night she met William. After the weekend in Paris, Saulo had told her he was ready to commit. It annoyed her that the way he said it sounded like a fucking achievement.

"I don't like modern art," she repeated, this time louder. Or I don't get it. I faked it."

"What?" Saulo banged his fist on the table.

"I'm a chameleon." The woman with the auburn hair. "I saw a painting in Paris. It was a portrait of a naked woman," she said.

Saulo's face was now twitching. Was he going to cry? Scream?

"But I just painted you!" he screamed.

Agata nodded quickly. The woman from the Degas painting, of course, was trying to seduce a man, but that man wasn't Saulo.

"You know what your problem is?" Saulo downed his Sangria. "You let other people live your life for you. You should've moved in with me, but your mother said no. What does your mother have to do with it? It's your life." He poured more Sangria into his glass, and drank it all at once. "I bet it's your mother who told you to dump me."

"You're right, I listen to people too much," Agata said. Especially my mother and whichever guy I'm seeing at the time, she wanted to add.

He looked at her attentively. When she didn't say anything else, he shook his head. "Wait till you miss me, Agata." He rose from his chair. "Because you will!" he yelled. The couple at

the table next to them now watched them openly. Saulo lifted the pitcher of Sangria, and drank the remains. He slammed the pitcher back on the table. He had a piece of fruit, apple or peach, in his mouth, and he spit it out, onto the street. He glanced at Agata, then walked away, blended into other people, tourists and locals, and evaporated from the old square. When she came home later that night she called her mother.

“Finally. Now you can marry William. You have to, especially now.” Her mother’s voice, solemn, familiar.

“Especially now?” Agata asked. She wanted to be alone.

There was silence on the other end. Finally her mother spoke again. “I didn’t want you to worry but if we don’t pay our restaurant debts until the end of the year, they’ll take away our apartment. I’ve been crying every day since I found out.”

Agata had never seen her mother in tears. When her mother was unhappy, she walked around with this piercing look that both Agata and her father avoided.

“This is your chance. Our chance. I always dreamt you’d marry someone like William.”

Agata knew how to be a chameleon. She could blend into a group of people she didn’t know and make it look like she was one of them from the very beginning. With every new boyfriend came a new set of hobbies and interests. She was into punk rock in high school because Damian was in a punk rock band. She studied Spanish and Portuguese linguistics in college because of Pawel. With Saulo came endless art exhibits. If she could be anyone she wanted, could she ever be herself? William didn’t exactly say he had a core, but he did say that he’d always be kind to others. The night she’d kissed him, when Agata wanted William to fight for her, William was unmalleable. He’d switch apartments, buy new clothes, make new friends. But he’d never be unkind.

When Lily came back from work that night, Agata was sitting on the floor, staring at the wall. Fados was playing from Lily's old stereo. She told Lily her parents owed almost twenty thousand euro and that they had until December to pay it back.

"Then you move to Manhattan, marry William, be rich, and help your parents out." Lily sat crossed legged on the floor, next to Agata. Her black jeans were soiled with food. "You can even take your melancholy music with you. All your problems are solved."

Agata shook her head. It wasn't that simple. "Why should I be responsible for my parents' mess? They throw all their savings into the restaurant, and now they're broke." Agata glanced over at her mother's picture on the desk. It was taken a few years ago in front of the restaurant: a woman with auburn hair that now began to gray, her chin raised, her eyes looking straight into the camera. The restaurant had been her mother's idea.

"It's the economy. My parents are also suffering. I forgot to add that they raised us." Lily yawned and said she was exhausted. "The restaurant was busy tonight." She wished Agata sweet dreams, and walked to her bedroom. "You are going to marry him, aren't you?" she asked, standing in the door.

"Goodnight, Lily," Agata said. She expanded the couch, laid down the sheets. All the furniture was Lily's except for the antique dresser Agata had splurged on once, back when she made decent money. She took off her skirt, folded it, and put it on a chair. She sat on the bed, a pillow and a laptop on her legs. There was a message from William on Skype from a few hours earlier: "I discovered a new feature in my coffee maker: it makes iced lattés. Do you like lattés? I just had one and it was delicious. I was rereading the instructions and must have missed that part before."

Agata searched for the Degas painting on the internet. She remembered an entire series of paintings from the Parisian museum, many of the same woman, drying herself after a bath. She skimmed through them and found the one she was looking for. "After a Bath," it was titled simply. The woman with auburn hair was a seductress. She didn't wait for men to throw themselves at her by the Seine or to invite her to their hotel in Barcelona. She took what she wanted, without asking.

Agata had a plan. She googled "Asperger's," and found an article with fifteen tips on how to live with a man who had the syndrome. The author was, apparently, married to an "Asbie." Don't fish for compliments: if you want to know if he thinks you're pretty, ask him. Don't interrupt his monologues: that may be the only way he knows how to communicate. Don't expect him to know how you feel: it may be difficult for him to read your body language. If you want something, tell him.

Before going to sleep, Agata wrote to William: "I love lattes and can't wait to have one with you. See you next week." She then wrote to Melanie: "I'm coming to NYC."

A week later Agata said goodbye to Lily at the airport. Lily was crying. She wasn't sure if Agata was doing the right thing anymore. "What if it doesn't work out? You don't know anyone there." She hugged Agata, then pushed her away. "Are you really going to marry William?"

Agata had to go, she couldn't miss her plane. Leaving Barcelona was like leaving Opole. She was on her way to a better life, again.

