

BY THE SEA

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The whole night spent in my blue van chasing Venus, the tires barely touching nests of giant oysters, right and left. White and black pearls, assembly lines of meat, archangels descending from ropes, blowing into horns of bone, calling the others to watch the trenches of terrestrial meat. Seraphs like peeping Toms, with fifty euros hidden in their feathered underwear, sweat their transparent holy sap, together with the people of the night queued up behind my blue van, seeing the bright eyes of the cars, the silhouettes of drivers with crumpled and curled wings, the microscopic fires of Marlboros, listening to Bruce Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad" blaring out a car window.

The whole night spent in my blue van waiting for Venus, through the narrow galleries of this new, soft Golconda. Roma, the electric blues of euros, the oases of hookers in that great fascist desert, inhabited by white marble ribs and buttocks frozen since February.

You can see explorers, ghosts without eyes, with flies as their passengers and hands full of diamonds; white colonnades; a dwarf standing on the aristocratic hood of a Mercedes scanning the horizon like an Indian; everywhere rectangular footprints of the Universal Exhibition of 1942. My blue van, with a full tank and an endless thirst, fits like a brick of plastic explosive in this rational geometry, lifting the leaves of extinct bus stops, crushing the ghosts of Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* who have remained imprisoned on the set, their pockets still bulging with storms as they stagger across Via Cristoforo Colombo.

The rearview mirror reflects the tired ink of the asphalt, a bottle of beer that rolls endlessly, Vincent Price digging his dog's grave in front of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. All these things I'm leaving behind, including the past and the curses, which now flow like the opening crawl of *Star Wars*, the words crashing into black space, while ahead, ten meters before tomorrow, the waves drown the heads of new days.

The sea is nearby, to the south. The sea has my therapy; it holds Sara hostage and waits for me. I know it very well, its empty, submerged fishing net into which small bass swim belly up from the ecstasy of their daily dose of petroleum. It's my cursed place that moves back and forth, with its tides and its wide beach, a name written in the sand a thousand times, a castle without towers, and a syringe for an antenna. Poachers who drag mermaids by the tail, footsteps of bulldozers, the skeleton of a three-star hotel, and in the distance the neon lights of bars. Ostia, city of the living, sleeps, digesting dreams in its psychedelic canal, the foam and the gray fin of washing machines run aground; the Roman theater in Ostia, city of

the dead, with the actors emerging from excavations, from the cracks, from ancient stone nests, nereids with decomposed thighs dancing with shopkeepers from other centuries, coins of Maxentius under their tongues.

This is the place I have to go back to every night. The shore. A trade, a contract, one Venus for another. My blue van knows the way, the bends and curves, its pistons frying when it hunts, when its stomach is empty. Its welds roar, it shakes off the old blood crusts, the thin mouth of its old car radio grinds its teeth and spits out “Walk on the Wild Side” by Lou Reed. It is its way of reminding me of her, Sara.

Sara sucks the souls of guys; the tequila of the party, her room, drunken people.

The amphetamines in the blood run barefoot chased by the muzzle of a truck.

Sara begins to shave her legs, eyebrows, puts cotton in her bra.

Sara becomes a she, and her eyes turn blue.

The fists of the Amazons, the she-males, their chorus of Spanish curses, the black enamel.

Sara who continues to repeat to all: “Honey, do you want to take a ride?”

But her body isn't free. Everyone has to pay for the little Venus.

The EUR district and its spaceship, fifty-one meters high, landed in Pakistan Square in 1957.

My blue van; her too-skinny body; her long fingers.

Sara who asks me twice: “Honey, do you want to take a ride?”

The Amazons throw stones at us; she climbs into the van in a hurry and sits in the hot seat, next to me.

It was two years ago the black enamel dug into me.

The probe of her mouth, many oil wells never discovered.

The diamonds of Golconda.

It was a Friday the last time I saw her, two months ago. That day continuously explodes, that day has a severed tail like a lizard tortured by children. The sachet of almonds between her legs, her skinny arms, and the yellow citron plants wobbling in the belly of my van. Transporting the last load of the day to the nursery; this is my job. Sara is waiting for me, walking back and forth in her five meters of that open-air

harem. Outside the perimeter, close to the streetlights and the square, goddesses of the moment parade dressed in the blue fur coats of male desire, while a switchblade snaps and another tattoo appears on the shoulders, a red snake-shaped warning. The mark of the pimp.

