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How to live life

1

The title of this book may seem a little pretentious to you, but trust me, once I've finished telling my story, you will look at the wily, bittersweet sequence of facts we call "life" in a completely different and enlightening way. Yeah, there's absolutely no doubt about that. The problem is that I may not be able to tell my tale accurately- you see, my mind plays tricks on me, as it does with each and every one of us, I'm sure. It's difficult for me to recall events in the order in which they actually happened, and I also tend to omit details frequently - after all, I'm a minimalist, always been, always will be. The less, the simpler, the better. Most of the more satisfactory and complex things in life are quite simple in fact. So I decided that the only way I could ever be able to reveal my story to the world was to write it just as it comes to me - call it as you wish: stream of consciousness, free-association, whatever. That's the only way I can write.

Before I met The Artist, I had tried to write a novel. I had planned the whole of it very carefully, but didn't manage to put it into paper successfully. Just some twenty pages and I realised it was boring as hell (or probably more - I've heard that they have a very fast Internet connection in hell). Some time later, I found out that it was actually fortunate that I hadn't worked enough to finish the novel, as it would have been worthless. You see, I had planned this breathtaking, completely innovative and revolutionary ending that would forever change the writing industry (if there's such a thing). Approximately a year after I had given up on my project, I discovered, while I was accidentally reading a book by someone called Unamuno, that my breathtaking, completely innovative and revolutionary ending wasn't *that* innovative and revolutionary after all (you never know about breathtaking). That's the way it is: one day you think you are the genius that will change the world, the other day you are just the fool who thought was the genius that would change the world.

“Brilliance is relative, so you must remember every moment”, The Artist once said to me. “You have to capture each and every second: remembering everything is the only way you won’t forget the good things”. Ah, The Artist. I may not have a good memory, but I can assure you that, if I try hard enough, I can recall absolutely everything The Artist has told me during the many, many times we’ve met. In fact, now I realise that quoting him may be the *only* way to remember what actually happened. Few things I can remember, but The Artist’s words – those I’ll never forget. Another thing I know I’ll never ever forget is my beloved wife’s name - *Jasmine* – even though I only saw her seven times in my entire life. The first time was, obviously, the day I met her; and the last one was the night The Performer’s Daughter died... sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me take you back, if possible, to where it all began.

2

I was born without a personality. Or at least I had very little of it, since The Artist has explained to me time and time again that it's humanly impossible not to have a personality – that for some people it took more than a lifetime to discover it, but it was always there, somewhere, deep inside. He was right, of course – The Artist was right most of the time - , but what he failed to realise was that my personality, as ephemeral as it was, wasn't exactly mine.

I am defined by the people I've met in my life. If I hadn't met those people, I would have been a completely different person – or maybe I wouldn't have been at all. Now that I think about it, it's quite ironic – and I mean real irony, not Alanis Morissette-like irony – that I, who had so little to say and to give, have always been surrounded by people who lived their lives on high.

I fondly remember the conversation I had with The Artist the day after I met *Jasmine* for the first time. We were having a drink at our usual place... The Performer, I think, was... performing something (performing was his thing, you know). We were listening to his performance, which, as always, left me amazed and The Artist unimpressed, when I suddenly looked at The Artist and said:

- I met the love of my life yesterday.
- Yeah, that new Bowie record is a masterpiece –he said.
- No, I mean... a woman.
- A *woman*?

As you can see, The Artist was a very unusual guy. His only interest in life was art – an interest so vast that it made his relationship with the opposite sex – or *any* sex at all – the least of his worries.

- Yes, a woman – I continued.
- A man needs a woman like and eagle needs a car.
- You say that because you haven't met her.

He kept staring at me. I was waiting for him to ask me something, but since he didn't, I went on.

- Her name is Jasmine. She's a traveller.

- A traveller? What sort of job is that?
- What sort of job is being an "Artist", anyway? – The Performer joined the conversation abruptly. No one was listening to his performance anymore, so he probably thought he might as well stop, come to the table and make his daily attempt to piss The Artist off instead.

The Performer didn't like The Artist. Oh no, not at all. I think it was mainly due to the fact that The Performer hated to be ignored (hence the pretentious performances he was so famous for), and I had started to believe that The Artist was really unaware of his existence. Until he started having that strange relationship with The Performer's Daughter, at least. "Strong friendship", she called it... sorry, I got going again. Where was I? Oh, right, the conversation. I don't think there's much I can add to it, though (by now I guess you are already starting to get used to my instances of bathos. Sorry about that, but I warned you earlier – my mind plays tricks on me). Let me better tell you a little more about The Artist's relationship with The Performer's Daughter, which was intriguing to say at least. Oh, that girl just adored him. They never had any physical contact, no, it was more like a platonic relationship. If The Artist had felt the same way towards her, I would have been forced to believe that deep friendship between men and women was possible after all...

