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Written by David Quantick

Published by Unbound

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The Mule

David Quantick

unbound

This edition first published in 2016

Unbound
6th Floor, Mutual House, 70 Conduit Street, London w1s 2gf
www.unbound.co.uk

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Typeset by PDQ

Art direction by Mecob

Jacket Illustration by Moose Allain

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78352-100-5 (trade hbk)
ISBN 978-1-78352-144-9 (ebook)
ISBN 978-1-78352-143-2 (limited edition)

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK)

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The Mule

The Mule

by David Quantick

PART ONE

It does not seem to me a common thing for a mere 'text' to challenge, still less convert, anyone.

J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony*

CHAPTER ONE

I was in a bar. It doesn't matter where. It's not relevant to the story. (If there's one thing I've learned in my job, it's that things that aren't relevant to the story have to go.) The bar was pretty quiet, which suited me because I don't like to go to bars that play loud music, where everyone's shouting to get a drink and it's so dark you can't see the prices of drinks. Funny – loud and dark always go together with bars. You never see a loud, brightly lit bar, do you? It's like not content with numbing our senses with booze, the bars want us deaf and blind as well.

Anyway, this bar was pretty much perfect so far as I was concerned. There was no music at all, the lights were OK – I could see the drinks were a reasonable price for the middle of town – and there were no hen parties or big groups of people making their own racket.

I signalled to the barman, who had his name on a badge on his shirt. 'Good evening, Don,' I said, smiling, 'I'd like a martini, please. Vodka, and—' But he'd already turned away to make it. I think he didn't like me saying his name. If I had a job where I had to wear my name on a badge and people said my name, I wouldn't have a problem. If people said, 'Excuse me, Jacky, could you look at these pages before the weekend?'

or 'Hey, Jacky, this is more of a technical pamphlet but we figure you can handle it,' I wouldn't mind at all. Of course I'd have to pick a version of my name that I felt comfortable with, which I admit would probably not be Jacky. Jacky is what my mother called me and I have never liked it. I would much rather be a Jack or even a J – 'Hey J!' – but there we go. Whenever I say to people, 'My name's Jack,' they always look at me as if to say, 'Really?' and before you know it they're calling me Jacky. If they call me anything at all, that is. I have never had any luck with getting people to call me J.

All these thoughts were going through my mind as I waited for my martini. The barman didn't seem to be in any hurry to make it and I was wondering if I should call him over using his name – 'Hey, Don! Where's that martini?' – or just do what I always do, which is sort of mumble 'Excuse me …' and hope he hears me, when a girl sat down next to me at the bar. Dressed in black, with smoky grey-blue eyes and dark hair cut in a fringe that gathered around her cheekbones, she stood out from the bar's other patrons like – well, I'm not one for fancy similes, but like a pearl in an ashtray. She looked at me, in that way where you're not sure whether someone is looking at you with some kind of interest in their eyes, or maybe you just caught their eye because of an unusual or deformed thing about you. I'm not saying I'm deformed or even unusual, by the way, I look pretty ordinary. My eyes are kind of big, though. At school, some kids called me 'Bug Eyes', until my mother went in and told the teachers that her Jacky was sensitive about his eyes. All this did was make the teachers start calling me Jacky. I was on the verge of persuading people that I was really called 'Jay', but after my mother went into the school one parents' evening, it was goodbye J, hello Jacky.

I averted my eyes – not so bug-like nowadays – from the girl, just in case I was staring back at her, and lifted my hand

to wave at the barman. But I could still see the girl out the corner of my eye and I felt self-conscious – who would she think I was, waving at barmen like a rock star or something? – and tried to turn the wave into a different gesture, as if I were just about to scratch my nose. But as my arm was about eight inches above my head, I had to turn the wave into a stretch.

It must have looked odd, because the girl said, 'Are you having some sort of cramp?' She had a nice voice.

I'm sorry if that's not very evocative and I should have said, 'She had a voice like hot cream,' or something but I don't care for over-cooked phrases (they're the bane of my professional life), and besides, she did have a nice voice. I put my arm down slowly in a deliberate way as if I did have a cramp, and said, 'Yes.'

