

Rafflesia

Rafflesia, the largest achlorophyllous parasitizing flowering plant in the world, grows on the roots and stems of tropical plants. The vegetative organs are so reduced that the body of the plant exists only as threadlike strands living within the tissues of the host plant. On extremely short stems vestiges of leaves exist in the form of scales. Rafflesia is native mostly to the tropics. The genus includes the giant *Rafflesia arnoldi* which often parasitizes the plants of *Cissus* genus. It is found on Sumatra. The diameter of the flower is about 1 m and it weighs up to 8-9 kg. It emits fetid odor and is pollinated by insects.

That business trip was a true salvation. I took in the reconditioned air of the plane and leaned against the back of the chair, resting my hands on the side supports and closing my eyes. The plane built up speed. I wondered: "Am I going to feel when it hovers in the sky?" The moment much alike orgasm: a second, a millisecond and you're somewhere far away, at a different altitude. Finally, I decided to look triumphantly through the window over the land below. Then I breathed out and waited to the stewardess to order some whiskey.

That business trip was a true salvation. The dank and chilly October days in Paris seemed to echo the state of my mind, the weather moaning and bewailing instead of me. The coldness, the dampness, the routine work, the calls, messages, replies, meetings and going home or going to the hell where I had already made a new discovery: Marijean used to champ neurotically when we dined. Good Lord! She'd been called my wife for twenty years and I'd never noticed that champing. All the breakfasts and dinners have been a part of my infernal experience for six months. She eats with noise, munches and frays my nerve endings, making me eager to take the bronze ballerina from the mantelpiece, the present, the symbol of twenty years of marriage, and bang it into her head. I know it's bad. If there were no risks to face a penalty, should I ever be able to do it? I believe, I shouldn't: I'm the most cowardly man ever... I put on my headphones, turned on music and, of course, annoyed her. She explained that my privacy, as auditory as it was, could disrupt the joy and happiness of our family life. She said it made her feel rejected. It's not easy to tell a woman that you're ready to strangle her because of her detestable manner of eating and you begin to cast glances at the lonely ballerina on the mantelpiece... That's why I prefer to listen to music... After a long time I've found a way out: I ask her how she spends her days and the main thing is to see her in high spirits. Otherwise she'll keep silent at dinner, leading me halfway to the hell. Yes, we have been standing each other for the last two years. We're both aware of what's been going on but that doesn't help. I think it's what people call a crisis in a relationship. Oh, it's stupid to rush headlong to a psychotherapist like Jean-Phillip and his narrow-eyed wife to save your marriage. What will ever save a relationship predestined to be ruined. It reminds me of tea bags, maybe not tea bags but surely loose leaf tea, the best Indonesian quality, maybe... in a porcelain pot... the best color and aroma in the beginning and hopeless efforts to add some color to another portion of boiling water in the end. We are like a discolored tea leaf in a porcelain cup and nothing is going to help it... It has been unbearable since the children left this house. George is in college: He prefers to live in the campus. Michaela looks in once a month and immediately leaves for the office. My wife and I, we're like Siamese twins but one of us has already died and the other has to hog the dead corpse because it's unimaginable to cut them separate. I believe I have to stand it and I believe she shares my point of view: We've never

mentioned divorce. I don't know what I'm going to do without her. I'm not deep in love with her. Nothing of the kind... A dog gets used to its fleas. We get used to our obligations, the punishments inflicted on us. We live side by side with those we haven't been in love with for a long time, but as far as we've accustomed ourselves to such life, we fail to think of any other living.

"Your whiskey, monsieur", the stewardess awakened me and poured some whiskey from the green Jameson bottle into a glass, her eyes silently asking: "Maybe some ice?"

I shook my head. I'd never spoil my favorite antidepressant with ice. Lately, whisky has been perfectly dulling all my pains, the feeling of injustice and loneliness. Two gulps and we were united, Jameson and me. I looked through the window again. The plane was at the ceiling. The rain, the black clouds blanketing France somewhere beneath...

Now I could see the dazzling lightness and the white clouds which resembled icebergs floating in the ocean. I felt the pocket of the jacket hanging in front of my chair, found the sunglasses and put them on. They comforted me: Now it was easy to watch the monotonous horizon. I asked the stewardess to fill the glass again but decided not to drain my whiskey in a gulp. The previous ones were still warming up my stomach from the inside.

