

*Jack & Cora*

*A Love Story*

*By*

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## Part I

### Chapter 1 – Spies Cora in bar - Working

When I walked passed the café I often saw her in there. Often she was carrying her tray between the bar top and the tables, which lined up neat and in a row, a small aisle in between. The tables were set back in a balustrade area which led up to by a step. I knew this because I was often in there in the evening, though much to my regret she never seemed to work evenings.

She was coming and going in an energetic yet defiant manner. I should have be courageous and gone in there and asked her her name. I should demand more importantly that she should have coffee with me sometime but I could never find the balls and so I stood out of sight uncertainly. I didn't smoke but this would have been an occasion for numerous cigarettes as I waited unsure hoping that the conviction would grab me and I would walk in there confidently and proposition her.

To me she was Venus-. a romantic goddess and my Muse. Every day I passed the café and I could see her carrying trays of drinks here and there. She was not so adept and didn't carry the tray one handed above her head as the other girls, but I loved her tentative but defiant face. I caught the looks of other guys as she passed them by. She was strong featured and almost off centre pretty. Her big nose dominated her face. Long blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail. And large hopelessly deep blue eyes.

My main plan then was America. I was waiting for a green card and then I would be away. America had it all. All I could hope for and where my freedom lay. In that land of plenty where no one gave a damn you I was and where I came from and I know I would be accepted because it had happened before.

I had applied to US immigration several times now. I was no fool. I realised my prospects in Holland were not bright. Without the language all I could expect was a dreary succession of manual jobs. Still it was not easy to get a green card.

I was not much to look at. I knew that and was under no illusions. But I offered my heart and as a result I felt a complete entitlement. She would listen at least and perhaps say yes. I didn't care. I offered my love to her and I was not in any doubt of my sincerity. If she passed on me then she was a fool and nothing more. But I had yet to ask. And ask I would.

My name is not important. And I never confessed it in my journal. My solipsist brain had no need of self-declaration. You can call me Jack, if that helps. I was questing for truth then, though I hardly knew it at the time. My right was my truth and I was very uncomprising.

So I gave the matter some thought and I plotted my next move. I was not so confident to walk in there and brazenly declare love. I had my steady and she was well hooked on me and salved my tender ego. It was emotional life-support and I could not quit her without a new opportunity and what I hoped would be the answer to my prayers.

I decided that I would try to get to know my Venus first. As such I would have to become a customer of the café and thereby the chance or opportunity for a few words here and there would arise.

## Chapter 2 – Woke in flat on floor with others

I awoke to the alarm at 6:45am. I arose from my assigned part of the floor and I could see that the other housemates were in various stages of wakefulness. There were six of us living in a one-bedroom apartment on the top floor of a post-war grey brick house and we were cordially hated by the other residents.

This was because the usual complement per flat was one or perhaps a couple. We however were six in total. And every night was a drinking session.

We were Irish students lured to Holland by the promise of work where none existed back home. It was a far cry from what I imagined I would be doing as a business graduate – working in a glass factory, checking bottles for cracks. It was I told my self, every day - a temporary solution.

There was one girl and she lived in the company of the five of us lads. She was endlessly flirting with all of us and had her favourites amongst which used to change from day to day depending on what mood she was in. Her name was Mairead and she was overweight and constantly snacking when she was in the flat. She subsisted on a diet of junk food and soap operas subtitled in Dutch.

I managed to remain aloof from her company though the other lads got to know her better. Since I had arrived more recently I was on the periphery of her

Today was Monday and it was another drab day outside, the sun barely up on a foggy, damp morning. It was time now to pull myself together and get on my bike with the other lads and cycle the 7 kilometres to Dongen where the factory was.

I hated this mornings particularly Monday with the prospect of the entire week ahead. It was a moronic job in a bland town tucked away in the middle of Europe. There was nothing about this lifestyle that smacked of anything other than temporary. But then there was Venus. And when I thought of her my spirits lifted.

What would she be up to now? I surmised from her clothes and her general haughty air that she was middle class. Menial work was beneath her and yet there she was, working in as a waitress.

I got my bike down stairs and set off following the other lads to Dongen. I wasn't exactly depressed but I didn't feel like talking either. Conversation was not really possible anyway on the cycle path and it quickly became congested.

We sped through the city avoiding the centre and passing the railway station on our right as we went along. We stayed mostly clubbed together in a group. There was Patrick who was the most outgoing of us and generally quite upbeat even on a Monday morning. Tim was an overweight, contrary, moaning guy who always complained and hadn't met anyone since he was dumped by his girlfriend. Nile was the guy I knew best and we had come over together. He was generally on the level and could be counted on to remain calm in most situations. Harold and Thomas made up the group. They were both easy going guys, could be relied upon to avoid drama at all costs which suited me just fine.

