

An excerpt from *Het koninklijk huis* (The Royal Household)

a novel

by Herman Koch

EPISODE 1

At a first glance, King Hendrik and Queen Margarita seem happily married, although Hendrik is perhaps happier with his wife than vice versa. On occasion the queen visits Amsterdam incognito, for a little up-market shopping on P.C. Hoofstraat, or simply to enjoy a brief moment of freedom. An encounter during one of those visits is about to change the lives of the royal couple forever.

The queen was asleep.

Her husband, the king, climbed out of bed almost without a sound and walked to the window. There he slid aside the curtains and looked out. The red sky of morning hung above the crowns of the trees at the far end of the palace garden. A heron took a few cautious steps along the tiled edge of the ornamental pond, then froze in place and stared into the water, its head tilted slightly to one side.

Carefully – for he didn't want to wake her right away - the king opened the curtains a little further, allowing a beam of red sunlight bisected by a ray of golden yellow to touch the head of the bed, just beside her sleeping face, her hair fanned out across the pillow.

Each morning again he was amazed to think that he had been able to make this woman his. Every hour of the day. From the moment she got out of bed, put on her kimono and walked barefooted to the bathroom, to late evening, the hour at which she took the elastic bands and combs from her hair, shook it loose and turned back her side of the eider featherbed.

During those first minutes of morning, he listened to the hissing of the shower and closed his eyes. Behind his closed lids, one image segued into the next: her naked body, the kimono, and then again only her body, under the jets of water. He wished he could be one of those droplets. From up above he would fall as tenderly as he could onto her face, her forehead, her eyelids or her lips. From there he would flow on down, first along her neck, then a brief moment of hesitation at the clavicle: on which side of her breasts would he continue his course? Left or right, or in between? He pushed off, like a ski-jumper at the top of the ramp, and there he was already at her stomach, then, more like a bobsled now, gaining extra momentum in the curve of her navel and so reaching the most electrifying part of the run. He held his breath. Here all droplets converged again, together they became a rivulet. Along the inside of her thigh, he slid further down, took in skillful stride the obstacle of her knee, and so reached her ankles, her feet. By way of her little toe, he left her body and allowed himself to be carried to the drain along with all the other droplets.

Before climbing into bed at night, she would also disappear into the bathroom for quite a while. He didn't really know what she did in there. First he would hear the familiar sound of the electric toothbrush – she never failed to complete the full cycle of four times thirty seconds.

He himself often fudged. Tomorrow, he would say to himself then. Tomorrow I will brush more thoroughly. Today I have the day off. His hurry to keep the hygienic ritual as short as he could had to do with his own face in the mirror, the zoom of the toothbrush in his mouth, his faulty concentration on the brushing itself, so that after the first thirty seconds the toothpaste foam was already running down his chin. He usually avoided looking at that face. He wasn't fond of himself at such moments, in the harsh light reflected off the bathroom's white tiles – or at least not of his own head. It was as though a

bottomless pit lay between the thoughts in that head and the head itself. As though his thoughts just couldn't conjure up a fitting expression on that face.

Sometimes he turned off the toothbrush after only half a cycle, rinsed his mouth quickly and moved his face up closer to the mirror. He tried to think about something: something that had happened that day; about his wife; about his daughter. But because he didn't really think, that is to say: because every thought of substance went fluttering away after a couple of seconds, his face remained blank and expressionless.

At other times he went on looking at himself, and tried to adopt a pensive expression with a frown and a slight squint. Sometimes he would say something: "Hey, how are you doing?" or: "Ladies and gentlemen, members of parliament." Not so long ago he had watched a TV interview with what they called a "laughter therapist". The man claimed that you could improve your mood by laughing, laughing without any cause, a smile was often already sufficient. Shortly after watching that he had tried it himself, and while his mouth was spreading in a smile supported by no emotion whatsoever, he felt briefly that he was being raised to a different state of mind. But he wasn't sure whether it was because of the smile or because he suddenly saw himself sitting there: a king smiling at nothing whatsoever, in any empty room, and that caused him to laugh for real. Quickly enough, the laughter therapist and his therapy disappeared from his thoughts, and once again the smile was swept aside.