'Do you often suffer from cramp in your arm?' said the girl. She was lighting a cigarette, which I didn't think was legal in bars. 'Because if you do maybe it's your circulation.'

'No, my circulation is fine,' I said, wondering if perhaps she was a nurse. 'I jog sometimes and,' I added, but not in a pointed manner, so she wouldn't dislike me, 'I don't smoke.'

'Oh, does this bother you?' said the girl, as the barman appeared and, to my amazement, placed an ashtray on the bar in front of her. 'I'm sorry. They let me smoke in here when it's quiet.'

I was about to say that it wasn't quiet when she put the cigarette out in the ashtray. 'I'm being inconsiderate,' she said. 'I'm sorry. And you don't have a drink.'

I didn't know what to say to this. She seemed to be awfully popular in this bar, was my first thought. My second was perhaps she was a hooker. I know that's a word you tend to see more in print than in real life, but it's the word that came to my mind first. But she seemed too pleasant to be a hooker, and anyway I could hardly ask her outright, 'Are you

a hooker?' in case she picked up her bag and walked out. Or worse, picked up her bag and said, 'Let's go, stud.'

It didn't matter that I had no reply, anyway, because she sat up and shouted, 'Hey you! Dan! This man doesn't have a drink!'

The barman came straight over and – glaring at me like I'd done a bad thing by actually coming into his bar and actually ordering a drink – said, 'I forgot what he asked for. I was coming back anyway.'

'Of course you were,' said the girl. 'You wanted another look down my blouse. What do you want?' she was asking me now. I repeated my original order, this time in full, and she said, 'The same for me, only with gin. And hurry up, Dan, we've been waiting.'

I said thanks to her, although I knew I could never come into this bar again. Dan would blank me for ever, or spit in my drink. Or maybe he'd just bar me. But when the drinks came (I checked mine for flecks of anything) I just clinked glasses and said, 'Bottoms up.'

Which she seemed to find very funny. '"Bottoms up",' she repeated. 'I haven't heard anyone say that for years.' She smiled.

She had a really beautiful smile, classy and a little bit melancholy as if she were a photo model advertising something sophisticated, like a perfume called Regrets. Excuse me. I should have just said, 'She had a nice smile.'

'Bottoms up,' she said, and toasted me.

By now, I was a little confused. I'm not an unattractive man – that is to say, I'm not ugly – but I was unused to this kind of attention from a woman, especially one with a smile like this girl's. I didn't think she was a hooker, partly because she looked so nice, and partly because I thought I'd read that hookers don't buy their own drinks, let alone those of their

tricks, and I couldn't for the life of me work out why she was talking to me. Maybe she was drunk, or high on drugs. Then again, she wasn't slurring and her attractive grey-blue eyes weren't dilating.

Maybe, I concluded, she just likes you. Not enough for sex, or to get married, but she likes you. So I smiled back and said, 'Might I ask your name, if that's not being too rude?' This was perhaps a little formal, I realise, but I was being rational as well as polite. I knew nobody could be offended by being asked their own name, because everyone has a name and they should be used to being asked it. And the 'might I' and the 'not being too rude' were there giving her the option of saying, 'Actually, I have a kind of stupid name so please call me by my second name which is Perkiss,' or – as I was hoping – 'Don't be silly! My name is Tammy. Here's my card, look, with my number on it. In fact, forget the card – just come home with me now.' And she would leave money for the drinks, and we'd go, me shrugging at Dan as if to say, 'Well, the best man won.'

'What's your name first?' she said, a little coolly. I thought about this and decided it wasn't rude because after all I was a strange man in a bar and I could be anyone. And she had bought me a drink, so who was I to assume she was being rude?

'Jack—' I began, and stopped right there. 'Jack,' I said again, more confidently.

'Hello, Jack,' she said. 'Nice to meet you.' She gave me a slightly cock-eyed look, as if she didn't believe me.

'It really is,' I said. 'I guess some people just don't look like their own names.'

She gave me the look again and I thought that perhaps she had been drinking earlier, or maybe her martini had hit her harder than she'd expected. I sipped my drink. It certainly was strong.