Mairead had managed to get a lift with one to the Turkish guys she was flirting with. I could never figure out if she was sleeping with these "friends" of hers.

"What is the story with Mairead and Abullah?" I said coming up along side Tim.

"Billies action I reckon" said Tim.

"Why don't you go for her?" I asked on the wind.

"Furla will."

"Tim you have to make an effort if you want to meet someone."

"Not like that billy goat you met. She has a moustache you know" butted in Patrick.

"You are talking about his girlfriend," said Harold.

I didn't mind too much because I didn't care about her much myself. I wasn't exactly going to rise to defend her honour or every slur that came her way.

Patrick just laughed and cycled on. He didn't care what I thought. Yes she was my girlfriend I suppose, my steady and she lived in the city of the town. I never considered her my girlfriend because I knew I would be moving on and America beckoned and that I would not be long for a glass factory in forgotten Holland.

Some of the guys questioned the logic of a steady. Patrick in particular was always dropping comments. Why go out with someone I was not into? He often asked. And the answer was I always sought the available

girls. I aimed high but I would always settle on what was available and within reach.

### Chapter 3 – Meeting steady in Heuvel

I met my steady in a club on the Heuvel. And my strategy since arriving had always been, meet someone, meet anyone and enjoy all the emotional benefits of having someone there. So when I first arrived I scoured the pubs and clubs around the Heuvel – striking up conversations with anyone who would listen. And she did listen.

She was petite and wore bright red lipstick. She had curly blonde; mousy hair on she was wearing a light beige overcoat, which she was preparing to put in the coat check when I lighted upon her.

“It’s a very busy place, here” I said for opening.

“Yes it is. Friday night is the busy night.”

She was nervous and also open to chat.

“Do you live around there?”

“Just across the street. Your English is very good.”

“I’m Irish. Mother tongue you know. Shall we sit outside under the heat lamps?”

We sat there for an hour to two. She wasn’t much of a drinker I noted with disappointment. She wasn’t soul mate material. I knew that from a few minutes conversation that she wasn’t but I went ahead with it anyhow. There was a precedent in my mind regarding such matters and it took me back to my time in LA.

“Take whatever you can get” said Nile, even though he showed little enthusiasm for the chase and was much happier drinking beer with Tim and Patrick. It was a case of too much stonage where they were concerned.

Their night out could not begin without a few big fat joints which they smoked in the apartment. After that they were fit more for bed than a night out.

Before they even

I was thrilled. This was as far as any conversation had gone for me since I first arrived.

I always promised myself I would quit it someday and find something better. Not speaking the language of course was a problem and even though the locals would speak English when asked they preferred their own incomprehensible gobbledegook. I know I should have seen it their

way and taken some lessons but I was stubborn plus I never thought I would be there that long.

My interests were women and the pursuit of them. I cannot explain or articulate what an overriding preoccupation that was with me then. I lived for the hunt and the pursuit of Venus as I called her and lived in hope of a thousand possible conquests with the percentages running closer to the 1 or 2%.

Venus was a dream and a goddess and an indisputably beautiful woman. In my life I had only meet two or three real Venus's and they had not expressed the slightest interest in me, but still the quest went on.

I lived in the north of town and I cycled my bike to the factory every weekday. My job was to inspect glass bottles for cracks. I was a twiddler as the lads called it. It was not a job a person should have to do. A machine would have been far more appropriate. So I became a machine for those seven hours and a half punctuated by two breaks and a half hour for lunch. The food in the cafeteria was crap but I ate it anyway. It was cheap.

Most of the lunch I would talk to Ali. He was a Muslim from Egypt and he took God very seriously. One time I made a joke about God and he got all shirty with me.

“Don't make jokes about God, my friend” he said, and walked off.

I didn't take it to heart and the next day he was his usual jokey conversational self. Ali lived with a Dutch woman and spoke some of the language. He was far more integrated than me and intended to stay. Holland was his future. For me I couldn't care less. America was the place for me but just now they didn't want me. I had no papers and I certainly wasn't going to go as an illegal.

I was seeing this girl who lived in the Heuvel and her name was Lucy but I was not keen and it was not going particularly well. It was going well for her part. At least I thought so. She was very clingy and demanding and I always wanted to run away and yet I kept coming back as she always said. And she was right and I was an ass with a commitment problem.