He opened the curtains a bit more, so that a ray of sunlight touched her face, then stepped over to the foot of the bed. On any other morning he would have let her go on sleeping, but today he wanted to look her straight in the eye as quickly as possible, to ask if she'd been dreaming. Although it would actually be better to wait until she started talking about it herself. That is: *if* she started talking about it herself.

Last night she had turned to him in her sleep, put her arm around his waist, hugged him tightly and whispered something in his ear.

"What did you say?" he'd asked, but she didn't respond. From that moment on, he was unable to sleep. He hadn't looked to see what time it was; in any case, it was still dark out. It felt like he'd been lying awake for hours.

The queen moaned quietly, rocked her head back and forth on the pillow a few times, then rubbed her eyes.

“Hendrik...” she said, once she opened her eyes and saw her husband standing in his pajamas at the foot of the bed. “What is it... What time is it?”

He said nothing. He waited. Maybe she had no memory of what had happened during the night. Hadn't the faintest idea what she, in her sleep or half-awake, had whispered in his ear.

A few days ago he himself had had a dream that stuck with him. He wasn't much in favor of relating one's dreams, and certainly not of searching for hidden meanings. “I had such a weird dream,” his wife said sometimes, while they were still lying drowsily in bed – and as soon as she said that, he braced himself. What followed was almost always something about a ship, or a desert. A ship or a desert, “and all of us were there.” “You were there, and Vera, my parents...” By that point he had in fact already stopped listening. His wife talked about what had happened in the dream, aboard that ship or in that desert. “We were all there, and at the same time we weren't,” and the ship and the desert too after a while became “not really a ship” and “not a real desert anymore”.

Having arrived at that point in the dream, in the dream being recounted by the queen, he would feel his eyelids growing heavy, he had to be careful not to fall asleep beside her. Until the question he feared most came at last, the way it always did. “What do you think, Hendrik? What do you think the dream means?”

His dream hadn't been one like that. You didn't have to ask about the meaning, because it was as plain as the nose on your face. In his dream he was hunting in the fields of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen; behind the low dyke lined with poplars you could see the spire of the church at Lamswaarde. So far, not a whole lot going on. He went there often to hunt, his dreams always had a high reality content. That was one difference between him and his wife. That same thing applied to their choice of Netflix or HBO series. Margarita, accordingly, was completely nuts about *Game of Thrones*; he himself gave up on it as soon as the first fire-breathing dragon appeared. After that he only watched out of love for Margarita, all seven seasons long. And he didn't even mind. It was lovely to just lie up against her and watch the whole parade of obscure characters go traipsing across the screen, while she, during the grimmest scenes – yet another beheading or burning-at-the-stake – would cover her eyes.

“Can I look yet?”

“The horse is still bleeding to death, that’s all. But you can’t see that anymore.”

In his dream he had shot two pheasants on the wing, one right after the other, and they both disappeared with a great flapping of wings behind a farmer’s shed. He didn’t have the dog with him, not the way he usually did. In no hurry, the gun slung casually over his shoulder, he had walked over to the shed. But instead of finding the pheasants, he found a man and a woman. They were both covered in blood, it was obvious as could be that they were mortally wounded. The man’s face was unfamiliar, but when the woman turned her head, he was looking straight into the shocked eyes of his wife.

“Hendrik, what have you done?” she asked, breathing laboriously as the blood gushed from her mouth and down her chin. “We waved to you. Didn’t you see us?”

Was this what they called “a portentous dream”? He looked at her face, she was squinting now into the bright sunlight. To cast his shadow over her face, all he had to do was take one step to the side, but he remained where he was.

Do you still love me? It was a question that took the place of a different question. One he would never ask her, if it was up to him, the question famous soccer players never ask their wives either. *Would you have fallen for me even if I wasn’t...?*

“You were pretty restless last night,” he said finally, stepping to one side now at last. “Did you have a weird dream or something?”

Sometimes the queen went to Amsterdam, incognito. She would put on pair of jeans with holes in them, combined with a leather jacket, a black wool ski hat with a white Nike swoosh on it, and put the finishing touch to her disguise with a pair of Ray-Ban sunglasses.