I believe, no one is able to escape either his own self or the thoughts about death in a plane. I looked around and found absolutely nothing to entertain myself during the next two hours. The guy by my side had already been snorting, but, in contrast to Marijean's champing his sounds did not irritate me at all. I don't even know whether she snorts or not... I don't know whether I snort myself or not... She's never told me. When did I decide to sleep in the room where my boy used to sleep? Why? It's hard to remember...

Two weeks ago I met one of my partners at Odeon to make a business proposal. Then I walked to the bank of Seine River through some narrow streets and noticed a tobacco yellow cloak at a small hotel in the corner. I remembered those thin shins and tiptoeing before the black shoes. I looked up and smiled. It was an involuntary smile. A commonplace still: A tobacco yellow cloak wrapped round a dark blue jacket on a man of about forty, about ten years younger than me, who's unable to notice anything around him. I saw how the Burberry's tobacco yellow cloak wiped the red trail of her red lipstick off the face of Armani's blue jacket and giggled, throwing back her head as she usually did. It startled me. Unwilling to disturb them, I pushed myself into Paul's bakery and I don't know for how long but I stood there as if rooted to the spot. I suppose the shop assistant asked me something. I could hear nothing but my own heartbeats and could see nothing but the still I had just seen. It repeated over and over again like a vinyl record: Marijean embraces a man in a dark blue jacket and laughs like... I don't remember how Marijean laughs! She was airy and happy, unwilling to see people around her. I felt tight and staggered but a woman stopped me falling.

"Monsieur, are you OK?"

I shook my head and sat down. Somebody brought me a glass of water and I swallowed it mechanically. Suddenly, I realized I wanted to cry, to blubber. When they called for an ambulance, I barely managed to look up and say that it was not necessary. "I feel better". I thanked them all and reeled out of the bakery. They had gone. Unable to think about anything, I turned off the road. Astonishment, that's what I felt and nothing else. I was astonished that there was no sign of anger in me... What astonished me... She invented the way to manage it, to save herself, to find a shelter in someone other than me when I failed to chase any other skirt. She denied going with the flow like dead fish. In that moment I thought I was a male deer with those heavy branching antlers on my head and, to see the poor reflection of my crumpled silhouette, peeped toward the shop window. I

can see no antlers on my head... It's me, Antoine... a man of fifty five, one hundred and eighty-four centimeters, hair touched with grey, unconsciously running backwards not to come across his wife and her young lover.

It goes without saying that I couldn't work. I called my assistant and asked to put everything off. I neither wanted to go home nor to drink at 03:00 p.m. Who will ever drink on Tuesday, man?

But I still drank. Then I went home, crestfallen like a culprit, crept into George's room and threw myself upon the bed without undressing.

The next few days were the most difficult ones. I took a two-day leave of absence for health reasons and didn't go to the office, but I went out every day, as I usually did, and used to sit in a faraway café from morning till night, beginning with some coffee and ending with some whiskey. Now I was even more convinced that I harbored no grudge against Marijean. No, I envied her, because she contrived a means of escape, a silent, secret means that helped her to hog the fetid corpse of our cohabitation, or marriage or whatever it was... Was it her first breach of faith? How long? I couldn't remember when I wore her out, when I lost her. Long ago, I guess. Nothing but the obligations stated on a sheet of paper makes us cling onto each other. Absorbed in my insipid, drab life I failed to notice when she cooled off me, alienated and played me false. Whenever the thought about her infidelity came back, I shook off my head, hearing the rattling of my imaginary antlers that made me think I had already fallen mad or I was going to run mad.

Now we both had our parts to play: A woman head over ears in love, fascinated with the secrecy of her affair, and a man playing some undisturbed confidence.

Actually it was a relief to know about Marijean's lover. I had no intention to make an investigation of him, not now. I had to overcome the sensation of weakness and insignificance. Curiously enough, none of these sensations urged me either to pack up and go from home or to drop a hint that I knew what was going on behind the scenes. Besides, my ego somehow enjoyed the role of an idiot I had been playing. So, that business trip was a true salvation...