

## THE DARK SIDE OF THE HEART (Il lato sinistro del cuore)

a short story by Carlo Lucarelli

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I remember that she was dangling a slipper poised on the toes of one foot, and that she was holding her terry-cloth bathrobe tightly closed with her arms, in front, as she sat on the arm of the chair. Her long, dark hair, gathered over her shoulder, was still damp because she had been taking a shower when I arrived at her house forty minutes early. I'm not sure if I was the one who got the time wrong when she called me that morning, but it didn't matter. The customer is always right. "Look, I'm not a private investigator... not exactly. My business is debt collection, automobile title transfers, leases, installment payments... people who don't want to pay".

"The newspaper said private investigator, with many years of police experience..."

"True, I was a police officer, but the thing is.. I never did investigative work. And then too, the story you've told me..."

"It's not a story".

"Okay, the incident that you've reported, then... I'm really not clear about it. That man, was he in a dream you had, or was he really here?"

She looked at me - I remember that, too, all too well - she looked straight at me and I think it was the first time she had done so since I entered the room. I, on the other hand, had looked her over right away: very attractive, with a dark tan, a round face and those feverish eyes, dark like her hair. There was something strange about her gaze and for a moment I thought she might be somewhat cross-eyed, but no... her mouth, too, the lips pressed tightly together, with a slight downward cast, had something odd about it... I don't know, a childish set to it. She was twenty-three years old, she later told me, but she looked a lot younger than that.

"I don't know if he was really here. I take pills to be able to sleep these days... but in the morning, when I wake up, I always seem to remember that at a certain point during the night, I opened my eyes and there he was, in my bedroom, in front of the door or sitting in the chair... usually I'm so dazed that I can't even see his face and I fall right to sleep again, like a stone".

"And this happens every night?"

"Every night when I sleep alone".

"And what does this guy do?"

"Nothing. He watches me sleep... or at least I wake up with that impression. Don't you believe me?"

"Well... I mean, yes, of course, it's obvious..."

"No, you don't believe me. But I wouldn't have called you just for this. There have been other incidents, concrete ones. For at least a month I've been getting phone calls, at all hours, but always when I'm alone. A male voice that speaks very softly. I pick up the receiver and he whispers just one word".

"What word?"

"Slut".

She had lowered her eyes, looking at the slipper that was swinging back and forth, its cloth edge caught on the tip of her big toe. A flap of her bathrobe had slipped over her knee, uncovering her leg to the ankle, and I felt uncomfortable watching her. She was so small, her shoulders hunched, and that worried look about her, that I found her... touching. In any case, when I think back on it, I tell myself that that must have been the first thing I felt for her. "Okay... I mean, not okay. And then? What else happened?"

"Then they slashed the tires on my boyfriend's car, two days ago at his house, in the garage. And then they set fire to my mailbox".

"What?"

"The lady who lives across the way saw it too. A thin guy, not very tall, wearing a hat and a dark coat... he

poured alcohol in my mailbox and then he set a match to it".

"That's strange".

"Why, does all the rest seem normal to you?"

"No, you're right, no... That's why my advice is to hire a real private investigator, even though it will cost more. I was with the police for five years, it's true, but I was in the riot squad".

"I know".

She continued staring at the slipper, but her lips were half-open in a sly smile that made me realize that she knew very well - God knows how - why I was no longer on the police force. I had killed a young man at the stadium, during an assault.

"That's why you were the one I called... because I want someone who won't cost a lot and who is able to defend me".

"Go to the police, then. They won't cost you anything at all. Why don't you call the police precinct? I'll give you the name of someone I used to work with..."

"People like me don't go to the police".

At that moment she opened her robe and I closed my eyes, like I used to do when I was at the precinct and my buddies would come out of the shower without a towel. When I reopened them, she - that is, he - was as before, arms tightly crossed in front. Except that the slipper had dropped to the floor.

"I live alone, I work here at my home two nights a week, and I only have a few hand-picked clients. I can give you their telephone numbers if you promise to be discreet, but none of them appears to be the man who... who is... oh God! I'm so afraid... Will you help me?"

