

## HONEST ISAK

by

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The door was opened by a tiny woman with curly hair tied up in a bun, which was pinned on the top of her head like a giant chestnut. She couldn't have been any taller than 5'3", but my eyes still came in a good two and a half inches under the tips of her breasts, which were outlined on the gray cotton fabric of her long t-shirt. Besides this shirt-dress with its deep v-neck, which revealed her smooth naked shoulder, she wasn't wearing anything else, as I would soon find out. She stood there barefoot, her skin tanned and taut, without any jewelry, birthmarks, make-up, or tattoos---just a few lines above her eyebrows and around her lips, which were noticeable when she smiled at me in a sign of greeting. I kissed her cheek without any anxiety of the type that usually rattles me on first encounters, because that smile of hers, plus her casual hand on my shoulder while I was on my way in, made it clear that she sensed my little deception. And that she was okay with it.

I adore the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Quick contacts, easy transfer of information, smart devices that store substantial collections of films and music, QR codes, binary language, the IT sector, working from home, cameras and filters, social networks and control over one's self-representation. And Tinder, for fuck's sake! A catalog of people you can in touch with this very

evening, if only you learn how to communicate, if you get the hang of it, you can tell which of these women is looking for a husband, which ones for experience, and which one for a partner for Instagram pictures. And I am a good and astute observer. I don't have a lot of great qualities, just an interesting life story and some money, and the fact that I have given up on love and the typical route to a family keeps my expectations and pleasures pretty simple. If I had a choice, I couldn't pick a better time to be alive. Except for some ancient civilizations, where I could be some well-hung god or at least a god's apprentice, there is no historical period in which I would have gotten by all right. In the best-case scenario, they would have trained me like a pet—firing me out of a cannon in the circus or showing me at fairs. In the worst case, they would have done experiments on my body, stretched out my joints, cut me to the bone, implanted metal rods in my limbs, to see if I could stand up or if I would just die. All of that stuff passed me over me. When I had gotten through the traumas of puberty, all of those miserable little people who were looking to make the world a better place pulled me into their crybaby circles, and it was only then that I was able to free myself from hatred and become conscious of the kind of life I could lead. In contrast to them, I triumphed. In one meeting of the group, that frank thought popped into my head, and I said it out loud. After a short silence, a woman started to cry, and she wiped her nose on a handkerchief that she pulled out of the sleeve of her sweatshirt with a Sponge Bob emblem on it. The others looked down at the floor. I let myself down from the chair, apologized if something was wrong, and declared that I wouldn't be attending any more meetings.

On Tinder things didn't go smoothly at first. There was this wall of mistrust—even towards standard, normal men, as my friends reported to me. But, in contrast to them, I understood women well. They've always admitted me to their company, as if I were their gay

brother, safe, the one who didn't count, in front of whom they could let their guard down. They revealed themselves to me, unburdened themselves, and touched me and let me lie in their laps. I smelled the seat and perfume in their underarms. I learned about them.

On the web she'd introduced herself as Sonja. On the photos her face couldn't be seen—only her figure, arms, big close-ups of her lips with a cigarette hanging out of them and that thick curly hair, which I meticulously imagined holding in my hands. She was imaginative, brazen, inspiring. But what drew me to her first was her age. Since I don't exactly have a lot of opportunities to hook up with women my own age—either they're not on social networks or they are frightened liars you can't get anywhere near—I mostly date girls who are out there wanting to try everything, for a year, before they go finish their studies, move abroad, have children, or set out on some new struggle that will give them the possibility of an ordinary life. I don't even need to mention that my partners were mostly artists, activists, self-aware women, or at least ones who didn't dare admit that they were prejudiced. All of that was a plus for me, because we all know that feminists are the best fucks, although I would settle for less than that. Since I'm not in a position to be really choosy, I can say that my sex life is satisfying. I carefully positioned my photo on the profile, only my head and beard, dark glasses, no physique, no arms. Sometimes months of correspondence would happen before the first encounter, but then I'd have a story ready that would suppress the betrayed expectations. You're not going to believe this, but only very rarely did I get rejected. Maybe it was because I reminded them of Peter Dinklage, and they in each of my attempts to be witty heard the sophisticated sarcasm of Tyrion Lannister from *Game of Thrones*. Conceited encounters work miracles. The other short-cut to their beds was

sheer curiosity—for who, after a few drinks and joints, would miss the opportunity to see a midget’s dick?

