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Priapus
A Don Juan Story

Chapter 1-3
Translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken

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Priapus

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*Translated from the Danish
by Martin Aitken*

Drowned

A hole. It starts and ends with a hole. In Priapus Cloakfire's case it was concealed just beneath his chest in the shape of a grinding vacancy that wouldn't go away. He'd tried most everything: pills, booze, cigarettes, cocaine – but that was all in the past; artificial stimuli had long since been shelved in favour of something more *natural*. Now he was trying to fill the hole with his genitals. What's to say? We all of us are lacking something in life, but Priapus' Lacking was, as we shall see, both greater and more desperate than the majority's. It was the hole that made him tick. The thing he at once shied away from and steered towards. The hole was everything. The hole was God.

We meet him the day before the night his wife drowns. It is still the afternoon. He has just arrived in the little Mexican beach resort that bears the name The Hidden Harbour, Puerto Escondido, a discreet isthmus on the Pacific coast, some 400 kilometres south of Acapulco. He is full of good intentions after having taken off to London to stay there indefinitely. He needed to collect himself, that was all, and now he has collected himself and come back. His wife doesn't know he is coming. It's supposed to be a surprise, a new beginning. He takes a taxi from the local airport, is driven home along the gravel roads with a certain tension in his stomach at almost being at the beach house again, almost being home with Faye. He doesn't even know if she'll be there.

He lets himself in, creeps upstairs, and after thirty-two hours of travelling, including awkward connections in a variety of international airports, he finds her on the first floor of the

house, sitting upright behind the desk of her study, her back to the door.

There she sits, completely naked, writing, the door to the terrace open, the view of the ocean in front of her: this immense drama, repeating itself over and over, waves rising up and collapsing, rising up and collapsing, untiring in their variation over this single theme. Priapus, who doesn't know if Faye is always naked when she writes, or whether she is merely naked on this specific occasion, stands transfixed in the doorway. He considers her figure in the backlight of the ocean's frenzy. There is something about the contrast to the roaring intensity of the ocean that gives him a feeling that in a short time everything will be over. It is a sound that brings everything to the brink, only to repeat itself a moment after and bring everything to the brink again – this sound of the Earth monumentally drawing breath, an antipole to the stillness of her concentrated figure. It is as though a nameless balance were upheld by these two forces. The one cannot be without the other: the figure and the ocean.

And he remains standing in the doorway for some time, transfixed mainly by the surprise of finding her sitting naked, writing, and then by his knowing that she is unaware of his returning home.

Thoughts cross inside him as he stands there watching his wife. He thinks that this is the first time he has surprised her in this way, and he realises at once that it is not. He recalls a darkened hotel corridor with patterned carpeting, the axis of his life, the place where everything tipped. And it occurs to him that this moment, too, is such an axis, and that everything can be tipped back, and that it is up to him to summon the strength to go for it.

He looks at his wife's body, at its curves in the backlight; at her shoulders, which are at once delicate and strong and ever so slightly in motion on account of her working at the keyboard in

front of her; at the straightness of her back in the chair; at her naked buttocks, which, because she is seated, are more rounded than usual; at her bare feet, entwined beneath the desk, like siblings at play.

And he thinks that there is nothing in this world more holy to him than this figure, and that he loves her more than anything else. She sees him as the man he wants to be. And inevitably he thinks about death, he thinks that for this reason he hopes he will die before her, it being too much to hope for someone like him that someone like her would be able to love him like this again.

The moment is there. With the action that lies before him, the relatively simple action of making love to his wife, he could replace the last four years with something pure and genuine, and the time they have shared will be different and right. That was how he had imagined it. He would position himself behind her and place his hands on her shoulders, and he would let them slide down over her breasts, take hold of her waist and draw her up towards him, lift her and carry her to the bed. Or he would simply remain standing, quietly, until the sense of no longer being alone made her turn round, and she would understand immediately why he was there.