She kept looking at me with an expression that was so desperate, so vulnerable, those lips pressed tightly together and those big eyes like a frightened little girl's, that I couldn't say no. Even if she wasn't a little girl. And so I accepted the job. I advised him to lock himself in the house and I went away with the advance in my pocket and a vague sense of uneasiness over having looked at his legs. I remember thinking - oh yes, I remember this too, all too well - what a fine couple! A transvestite and a police officer ousted for manslaughter. Oh yeah, a truly fine couple...

If you excluded the clients (there were only four of them and they did not correspond to the neighbor's description) and some sinister deal involving pimps and Mafia types, whose behavior is not usually that complicated, that left rejected lovers. The phone calls, the boyfriend's tires, the strange story about the mailbox... the nocturnal visits, if they had really happened... it all seemed pretty clear to me. A morbid jealousy, that of a madman, a love that had turned sick...

Rita - that was my client's name - remembered three significant love affairs that had ended badly... badly for them that is. A guy who lived in the city and was a sales rep, a tennis instructor who had gone away with a broken heart soon after the breakup, and a third one, a younger man, a student who was a little strange. The student had been the first of the three in chronological order, and my client spoke to me about him only as I was about to leave, and then almost hesitantly. All she said was that he was someone who liked to watch her. Watch her? Yes, as she read, as she put on her makeup, as she ate or as she got dressed. Or as she slept. Right.

I began with him. But a family from the south was now living at the address I had for him; they couldn't tell me anything, except to show me a bill for a payment to be made for the second year of engineering school, which no one had ever picked up. I can't say if I would have had better luck with the sales rep or not, since he had died three weeks earlier, in a car accident. The instructor, on the other hand, had left his new address with the post office and I had directory assistance give me his phone number. I called the number, but there was an answering machine with Ravel's Bolero in the background that said he would not be back until the following day. So then I went to see the current boyfriend, but I didn't get much from him either. He was a painter and he received me in the top-floor flat that he used as a studio. There were portraits of my client on all the walls, in every possible pose. They were all looking at me.

"I'm glad Rita decided to call someone... that way she'll get these fantasies of hers out of her head. As far as I'm concerned it's those pills she's been taking since she had the nervous breakdown that are making her this way. She attaches importance to a whole lot of things that have nothing to do with anything, like my car tires".

"Why, didn't someone slash your tires?"

"Punctured, not slashed. Look, the car was in the garage, with the garage door locked. I must have driven over a nail... okay, a couple of nails, without realizing it. As for the mailbox, you get around quite a bit, you know how many thugs there are all over, even in good neighborhoods. They even destroyed mine, you know? Hasn't it ever happened to you?"

"Never, despite the fact that I live in a run-down neighborhood".

"Lucky you. It's not the idea of the mailbox, that only costs a few bucks... but the letters. Rita and I write each other the most beautiful letters, very profound. Sensitivity is one of her most distinctive qualities... sensitivity, a tender, pervasive sensuality, a fragile, poignant gentleness... and a natural unfaithfulness, almost instinctive. Can I ask you a question?"

He had the longest, most delicate hands I had ever seen and he held them joined together in front of his face, sucking the tips of his thumbs. He was older than my client, much older. I understood what he wanted to ask me as soon as he bit his lip, as though searching for the right words. "No, don't worry. I'm just a private detective paid to solve a problem and that's it. I'm not after anything else. And then... he's not exactly my type".

"Don't speak too soon. And please don't say "he", say "she". Aside from a small detail, my Rita is a woman... or rather, a little girl. Don't you think so?"

No, I didn't think so, but I didn't tell him that. I had him show me the garage door, still locked and without any sign of a break-in, and I went away convinced that he was right, that they were all coincidences and that the man in the night was only a dream resulting from an excess of tranquilizers. I also made the rounds of the neighbors again, since the man had to have lurked in the area a long time to know just the right moment to phone or enter the house, but no one had noticed anything. I intended to call my client the next day to close the case, persuade him to let me keep the entire advance, and recommend that he get another doctor, since no one was out to get her. To get him, him... and I had to keep repeating it to myself as I drove, as I recalled the curves of her hips outlined against the cloth, him, him, him, until I got home.

