

# Madame Mephisto

a novel



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by A.M. Bakalar



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*To Mum, Dad, and Asher*



From an economic point of view,  
a person's decision to enter into the drugs trade as a  
producer, distributor or retailer is entirely rational,  
because the profit margins are so high.

Misha Glenny - *McMafia, Crime Without Frontiers*

Why should I fear            the things I fear?  
Why shouldn't I have fears?

Maryam Huleh - *The Sticky Dream of a Banished Butterfly*





# one

**URBAN DICTIONARY ON POLAND:** A nation that is unaware of its own collective backwardness, to its utter tragedy. It works efficiently only under occupation and dictatorship. Xenophobic and nationalistic.

You don't believe me? It gets better. Have you heard of a country where twin brothers rule, one the president, the other the prime minister? No? How about this one: the president dies in a plane crash, for which he was most probably responsible because he forced the pilot to land, killing himself, his wife, and ninety-four other people? Did I hear you right? You say it's a conspiracy theory? Not so fast.

It is your country we are talking about.

But maybe you are right. It is all fucked up anyway.

I am sorry, perhaps I shouldn't swear. Not in front of you, at least. And we are going to a funeral in five days. But there is still time before we pay our respects.

You see, there are some things you should know about our country. And our family of course since, well, you and I are going to spend lots of time together. And I am not talking about those many hours before the last rites. Everybody is so busy with grieving and lamenting that they almost forget about you. You could say we have a lifetime ahead with each other.

What? Don't look at me like that. There is nothing to be afraid of. You will learn to appreciate me. Oh, for Christ's sake, don't cry now! I am not a monster. But hold that thought. You see, my mother once said to me: 'How can you be my daughter?' A bit harsh, if you ask me, don't you think?

If I were you I would listen to what I have to say in the coming days because I am doing you a favour. I like to think of it as a rescue operation. Oh no, I did not ask for it. Believe me, taking care of you is the last thing I need in my life. I had no choice. Nobody asked for my opinion.

This family! It's so much easier to love each other from a distance.

So here we are now, you and I. We will see about the future later.

Anyway, we may as well spend this time we have together getting to know each other, or you getting to know me. Here in this room, in my parents' house. Did you know that it was built in 1928? Of course not. How would you know? Mind you, it is a very solid construction unlike what they build these days. They moved to this house in the late 1990s from a block of flats we used to live in.

Are you comfortable? Good. I will place a pillow under your head.

Let me make it easier for you and lay down the options. You can listen to what I have to say and make up your own mind about whether you want to leave with me for London after the funeral. Or you can simply ignore it and get on with your life, here in this country I decided to leave a few years ago. But you should know that if you choose to stay I will not be able to help you because the family I left behind don't exactly wish me well, and are not the kind of people I think you should stay with anyway. But we will get to that later.

Why am I saying this? Oh, because I am – well, how to put it? I guess you could call me a herbal purveyor. My clients call me

a guardian angel, a lifesaver. Commonly known as a cannabis dealer if you insist on using the, in my opinion, outdated terminology. But this is not the only reason why my family is reluctant to welcome me back.

I am a professional liar. I am two people. I take pleasure in experimenting with people's emotions, people who trust me, putting their understanding of me in doubt.

Basically, I am the best thing that could have happened to you.

You see, I offer you a once in a lifetime chance to change your destiny. Learn from my mistakes. As I said earlier, I did not ask for it but since we have found ourselves in this situation we may as well use it as a business opportunity. Let's say I have acquired enough and I am ready to share. And since I hate surprises I think it would only be fair to show you the whole picture.

As I was saying, I left the country a few years ago. It was 2004, and Poland joined the European Union. I felt no patriotic duty to stay. Living in Poland was a structured phase of my life. I had just spent four years working as a translator in a bank, right after I did my university degree in translation studies. It was a cover job.

You need to have a cover job if you don't want to get caught. This is your first lesson. You should remember that. You see, I did not actually need to leave as I was already making good money, from dealing cannabis, of course, not as a translator. Growing and selling weed made me feel needed, appreciated, rewarded. Simply put, there is no comparison between working in an office and working as a cannabis grower.

After Poland joined the EU we, the young people, had such hopes, hopes for our own country. That things would get better from now on! There's nothing better than being young and naïve, with no imminent danger of future responsibilities like parenthood, marriage, paying taxes – basically being a good citizen. Some call it contributing to society.

