

# The Body Hunter

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Translated from the Catalan by Peter Bush



The translation of this work was supported by a grant from  
the Institut Ramon Llull



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the British Library on request

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First published in 2011 as *La caçadora de cossos* by  
Columna Edicions, S.A. Barcelona

First published in this translation in 2013 by Serpent's Tail,  
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd  
3A Exmouth House  
Pine Street  
London EC1R 0JH  
[www.serpentstail.com](http://www.serpentstail.com)

ISBN 978 1 84668 901 7  
eISBN 978 1 84765 858 6

Designed and typeset by [sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk](mailto:sue@lambledesign.demon.co.uk)  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



She's standing opposite a door at the top of steps that are far too steep. And hesitating. She's not rung the bell yet. She wipes the sweat – or nervous tremor – off her cheek with the back of her hand, a caress almost. Though, of course, it isn't a caress; they explore slower, more tentative paths across your skin. She looks over her shoulder: one day somebody decided to build those narrow steps rising in hot pursuit of each other and created a precipitous staircase. What's more, no banister. Beautiful marble steps from another era that make you dizzy. How stupid to stand there, not daring to ring, like a little kid. Hardly, kids are bolder because they know less, and haven't a clue what might be lurking behind the door. What if a neighbour saw her? It's only a job like any other, a way to pay the bills. What's wrong with topping up your earnings? True, she'd pledged never to do this kind of domestic work, but she'd been obsessed by the prospect from the moment a friend at the factory suggested it. She has wiped her forehead, wiped her sweaty hands over the stitching on her trousers, switched her bag hand a couple of times, scratched her right ear until it's sore, and now she has run out of excuses, she feels frightened when she rings the bell and sets off that strident buzz.

# Mr Ethereal

Sir, if you could only see my memories of all those men, though I always told myself it was about having a good time, putting a bit of spice into life. I've never managed to forget a single one, however briefly they lasted.

I remember Mr Ethereal. Mr Ethereal was a young guy. Yes, I'd say he was still very much a young guy, who would walk up a slope close to where I lived. We walked up that slope together a lot. Until I realized we were heading to the same place, where I was going to clean and he went to loaf around. Right now I couldn't tell you what attracted me so much that I stuck with him for so long. But it wasn't all the time, was more off than on, and never a real relationship. What's a relationship anyway? Where do you start? I don't have a serious girlfriend, he told me, just the casual sort. I didn't ask him what he meant by his girlfriends, or what he thought that meant, or whether they were half serious, I mean, that he simply went to bed with them whenever he felt like it. When you think people haven't left you anything to remember them by, you keep quiet about such things. I was saying that I don't know what attracted me to Mr Ethereal, maybe it was his bottomless eyes, or the expression permanently fixed on his face as if someone had

pressed the pause button. He took ages to answer questions people usually answered without a second thought. When it was all over, that bothered me a lot.

Mr Ethereal invited me to lunch at his place and we both knew where *that* would end but it took longer than I imagined. Sure it was great sitting on his balcony warming up a bit in the February sun and swapping our life stories, drinking tea to which he wouldn't let me add sugar because he'd flavoured it with anisette and anisette is sweet enough. Every sip left a nasty, warm, bland taste in my mouth. We found our lives had things in common. We'd both been reasonably happy kids in reasonably conventional families; we'd not stood out either way from our classmates and had decided to give up studying because we'd no clear idea where we wanted to go. When we'd established the common elements in our past lives we felt on a high and that smoothed the way for what came later. As if it was fated. In fact, we could have shared those things with almost anybody. Looking back, it seems clear we hardly mentioned how our lines began to diverge at that point in the conversation when he told me he'd left for Canada at the age of eighteen and I hadn't dared reveal that I'd hardly been outside my city. Or when he talked about how he'd gone back to studying after a sabbatical year when he'd learned how to cure broken bodies. Studies that obviously cost a mint and made him what he was now.

I ignored these differences, just as I didn't go along with that universal rule hammered home by every film and television series that says you must never, on any account, fuck a guy on your first date. I was thinking about all that, the scenes of

sloppy kisses and girls going upstairs by themselves, shutting doors in forlorn faces, when I felt something press hard on my belly button. Something hard coming from behind the knee up to my bum. And this was before he'd even kissed me or we'd passionately embraced, him making the first touch, even before we'd rolled around on the kitchen floor. Not that we ever did do it on any kitchen floor. I'd say I was won over by the bold, hard way he pushed me onto the bed, and that other slow, suggestive movement I found strangely invasive and arousing. He never did it again. I sometimes thought it was just a ploy, a trick he'd worked on, knowing full well the effect it would have on my body. Because Mr Ethereal knew a lot about bodies, even if he knew next to nothing about anything else. He studied and investigated them, knew the names of every muscle, limb and joint. That was why he grabbed a soft drink bottle when we first went to bed and pressed on a muscle that connected with another I didn't even know existed. I made sure I gripped the table tight to ensure his pressure on my flesh lasted longer.

