



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Watery Hues

A Short Story

B.A Essay

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Abstract

“Watery Hues” is a fictional short story written in a first person narrative. The reality is blurred at best, a complete chaos at worst, as the reader discovers while entering the world of the main character, Hope. When you think you are at the top of the world, the fall is high. The story opens with a prose composed to enhance the unreal feeling Hope experiences throughout the tale.

Standing on the shore the waves washing over my feet its watery hues in black and blue and grey. The silvery shadow of the moon casting its reflection on the black mass making it glow and glow. The waves topping sparkling dancing soft and blithe the vast black black mass below pulling me calling me come come. The waves smoothly caressing my thighs so soft so shiny ever flowing back and forth back and forth in continuous rhythm becoming rougher louder requesting my surrender. Staring at the bottomless void lost in its endless depths entranced by its offerings of peaceful oblivion. Slowly feeling my way through the soft sand hidden beneath the surface giving away to the smooth pressure of me animated. Feeling leaving my body just the moon shining nodding its head coldly inciting me to advance to embrace the void. The cold sea like the sheets uninhabited in our bed when you're not there. The wind is increasing gathering the soft cotton-like clouds building up mass of darkness threatening the celestial body. The sea giving up on playing nice passionately pulls at my body, swelling demanding submission, my complete recognition of its power. My mind exploding scattering over the universe like stars the black black waves washing over me throwing me into sensual plethora. Slowly reluctantly return into being, lured back inside perceiving the rhythmic beating of my heart rushing the blood through my veins. Collecting pieces of me putting them back together again, trying to be whole but missing parts becoming less and less me and increasingly you until nothing is left just fragments of existence reconstructed by you only.

‘You can’t take that in with you’ the white clad woman pointed at the beauty-box in my hand.

‘You’ll have to put all your things in this’ she continued and handed me a white plastic shopping bag.

‘In here everybody is equal, we can’t allow anything that separates you from the rest.’

I felt the humiliation colour my face as I emptied all my belongings into the hideous bag.

There’s still time to change your mind a little voice whispered inside my head, you don’t have to go through with this; there is nothing wrong with you – really!

‘I also have to ask you to pee in this’ she resumed, holding a small plastic-cup with a red lid on it, in my direction.

‘A what?’ I asked confused, looking at her, wondering if she was perhaps an alien that had just landed from out of space, all green and glowing.

‘You have to pee in this’ she repeated, putting the cup in my hand.

‘There’s the bathroom’ she signalled with her head towards a door I hadn’t noticed before, half-hidden behind a curtain in the corner of the room.

‘After you’ve finished, just leave it in there, someone will come and collect it later.’ Her voice was monotone like she was asking me to write down the shopping list for next week or pick up her clothes from the drycleaner. I stood up slowly, my knuckles white from the tight grip on the small cup.

‘Is that necessary?’ My voice broke and I cleared my throat, looking pleadingly at the unyielding figure in front of me. She just stared back at me, waiting patiently for me to do as I was told.

‘Are you ready?’ the woman asked, looking at me questioningly.

I nodded slowly, and followed her lead through a door, opposite from the one I came in. As I walked behind her watching her straight, stern figure, every fibre of my being screamed at me to run, to get out while I could. I felt the cold fear lying heavily on my chest like a rock. I

couldn't breathe and felt heat gather in my eyes. We moved through what seemed to me infinite rows of corridors, turning right, then left, then right again. The walls were gleaming white, almost luminous, the moss-green lanolin floor spreading endlessly before me without giving any indication that you had actually moved. The white rigid body in front of me stopped at last, pushing through a huge double swing door.

I sat down on the bed clutching the sickly green rope and white pyjamas in my arms, my body shaking violently, gasping for air. I had to get out of there, anything would be better than these white suffocating walls closing in on me.

'Everything will be ok' whispered an unfamiliar voice.

I felt something sharp stick into my arm and then blissfully – blackness.

I watched the girl perform her routine, how she moved gracefully to the music, her body winding itself around the pole on the soft lit stage. Oh – finally someone that can actually dance I thought as I observed her finish her performance. She seemed self-confident up there, her body beautiful and perfectly in control over the demanding lifts and swirls in the air. It was almost like watching acrobatics with all the graceful motions performed, assisted only by one single bar. This could be art I mused, if only they would keep their clothes on.

'Hi, here you are.'

I looked up and it was Mark.

'I've been looking for you, can I sit down?'

'Yeah – sure' I gestured towards the empty seat next to me and continued to watch the stage.

'Can I get you anything to drink – or do you want to go upstairs?' Mark asked, eyeing my empty glass.

I turned my attention back to Mark again. 'Yeah – why not, it's not like anything is happening down here.'