It is not just that he has returned home from a long journey and, like any husband in the same situation, as likely as not wants to make love to his wife right away. There is, as we shall see, far more at stake than that, far more, perhaps, than he himself is aware of. The lovemaking he has imagined is in the nature of something greater; we're talking about a kind of self-sacrifice, a little death from which he will be resurrected and return a whole new man, at once defeated and victorious.

But because her nakedness so clearly is not intended for his benefit (and at this point he cannot help but be reminded of Chase Moreno, the agent, who although being resident on Manhattan easily could have made the flight down here in his

absence) he refrains from placing his hands on her shoulders. Instead, the thought catapults him into even darker thoughts that threaten to undermine his lovemaking plans.

Or maybe, he thinks, her nakedness is not for anyone's benefit at all, a thought he finds more intimidating all the while it remains so incomprehensible to him, and it makes him think that he does not know her, as it is never possible to know another person fully. Because he is standing in the doorway and suddenly realises that he has not the faintest idea of what is going on inside his wife's mind, a sickly, sallow, utterly paralysing feeling of jealousy is there, too.

He is stricken by panic. And so he stands, in the crossfire of a thousand thoughts, and then with barely audible footsteps he inches backwards and leaves his post in the doorway and continues moving backwards until he is able to turn around unseen and sneak further away down the stairs, just at the moment his wife turns and looks towards the empty doorway.

It is not a day for miracles. Priapus sneaks down the stairs and does not see Faye's eyes as they squint at the doorway. The light catches her gaze in such a way that one senses a fluttering uncertainty, but also something else, a knowing of some sort.

Crumbling inside, Priapus picks the car keys out of the decorated bowl on the chest of drawers downstairs, allowing them to glide silently along its edge. At the same time, Faye Mitchell turns back round upstairs and continues her writing, without sign of the impression made on her by the empty doorway. They are each in their own world, he in that of his fantasies, she in the story she is making up. They do not meet.



He starts the car, a two-tone Dodge Pickup that has been standing in the sun all day and which therefore has a strangely stagnant, warm smell, a smell of paralysis and death, a smell

filled with omens. But Priapus is too emotional to notice, he turns on the air condition and speeds away so the sand beneath the wheels is churned up, leaving two small, red heaps next to the house. Thus he drives around for hours with so many thoughts milling in his head they transform into a humming minus.

He becomes a part of the sliding rhythm of the town. He sees the bodies moving through the streets, warm and composed. On the one side is the mainland, where small, rusting shacks hug the hillside, and on the other are the ocean and the waves. He follows Highway 200 that runs along the coast high up on the hillside; he follows El Adoquin and drives further still, up to the market building in the finely meshed grid of streets with all its small traders, the stores with their Aztec chocolate, colourful swimsuits, spades and sandals of plastic. He drives back towards Zicatela Beach, where a dribble of people traipse down to the ocean and back in sloppy flip-flops, straw mats like enormous enchiladas under their slack arms. Dogs run about nosing in garbage, Bob Marley emanates from slow cafés, always Bob Marley, and two girls come walking along, each with an ice-cream; long, brown limbs flapping as they go, like swaying reeds with nothing to do but succumb to the will of the wind, an aimless swinging back and forth, comely, tanned pendulums sending him into a trance.

If he gives Faye a thought at all, cruising around behind the rolled-up windows of the car, he does so frostily and with a sense of justice. He drives around until darkness falls on the town. At some point he parks down at Zicatela Beach and finds his way into *El Burro Borracho*, not because he wants to drink: he goes in for the drinking of the others; surrounded by people intoxicated, it is as though his actions are written in pencil, not in ink. The light of green, orange, yellow and red lanterns twines around the palm trees and explodes into the night above the bodies that are so very friable and sluggish and impassive

from the heat, for such is the way of bodies, and in that they cannot be prevented, and Priapus floats gently away to be incorporated in the hazy senses of those around him.