Trust me, it's all bullshit.

Do you remember what I said about the twin brothers? Well, it was like the movie they starred in when they were thirteen. What was the title? Ah yes, *The Two Who Stole the Moon*, about two cruel and lazy boys who one day have an idea to steal the moon, which – in the story – is made of gold, so that they will not have to work any more. You see, those twin brothers later became two cruel politicians who, like the boys in the movie, had a vision of the glory of this country. Yes, you are right, unlike the boys in the movie, the brothers did have jobs – president and prime minister – but their paranoid ultra-nationalism and obsessive religiousness has turned our country into a place I can no longer call my home. It is not always about money, so I can't complain. (Mind you, the UK has one of the largest cannabis markets.)

You see, in a way, the twin brothers made it so much easier for me to make this decision and leave. After Poland became a member of the EU I gave up on my homeland and devised a plan to retreat to London.

There was also the question of my family, or my mother to be precise, who I thought would be the main beneficiary of my absence. Don't get impatient. We will get to the family. But first things first.

A cover job. Remember?

When I think about the first few years of my life in London, I admit that I was not ready to circulate amongst the Westerners. You must remember the years of communist propaganda did a good job of temporarily carving its way into my emotional system. Under the banners of the Polish United Workers' Party to the victory of socialism! The Polish–Soviet friendship!

Bollocks.

Perhaps I did not smile as much as was expected of me during my first job interview in London, which unsurprisingly turned out to be a failure. I tried to be friendly and unthreatening.

But smiling was something I had yet to master. No matter how much I wanted to escape from my birthplace, and find solace in inventing my new immigrant identity, I was forced to admit to myself that the essence of my being was formed where I came from. And where you and I come from a smile is a rare phenomenon, perhaps because of the turbulent history of our country, feeding fears and expectations directly to the heart of each Pole. Poles have a talent for lamenting, endlessly dissecting the events of the past.

While I was battling the crowds on Oxford Street, trying to squeeze my way towards the pedestrian crossing, I received a phone call from the little-known agency called Office Beasts that set up my first interview.

‘I’m sorry but you didn’t get the job.’

‘What?’ I said against the roaring noise of a double-decker bus passing in front of me.

‘It’s not that you don’t have the right experience. They really liked you. But they said, and please don’t feel bad about it, they said you’re too beautiful and they would have trouble working with you. We’ll find something else for you.’

‘Why don’t you send me where looks do matter?’ I asked, but it was unnecessary. Office Beasts never set up another interview and I didn’t know enough about political correctness to question what I had been told.

Of all the insecurities I brought with me – my imperfect command of English with a dominant Polish accent, my unprivileged non-Western education, and my lack of work experience – my face hardly made it to the list.

My first job interview in Poland had not gone well either, in fairness. With a degree in my hands I knocked on the door of the biggest bank. Ah, those were the days of the Celtic Tiger, and the Irish were investing in the Polish banks before anybody else in Western Europe realised that the countries of the former Soviet bloc would soon become goldmines of

opportunity. McDonald's had just opened its doors and we all queued for hours to taste the West. The new owners needed translators and interpreters, and I needed a cover job for my budding cannabis enterprise.

The president of the bank, a Polish man in his early sixties, looked at me with curiosity. Or was it my breasts he was staring at? I do not remember exactly.

'When are you planning to get married and have children?' he said.

'I don't.'

He laughed. 'A young and beautiful woman like you will surely find a husband very quickly and we will lose a translator when you get pregnant.'

I came home that day and told my mother that I got a job because my boss liked my face and my breasts. She shrugged. 'What's wrong with that? You got the job,' she said.

I admit my looks helped me in the past, but I did not come to London to face the same judgment.

Lesson number two: don't underestimate your appearance. Learn about the market and your clients. I did not know it then, but in my line of work I can't emphasise it enough. BPR – behaviour pattern recognition: never act as if you are carrying illicit substances. Who do you think the police are going to suspect first as a marijuana dealer: a woman wearing an impeccable suit who works in a well respected company, preferably in the City or Mayfair, or a black guy with the stink of weed about him? That's right! You already have the answer. Image! Façade of trust and honesty. Your biggest asset is the fact you are an attractive woman. Use it! There is more to it than that, but for now that is all the information I am going to give you.