A night Amazon, a she-male with gold bars hanging from her ears, pulling her little clump of Equatorial Guinea on a leash, looks at me crookedly and lowers her vanilla miniskirt. The gardens, the open space with two peeling benches where an old witch speaks to her fire, throwing sparks at whoever passes by, the hill on the left, the armored villas and the boxy hedges. The descent, the police siren that screams, suddenly dispersing the group of nameless African gazelles, their black thighs like legs of the night. A pimp rattles his ten bracelets and starts the engine of his expensive car, smiling at the magnet on the dashboard with the face of Idi Amin.

I move ahead, looking for my therapy, for her. I haven't used sertraline for months now.

Here she is. Her red knees, her black boots, the crucifix between her newborn tits with two bright stones in place of the eyes of Jesus Christ. Sara, she's just thirty meters from me, with her handbag swollen with latex bellflowers and a dried sunflower sprinkled with hairspray sticking out from the purse's zipper. I speed up, but not enough. A black BMW, faster than me, brakes and opens the door. Sara looks around and decides to get in, while the muzzle of my van, still too far back, snarls, deforming the steel bars of the grille, revealing the radiator's baleen.

They run to the south, while the traffic lights of Via Cristoforo Colombo blink out of order, showing their faded orange eyes. I can barely keep up, the large citron fruits falling and bouncing everywhere as I change lanes. It's like a hailstorm only I can hear, in the back of the van and between my ribs, strangling my heart, making it climb up my throat to be spat onto the windshield, to see what I see. I can't make out who's driving the black BMW, while the car window at times shows Sara's profile, her white, byzantine face screwed onto generous jaws, pointed at the horizon, to the south, to the sea.

The street, this ramp of asphalt toward the shore, is very long, bordered by pine trees and unsold billboards with torn words in their white squares. On the right appear the rusted sides of a kind of Stonehenge made up of three buildings, under construction since 1970; pylons with crooked legs; minefields where heads full of loneliness are blown up and streams of mist flow through; a motel with no windows screaming "Always Open" in blue neon; a gypsy camp with a shaman who spits fire from his mouth, surrounded by children without shoes. Then you find the sea, in the background against the black edges of the Ostia beach, lit up at times by the purple and milk-white alien corpses of luminescent jellyfish. The black BMW stops in the parking lot of the large roundabout, turns off its lights and disappears. This is the moment when that day explodes, inside my mind, preventing me from remembering. I just know that the sea took Sara that night. The last time I saw her.

*Our names in the sand survived the tides and the bulldozers,
Maddalena and Sara; the two lesbians, she and I, the two asteroids.
The sea who doesn't want to open its mouth and let her go.
"Honey, do you want to take a ride?" But she can't answer me.
The stereo in my van plays "My My, Hey Hey" by Neil Young.
It's useless to wait for a miracle, for an ABRACADABRA.
I will bring another bride, another Venus, to this cannibal sea.
"A trade, do you agree?"
You can't go back, when all of a sudden you're in the dark,
when a man driving a black BMW fucked you,
out of the blue.*

For this reason, every night I go hunting, to barter with the sea. That's why I am here, in the seat of my blue bride eater. But it's time to change the music, the polycarbonate spirals of Metallica's *Black Album* begin to spin faster. The "Enter Sandman" riff spills onto the orthogonal axis of the EUR district, shaking the foundations of the Palace of Italian Civilization bruised with too many black holes; the modern Coliseum seems about to take off, with its base burned by the fire of an imaginary Apollo 18, crewed by ghosts with black fezzes who emerge from portholes carved in travertine. They are soldiers of a dead empire, hunting for the Moon. They are hunting like me.

A checkpoint; dummies with egg-shaped skulls stop my van. Then their general, Giorgio De Chirico, pops out, shooting a burst of colors along the van's side, and curses me. I see him lying down on the navel of a star-shaped square, in front of a fountain that sprays arcs of water, before getting up again to get my plate number. Neil Gaiman avenges me by giving him a kick in the ass, before slipping down the long colonnade hand in hand with Oneiros to go and have a beer.

The rhythm of the music slows down, perhaps only for a moment, the song "The Unforgiven" takes over, the illusion of a classical guitar's sound before the next storm pours out the car window and reaches a small colony of prostitutes, the ones with real pussies between their legs, parked near the pagoda of a rusty dead newsstand. The old empire in decline, you can see the remnants of the walls of Byzantium.