Mark held the heavy, dark cloth aside, revealing the stair behind it. In the room above, several people were sitting in the huge black leather sofa that formed a half circle around a square glass table in the middle of the space. Up against the wall on the right was a small bar with row of high-seats in front of it. The whole room was completely black, from the sofa to the walls and the heavy drapery covering the windows; no light was allowed. Sandra waived at me and then continued her conversation with a dark haired girl sitting next to her. John and Heath were in their usual seats with two of the show-girls in their laps. John with his hair flowing in crazy curls down his shoulders, long abandoned by their owner and Heath wearing his trademark; too-tight-t-shirt, making sure that his bulging muscles were noticed. I squeezed myself in an empty space between Sandra and John, watching Mark as he walked to the bar. He was like a huge teddy bear, all soft and rounded, everybody's friend.

'Have you heard from Joel?' I asked as he returned with my white wine.

'Not since last night' Mark replied. He sat down and looked at me for what seemed to me a very long time.

'What' I asked, getting uncomfortable.

'He gave me permission to share' he finally said.

'Share what?' I stared at him blankly.

'You' Mark whispered so low that I almost couldn't hear him.

'Me – you got his permission to share – me?'

My insides turned and I felt sick, the giant, all too familiar hole in my chest throbbed like someone had ripped it open again, the wound that was already there nowhere near healing.

Mark inclined his head smiling, like we were discussing yesterday's news. I couldn't say a word, this was the ultimate humiliation. That I had become so worthless to Joel that he could pass me along like a used car, like a child that gets bored with his toy. I had to do something, hurt him back, make him pay! If I were a guy I would smash something, start a fight,

anything. The feeling of physical pain would be pleasantly distracting. I often wished that Joel did actually hit me; a black eye would at least be visible. I looked at Mark and laughed, ignoring him and his comment like it was some kind of a joke. If I didn't acknowledge it then it wouldn't be true. I turned in the other direction, focusing my attention on Sandra and the girl she was talking to. The girl was one of the dancers and apparently discussing, or rather defending, her reasons for being one.

'I'm studying business administration back home' she said. 'The school-fees are quite high and I don't want to take a student's loan, so I dance. It's not like I'm a prostitute or anything like that. I come here; I dance for a couple of months during the summer and get enough money to pay for the next term. If I'll get the opportunity I'll also come here during my Christmas vacation.'

I wondered if she really believed her own reasoning, believed that she was doing nothing inappropriate, that she was pure and innocent like a freshly fallen snow on a Sunday morning. I asked her if she would put her dancing career in her résumé, everything being so virtuous and all – she just stared at me blankly.

'Well sweetie here, have some refreshment.'

John had been busying himself, arranging several beautiful sparkling white lines on the glass table. I took the spiral bill from his hand and inhaled heaven.

I woke up all covered in sweat and tangled in the sheets. My mind felt like it was made out of cotton, my mouth so dry that I couldn't swallow. I stared at the white ceiling above me and couldn't remember where I was. I turned my head slowly trying to regain full consciousness. Everything was white, the walls, the ceiling the sheets on my bed. Even the door was white. Singularly separating itself from all this whiteness was a green plastic chair in the corner of the room. It looked uninviting, offering only a momentarily relief on the gleaming surface.

My mind faded again, the hideous green chair the last thing that I saw before peacefully drifting off.

Candles flickering everywhere, on the window shelves, the coffee table even on the floor. The soft light was glimmering, making everything beautiful. It danced on the walls like magical fairy kings and queens on their annual dance, playful and blithe. I nestled my head on Joel's chest, feeling like a small kitten snuggling against its mother's soft round belly, warm all over, safe. Perhaps the comparison was a little off, I smiled inwardly, especially bearing in mind that Joel actually referred to his own chest as "the chicken breast" acknowledging the fact that he was quite thin. We had spent the whole day together. I couldn't remember the last time. Joel talked about going out for dinner but in the end we opted for take-away. I didn't think much of it, thought he just wanted to have me all for himself. Ignoring the fact that we didn't go anywhere public anymore. Nothing was going to spoil this feeling, this moment, no rationality allowed. Joel stroked my hair and started to sing along with the music so low that I almost couldn't hear him.

"-You make it easy to watch the world with love

-You make it easy to let the past be done

- You make it easy¹"

He does love me I thought to myself; even he was not capable of faking this. Joy swept over me and I wanted to laugh out loud. My heart seemed to be full of butterflies and sun, reminding me of the times when I was a small child riding my horse, out in the meadows with my grandfather. Everywhere we looked all we could see were round tufts covered with soft green grass and moss, like an ocean on a warm sunny day with just a little breeze ruffling the surface. The feeling of the horse's movement between my thighs, the strong muscles taking

¹ Air. *Moon Safari*. 'You Make it Easy'

me wherever I wanted to go. The complete trust and love between my beautiful white and brown mare and I, her soft velvet snout nibbling at my hand for bread after a job well done. My grandfather always wearing his grey grandpa's-cap and a warm smile. We had some apples and sandwiches in our saddlebag made with love by my grandma, and the only limitation to our journey was to be home before dark.

