

No. 1

“Thanks, I’m fine here.”

“Beer?”

“Yes.”

“Budweiser?”

“No, thanks, it tastes like dishwater, as my wife used to say. I’ll have a Sapporo.”

As soon as I said that, I remembered who he was, and corrected myself:

“My ex-wife, I mean.”

Then, I added:

“I hope you didn’t call to have my blessing.... You were quite mysterious on the phone.”

He waved his hand dismissively. I took a good look at him: early forties, slightly balding academic with the expression of an honest, intelligent dog—I could tell what Alma saw in him: a reliable pet one could count on at the end of a hard day’s work.

“OK,” I said. “Because, as far as I’m concerned, she and I are history. Or maybe you wanted to see with your own eyes what you’re up against. You must know that our lover’s past

is like an invisible mountain standing between us and them. You know it's there, but you can't give it a shape, you can't touch it. And it drives you crazy. Believe me, I know. So you wanted to see the mountain. Here it is. Take a good look. Keep in mind that I'm fifteen years older than when I met her. I've put on quite a few pounds. And my hair isn't what it used to be. But then, she, very likely, isn't what she used to be, either. Men used to stop in the street to gawk at her. It's not simply that she was beautiful; she looked as if she came from another planet. Does she still have that dreamy look? She used to stare for minutes like that into the distance.... Before our marriage it made me want to hug her, she seemed so vulnerable, but after, well, after, it's all very different. Have you been married before? No? Never?! Well, good luck. Everything that is touching and charming *before* becomes unbearable *after*. I mean, I come home after a day's work, and she's there, in her armchair, staring at the wall. And she isn't staring for ten minutes; she could sit like that for hours. Without moving. No wonder she had an attraction for monks."

"How did the two of you meet?"

"You mean, she never told you the story? Well, then, let me entertain you. At the time I worked as an electrician at the university. One day I got a call to come fix the VCR in the Languages and Literatures Department. The classroom was empty, and the desk in the middle had a TV and a VCR on it. It was a hot day, so, before starting to work, I took off my T-shirt and secured my hair with a bandana. I had shoulder-length hair then, not like now. So, there I was, with one hand inside the TV, the other holding some wires from the VCR, and my chest bare—need I mention that I used to work out every day?—when I heard a voice coming from the other end of the room.

It was the voice of someone who had just woken up, sleepy and hoarse, vaguely masculine, coming from far away. It scared the bejesus out of me.

“‘Jesus,’ I said. ‘Who’s there?’

“The next thing I saw was a wild mesh of long, spiraling dark hair rising above a desk and a creature getting up and moving toward me with the superb idleness of a jungle queen, carrying all that hair on her shoulders and on her back, all the way down to her waist. She came up to me, and I could see that her eyes, dark as her hair, had a spark that reminded me of one of those tribal people seen on National Geographic.

“‘I think I fell asleep,’ she said. ‘Did the class end?’

“‘The class? Which class?’

“‘French 202. Are you the teacher?’

“‘Me?’

“For a second it crossed my mind to say, yes, yes, I’m the teacher. I am whoever you want me to be. Instead, I said:

“‘No, nooo.... I’m the electrician.’ And I pointed apologetically at the machines on the desk.

“‘Oh,’ she said. ‘I guess that’s why you go around bare-chested. It must be part of the job description.’

“She didn’t sound sleepy any longer, and was sizing me up quite shamelessly. I told you that at the time I worked out every day, didn’t I? Pushups and weights, at least an hour a day. There was plenty to look at, if I may say so myself.

“‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

“‘Alma.’

“‘*Alma?*! As in *soul?*’

“‘Yes, but don’t be fooled. It’s a misleading name. I have no soul.’

“‘Of course you don’t. You can’t have what you are.’