'So …' I began, and stopped before I could ask my next question. I thought quickly and realised that if she didn't want to tell me her name, she probably wouldn't want to talk about her job, or her life or her romantic status or anything personal. This left me with zero questions to ask her, so I decided to talk about myself instead. I know this is a no-no in books of dating and the like, but she wasn't saying anything so I thought maybe I could draw her out a little.

'What is it you do for a living, Jack?' said the girl.

I was amazed. This was exactly the thing I was about to reveal next. 'Are you a magician?' I said, making my voice sound jokey. 'That was exactly what I was about to tell you.'

'I'm not a magician,' she said. 'I have not been granted that particular skill. More's the pity.' Now she sounded a little sad, as though she would have really wanted to have been a magician.

I remember as a child reading that only men can become magicians and thinking that this was unfair, although I believe times have changed, perhaps because of those hugely popular books that feature both girl and boy wizards. I said none of this, because it might have made her angry, or bored, or both.

'Would you care to guess?' I said.

'Not particularly,' she said. 'I mean, I want to know and you can tell me. There's no need to introduce a vein of uncertainty, I think.'

I didn't understand what she meant, and now I think she was trying to say something about a 'Venn diagram of uncertainty', but had abandoned the thought as too complicated. Plus she had a good point. Why should I conceal the information I had when all she wanted was to know it?

'I'm a translator,' I said.

She just looked at me.

'A translator is a guy who—' I began.

'I know what a translator is,' she said. 'Do you think I'm an idiot?'

You see? People just think I'm obnoxious when I'm trying to be nice. I guess if I'd thought faster, I'd have realised that of course a girl like this would know what a translator was. But instead, because she didn't say anything, I assumed she didn't know, and now here she was, thinking that I thought she was stupid.

'I don't think you're an idiot,' I said, 'I just …' And I tailed off, which probably to her meant I was silently adding, 'Actually, I do think you're an idiot.' But she looked angry now. I was kind of angry too. I mean, I was just trying to be helpful.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I was just taken aback.'

I didn't know what to say. But what I was thinking was, All right, you snap at me and then apologise and that's fine, but how would you like it if I called you a great big horse and then said sorry? Not that she was a great big horse, and that's not an expression I would ever use, but you see my point. So I said, 'Why would you be taken aback?'

'Because – no, this is crazy.'

When she said that, she did something that only attractive women do, where she turned her head away as she was talking, as if she were addressing her words to someone on the next bar stool. You never see men do that, or old ladies, or anyone who doesn't look good in profile. Also it's a good way of making sure people are listening. Try it. Turn away from someone when you're talking and nine times out of ten they'll lean in to hear what you're saying.

'What's wrong?' I said.

'Nothing's wrong,' she said, but this time even as she said it I knew she was going to apologise again. It's called 'emotional turmoil'. That's an expression I come across a lot in my work. The girl was thinking. She was doing it with her eyes, looking

at me, and at the bottles behind the bar, and at the counter, as though she were taking tiny photographs with her eyes. She finally stopped scanning the bar and said, 'Can you keep a secret?'

'Of course,' I said. In actual fact, I had no idea if I could keep a secret. Nobody tells me any secrets. Maybe they just figure I can't keep secrets. Sometimes I try to imagine a secret and work out how long I could keep it. But it's like pretending you're underwater and you have to hold your breath; after a while your brain realises you're not underwater and it tells you to stop being a dummy and breathe in. My brain says, you have no secrets, and anyway who are you going to tell? Your mother?

While I was thinking this – and it takes a lot longer to write it down than to think it – the girl was fishing through her bag. I don't know if you've ever noticed with girls and bags but there seems to be a rule that the smaller the girl, the bigger the bag. And vice versa. You see big ladies in fancy restaurants wearing fur coats and they have bags that you could just about squeeze a wasp into. And you see girls in taxis and when they have to find some money for the driver, they're rooting through bags that would be suitable for a large family's laundry. This girl was no exception. Whatever she was looking for wasn't coming out any time soon. If she had been looking for a vole, for example, the vole could have run around in the bag for minutes before she grabbed it. Not that she was looking for a vole.

