

The Beloved Time of their Lives

by Ian Watson & Roberto Quaglia

By the age of eighteen Jonathan still hadn't fallen in love. For the past few years his friends had been flirting with girls, passionately or heartlessly jumping from one to the next, but this procedure didn't interest Jonathan. He was sure that he could only really love once during his lifetime, and he wasn't disposed to waste time on anything less. His friends warned him: you'll be a virgin forever. No, he would answer, I *shall* love -- but only when I can love forever!

Very probably there was a genetic reason for his attitude. A human being has genes that make him or her behave in a monogamous way -- and also genes that push him or her towards polygamy. Love stories are often full of drama because of the struggle between these antithetical genes. By random combination, a person may exceptionally have *only* the genes for monogamy (or, of course, those for polygamy). Jonathan must be one of these rare individuals all of whose genes chorused a faith in, and a will for, an eternal immense love for a single person, a love that would be complete, perfect and unbreakable.

None of the adolescent girls he saw around seemed adequate. The problem with adolescent girls is that, if they're banal, they're almost certain to remain banal -- but if they're vivid and intelligent they might still become banal in future. How could he love forever a lively and intelligent creature who in later years might mutate into something he couldn't love any more? Popular wisdom suggests you look at a Beloved's mother to get an idea of what you'll end up hosting in your home a few decades hence -- and the result is often mortifying. Even this method is far from foolproof. If only he could take a look into the future of candidates for his love, to be positive what they would become later on!

Elena knocked at the door of his life shortly after he'd celebrated his eighteenth birthday -- to give him private lessons in Physics, a field he was fascinated by and knew that he knew insufficiently. Due to Jonathan's father emigrating to Thailand to enjoy massages, and his mother joining a commune in Spain to expand her mind, Jonathan had been left on his own since seventeen, although adequately provided for in a small flat, with a small allowance -- and, as you'll have gathered, he was of a philosophical disposition. Jonathan had never felt quite at home with his parents, nor evidently had they felt at home with him (nor with each other).

Elena was more than a mature woman -- maybe she was sixty-five or seventy.

She could easily have been his grandmother! So any notion of a sexual relation with her was absurd to an eighteen year old boy. However, during the long hours they spent studying together, he perceived Elena to be a woman of an extraordinary sweetness. Despite her age she still had a pleasant figure, and her voice possessed a hypnotic tone which gifted him with inner peace. It even seemed as if she could read his mind, for she would answer questions he hadn't yet put. Frequently she anticipated his unvoiced desire for a coffee, or for a beer from the fridge. "What's the probability it's time for a coffee?" she might say. "Let T be Time. Let C be Coffee as well as Celeritas, the speed of light..." To a surprising degree they seemed on the same wavelength as regards the how and why of the Universe. Although Elena clearly couldn't be the woman of his life, Jonathan realized that he would know he had found the woman of his life if he were able to imagine her ending up in old age resembling Elena.

One day Jonathan asked Elena if she was married, since until then she never had touched on the matter.

"In a way," she replied.

"You mean that you don't believe in the formalities of marriage?"

"That isn't why I never married formally."

“Why, then, may I ask?”

“It’s a long story.”

“And you don’t want to tell me.”

Elena sighed in a bittersweet way. “Another time. Probably before Death kisses me.”

“Eh?”

“Oh, just something I read -- forget it.”

So he did. He had much more important things to concentrate on.

“I’ve never been in love yet,” he said.

“The time will come, Jonathan, there’s no need to hurry.” Elena’s smile seemed maternal.

“It must be so nice being in love.” Briefly Jonathan was lost in a vacancy consisting of the absence of any such memories.

“It’s the only feeling it makes any sense to have,” she confirmed.

Months passed, and a deep friendship flourished. Sometimes they took tea in the city, or he went shopping with her. As the last day of the old year approached, Jonathan confided that he didn’t much want to spend New Year’s Eve with his friends and whatever girlfriends of the moment, getting pissed. But the alternative might be sad.

“If you like,” said Elena, “we can spend New Year’s Eve together. I invite you to my place! I’ll cook.”

Jonathan accepted gratefully.

Entering Elena’s cosy flat for the very first time gave him a strangely satisfying sensation. On the dining table two tall candles burned.

She beamed at him. “A romantic little dinner for a granny and a young boy. Nobody else.”

Elena had made herself really elegant in a cream lace top and long pleated turquoise skirt. The years hadn’t been able to steal away her essential classiness.