In fact, sex with Mr Ethereal was perfect. He slid and hid himself in my body, then resurfaced powerfully. He acted with a deceptive, gentle tenderness and then abruptly turned into a dominator. How *do* they know I love to be dominated? I never tell them, they just know. But, I have to say, Mr Ethereal was a courteous, subtle dominator and used tricks others would have never tried to get me to play my favourite role. Like the sudden, energetic way he'd pull my arms away from his body and force them down against the pillow, leaving me helpless, or slid his fingers down my back until they were inside me without my

even noticing, then sticking it into me without hurting. When I think back now, I must be honest and say that sex with him was really perfect. Mr Ethereal was a body tamer. He never started off rough or crude, he was into rhythm, the most difficult thing for a lover, but then I'd start to think it was all one big joke. I'd burst out laughing when I saw him looking so serious from on high, as if his eyes were going all dark. That's right, those blue glassy eyes of his changed with the really serious orgasms he usually had, as if it were the climax to a tragedy. Maybe I just got bored, bored of sex transforming his face into something so grotesque, or of him making it out to be such a big deal or saying so little it exasperated me. These are things you don't see when desire is driving you on, as if you were in a race and all that mattered was reaching the tape. You only see the kind of thing that worried me afterwards when you are quiet and relaxed, and, in any case, I'd only start sprinting when I saw desire flash in a man's eyes.

When did I begin to turn against him? Turn against him, hate him to the point of repulsion, not want to be near him. I could tolerate him, but only at a distance, when I couldn't smell him. When exactly did I stop racing in tandem with him? Because, for sure, he hadn't changed, he was the same as at the start, but I'd stopped seeing him with the same eyes. I'm good at deceiving myself when I feel the need for a body, I tell myself it's pleasure and no more, but I can't deceive myself for long. Fortunately or not, who can say, such self-deception is short-lived. That's how I began to think about the things that bugged me about him: when he was frantically licking me in the hope of a reaction and I could only think about how

slow-paced he was when he wasn't fucking, about the despair on his face when he couldn't light the burner on the cooker, how he got upset when it was late and he had to walk along the dark streets that go from my house to his. Sure he was only young but he was old enough not to be afraid of the dark. Or what about when he didn't eat salad at a party because the lettuce leaves had been in contact with tuna and he never ate meat. When he is licking me, hoping I'm going to come at any moment, I think about how he counts his almonds and rations them over a number of days so they last longer. I make an effort to cover my nose to keep out his smell that used to be so pleasant. I don't come anymore because I don't relate him to sex now and I don't know if I do that for myself or as an act of revenge because he is the pits and yet still part of me. Until I say stop, leave off, and he says, no, I can't, I don't want to leave you halfway and I say I don't feel like it, I'm alright, and now it's all about eluding the pleasure he wants to impose on me. He doesn't get it, but he doesn't get annoyed because he's long since passed the halfway mark.

Then he became crazy about entering me from behind, something I liked as a bonus, but after one session in particular he always wanted to end up in that same place. We'd kiss and embrace but when I wasn't watching he'd stick it in there, as if he was obsessed with the back entrance. A lot of men are like that, when they do something with you they've never done with another woman, it soon becomes what they always want. And if you are cheeky enough to say that what you like one day, you don't necessarily want the day after, though maybe the day after that, fine, they look at you all upset as if



you'd gone mad. But the way Mr Ethereal went after me was rather animal-like and he reminded me of dogs when they sniff each other the moment they meet. He'd said he'd never dared do it like that before he'd been with me, but I thought it was because it was taboo or unusual, or he was afraid I'd suck him off in front until he disappeared completely. Or was that when I was afraid of sucking off the men I was fucking? As I don't like thinking about such things, I did all I could to get him to change his ways, silently guided him, made sure I didn't turn my back on him, but in the end I was bored because he always seemed irritated, became dull and deadpan and all our sex was a big letdown. I thought he was trying some kind of blackmail, for when I said no not like that he'd go all limp in bed leaving me to do the work. As if he was saying, 'If we can't do that, you just do what you want.'

I also took against him because he talked about other women's bodies. I never said anything to him, naturally, because right from the start it had been made clear we weren't going steady, that he only had casual girlfriends, but he'd no need to tell me how he was aroused by the sight of the naked bodies of the women who came to see him through his job, because he had to cure them on his bunk bed and there was no way round that. Lucky he was a real professional, he'd say, but he went on talking about his patients who gave him a hard-on when they were on hand. I also think he did it on purpose. He'd always said he didn't want a conventional relationship, that everything should be freer and more flexible.

And that sums up the pair of us: friends who got together to fuck, like so many couples of our age. Except that I was no

friend of his before doing it with him the first time and still wasn't after we broke up, even if our sexual encounters had been more frequent than encounters between friends. No need to label things, he'd say, why do we have to be like other couples and kill everything by sticking on labels. No need to. I was fine with that, I wasn't interested in a life-long relationship, those that begin, go through every stage and come to an end. Passion at the start, followed by something like love, then hatred and final indifference. I didn't want to take that route.

But our relationship stopped being entirely open or at least I noticed it was only open for him. I let him know when I wanted him and he would let me know when he wanted to be with me and the two things normally coincided. Until one day he sent me a message saying, 'Can I come?' and I said no. Not that I didn't feel like it but I was in a bar drinking a beer with Him, and He was already caressing a finger of mine and talking non-stop. He was quite the opposite of Mr Ethereal. Tense, always in a rush, plump, short with lots of flesh on Him, not like tall, skinny Mr Ethereal. Right, if I had to define Him, I'd say He was all flesh and I imagined myself disappearing into his flesh. He was also fond of excesses, He'd never have counted his almonds; He'd have scoffed the lot to a chorus of animal grunts. A wild boar. I'd think of wild boars running through woods when He told me how important his work was, wiping the corners of his lips with two fingers more often than was usual, before wiping them under his nose. He ran his hand through his hair, kept shifting the leg resting on the stool by the bar in that shadowy dive where I received that message from Mr Ethereal when I was outside.