When I woke up again it was day. The light was pushing at the window drapes, trying to get in, sneaking its way through the gap between the curtains. I lay completely still in the unfamiliar bed, listening to the sounds outside my room. People were talking, their voices muffled because of my closed door but I could hear footsteps hurrying back and forth. Confusion and chaos were fighting a battle inside my head. Perhaps, I thought, if I just lay here, completely still, in this cold metal framed bed, then nobody will remember me. I can pretend that I'm Pippi Long-stocking, having some great adventure. My grandmother once told me, about how Pippi used her bed as a ship to sail the oceans in order to save her father from pirates. Yes, I would like to be Pippi, her carrot-red hair so obvious statement of strong will and independence. Whatever circumstances Pippi found herself in, she always had the upper hand. Well, in my current state of mind I'm afraid that Pippi wouldn't find me worthy of being her representative. The door opened and a woman came in wearing a smile and a friendly eyes. Even though she was clad in the same white hospital clothes as her predecessor from yesterday, the resemblance ended there.

'Good morning, how did you sleep' she asked in an amiable way.

'Not so well' I answered. 'I woke up in the middle of the night all covered in sweat and miserable. I was having a nightmare – I think.'

'That's normal reaction to the tranquilizers you were given last night' she said and took hold of my arm, checking my pulse.

‘Everything is OK’ she announced. ‘I’ll give you some minutes to brush your teeth. When you are ready come and find me in the cubicle right across the hall and I’ll show you around.’ Oh no, I’m not ready, I thought, I want to stay here, just for today. Maybe tomorrow – tomorrow I’ll take a peek outside. I stared at the closed door, unable to move. I looked carefully around me, noticing a small sink in the right corner of the room. OK, be rational I thought, first brush teeth, and then if still feeling the need, panic. I found the plastic bag with all my things on the floor next to my bed. I retrieved from it my toothbrush and paste, and walked slowly to the sink. Oh my god! A small whimper almost escaped my mouth – I nearly didn’t recognize myself in the mirror. This hollow-eyed, girl staring back at me couldn’t be – ME, she looked more like a character in a bad horror movie. There were dark circles around my eyes; my usually reddish-brown and softly curled hair was just hanging in strands down my shoulders. Well brushing my teeth and washing my face was all I had time for, perhaps I could shower later. I rummaged through the bag again and got a hold of my mascara. There! This was at least some improvement. I gathered my hair into a ponytail and decided that I was ready. Since I was obviously supposed to wear pyjamas the whole day, I had to put on the hideous green robe I was given yesterday.

I opened the door carefully, taking just a little peek before stepping out. Nobody seemed to notice me at all. Along the walls in the hallway were low wooden chairs with plush cushions in a grimy blue, similar to the sofas from the seventies. Between the chairs were low wooden coffee-tables. The chairs reminded me of a three-piece set that adorned my living room, when I started my first home. My dad gave it to me as a kind of moving in present; it was bought from a second-hand store, dark olive green with black stripes. It was horrendous and didn’t match anything I owned, but at least I didn’t have to sit on the floor. Several people were settled in those chairs, chatting, and all of them were wearing green robes, similar to

mine. Oh, look at all the crazy people, I thought as I glanced around for the cubicle, my safe house in this linoleum floored wilderness.

Joel wasn't answering my phone calls. We were supposed to meet last night and he didn't show up. I called him Friday night, devastated, wanting to get rid of the guy sleeping in my bed, my alleged revenge. I called Joel that night, crying, how absurd the relationship between us had become. He was my best friend and my worst enemy. I couldn't quit him; I was addicted to him like a drug. You know what you're doing is killing you but you can't help it, can't give it up. This guy, the sleeping guy in my bed, he'd been hitting on me for weeks. Somehow always showing up at the same places I was in, with his gorgeous long black hair like ravens wings, being all nice and concerned. So I thought, why not – I need someone to notice me – see me – to be thinking only about me. The sex was awful, I should have known. His main concern, as I could perceive it, was that his chest and abs looked good during the whole procedure. When he finished he just rolled over to his side and fell asleep. Stupid I, to think that he was my trophy, my see-what-I-can-do-you-don't-own-me kind of thing. It backfired, of course, what I hadn't realized was that I was the medal, the gold star, the object conquered. At least I didn't feel like a winner, calling Joel up in the middle of the night – crying. I actually confessed my reasons for sleeping with this guy, almost begging for absolution.

'It's okay, honey – my little woman – don't cry' Joel whispered softly through the phone, his voice caressing me like a smooth warm blanket, making it all better.

'I'll come and see you tomorrow night and we'll do something fun, just the two of us' Joel continued soothingly.

Sunday morning and no answer, I called him several times last night and nothing, he just ignored me. I decided to go to his flat, I couldn't just sit around here and do nothing. It

was ridiculously cold outside. Everything was covered with snow, the branches hung heavily from the weight of the sparkling white mass, the sky glimmering blue. The orange globe in the sky, all happy and round smiled cheerfully and nodded its head to all the delighted families enjoying the weather. I pulled my cap down to cover my eyes then buried my hands deep in the pockets of my long, black wool coat, hurrying to the bus-stop.