I'm having a flashback again. The three of us – The Artist, The Performer and I – were sitting at the UP (UP is short for "Usual Place" – since I'm going to mention it a lot of times during the story, I figured it would be a good idea to come up with an abbreviation for it), The Artist and I chatting and The Performer being ignored as usual. Personally, I didn't have any particular interest in ignoring The Performer, but since The Artist did and I couldn't help but paying attention to his words – he always had something interesting to say – , I didn't have much of a choice. Suddenly The Performer looked at The Artist, his eyes burning holes through him, and said:

- Touch my Daughter and I'll kill you.

- You needn't worry, my friend – The Artist replied, charming and quiet as always - . I have no intention of putting my hands on your teenage darling.

That was the first time The Artist had ever spoken to The Performer. I guess The Performer wasn't expecting that he would reply, and that's why he left the place in shock, as fast as he could, as if there had been a stampede of bloodthirsty mannequins following him.

- He was serious – I warned The Artist.
- He sure was. But I told him the truth. And anyway, my little Storyteller, there are not enough *ballets* in this world to kill an Artist!
- *Ballets?* You mean... like, dancing?
- Dancing? No, no, *ballets*... you know, guns shoot *ballets*...
- Oh! You mean *bullets*.
- No, my friend, I'm afraid to tell you that your pronunciation is inaccurate. This words comes from the Latin, "*baliesta*" . Over the years, people have changed the "a" for an "u", thus destroying the Latin morphology of the word.
- Really? I've said *bullets* all my life. Is it really *ballets*?
- No, not really, I made up that whole story. But you believed it for a moment, didn't you?
- Yes, I guess...
- That's all I needed to know. Haven't you realised that *ballets* sounds much, much better than *bullets*?
- Never really thought about it, but now that you mention it...
- I've decided that from now on, I'll always say *ballets* instead of *bullets*. And if anyone ever wants to correct me, that Latin "*baliesta*" story will shut them up.

That was the way The Artist was most of the time, or at least the way I would have liked to remember him: untroubled, always with a smile upon his face, adding new twists and turns to the most mundane of things... unfortunately, he changed as time went by. All of us did, in some way, the day The Performer's Daughter died (except for me – I had always been The Storyteller who didn't have enough personality to tell anything, and I still am).

But it's still too early to talk about that day. I'll keep postponing it as much as I can, I guess, since I prefer recalling the happier times – the long hours of conversation with The Artist at the UP, The Performer's complex, beautifully crafted performances, the joy I felt because I knew that I still had much of Jasmine to see...

Oh, Jasmine... my existence wouldn't have made much sense without her. It wasn't love at first sight, no. It took me about two minutes after I met her to fall head over heels. My first words to her weren't exactly memorable: "*What brings you here?*". Say what you will, but bare in mind that we weren't used to seeing new people arrive at the UP, so my question wasn't that inappropriate. Do you know what she answered? She said:

"I was following the trace of a rainbow and it led me here"

May I repeat it? She said:

"I was following the trace of a rainbow and it led me here"

That was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard from a human being. The rest was history. Our history, at least.

The Artist's first meeting with The Performer's Daughter wasn't nearly that memorable, but, since their history is in some way mine too, I think it's worth a mention: they were both sitting next to each other at the UP: she was crying a waterfall and he was reading a comic book... something called "Slingmen", I think. The Artist really liked comic books, specially the ones that didn't sell well. Anyway, the girl had been crying and crying for about an hour when The Artist gazed at her and said:

- I guess that, after all, it's true what they say about a seventy-five percent of the human body being water.

The girl kept crying for another hour. Suddenly, she stopped and, between sobs and snobs, shouted at The Artist:

- Aren't you gonna ask me *why* I'm crying?

The Artist hesitated for a minute. He scrutinised her as if he had just met a visitor from a faraway galaxy. Then he finally answered:

- Why on *Earth* would you want me to ask you that?

Based on that question, I assume that for a moment he really believed in the possibility of her being an alien. The girl didn't reply and continued with her downpour. Some minutes later, perhaps because he couldn't take the constant sobbing anymore, perhaps because he wanted to experiment something new to him (sociability), perhaps out of pity or perhaps because, although he'll never admit it, he really cared about her a little, The Artist made a mistake he would regret for the rest of his life: He asked The Performer's Daughter "*Why are you crying?*".

What followed next was an endless story of how her best friend kept betraying her, how she couldn't lose any weight even when she was strictly following Uranus' diet, how the hottie from the club she had screwed the previous week didn't call back again, how the whole universe was so cruel and unfair to poor little her... during this "marathonical babbling", as The Artist would call it (and yes, he was well aware that "marathonical" isn't a word – but he always said "if a word doesn't exist, someone has to invent it"), all he did was sit down and listen. Nothing else. But for The Performer's Daughter, it was more than enough.