Her flat overlooked the Heuvel Ring and from it you could see Extase where we met. I guess I did like her a little but I mainly wanted to have a

girlfriend and she was no Venus let me tell you. And yet who was. I was trying to find a woman that had never been born.

Lucy and I met in Extase and our meeting coincided with me touring the bar. I was doing the rounds tipping off girls and on this occasion I tipped off her.

She was polite and smiley. She was not very tall and was wearing a yellow overcoat with a trailing belt. Her hair was naturally curly and she had a wide smile displaying beautifully clean teeth.

We sat at the front under the heat lamps. And despite them it was freezing. I had a pilsner and she had a glass of red wine.

I cannot tell you what we talked about because I never had anything in common with her intellectually. My mistake. She was interested in improving her English and that's how it started.

Thereafter I used to creep upstairs to her apartment late at night. All manner of day and night she would permit my coming and going. And once the rules of engagement had been laid down I was the boss and I made the rules. I knew that ultimately she would tire of me but just for that brief summer of dalliance I was the boss of her.

In general the town made me sick. There was nothing going on in Tilburg, nor had there ever been. Things of importance always happened somewhere else. The city sported some bland post-war architecture and I lived in a high rise where I could see it all from my bedroom window. It was the arse end of Holland and a flat landscape spread out in all directions.

My thoughts often came back to California where I really wanted to be. Where the weather was good and the living was easy and everyone had money and a generosity to match. I was counting the days but still there was no word. I had written to immigration twice already importuning them with my situation and still no word.

California now that was the beating heart of the Western World. Los Angeles the media hub and here was I lost in Holland trying to get by.

Two things I planned to do today, one was work and as I rode my bike back along the cycle path to Tilburg I had already checked that box. The

second was to pay a visit to the Venus in the café. And to see if I couldn't get talking to her in some shape or form.

I parked my bike outside the café and didn't bother to lock it. That was the other annoying thing about Tilburg - the complete absence of crime that I could see. In fact I was a criminal because I had stolen my bicycle from someone else.

I could see from the window that she wasn't there but I decided to go in anyway and have a beer. It was early days for Lucy and I didn't want to be subjected to too much cannoodling. I sat in the booth at the back of the café. The place was empty. On the walls were pictures of Tilburg's uninspired history. Another waitress came and took my order.

"Excuse me. Where is the girl with the long blonde hair who works here?"

She turned around and smiled.

"Oh you must mean Cora. She's not on today."

"Back tomorrow?"

The smile widened. "I think so." And she was gone.

Cora. Cora. Cora. What a beautiful name! Beautiful and yet simple. It was the name of a lady, a real princess. She had to be. There was no doubt. My thoughts computed a thousand possibilities. I would come back. That much was sure and when I did she would be here. Would she find favour in me? And what about Lucy? I was dreading the inevitable break up that was on the horizon and how was I going to handle it?

I left having finished my beer. And I cycled at a leisurely pace back to my home in Tilburg Noord. There was nothing going on that evening now that I had decided to give Lucy's place a miss. I rang her and made up some flimsy excuse. I could hear the disappointment in her voice. It made no difference however. I was the boss of her.

I sat in my room but I couldn't read or even consider watching subtitled telly. I got up and put on my jacket and went for a walk. There was a biter of a wind that night and I cursed my forgotten gloves. I walked along the canal because really there was nowhere else to walk and I felt sad about stuff but I didn't really know why.

There was a girl out there in California too and right now she seemed like the only thing that was warm and loving. I felt surrounded by a life I didn't want and yet was forced to lead. There was no future in this place.

Of course Venus or Cora sparked a moment of hope but it was forlorn. I sat on a windswept park bench and wished I could be magically conveyed to where she worked in Los Angeles.

After a while my bum started to freeze so I came back up to the flat and went in and sat down. Other things I tried to do in this mood was to distract myself from myself. I forced myself to read but I found I was rereading the same paragraph over and over. I would have got drunk if I had the forethought to do it but it was too late to go down now to the Heuvel and anyway I had to work the next day. In the end I parked it all and went to bed. A half hour later I heard the front door open. Michael was home.

The next day dawned bright and shiny and my morose mood of the night before had mostly lifted. I cycled along the cycle path out to Dongen where the factory was and I considered my situation afresh. America was a no go without a green card. I didn't fancy working in a taqueria and the employment opportunities for illegals were scant.

Holland wasn't such a bad station. Obviously I couldn't work in a factory forever but I didn't plan on it anyhow. I would get a better job or maybe go back to Ireland I didn't really know. But when the sun was shining and the day bright things didn't seem so bad.