“Look at that bitch,” one of them says, looking at me, grimacing and gnashing her teeth. She should be the fat captain of that group of prostitutes, with her Marilyn Monroe canary yellow wig. She sees me passing, spits on the ground and rubs her fingers on the talisman buried in her loose bra: a small photograph of Father Pio. I know what they are thinking about me: a woman who enters that open air brothel brings bad luck, just like females that board ships under the eyes of frowning superstitious sailors.

The Black Album runs faster than usual. I have to find my Venus quickly tonight. The sea is waiting for our strange barter. I accelerate, I reach the artificial lake surrounded by the Walk of Japan, still stained by the purple of the Yoshino cherry blossoms. But it isn't spring, they are not in bloom; the specter of Basquiat is working on the bare branches with a psychedelic spray, decorating them with colors only he can see, thanks to his heroin binoculars. He's probably still grinding his teeth, recalling old bites from Brooklyn rats.

The ballad “Nothing Else Matters” bounces out the other side with me, into the labyrinths of Lebanon and Indonesia Street, toward the fresh flesh market. I stand in line with others to smell an Amazon with stylized silver hands that hang from her ears and a large nugget in her red panties. On the sidewalk, on the passenger side, there is a row of forgotten stuff: a plastic shell from which you can hear a thousand stories of desperate illegals crammed in fast rafts; a doll stitched with the too-big head of another; Mussolini's war helmet; a grenade; a Koran illustrated by a child; the scale model of St. Peters and of the Mosque of Samarkand with its four giant tits; an army of ants dragging a wedding dress; a sandbag from Danakil; an old election poster of the Christian Democrats; a spear from the Battle of Adwa; a meatball of human flesh; memories that, like the vertebrae of a spine, join the rectum of the past to the neck of tomorrow.

Now it's my turn. The Amazon, the she-male, looks into the passenger window, smiling. *A woman, yes, I am a woman, damn it!* She doesn't have Sara's blue eyes, but she's thin like her; she has long bones and tits that have yet to ripen. She's still not a bride, but she is becoming one. Nineteen years old, she looks like Sara, maybe the sea will accept her. Now she peeks inside the van, stretching her neck as if she's looking for someone hiding behind the seat.

“I'm alone.”

She hears the broken rhythm of the song “My Friend of Misery” and lights a cigarette, moves the filter from her purple lips and sighs, “Cool music. Let's go?” then sinks two fingers inside her red panties; half-closing her huge eyes, giving me a glimpse of something between her legs. *The Black Album*, the gasoline of my courage, is about to run out.

“Let's go, but I don't want to do it here.”

The Amazon with the large eyes says her name: Caroline.

Sara, Caroline, and Maddalena; we are three alien asteroids now.

Every now and then something strange falls from the sky.

Her fake nails, painted with a beautiful, phosphorescent green,

her too-big hands which now hold her smashed head;

I hit her very hard...

She remains motionless, in that pose;

she looks like a living statue of Pompeii protecting itself from hot hailstones.

Every now and then something made of steel falls from the sky.

The brain fluid leaking out over her face drips from the tip of her nose.

Yeah, I hit her very hard. Out of the blue;

her thoughts, slowly draining, seem so yellow.

"Honey, do you want to take a ride?" But she can no longer answer me;

now she's in the back of the van, between the citron plants,

while the car stereo plays "Walk on the Wild Side" by Lou Reed.

ABRACADABRA. Sara seems to be here, now,

with her skinny legs crossed, knotted,

with her smell different from everything else.

I push the blue van to the south, toward the sea.

The sea is waiting for me, on the usual shore. Ostia City sleeps with its toes immersed in the water, with the fog that crosses its rusted balconies; it doesn't seem to notice anything. I hear gunshots from the old Idroscalo area, but there's nothing to worry about. It's the ghost of Pier Paolo Pasolini who chases the people, the dead of today, the new ghosts, shooting into the air with his 24-karat Kalashnikov, waving his diary *The Novel of Narcissus* like a pirate flag. He enjoys scaring the souls in an orderly queue in front of the grand staircase of Purgatory, with a sealed K ration under their arm and the Star of David on their

sleeves. They are not Jews; they are those guilty of forbidden love along with their accusers, bent over by stone toads tied around their necks.