As for The Performer himself, he didn't have much of a life apart from his performances. Of course, the performances had a life on its own. If U2 hadn't existed, I could have easily stated that The Performer was the best live act in the world. His shows were a mystical experience. He took anything from anyone – from Madonna to Chumbawamba, Harold Budd to The Ketchup Girls, Blonde Paulie to Mike Garson – and made it his own. Even the most mediocre of songs were brought to life by The Performer's talent. Most of the times the originals were turned into just a shadow of his interpretations. The gigs were maybe too pretentious, and the tickets' prices were not particularly friendly to the pocket – but I have to say that the shows were well worth the money. They were something that

each and every person should have experienced at least once in their lives. Unique and astounding... but, as I said before, there wasn't much about The Performer's life apart from them. Just maybe his bitter rivalry with The Artist, of which I have already told you a little earlier. Well, things started getting uglier between them the day The Performer bought a DVD player. But that's a story for another day (or chapter, since you will be reading it in this same book), as it's time for my Permanent Reminder of the day. Obviously, it'll have something to do with Jasmine – for her is the only thing I need to remember in order to go on living (and go on living I must, since I've promised her that I would finish this book).

Quite a group we were – Jasmine and I, I and Jasmine. The only positive aspect of our separation I can think of is the fact that there wasn't any rift between us – we remained the happiest of couples till the very last day we saw each other. But I shall not speak about our farewell right now, as I can't do so without crying, and I have to save my tears for the Permanent Reminder (The Artist once told me that, unless you happen to be The Performer's Daughter, there's only a certain limited amount of tears a human being can cry per day). I may as well close this chapter of the book right now, for I've been pining for Jasmine too much already (which is quite a letdown for me – I had thought that writing this would offer me the chance to think of something else other than her). But the passing of time is always cruel when you are not allowed to be with the person you love – and no man can defy the passing of time. If there's such thing as an afterlife, I would like to be reborn as a clock – that would surely be the only way I could ever hold time on my hands. But until that day comes (if it ever does, which is not very probable), I shall keep struggling with the only resource I've got left – the only one that offers me, poor tiny human, the chance to resist, if only a little, the flow of time: my memory.

3

- What was that song which said "This could be the saddest dusk I've ever seen"? – The Artist asked me once at the UP.
- I don't know. It was a Bowie song, wasn't it?
- How could you know? You are one of those unlighted individuals who never listen to Bowie records.
- I was just guessing. Since you're always talking Bowie...
- ... yeah, you could have been right, but I think this one's an R.E.M. song.
- R.E.M.?
- Yes... it's definitely an R.E.M. song.
- What does R.E.M. mean?
- It can mean whatever you want it to mean.
- Anything?
- Anything. Like "Remain Excited, Man".
- "Return Early, Mary"
- "Rhetoric Electric Moron"
- "Remember Every Moment"
- ... That's a good one.
- Thanks
- ... there's no doubt it's an R.E.M. song. It's a great tune... now if I could only remember its name...
- Why is it that you're so obsessed with that song today?
- Take a peep outside. I think this, in fact, *could* be the saddest dusk I've ever seen.
- It seems like an ordinary dusk to me.
- No, there's something in the air today... we Artists are very sensitive to this kind of stuff. Anyway, going back to what you said, I'm not *obsessed* with the song. Obsession is in a completely different league.
- Sorry, I didn't mean to say *obsessed*...
- Then you should have used some other word, my friend. If people chose their words more carefully, the problems of the world would be reduced by a fifty percent.
- I think you are making too much of a deal of it...
- No, I'm not. I was just *pondering* about the song... being obsessed is a completely different thing, and it doesn't

apply here. For instance, you can be obsessed with a woman...

- Like I'm obsessed with Jasmine...
- There you go, mixing up the terms again. You are not *obsessed* with Jasmine, you fool, you are *in love* with her. *I* am the one who is obsessed with a woman.
- You?
- Me
- With a woman?
- That's right.
- I'm speechless.
- Why is it so?
- I don't know... I thought you were... you know...
- Nah, I don't have enough personality to be homosexual.
- You are a box of surprises, you really are. So, what's the deal with you and this woman? Are you dating her?
- *Dating* her? Oh no, nothing of the sort. I'm not dating her, I'm *stalking* her.
- *Stalking* her?
- Stalking her.
- What exactly do you mean by "stalking"?
- I follow her wherever she goes. From a distance, obviously. I want to know *everything* about her. I have already found out where she lives, at which time she enters work, which time she leaves, where she lives, which kind of clothes she wears each day of the week... I've done a very good job so far, I have to say. Now I'm very close to discovering her telephone number.
- Oh, you want to call her?
- *Call her*? Of course not. I just want to know the number.
- So you are not planning to speak to her?
- If I spoke to her, then finding out the information wouldn't be any kind of challenge.
- Ah... I think I'm getting it now... you'll talk to her only after you've finished collecting her data, right?
- I really don't think so.
- Then when?
- Probably never