The first few times it had been exciting. What if someone recognized her anyway? She had the driver drop her off on Dam Square, then she would stroll down Kalverstraat. Sometimes people looked at her: they looked once, then they looked again, the way you do at someone you think you’ve seen before but can’t really place.

It could also have been that they only looked at her because of her looks, she told herself. Especially men. She saw their glances, the way their eyes they traveled down her leather jacket to her torn jeans

and then on to her no longer completely new white sneakers. They probably thought they detected a pretty woman behind the sunglasses and underneath the Nike cap.

During the last ten years, she had been unmasked only once. A sales clerk at the Athenaeum bookstore on Spui complimented her on her purchase, the second novel by a gifted Dutch writer.

“May I congratulate you on your good taste, Your Majesty?” he said, so quietly that no one else in the store could hear. For a moment she thought she was about to blush, but then she bestowed upon the sales clerk her warmest smile, the smile that had become her trademark, no other smile was quite like hers – and by simply showing him her smile, she confirmed that he had indeed seen correctly.

Once she’d left, the clerk hurried up the shop stairs. “You’ll never guess who was just in here,” he said to his two colleagues who were shelving books.

On the top floor was a little window, they had to bend down to look out.

“Her?” one colleague asked. “You’re kidding, right?”

And indeed, in her disguise, when seen from the back, the queen looked more like a sixteen-year-old girl.

“It’s really her,” the clerk said as Margarita walked past the statue of Het Lieverdje, then crossed the street and entered Café Luxembourg. “She smiled at me, you know, with that smile, that whole row of pearly whites, no, there was no mistaking that.”

On occasion, the queen even ventured onto P.C. Hooftstraat in disguise. She went to the shops there fairly often otherwise, to buy clothes, but then it was usually an official visit. A black Mercedes with tinted windows would pull up right in front of the door of the shop she wanted. The bodyguards got out of the car first. Sometimes her arrival had been announced beforehand, then the shopkeeper would close for half an hour during her visit. There were other times when popped in on impulse. “Let’s swing by the P.C.,” she’d say to her driver, after a lunch with a foreign head of state at the Palace on Dam Square. Then the bodyguards would go into the shop and ask the customers there, friendly but firmly, to come back later.

Deep in her heart the queen enjoyed the submissive behavior of the sales people, the way they sometimes seemed to be wondering whether to bow or not, the vague look of panic on their faces. But she never abused her position of precedence over the common people. She issued no orders, never snapped at people. On the contrary, she did her best to make everyone feel comfortable as quickly as

possible. She was the queen, everybody knew that, there was absolutely no reason to put any added emphasis on her natural authority.

“Please, let’s just relax and act normal,” she said. “How about if all of you just show me the new collection first?”

“So normal, so down-to-earth,” the salespeople would say to each other afterwards. “What a sweet, charming woman. If only all our customers were as well-heeled as she is.”

In disguise, however, the queen saw the shopkeepers as they really were. When she would stroll past the racks and run her fingers over the sweaters and blouses, a salesperson would usually come up to Margarita within the minute to ask if she could perhaps be of some assistance.

“No, thank you, I’m only looking,” she said. And in the expression on the salesgirl’s face she saw a hint of disapproval. It was a look she never got to see when visiting that same shop with her bodyguards.

Finally, she would take one or two blouses to a fitting room. There she would remove her Nike cap and sunglasses, shake free her hair and run her fingers through it so that it once again fell across her shoulders in waves.

The salesgirl would be standing just outside the curtain, waiting for her.

“What do you think,” the queen would ask, “perhaps a little too tight? Do you have this in extra-large too?”

The look then on the salesgirl’s face – that was the real treat.

“Your Majesty... I didn’t know, I thought...”

“Please, no need to apologize. I’m just trying to keep a low profile. So if you have an extra-large here somewhere, could you perhaps bring it to me?”

The panic on the salesgirl’s face made way for relief. That too was something the queen wouldn’t have wanted to miss. With her royal presence, she could generate both panic and relief on the part of her subjects.

She looked at the face of her husband as he stood at the foot end of the bed. It was the same face she had fallen in love with years ago, she still didn’t know exactly how that had happened. Of course, his

face bore a promise. When she was first introduced to him, at a reception at the Dutch embassy in New York, he was still a prince. But someday he would be the king, and she would be the queen.