The body he erased himself in later that same evening belonged to an ordinary Californian girl with an unusual name. Cordelia or Clarabell – or was it Beatrice? The name drowns in an ocean of girls' names. Priapus has never felt inclined to draw up a list, for only at a late stage did he realise that there *was* a list and that it was long. And although such a list would instil in him a secret sense of pride, if only he should take it as an affirmation, he would feel ashamed on account of its sheer abnormality, its scorn of his love for Faye, the possibility of it, the hope of it. In spite of the tantalisingly conceivable nature of such a list, it had to be dismissed and we must make do with simply noting that the girl sitting opposite Priapus at *El Burro Borracho* is from California and that as the evening progresses she becomes more and more intoxicated by mescal. Priapus, on the other hand, drinks Lipton.

When the moment arises at which the girl seems receptive towards what they both know will happen, he ambles back with her to a youth hostel of sorts, *Papaya Beach* or *Coconut Ocean* – a name pairing fruit with some watery element – and though Priapus is sober, at least in the classical sense, his mental field of vision is akin to squinting through a very long and narrow tube.

The room in which the girl is staying is no more than three or four square metres in area, just big enough for there to be a bed, a backpack and a damp, malodorous swimsuit drying on the bedpost. The ventilation does not work, there is no window, and everything is sweating, not just the Californian and Priapus, who without further ado pushes her down onto the bed and pulls off her panties, but also the walls are sweating, and the swaying swimsuit on the bedpost, and the bed beneath them. This had not been a part of his plans. For a moment the

girl seems to have passed out from drink, or else she is simply not moving underneath him. He is almost finished when the girl suddenly comes alive and throws up some of what she has drunk. An acidic stench of puke rises in the room, mingling with the mouldy mattress and the damp swimsuit. She dries her mouth with the pillow and mumbles something about some rubbers, at least that's what it sounds like beneath him in the dark. She has no proper control of her mouth. Out of one corner, a dribble of saliva shines in the dark of night.

Fuck rubbers, says Priapus, I'm not going to get you pregnant. A dull thought penetrates the haze of his consciousness: *What if I catch something?*

Well, if I die, I die, he thinks, and there is at once a metallic taste of death in his mouth. He withdraws at the last moment, squirts his sperm on her T-shirt, in the same way one would pee in a hole. Immediately, he flicks the sperm that runs down his own fingers off onto the twisted, stupefied face beneath him. It is a ritual, the essence of his disdain for the act itself, for the sperm, his sperm, which she has just stolen from him with her sex.

Then he gets up and goes to wash his member in the sink. A rusty sound comes from the tap. He twists it this way and that, but no water comes. He turns round and takes the swimsuit that is hanging from the bedpost. The girl is lying on the bed, moaning slightly. Then Priapus lowers his head and allows a mouthful of spit to fall onto his member. He wipes it with the swimsuit, which he then dumps on the floor. Without a word, he leaves the girl on the mouldy mattress and drives back on the dark, sandy road, drives home along the coast.

The houses become fewer and fewer. This late evening, the road seems endless, now that he suddenly finds himself longing to come home to Faye, longing to be loved and considered normal.

Outside is the thundering ocean, but he does not hear it. The sound of the ocean is a foaming, triumphant sound, because we can figure out that it must be during these very seconds that his wife is on her way out into the waves. A fateful decision insofar as the waves along this particular stretch of coast are numbered among the most dangerous. But Priapus does not hear the ocean, he hears only the sound of his own blood's dim accusations, its embarrassment, its deep, dire shame.

Nevertheless, he has found a form of redemption. For a short moment, he has been relieved of the images and the despair that drove him to cheat on his wife in a squalid youth hostel, but the images of despair have merely been replaced by others of his own creation and which now propel him home. For everything he despises in humanity, he unremittingly finds in his own wake.

He drives until he reaches their house, white, two storeys, modestly illuminated on the dark beach and edged by cactus, aloe vera and palms. The screen door is banging in the wind; the inner door is open, too. There is light in the house, but there is no Faye.