- Never? Then what's the point in doing all of this?
- I've already told you, this is a case of *obsession*. Obsessions don't follow any sort of logic, hence they can't have a point.
- All of this is very weird, even coming from you... and what about The Performer's Daughter?
- *What* about The Performer's Daughter?
- I assume you have loads of things to tell me about The Performer's Daughter.
- You never were a good guesser.
- You don't even have a *single* thing to tell me about her?
- Well, I suppose you already know the little bitch's deranged.
- You never were a good guesser either. Just like me.
- On the other hand, my friend, you were always really good at playing the fool. Come on, you can't tell me that you didn't know about the girl's unbalanced mentality.
- I'm only aware of the fact that she's a little... "quickie", as Jasmine would say, but I wouldn't say she's "deranged" because of that...
- Trust me, she is. I mean, one day I barely know her, and the other day she comes and hugs me, kisses me, holds me, thrills me as if I were the love of her life!
- Maybe you are.
- Don't even mention it.
- "There's nothing wrong with considering the possibility, if it's plausible"
- You know that it bothers me a lot when you use my own quotations against me, don't you?
- Yes, I know. But I just can't help it. Sorry.
- Oh, don't worry about it. That's why I like you, actually – you are one of the few living beings who can knock some sense out of me.
- Really?
- Really.
- You are not praising me just in order to avoid the subject, aren't you?
- What was the subject, anyway?

- The Performer's Daughter considering you the love of her life.
- Oh, that. If she really did, my naive Storyteller, then she wouldn't be screwing every kiss-and-tell who happens on her way.
- Maybe you're right... but again, "deranged"... that's a very strong word.
- Indeed. I adore strong words.
- ... But this word may be too strong for the case.
- No, I can assure you, she's *extremely* deranged. She scarcely knows me, and yet yesterday she invited me to spend the night at her place! I was, like- "what's the frequency, Kenneth?"
- My name is not Kenneth.
- Neither was Dan's.
- Whatever... let's not miss the gist here: she actually asked you to spend the night with her!
- "At her place" does not imply "with her". At least not for this teenage wonder. She clearly explained that we would sleep in separate beds, and even that her father was going to be there.
- What sort of relationship is that?
- She says we are "strong friends".
- Interesting euphemism.
- Probably not intended to be one.
- Who knows... and what does she think about your work?
- She doesn't give a damn about anything besides biceps and dietetic meals. And it's funny that you mention my work, since it has been suffering a lot since this girl entered my life. I need to get rid of her soon or I'll never be able to work on anything again... why don't you talk to her?
- Me?
- Is there anyone else in here?
- You have to be kidding.
- Why? She seems to like you.
- She didn't even come to my wedding!
- Well, she surely had something else to do, something extremely important.

- That was ironic, wasn't it?
- At this time of the session, you should be able to tell by yourself. I can imagine her at the party – trying to score with any of Jasmine's friends...
- I was surprised by the huge amount of friends she invited.
- Everyone seemed to like her a lot.
- I can't blame them... how could somebody not like her? She's the most precious person in the world.
- She's nice, I'll grant you that. You were lucky to marry her.
- Yes... I'm a lucky man...
- Will she ever find that bloody river?
- Rainbow.
- Pardon me?
- She's looking for a rainbow, not a river.
- The metaphor is the same.
- What do you mean?
- You really don't want to know. Where is she now, anyway?
- Oh, she's like half a world away...
- That's it!
- Uh?
- "Half a world away"! That's the name of the R.E.M. song!
- Oh.
- What a beautiful song it is... I remember it clearly now. That band... they are awesome, aren't they? Wonderful lyrics they have, wonderful.
- So you have told me.
- I think my favourite line ever is in that song which says "If I wrote a book, it would be called *How to live life*". Brilliant.
- I have to say I quite liked it, even though I'm not sure about its meaning.
- It's an extremely wise line. There's no point in writing a book unless it will give you any hint on how to live better.
- Do you think we need a book to tell us how to live?
- Believe me, we need all the help we can get.
- But who is the writer to tell *us* what to do with our lives?
- A writer... or any kind of Artist, for the record... doesn't go and tell you directly what to do... they just make suggestions... but you have to figure them out on your own.