Hendrik was sweet and attentive, he adored her. She had really come to love him, to love his sweet face, his eyes that clung to her wherever she went. Not right away, at that first meeting at the embassy, but certainly in the weeks that followed – and right up to this very day.

The only thing was, there was no way to separate her feelings for him from the fact that he would one day become the king of the Netherlands. Which now, as he stood there at the foot of the bed, he actually was.

The way he looked at her... That loving look, in complete adoration, as though he might fall to his knees before her at any moment and kiss her hand. During those first years, it had been addictive. There was no greater pleasure than seeing yourself worshiped in the eyes of another. His gaze traveling over her face, over her body. A look that made her warm inside and caused her to glow. Better than a mirror. But in recent years she also found it tiring at times, the way you can become tired of an all-too-devoted pet, a cat that never stops brushing up against your legs or trying to jump onto your lap.

Whatever the case, though, she didn't want to disappoint that sweet face, she never wanted to hurt him, or try to put one over on him.

But she had to, there was no way out now. How could she possibly tell him what she'd dreamed about last night?

Her mind racing, she went in search of dreams she'd had before. Ones she hadn't told the king about yet. But it was impossible: as soon as she had them they evaporated right away, they went up in smoke. She was going to have to make one up on the spot.

"I was walking down a hallway," she began. "A hallway that wasn't actually a hallway..."

Joseph Bosman saw it right away.

Perhaps it was because of what people called his "special eye" for things, his unusual way of looking, which you saw reflected in his paintings too. He saw things in a context that was out of the ordinary. A horse in a field was never just a horse, but right away it was The Horse Throughout the Ages. First living free in the wild, then as beast of burden and motor to the plow and the stage-coach, in full gallop at the

spearhead of the cavalry, and finally as a superfluous thing, serving only to entertain, bearer of jockey and jumper – and that’s the way he painted it too.

When the painter fixed his gaze on others, they were always the first to avert their eyes. He saw a new face and tried to absorb it in its entirety, to make it his own right away. He looked at faces the way a person who hasn’t eaten for two days looks at a table set for dinner. That, perhaps, was what made other people look away.

Sometimes he tried to catch his own gaze in the mirror, but it didn’t work that way. He was simply incapable of looking at himself with the same kind of intensity. He couldn’t pretend he was taking himself in to himself, or devouring himself whole.

He rarely shaved, he usually sported a stubbly beard that was a few days or weeks old – as soon as it was about to become a real beard, he shaved it off.

He was, generally speaking, satisfied with his own looks, with his face. What that face resembled most was an untidied room. A room with all kinds of things lying around, socks on the floor, dirty dishes beside the bed, but not in a way that bothered you. Even without the intense gaze, it radiated something, something warm and robust: a boulder fallen from a mountainside, logs beside a fireplace, a fisherman’s net being drawn in. If he’d been born a boat, he would have been a trawler. A trawler just as it reaches the crest of the wave and then slams its hull back into the water in a cloud of flying foam.

They were all standing outside, before the door to the gallery – it was too warm, too crowded inside, the people were packed together, sweating in there. After the obligatory speeches, after the obligatory procession past the paintings, they had all picked up their glasses and gone outside as fast as they could. He was the first one, and maybe the only one, to notice the girl coming around the corner. There was no way he could know that he had been the first, of course, but that’s the way it felt. In any case, he paid more attention to her appearance than did the others who, a bit more noisily now, were occupying the sidewalk and part of the street.

For one, or perhaps two seconds, he thought that she was indeed a girl. She was walking with her head down, as though she had eyes only for the paving stones.

But then she seemed to become aware of the presence of a large group of people out on the street. She raised her head, quickly scanned the crowd gathered in front of the gallery, and smiled.

As though that's what she was used to doing, he thought later, as though the smile was her natural reaction to crowds and she'd almost had to force herself not to wave.

It wasn't that he blocked her path, at most he took one step aside so that she would have to swerve to keep from bumping into him.

"Excuse me," he said.

She looked up at him, he stood at least a head taller than her; she was still wearing the smile.