‘You can’t come up’ Joel said through the speaker phone, finally deciding to answer my constant buzz. ‘I’ll come down, just wait a minute.’

‘I couldn’t come to see you last night’ Joel said as he sat himself down on one of the steps in the stairway. ‘I was going to – but then I just couldn’t’

‘Why?’ I stared at him, more puzzled than angry. ‘And who is up there?’ I waved my hand towards the stairs.

‘Does it matter?’ Joel asked, his voice tiered. ‘Just someone I met last night.’

He rested his head on the palms of his hands, with elbows on his knees. The movement caught the light in flakes of glimmer on his face, sparkling joyfully, unaware of the atmosphere.

‘Oh I think I have a pretty good idea. You’re right, it doesn’t matter, this is a new low even for you.’ My voice was calm, amazingly so, and I watched as from a distance how Joel twitched at my recognition.

‘How can that be better than seeing me?’ My voice was turning high-pitched, hurt.

‘You were dirty – used’ Joel’s voice so low that I almost couldn’t hear him.

‘Used, what...’ my voice trailed off as the realization hit me.

‘Oh – so it’s just me, you don’t go by the same rules then?’

‘I know that I have no right to think that way – I just do. I couldn’t see you, sleep with you, knowing ...’

‘It meant nothing’ I whispered.

‘I know that, it’s just ...’

I stared at him for a few moments unable to say anything, then turned and left him there, closing the door smoothly behind me.

Outside it had started to snow again. The thick white flakes falling softly to the ground made everything seem unreal, as if I was enclosed from reality within this soft cotton like fairytale world. Only my prince was not the prince of my dreams, the knight in shining armour, but some evil witch waiting to destroy me with her poisoned apple. The streets were empty, desolated, the heavy snowing too cold and too wet for any outdoor enjoyment. I walked aimlessly, not noticing the biting weather. I found myself near the chest and abs guy's home and for reasons unknown to me I decided to drop by. His roommate, Julian, opened the door wearing only the bottom part of his pyjamas, his hair rumbled in all directions. He didn't speak a word just gestured toward to his roommate's quarters then stumbled back to his own. I opened the door quietly, suspecting raven-guy to be in similar condition as his flatmate. He was, and even more so, because lying next to him was some blond, pretty little thing; both of them were naked. Oh great I thought, my very own real-life-soap-opera.

I found my smiling nurse again; she was giving me a tour around the place, making everything sound so fun and interesting, almost like I was on my dream vacation.

'Here we have the lecture room' she said. 'You are supposed to attend all the presentations, it's an important part of the program.'

Through the double glass door I could see rows of chairs in the same grimy blue colour as the seats in the hallway. In the front of the room there was a big white board, like in a school room, with rolled-up white screen that could be pulled down when using the projector. A little in front of the board there was a pulpit with huge metal shield facing the room. Something was written on it but I couldn't quite make it out from the distance I was standing in.

Lectures, really, I thought to myself, can't I just see the doctor and he will transfer me to the

psycho-ward or something. I turned my attention back to my friendly guide and noticed a nametag on her white bosom, Joy, it read. Ah ... of course it's Joy I thought, what else could it have been.

'The first lecture of the day starts at ten and finishes around eleven thirty when it's time for lunch.' Joy looked at her watch. 'Yes in just a couple of minutes now, but you'll pass this one; just remember to be on time tomorrow. At one o'clock you attend the group therapy. That session ends at approximately three o'clock. You'll have a short coffee-break for about half an hour, but then it's time for another lecture, that one is short, only an hour or so. At eight o'clock in the evening you attend a meeting with all the inmates.'

Joy signalled me to follow and started walking further down the hall. I trotted behind her like an obedient child, a little bewildered and lost in this whole new world. I followed her enthusiastic figure down a huge a stairs, divided in half by a platform. We were in a basement of some sort, or at least a kind of half-floor, buried to some extent in the ground. Down there the atmosphere was friendlier with softer lightening and tighter space, a complete turnaround from the vast coldness from above. Coming down the stairs there was a kind of a centre circled by a rectangular passage with a numbers of doors opening into some unknown territory. In the centre there were couple of sofas in deep, earth brown colour, seeming soft and inviting. A few small coffee-tables were placed at a regular interval between the sofas. Joy opened a double door facing the stairs.

'This is the cafeteria' she said. 'Here are all our meals served and during the day you can always get some fresh coffee. In the evening light snack, biscuits and such, are available on the counter over there' she pointed towards a low bench in the further end of the room, on which I could also see a big coffee-machine.

'Breakfast is served from seven until nine, lunch from eleven thirty to one o'clock and dinner starts at six thirty to eight.' Joy looked at me, catching her breath. 'Any questions so far?