Asparagus and oysters were followed by duck then by crême brulée. By candlelight, and fuelled by a notable quantity of Red Paradox wine, an excellent Cabernet Sauvignon from Romania, their conversation achieved new levels of intimacy. When midnight arrived, they toasted the New Year with Champagne to the sound of Apocalyptica, a sort of hard rock performed with cellos, Elena’s choice.

The eyes of both were shining, not just due to alcohol, which is merely a noble amplifier of emotions. As the cello-rock of Apocalyptica became mellower, the music was an invitation to dance. To resist would have been an insult to the universe. So Jonathan and Elena danced, and their dance was sweeter than words can express. Their scents mingled and the implacable gear of destiny eliminated any other outcome than what must happen. Elena closed her eyes and stretched a few centimeters towards Jonathan, just enough to kiss his lips delicately. Emotions exploded inside Jonathan’s chest, beautiful emotions that for many years he had awaited in vain. Without querying what he was doing, Jonathan returned the kiss with passion. Time warped for numerous seconds, creating amidst the universe a little bubble that should rightly last forever, regardless of what went on elsewhere.

When the kiss ended, Elena regarded him wide-eyed.

“Come,” she murmured, and took his hand with delicacy. Jonathan – his mind in a trance and his body flooded with enchanting hormones -- followed her trustfully into the bedroom.

It was a very long night of passion, during which Jonathan was initiated into what he imagined must be all the possible variations offered by the act of love. Signs of age seemed to have disappeared from Elena, who greedily tasted every moment of that sublime sexual communion, and was never sated. After each orgasm of his she returned to the fray, sweetly yet tirelessly

determined, as if his fluids were needed to extinguish an age-old fire that nothing else in the world could possibly douse. And he, intoxicated with ecstasy – the natural, rather than the pharmaceutical sort -- seemed able to continue making love forever, after so many years of waiting and abstinence. When, by the first light of morning, bodily obsession had at last calmed in both of them, tangled together they still fed on each other's heat and smell, in a fusion that nothing in the world could sever.

"I'm so happy," murmured Jonathan, enjoying a completeness that till a few hours before was unknown to him.

"I'm happy too now," echoed Elena, clutching him even more tightly.

"I'll love you forever," vowed Jonathan.

"You already did," she replied, stroking his hair.

Those caresses propelled Jonathan deep into the innocent sleep of children and beloveds.

When, after an eternity had passed, Jonathan awoke, the sun was flooding the room. Close to him was Elena, but all the same she wasn't there any more. Her body was cold. As Jonathan very soon discovered, she was dead.

All the unaccustomed exertion and joy must have resulted in a heart attack. Or all the intimate caresses, in a massive stroke.

The fall from the pinnacle of the world was unutterably painful. The unlikely and the impossible had happened one shortly after the other. He had found what he knew would be the only love of his life, yet she had disappeared almost immediately from the universe and from his life. His lifetime of love was all completed in a single night with no possibility of replays: what a terrible joke destiny had played on him!

Anyone else would have been traumatised by such an experience but sooner or later would have recovered, unless he killed himself straightaway. Such a person's life would go on. He would know other women. But not Jonathan. Like it or not, he was made to love once only, completely and irrevocably. His love for an Elena who didn't exist any more would accompany him for the rest of his life. Nothing would be able to change this state of affairs. Awareness of this tortured him, plunging him into an abyss of pain of with no return.

In the years that followed, Jonathan closed himself up within himself and his studies. Those were the only evasion he permitted himself from a pain which nevertheless resembled the highest of all pleasures – for if his love for the vanished Elena were not to fade away, he must never renounce the sublime pain of her absence, a sacred pain that bore witness to his immutable love and symbolised it.

Jonathan began to dream of somehow going back in time to a period before Elena's death. Obviously the idea was impossible, but this didn't stop him from dreaming – nor from delving into scientific enigmas involving time. Ten years passed in the world while Jonathan remained cut off from human society, lost in obsessive study. Thank goodness he had an allowance. His mother and his father seemed to have lost track of time and reality, one through spirituality, the other at the hands of Thai masseuses who must be really good. Occasionally a postcard arrived.

Actually, time is merely one of the models by which human beings interpret reality, not something that exists objectively in an absolute sense. What if *alternative* futures and pasts and presents could be accessed *mentally*? What if you could derail your point of view from the continuum you were used to, and allocate it to an alternative timeline chosen by your deepest instincts?