"Do you mind my asking... Would you perhaps like to have a drink with us? With me? A glass of white?"

She'd hesitated for maybe half a second as she examined his unshaven face. Perhaps this big man had recognized her, he saw that in her expression. He kept his gaze on her.

"Okay," she said. "Why not? A glass of white wine please, if you have it."

"Yes," he said, holding out his hand. "Joseph Bosman."

Again, she hesitated. He was curious to hear what name Queen Margarita would come up with for herself in disguise.

"*The* Joseph Bosman?" she asked. "The painter? I thought I recognized you somehow."

For a brief moment he thought about putting an end to the farce right then and there, about kneeling in front of her, kissing her hand and saying "At your service, Your Majesty," but there was plenty of time for that.

She shook his hand, which enveloped hers almost entirely.

"Charlie," she said.

Fifteen minutes later, he poured her a second glass and they went strolling side-by-side past his paintings. Just like before, with *The Horse Throughout the Ages*, he saw her not as *the* queen, but as all queens put together. Not *who* she was, but *what* she was. There was a direct line linking her to all those other queens. At the point where it started was the very first queen: she stood up from her throne and, with a simple wave of the hand, indicated it was time for that traitor at the foot of her throne, down there between the two sentries, to be beheaded.

At the end of that same line was the queen standing beside him now, a queen who smiled as she watched a folkloric dance on King's Day, who took a demonstrative bite from a piece of gingerbread

hanging from a cord, who looked grave when the children of refugees from an asylum-seekers' center showed her their drawings of bombardments and burning tanks.

Standing beside her, he began wondering how long he could keep up this ruse. Whether he should tell her that he knew who she was. At the moment he felt a bit like a voyeur, as though he were spying through binoculars on a naked woman on a lounge chair in her garden.

He looked at her face in profile. She looked at his painting: a couple having a meal at an outdoor café, the man has taken the woman's hand in his, on the table is an open box from the jeweler's containing a glimmering engagement ring on a red velvet cushion. In the background, on the horizon, we see the mushroom cloud from an atomic explosion.

He could tell by her eyes, by the tip of her tongue with which she momentarily moistened her upper lip. She wasn't feigning interest. She was really looking.

"It's...", she began. "I find it disturbing, I'm sorry, I don't know any other word for it. It's disturbing, mostly because it's painted so well."

Almost all the paintings here today had a mushroom cloud in the background. That was the binding theme, the show's leitmotiv. The first painting they'd walked past was of a children's farm. Back when he used to visit the zoo with his parents or his whole elementary school class, the children's farm was always the first attraction he wanted to skip. He didn't have to see any pigs, ducks and geese, he wanted to move right on to the real animals. The only thing special about a children's farm was that the animals weren't behind bars, you could walk around in their midst.

In his painting he had done a precise representation of the children's farm, but he had replaced the domesticated animals with wild ones – he had gone to Artis Zoo specially for that reason. The children were now walking around amid lions, tigers, a venomous snake and a crocodile. There were three of them, a boy and two little girls, in dresses and short trousers that reminded you more of the 1950s than today. They were feeding the lion a hamburger, petting the crocodile and letting the boa constrictor drink from their bottle of soda pop through a straw.

It was one of the only paintings without a mushroom cloud. High in the sky, above the treetops, you saw something floating down on a parachute. The atom bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been tossed from a bomber on a parachute as well.

Free the Animals! the painting was called. The original title, *Little Boy Loves Animals*, he had abandoned a couple of days before the opening. There weren't a lot of people who knew that the bomb dropped over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 was called Little Boy.

The painting they were standing in front of now, the one with the man proposing to the woman, was called *The Shockwave Will Reach Them Within 11 Seconds*. The thing the paintings had in common was that no one seemed aware of the atomic explosion in the background. No one was paying any attention to the mushroom cloud on the horizon.

There was one painting with bathers playing badminton on the beach, the cloud is rising up out of the sea, a perfect replica of the nuclear tests photographed at Bikini atoll. In another one, people were disembarking from a train at a station in the countryside. A third one showed a soccer pitch in a little stadium, an injured player was lying on the grass, the referee was gesturing for a stretcher to be brought out.