Then she called me. At night, unexpectedly, in the middle of a confused dream that was making me sweat. Her voice was shrill, like the ring that had awakened me, and she was talking hurriedly, between sobs, and gasping.

"He was here! He was here, I saw him!"

"Saw him? Who did you see? Who are you talking..."

"That man! The man who watches me! He was here in my room! I woke up, I opened my eyes and I saw him! oh God..."

"Just a second, hold on a minute... Is he still there? Answer me, is he still there?"

She didn't answer. She was sobbing and then she hung up the phone. I got dressed in a hurry, climbed in the car and raced to her house. The door was partly open, secured by a chain. I rang, but no one came, so I grabbed the door jamb with both hands and ripped off the chain by shoving my shoulder against the door. Inside it was dark. I heard crying at the end of the hall, behind a closed door.

"Open up! It's me, open the door!"

She had triple-locked the door, and when I flung it open she had already gone back to the center of the room. She was wearing a flimsy slip, almost transparent, that grazed her knees and left her shoulders bare. She was hugging herself tightly and she was trembling.

"There's no one here".

"There was. I saw him with my own eyes. He was sitting right there".

With a quick gesture that raised her slip to her buttocks, so that I had to avert my eyes, she pointed to an armchair against the wall, in a corner.

"And what did he do? Did he say anything to you?"

"Yes, no... I don't know. I screamed as soon as I saw him and then he was gone".

"When did you put the chain on the door?"

"When I always do... as soon as it gets dark. And then I lock myself in my bedroom".

"Today as well?"

"No, yes... I don't remember".

She was about to start crying again. I shrugged and turned away, so that she wouldn't see from my expression that I didn't believe a single word of what she said. But as I moved closer to the armchair, a cold shiver stiffened my back, running down between my shoulders like a drop of iced water. It was the smell that struck me, a different smell, more musty than the sweetish scent that was in the room. Someone else's smell. Then I saw the cushion, crushed in one corner and at the edge, as if someone had sat on it. I ran my fingers over it, and though I knew it wasn't possible, I seemed to feel its warmth.

"What is it? What did you feel?"

I had straightened up with a start, as abruptly as if I had gotten an electric shock. Rita was looking at me with such a frightened expression, with those incredibly big eyes, that I couldn't help reaching out and touching her shoulder. She slipped into my arms, quickly, pressing herself against me. She was trembling and when she raised her chin I realized that even her lips were trembling, pressed tightly together in that thin-lipped pout, like a frightened little girl. I don't remember if I was the one who kissed her or if she kissed me. We slid down onto the bed and made love, it doesn't matter how.

"Broken heart my ass... I didn't leave town to forget Rita. They tried to kill me".

I was digging my nails into the palm of my hand to resist the temptation to punch him in the face. I had left a message on the tennis instructor's answering machine, and he had called me back, arranging to meet at the Club's bar.

"Sure, sure, great mouth, great tits, great... the best fucks I ever had in my life, but that's all it was. And then, Christ, he's a transvestite... Breaking the rules is one thing, but I'm no queer!"

"Me either".

"Fine, good for you... Anyway, a few months ago I nearly got killed, on the highway. The mechanic says they loosened something under the steering wheel. I didn't believe it, but after a week the same thing happens with the dealership's loaner car, so then I start shitting my pants. You know how it is, in my business I know so many easy women, wives of important people... So just to be on the safe side I leave town and get them off my back. What do you think, did I do the right thing?"

I didn't answer. I made some notes in my notebook and walked away. As I was paying at the cashier's desk, he took his parting shot from the table, where he was sitting beneath the big umbrella. I had to dig my nails into my palm to the point of really hurting myself then.

"Did you really think I was in love with Rita? Imagine... She was in love with me but I... Sure, a great body, but Christ! And then, take my word for it... as far as blow jobs went, she wasn't worth a fuck".