He has not been through the entire house, and neither does he need to. Instinctively, he turns back and runs down to the ocean with panic pumping beneath his temples. In the moonlight he can see an outline of palms, rocks, distant houses. Everything spins together in one dizzying, extended present. The contours of everything become fluid, but the foam of the waves is clearly visible as he searches for Faye in the night, and there, out there, he thinks he sees a black dot being thrown about among foaming horizontals.

In a moment, everything will tip. He shouts something at the dot; for some reason, he is angry. He hurls himself into the ocean; he is a good swimmer, but against the Pacific Ocean's colossal tunnel of current it means nothing. The best he can do

is nothing, for when the towering waves have come all the way from Australia it is no use fighting them. Yet Priapus fights like an unruly merman raging against his own element. He can no longer see the dot, but collides miraculously with a human body in the ocean (Faye!) and holds her tight, as though his own existence depended on it; he holds her tight in a state of wild, frenzied lunacy, but she slips from his grasp, pulled away by a force so much greater than his own – and is gone.

He thrashes and thrashes in the waves, is cast around and around in an impotent rage, but Faye's body has long since been taken by the trackless deep when finally he gives up. His love is gone. She is lost to the ocean.

A couple of points concerning the potential weakness of spermatozoa

So much for Faye's drowning. Priapus had arrived too late on account of his particular faculty: getting women to seduce him. Over and over. And over and over and over again. It was a talent, a gift, even, which – given the right circumstances – might easily arouse envy in many a reader's armchair. But for Priapus himself it was not so much a gift as a curse, something from which he would never escape, no matter how much he wanted to.

Ordinarily, one would seek explanations in childhood, and we shall not in this context shy from doing what may be ordinary. The ordinary is not to be underestimated. The ordinary erected the very columns of civilisation, papered its walls, upholstered its armchairs and got the fire going in the grate. It has accorded us a comfortable base from which to investigate the extraordinary. So we dig, as convention prescribes, we hark back to Priapus' childhood in order to see if he fell from his potty or got a rusk stuck in his throat, something – anything – that might explain and illuminate this extraordinary case.

Priapus was the youngest of three. He grew up with his family in Normal, Illinois, a place populated by middle-class provincials, in a neighbourhood whose inhabitants wanted not to be middle-class provincials but artists, hippies, ecologists, clergymen, a fact that explains the unusual name: Priapus. What's to say? It was the Seventies. People did funny things even in Normal, and after Betsy and Bob, his parents wanted to experiment. It was enough to make anyone scream, which is just what Priapus did: he screamed. He screamed and cried,

punched and kicked, as though right from the start he were trying to break out of his own skin. He screamed for his mother to hold him, and when she held him he screamed for her to stop. He bit her arms with his sharp, irregular little teeth until she began to bleed. What else? He hit his head against the wall, he fell out of trees, he broke arms, legs, fingers. Always breaking something, smashing things, bawling out, swearing and cursing. Nowadays there are acronyms for that kind of behaviour, but back then his parents (Christian, though willing to experiment) put him in a school that practised a radical form of educational theory, a Waldorf school an hour and a half's drive from the city (which meant he was the only child there from Normal).

At the school they made their own schoolbooks, and together with the other children he learned that nature is alive in man, and that everything influences everything else. The family ate vegetables that had been grown in accordance with the movements of the planets. His mother was a nurse, and at Christmas they all sat in the kitchen and made angels they fashioned out of clay from big bags, baked them in the oven and then painted them sky-blue. His father drank and took the name of God in vain while the children were listening, but on Sundays the whole family went to church wearing starched shirts and suitably pious faces.

They were a family of contradictions and as such there was nothing in his childhood that stuck out from so many other families. In fact, there was nothing at all that might explain why Priapus became Priapus. Perhaps, then, the explanation is the simple one, that his father only had poor sperm left when it got to be his turn. The best batches had gone to his older siblings, two by any accounts impressive children with the robustness of boy scouts and mops of thick, red hair, and when Priapus Cloakfire's father finally got round to the making of Priapus, his body was pooped, rendering him unable to produce anything

more than a teaspoonful of morally enfeebled spermatozoa. Everything has its own explanation, and in the case of Priapus it was his father's substandard sperm.