The atomic explosion and the mushroom cloud didn't seem to have any effect on these peaceful scenes, as though the people were just going on about their quiet lives and weren't impacted by it at all.

"And what would you say was the painter's intention?" he asked, adopting the most ironic possible tone – or at least that's what he hoped.

"His intention..." She turned to face him, looked at him in shock.

"I was joking," he said.

He looked into her eyes, and she looked back. In her gaze he saw something questioning, something frightened too, as though she was afraid that he had recognized her after all and was only playing a game with her.

That was, indeed, exactly what he was doing: playing a game with her. He wouldn't clue her in, at least not yet; for the time being, he would act as though he were walking past his paintings with simply one woman among many.

"There is no intention," he said. "At least, I wouldn't know what it was. As a matter of fact, if I knew what my intention was I'd probably stop painting tomorrow. I'd never dare ask anyone, including you, about an intention. That would be too much like a school field trip to the museum."

She smiled broadly. "Oh yeah, those museum trips..."

"Did you go on those too? Here in Amsterdam?"

“They took us to the Stedelijk, I remember that clear as a bell, with the whole class sitting on the floor for a whole hour in front of that painting by Marc Chagall.”

“*The Violinist!* Oh my God, that’s so terrible.”

“The art history teacher asked us what it meant. That’s right, she actually asked us what the painter’s intention was. And the showoffs in the class raised their hands and recited all kinds of stuff about why the violinist was floating in the air above the rooftops, etcetera. While all we wanted was to get away from that horrid painting as quickly as possible.”

“I had an art history teacher too,” he said. “Maybe it was the same one. She was pretty old by then, friendly enough though; typically one of those unattached women who take jobs like that just to get out of the house every once in a while.”

“Yes, there was something sweet about ours too, that’s right. But also something a little sad. Like you said: lonely. Not someone you’d have a crush on as a ten-year-old boy.”

He couldn’t help laughing. Had she just narrowed her eyes at him? Was she suggesting that she was the kind of woman a man, he himself in fact, could develop a crush on?

“I bet we had the same teacher then,” he said, his eyes fixed on her the whole time. “What year was that, can you remember? Which primary school did you go to?”

Only too late did he realize that this was a roundabout way of asking her age. Not very polite. Never ask their age the first time you meet, that was his golden rule. No matter how old or how young she was, you should always make a woman feel that she was ageless. Or, in other words: at least ten years younger than she really was.

“I went to a Dalton school,” she said. “The one on Apollolaan.”

“I’ll be damned!” he said. “I went to the Montessori across the street, on Apollolaan too!”

She turned, not just her head but her whole body, to face him, and he did the same; they were no longer looking at the painting, they were looking at each other.

During their little walk around the gallery, he’d thought of saying that it might be better for her to take off her sunglasses, but for obvious reasons he hadn’t. Now he wondered whether maybe that already gave away the fact that he knew who she was.

Maybe she was playing a game with him too.

“Then I presume you also took part in the annual snowball fights,” she said.

“You bet!” he said. “I was...” He had started to say “I was one of the best snowball-throwers” but he stopped himself just in time. It would have sounded boastful, and there was no need for him to boast. “I always did, every year. I could throw pretty far,” he added, despite himself. “And hard too.”

The snowball fight always started with volleys from opposite sides of Apollolaan, but that was too far for any satisfactory result. One of the two schools – usually the Montessori – was the first to cross the traffic lane and advance to the median strip. But when the Dalton school got closer, it quickly became clear which of the two had the hardest snowball-pitchers.

“You guys were overconfident,” she said now, accordingly. “You moved up to the middle of the street, but in the end we always made you run for it. All the way back to your own schoolyard. Then you’d rush inside and try to pull the door closed behind you, but by then we’d gone berserk, because we’d won. We yanked the door open and chased you with snowballs all the way to the classroom, to rub them in your faces. Some of the kids at your school cried. So pitiful! But actually, of course, you were all just a bunch of crybabies.”

He couldn’t help laughing: it was true, she was absolutely right.

Both of their schools were on the most exclusive street on Amsterdam’s south side, but the Montessori was just a little more elitist, the Dalton a tad more common. Although “more common” in a neighborhood like that sounded as ridiculous as an actor from out in the genteel woods of Het Gooi trying to do the voice of an Amsterdam taxi driver.