That day I twiddled an extra pallet for badness and the foreman came down and commented and was impressed. They liked my work ethic in the place and generally approved of me, which was important because I needed them. They had hired some ass wipe from Sweden who was pushing all the foremen; mine included, really hard to make quotas. Until he arrived things had been peachy but now we had to work twice as hard. Anyway I didn't care about him. I was on the twiddling A-list and I had no concerns about my job security.

At lunchtime I told Ali about Venus Cora or just Cora as I called her. "Man I don't see your interest," he said. We were sitting at one of the tables in the cafeteria. "You already have a girlfriend." "I know but she isn't right." It sounded stupid even as I said it. "Not right? Why not right?" "Just not right. We don't get on or something. She wrecks my head." "Ah I see. You don't love her." "Of course I don't love her. She's my in-between girl." "Man. You are messed up."

“That’s what I am saying. I know I am messed up. What should I do about Cora?”

“What you should do is tell Lucy that it’s over. Then you can tell Cora how you feel.”

“I know. I know. You’re right.”

He was right. He was honest and ethical in his dealings with women and I was just a scumbag. Well I didn’t really think I was a scumbag. I was just young and sowing my wild oats. Or something like that.

I phoned Lucy later from the cafeteria and arranged to go around to her place for dinner. I hadn’t seen her in a while so I was hopeful that the annoyance factor would be minimal but she was quick to prove me wrong. I also tried to avoid kissing her on the lips but she got wise to my evasion and managed to force her mouth into the right position. She was also quite a giggly girl. She had this tendency of giggling at the end of each sentence. After a while I thought that I would have to leave it was so bad. Also when she answered the phone she used to say “Allo met Lucy” and then giggle afterwards as if there was something funny about answering the phone.

We sat in the kitchen come living room of her flat and ate the pasta she had cooked.

“Where have you been?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you for ages.”

“Oh well. I have been really busy at the factory.”

“No. You haven’t you only work seven and a half hours. Nobody works overtime down there.”

“Who told you that?”

“I talked to your foreman.”

I tried another tack. “Look. I can’t tell you where I have been. It’s a secret.”

“What do you mean secret? Tell me.”

“I’m a secret agent.”

“No you’re not.”

I was thinking in the back of my mind. I could be out with Venus instead of listening to this tripe. I said no more and ate my pasta.

“Do you want to come to Amsterdam? My father is driving up and you can come with me. We could spend the whole day in Amsterdam.”

“I can’t go. Sorry.”

“Oh. Why not?”

“I have to work. Remember. In the factory.”

“I know in the factory.”

There was silence for a while.

“But Amsterdam would be fun.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry.” There was an edge in my voice and she dropped it.

Later as we lay side by side not talking the sheets thrown off for coolness. I knew I had to get out. It was unfair to her. It was unfair to me. It couldn’t continue. And yet all along I had felt like that and acted as though it could carry on. She took away her conclusions. I held on doggedly to mine. Why was love such an elusive drug? And the girl next door was never the one that I fell in love with.

I was always out there on the margins, quixotically questing for some vision of beauty feminine and patently failing to find it. There was no point talking to Lucy about such things. Abstraction was not her strong suit and theoretical conversations didn’t go down so well with her.

After a while she fell asleep and I thought I would leave but then I felt so bad I decided to stay. I would leave early in the morning and this time I resolved it would be for good.

I slept in the end but my dreams were unquiet. California was shrouded in a veil of darkness and there was no escape, not there, not anywhere. I was being dragged into a cul-de-sac with no exit and no way out.

The next day as I peddled my bike out to the factory I made up my mind I was going to break up with Lucy. I told Ali on the lunch break.

“Well man, if you don’t love her then you should break up with her.”

This seemed like the greatest good sense but as the day wore on and we knocked off for the evening. I began to question the advice and finally I thought I don’t want to be alone. I still needed her and as I pedalled my bike back to Tilburg I decided to put the whole break up thing on the long finger and wait and see what happened.

I would endure Lucy for a while longer. That was all. That night on my way through Tilburg I passed by the café deliberately and there she was working away. The place was only half full.

I parked my bike and went in and sat down. Now that I was confronted with the prospect of meeting her I was strangely not nervous. I was sitting in a booth and she came up to take me order.

“Mmmm, I’ll have a pilsner.”

She didn’t smile or make any sign of friendliness. I ploughed on anyway.

“Very quiet for a Thursday.”