- I'm not sure if I'm following.
- My friend, the sad truth is, Artists just whine about their grief. They just expose their sorrow through their work, as if telling you "don't waste your life like I did with mine"...
- ... That's quite a terrible thing to say... specially coming from The Artist himself.
- I'm not *The* Artist, kid... I'm just *An* Artist. Just another one.
- I wonder what The Performer would say about this topic.
- I don't.
- Aren't you on better terms with him, now that you are friends with his Daughter?
- A Performer and an Artist will never understand each other, just as the two sides of a coin will never meet.
- But he really is a nice person...
- Oh, come on. He got a DVD player!
- So?
- He doesn't even know how to turn it on!
- Now I'm sure I'm not following.
- He just got it because he knew how much I've hungered for one.
- Oh no, he wouldn't! He's such a good fella...
- What exactly do you mean by "good"?
- Excuse me?
- Let me reformulate: what is your definition of "good"?
- ... Definition of good?
- Definition of good.
- I will need some time to answer this one.
- Take all the time you need. You can answer me in our next life, when we are both clocks.
- Sometimes I feel as if you were reading my mind.
- Well, people are like books to me, buddy – open books, free for me to read.
- That's a promising metaphor you got there. Feel free to expand yourself.
- This city is my library, and it's loaded with material of all sorts... there are some books with very few pages, other ones whose plots go round and round and round without

- ever reaching a conclusion, and of course, others so rich in content that a lifetime reading them would not be enough.
- In which of those categories do I happen to fit?
 - I'll tell you the day you come up with your definition of good.
 - Oh, come on...
 - Don't be impatient. If there's anything you have, it's time.
 - I doubt I'll finish my definition of good before I bite the dust...
 - Oh, you will. If I were you, I wouldn't worry much about death.
 - We humans – or books to you, my artistic friend – all worry about the Grim Reaper sooner or later.
 - But you are not an ordinary book, dear – you are an Storyteller. You live through the books, breathe through their pages... no, you are not any kind of book – you are the King of the Library.

The King of the Library. Those words spread through my heart and soul like a deadly curse, and even now they keep haunting me.

That conversation with The Artist actually went on for some more hours, and could have probably lasted more if The Performer hadn't arrived out of nowhere to tell us that his Daughter had died.

4

The Performer and I had always maintained a friendly, cordial relationship through the years, without ever attempting to reach the level of intimacy I had with The Artist. After all, not only was The Performer a very introvert person, but he was also practically impossible to reach, since the man hardly spoke a word when he was not performing. I even remember that Jasmine, in all her beautiful naivete, once asked me if he was mute, to which I replied something like "No, my darling... don't you remember he said "hello" when I introduced him to you?". So, taking into account these facts, you can't really blame me for being unable to have an intimate relationship with The Performer, not even after all those years I spent with him as his friend. But all of that was turned upside-down when he received the news that I was getting married.

For some reason, I can recall my stay at The Motel by the Lake with far more detail than anything I've told you so far. Maybe it's due to the fact that those days were a very intense emotional experience for me, or maybe because the stunning, unforgettable beauty of the place makes it easier for me to remember the events which happened in there. Or maybe it's just chance, but I'm not particularly fond of this possibility. You see, my beloved Jasmine never believed in chance. She used to say: "Every second of our lives has been planned, just as the author of a book knows what the final fate of his characters will be from the moment he starts writing". Jasmine... how lovely she was. Sorry, she still *is*. It's an awful tendency to think that people are no more once you stop seeing them.

... Where was I? The Motel by the Lake, right? The Performer was on a huge tour through the city at that time, and invited me to join him on his two nights at The Motel. On the one hand I was delighted by the opportunity of getting to know that luxurious place at last, something I hadn't expected to be possible due to my salary (Please don't get me wrong - I'm not complaining about my salary, it'd be the least of my intentions. I was just trying to make it clear that, while it was

enough to pay for me and my wife's living, it certainly didn't allow us to spend a little on those pleasures that money *can* buy). On the other hand, I was kind of suspicious of this sudden attack of generosity by The Performer, and worried that it would imply some instance of sociability from my part, more than the one I was used to offer. This suspicion was later proven to be right, although not in the way I had predicted.

I remember that as soon as I arrived to my room at The Motel, a desperate letter from The Artist was waiting for me. Apparently one of The Performer's Daughter's ex - acquaintances was stalking him. It was a hilariously sad letter for sure. Let's see if I can reproduce some lines from it, as they're certainly worth reading: "My friend, you have no idea what a terrifying feeling it is to know that you're being stalked. You can't even listen to The Police's song anymore without wetting your pants out of fear. And the creepiest thing of it all is that I know next to nothing about my enemy, except that he once had something to do with The Performer's Daughter, which is enough proof of his insanity. Although I must also admit that I find this whole situation rather amusing - and, in some bizarre way, inspiring."

Ah... inspiration. I wish I had at least a diminutive fragment of The Artist's inspiration right now. Despite what he may have sworn, I have discovered it's almost impossible to find inspiration when you are apart from the person you love. I can perfectly imagine The Artist right now, with his trademark arrogant smile, explaining me how many people were able to create their best work thanks to the sorrow they felt as a result of their misery. But, unfortunately, that statement doesn't apply to me, for sorrow I do not feel - only emptiness. Cold, bitter, neverending emptiness which, if it weren't for this book I'm writing, would make me wander aimlessly through life like a dead man walking. I miss Jasmine so much, so much that not even the Permanent Reminders can heal my wounds anymore.

