



CRYSTALLIZE

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We met in Reykjavik. This is not a love song. Maria was 45, Italian, Padua or thereabouts, with long, toothy cheekbones and a smirking, vivid, gloss-lined mouth. Beneath her dyed black hair and Cruella-caricatured lashes Maria's eyes had some strange fluttering quality like she was following empty shadows round the walls. She wore a black dress and low heels, smoked French cigarettes constantly and spoke with a thick accent, and made it quite clear she hated the Brits.

So did I.

"Hey, Mister English!" she shouted as I entered the airport lounge, "you want ice?" She raised a glass and laughed bitterly. An Italian joke. Luckily the few fortunates in the bar (the ones who were about to get out of Iceland alive) were so happy they never looked up from their cod liver oil. Maybe she'd already worn them down. It didn't seem to take her long. When she found out I don't drink she said we might as well leave. Next thing we were walking along this freezing airport corridor and all I noticed were the same old signs for vodka and perfume but the letters were zeros with slashes

through them like harpoons. Out the corner of my eye I watched Maria watch herself: in every shiny surface, every mirror, every pane of glass that didn't look out onto the Nordic night, floating like a paranoid vampire, as if hoping to find some better answers than she'd been dealt so far. I knew what she was doing: composing the final walk, that CCTV march into oblivion. You've all seen it. Her final moments.

Unaware, she. Just a few hours later. Live from *Padua TV*. It made me think about my stage exit, except no-one would miss me: my moon face, low-res, short on pixels, my heart cold as cancer my eyes like weapons in this hard dead head, leaving the airport to face his –

When they asked for a license at the Avis desk Maria looked at me enquiringly.

"I don't drive."

"Jesus! He doesn't drink, doesn't drive... just my luck. On the way out with an English fruit."

"I used to drive," I lied, "I hit a kid. He died. That's why I went to jail."

"Jail?" Maria's expression changed. "So Mister English, are you dangerous?"

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It seemed a bizarre question in the circumstances. What did she think I was going to do – kill her? I shrugged, tired from the long flight. Not the hop from London, the one before. The one she didn't know about. Was I dangerous? For the first time in my life I recognized the description as one that might fit. "Like you care." She smiled, but I couldn't read her. Didn't really want to.

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Walking to the car lot the rain hurt like hell, like glass. I've never been anywhere cold before. Not like this. Although there were no street lights, the stars on the sky showed us a flat drab landscape of lava. Cold, old and very dead. The glacier we were headed to was in the far north, as far as you could get from the world. I needed snow, but it just drizzled cold rain down the windscreen. They say it can get too cold to snow: tell it to a penguin.

Maria was driving, so I had plenty time to squint through the window. I didn't say much: I never do. I left all that to Maria. One time I tuned in long enough to hear, she was moaning she'd never been to Venice. Jesus. Nor have I, who cares?

We found a motel room and there was the embarrassment at reception where she made it overly clear she wanted separate rooms. Like I wanted to fuck her? I don't know, maybe I did. One last time, for luck. Not that screwing ever brought me luck before.

I got bored in the room flicking the same six channels, all of them American, four showing *Friends* on a loop, so I went to the bar. It was closed but the Viking hulk in a white pullover seemed keen to talk. I wasn't, so he put on *Friends* and I sipped on a coke and watched in silence. Funny how Maria never noticed my accent

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wasn't exactly Hugh Grant. Guess she just didn't get out much. Of Italy, I mean. Then again – she'd never been to Venice. Now she never would. Maria entered the bar and asked for a whiskey. No reason for small talk, not now, so I went to my room and whacked off to some high rent porn movie with a distinct lack of humour therein.

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Out in the boondocks. Forest slid by on all sides like we were in some computer game. One last stop, down a sad little track off the metal highway. A campsite in summer. Stars spun: odd, here we were shaken from the equator, yet it seemed the earth was turning faster the further north. The sign on the store said this was our last chance to stock up or turn back. The place looked closed, but the guy waved happily enough when he saw us squinting through the door. I thought all these guys were meant to be depressed. Maria flirted with him as we browsed. Not that we needed much: cigarettes, snacks, whiskey for Maria. I could sense him looking at the car; his eyes screamed we were crazy. It was winter, and this was the only road. The only place it led to was the glacier. He followed me out to the car and as I pumped gas he looked solemnly at me, his cheeks red from generations of cold. "You know the glacier is closed."

Behind him I watched Maria lift shit from the till. Chocolate, water. In a world of ice she wanted water.

"What?"

"The glacier. It is closed. For winter. The snow gets too serious. Tourists stop, the fishermen go elsewhere. There is no rescue for people. I close in two days and I go to the city."

Maria laughed shrilly. I knew what she was doing:

