

LES FEUILLES MORTES

I tried to cover my head with my pillow so as not to hear the phone, but it kept ringing through. After a minute's pause, it rang again, and then a third time. I had to lift the receiver, even though I hated the idea of talking to someone at 7.05am, after getting to bed at 4.05am.

"Hi! Glad you're awake already", said a cheerful voice.

"Did I have a choice, Dad?" I said. Dad called me up only if something was really big, like the time he'd tried to fill up the washer fluid on the car, but dumped a bucket of water into the crankcase instead. I collected my wits to brace the impact. "What's up?"

"Morocco. All the neighbors are going down there, to play tennis, over New Year's. Want to come? Mom doesn't want to go."

Thinking of tennis right now was pushing it, but I tried. "Like, how? I'm on student loan and I haven't even done any translations lately, so I don't think I can afford it. Talk to you later, okay?" I was about to put down the receiver, but then I heard the magic words:

"I'm paying."

It turned out some neighbors were flying to Agadir on December 26 for two weeks. Fourteen people had signed up already, and Dad wanted to join the gang, but fifteen was not as good as sixteen. "So why don't you join up and we'll spend two weeks at Dunes D'Or! They have tennis courts at the Hacienda, an oasis in the desert, with palm trees and free drinks. Besides, it's an all inclusive trip."

Dad sold the idea to me on the Hacienda bit. I had always wanted to see an oasis. The free drinks were a definite bonus.

So, right after the most traditional of Christmases with all family and bells and whistles, Dad and I hopped on a train on Dec 25 to get to Helsinki International Airport by the early hours of Dec 26. The team of neighbours assembled at Gate 26 with much hugging and kisses on cheeks, jokes on wearing winter jackets to Agadir, and so on. These people had been living on the same street for twenty years already, and most of them worked at the University, like my Dad. It was therefore a bunch of happy campers that boarded the narrow-body MD-82 jet for the six hour flight to Agadir.

Fifteen of the people took up seats at the front of the plane. My boarding pass had the seat 23A, way back in the plane. I bade good flight to all the people and wandered to my seat. At least it was at the window. I've always wanted a window seat, if not for anything else, just to be able to see people turn into ants and trucks shrink down to Matchbox scale. I was hoping with all my might the next seat would be taken by some nice young lady, or at least some guy my age. While fastening my seat belt I remembered I had nothing to read.

As the gate closed, and the seat next to me was still vacant, I was already hoping I'd have some space for the flight. I had very little leg room, and sitting sideways would have been great. Then I glanced up.

A large lady was rolling down the aisle. She looked fiftyish, give or take a decade. Quite a few frequent flyer miles were drawn on her face, either that or she had a predilection for booze. All my hopes of a spacious, uncramped flight to Agadir evaporated as she wheezed up to the seat next to me and installed herself in it. Judging from the heavy sigh she let out as she sat, she was pneumatic.

"Oh dear, oh dear. That taxi almost made me miss the flight. It's a long trip from Hotel Kalastajatorppa to the airport of course, but I made it. The traffic was absolutely HORRIFIC this morning." She jingled her golden bracelets and made sure I noticed the thick Byzantine necklace around her neck, which was also quite thick.

Kalastajatorppa at that time was the hotel to stay if you wanted to spend some serious money. However, the scent of her perfume was a bit overpowering for someone who'd stay there. Also, it wasn't Eau de Old Money, I thought I smelled Eau de Leningrad instead. The lady was wearing expensive-looking clothes as well, but there were definite marks of wear and tear on them. I shrugged in my mind – why couldn't she be rich but thrifty?

"So nice to meet you! I am glad you'll keep me company for the long flight. Why don't we just introduce ourselves and get right down to knowing each other? My name is Maria Langenskiöld. What's yours?" she said and thrust out a pudgy hand. I shook it and told her my name, and offered some customary phrases. I've never liked people whose handshake feels like custard in a rubber glove, and hers was one. I thought myself a real fool for not bringing a book. It'd have been a great shield.

By the time the Captain came on over the intercom to tell us just how high we were flying, Mrs Langenskiöld had told me much of herself and asked nothing of me. I didn't mind. She was the director of public libraries in Kuopio, a rural town, and she travelled to Morocco every year over New Year to celebrate her dear but deceased husband's memory, and so on ad nauseam. I looked out of my window to see the endless, woolly overcast clouds and thought how this trip will be just as interminable.