How different from this I felt on those days at The Motel by the Lake... I was going to get married soon, after all, and the

thought of being able to wake up by Jasmine's side every morning from then on was enough reason for living. So forgive me if I didn't pay much attention to The Artist's misfortunes with his stalker back then, but I just couldn't. I had other things in my mind. Most of them were Jasmine, or Jasmine-related, but I was also a little concerned about The Performer's upcoming shows, and what those two shows could mean to his career. His followers had been starting to complain about the lack of variation in his sets, and they were right in their claims, since The Performer had been playing the exact same list of songs, in the exact same order, for at least seven years. A tremendous amount of people had travelled all the way to the Motel to see his act, so those two nights would obviously be a good chance to surprise his long-time, devoted fans with a new song or two. But on the contrary, if he didn't, many of those adepts would start to get tired of the repetitiveness of his set. It was clear that my duty as The Performer's friend was to suggest him to shake up the setlist a bit. He had always boasted about being a worldwide respected act – he *ought* to have a few more tunes up his sleeve.

- How is your grandmother? – I asked The Performer, sitting by the Lake, the following day. There had been no show the previous night due to his grandmother's accident, which was weird to say at least. The Performer wasn't, in any way, young; and though numbers were never my speciality, anyone would have agreed with me if I had affirmed that his grandmother was as dead as techno. But nevertheless, there she was, not only alive but also having accidents.
- Oh, she's alright. She just hurt her back a little. They should have an elevator at that place... - he replied, sullen and distant as ever - . Thanks for asking.
- Oh please... it's the least I could do.
- Actually... there's a favour I need from you. An extremely important favour that only you could carry out.
I hesitated for a moment. My mind was a blank.
- What is it? – I murmured after that brief lapsus.

- I want you... I *need* you... to write a book about me.

I retold that episode with The Performer to Jasmine during our wedding night. To my surprise, she didn't make any comment about it.

- Aren't you gonna ask me *why* did he want me to write a book about him?
- Do you *want* me to ask you?

Jasmine... she had this power of being able to look through me as if I were made of glass. I couldn't hide anything from her – not that I tried, anyway – and she could hide a universe from me.

- Yes... I would like you to ask me- I confessed. Resistance was futile.
- And what did you answer him?

Ah, how tricky she was.

- But I wanted to tell you why...

She kissed me on the lips and looked into my eyes. I finally understood.

- ... You... know, don't you?

She smiled and kept staring at me (oh, if all my life could be just that...).

- I should have known... what a fool I am. Of course! There's nothing that you don't know.
- Oh, please, darling! How can you say that? There is an embarrassing number of things I don't have a clue about. Don't overrate me.

That was Jasmine... as humble as she was beautiful. Although she seemed to enjoy my praising her a little, if I insisted on it for too long she would softly whisper in my ear something like: "Shhhh... stop, sweetie. That's enough". There were even some times when she added: "*Don't forget that you are special too*".

The point is that lovely Jasmine was able to guess which were The Performer's motives, which is something that The Artist didn't manage to achieve. "He just wants the money", he swore, "Vultures like him are only interested in profits". If

only he knew. Of course, wise as he was, The Artist would have rethought this situation over if given the time, but on those days he just couldn't have cared less about it. When I came back from The Motel by the Lake, The Artist had reinvented himself yet again. He was a master of disguise, capable of switching personalities as often as those singers he revered so much. Well, maybe not *that* often, but it was still a considerable amount of times. Although never before he had appeared in such a hilarious guise: on that occasion The Artist had turned himself into a hippie.

- These are my days, I tell you, these are my days – he boasted happily - . Not only has my deadly stalker gone away to a faraway country, but I've also rediscovered my art and the joy of life.
- By becoming a hippie?
- The world has suffered war, famine and injustice for too long. We need more hippies.
- We need people who are willing to take a shower. Just look at you! The Performer's Daughter won't even dare to look at you like this!

The Artist just froze as if I had uncovered the secret of his temple. One week later he reappeared as a drag queen, some weeks later he finally gave up. It was at some point between those chameleon weeks that he said something very shrewd and interesting about my Jasmine, something like "*She dreams of leaving, but she always stays behind*".

Before hearing that I had never really put much thought into Jasmine's endless trips on her quest for the rainbow. I was quick enough to propose to her the second time I saw her, which was at least seven months after our famed first meeting. By being engaged to her, I was sure that she would settle down once and for all and I would never again have to experience the agony of being apart from my one true love. If someone had told me that I was only going to see her five more times since then (four if we don't count our wedding day – luckily, she was there the day we got married), I would have not believed it. At least not until I had read the letter (the first of the two dreadful letters that she would ever write

to me) that Jasmine had left by her side of the bed when I woke up the morning after our wedding night. It didn't kill me in the way her second letter did, but nevertheless it did manage to slice at least a small portion of my soul.