As I said earlier, I was not ready to work among the Westerners. After the first interview in London I cut my long blonde hair, much to my mother's displeasure. According to

her, it was throwing away the biggest asset that could make a difference among the possible suitors for my hand. Abnormal, was the word my mother used to describe me, and in the same breath she praised my twin sister's sensibility. Alicja served as an example I should aspire to, with an established career as a corporate lawyer, and long hair accentuating her femininity, of course.

Polish women make good housewives; a two-course dinner is always ready on time, the house is scrubbed clean, the children are taken care of, and at night we transform into sexually insatiable goddesses. Making a career is the last of our worries, because it is the family, husband and children who always come first. Simply put, a Polish woman is one of the best deals on the matrimonial market.

Much to my mother's disappointment, I yearned for a childless and marriage-free existence, whether in Poland or in England, and with the list of expectations relentlessly drummed into my head since I was a child at school and at home, I felt I had to escape my conventional predicted future. I was terrified by the prospect of ending up like my mother; a faithful and devoted housewife. It was not only how she groomed us at home when we were children: weaving ribbons into our plaited hair, buying colourful fabrics on the black market to sew skirts on the Singer sewing machine, knitting pullovers out of pink wool; my childhood was full of my mother's commanding voice: 'Don't splash soup on your blouse'; 'Stop laughing so loud'; 'Sit straight with legs together, you are not in a barn.'

Don't be surprised. My mother is the product of a strict Catholic upbringing. And I can tell you now that if you decide to stay here, she will get her hands on you before you know it.

Unfortunately, it did not end with my mother. At primary school, Alicja and I were taught to bake, knit, and make sandwiches, while the boys built birdhouses, learnt about car engines, and assembled radios. I, too, wanted to build

birdhouses. At secondary school, my mother made sure Alicja and I attended classes on religion. Catholic religion – it is not like in the UK where you have a chance to learn about other denominations. Here you will learn only about sweet Jesus.

I say, forget about Jesus. There are so many gods to choose from.

My mother was friends with Father Maciej, who dutifully reported whenever I skipped classes. What she did not know was that I would use the hours of freedom to hang around the park near the secondary school where I smoked my first joint and listen to the Doors on a Polish-made Diora cassette player. It was so much more fun than memorizing the Ten Commandments.

I was popular among the boys. I think for the first time I realised that there was an opportunity for me. I was not only interested in getting stoned in the park but I was already collecting my first list of future contacts. I smoked, I observed, I listened. I sometimes let them fondle my breasts or lifted my skirt to show them my knickers, and in return, they told me who their suppliers were, how much they paid, who their friends were in other schools who also bought ganja. Most importantly I felt safe. The boys, who later became my devoted clients, never thought of me as a potential wife.

Alicja deliberately chose to prove that individuals can change the stereotypes. 'It's up to you,' my sister would say. She was impatient to demonstrate her being a girl had nothing to do with being successful; I was impatient to leave for a place where I did not have to justify myself.

Several interviews later, I eventually got a full-time job at a major diamond company as a junior assistant in the marketing department. Hatton Garden – the perfect environment for a dealer. Did I hear you right? Imagine the possibilities, the rich clients. But at that time I was nobody in London and I knew nobody. I refused to pimp my product on the streets. I still



had a lot to learn. The salary was at least six times more than I could make in Poland. I decided to watch and listen. Eventually I would find the right person.

The post-communist hunger struck and I spent most of my salary every month on shoes and handbags, and everything else I did not need. When I came to the UK I was economically starved. I had all this drug money back home but I could not buy the products I wanted. I was greedy to have a surplus of everything in my life. Splashing cash on fancy Western products which my family could hardly afford would have raised suspicions. You must understand that until I decided to leave Poland I still lived with my parents.

Now, there is lesson number three for you. Don't get greedy. The last thing you need is people, especially your family, wondering how you could possibly afford all these expensive things. Best to keep a low profile, especially if you still live with your parents.

I am sorry. I did not mean to upset you. Let's carry on.

I settled into my first job, in the safety of my colleagues' familiar smiles. I did not think that anything unexpected could happen. At the beginning I did not have a reason to develop cautiousness towards the people I worked with. I did not realise what lay beneath the surface of their exaggerated politeness. I let myself trust them because, despite my arousing their curiosity (I was the only Pole working for the company), they accepted and tolerated me. I did not think there were any barriers between us. Why would I? As I walked the corridors of the company, every person welcomed me with a grin and a question: 'Are you settling in well? Are you enjoying yourself?' As if my wellbeing was everybody's personal agenda.