I just shook my head as an answer to her inquiry, for the moment I wasn't even sure where I was. Maybe I was dreaming, perhaps I was really on a wonderful vacation in the Mediterranean ocean. The case might be that Joy was not a nurse, but a white-clad waitress giving me the grand tour around a marvellous five star hotel. Next she would show me the spa with all the wonderful saunas and hot-tubs. Yes, for sure – there would be one with sea-water and several others, each one with different aroma therapy. Next Joy would lead me to the resting room with the burning fire in the middle, the deep red heat in the centre of the logs casting soft light around the room. I could see it all in my head, the white lounge chairs in perfect circle around the fire where you could lay down and dose off after thorough relaxation in the Jacuzzi all soft and mushy. The heat would caress my body, warming it all over like the loving rays of the sun. Yeah, that was it! All the doors around the cosy living-room in the middle, they led to the sauna and the massage rooms.

‘OK, I think I’ve covered everything, if you have any questions you know where to find me’ Joy smiled kindly. ‘Next I’ll take you to meet your group therapist.’

‘Want some pizza?’ Joel held out a slice in my direction,

‘It’s pepperoni and cheese.’

He looked pleadingly at me, concern on his face,

‘Baby please you must eat something.’

I shook my head, curled up in the chair, unable to move or do anything except to just sit there.

I watched Joel devour the pizza with much pleasure. I loved watching him, it didn't matter what he was doing. He sat on the sofa in his favourite baggy jeans and worn out pink t-shirt with a text on it that said "I'm not a complete idiot; some parts are missing." Nobody I knew could pull that off, the pink t-shirt; it would make most guys look ridiculous. Joel however was perfect in it, and I remembered thinking when I first met him that there was no way that

he could be twenty-seven. His hair was blond and made to look like he'd just gotten out of bed, an impeccable mess. I could drown in his eyes, big and dark-grey like the ocean on a wild and windy night, framed by long thick and dark lashes. His lips tasted like vanilla; soft and warm when kissing me. The doorbell rang and Joel stood up to answer. When he came back, Mark was with him.

'Hi' he said to me as he threw himself on the sofa, glancing at Joel. 'I didn't know you were here – ah pizza, can I have some?' He grabbed a slice, not waiting for an answer. 'Do you have more coke?' he asked, looking at Joel.

'Yeah – in the fridge' Joel made a sweeping gesture with his hand towards the kitchen. 'Bring one for me too.'

Mark returned with two colas, handing one to Joel. The silence was heavy with tension, with Mark eyeing Joel again, his round face without its usual cheerfulness. I was paralyzed; nothing could make me stand up from the chair I was sitting in, my knees pulled up to my chest with my arms circling around them, almost in a foetal position. Oh, how pathetic I had become, this mindless object. I didn't recognize myself anymore. The doorbell rang again and saved Joel from the uncomfortable situation. A few moments later Joel returned with Sandra by his side. She looked at me smiling; all dressed up and gorgeous, obviously ready for some action. Her blond hair falling down her back in skin-tight white pants made of some shining fabric, in equally tight, low-cut gossamer top.

'There you are honey' she said and squeezed herself beside me on the chair. 'I've been trying to call you all night.' She hugged me close and whispered, 'Come on sweetie, let's get out of here.' Sandra raised her voice again, 'Marco and Alec are down in the car, waiting.'

Joel watched us closely, without saying anything. Sandra stood up and pulled me out of the chair with her.

‘We’re going to Alec’s’, she said and looked around her in the living-room. ‘Where’s your bag?’

I got my jacket and purse waiting for Joel to say something but he just sat there and watched me leave, his face passive, revealing nothing. I closed the door slowly and reluctantly followed Sandra down the narrow stairway. The staircase smelled of stale dinners and old people, mixed with cigarette-smoke. The linoleum on the stairs was faded in the middle, worn out by endless pairs of feet making their way up and down. The banister was smooth under my hand, held by so many before me. Would I become imprint here, doomed to aimlessly drift within these corridors, restless and grey. Trying to get a hold of something that perhaps was never mine in the first place, in my stubborn pursuit of happiness. I shivered like someone had walked over my grave, almost running out into the street. The night was still, waiting, like it was holding its breath.

I slid into the backseat of Alec’s silver Mercedes, greeting him and Marco. I felt like I was coming out of a coma or released from an evil spell that had robbed me of my will, my identity. Sometimes I felt like I didn’t know who I was anymore, that Joel was inside my mind, controlling my every thought. I smiled at Sandra, who was sitting beside me, silently forming the words, thank you. I pulled myself in the middle, between the front seats and said ‘So – where are we going?’

Alec gave me one of his cute crooked smiles, his dark hair falling down his face soft and curly, almost reaching his eyes. He stroked his hand impatiently through it, pushing it away, ‘Oh – you’ll see’ Alec said as he drove out of the parking lot, speeding up the car, the lights flying by like multicoloured streaks on the black sky.