More streetwise, that’s probably what you’d say these days about the Dalton pupils. And the Montessori kids were indeed – she’d said so herself – the crybabies. A disproportionate number of children with artists and actors as parents. And also quite a few dentists’, psychiatrists’ and bank directors’ kids. No plumbers, carpenters or bookkeepers. Most the pupils went straight from there to high school at the Montessori Lyceum, a few streets away. Where they were destined to fail miserably anyway. Those who actually graduated went on to fail at life itself. Montessori students rarely or never found a job, let alone kept one. Some used money from their parents to open a shop in the Jordaan neighborhood, where they sold cute little second-hand goods; others went on to study art history or anthropology for a couple of years, then started taking odd jobs as handymen. Not too frequently, by the bye, maybe three times a year: driving their used, dinged-up panel truck from the hardware outlet to the house with the soon-to-

be renovated kitchen, they congratulated themselves on the life they led. They didn't take part in the rat race, had never submitted to an office job simply for a regular paycheck. They were free. They lived life the way it was meant to be lived. People who actually earned money were bourgeois, after all, slaves to society.

"Oh yeah, absolutely, you're right," he said. "They were all crybabies. *We* were all crybabies," he added with a shrug, smiling at her apologetically; he hoped that was enough to show her that he himself had not been a crybaby. He had never turned and run; he'd always held his ground. Some of his classmates packed stones in their snowballs, but he didn't play dirty like that. With his big hands, he could knead the snow into a ball of ice that was hard as a rock – and throw it from far away, all the way across Apollolaan and right between the eyes of his chosen target. His victims wept and fell to their knees, had to run inside right away, or were in any case out of commission for the rest of the snowball fight.

"The worst of it was that your principal came and complained to our principal after we invaded your school," she said. "For punishment, we weren't allowed to go outside for a whole week. In any case, for as long as it took for the snow to melt."

It happened without any warning. You couldn't call it a memory, it was more like a flashback, the way it happens in movies. He saw a girl with long blonde hair. She was wearing a short jacket with a fur collar. He was lying on his back on the median strip on Apollolaan. She was leaning over him. In her hands a snowball the size of a soccer ball. He couldn't remember whether he had tripped or fallen down there on purpose. She was going to rub the snow in his face. He wanted her to rub the snow in his face. He would put up a struggle, but only for the show.

And just like in a movie, he blinked his eyes once and the flashback was gone – he was back in the real world.

"I hope you'll forgive me," he said. "I know it's not polite to ask something like this when you first meet a pretty woman. But how old are you, exactly? When exactly were you at the Dalton school?"

He smiled. Indirectly, in a sentence that had sounded almost ironic, he'd told her she was pretty – as though – which was his following thought - she hadn't known that forever already.

"I was born in September, 1971," she said. "September 5, 1971, to be exact."

He stared at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked; apparently, she’d seen something in his expression, in the way he looked at her – he realized that his jaw might actually have dropped.

“That’s unbelievable,” he said.

“What?”

“I was born on September 5, 1971 too.”

Now it was her turn to stare.

“We’re exactly the same age,” he said. “That’s... that’s...” He didn’t know how to go on. He was afraid he might have to fall back on the old cliché. *This can’t be a coincidence. How can that be?* At big, important moments in life, on the other hand, it’s usually impossible to avoid clichés. “I thought my final hour had struck,” says the survivor of the *Titanic* after he’s bobbed around for almost two hours in the icy waters and then, just before going down for the last time, is actually saved by a lifeboat.

And now she was saving him.

“Then we must have thrown snowballs at each other,” she said. “Maybe I even chased you into the Montessori school one time and then the principal had to come and rescue you.”

Yes, we threw snowballs at each other. Je rubbed snow in my face. I was lying on my back in the snow and you were sitting on top of me. And then, then you... And then I...

He hesitated about whether to tell her now or wait for some other time. At their following encounter. An encounter he was already certain was going to take place.