It was the first observation about my new life that I reported to my mother. 'They are hiding something,' she said. 'Nobody smiles unless they want something from you.' I told her she was overreacting.

Occasionally the people I spoke to would display a look of bewilderment when I spoke about our country, its religiousness or cuisine, but I thought my stories were simply too exotic.

'You've got a funny accent,' I heard one day at lunchtime from one of my colleagues when we both stood in the queue in the company's canteen. 'Where are you from?'

'Poland.'

'Really? So you people were like part of Soviet bloc? But now it's safe to travel there, isn't it?'

'No Soviet army on the streets any more.'

'You're so lucky to be in London.' I was rewarded with a sympathetic smile.

I hardly expected them to understand since even I realised how ludicrous my stories must have sounded to them when I heard myself trying to explain the daily hardships of emerging from communist rule. Some English live in blissful ignorance of their superiority, of their well-established democratic ways and equal rights. My presence in their company was proof they were doing the right thing, giving me a chance to experience what I lacked back home.

I had been working for the company for two months now. In the first week of December the management announced a Christmas party. I did not think the people I worked with would treat the whole incident at the party so seriously. I certainly did not. Basically after one too many glasses of champagne, and an ecstasy pill I had swallowed in the ladies' toilet, I joined the table of senior executives and decided to smoke a cigar with them. It did not end there because when I got bored with the conversation I left them and jumped on the stage. My soul woke up to the beat blasted by the DJ the company hired to entertain the younger staff. Below me was a liquid mass of bodies. I must admit, I had encouraged more attention than I intended.

The only good thing that came out of this mess was sex with Percy Jantjes, a South African lawyer, who worked for the

company. We got back to his place after the party came to its end around one in the morning.

Still, I broke one of my own rules: don't draw attention to yourself. But if you don't make mistakes you will never learn. A simple truth but a very good one. You should remember that as well.

I was still in the black cab going back home from Jantjes's flat in Notting Hill when I called Alicja. 'You promised you wouldn't do anything stupid,' she said. I failed to convince her in my drunken voice that my disruptive behaviour – the dancing, not the sex – was largely exaggerated and would be quickly forgotten. She had a different opinion. Besides, as far as I remember, I never promised her I wouldn't do anything stupid.

I naïvely thought that the Monica Lewinsky scandal would be forgotten by now. I underestimated the culture I was living in. In different circumstances there would be nothing wrong with a woman smoking a cigar, except I worked for a company with more than one hundred years of tradition and which employed whole generations of families, mostly Oxbridge educated.

Correction – there were some gays who commented with a sorrowful shake of their heads on my misguided colour coordination: 'Darling, if you don't mind me saying, those colours are so yesterday. It's black, black, black.' I went shopping for new clothes, all black of course, the same day.

What attracted Human Resources' attention more than smoking the cigar was the fact that I openly talked to people I was not supposed to. The company I worked for had invisible glass partitions, safely guarding the executives from the lower-level employees.

The culture that looked so welcoming suddenly began to feel very alien.

'There was a complaint against you,' Jantjes told me two weeks later at his place. He was my first link to the cannabis business I was yet to establish in London.

I took a spliff from his hands. 'It's good.'

'Swazi gold.'

'Have you got more of it?'

'I have a small amount of Zimbabwean mbanje and some Malawian chamba. I'm not sure you will like them.'

'Let me try.'

He took a thin long wrap and handed it to me. 'Malawian. It's called a kop or a head.'

I gently rolled the tightly wrapped cob in my fingers. It was small enough to place it in my pocket. He took it from me, cut the wrapping and rolled a spliff with no tobacco.

'Nah, I think I will stick with Swazi gold,' I said after a while, filling my lungs with the chamba smoke.

'Dagga and Swazi gold are most popular. Dagga costs almost nothing in South Africa. Around £22 per kilo, loose leaves, straight from the producer.'

'You're joking,' I said. I quickly made a calculation in my head. The average street price for South African cannabis in the UK was more than £3,700.

'So what's this complaint about?' I asked.

'You are a bad girl, you know that?' he said, biting my ear.

Jantjes blocked my next question with his lips on mine while I kept thinking that the complaint must have been made by somebody who witnessed my behaviour. How was it possible that an immigrant with a dubious command of English could so easily befriend the senior executives? It was a question that probably rattled through the brain of the person who made the complaint. Instead of staying quiet and inconspicuous, within my bounds, I had dared to make myself visible.