I stared at myself in the mirror. Nothing seemed real anymore, I felt outside my body with no connection to the thin doll like creature staring back at me. My eyes were huge, the pupils so dilated that it almost filled out the irises making my eyes seem almost black. I dried

my hands and went back to the living-room and sat down on the worn-out sofa. Everything was old and dirty. The ashtray on the coffee-table was overflowing with cigarette-stubs, ash scattered on the table as well as the floor, empty beer-bottles everywhere. Sandra was asleep in Marcos arms on a bed in the corner of the room. Alec pulled me close and I felt myself stiffen against his chest.

‘Come on sweetie, you have to get some rest’ he said, concern in his voice.

I gave in and tried to make myself comfortable on the sofa, my back to Alec, my head resting on his arm. I felt the pull in my head; my heart, like Joel was there with me in the dark room calling for me.

I woke up to the vibrations of my phone clutched in my hand, it was Joel.

‘Hi’, I whispered my voice hoarse from lack of use.

‘Where are you, why didn’t you come home last night?’ his voice tense like a wire ready to snap. ‘You could at least have called me; I had no idea where you were.’

‘What – what are you talking about, from what I gathered last night you didn’t even want me there – you said nothing when I left.’ My voice sounded more hurt than I intended and I rose carefully trying not to wake Alec, my left arm numb. There was a long silence.

‘You’re right’ Joel said at last, softly, his voice melting out of the phone like honey. ‘Where are you? I can come and get you.’

‘I’m fine’ I said coldly ‘Alec will drive me, I’ll talk to you later’ I hung up, knowing that I behaved childishly but I couldn’t help myself, it felt good to be able to hurt him. Mission accomplished.

‘Hi, my name is Derek and I’m an alcoholic’

The whole room echoed in return ‘hi Derek!’

I couldn't believe my ears. This was a freak show, I didn't belong here. I was just crazy and wanted somebody to fix that. These people here were mentally ill on a whole different level. I sat in the back, trying to take up as little space as possible, wishing I was invisible. This Derek person speaking in the front was not a patient, but a recovering alcoholic. He was here to tell us his experience, how he recovered and got his life back. I don't have problem with alcohol, I thought to myself, I'm just depressed and suicidal, that's all. I was not even sure how I ended up here. Well, I could stay here another night, tomorrow I would meet the doctor and he would prescribe something for me, something to make everything all right again. I sat through the meeting and listened to endless number of people feeling sorry for themselves. They all came up to the pulpit, announcing their name and stating that they were alcoholics, getting the same response from the group as Derek. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, this was all so ridiculous. After the meeting everybody started to hug each other, thanking for a good meeting. That was it, I couldn't take anymore. I was not about to hug a complete strangers. I sneaked out.

The heat was suffocating, the dance floor so crowded that you didn't have to move your own body, the mass of people in unison motion like a giant heart, pumping the life force through its veins in ever beating rhythm. Lights were flashing from the ceiling in multicoloured beams following the pulsing of the music. My hair was sticking to my forehead and neck, sweat dripping between my breasts even though I was wearing almost nothing; my skirt was so small that it didn't count and the tight lace corselet was only covering what was necessary.

'Sandra, please' I yelled over the loud music. 'I have to get out of here.'

Sandra inclined her head in agreement and started to squeeze her way through the moving crowd, pulling me along. We reached dry land almost throwing ourselves down in a miraculously empty sofa on the platform above the dance floor. I needed something to drink,

badly. The bar was overcrowded, so sitting where we were was our best option for the moment.

‘Hi, can I join you ladies?’

Oh-my-good – yes, I thought as I nodded my approval towards the tall guy standing in front of our chaise lounge. His long slender figure slid smoothly onto the sofa.

‘I’m Zach’ he said, smiling and exposing a perfect row of pearly-white teeth. Dark impeccable hair, deep brown eyes with black thick lashes. Chocolate was the word that came to my mind, soft, brown and silky under your tongue, melting slowly – sending waves of sugary pleasure through your body. He was all black, tight black pants, black shiny shirt, black – like a smooth panther gliding through the dark forest. My breath got caught in my throat and looking at Sandra I could see that Zach had made a similar expression on her.

‘Hi I’m Hope’ I said. ‘And this is Sandra’ I waved my hand towards Sandra on the couch.

‘Can I get you anything to drink?’ he asked looking at the empty table.

‘I’d love one’ I managed to breath out. ‘But the crowd’s a murder’ I gestured towards the bar.

‘Oh no problem, he said. I’ll be right back.’

Zach strode towards the bar and miraculously appeared only a few minutes later with the drinks.

‘I know the bartender’ he said, handing me a tall glass, the ice-cubes making a soft sound at the movement, the content light lime colour.

‘Mmm – looks good’ I said. ‘What is it?’

‘My secret recipe, just try it’ Zach handed Sandra her glass and watched us closely as we took the first sip.