Finally she found what she was after. She pulled it out. It was a tatty-looking hardback book, the kind you find on a stall with other tatty-looking hardback books. It had no dust-jacket, and it had obviously been on a shelf next to a smaller book because the front was faded by the sun down one side, from a deep red to a kind of weak pink. There was some writing in gold on the pink cloth, but I couldn't make it out.

'Translator, right?' she said.

I nodded agreement, in case actually saying the words 'I'm a translator' would get her angry again.

'OK,' she said, sounding tired, 'see if you can translate this.'

She held out the book to me and I reached for it. Then she pulled it back again.

'I'm just going to lay it on the bar and open it,' she said. 'Is your eyesight good?'

'My eyesight's fine with these,' I said, taking out my reading glasses and wondering what the hell was going on. Did she think I was a book thief? That I was going to steal her old red hardback and run out, laughing my face off? I put on the glasses in silence and she opened the book at random and slid it across the bar.

'Don't pick it up or touch it,' she said. 'Can you see it all right from there?'

'I'm going to have to get off this stool to look more closely,' I said. 'Otherwise I may topple.'

'Don't topple,' she said.

I got up and leaned over the book as if it were a rare antique I was valuing. I put my hands behind my back so I wouldn't accidentally reach out and touch it (for a moment I wondered if she thought the pages were poisoned) and I looked at the open pages. After a few seconds, I said, 'Is it all like this?'

In answer, she picked it up and opened it at random about sixty pages further in. Then, when I had looked at those pages, she went back to an earlier section and I looked at that.

I sat down again. 'What language is that?' I said.

'You're the translator,' she said. 'You tell me.'

I was feeling better now. The girl was obviously acting weirdly because she had this book in a language she couldn't understand. Maybe it was an inheritance or a gift from a friend, or something to do with a college course or

a newspaper competition. Anyway, she had a book that she couldn't translate and then, hey presto, she goes to a bar and who does she run into but a translator? That would shake anybody up. Not me, obviously; it's amazing when you have an unusual job how often you run into people who have need of your skills. I imagine it's like being a doctor at a party: everybody's always telling you about their supposed illnesses and showing you their bumps and lumps. With me, it's almost the same. People ask me to translate the names of foreign foods on a menu, or the name of some classical piece they like. One time this couple asked me to translate a phrase they'd heard on holiday. 'Everybody kept saying it to us!' they said. 'We wondered does it mean "good luck" or "thank you" or something?' I told them it meant 'best of health'. It didn't, it meant 'screw off' but I didn't want to upset them. Later it occurred to me that they might have gone back to the same place next year and walked around smiling and saying, 'Screw off!' to everyone they met. It's hard to judge these things.

So I wasn't too surprised that she had shown me the book, but I could see why she might be. Things were fine, and we were getting on. There was no need to be upset at her earlier anger.

'Could we get another drink, please?' I asked Dan, who by some error of judgement was standing next to us, who were now his only customers. Dan looked at the girl as if he needed her permission and she nodded, a little impatiently. Come on, Dan, I thought, get to it.

The girl looked at me. 'Can you translate it? I'm guessing no by the way you're just standing there and looking into space.'

I decided to ignore the last part of her remark. 'I can't,' I said.

'Is it in a weird language or are you just a bad translator?' she said.

I was actually about to walk away this time when I saw she was smiling. I was pleased; it was an impolite joke but at least it was a joke. I feigned affront. (That's a phrase I came across in a book I worked on once. I'm glad I finally found an opportunity to use it. In fact, I'm pretty sure that even as I was doing it, part of my brain was thinking, Excellent, I just feigned affront.)

'I'm a good translator,' I said, looking hurt but also smiling so she'd know I wasn't really hurt. 'I speak most major European languages and, as I'm also a student of linguistics, I'd say that I would at least recognise 99 per cent of all world tongues.'

'All world tongues?' she said, making it sound sort of dirty. 'That's impressive. What about dead languages? Like Etruscan and so on.'

Now it was my turn to be impressed. Not everybody you meet in a bar knows Etruscan. Well, nobody knows it, it's a dead language as she said. But not many people even know there was a language called Etruscan, let alone that nobody speaks it. I raised an eyebrow to show that I was impressed and said, 'It's not Etruscan. It's not Mangue or Koro. It's not anything.'