As for his outward appearance, there were both pluses and minuses. His build was harmonious, noble even, his hair longish, fleece-like and wavy like an angel's. The nose was a little too big, and the various elements of his face were proportionately in conflict. The lips were attractive enough: at once fine and full, but the teeth were askew and discoloured, despite them being false. In the constant irascibility of his childhood he had first knocked out his milk teeth and later his permanent teeth, and the dentist, Mia's father, Dr. Nussbaum, who lived further up the street, had been of the opinion that a pair of classical, healthy-looking teeth would not be suited to the boy. Thus, he had made a couple of squint, slightly discoloured pivot teeth to which Priapus still was attached and which once in a while were put on display amid a wide grin not unlike that of a chimpanzee.

Then there was the hat, which he had bought one time during a photo shoot on a beach in Malaga, a crocheted, yellow hat with a black Egyptian border. It made him look like a clown or an artist – or at least a person from whom one might expect the unexpected. It said: Badabim-badaboom, here is someone who does not take himself that seriously. It was a hat that held the world in aesthetic arrest.

The feet were his father's. In that feeble teaspoonful had been the germ of his magnificent foundation – credit where it's due – and Priapus had been the only one of the three children who got to walk about on his father's feet. Like his father's, they were an unusually handsome pair – and certainly a manifestation of God's great sense of irony that his most handsome feature also was the one that remained most concealed. Looking at Priapus's feet, one could only think with a sense of relief that this was truly how feet should be. Such

must have been God's original intention with this otherwise so hopelessly timorous part of the body. These were feet so handsome that the sight of them made one forget that their function was merely to keep the body in contact with the ground. Indeed, so proud had his father been of his own feet that on occasions of family gatherings and other social events he often had the nerve to whip off his shoes and socks and point down at them and exclaim: Look! Look what God can do!

Finally, there was the matter of his – what are we to call it? – *Priapatic emblem*? We cannot escape its mention. His parents' unusual choice of Christian name had the unfortunate effect of engendering a certain level of expectation to which the more prosaic names of his siblings Betsy and Bob did not give occasion. But alas, the emblem was not at all of the magnitude some Antique Roman murals, or for that matter Antique Grecian bronzes might have us believe. To put it bluntly, there was an *anatomical discrepancy* between name and flesh. Which is all there is to say about the matter.

Despite the opposition of nature, however, there was something rather striking and inexplicably attractive about him, something charming and magnetic. Something that made one want to trust him, made one wish things to work out for him, and one forgave him everything, his fiery temper, his indecisiveness, his lack of fortitude. His eyes in particular had something. They were silent like those of a child peering in at its parents' bedroom window and seeing things it should not. These were eyes that *truly saw*. These were eyes full of the very thing one wished for the most – melancholy, vitality, longing, adventure – whatever. Their dark brown surfaces were like a conjurer's hat from which the white rabbits of faith, hope and love could be made to emerge.



Some may contend that our assertion as to substandard spermatozoa is rather unfair. That the father's sperm cannot in such a way be held responsible for the misdeeds of the son. That what the son makes of the father's sperm is the son's matter, not the father's. Only to a certain extent can the father explain the son. Man, they might say, is not of nature alone like the animals, but also of something greater: man is of *spirit*. They might say (as they waft the smoke of their pipe tobacco away from their faces and tighten the cords of their smoking jackets), that in contrast to the animals, man has a *choice*, and from their bookshelves they will bring out dog-eared works with titles in French in order to check up on a thought or a word as they stroke their greying whiskers and mutter triumphantly to themselves. They will speak of *complexity* and *free will*, and their contentions will find corroboration in theories written down by full-bearded peers in similarly comfortable smoking-jacket situations. Sipping their cognacs and pulling at their pipes, they will hold forth on human existence by the light of the crackling flames in the fireplace, and they will carefully study the sperm; they will transfer Priapus Cloakfire's father's pathetic little teaspoonful to Petri dishes and consider it through a microscope, and they will say that they find nothing in that dish to indicate that from that splodge a formidable individual could not arise, an astronaut, a president, a hero among ordinary folk – and they would be right.