Over lunch, she ordered another wine after the first Cabernet, and then another. By that time she was telling me how she'd read French and Spanish at the University of Helsinki, and how she spent one year in France, meeting Michel, and having a mad love story, and getting married, and losing him to cancer after only one year of marital bliss, and how she'd decided to return to her ancestral home, a manor at that, and taken back her maiden name. She tended to accompany her story with large sweeps of her hands, and one of these movements sent her handbag to the floor.

I was better equipped to bend over and pick it up. As I did that, her return ticket fell to the floor. I picked it up and couldn't help noticing the name on it. LANKINEN MAIJA MS. Not my business at all, I thought, slipped it into the bag, and handed it to her. She flashed me a genial smile. Then she made a trip to the toilet, during which I went to Dad to ask for anything to read. I was handed the book "Lär Dig Tennis", a goddamn Swedish tennis guide, printed in Stockholm, 1964. Good vintage of course, same as myself.

When she returned, I had picked up my only remaining defense, my Walkman with five cassettes of Genesis, Rush, and Miles Davis. I was still fumbling with the cassette when she returned. "Oh, you have one of those! I thought of buying one when I was in New York a couple of months ago, but then I thought about the hassle of recording all my albums, and dropped it. You just go ahead, I'll be taking a nap anyway. Hmm... maybe I'll ask for just one more wine." By the time I had *Kind of Blue* in the earphones restoring my sanity, she'd downed the bottle and was fast asleep, head leaning left towards me, wheezing and snorting. I looked at the clouds and wished Albert Einstein was here to make time run faster.

As the plane touched down at Agadir, the jolt woke her up. "Ohh! We're here already!" She gave herself a quick makeover with a heavy makeup palette, then asked me: "What is your hotel?"

I said, *Dunes d'Or*, but knowing no French, I pronounced it "*Doons Dorr*." The condescending look I was given made me feel like a serf.

"*Dunes d'Or*, my dear boy, is the best hotel. I always stay there. The service is excellent. And it's all inclusive... very handy. You'll see."

When I got to the doorway and had my first lungful of Africa, it was like opening the door to a sauna. The air quivered with heat over the black tarmac, and the palm leaves waggled in the gentle wind. Burnt kerosene was the dominant scent, instead of the expected herbs and spices you always read about, but nevertheless it was a welcome change. I didn't manage to escape Ms Langenskiöld though; she squeezed herself next to me in the bus to the hotel and yakked all the way.

It was only 10am, so we had a full day ahead. A quick trip to the room to change into something more comfortable, and then down to wait for the shuttle to the Hacienda. I was happy to lose Mrs Langenskiöld, or Lankinen: however, I pondered about the name change. After all, Langenskiöld is Finnish-Swedish, old nobility, and Lankinen is, well, lay people's name. The same goes for Maria and Maija. Still, the prospect of outdoor tennis buried these thoughts as soon as the bus left.

The Hacienda was just as great as I'd expected. It was a spot of lush green in the desert, guarded by palms and bushes, and it had a pool in the center. Six clay tennis courts, impeccably maintained by a large staff of Alis and Mohameds, were the best I'd ever played. After four sets it was wonderful to retire to the deck chairs out of the sun's fierce blast, and watch the others play. Now time just flew, so thanks for nothing, Mr Einstein.

The bus took us back at six. We all had played at least six sets in the desert oasis, and I for one was feeling elated. This feeling lasted through a shower and the assembly of the entourage for dinner, but the sight of Maria in the lobby, waving to me, made me want to blend into the stucco walls. She joined us and introduced herself to all, and within fifteen minutes, acted as if she'd entered the team ten years ago.

Dinner was absolutely fantastic. I'd never been on an all-inclusive trip before, but I couldn't help noticing how Maija took full advantage of the situation. Just like in the plane, she worked up a buzz within fifteen minutes, and as far as I could tell, her way of pronouncing *Encore du vin, s'il vous plait* sounded like she stemmed from Rive Gauche. Since our entourage

was by no means averse to wine, people enjoyed themselves. I saw my chance and effected a quick getaway, claiming a headache.

On the way out, I saw a poster. "House band plays jazz every night in the Blue Room, from 10pm till late." It was ten to already, so I went to check out the house band. The Blue room was a tight little club with a scenic view of the dark Atlantic, and sparsely lit, it was very nice as a jazz club. I sat down and ordered a rum and Coke, and waited.