Her apartment was comfortable and casual, sparsely furnished, just basic elements: a restored armchair from socialist times, a couch from IKEA, a little table of wooden boards, framed album covers from the ‘60s, a movie poster for the Yugoslav musical *Ljubav i moda* on one wall, a polished parquet floor with no carpet, a lemon tree with two dazzling fruits. I thought they were plastic. Something was suspicious about the whole set-up. It was too clean, as if it weren’t an apartment but the set for making commercials about products for a cozy urban life.

The living room was separated from the kitchen by a tall counter with barstools. I climbed up onto one with my eyes on the retro fridge and Sonja, who was taking out of it a bottle of Finlandia. While bent over pulling out vodka and ice, the top of her opened down to her nipples, and I could see that they were erect from the cold. She put the bottle and two large glasses down on the counter, and then she turned back around to get blueberry juice in a bag bearing the logo of the supermarket at the end of the street. “I don’t like to drink it straight. You?”

When we started our correspondence on Tinder, while we were still in the phase of exchanging basic information and a few untruths, she told me that she worked as an illustrator. She sent me a link to a website that sold tote-bags, shower curtains, toiletry bags, and linens, all with her original prints on them. For the most part these were reworkings of well-known that she repurposed. Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* she transformed into a beggar from the market, and onto an iconic St. George she drew breasts, a polka-dot dress, and tennis shoes. She turned a horse

into a bicycle, and a spear became a taut cord, on the upper end of which a paper kite flapped in the wind. In the dragon's place she put a dog that was pulling on the other end of the leash. Totally likeable. I sensed good sex. But she didn't tell me anything about how she actually earned a living. I assumed that behind her silences stood some husband-provider, but I didn't care all that much about finding out that part of the story.

She noticed me looking around and drawing conclusions, so she came right out and said: "We rent this apartment out by the day. To tourists, people having affairs, families of patients at the hospital. It's close to here. Across the park." Her husband was away on a short trip. We could stay till the next morning if I wanted. Sonja spent a lot of time in this apartment. On the excuse that she was going out to clean up and wash the linens after guests had left, she used the free time and the empty space to be alone. Sometimes she would have a drink or two, because her husband, on account of a heart condition, had to give up cigarettes, alcohol, and other vices, and Sonja was in solidarity with him. She came here to relax, watch a movie, listen to music, and work through some things for herself. She would spend five or six hours in the apartment and go back to her life relaxed. "Why? Don't you like your life?" I asked, trying to reach her fingers with mine and stop their nervous drumming on the table. "On the contrary. I like it too much to screw it up," she answered. She was as earnest as someone taking an oath in a courtroom. "What a load of crap. Excuse me. I'm nervous." She covered her face with her hands, beneath which, as I could see, she was still smiling.

I didn't expect her to be bashful. After the chats we'd had on Tinder and the crude comments we had exchanged, I couldn't imagine her being this quiet and distant. I noticed she finished her vodka-and-blueberry before I did, and I decided she needed alcohol to feel free.