I had a friend at the highway police and I went to see him as soon as I left the Club. He showed me the reports of the tennis player's accidents and that of the sales rep who had been killed in a head-on collision with a truck. The accidents were identical. A bolt unscrewed beneath the steering wheel. The man in the night existed.

The student, on the other hand, had disappeared without a trace. I had the department secretary give me his home address, but at the house his parents told me he was living here, in his own apartment, although they hadn't heard from him in quite some time. But a couple with two kids was living in the apartment; I knew that because I had already been there. The landlord told me that he had re-rented the place after he had been given notice by phone, without anyone coming to claim the deposit. A strange character, said the landlord. Rita said so too, as I held her in my arms, there on the couch, at her house.

"I never understood him, that Alessandro. He had so many fixations, he was always so anxious... or depressed. He took a bunch of pills, to sleep, to eat, to study... but he never studied. He would hang around here all day and watch me; he'd be sitting at the table, his chin resting on his hand. Sometimes he would lean against the bathroom door as I was putting on my makeup and I would see him reflected in the mirror, motionless... but most of all he liked to watch me sleep. I would wake up during the night and there he was, raised up on his elbow, leaning against the pillow... Would you believe it? In all the months we slept together, he never touched me. He would hold me in his arms and caress my hair until I fell asleep, but we never... it's the truth. Easy, you're hurting me..."

I was holding her tighter and tighter, without realizing it. There was something about her tone of voice that provoked me, making my nerves and muscles tense... something tender and languid, which had clouded her

eyes as she spoke about him... the student. Something that made me jealous.

"Why did you leave him?"

"I don't know. I couldn't take him anymore... I didn't like the way he looked at me when I came home late at night. He made me feel guilty. And then too he had become obsessive, he wanted me to stop working, he no longer accepted what I... what I am. I cried for a week when I left him... I was the one who sent him away and yet I cried, isn't that dumb?"

"No".

"At times I miss him. At times, when I think about it, I miss Alessandro. I miss him a lot. But I love my painter, he's intelligent, caring, charming... a little morbid, maybe..."

"Morbid? the painter?"

"Yes... Sometimes he almost scares me. Do you know he likes to tie me up? ow... you're crushing me again... Do you want to hurt me too?"

"Not me, no..."

I loosened my hold and slid back on the couch, flattening myself against the armrest. Rita smiled and for the first time I noticed a small wrinkle at the corner of her mouth, sly and mischievous; it was all I could do to resist the impulse to kiss her.

"Yes, I know. I feel things are good with you too. I feel... I feel protected. Really."

She leaned over, pressing against me with a sigh, then she relaxed and I felt her body, warm and tempting, slide along mine. What she breathed in my ear - before biting my earlobe and making me shiver with desire and rage - was only a whisper.

"But I will never love anyone again the way I loved Alessandro... or the way he loved me".

I had them give me the list of courses he had enrolled in. Most of them were the usual courses, attended by dozens of students, but there was one special one; its classes were held at the professor's office. I went that same morning. There were six students. I had no trouble finding the one who knew him best.

"I can confirm it, Alessandro was the strangest character I ever met. Who knows, maybe that was exactly the reason for his appeal... I was a little in love with him, you know?"

I had no intention of listening once again to Alessandro's many virtues, but the girl - her elbows leaning on the small table in the coffee bar, chin resting on her hands - was staring at a point far-off in the distance, her eyes dreamy, and I didn't have the heart to interrupt her trance.

"He was so... so sweet. One of the nicest guys in the world. He wanted to go to Brazil and be an engineer in Mato Grosso after he graduated, as a volunteer".

"You never saw him... how should I put it, violent?"

"Alessandro? You're joking. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He seemed like a child at times, so vulnerable... once when I got pissed off and shouted at him, I saw him cry, poor Alessandro. Yes, really, I was a little in love with him. But there was that other one".

"That other one?"

"That girl... beautiful, very beautiful. At least so he said, I never saw her. But it was obvious that he loved her, so I resigned myself... after feeling really bad for a while. Well... now he doesn't show up at the university anymore, so... you know what they say, out of sight..."

"And you have no idea where he could be? You don't have a phone number, an address, a friend's address...?"