‘Oh, this is unreal’ Sandra finished half of her class in one swallow. She leaned back in the sofa, with look of satisfaction on her face. Zack smiled and relaxed against the lounge, lifting his own glass in salutation to ours.

‘Enjoy!’

Half an hour later, one of the bartenders came to our table holding a tray with several glasses of the delicious lime green liquid.

‘Thanks’ man’ Zach nodded his head towards the bartender then turned his attention back to us. I raised my eye-brow questioningly.

‘What was that?’ I asked him. ‘Do you have a subscription to the bar or something?’

‘Let’s just say that I have connections’ Zach replied, dazzling me with his pearly-whites’ again. Before I could say anything in reply I felt the seat next to me bounce. Looking to my side, I saw another delicious specimen of the male race comfortably situating himself on the sofa.

‘Here you are’ he said to Zack. ‘You left so suddenly, I was wondering what you were up to.’

‘I got bored’ Zack answered. ‘Let me introduce you – these lovely ladies over here are Hope and Sandra – Hope, Sandra, this is Neo.’

‘Hi’ I said as I took a closer look at the new guy. This whole night was becoming unreal – I mean, two totally hot guys sitting at our table and the drinks just miraculously kept coming. Neo was handsome in a rough, country kind of way with golden three-day beard and laughing lines at the corner of his eyes. Not as tall as his friend, but broader, more masculine.

‘Hi’ he turned his attention to me and Sandra, smiling boyishly. ‘The pleasure is all mine.’

I had lost all track of time, had no idea for how long we had been sitting there in the soft chaise lounge with the music beating steadily, the lights from the dance-floor not quite reaching us, enclosed in our own little world of lime drinks and ice. My head was heavy, the liquor going down too easily, tasting more like the soft drinks my grandma served in my earlier birthday-parties. I remembered how they were arranged in a perfect row next to my birthday-cake in small glass bottles with red, green and blue straws. How they stood there joyfully

waiting for little hands to hold them. Zach put his arm around me and it took me a while to grasp what he was saying.

‘Let’s get out of here, you seem to need a fresh air’ he said, signalling our departure to Neo.

Outside the air was fresh and crispy, the first rays of the sun streaking the night-sky making it glow soft pink, like the cotton candy sold at the Tivoli down-town. The taxis waited in line outside, the night obviously almost over for their drivers as well. Their mind was probably occupied with the thought of their bed waiting for them at home with its soft sheets and oblivion. Our cabdriver put down his newspaper, waiting patiently for our destination. On Zach’s directions he drove down-town, stopping in front of a brand-new apartment building, all glass and steel, with view over the ocean. Inside everything was sleek and sophisticated, the marble floor shining coldly. The elevator’s door was grey steel, reflecting our images as we stood outside waiting for it to open. Zach pressed the elevator’s button for the fourteenth floor – the penthouse. The lift glided smoothly upwards, coming to a halt with a low thud, the doors sliding open and revealing more marble and glass. On opening the door at the end of the hallway, Zach made a sweeping bow, gesturing for us to walk in.

‘Whoa’ Sandra said as she looked around her in the huge apartment. We walked straight into the centre of the flat and rising above us was a glass ceiling probably five meters from the floor. In the middle of the room there were white expensive looking leather sofas with low steel and glass table as a midpoint, sitting snugly on a white, furry rug. To the left in all this whiteness you could see the kitchenette, the cabinets gleaming black like ebony, the refrigerator in the same stainless steel as the elevator we had just ascended with.

‘Make yourselves comfortable’ Zach waved towards the sofas. ‘Want something to drink?’ he asked as he headed towards the kitchen.

‘Just soda for me thanks’ I said as I lowered myself carefully down on the couch, almost expecting it to be made out of plastic.

Zack returned with a couple of beers, white wine and my soda, handing the beverages around. 'Well – what about something a little more invigorating?' Zack asked as he pulled a small plastic bag out of his pants pocket, pouring the content on the glass table in front of us. With his credit-card Zack divided the powdery pile into four lines, their whiteness in perfect symmetry to the interiority of the apartment. I eyed Sandra nervously but she seemed to be in a world of her own, watching Zack closely, almost holding her breath in expectation. Neo produced a bill from out of nowhere, rolling it into a tight cylinder, handing it towards me and Sandra.

'Ladies first' he said, smiling – his blue eyes sparkling with excitement.

Sandra took the bill without hesitation. She bent over the glass table, putting the roll down at the end of one of the white gleaming lines, inhaling it in one sweep – then she held out her hand to me. I took the cylinder from Sandra's hand, my own hand shaking, almost dropping it. My heart was beating rapidly, like a small bird fluttering inside its cage, looking for a way out. The blow hit me immediately, the rush spreading through my body filling it to the brim, almost spilling. I felt indestructible, in control. I could do anything I wanted to do. Finally I'd found my missing part. I was complete, whole, like a glowing, continuous globe.

'I have to ask you to answer this questionnaire.'