The ideal timeline would be an alternative present in which Elena would be his own age and the circumstances for their love would then be perfect. *A priori* he had to exclude this utopian vision. Even if such an alternative present did exist, he'd never find a way to shift his point of view there. It would be a continuum with which Jonathan had never had any contact, so he'd never be

able to guess where it was by intuition. Even though that place would be a parallel present time, existentially it was too distant from his current life – like the hundredth reflection of oneself in a mirrored lift where the images progressively bend away out of sight.

The best hope of finding a way to relocate his viewpoint was within his own timeline of probability, for that had certainly crossed Elena's timeline for a while. There was no sense in hoping for more -- not for all the love of the world, which was burning inside him.

Years of obsessive research and desperate commitment ripened till finally Jonathan convinced himself he was ready for the big jump. By now he was thirty-one. What he must conjure up was a *virtual* time machine that could exploit strong morphic resonance between his starting point and his destination. He must leave from, and arrive in, an almost identical situation -- whatever differences existed externally to it.

The most constant and stable context he could think of was MacDonald's, since the difference between any MacDonald's and another is minimal, less than a single letter such as an *a*. Just as MacDonald's had colonised this world, so it must have colonised any other that was remotely similar. Conceivably there might be a McDonald's without two "a"s in some reality, but it was hard to imagine a reality without something very like MacDonald's. Consequently MacDonald's would be his time machine!

When the big day came, Jonathan went to a random MacDonald's and ritually ate the last MacCheeseburger of his personal epoch. Now the compass of his love must take him to a MacDonald's nearest to a space occupied by Elena. As to *when* in time... he must be like a Zen archer, hitting the target while blindfolded in darkness.

After swallowing the last bite, Jonathan closed his eyes and concentrated, as he had taught himself to do. His mind lost itself inside itself. The sounds and smells of MacDonald's disappeared.

After an indefinable interval what impinged on his awareness was a difference in smell, less burger grease in the air, more odour of sweet MacSalads. He opened his eyes. The MacDonald's was almost identical to the one where he had closed them except that customers were dressed differently! Quite a few men sported pastel jackets with wide lapels; some women favoured velvet jumpsuits. The staff, of course, wore exactly the same MacUniforms.

How Jonathan exulted. His chinos and corduroy jacket didn't seem too much out of place. Briefly he wondered whether, by his arrival, he had displaced a Jonathan to make space for himself – obviously not from this very same MacDonald's; that would be a remarkable coincidence! But if he did displace a Jonathan, where did he displace him to? Maybe to a timeline where Jonathan had never even been born – otherwise the displaced Jonathan would in turn displace a Jonathan *ad infinitum*, and this process might continue like dominos falling over until he himself in turn was displaced by some other displaced Jonathan. No doubt due to such perspectives, Jonathan felt indefinably more mature than previously.

Presumably Elena was alive and living not very far from this very MacDonald's. So how would he find her? *She* couldn't possibly recognize him -- he had only known her in her old age. Going to look for her at random risked missing her repeatedly. Waiting in this MacDonald's closest to her home seemed the best strategy! Surely sooner or later she would come here to eat or drink or merely use the toilet which in MacDonald's are always clean and welcoming. And then he would meet her again. Ah, from her point of view not *again*, but for the *first* time -- so from their combined viewpoints he would fifty-per-cent meet her again. MacDonald's would be like Schrödinger's Box until he observed her.

Jonathan rented a room in the nearest hotel for the hours of night when MacDonald's was shut. Fortunately a principle of conservation had kept money identical. In case credit cards weren't conserved, he had brought a lot of cash with him, choosing the oldest banknotes he could lay his hands on. This made him rich due to the opposite of inflation.

Every day of the following three weeks he spent inside that MacDonald's, only rushing out twice a day to a healthfood shop for snacks. It would have been unromantic to supersize himself. To propitiate the staff of MacDonald's, he frequently bought MacWater, and he read a detective novel called *Death Kisses Me* which he found in a wastebin, ten words at a time, look round, another ten words, look round – hopefully without appearing paranoid. Now and then he rubbed his neck as though suffering from an affliction requiring frequent turns of the head – otherwise his head might lock in one position. The staff, who were all afflicted in one way or another, ignored him, although children would stare. At first the title of the book rang a faint bell, but its repetition atop every other page quickly deafened him.

Finally, on the twentieth day of his vigil Jonathan's heart almost exploded when a woman in her forties exactly resembling a photo he'd seen of Elena at forty-one entered MacDonald's and hurried to the toilet. *Elena!* How should he accost her? Ah, he'd pretend to be doing a survey regarding the quality of the MacToilets.