"No. I didn't try to find him after that, I... But there's a girl who saw him, one time, on the porch of one of those shacks with the fishing nets that you see on the canals, over by the sea".

"Where?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask her. If you want, I'll give you my friend's number".

I took it. It was a number outside of town, where she had returned for a temporary job. She had such a complicated last name, the friend, that the girl had to write it for me after repeating it three times. She smiled as she wrote it in my notebook, above the area code.

"Isn't it funny? This is just how it began with Alessandro. He wasn't able to write a name, in class, and I did it for him. Just think, during the three months of the course no one ever became aware of his problem..."

"What problem?"

"That disorder... What is it called? The one where you can't write. Alessandro had the handwriting of a five year old child... illegible, hideous. It was something he was very ashamed of. If you knew how long it took me to get him to accept photocopies of my notes..."

As soon as I left the bar, I dashed into the first phone booth I saw and dialed Rita's number. The painter's voice thoroughly dampened my enthusiasm.

"Hello? Who is this?"

I wanted to slam the phone down, stunned by a deafening rage that buzzed in my ears. Instead I clenched my teeth and dealt the phone booth's blue-tinted Plexiglas a sharp blow, using my fist as a hammer.

"I'm calling to speak to Rita. This is..."

"Oh yes, the detective, of course... Rita can't come to the phone right now. What did you want to tell her?"

"Nothing... That is, no... I think, rather, I'm sure... In short, I know who the bastard is that's tormenting her. It's that student, what's his name..."

"Alessandro".

"Right, Alessandro. He's crazy, he's disappeared, he knows enough about mechanics to sabotage a car, and he can't write! That's why he set fire to her mailbox, because he's jealous of those who can write and he hates them!"

"I don't understand a word you've said, but it doesn't matter. You're the detective, you know what to do. We'll expect you this evening, at seven. "

"At seven?"

"I'm going to Milan. I'll be gone two days. Rita doesn't want to be left alone tonight, after the last phone call... She told you about the phone call, didn't she?"

She had told me. "Slut", as usual, and then "I'm going to kill you" and nothing else.

"I was against it, because I'm still of the opinion that it's all nonsense, but she insisted, so I want you to come here and stay with her tonight. Listen... Do you remember the question I wanted to ask you the other day? And you told me that Rita was not your... type? I want to ask the question again. What do you say, detective?"

I said nothing. I only mumbled "I'll be there at seven" and hung up.

"Get some sleep".

"I'll try".

"Don't lock the door. I'll be right outside".

"No, all right..."

Rita lowered her eyes, leaning against the door jamb, then all at once she hugged me, rising up on tip-toe, and kissed me on the mouth. I closed my eyes as I felt the heat of her arms around my neck and the sweetness of her perfume, but it was only for a moment, because she quickly broke away and disappeared behind the bedroom door. I stayed there listening to the soft patter of her nude feet against the floor and the lively creaking of the bed springs, then I sighed, picked up the remote-control, and turned on the television. I had arranged a table in the middle of the room, with a chair in front of it - the most rigid, uncomfortable one I could find. From there I could keep an eye on the door to the apartment, the window, and Rita's bedroom door. I wasn't in there with her, sitting in the armchair like the student, for the same reason I had preferred that she close her door: I knew very well how it would end up if I saw her in bed, and I didn't want to run the risk of being taken by surprise. In addition, I had barred the glass door leading to the balcony and had put one of those anti-assault sprays on her nightstand. In the absolute silence of the apartment, I could hear the bed springs each time she moved. At times I even seemed to hear the rustle of her legs against the sheets, but maybe it was only my imagination...

I had muted the sound on the television. I kept it turned on only to have something to look at and not be left completely in the dark where I might doze off. I had made a thermos of coffee, like I used to do when I had night duty at the maxi-trials, and I poured a little into a large mug that was on the table in front of me, next to the switch-blade knife and an iron bar that I had found at home, in the garage. I didn't have a gun; I didn't need one. A gun wasn't what I had used to kill a man a long time ago.