As the elevator music ended and the five-man band took their seats, I was surprised by the warm welcome they got. Not a note played, and yet the crowd was clapping away. When they launched into *Freddie Freeloader*, Miles Davis' immortal classic, I knew why they'd been so eagerly awaited. These cats knew their stuff. The trumpet player would have passed for young Miles, and the sax man was probably Coltrane's cousin. Both the band leader at the piano and the base player were heavy duty; the drummer seemed the weakest link. Nevertheless, I'd never heard Davis played live, so I was hooked.

The band put in an hour and a half with just a ten minute pause. After that, they started doing favors. "Any requests?"

I put in, "Play *Dear Old Stockholm*, please!" The band leader at the piano acknowledged my request with a flash of a smile. The rendition was on a par to what I had in my Walkman, as played by Davis and his crew. As soon as that was over, someone shouted, "How about *Donna!*" Next, from the back, another voice requested "*Straight, No Chaser*"; no mean feat for a Moroccan hotel's house band.

The room was rocking. It was clear there were quite a few jazz fans, because the requests followed in quick succession. Classic songs followed jazz staples. Just before midnight there was a slight pause. Then I heard a familiar voice: "*Les Feuilles Mortes, s'il vous plait, Monsieur!*"

The band leader pretended not to hear.

Again, the same slurred, hoarse woman's voice shouted, a bit annoyed: "*Les Feuilles Mortes, s'il vous plait, Monsieur!*"

With a shrug, the band leader hit the first chords. Maija joined me in the small table I had for myself. "Michel always, always wanted to hear this song when we were here. We always danced to it. *Garçon! Une verre de vin, s'il vous plait?*" She was handed a red wine, and she gulped half of it at one go.

Much as I like *Feuilles*, it was not what I liked the band to play. I made a move to leave. Maija put her hand on my arm. "Please stay."

I sat down and asked her point blank: "Why did you say your name was Langenskiöld?"

She rolled her eyes, then said: "It's just a game. I like to do that whenever I come here. It gets me better service, or something. So what?"

I shrugged. "It's all the same to me. I just wondered."

She went silent for a while. “You know, I told you a little white lie on the plane. I’m not the director of libraries in Kuopio. I am a head librarian.”

“Okay.” I failed to see what that had to do with me. I had already deduced she had more than two jokers in her deck.

“And I don’t come here every year. This is my third trip. In fifteen years.”

“Fine”, I said. “You don’t have to explain to me. It’s none of my business.”

We went silent. The band was halfway through the song, when I decided to leave. Maija was listening to the band with her eyes closed, and hummed along. I tapped her forearm, smiled and left. She remained at the table, and behind my back I heard, “*Encore du vin.*”

The days entered a routine. Up at eight, and after breakfast, catch the shuttle at ten. Tennis until one, then a siesta with snacks, and more games until five. Catch the last shuttle, relax until dinner at eight. The Blue Room was alive by ten, and back to bed by two or so. The older people in our contingent wined and dined in the restaurant cum ballroom; none felt the lure of jazz like I did.

Maija joined us every chance she got. She even hopped on the shuttle to the Hacienda on many days, pestering Abdullah with her incessant drink requests and ogling the courtkeepers. To the others she kept up appearances, but to me, in the Blue Room, she let the cracks enter the façade. I was irked by her attention. What was I to tell her? I simply had nothing to say to her. I had no opinion on her life, or travels, or anything. I just wanted to say hi to her in the morning and get to the tennis already.

In the evening, after watching the Sun dip almost vertically into the Atlantic and a very nice dinner, I went to the Blue Room again. The band was there already at fifteen to ten. They simply loved to play bebop and ballads in just the right mixture. This time, I had listed the songs on my cassettes on a sheet of Dunes D’Or stationery, and I had the paper with me. I had decided to run the show and shoot the songs before no one else thought of the next one. Besides, I wanted to see just how much they knew.

I started the requests with staples: *Stella by Starlight*, *My Funny Valentine*, *All Blues*. The band leader smiled wider every time I called a song. Someone beat me to *Tempus Fugit* but I didn’t mind. As the last chords of *Blue in Green* faded away, and people were gearing up the applause, a familiar voice called from the door. “*Les Feuilles Mortes, s’il vous plait, Monsieur!*”

I turned to see what condition she was in this time. I don’t know whether she had any dinner or if she sat at the bar all evening, but she was skunk drunk. My table had the one free seat, and I cursed my stupidity in not joining someone else’s table when I got there. She stared at Jamal the piano man until Jamal shrugged and once more played the song. This time, he arranged it into bebop, and the song was over in half the time it usually took.