“Yes it is.” And there was that smile. It was a wide, wide smile with beautiful teeth revealed. It suggested empathy and comprehension and her eyes sparkled with merriment.

“You’re not from here, are you?” Her English was flawless and she spoke with a slight American twang.

“I’m Irish. Are you in the university?”

She nodded.

“So am I. I’m an Erasmus student.”

Folly of follies. Why had I told her that? I should have told her the truth that I was a humble twiddler. But I wanted to impress. Be on her level for at least at moment.

She just nodded again not thinking to question what I had told her. And then she was gone to fetch my beer and I was left wondering did I imagine all that or was there some kind of connection.

The place had filled up and I sat in my booth for a while longer and she was busy elsewhere. There was no further opportunity for conversation. I paid my tab and left.

I eschewed Lucy’s place again and pedalled on up to the flat. I just didn’t want to deal with anyone really and preferred to be alone with my own thoughts. And then something happened that I really didn’t expect. I was going through my mail from home when I was in the hallway of the flat. And there was a brown, manila envelope.

I knew instantly what it was and where it came from. It was from the US immigration in Virginia and there could only be one reason why my parents had sent it to me.

I tore open the envelope and there it was – all the details. I had to present myself in the United States within four months to avail of the work permit. A green card! I couldn’t believe it. I could even become an American citizen within five years. I had broken the chains of my origins, of sleepy poverty ridden and priest ridden Ireland. I could go wherever I pleased in the States and live how I pleased. There was no reason for me

to linger much longer in rainy, depressing Holland. But then there was Venus.

Now was the time to escalate matters and there was no reason for delay or waiting. No time like the present. So even though it was late I put on my jacket and got on my bike and headed back to the Heuvel ring and the café where I knew she would be working tonight.

Things were coming together, really coming together. I could feel it now. The green card was a sign. My guardian angel was watching out for me. I had scant obligation here. I could be wound up in a matter of days. Of course there was always the matter of Lucy. Poor Lucy! What the hell was I going to say to her?

What I got to the café it was bustling with people. There were people out on the street. Every seat and booth was taken. I could see Cora busy amongst the crowd carrying a large tray of drinks. I decided to take a position and wait for the crowd to subside somewhat and then to make my move.

I had rehearsed a thousand times in my head what I was going to say and it went something like this “Cora I was just wondering if you would like to meet up some time and maybe to grab a cup of coffee?”

Eventually I found some standing room near the toilets and I found a perch on a little ledge. I put my drink down. It was clear as I observed that other men found her just as attractive as I did. I could see that she was being drawn into conversations all over the bar.

I bided my time but I started to feel really self-conscious. What if it all went wrong? What then? I felt I couldn't be comfortable now I had started to think this way. I should have been subtler and invited someone to come with me. Even Michael or Ali could have been persuaded. It was so obvious that I fancied her. At least it was to me.

As I was in the throes of these worries I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and she was standing there smiling from ear to ear. Up close I could see that she had freckles though they were quite becoming.

“Well stranger. What are you doing here?”

“Oh just having a quiet drink.” I kicked for touch not wanting to launch into it to quickly.

“Quiet drink! Tonight is not the night. The football. You know all you guys go crazy over football.”

“Not me. I don’t even like football.”  
“Yes you do” she started to laugh. “Well I got to get back to work.”  
She turned. It was now or never.  
I blurted out. “Listen when do you finish?”  
She stopped, smiling.  
“Do you want to get a drink or something?”  
“A drink sounds very possible.  
My heart soared at these words.  
“Look, I have to go” she said. “Meet me in the university outside the library, tomorrow at three and don’t be late.”  
And she was gone, back into the crowd taking orders and high fiving with the lads.

After she left, I was stunned - this beautiful girl interested in me. It didn’t seem possible or plausible. I silently watched her in action in the bar. She was so confident, so utterly in control of herself. But she was a Venus and that meant that she was a worthy target of my solicitations. Now at last I was approaching my goal, and the corpse strewn battlefield of my amours seemed suddenly justifiable and sensible. Of course it was the only way to find my way to someone like her.

I slinked out without saying goodbye. I didn’t want to say something that would detract from arrangement we had made or give her the opportunity to change her mind. I avoided Lucy’s place as well that night.

I cycled home in a world of congruence. The sky seemed a familiar sight and the trees and houses and people walking in the streets seemed known to me and friendly. The world was one of love and sense and all the unanswered questions were suddenly answerable. Love was the drug that made life liveable. And I could get my head around it all now.

There was definite interest. I knew by the way she looked at me and by the way she acted she had thought about this too. She was a defining moment I was sure. Someone I had to meet and had to follow through with.