"... And don't even dream of accompanying me in my travels... you wouldn't survive one single day outside of your city", she wrote. And how right she was. I was chained to this place. That was one of the many curses cast on me (The "King of the Library" is ringing a bell right now) ... and speaking about curses, I had a tough time dealing with the burden of having to write a book about The Performer. Once again The Artist's words are coming to my mind... "Oh, The Performer's Daughter and I had a wonderful weekend... we went swimming in a sea of sham". A sea of sham... I guess I was swimming in similar water myself. I had been observing others all of my life, now the time had finally come to write my own story. Only that it had to be The Performer's story. It was much later when I changed my approach to the task... it was after that fateful day. The day which turned out to be the turning point of our lives. I had delayed it for too long... now I guess it's high time I told you about the day The Performer's Daughter died.

5

The last time I ever saw The Artist was some months after The Performer's Daughter had departed to the Great Beyond. Such a painful event is rendered with high detail in my memory. That day the sky was broken. Silver leaves were spinning around. I had been apart from Jasmine for so long that I was going blind. Even though I had fixed my stare to the UP's window, it took me some time to notice The Artist standing still at the other side of the glass. We were supposed to have met inside, so from the moment I saw him, I knew that something was wrong. Well, in fact, nearly everything had been wrong since The Performer's Daughter left this world, but this time it was something different. We had lived the rain, now it was time for the storm.

Jasmine couldn't stop laughing the day The Performer's Daughter died. She laughed when she heard the news, laughed all throughout the funeral, and was still laughing when we got back home. Deep inside I knew that asking her about the reason for her endless laughter was not a good idea but, weak as I am, I did it anyway. But as each word that came out of her mouth pierced my heart little by little, I realised what one of the many reasons why I loved her so much was: she fed me no lies.

- Why am I laughing? Do you want to know *why* am I laughing? I am laughing at us, darling. I'm laughing at all of us. I laugh at the world's greatest Performer, who cannot write a single piece of work on his own. I laugh at The Artist, who pretends that art is his life when the only thing he really wants is to have some company. I laugh at The Performer's Daughter, who died before even realising that true love had been right in front of her eyes. I laugh at us two, sweetheart...

Sorry, I find myself unable to go on. Even though The Artist was indeed wise when he once claimed "If pain is the only thing we have left, we may as well hang on to it, since it's better than holding on to nothing", the rest of Jasmine's

honest, heartfelt declaration is just too painful for me to reproduce.

The following morning I learnt about The Letter's existence. I think it was The Performer who shrewdly warned me "don't you let this letter get you down". It must have been before I decided to stop seeing him. Ever since his Daughter perished, I started sensing something strange in him, something which terrified me... some kind of... (and I'm ashamed to even mention this, but I'm obliged to tell you nothing but the truth) ... repressed joy. He looked and behaved as if some extremely heavy weight had been over his shoulders all of his life, and now that weight had vanished. And so I began reckoning, and realised, to my awe, that there had always been something slightly evil in The Performer. And the last person in the world I would have expected to contradict me in that hypothesis was The Artist himself. But then again, predictability had never been one of his flaws.

He looked like a ghost that day, so pale and skinny it was scary. I had rushed out of the UP to ask him what he was doing standing there, but all he did was to mumble incomprehensible accusations towards me.

"If you didn't like her, you could have just sent her away... to another town, even another country! But no... you had to erase her completely!"

I never understood what those words meant, never put much thought into them in fact. I could have been that man who stated "I don't want knowledge, I want certainty". But everything that had been certain all my life had suddenly been turned upside-down.

I had a dream one night in which I visited a faraway town I had never been to before. Nobody knew me, and I didn't know anybody. I didn't know their secrets, didn't even know their names.

How can I tell when exactly did I start to go insane? When The Artist threatened me to escape from this town and leave me alone once and for all, for some sinister reason I replied:

"You are nothing without me".

Maybe that's when my mind took a life on its own. Or maybe I was already deranged by then. Maybe I had been having mental problems since the day I was born, who knows? I am lost in a river of suggestion where no one knows any answer. Or perhaps The Artist did have some vague idea, since his last words to me were:

"I am nothing with or without you"

In my other dream, I was living inside a huge room. The dream ended when somebody closed its door.

Sometimes I wonder, if I stop thinking about Jasmine, about The Artist, about The Performer, about everyone I have known and everyone I have not known... will they continue existing? Or will they disappear? Does the fact that I'm still here imply that someone else remembers me?