Rita moved in her room and I stiffened against the chair's wooden back, listening intently to the metallic sigh of the bed springs: just a single, brief sound before silence returned. Tense and motionless, I tried to

concentrate to see if I could hear her breathing. Little by little I convinced myself that the low sound I heard in the semi-darkness, lit only by the intermittent gleam of the television, was her breathing, slow, relaxed and regular. I felt like going into that room warm with sleep and sitting in the armchair myself, just to watch her as she slept. As I clenched my teeth in rage, I thought how much I hated that bastard, the student, who had watched her so many times and who was now keeping me from doing so. By now I was convinced that he was the man who came in the night, but there were a few things that troubled me and almost scared me. This invisible guy who knows when Rita is alone, when she receives mail... who intrudes everywhere, slipping in through closed windows and locked doors, like a ghost... I touched the iron bar with my fingertips and the contact with the cold metal made me shiver. I remembered that day at the stands in the stadium, the blood running down my eye from having been pelted by stones and the boy's blood which had spurted all over my face...

Then I heard the shriek. An abrupt, high-pitched scream, Rita's voice, but there was also a deep, husky growl, like that of an animal, muffled by the frenzied creaking of the springs and the sound of the glass door banging against the wall. I grabbed the bar and ran toward the door, bursting it open with a single blow to the handle, but as soon as I got inside I stopped abruptly. The pungent, acid smell of the paralyzing anti-assault spray filled the room and went to my throat, making my eyes tear, and I had to hold onto the wall so I wouldn't fall to my knees. I couldn't see anything anymore, but I felt a breath of fresh air on my tingling face and I lurched toward it, banging my shoulder on a panel of the glass door leading to the balcony. I ended up halfway out the door, leaning against the marble balustrade, sucking in oxygen with my mouth wide open, when the first blow struck me on the ear, turning the inhalation into a hoarse sob. The second blow caught me on the nose, with an abrupt snap that reverberated in my brain and continued vibrating against my teeth for a fraction of a second. By the third time, however, I was able to raise my arms and grab the bar before being struck again. Through tears that made it difficult to see, I glimpsed Rita a moment before blindly throwing a forward punch as hard as I could.

"Stop, stop! It's me, Rita, stop it! It's me!"

Rita let go of the broom and threw herself at me with such impetus that I almost lost my balance. She hugged me, pressing herself to my chest. I felt her trembling, hard, as she went on sobbing. I closed my arms around her and wanted to hold her tight until she stopped, but I glanced out beyond the balcony and saw something lying on the grass, barely a couple of feet below. It was a hat.

"Stay here. I'll be right back".

"No, no! Don't leave me alone!"

"It's over, there's no more danger... It's all over and now I'm going to catch him".

I had lost the bar but I didn't need it. I climbed over the balustrade and jumped down, landing near the hat on the grass. The garden was small, surrounded by a rather high wall. An almost-full moon illuminated the lawn, a corner of which was sheltered by a dense patch of laurel planted in the center of a circle of fresh soil. He couldn't have had enough time to run around the house and escape from the gate which, I could see from there, was still closed as I had left it.

I squinted my eyes, staring at the uneven shadow of the laurel. The bastard was in there. I could imagine him staring out at me from among the leaves, seeing me growl between my teeth, my fists clenched, ready to kill him.

"You won't get away from me this time, damn you, come on out of there! Come out or I'll come and get you!"

But just as I was about to take a step forward I noticed something that scared me. The fresh soil surrounding the clump of laurel had been recently turned over with a spade but there were no footprints on it. Then too... there was a whole can of Mace in the room and Rita must have sprayed most of it in his face, yet instead of choking, like I did, this bastard had climbed down from the balcony. And earlier he had managed to open the glass door that I myself had barred, without making a sound. The idea of a powerful, supernatural phantom made me shiver again...

All of a sudden the wind blew for a few seconds, making the leaves quiver and shaking the tips of the branches. It seemed to me that one of the branches continued to move even after the air turned still again, then another one further up, and another higher still. I sprang into action, circling the clump of laurel without thinking of covering myself, but it wasn't necessary. Behind the laurel there was a gap in the wall, at the top,

and three sturdy branches, one above the other, formed a kind of ladder.  
Son of a bitch.