The next day I called in sick to the factory. My first sick day but I didn’t really care. What really mattered was now was my date with her. I knew I couldn’t go to work and do both. I told Michael about it.

“What are you getting so excited about?” he asked. “You don’t know her or anything about her. She could be a total idiot.”

His words deflated me a little bit. He was right. I didn't know anything about Cora except a few hurriedly exchanged words and of course her appearance of which I was very confident.

"I think she is what I am looking for. I think we might be soul mates" I said.

"Yeah. But you don't know that. Look I was half cracked about a girl I met in Extase before Christmas but after a few months going out I realised we had nothing in common."

"Yeah well I'm not you."

There was a knock on the front door and I went to answer it. When I opened the door Lucy was standing there.

"What are you doing here?" I said, genuinely amazed.

She tried to smile but it was pretty clear she had been crying.

"You are leaving I think."

"Who told you that?"

"You never liked it here anyway. Aren't you going to invite me in?"

I ushered her in and we sat down in the small living room. A large TV was the main feature of the room. The walls and ceiling were painted a dull brown and two other chairs in addition to the sofa were the only other furnishings.

Through the window was a panoramic view of the Tilburg hinterland. Tilled fields spread with symmetric precision in all directions. The crops were long harvested now and only the ploughed furrows remained in readiness for next year.

I felt awkward and uncomfortable. She was the last person I wanted to deal with at this moment. And I wasn't ready to tell her that she was right. I was leaving. And I don't know how she knew. It must have been her much vaunted female intuition but she was correct. I had made up my mind and I had almost put wheels in motion but not quite yet.

"Why don't you call over anymore like you used to?"

"I don't know. It doesn't feel right. I mean I don't want anything serious. I told you that already."

"Anything serious" she started crying. I should have put my arm around her and told her everything was going to be all right. But it wasn't going to be all right and everything she suspected was going to come true.

"Look. Be fair. I hardly know you. You hardly know me. Why I only met you two months ago."

“But we are perfect for each other. I know that we are. I know I can be annoying but I don’t mean to be. I mean I can change.”

“But I don’t want you to change. I mean you are fine the way you are. It’s just you and me isn’t right. You don’t have to change for me. I wouldn’t want that anyhow. You would be pretending to be someone you are not.”

She wiped her eyes and sat up in the chair.

“Okay I am not going to cry anymore. Let’s do something today. You and me, it will be fun. I promise I won’t complain again. That’s it. I am finished complaining.

It was going all wrong. She was not getting the message and preferring illusion to reality. The clock was ticking away and I was supposed to be at the university for three. I checked the time again. It was one thirty.

“Look I can’t really hang out with you today. I have to go to the agency.”

“But I will come with you. I can wait for you outside. It’s not problem at all.”

My inspired excuse fell flat.

“I have to meet someone at three.”

“Who are you meeting?” Her radar was on instantly.

“Just a friend from the factory.”

“Why don’t you cancel?”

“I can’t look I am sorry. Tell you what. I will call into you later on this evening. What do you say?”

“That’s a lovely idea. I will cook you some dinner. Just like old times.”

“Okay great.”

Finally it seemed to be working.

She stood up to leave. “Okay I will leave you now. See you about seven thirty then.”

“Okay see you then.” I ushered her out into the corridor.

When she was gone I realised I had only postponed the encounter with Lucy until the evening. Intuitively Lucy sensed that I was pulling away and her reaction seemed to be to cling ever more ferociously

As soon as the door had closed behind her I raced into my room and got changed into my glad rags. I wanted to look my best for Cora and I chose one of my scoring shirts that was battlefield tested. I checked the time. It was now two.

I had only a vague idea of how to get to the university since I had never been there. I got on my bike and I pedalled and I pedalled for a long time. I cycled down a tree-lined avenue and all the time watching for signs for the university. I stopped a man at an intersection and asked him but he

didn't speak English so it was no use. All the time in the back of mind time was running out and I didn't want to be late.

Of course I could have found her again at the café and it wouldn't be the end of the world. But something told me this was a once only offer and if I weren't there it wouldn't be repeated.

Finally I found my way to the campus and cycled through the entrance. It was a nondescript place with lots of sixties architecture and not particularly attractive at that. A nice woman directed me to the library and I arrived out of breath and palpitating. I was late I knew that. It was only when I looked at the clock in the window of the canteen that I realised by how much. I was forty-five minutes late and there was no sign of Cora. No sign and I had made a bags of it. It was all Lucy's fault and I indulged myself for a moment in an orgy of blame.