The sea rears its back and sinks its foam claws into the sand. The beast has seen me. I turn off the square eyes of the van, then I push Caroline out of it, dragging her by the ankles. *Damn heavy*. Before taking her onto the beach—before the sea, the beast, can see her—I must do something to fix her wrong eyes. The sea has spit out too many fake brides until now; it only wants Venus with blue eyes, like those of Sara. The terms are clear, and I really do not want to leave empty-handed this time. I climb back into the van, looking for something that could help me. *A spoon*, it will work fine. Caroline, lying on the ground, seems to admire the black sky. The expression on her face is the same as a broken TV. No electricity—the Amazon without pussy still sweats neuron juice, which is spreading on the grass like thick yellow frost.

I sit astride her. With one hand I hold her firmly by the hair; with the other I push the spoon into her right socket, exerting pressure, like a lever. I go deeper to excavate the optic nerve. The eyeball begins to rotate upward, showing thin blood vessels underneath. Now Caroline can look directly into her own brain. *We are monsters inside; beneath our human skin we are horrible*. The eye of the Amazon squirts out with a plop, and then it's time to work on the other. Those two empty holes that now shine in her face look like shotgun wounds on an alien; purple skin like that of a dinosaur.

I go back to the van to pick the right eyes, blue, stuffed in the ice of my lunchbox, fresh from yesterday, those of a little girl who, sitting on her backpack, watched the trains departing from the Tiburtina Station.

“Are you lost?”

Catching someone without being seen is very easy with all these windows, eighteen thousand square meters of illusions, mirrors, and reflections. *Thanks, Tiburtina Station!* But it's hard to find the same look as Sara's, the same naïve-blue blood of Neptune, of subzero planets. The sea is demanding, spits out everything, and I have to start all over, every time, hunting for Sara once again, the only one that the beast wants to keep in its gullet.

“Today you'll accept the trade, right? Look at that blue...” I lift the rubber lid of my lunch box and show the beast what it contains: the little girl's eyes in the ice. The waves rise, protrude, but they do not want to look; they want to be watched. On the black skin of the sea small yellow spots appear. *What...?*

I go down to the beach; I get closer to the beast, to the sea, for a better look. What is it spitting out today? It is not human flesh, not pieces of brides as usual. *They are...my rotten citron fruits which float*, and then suddenly other citrons emerge from the seabed. It's like a yellow dance, so heretical. *Jesus Christ*. Here is the tail of that damned exploded day. I can finally see it.

Sara who sucked the souls of drunken customers.

"Honey, do you want to take a ride?" But then she never came back.

The song "Do You Feel Loved" by U2 plays strongly in my head.

The magic is over, the ABRACADABRA.

Sara and Maddalena; the two lesbians, two asteroids, both of the same race.

I've been waiting for her for days, under her empty apartment.

But she came back home with him. She opens the car door,

I see her skinny legs and the red shoes.

The black BMW drives away screeching its tires.

"Honey, this is not just a ride."

She carries two suitcases, behind her I see a trail of rainbow, that of those

who have been lucky, of those who harpooned a huge whale

to have enough oil, grease and light, for life.

You can't leave, out of the blue. The blue van roars.

She screams, and then my steel shot closes her mouth and her blue eyes.

We go south, toward the sea, who can clean everything, erase everything.

But her body re-emerges, it floats. I know what to do...

The adhesive tape, the citrons as ballast tied to her legs, around her waist.

It takes more than thirty citrons to make her go down,

so that no one could bring her back.

"Your new home, sweetie, three meters underwater. Yellow looks good on you."

What else can you do when a son of a bitch

steals the only Venus you've found in the last forty years of frost,

out of the blue.

I dive into the water, I know where to look: one meter, two meters, my lungs are bursting. I can't see anything; the moon's neon doesn't reach me. I follow the citrons that continue to float upward; I make my way to the seabed. I touch the sand with my fingers. Forty seconds, I can't hold on much longer. I found something: the bones of Sara's skeletal leg. Her flesh is becoming mush, and the citrons, detached from her body, rise like missiles to the surface. I cling to these horrid remains with my fingernails. I get a good grip on her shoulder blades and I can slide horizontally toward her head. Sixty seconds, I don't have much time. I find Sara; with the last of my strength I kiss her passionately.

“Honey, do you want to take a ride?”

Her mouth is empty, a meatless hole with ivory battlements. Then something soft twists around my tongue.

“Are you alive?”

The moray eel with its steel-colored eyes slips down my throat, quickly slides down flopping wildly, and bites my heart.