“Could I bother you for a moment?” asked the gallery owner, who had suddenly popped up beside him, freeing him from his dilemma for the time being. “There are a couple of people who’d like to buy something. And there’s a journalist who’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Joseph looked at Margarita and shrugged.

“I’m coming,” he told the gallery owner, still looking at her the whole time. “In a minute.”

“We’re out there,” said the gallery owner, pointing. “Outside, at the tables.”

“Are you...” he began once it was just the two of them again. “Will you stick around a bit? I mean, this doesn’t have to take long.”

“I really wish I didn’t, but in fact I have to be going,” she said. “I’m already running late. I should have been on my way home by now.”

“Home.” He let the word sink in for a moment. Home was the palace, he didn’t know exactly which one, he had never paid much attention to the doings of the royal household. In a flash, he saw in his mind’s eye long hallways with paintings on the walls, with sculptures. Down one of those hallways walked a footman, carrying a tray with a tea service. In that selfsame flash, he knocked and she let him in.

“That’s okay,” he said. “I was just... I wanted to ask you...”

And then he said it. He used the line he may not have used on a daily basis, but still at least once or twice a week. And somehow it was still fresh every time, the way a first kiss is of course just a kiss, but then again different with every new woman.

“I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t ask you to come and have a cup of coffee with me some time,” he said.

He knew the possible female reactions by heart, they could be counted on the fingers of one hand. First you had the blunt rejection, the disapproving look, about which one could make no mistake. The look on their face had been accommodating enough when he first spoke to them, as though maybe he only meant to ask the time, but then it changed from puzzled to ice-cold, their eyes filmed over, as though he had been peering through a window at them without asking, and now they yanked the curtains closed.

There were those – they were the worst, the kind of woman you wouldn’t want to start something with anyway – who looked at him as though he had touched a spot on her body that would have been inappropriate to touch even on the third date. They were seated in a crowded café, but still they looked around as though they were in a darkened, blind alley and might start screaming any moment now.

When rejected, he never went on insisting. Never. The women who gave him that look, he really had no desire to get to know them better. You saw a gold ring on a red velvet cushion in a showcase somewhere, but just as you were sticking your hand in to grab it you caught sight of the alarm system and pulled back.

Maybe they were attracted to other men. Or to a different type of man. Wishy-washy men, he could never help thinking. Men who wore little bracelets and mopped floors better than their wife.

Househusbands, perhaps.

The rejections were the majority by far. Nine times out of ten, he figured. That was okay. After number nine you always had number ten.

“I have a boyfriend / I’m married.”

This response didn't mean the door had been slammed in his face already. It was still open just a crack, the woman had opened the door for a stranger, but wasn't yet sure whether the man holding the package was a real postman or an impostor.

"He's a lucky man," he said whenever a woman told him she had a boyfriend.

When women said they were married, he said "So am I."

Coffee – a cup of coffee sounded safe and reliable. You weren't asking to meet in some dimly lit cellar, but in broad daylight, amid the housewives out shopping and the teleworkers with their laptops.

He hated coffee. Not so much the substance itself, really, more like the idea of drinking coffee in a public place. People who sat drinking coffee at eleven in the morning at a Coffeecompany or a Starbucks made little or nothing of their lives, that was his experience, no matter how much of a show they made of staring at their screen in so-called "concentration".

Whenever a woman agreed to a coffee appointment, he always called or send a text message at the last moment, to say that something unexpected had come up but that they could still meet at four. At café such-and-such. Did she know where that was? A café at four in the afternoon was like a turned-back blanket. On her side of the bed, that is, especially after three or four glasses of red wine.

"I'm starting to get pretty hungry," he said after that fourth glass. "Maybe we should go get something to eat."

One thing he knew for sure: men who rarely succeeded in seducing a woman always bragged, they wanted to share their conquest with as many other men as possible (and sometimes with other women too). Men like him, for whom flirting was a basic necessity of life, tended to keep their mouths shut.

When other people said that he could probably have any woman he wanted, that the girls were probably lined up around the corner to meet him, he just shrugged.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," he said.

And now he was looking at her, without her knowing that he knew that she was the queen of the Netherlands – or at least that's what he assumed.

"We could meet at the Stedelijk," he said. "There's a painting of mine there that I'd really like to show you."