She looked annoyed at this. 'What do you mean, it's not anything? It's a book, it's got to be something. Oh wait, is it like that stupid Latin you get on cushions? The one printers use?'

I had to think about that for a moment. Not much of my job involved cushions. Then I got what she meant.

'You're confusing two separate things,' I told her. 'The text sometimes used on fabrics is the Loqueris poem. It begins with the words *Si vis me flere*, which means, "If you want me to cry". But the printers' text, the one they use when they need random text to fill the page when they're doing a layout, is called *lorem ipsum*, which is short for *dolorem ipsum*,

which means "pain in itself". It used to be done with hot metal but nowadays it's a computer program, I think. They're two different things.'

I was impressed with myself, having made the two connections just from her mistaken assertion. She didn't look impressed, though, possibly because she hadn't made the connection herself. In fact, she looked annoyed, so I made a mental note not to show off my knowledge of dead languages to girls and added, 'But you're on the right lines. I mean, it's not Latin, this text, but it could be that the whole book is written in random text. Like filler.'

'But it's got to be words, right? It's got to have meaning.' She seemed almost desperate now.

'I don't know that it does have meaning,' I went on. 'Here, look at this line of text …' and I moved to show her the page.

She grabbed the book off the counter. 'Sorry,' she said. 'I know how I'm acting but this book is important to me and I can't let it out of my sight. Tell me where the line is.'

I told her and she read it out loud.

'You see?' I said, then realised I was talking to a layman. 'It's got the word *sunt* at the end, which is a common Latin verb. You would expect to see *sunt* in each and every Latin text. But next to it are these two words – *la furcheuxne* – which sounds like French to me. Except it isn't French. It's not *langue d'oc* or *langue d'oil* or ancient or modern French or anything. It's just French-sounding.'

'It could be a place name,' she said.

'It could be,' I agreed, 'although it's spelled irregularly even for a place name. Anyway, that doesn't explain *sunt*, and it doesn't explain the next word.'

'Which next word?' she said, peering at the text.

'The one beginning with "I",' I said.

'Oh,' she said, trying to read it out loud. '*Iiiiiiiiii-i-i*.'

'Yes,' I said drily, 'that one.' I can be dry when I want to, but sometimes people mistake dryness for sarcasm so I keep it in check. 'I mean, it could be some Papuan word or an exclamation in some obscure language, but put it next to *la furcheuxne*—'

'And *sunt*,' she said.

'And *sunt*,' I agreed, 'and you've just got nonsense. And the whole book seems to be like that. At least with the cushion texts they make sense in small doses, but—'

Our drinks arrived. I lifted mine and sipped it. Still no spit.

'It's just nonsense,' I concluded.

She looked disappointed, and a bit angry. I sympathised. Here was this random encounter that had promised so much – a translator when one was sorely needed! – and he had failed. Then she brightened a little.

'But what if it's not in a real language,' she said, and I stiffened, mentally, because I think I was able to guess what was coming. 'I mean, a real language, but not one like French or Latin? There're those books, aren't there? I don't know the names.'

I knew what she meant, unfortunately, and when I looked again at the book, which had a fancy binding and if you ask me a bit too much gold writing on it, I wondered maybe if some bookseller had done a number on her, telling her the book was in a mystical tongue or some hippy thing like that. There are lots of books like that. I shan't list them here, because I think they're silly. I have enough trouble extracting meaning from books in my own life without some smart alec coming along and writing a lot of gibberish that a muggins like me might one day have to translate. You know who I feel sorry for? Those poor people who have to render Lewis Carroll poems and Dr Seuss into different languages. I hate books like that.

I didn't say any of this to the girl. In fact, I'd kind of forgotten what she just said so I asked her to repeat it. By now she looked exasperated, which I don't blame her for being, so I apologised and said, 'I know what you mean, but it's not my field. I'm a workaday person. A meat and potatoes translator. If it's real, I can get my teeth into it, but if it's not real, if it's in Klingon or Elvish or something like that …'

She looked suspicious and downcast at the same time, which was a thing to see, like somebody who was sad because she had just been told by a lawyer that there was no money in the will for her, but also wary because the lawyer might be crooked, too. It was a weird look, and it worked on me.