I blamed Percy Jantjes. He should have warned me. After all, he often complained about 'certain cultural inconsistencies,' as he put it, that I should be aware of. I remember him cautioning me against some of our colleagues.

‘They’re not what they seem,’ he said. ‘And one more thing: maybe it would be better if we were not seen talking with each other in the company, at least until the situation quiets down a bit.’

‘I grew up in a police state. I think I can handle a few overzealous Englishmen who have a burning desire to get rid of me,’ I said. ‘Back to business. Can you get me in touch with somebody on the ground?’

During working hours we began to maintain a professional aloofness. In Jantjes’s flat we smoked and fucked. He was attracted to my Slavic side, the distortions in my accent, and he liked it when I spoke Polish to him during sex. ‘Say something in your language,’ he would ask me. And I recited poems I remembered from my secondary school by the greatest Romantic Polish poets, Mickiewicz, Slowacki, Norwid. When I recall how he got aroused to the words ‘For a year I’ll make my dwelling with Beelzebub,’ I thought that perhaps I should have chosen a different profession. It all came so easily.

In exchange for sex he told me everything he knew about cannabis production in South Africa. Don’t make that face at me. I told you, you should use your assets as a woman. Besides I found him equally exotic, with his Afrikaans, which he mostly used for swearing. His parents exchanged their involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle for a vineyard in eastern Stellenbosch. Percy Jantjes knew a grower who cultivated cannabis crops in the KwaZulu-Natal province. He said the money from wine production did not come near the profits on exporting South African weed. ‘You are on your own,’ Jantjes told me when he handed me a phone number written on a piece of torn newspaper. ‘Wait till I introduce your name first before you make contact. Always call him from a different phone number.’ He did not want to know the details. He only bought enough for

himself and his close friends to smoke but he was not involved in drug trafficking.

I rewarded his trust with more sex.

For the next month I took his advice about keeping my distance so seriously that he finally approached me near the lifts.

‘I don’t want to be branded as a troublemaker,’ I explained.

He made sure nobody was around before he drew me closer to steal a kiss from me.

‘It’s too late now,’ Jantjes said, still holding me his arms.

But I was confused and did not share his laughter. I did not know how to read my colleagues any more. The feeling of security I had developed working in this company for the last six months changed into a form of paranoia. Could they actually get rid of me because of a stupid incident at a Christmas party?

‘Don’t be silly. Of course not,’ he said, but his answer did not sound convincing.

You see, you should always be vigilant and assume the worst-case scenario. I did not. This, I think, is lesson number four. I hope you are keeping count but please stop me if I am wrong.

At the beginning of February, a special edition of the internal newspaper distributed via email to all workers in the company had a picture of me on the front page – my silk skirt lifted above the knee level, my arms thrown up in the air, my lipstick-stained lips around a fat cigar. It was not the image my mother would picture when thinking about her daughter working abroad.

I am glad it makes you smile. It is reassuring to discover that at least one person in this family has a sense of humour.

From now on I did everything I could to keep a low profile, restricting interaction with my colleagues to a bare minimum. I kept telling myself that soon my unfortunate conduct would be forgotten. I limited my visits to the company’s

canteen, I chose my smoking spots carefully, tucked away in a side street rather than in front of the main entrance, and I used the staircase instead of the lifts to avoid my colleagues' curious glances.

The company gave me one last chance to prove my fading obedience during the selling days held every five weeks. It was Percy Jantjes who pulled a few strings to get me into this. He was thoroughly civil, which I appreciated. Or maybe by then he knew that I was on the way out and it was just a matter of when it would happen. Either way, I was impressed. Not to the point where I would go back to him, but I did thank him for using his influence. 'Everyone deserves a second chance,' he said to me in his office and I attributed his comment more to his good nature than to the fact that I was still upset he was somewhat ashamed to be seen talking to me.

The diamond selling days were a party of precious stone indulgence, hosted for the exclusive and highly esteemed diamond traders, known as the sightholders. Each sightholder would enter an empty room, empty, that is, except for a dark cloth-bound table where the diamonds were later displayed. In case anybody had the audacity to launch an attack from the opposite building and steal the rocks straight from the table, the windows were bulletproof. I know because I checked – one of the advantages that comes from smoking weed with the lawyer, who knows the secrets of the company.