Since there was nothing I could do about it I decided to have a look around. Maybe she would come back upon the hour and that would be worth waiting for. I walked through the canteen and there was no sign. I decided to go into the library and I took an escalator upstairs. As I did I saw her standing at the top of the escalator outside the entrance to the library. She had clearly been watching me come up the stairs and she flushed very becomingly when our eyes met.

"You are late" she said when I was within earshot. She was smiling again.

"I'm sorry. I was delayed. I came as soon as I could."

"Oh."

"Well I did try to be on time."

"Yes. You looked rather out of breath I thought."

"You saw me?"

"Well. Hmm. Yes I was looking out the window. Well you didn't expect me to run down and greet you, did you?"

"Not if you didn't want to."

"Well I was there on time anyway."

I could see the conversation was getting quagmired.

"Well what do you want to do?"

"Let's go to a café. I know a place."

We took the elevator down to the ground floor. And I unlocked my bike. She sat on the back and I pedalled and off we went.

"This is a good bike. Was it expensive?"

“Oh not too bad. You know. A hundred guilders.”

“A hundred guilders. I thought it would be a lot more.”

“Oh I bought it second hand,” I said, airily. “Where is this place?”

“Oh not too far. Turn here and then along the canal.”

Even though she was sitting on the backseat, she quickly took control of the situation and shouted out directions in a very manly and confident way.

We sat outside the café. It was cold as winter was setting in. But still the ever present heat lamps helped. We ordered coffee following her lead but I could have used a beer at that point.

“The other people in the university don’t like me” she said. “But I don’t care. All the girls talk about is stupid stuff, bitch crap. Clothes and who is screwing who and for how long. I don’t care about that. What do you think?”

“Oh well. I don’t really know anyone in my course, you see.”

“All the way from Ireland and you don’t know anyone. That is awfully brave of you. I like that. That’s cool.”

I had the terrible feeling I was going to get caught out in my lie but now just wasn’t the right moment for honesty.

“I don’t understand men, you know. I mean most men just think with the dicks. You’re not like that. I can tell.”

“Well I had sisters I suppose. I guess that helps.”

“You know we could go over to my café for a drink. I’m not working tonight but Rudi will give us drinks no charge. What do you think?”

“I think that would be just fine.”

“Well take your time. There is no rush. You can finish your coffee. Where do you live?”

“Tilburg Noord. But I spend a lot of time in the city centre.”

“Really. Doing what?”

“Oh well I like to dance. Do you like dancing?”

“Of course. Every girl likes dancing. Well at least I think so.”

“There’s something we could do. We could go dancing. What about tonight? We could go to Extase. Do you know Extase?”

“Of course” she smiled. “Okay let’s do that. Let’s go to the café first and have a drink.”

I looked at the clock in the café as we left. It was half six already. Lucy would be preparing dinner at this stage. All I had to do was to offload Cora to another night or rather still simplify my life and not go down this

new road when I knew I was leaving. What was the point? And yet she was as Venus and that had to count for something.

And a road was definitely opening up. I could sense it. As we left the café she put an arm around me and we walked, I wheeling the bike and she with her hand in mine. It felt right. It felt meant to be and I didn't want it to stop and I didn't care about the consequences. Extase was Lucy's turf. In fact it was the very place I would look for her if she were not at home.

Later we sat at the bar in the café and Rudi plied us with drinks. It was early but the place was dead.

"Rudi come met my new friend."

"Another new friend, Cora."

She scowled. I didn't like the sound of that.

"Oh you're Irish. Another one of those Irish that works in the glass factory."

"Hmm. Well. I used to."

"Now just hang on a second," said Cora. "You told me you were a student."

"Well I was. I am. Oh damn it anyway." Rudi had gone to the other side of the bar. "Look I told you I was a student to impress you and to be like you. I thought it would make you like me."

She thought about that for a while and then she started to smile.

"So you made the whole thing up?"

"Pretty much. It's true what Rudi says. I'm one of the Irish who works in the factory and I might as well tell you that I am leaving soon to go back to Ireland and then I am probably going back to America eventually. So you see getting involved with me is probably not a very good idea."

That shut her up for a while. Then the smile was back.

"I think it's very romantic. You are a big liar you know. A bigger liar than me and I thought I was pretty bad. I need to make a phone call. Hang on I will be back in a few minutes."

When she was gone I reviewed my situation. I could just make it up to Lucy's place and not be too late if I went in the next fifteen minutes or so. I didn't rate my chances very highly with Cora but I would wait to see if she came back or not. What could I do? I was glad I told her the truth in the end. It was weighing heavily on my mind and I felt lighter now. She was too nice a girl to lie to and what was the point of some kind of one-night-stand. When it came down to it there was a real person involved and one who could get hurt.