Maria was stunned by this move. She opened and shut her mouth much like a sea bass in a boat. The band went into *Basin Street Blues*, and I tried to leave. She yanked me down. “Don’t go. What a shitty band. I want to have a drink with you.”

I decided to see what was up. She looked at me and said, "I've not been honest with you, you know. I wasn't married to Michel. He was my fiancée. But I had a son with him."

Once more shrugging, I said, "Good for you." She had the rest of the wine.

She looked into my eyes and I felt her probe me, probably to decide whether to go all out. "Ahhh, what the hell. I was a student once, just like you are now, right? At some point I had to make ends meet and do my language practice, so I went to Paris as an au pair. I found this businessman Michel. His wife was a nagging bitch, and Michel told me he was going to leave her as soon as he could set her up financially and marry me. Everything was fine for five months, and then he got me got pregnant. He spilled it to his wife and I was kicked out in two days with just a freaking plane ticket home."

She lured in the waiter with a hook of the forefinger. With her replenished glass of high grade Cabernet, she attempted to go through the motions of a true aficionado, but only managed to spill some on the tablecloth. "So there I was... flying home, bun in the oven. I had no money to go back to the University. I had no chance of making it without a job. I couldn't go home and face my father. I had no choice but to drop out and get a job."

I thought for a while and said, "Sorry."

She smiled. "Oh, that's sweet of you. You're a nice kid. Say... you look like the age of my son. When were you born?"

"August '64". I was not very happy to explain my life to this drunken lady and decided to leave it at that.

"I knew it! Mikko is June that year. You even look like him. Where's your Dad?"

I could see him in the back – he sometimes liked jazz – but I pretended not to see him. "He's not big on jazz."

"All I wanted was Mikko and Michel. Wasn't it nice to call him Mikko?"

"Sure was. Listen, we're taking the bus ride around to the hills and then to the Souk tomorrow, and it's an early morning thing so I got to get to bed. Nice talking to you as always."

I beat a hasty retreat, but not fast enough to miss the "*Garçon! Une verre de vin, s'il vous plait?*"

In the morning, she was nowhere to be seen when the bus took off at eight. I was happy. Without her, I felt I was finally able to suck in the essence of Morocco. Scents I'd never sniffed before, the wind carrying Saharan sand, and the fierce Sun high overhead. I'd never seen such a short shadow on myself. When the bus disgorged us happy campers into the fangs of the Souk sharks, I almost turned back into the oven heat of the bus; Maija was across the street, having another wine, in the streetside restaurant. I was too late.

"Yoo hoo! I was sure I'd see you here!" she said and ordered me a glass of wine too. I was not what I wanted after the hot bus ride, but we toasted nevertheless. She was well on her way to a drunken stupor already.

By now I was already pretty well pissed by having to bump into this time vampire everywhere I went. “Look, what is it you want from me? I never met you in my life, yet you’ve told me all of yours, and never once asked me whether I wanted to hear any of it!”

She put on the surprised look. “I’m... sorry if I’ve bothered you. It’s just that ... well... you know. You’re here with your Dad, and ... I’m sorry.” With a surprising bounce she lifted herself from the wicker chair and took a few quick steps, and disappeared into a battered old Renault posing as a taxicab. I was left with the tab, which I paid and then I went to study the Souk, steaming inside.

Maija didn’t appear to dinner, and I hoped she’d passed out in her room. I made my way to the Blue Room in time to get a nice table by the side of the bandstand. I moved the other seats to the nearby tables, rude as it looked, but I was damned if I was going to listen to her tonight. Jamal led his band up and he flashed me the secret cognoscenti hand flip to acknowledge me. I’d never heard *Round about Midnight* played with such intensity.

As the band wrapped it up, I heard someone drag a chair up to the table. “*Les Feuilles Mortes, s’il vous plait, Monsieur!*” Maija said as she left her excess pressure escape and she descended on the rickety chair.

“Fancy meeting you here”, I said.

She smiled at me, but her blood was so well infused with red wine she moved sideways like a snake charmer, sans the flute. I’ve always hated the look in the eyes of a drunk. It’s like they’re not all there; something is missing, but the part that remains is always the bad one.

“I’ve decided to come clean with you. But first, I need my song.” She asked for it in a loud voice, but Jamal and his cats were too busy with *So What*. She looked like she was ready to fight for the *Feuilles*, but decided otherwise. “I wanted to tell you why I’ve been running around after you. When I was home alone, and had no word from Michel, I gave birth to Mikko. He was the cutest kid ever. Big bright eyes, and a full head of black hair, just like Michel’s. I was so happy with him, even if it was tough alone.”