Even now, after all I have suffered; even now when loneliness has become my sole and faithful companion, I still fear that day when someone will close the door of my life. When the time comes, I wouldn't like to know it. I just wish he would let me vanish slowly until there's nothing left of me, which will surely happen when I finish this book.

Yes... soon there will be nothing left for me to release. Until then, I'll keep remembering and writing about Jasmine, about The Artist, about The Performer, about everyone I have known and everyone I have not known. Once I'm done, I'll just sit and wait until the door is closed. Or perhaps I will be able to close it myself when I write the last word of my book.

After all, I am, and always will be, the King of the Library.

Darling,

I wish there was a reasonable explanation for my actions, but there is not.

I guess you know I never wanted anyone more than you. You are the love of my life, the man I was born to be with, and above all, the reason for my existence.

So I can't believe it myself that this time I'm leaving you for good. But I just can't stay in your town anymore. When I'm around there, I don't know who I am. And although it's uncertain if I will find my identity somewhere else in this globe, there is no doubt I will pass away soon if I stay here, for living in this town equals death to me.

It will be hard for you at first, but I can assure you that you will be able to survive without me. As long as you have your town and your people, you'll always find a reason to continue living. Sometimes you won't find it within yourself, so always remember to look inside others.

You'll do fine.

You must surely hate me for leaving you alone with all the pain of existing. But please, never turn our seven days into something painful, for they were the most marvellous days of our lives. Days when everything seemed possible, when everything felt so real, when we were so alive.

Because I don't want you to forget those days, because I don't want you to forget that we were happy once, I leave you these Permanent Reminders. They will help you out until you finish your work.

So, my love, whenever you are feeling down, always remember...

Remember when we first met.

Remember how nervous you were when you proposed to me.

Remember the look you gave me when I told you that "The One I love" was not a love song.

Remember when you fell in love with me.

Remember when I fell in love with you.

Remember all the trouble you had to go through when I felt sick at the bus.

Remember our wedding night.

Remember our first kiss.

Remember that day we played "Mortal Kombat 3" together.

Remember the love songs we loved.

Remember our second kiss.

Remember our wedding party.

Remember our private jokes.

Remember all the angry games we played.

Remember when we mocked other people.

Remember that rainy afternoon we stayed in bed.

Remember the poems you read into my machine.

Remember how you made me smile.

Remember the presents we gave one another.

Remember the e-mails.

Remember the letters.

Remember the phone calls.

Remember the hugs.

Remember when we slept side by side, hearing each other breathe.

Remember the photographs we took together.

Remember when you helped me out.

Remember all the times we said "I love you" and we really meant it.

Remember when we were so close we could hear each other's heart beating.

Remember that no one else knew you like I did, and no one else knows me like you do.

Remember how the closer we were, the better we felt.

Remember that you said that one day of this was worth dying for.

Remember when I promised that you would see the sun again.

Remember how beautiful I felt when I was at your side.

Remember the visions we saw.

Remember the dinners.

Remember the movies.

Remember our journeys on the underground.

Remember that afternoon by the sea.

Remember our passionate kiss at that McDonald's.

Remember those tasks we had to carry out together.

Remember how jealous you were of my ex boyfriend.

Remember that night at the café.

Remember that evening at the ice-cream parlour.

Remember that all my love for you could break someone's heart in two.

Remember that night at the English festival.

Remember how to dream.

Remember who you are.

Remember that we had seven days to live our lives, but we can turn them into endless ways to live.

My love,

Remember to smell the flowers while you can.

Forever yours,

Jasmine.

Thank you so much, dear Jasmine. Thank you so much.

Z

I first met The Artist on a lonesome day at the UP. I was reading Unamuno's book, discovering to my horror that all of my original, innovative ideas had been stolen even before I was born. So there I was, melting like a snowman on a hot summer day, when suddenly this peculiar individual came to my table and said:

- That's not a bad book.
- Everyone says it's excellent, actually.
- Us Artists do not fit into the "everyone" category.

The Performing was interpreting his usual set, which was new for me at that time, since I had known him only for three days and a half. And though my path hadn't yet crossed with Jasmine's, that day I started to feel, for the first time, that everything was on its right place.

And so The Artist and I danced, drank and saw things we had never had a chance to see.

- So, how is your book coming up?- he asked me.
- How did you know I was writing a book?
- Oh, I recognise a Storyteller when I see one.

I told him how my novel was aborted thanks to this fellow with the funny surname, and in return he told me what I should have done and offered what I could. In other words, he gave me an idea.

- Why don't you just write about us?
- Us?
- Us! Me, you, all the people in this place, all the people in this town. We will be your characters, and from now on you will be the director of our lives.
- I'm not sure if I understand.
- For example... see that Performer over there? You could make him have a son... or a daughter!
- Well, in fact he *has* a daughter.
- See? You've already started.