"Here's the balance; allowing for the advance, this should be enough to cover your expenses. Rita thanks you and says goodbye".

The painter had a yellow envelope in his hand which he held pointed at me, like a gun. I stood with my arms crossed, without taking it.

"Why?"

"Because we don't feel we need you anymore. Because it doesn't do any good. Because last night somebody nearly managed to hurt Rita."

I lowered my eyes, embarrassed, and angrily gritted my teeth. It was true.

"I almost caught him. Almost. A girl gave me the address of a fishing shack and I'm sure that's where the bastard is hiding... or that he's left some trace which..."

"And meanwhile my Rita sits here like a target".

His Rita...

"No, detective... I admit I was wrong, they weren't just coincidences and there really was someone, but it's not a bodyguard we need. It's not a matter of guarding or protecting her... There's only one thing to do. Take her away".

"Take her away?"

The painter looked me in the eye, rolling the envelope around his slim fingers. His eyelids lowered because he realized from the expression in my eyes that I had seen what was in his. My eyes held fear. His hatred. He didn't ask me again if I had changed my mind about Rita. He slipped the envelope in my jacket pocket, rolled up tightly like a cigar.

"It's been years since I've taken a vacation, and this seems like just the right opportunity. I don't know yet where I'll take my Rita, but I assure you we will be gone for such a long time that when we return this maniac will have forgotten all about his obsessions. Perhaps you too, detective, will have forgotten Rita".

"Where is she now?"

"She isn't available. She's sleeping and can't be disturbed".

"Does she agree with you? Does Rita also want it this way?"

"Not exactly. But I'll persuade her. This will be the right time to persuade her about a lot of things... to leave that damned work she does, to give up certain... amusements, once and for all. The time has come to do things right, and I know what the right things are for my Rita. We'll send you a postcard, detective. So long".  
Again those eyes, peering between his lids, cold and nasty. Like mine.

The fishing shack was at the very end of the canal, on the edge of the embankment, almost hidden by reeds. I left the car on the street and ran along the wall, until I was close enough to jump up onto the bank. It began to rain, a light drizzle, which smelled like salt each time the wind gusted.

The door was closed and the windows boarded up, except for the one facing onto the canal, from which protruded the arms of the winch that hoisted the nets. There was a putrid stench from over there, a strong, sickly-sweet smell, almost unbearable, that had attracted swarms of mosquitoes waiting expectantly on the surface of the fetid water. I ran a hand over my eyes to dry the salty rain that was wetting my face, and leaned over to look. There was someone inside there, a motionless shadow in which I perceived the outline of a face. He was outside my field of vision, but judging from the shadow he seemed to be staring right at the window. I drew back with a start, the wooden boards creaking, holding my breath as the wind whistled through the reeds, then I leaned over again to look. The shadow had moved: it had turned to the side, so that the curve of the nose had disappeared, and I didn't know if he was looking toward me or in the other direction. Moving as quietly as possible, I retraced my steps. I stopped in front of the door. I waited. If he realized I was there, maybe that bastard would come out and I could grab him. But maybe he was waiting for me. Maybe he had a gun. Or maybe he wasn't even there, maybe it was only a shadow, an invisible phantom... I picked up a stone and clenched it tightly in my hand. I wasn't scared. Whatever he was, man or ghost, I would bring him to Rita and that painter of hers, dead or alive. The painter would have to leave her. Him too, dead or alive.



I glanced at the door hinges and the sturdiness of the wood, then I counted to three and leaped forward. The door gave as soon as my shoulder struck it, with a damp, unexpected splintering that made me fall to the ground; I remained motionless, petrified, stone in hand.