So perhaps it simply was his *name*, Priapus Cloakfire, which accorded his life such mythological weight. Perhaps it is the case that fate maps out a pathway for us, which during the course of our lives we are intended to pursue and make our own. Perhaps our free will resides in our making it our own. And perhaps Priapus's own pathway departed from the beaten track and led off into the peripheral areas of existence, for such pathways do indeed exist, no less vital for the whole than those of the astronaut and the president (and neither are they without

their pleasures). For who can honestly say that there is no use for those who seduce, as long as there are those willing to be seduced? Who can claim not to be titillated just a mite – or at least be amused and entertained – by such drama? Who can deny that, in spite of it all, a certain beauty resides in the fact that the world in this way is made greater when masks fall, minds accede, and the veil of illusion is drawn aside?

Perhaps this is sufficient: to be and incarnate this *homo horizontalis*. There must be someone to explore the peripheries of being human in order for us to understand what it is that makes us as we are. In such a perspective, Priapus is a kind of hero. India (because of technological deficiencies) has its *untouchables*; they are sent down drains to clean the sewers, and we should be thankful that there are those among us who are willing to get their hands dirty. Heroes come in all sizes, and some of them are there to show us the way down through the funnel into Hell so that nothing may remain unfamiliar to our eye. Everything exists.

From this angle, even seducers such as Priapus have their place in the greater scheme of things, and we forgive them readily for the pathway fate has mapped out for them. Especially when they happen to be as charming as Priapus. And for making his pathway his own, albeit with such indecisive feet, for erroneously and misguidedly simply aspiring to be *good*, and subsequently failing, we forgive him all the more.

And let us on that note roll out the red carpet of our tale before the handsome feet from Normal, Illinois ...

“Expect a Miracle”

Faye was gone, and there was no longer anyone to see Priapus as the man he wanted to be. He ran through the dark along the foaming breakers in the hope of finding her. She could be washed up further ahead, she could be lying motionless and stiff like a doll somewhere, something inside her might have kicked in to make her cough up the ocean again, litres of salt water, a coughing cadaver already weary of death, returning to life. He ran up and down the beach, his cries were cast against the rocks and echoed back. They made cockerels crow and dogs bark, but these were only sounds that told him he was alone; sounds that made him sink down into the sand, weeping, barking like a sea lion.

It was in this state that the tourist police caught Priapus in the beam of their pickup during their nightly patrol along the Zicatela Beach. He didn't notice the light when it hit him, and he heard neither the crowing of the cockerels nor the shouts of the police officers as they jumped down off the back of the pickup and ran through the sand towards him, pistols drawn, truncheons slapping their sides.

“Estas borracho? Has tomado?” the shadows cried. Six stocky silhouettes against the beam of the headlamps, and Priapus didn't know what to do but to wave them away and point out to sea.

Then there were voices speaking first Spanish, then English at a variety of volumes and in different pitches, as though the voices were a bunch of keys each trying in its own way to coax its way into the lock and gain access to the chaos inside him. They drove him along uneven, sandy roads through the darkness to the police station. They wrapped him in blankets,

they served him coffee, they spoke to him, and their faces were friendly and foreign.

When they saw how come apart he was, they told him they would inform the father and the sister themselves, but he said no. That was the only thing he said: *No*. The police officers lived at the station. Their beds were unmade, there were large stains of damp on the walls, and the coffee he was given was in a chipped mug. It stood getting cold on the table whilst the officer whose English was best made calls. Priapus sat on the chair and said no, the pauses grew longer between every word. They got hold of Faye's father. The cushion of the chair on which he was seated was made of plastic; it was torn, the foam rubber inside was wet and a puddle had formed beneath him. Everything was wet, and he could no longer cry, but simply sat with his face in his hands, saying *no* and *no* and *no*.