Great stuff, I thought, now I get to hear the rest. I had a long draught of my drink.

Maija was driving with half lights as it was, but now, when tears welled in her eyes and her voice began to shatter, she was a miserable sight. “So one night I came home by the liquor store, with just a bottle of red wine. I only had one glass, and I was okay. The bottle lasted me a week. The next one lasted me two days. I was sure I was handling it just fine, but the daycare people... bitches the lot of them. They reported me for being late to pick him up, and for picking him up just a teensy weensy bit tipsy one day. He was put up for adoption six months later. Now... he doesn’t want to see me, talk to me, meet me, nothing.”

I was considering my options. She was going to deliver the bottom line, that much was certain. But I wasn’t sure if I was up to hearing it. I had become the image of her lost life, something she had yearned for all these years in her library, stacking books someone else had read and feeling sorry for herself. Then I thought - if I hear it out now, I’ll be over it. I sat still.

She said, “All I ever wanted was a husband and my Mikko. That’s all. And a trip to the sun with them once a year. Was it such a freaking hard thing to ask for?” Then she realized the

band was in between songs. She lifted her right hand as if she listened with it. Then she let out, “*Les Feuilles Mortes, s’il vous plait, Monsieur!*”

Jamal displayed his intense displeasure with a frown but signaled the drummer a new beat. I have to admit, I’d never heard a reggae rendition of *Feuilles* before, but it worked damn well for me. The drummer would have been just fine in Bob Marley’s band, it was such a pulsating groove he created. The rest of the band fell in and started to play.

Maija couldn’t believe what she was hearing. It took a minute for the languid beat to work its way through her Cabernet-marinated brain, but as soon as she recognized her treasured song going through the Jamaican blender, she rose in fury. She gulped the rest of her wine at one go, then threw the glass to the stone floor. As the splinters flew, she yelled at the top of her lungs, “SAATANAN MICHEL!”

The band ceased to play. It was only a handful of Finns in the room, but it became evident to any person, no matter what language, what she thought of Michel. She turned like Sarah Bernhardt, collected her tattered pashmina and wobbled out of the room, leaving behind the most embarrassing silence I’ve yet endured. After a pause, the band picked up *Freddie Freeloader* again, as if to reset the whole situation.

In the morning I was making my way to the breakfast room, already scanning for her, when my Dad pulled me into a conference room by the elbow. All the Finns were there, and so were a Moroccan policeman and a smart dressed European guy. I wondered what had happened. “That’s the consul”, Dad said just before the guy spoke.

“It is my sad duty to tell you that one of the members of the latest Finnish tourist contingent is dead. This officer of the Moroccan police has explained to me that there is no foul play involved. Mrs Lankinen was found dead on top of one of the restaurants, where she had fallen off the roof terrace. Though it’s only a couple of meters to fall, she had broken the back of the skull. She died more or less instantly. The consulate is locating her next of kin and arranging for the body to be transported to Finland.” I thought she had gone to the reception to demand a bottle of red wine, and they got her one from the kitchen to keep her quiet. Then she made her way to the roof terrace. She probably sat on the ledge and toppled over.

I felt a swoon take over me. No matter how big a pain in the ass she’d been, she certainly didn’t deserve this. All she’d done was yearn for a normal life, and numbed her pain with wine; she wasn’t the first to go that route, but still – that wasn’t right. I sat down and heard the consul finish his speech, but I didn’t listen. No one was in the mood for tennis after such an incident. Mostly we just lounged out by the pool, or read books indoors, or talked to each other in hushed voices all day. The dinner was very different from the previous ones.

I remember just one thought from the entire day. I hoped the last thing Maija saw was the velvet black African sky, studded with diamonds. She had come to rest face up. Maybe she did get to see the stars as her life ebbed away from her.

In the evening when I sat at my table by the bandstand in the Blue Room, I applauded just like everyone as the band appeared. Jamal shielded his eyes from the spotlight as he looked for me. I had an empty chair by me. He made a quizzical face, and I understood he meant Maija. I put my face to my hands. The first chords of *Les Feuilles Mortes*, this time

played as if Joseph Kosma himself sat at the piano. Jamal first hummed the vocals, then started to sing.

I knew no French, but I remembered the Finnish words. I followed them in my mind, and by the time Jamal sang, *Et la mer efface sur le sable, Les pas des amants désunis*, a teardrop fell in my Cabernet.