'Maybe,' I said, 'I could get someone at the publishing house to take a—'

'No,' she said. 'Thank you, but I can't. The contents of this book stay with me at all times.'

'Well, how about you scan some pages and print them off?' I suggested. 'That way you keep the book and …' My words tailed off. I knew there was no way she would do that.

She looked up at me. There were tears in her eyes. 'Thank you for trying to help,' she said. 'You've at least cleared up one thing for me. Now I know the words have no meaning, I can stop wasting my time.'

'I didn't say they had no meaning,' I said, 'just that they're not in any known language. The text as a text is incoherent. Even if you Googled the individual words, it wouldn't help any. But, as you say, it could be in a fictional language. It could be in some code. I don't know. There could be all kinds of meaning here.'

At that, she laughed. She actually threw her head back and made a kind of bitter, self-mocking sound. 'Oh,' she said, and pushed the book across the bar at me, 'there's meaning.'

The book was open at a page of photographs, what they

call 'plates'. There were five black and white photographs. Each photo was of a girl, and in each photo the girl had been killed in a different way – knifed, shot, strangled, drowned, the last one I forget. The girl was the same girl in all the pictures. She was the girl in the bar.

'There's plenty of meaning, all right,' said the girl.

After that, I don't remember very much until we were at my apartment. ('Flat' seems too grand a word for where I live, whereas 'bedsit' is inappropriate, as I have more than one room.) She was pretty shaken up now and I'd had a couple of drinks more than I might usually have. I remember asking her in the bar if she was OK and she said she was, but clearly she wasn't. She said she didn't want to stay in the bar, though, and she didn't want to go home. And she looked at me as if I had to fill in some puzzle, and finally I got it. So we were at my apartment and she was looking for wine in a cupboard.

She found some and I opened it. I gave her a glass and she raised it.

'To you,' she said, and clinked her glass against mine.

'I've never had anybody drink a toast to me before,' I said.

'That's sweet,' she said. 'Sad, but sweet. But I can't say "to us", because we just met.'

'How about "to you"?' I said. It wasn't the wittiest thing I'd ever said, but it was at least inoffensive. Or so I thought.

'No, let's not do that. There's no point,' she said, and looked sad again.

I didn't know what to say to that, so I moved over on the settee. She leaned her head on my shoulder.

'I'm going to bed,' she said, and got up.

I didn't know how to tell her there was only one bedroom but I reckoned she looked more in need of the bed than me, so I said, 'I'll see you.'

'Oh,' she said, 'aren't you coming?'

I stared at her, letting the words sink in.

'Sure,' I said, trying to sound like women invited me into their beds – into my bed – whatever – all the time.

'Is this your bathroom?' she said, and walked off, leaving me in a highly confused state.

Women, I have observed, take a long time in the bathroom. I understand this is to do with make-up, and personal hygiene, and so on, but that only applies to getting ready. It's a start of the day thing, surely. I don't really get why it doesn't take a woman a shorter length of time to get, as it were, unready. I mean, if a woman had a false leg, obviously, but at this time of night a woman is only washing her face and cleaning her teeth. I don't really know. I have limited experience in this area.

Anyway, she was a long time in the bathroom and that's why I did it. Or at least that's the excuse I made for myself afterwards. I was sitting there on the settee, with nothing to do. I couldn't go to the bathroom because it was occupied (I'm sure married couples use the facilities jointly all the time, but we were scarcely at that stage of our relationship, or any stage). I couldn't undress because it would seem forward, and anyway, I'd still need to get up again and clean my teeth and wash. And I didn't want to drink any more. So I put the glasses in the sink and found a stopper for the wine bottle and then I saw it.

The book was next to her bag. If it had been in the bag, I wouldn't have done it. I would never open a lady's bag, or anybody else's bag come to that. But the book wasn't in the bag. It was just lying there. She had said only that I couldn't take the book away. Well, it was in my apartment already. There was nowhere for me to take the book to. I had already looked in it.