Who could be better at the diamond trade than Orthodox Jews? As expected, they arrived in large numbers. Because I was a woman, but not one of their wives, I was instructed not to engage in any kind of conversation with the Orthodox Jewish diamond traders. God forbid I was menstruating! I wondered if Jantjes's favour was nothing but a bad joke.

'Do I actually have to disclose if I have a period?' I asked, when prompted to share this piece of information a few days before the fair.

'We treat cultural and religious beliefs very seriously and we cannot afford to insult anybody,' I heard from the spokesperson of the company. He did not give a rat's arse about insulting Botswana by turning it upside down in search of precious stones, but would go to great lengths to please Orthodox Jewish diamond traders who arrived to buy Botswana's heritage.

Forgive me, I did not mean to shout. I got carried away there.

Alicja was furious. She said it was proof that even in the emancipated Western world I was constructed within the boundaries of my femininity.

'Why do you want to change somebody else's country instead of making a difference in your own?' she said during our telephone conversation.

I lied that I needed more time, that it was too soon to proclaim a firm judgment, pack my bags and return to Poland. She reluctantly agreed.

Before I left Poland I had already decided that I wasn't going back. Lying to my family was easy.

I refused to disclose whether I was menstruating or not. On the day of the event I showed up at work as usual. And yes, in case you are wondering now, I did have my period. My curiosity about what was going to happen was larger than the fear of being sacked. Was I going to burn on the spot, or in hell later? You see, I do not respond well to authority.

I was in a lift with three Orthodox Jewish sightholders, squeezed into the furthest corner. I did not have a pen and paper to help me resist the urge to break the silence with my female, unmarried and menstruating voice.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' I coughed to get their attention. 'The event takes place on the fourth floor and the refreshments will be served on the fifth. Toilets are located on each floor.' All at once, they shouted in Yiddish, their long curled sidelocks bouncing against their cheeks.

Later that day, I was called into the boss's office.



'I heard you were talking to our clients,' he started, without lifting his head from the pile of documents covering his desk.

'Well yes, I wanted to inform them how to find their way around the building.'

'Did they ask you for your opinion?'

'No, but...'

'Exactly,' he said, lifting his index finger in a gesture of silencing me. 'And weren't you informed about not talking to the clients, and specifically not to the Orthodox Jewish diamond traders?' he asked, shaking his finger at me, which was entirely unnecessary. I was a grown, thirty year-old woman, not a kid at school.

'Yes, I was, sir. But I thought they would like to know where the toilets are, Wouldn't you?'

This time he looked at me. 'Don't get clever with me. Next time do as instructed.'

There was no next time because a month later I was no longer working for the company, which did not surprise me. I would have fired myself. I did not care because I got what I needed – my first job experience and the contact for the supplier of Swazi gold.

Termination of my contract was quick and painless.

'Do you enjoy working for our company?' asked the Human Resources manager. I did not think he expected an honest answer from me so I said yes.

'It's been five months and your maternity cover has come to an end. I am really sorry to inform you that we decided not to extend the contract with you. We don't feel you fit the image of the company. And as you know, we are in a business where each employee is the face of the company. And recently you have not conducted yourself appropriately. Therefore we have come to the conclusion that it would be best if our ways were to part. I am sure you will understand. Besides your contract was a maternity cover, which as far as I am aware has come to its natural end.'

After my dismissal I went to one of the wine bars on Charterhouse Street and waited for Percy Jantjes. He quickly walked in my direction, and before he sat down next to me said, 'Well done. You ruined everything.'

'Fancy a glass of wine or a goodbye fuck?'

'I vouched for you and this is how you repay me?'

'You're just like them.'

'What?'

'You heard me. You talk behind their back, but you're too scared to jeopardize your position by saying something into their faces. What's the word? Ah yes, a hypocrite.'

'You're drunk. Let's go home.'

As much as I was attracted to the childlike curiosity he displayed every time he explored my body with his tongue, and his tireless playfulness during sex, which made the nights we spent together so unexpectedly entertaining, I said no.

'I'm going back to my home. You can go to yours if you like. There's a third option: you can pick up the bill for this bottle of wine.'

'How can you be so selfish?'

'You're angry because I'm not the poor Eastern European girl who needed saving. And it never crossed your mind that maybe it was never about that.'

'I cannot help you to get your job back.'

I had what I wanted. I did not need his help anymore.