She was back a few minutes later.

“It’s all arranged,” she said, sitting up at the bar.

“What do you mean?”

“I spoke with Mama and it is all arranged. You can come and stay with us until you go back to Ireland and after that who knows.”

“Oh. Well.” This was not what I had been expecting. “Wait now hang on a second.”

But she didn’t wait. She leaned across the bar in my direction and kissed me on the mouth. She tasted all lemony and balmy as if she had used only the best lip care products. Rudi came around the bar again and had a big smile on his face.

“There now - see you are a good kisser. I thought so,” she said when we had finished.

My mind was churning and I could see I was on some kind of roller coaster. And the best thing to do was to hang on for dear life.

“Finish your drink. We’re going.”

“Wait. I mean where are we going.”

“We’re going to Extase like you suggested.”

My heart sank at that suggestion. Why had I suggested that? I must be retarded. Straight into the lion’s den. Or maybe I wanted to be found out and just get it all out in the open. There was a chance she wouldn’t be there, but generally she was there if she wasn’t with me.

“Wait maybe we can go somewhere else. How about Das Spool?”

“No I hate Das Spool. It’s full of sleazy guys. Unless of course there is some reason you don’t want to go to Extase.”

I gave up. I was trapped. We said goodbye to Rudi and we walked the few cobbled streets to Extase. It was early but the music was playing and we tried out a few moves on the dance floor. She again displayed a complete lack of self-consciousness, which I was now becoming accustomed to.

It was ten past ten. And Lucy would have given up waiting for me by now. Now she would be on the phone to her friend Sasha organising a night out which in practise consisted of both of them going to Extase to dance.

There was something neurotic about my feelings for Lucy. On the one hand I wanted her to know so she would leave me alone now there was someone else. But on the other I needed to feel cared about and I needed

her to give me her undivided attention so I was a dependent in that respect.

Cora and I danced the night away and more and more drink was bought and drunk and she matched me for every drink with no sign of drunkenness or tiredness.

At about eleven Cora pulled my arm. The place was full now and people were arriving all the time.

“We have to go if we are going to catch the last train to my place.”

“Okay.”

My heart soared. There was a chance I could get out of this without bumping into Lucy. We got our coats and made our way to the exit. I was holding her hand and she kissed me as we waited to leave the building.

We had just entered the front bar when I saw Lucy and Sasha coming in the main entrance. There was no time to hide or dodge the encounter. Her eyes saw me instantly and quickly took in Cora and the holding of the hands.

I let go of Cora’s hand and walked over to Lucy. She didn’t say anything but I could tell she had figured out the situation. There was a world of recrimination in her eyes.

“Who is that?”

“Just a friend. Look I have to go.”

“Now wait one second. You can’t just walk out without an explanation. Where were you this evening? I cooked dinner for you and was waiting for you to come over. Now who is this and why are you holding hands with her?”

“Look” and there was an edge in my voice “it would take too long to explain and I can’t go into it now. She’s friend that’s all.”

“More than a friend if I know anything. If you go off with her we are finished do you hear? Finished!”

I turned around and walked over to get Cora.

“Don’t you ring me again, do you hear? You bastard. You play with my emotions. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

She shouted the last words at me and people in the bar turned around to see what the commotion was.

I didn’t bother to listen to anymore. I just grabbed Cora and I left. So one chapter of my life was closing and other one was opening. I felt kind of

sick. The whole evening had been a jangling build up to this climax. I didn't care about women at all at that moment and if Cora had walked off I just would have gone back to the apartment and crawled into bed. But instead she was swinging my arm and taking me down to the train station in typical confident style.

"Who was that?" she asked breaking the silence.

"That was Lucy. An ex girlfriend."

"Oh. She didn't look very ex to me. Why was she so upset? You didn't sleep with her did you?"

"Look I don't really want to talk about it."

"That's okay. You don't have to. Look I have it all figured out. Why don't you stay with me until you have to go back to Ireland? You're pretty much finished with the factory right?"

She went on methodically explaining the details of how tomorrow we would collect the clothes and pack up the stuff from the flat and I would move in with her for as long as I liked. I thought of poor Lucy crying in Extase and I let the thought pass me by. I just sank back on the melodious sound of her voice.

"Don't blame yourself okay. She was not for you. You didn't match well with her."

We caught the last train from Tilburg to Den Bosch.