My long awaited doctor handed me a sheet of paper crowded with questions. At the end of each one there were two boxes to tick, yes or no. The first one read: Do you lose time from work due to your drinking?

I looked at the doctor again, he just sat behind his huge ash table, his hands clasped in front of him, indifferent. I scanned the questions quickly:

Is drinking affecting your reputation?

Do you turn to lower companions and an inferior environment when drinking?

Do you drink alone?

‘Really’ I said. ‘I don’t have a drinking problem.’

I smiled, trying to use all my charm to get some reaction from the motionless figure at the other end of the table. The rim on his spectacles gleamed, the light reflecting in the glasses, hiding his eyes completely.

‘It’s just that my friend convinced me to come here, that this was a good place to start. That you guys could perhaps transfer me to somewhere else – or give me something to make me feel better. It’s just that I’m depressed. Really – if you could just give me something for my anxiety I will be fine.’

‘Can you please just take a look at this query and answer it the best you can’ his long fingers pushed the sheet back in my direction. ‘After that we can discuss what can be done regarding your nerves.’

I took the pen and started to go over the questions on the paper. Reluctantly I had to put an x in almost every box belonging to YES. I put the pen down and slid the sheet back towards the glasses.

‘This doesn’t mean anything’ I whispered. ‘These questions are too general; they can apply to every-other person out there, or just someone like me that is not feeling too well.’

‘OK, what do you say about this’ his voice a little softer, leaning forwards so that I could actually see his eyes. They were grey, like the rocks near the ocean out on the peninsula I used to gather shells with my grandma. His nose was thin and straight, his lips set in a stern line.

‘You try this here for another couple of days’ he gave a sweeping gesture with his hand. ‘I can give you something to make you feel a little better and in return you participate in the whole program here, and that means sitting through all the lectures as well as the group therapy.’

‘Yeah, sure, I’ll give it a try.’ I nodded my head slowly. ‘But only for two more days. If I still feel that I don’t belong here, then you’ll transfer me to somewhere else.’

‘Of course’ he looked down again, safe behind his glasses once more and started to write something down on a yellow post-it note.

‘Here’ he handed me the paper. ‘Give this to one of the nurses.’

He looked down again, our conversation obviously over. I stood up, my hands shaking, clasping the post-it note. I was almost to the door when his voice stopped me.

‘And one more thing’ he was still looking down, writing. ‘You were tested for hepatitis when you came in, that’s normal procedure, but would you like to be tested for HIV as well?’

‘Sure’ I had to clear my throat. ‘Why not.’ The door closed silently behind me with a small thud.

Sitting on the linoleum floor in the nurse’s cubicle, crying. My knees pulled close to my chest, hugging myself. The need to get out of here is so bad, almost physical. I need a drink, a line, anything – everything! I phoned my voice-mail and of course Joel had left countless messages. Hearing his voice again the last of my restraint broke away. This was all wrong, I didn’t belong here. My place was with Joel no matter the cost. What did I think I was doing? Trying to feel better? Without him? That was absurd, no matter what, being without Joel was not an option. Still I sat there, crying, my body rocking back and forth, back and forth in rapid movements, the panic stirring, swelling, stretching inside of me, like a small creature with its own identity.

‘Can’t I have more of this stuff you gave me on my first night here?’ I looked pleadingly at the nurse on duty, barely seeing her, my eyelids so swollen.

‘No honey, we can’t’ she looked at me, kindness in her eyes. ‘You’ve been here four days and your body is becoming clean, getting rid of all the chemicals. If I would give you lithium now it would only delay the progress.’

‘I don’t care – please – please – please’ I begged, continuing my rapid rocking, unable to stop.

‘No, honey, you can sit here if you want to and wait it out, but I can’t give you anything.’ She stood up from her chair and walked towards the miserable heap on the floor that was supposed to be me.

‘You can also go to the meeting in the lecture room.’ She took my hand in hers, mine cold like ice and clammy, hers soft and warm. ‘It’s just starting.’

Tears started to flow again, her hands so tender and firm, like my grandma’s when drying my eyes after I fell off my bike at the age of five, or stroking my head softly when I had my first broken heart. The nurse got down on the floor beside me, holding me with her warm hands, without saying word. Finally the flow of tears subsided; I was numb, a black hole staring at the abyss. I cleared my voice and stood up slowly.

‘Maybe I’ll go to the meeting.’

I opened the door to the lecture-room carefully and sneaked in, finding me a seat in the back. The guest-speaker had already started. I sat there and listened, hearing for the first time what was being said, seeing the connection, the resemblance between me and him. The speaker finished and the floor was open. I raised my shaking hand, feeling like I was standing on the edge of the void about to make the jump. I took my stand behind the pulpit, noticing for the first time what was written on the front. Inscribed on each side of a triangle were these three words; Unity, Service, Recovery.

‘Hi, my name is Hope and I’m an alcoholic.’

The room echoed in return,

‘Hi Hope.’