I listened for the sounds of hot water, and opened the book. There again on the page was the jumble of words. It was immensely frustrating. Just when they seemed to make sense, any possible meaning evaporated. It was like language but not, like a fly that disguises itself as a wasp (I mean through heredity, not deliberately. Flies can't deliberately disguise themselves, to my knowledge). I could make no sense from this brief look. I needed more time. Just a page would do, a page with a good deal of text on it. But I couldn't exactly rip out a page. That would count as 'taking the book' to a more than debatable extent. But there was one solution. It was morally on a knife-edge, but I didn't care. I just couldn't stand the temptation. Here was I, a translator, with a book that could not be translated. And I might never see it again!

So I made my way over to my computer station, and turned on the printer, which contains a scanner. I clicked at the keyboard until the computer woke up, and looked for the scanner icon. I clicked on it and waited for it to acknowledge my request. And then I picked up the book and, opening it at the page I'd first seen in the bar, placed it on the scanner. The icon flashed at me that it was ready to go. I closed the scanner lid carefully on the book.

'Bastard!'

The girl was screaming at me and striding towards me too. She smelled of steam and soap and she was really angry. I couldn't speak. What had seemed like a rational argument for making a copy of the pages now looked in her eyes, I could see as surely as if I were looking through them, like a gross invasion of her privacy. She pulled the book out of the scanner and looked at me with eyes full of rage and hurt.

'I'm really sorry,' I said.

She didn't reply. She just clutched the book to her chest and went back into the bathroom.

I could hear her dressing, and speaking to someone on her mobile phone. I just stood there, feeling awful.

I don't know about you, but I've never been a huge fan of dreams. They're confusing and too many things happen and none of them makes sense and when you try to remember them, half the time you just remember the odd detail, like there was a talking cat or you were drowning. I don't like dreams and I don't hold with the Freudian idea that a big tower means something erotic and all that. I don't see how you can analyse something that makes no sense at all.

Take that night, for instance. What with the girl and my foolishness with the book, a logical person would say that any dream I might have would be about the events of that evening. But the dream I had that night was nothing to do with the girl, or the book she showed me, or anything at all that I could see.

I was in some sort of large open space. It was a bright sunny day. Far off I could see some trees, and the silhouettes of people. There was nothing else there. I had the feeling that I was in the middle of a big city. I sat on the bench for quite a while. I looked around me a few times, but nothing happened. I was about to walk away when I woke up. I defy any psychiatrist in the world to analyse that dream and make the least particle of sense from it.

I certainly wasn't going to be spending any time looking up dreams that day, because I had woken up with a pretty nasty hangover. I don't drink a lot, even though I do go to bars. And I'd had two martinis, and some of a glass of wine. Outside, delivery men were swearing at each other as they emptied a lorry. There was a loud banging coming from somewhere. And I could hear rap music coming from a car parked down below.

But more than the hangover, I woke up because all through the grey waking hours I had been subconsciously needled by something just under my mental radar. I'm sure you get the same feeling. You know there's something 'on the tip of your mind', as one of my writers put it. (Actually, if I can be allowed some immodesty, what she wrote was less interesting in her own native tongue. I put some spin on it, which can be risky for a translator. Authors don't like the fruit of their creation to fall far from the tree, as it were.)

I lay there in bed, trying to remember what it was that was needling me. It wasn't meeting the girl, or her showing me the book, or even those photographs. It wasn't her being angry, although that was pretty upsetting. Then I had it. It was what she said when I was walking her to the ground floor after she had gone into the bathroom to call a cab. I know that sounds weird, after what had just happened, but when she came out, she just said, 'I don't want to be mugged on top of all this,' and asked me to walk her down to the street. She didn't say anything else, so I picked up my keys in case I locked myself out and we went.

It was cold outside, I remember, and she was wearing a coat that looked like two black sheets of rumpled cloth crossed over each other. It was such a big coat that when I opened the taxi door for her to get in, it took her a while to get herself all into the cab, as though the coat were the wings of a bat. It also muffled her words so I had to strain to hear what she was saying.

'Don't look for me,' she said, 'but don't forget me.'

And before I could say anything to that, the cab drove off. I stood for a moment as it disappeared into the late-night traffic, hoping it might stop and she'd get out and walk back towards me in the big black bat coat, but she didn't even turn her head.