"Como se dice 'ahogarse' en ingles?" the policeman asked, his hand over the receiver, the question addressed to no-one in particular. Priapus got to his feet and took the phone. "Hello?" Faye's father, the astronaut. It was the middle of the night on Long Island and the old man sounded confused. Faye was the daughter he understood best. Their brains shared the same frequency (his other daughter was a designer of hats). "It wasn't my fault," said Priapus. He was weeping and shaking. "It wasn't my fault." He said it twice more before saying: "I did my best."

"Please don't hate me," he begged the silence at the other end of the receiver. "Please say something." But the father at the other end said nothing.



When he awoke, the sun had not yet risen. In the distance, one could hear the dogs of the beach barking, and the sound of the ocean was a hypnotic whisper. Priapus got up and put on his clothes to go out.

He walked barefoot in the cool morning air. There was a wind from the southwest and the sea fog rolled in to envelop him, drying his lips with its salty taste. He walked first south towards La Punta. He followed the wind. If she had been washed ashore she would wind up there, embraced by the arms of rock that reached far out into the waves. He searched in the milk-white fog, he searched among the rocks that rose up out of the fog like prehistoric islands, but he found nothing. He turned back and walked north towards the lighthouse that stood on a rocky outcrop a few kilometres down towards the other end of the bay. He screwed his eyes together. There were tears, not because of Faye, but because the salt air stung in his eyes. He walked on the flat where the ocean rolled in and rolled back again, a band maybe twenty metres wide. He walked slowly, turning around once in a while to make sure she wasn't washed up with the lapping waves as the ocean breathed in and out.

The sun was a dim, moon-like disc. Everything was white. A figure came out of the fog. It was swinging something in front of it, and at first he thought it was a metal detector, that the person was looking for lost gold, but then he saw it was a blind person, and that the stick was his snail's horn. Priapus was walking in the blind man's way. He stepped aside so they wouldn't collide. As the blind man passed he stopped and looked in Priapus's direction, a diffuse, white gaze. "Stop calling like that. She's not coming back." The voice sounded like the air. "I didn't realise you could see me," said Priapus cautiously and pushed away the waxy hair from his face so as to be better able to see. "I can hear you," called the man and stared right at him with his empty eyes. "But I didn't say anything," Priapus yelled. They had to yell to be heard above the ocean. "It's like I say: she's not coming back." The blind man turned and walked away and became a white shadow in the fog. Priapus ran after him, but he was gone and there was nothing to see.

When he got back to the beach house, one of the policemen from the station was standing waiting at his door with his hat under his arm. It was the officer from the evening before, the one whose English was best. In the dark of night, Priapus hadn't really seen him properly, but in the light of late morning he saw that the man's smooth pate shone like a polished brass knob. The hair he had left at the back of his neck and at the sides was kept long enough to be drawn around his head in a neat bob. In daylight, the policeman's appearance seemed surprisingly clown-like in respect of Priapus's recollection of the man who had given him coffee, blankets and a telephone the previous night. His uniform looked like something he had found in a dressing-up case: threadbare jacket, shorts, socks, lace-ups and a pair of cheap, utterly ridiculous plastic sunglasses in the same dark blue shade as his uniform.

"I am sorry, Señor Cloakfire. I will be short." In his hand were some papers requiring Priapus's signature, papers confirming the death of Faye Mitchell. "I put the time for midnight," said the policeman. "We find you at one, yes?"

"That's too early," Priapus objected.

The policeman peered over the top of his sunglasses and clicked his ballpoint pen into position. "Yes? You think it is better I write eleven on the twenty-eight?"