"Welcome to my world," William said to her the next day at JFK. He looked taller, more manly than before. His light blue shirt smelled fresh and moist, like the woods. She'd expected to see Melanie, and it pleased Agata that he came to the airport alone.



“I watched movies and drank wine on the plane, so it was okay,” Agata volunteered. She was glad she’d read the article. But she’d ask William about the Asperger’s, what it was like. What she could do to understand him.

There was a long row of yellow taxis in front of the terminal. Enough taxis for the entire world. In the cab, William said his home-made lattes were now as good as the ones in Starbucks. In Barcelona, taxis were black. The drivers complained about the color, especially in the summer. Agata couldn’t remember the color of taxis in Opole. There were barely any on the street.

More yellow cabs on the highway. William asked if she liked sushi. It sounded like he was asking her to marry him—his voice was tense and formal, as if a lot depended on her culinary preferences.

“I do,” Agata whispered.

William’s apartment had large windows with a view of Manhattan, just like she’d imagined it. It was growing dark, but the city was filled with lights, as if by design. William pointed out the glowing Empire State Building.

Agata said it was beautiful. She tried to remember which movie she recently saw it in.

“1,454 feet tall, 443 meters, I converted it for you.”

William’s memory for facts and numbers was impressive. Agata could never remember such things.

William rolled her suitcase to the first room on the right. “Guest bedroom,” he said. “Your bedroom,” he clarified and blushed. “My room is over there,” he waved his hand towards the second door in the hallway.

He didn't ask her if she loved him, and he wasn't going to ask, either. If William were one of those insecure men who need constant affirmations of love, it'd be a lot easier to back out. That William's parents didn't seem to doubt her love for their son seemed like a conspiracy. The good-natured Americans. Didn't they know that not everyone's intentions were good?

"I need a shower," she announced. William said the water pressure was excellent.

The bathroom was spacious, white, spotless. There was an unopened bubble bath bottle on the bathtub tiles. The bathtub was bigger than Agata had ever seen. She ran the water, and poured the bubble bath gel in. She undressed, and soaked herself in the water. Agata imagined herself taking luxury baths every day for the rest of her life. She wondered if William was going to pop the question tonight, then dreaded the moment. Why did he want to marry her? Because he liked her or loved her or because his mother told him to? Agata thought of her own mother. Her mother was always right. She said this would make Agata happy. But if she knew so much about happiness, why was she so damn miserable? Agata played with the bubbles. She was taking a bath in a rich man's bathroom, like the Julia Roberts character did in "Pretty Woman." She'd have to remember to tell Lily. Was William about to walk in and offer her money for her services? She let the water out.

Water was dripping on the tiles. Agata unfolded the red dress she'd set out to wear. There was a full size mirror on the bathroom wall. She looked at herself, and run her hand along the line of her stomach. The dress fell on the floor. Agata watched her reflection as she dried herself with a large white towel. The curves of her body, the long auburn hair. She wrapped herself in the towel. When she opened the bathroom door, she heard the music.

"What's this?" she asked, although she knew very well who was singing.

“Amalia Rodriguez.” William stood in the kitchen. He glanced at Agata, then turned to face the fridge. “Music is called Fado, it’s Portuguese. Sad but beautiful.” William displayed a tray of sushi on the table. There was a bottle of wine, too. He explained he’d gone to Portugal a few summers ago, with his parents. “A woman was supposed to join us, a friend of mine, but she cancelled at the last minute. No explanation.”

Agata said that she fell in love with Fado when she first moved to Barcelona, after a man left her.

William turned and looked at Agata. “From a statistical perspective, coincidences are inevitable.” He shifted his body weight from one side to another, stared at the floor.

“Are they?” Agata stood facing him, a safe distance away.

He’d been unlucky in love, his mother said. Was that a synonym for “inexperienced in bed,” or a “virgin” even?

The fantasy.

“William,” she whispered. “Do you have any candles?”

William opened a kitchen drawer, took out a box of matches. He walked to the living room, reached towards a candle on a bookshelf. He lit it, and stood there, holding the candle.

“Look at me,” Agata demanded.

William leaned against the wall. Agata saw that his hands were shaking. The flame was unstable.

She turned her back to him, and slowly lowered the towel, slightly below her back. She remembered the painting. Her pose, too, was seductive. She stood there and contemplated her secrets. She imagined that William was watching her. She dropped the towel on the floor, looked over her shoulder, reached her hand out to William. “Come here,” she said.

He moved away from the wall, his head down. He touched the tip of her fingers. Agata led him to the bedroom.

“What are you doing?” William asked, his massive bed behind him. She heard when he swallowed his saliva. “You don’t...,” he wanted to say something else, but Agata placed her finger on his lips.

She took the candle from him and placed it on a side table. The flame gently illuminated the bedroom. She stood in front of him, then kissed him long and slow. She lifted his hands and placed them on her hips. He looked like a robot, except that his hands were trembling. She unbuttoned his shirt and took it off; it landed on the floor noiselessly. She caressed his shoulders, his back. William stood still. He stared at the wall, just beyond Agata. She undid his belt, and pulled down his jeans. He didn’t lift his feet so the jeans lay on the floor between them. Agata embraced him with her entire body. She felt his heart beating violently. Her body was warm, and so was his. She rubbed her breasts, stomach, and legs slowly against his. Amalia Rodriguez sang about bizarre shadows, ash and light, pain and sin, and love. William looked at Agata, his green eyes shining, and extended his arms towards her.