With the third glass, she became a different woman. Her tongue loosened and we started flirting the way I'd been hoping for the whole time. She settled onto a stool, ran her hand repeatedly over her neck and hair, and looked me in the eyes every time she took a sip, holding the liquid in her mouth for a long time. She kissed me first, leaning over the wooden table top between us and indicating the closed door on the far wall with her eyes. She walked off into the bedroom, shedding her shirt-dress as if she were heading for the shower. This speed was disappointing; I had expected a little more seduction, for us to look each other over for a while longer, but I didn't call out for her to come back. Instead I jumped to my feet and followed her like a frisky pony. While I got rid of my tennis shoes and boxers, Sonja was already opening a box of condoms and offering me one. She planted me on the bed and straddled me. She was crazy wet, and I thought I might come as soon as I was inside her. She clenched my neck with her hands and panted into my face like this was her last fuck before the end of the world. She bobbed up and down on my cock in a jerky rhythm and swatted my face with her breasts. "Slow down...I'm gonna come...I don't want to finish before you do...I want it to last---" I fought not to explode in the first minute. It was in vain, because Sonja went faster and faster. She looked at me from under her eyelashes, bit her lower lip, and counted out the seconds. One, two, three—and I was spent. Before I could sit up, Sonja was already completely dressed: t-shirt, pants, socks—I saw her through the open door. When I had pulled myself back together and gone out into that fucking hipster living room, I found her arranging prosciutto and cheese on a plate, swaying to the music playing from her laptop, singing in a quiet voice and downing big gulps of vodka-and-blueberry. I gathered that her excursions over to this empty apartment had never been about just

two glasses of wine, but rather that she was a well-trained alcoholic. The Finlandia had been reduced to less than a third of a bottle, and I had barely had time for two shots over ice.

When she saw me approaching, she turned up the music and started to dance faster. “I walked the empty streets for ages and saw nothing but boredom,” she sang with her eyes closed. She waved her arms in the air like she was searching for me in space, and, despite my original intentions to get the hell out of there, I found myself in her embrace. I grasped her around the waist and tried to follow her rhythm, but after a few steps I had to escape the situation, which was clearly accentuating the difference in our heights. “I need to take a leak,” I said, squirming; she stroked my hair, bent over to kiss me, and sang: “Never tell me/that they broke us/and we’re unhappy/and gonna die.” I finally succeeded in extricating myself gently, kissing the palms of her hands. As I headed to the bathroom, I took out my phone and clicked on the Shazam app. It said; “Band: Dobri Isak. Song: ‘Let Me Stay in Your Bed.’”

I wasn’t unsatisfied, but everything was getting too silly and trite. This inebriated little artist-in-waiting, the wife of some well-established man, is attractive and secure and fucks men she doesn’t know and pretends to be insane. This is such a cliché. And I know my way around cliches. My life story is built on something similar.

I was washing my hands when she showed up in the doorway: “Now I need to pee.” She staggered to the toilet with her pants already off. She’d barely lowered her butt onto the rim when she started throwing up. I adroitly turned her around, positioning her head above the toilet bowl and holding onto her by the stomach and forehead. After two rounds she was finished, and she lay down on the bare tile floor. On her face, dark blotches had appeared. “Are you okay?” I asked. I wanted to hear her talk so that I could leave with a clear conscience. I was hoping that a

convenient moment would present itself soon: I would look at my watch, raise an eyebrow, and say that I needed to go. She mumbled: “I’m okay. Okay.” “Why do you need all this?” I asked, mostly for my own sake. I didn’t think she was capable of answering, and I wasn’t prepared to hear her out. Her pants and underwear were still down at her knees after her unsuccessful attempt to pee, and now I tried to pull them back into place. I lifted her skirt and saw for the first time her thighs, streaked with narrow scars of various ages, thicknesses, and lengths. I recoiled as if I had done that to her myself, while I tried to cover them up again with her clothes, as quickly as possible. Sonja mumbled something that sounded to me like this: “I don’t deserve better. I don’t deserve anything better.”

“Well, what do you deserve then? You’re fucking crazy.” I’d had enough of all this, this tarted-up pseudo-apartment, the pathology that this woman was hiding and was now threatening to spill over into my life without my consent. “I don’t deserve better. I deserve a midget like you. I am no better than that, and I’m sorry if something went wrong here...” I left her to sleep it off on the bathroom floor and got ready to leave absolutely as fast as I could. On my way out I took her by the frayed chignon, lifted her head up off of the floor, and slapped her as hard as I could. For a fraction of a second she opened her eyes and let out a sob, but she after a moment calmed down again and went on sleeping with her face glued to the cold tiles. Out of the corner of her mouth a thick line of drool had started to flow, and from her nose a drop of blood. I left the door open behind me and went down the stairs to the street. I decided I would walk home. Once again I had to win.

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