The student swung suspended from a beam, the tips of his shoes a few inches from the floor, his head tilted on his shoulder by the twisted knot of the rope. He was swinging around at every gust of wind coming from the window and he did so just at that moment, turning his back to me. I was sure it was him, even though there was almost nothing left of the face. It was covered with flies and mosquitoes and his clothes hung on him like an empty sack. He had been dead for some time, a very long time. More than a month for sure. This time the door of the garage was open. I entered through there and climbed the stairs in a rush as soon as I saw that the painter's car was still there. I didn't worry about the sound of my footsteps on the wooden steps because now that I knew he wasn't a nameless ghost, I wasn't afraid of him anymore. As I lay stretched on the floor of the shack, curled up like a fetus, telling myself that this wasn't the time to give in to the urge to vomit, it had come to me that if the man in the night wasn't the student, then I could understand how he had gotten into a garage that was locked from the inside and how he knew about Rita's movements and about the letters... that bastard the painter with his eyes full of hatred... and as I scraped at the rotten wood of the door with my fingernails trying to get up, my one thought was that I would have to hurry, race there in my car, hurry and get to Rita before he took her away or hurt her, quickly, quickly... and I shouted it out loud and continued repeating it as I crawled out of the shack on all fours, like a dog, and raced along the bank, under the salty rain that whipped my face...

"Rita! Rita, where are you!"

I could hear voices from the top-floor studio. Little more than a murmur, nearly a sob, that made me shiver violently.

"Don't touch her! I'll kill you if you touch her, you bastard! I swear I'll kill you!"

The painter came out of the room wide-eyed and stopped in the doorway, a couple of steps above me. I raised my fists, ready to punch him, but he grabbed onto the door jamb, swaying. A thick spurt of blood gushed from between his slim fingers as he clutched his throat. The blood ran down his shirt as he slipped sideways to the floor. Behind him, reflected in the glass of a painting that portrayed her naked with her hands clasped in front of her, stood Rita, motionless, her eyes lifeless. She was wearing a hat and a dark coat. She let the bloody razor fall to the floor when I took her by the shoulders and smiled at me, with that tiny wrinkle that appeared at the corner of her mouth whenever she tightened her lips.

I'm no psychologist: I'm a private investigator whose business is debt collection, and before that I was just a member of the riot police with a ready club. I don't know what it was that pushed Rita to kill everyone she thought she loved... maybe guilt feelings for that student who had hung himself for her, a sense of guilt so unbearable that it made her kill others instead of just killing herself. Or maybe longing for a love so strong that it made her relive the past, trying to replace that boy who was able to love her simply by watching her sleep... a sick love, but one so great that even now, when I think of it, makes me clench my teeth to keep from being overcome by a rage and jealousy that makes my blood boil.

In any case... I remember that it was still raining as I waited at the red light, at the corner where the police precinct was. Rita had fallen asleep, huddled in the back seat, her clenched fists against her chest, like a child. I tried to think about what she was, a killer... a killer, but try as I might I wasn't able to. I was glad she had a name, Rita, that couldn't be transformed into anything different from what she now was. As I stared at the drops of rain running down the back window, I was thinking that there were only two alternatives. Let her go and run the risk that she might kill again, or take her to the police and make them stop her. Let her go or stop her. Take her back home or send her to prison. Not because of the murders she had committed... I too had killed, out of rage and not in self-defense, and I hadn't gone to prison to preserve the force's reputation. No, it was because of what she might do when...

So there you are. I remember that it was at that moment that I leaned my head back against the seat and sighed deeply, feeling bad. Because as I thought about the fact that Rita had killed every man she had ever loved after the student - the sales rep, the tennis instructor, and the painter - it came to me that in all the time I had been with her, distracted, lonely, unarmed even, well she had never done anything to me. Not a thing. Then the green light flashed on and I took off.

From that day on, the murders stopped. I don't know if the decision I made was the right one, but Rita is at

peace now and when I see her, every now and then, she talks and laughs and tells me what's going on, her work, her new relationships, her problems... And once, but only once, we even made love. Because I didn't send Rita to prison, I couldn't... I took her back home.

Every night, when she sleeps alone, I scramble over the little garden wall, climb up onto the balcony, and open the glass door with a screwdriver. Then I sit down in the armchair and watch her. She goes on sleeping, she never opens her eyes or moves, but I know she feels me there.

Sometimes, when I'm sure of not waking her, I lean forward and kiss her on the mouth.

[Top of Page](#)