"No, certainly not," said Priapus. "It's too early," he repeated. "Perhaps ... she may not be dead. Perhaps you might ..." And here he was unable to explain to the policeman what it was he perhaps might, because now the policeman had pushed his plastic sunglasses onto the top of his bald head and was staring at Priapus with the round eyes of a child, completely at a loss. The sun had dispersed the fog.

The policeman said that in that case the twenty-ninth was a good date to put.

"Why?" asked Priapus.

The little man before him managed to explain that the twenty-ninth was a leap day, a day inserted 'by human hand' between all the others to make the calendar fit, and as such it did not exist – not from God's point of view. "Maybe you can think of it like a this," said the policeman.

"Why should I want to do that?" Priapus asked.

"It help to think it is the dead still here. With the living. This is how Mexican people think. But I need you to sign, plis." The little man held out the ballpoint pen. It was an imperative gesture.

"But what if she's *not dead*?" Priapus persisted.

The policeman began to list the beaches of the area, pointing wildly in different directions. "We look a Zicatella," he said and gave Priapus a heartfelt look. "We look a Puerto Angelita and a Carizalilla. We also even look a Playa Bacocho. We look a elsewhere. Sorry, Señor Cloakfire." As he turned and gesticulated in the direction of the various beaches, he cast his long, clownish hair to the four points of the globe. "It is a sad," he said, shaking his head in sorrow. "It is a so sad."

"But I can't sign this," Priapus protested, his desperation increasing. "There's no ...". He couldn't say the word: *body*. Instead, he said: "You haven't found her yet."

The policeman shook his head in regret. "Yes, no – what do you say? Dead body? No dead body, sorry. Each year: five." He held up five brown fingers for Priapus to count, though it was unclear whether he meant that five were never found or only one in five. "Better we never find. Sometimes we find, and no good. No good, Señor Cloakfire. Better we not find." He turned in the direction of the ocean and a look of poetic sadness came over him. "The sea, it is a dangerous. A very dangerous." He shook his head once more and was then at once matter-of-fact, pushing his handful of papers at Priapus and indicating the dotted line with the manicured nail of an index finger. "Sign a here, plis."

Priapus reluctantly accepted the pen. “But there is no ... body?”

The policeman closed his eyes and waved a dismissive hand. “Yes, this is a normal,” he said. “It is a totally crazy this point, but it is a normal a Zicatela. Better we never find. Here, plis.” He pointed again, and Priapus signed for the death of his wife.

The following day, Priapus flew to Arizona. He had heard of a place hidden among the mountains of the Sonora Desert, far from the beaten track of temptation, a clinic devoted to discretely helping people like him to take control of their passions. It was a detox clinic for seducers, but also for drunks, gamblers, binge eaters, drug addicts, pill poppers and run-of-the-mill depressives – a place that had succeeded, so the story went, in turning even rock stars and Hollywood actors into good people. Now he was going to take control of his libido. The things he had done over the years were not normal. Priapus wanted to be normal.

He climbed into a taxi at Tucson’s airport, and the driver agreed to the long trip. When Priapus told him where he was going, the driver gave him a look without saying anything. “Are you sure?” he asked after a moment, like he was the ferryman and Priapus had asked to be taken to the realm of death itself. “Yes,” Priapus replied gravely. “In that case it’ll be an extra fifty dollars,” said the driver. Priapus looked at him. “Because I’m coming back,” said the ferryman.

Then they set off. They drove through red, sandy landscapes that became increasingly deserted, punctuated by occasional surreal green lawns where old people in cotton caps and checked stockings played golf. They drove along endless, straight roads with yellow stripes down the middle, seeing nothing but a house here and there with a pickup in the driveway, cactuses out front and a faded flag in the window.

The clinic was situated on a small hill, hidden away behind a row of trees, and if the driver hadn't slowed down and turned off onto the narrow, unmade road, Priapus would never have noticed there was a building in there. At the entrance they passed a sign made of dark brown wood that filled Priapus with a kind of hope. Spelled out in white, rodeo-like block letters were the words: EXPECT A MIRACLE.

Extract, pages 8-30

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