When the door with the woman icon opened and Jonathan found himself face to face with Elena, he was paralysed and speechless.

Elena found herself facing a man maybe in his mid-thirties with pale face and trembling lips, who gaped at her with bulging eyes.

Blood drained from her face. Her eyes widened.

"Jonathan!" she gasped. Then she fell into his arms, and he had no idea what was happening. "Oh, Jonathan, I've waited for you all these years! And now you are here!" She sighed happily, head on his shoulder. "You're here!"

"This isn't possible... How do you know me already?"

She stepped back, a pitying expression on her face.

"This must be your first jump... It's true what you told me ages ago."

"Eh, my *first* jump? You mean I'll meet you another time in my future -- but in your past...? *How, why?*"

Jonathan had been certain that, when he found Elena, they would be together from then on forever. Not so, it seemed.

"*Why,*" she said, "is the question that tormented me for years. But let's forget why! We're together, you and me! That's all that matters. We must savour every moment while it lasts."

"*While it lasts?*" echoed Jonathan.

Looking serious now, she gazed into his eyes. "You've already explained to me once that if the past of a person contains the future of another person, there must be a certain indefinability, or a definite uncertainty, so as not to destabilise the continuum and let things carry on."

"I told you that?" He felt he was in a trance.

Elena nodded.

"Excuse me," said a supersize mother who was trying to approach the toilet.

When Jonathan had got to know Elena for the first time for Physics lessons, so far as he knew no older version of himself was her partner -- so for some reason he wouldn't spend the rest of his life with her right till the end. Maybe the older version died before his eighteen year old self met her. That would happen in her future, so Elena couldn't know this yet. Not unless he already told her in her past, but he didn't know this because that would only happen in his own future... always assuming that an older and younger version of himself from separate timelines could both occupy the same timeline, all be it at different times.

"*Excuse me! I have a right to use the toilet.*"

As Elena stepped further back, the vast woman moved between her and Jonathan like a total eclipse, filling all the available space. With difficulty the woman passed through the doorway to the toilet. As she did so, slowly she unclipped... a *blank wall*. Had the supersize woman dragged Elena with her, attached like an inadvertent parasite on a whale? No -- Jonathan had stopped observing Elena and now she was gone!

Jonathan staggered, bewildered, panicked, and desolate. To have found Elena and lost her because a mountainous woman wanted to use the MacToilet! Elena had been solid and real, but the continuum had destabilised due to local obesity. Too much mass occupying one location, too much definability. Maybe!

Jonathan returned to his table where *Death Kisses Me* lay open, and slumped. For a while he stared at the street door, willing Elena to walk in to MacDonald's again, as if reality could simply reset itself by a few minutes. Instead, an even larger woman overlapping a power wheelchair entered. Jonathan felt unreal by comparison, as though he lacked enough substance. MacDonald's was a risky place to try to meet Elena! Yet it also remained the most logical place. Oh why had Elena lingered with him beside the MacToilet? They should have run hand in hand out into the street where there was more free space.

If Elena had vanished, that meant she had only *probably* been present in MacDonald's that day. The probability had been very high, maybe 99.9 per cent, but that left 0.01 per cent of improbability, which the sheer bulk of the supersize woman displaced into reality, rather like a black hole in reverse. Right now very likely Elena was somewhere else in the city where she might most likely be, unaware of having met Jonathan yet perhaps thinking about him and wondering *why*, at this particular time.

A whole new vision of the world came to Jonathan, which explained how he had been able to travel by willpower to an alternative timeline, and which also explained socks lost in washing machines...

There must be an infinite number of timelines with a greater or lesser degree of probability – but never with *absolute* certainty. In the least probable timelines, the whole human race might become sapient dinosaurs and the sky might turn green. In less (but not least) probable timelines a man might become a woman, or your pet cat an iguana – flux, though not so chaotic. The most probable timelines would be very stable but not totally so. You might put twenty socks into a washing machine and only retrieve nineteen. Sometimes crazy coincidences would occur. A child called Ruby Gumdrop of 52 Weasel Road would release a balloon with her address attached -- the balloon would land 200 miles away at 52 Weasel Road in a different city, to be found by a different girl of the same age who was also called Ruby Gumdrop.

So Jonathan had become very improbable in one timeline, and very probable in this one.

Now that he knew Elena was here, and that she knew who Jonathan was, why not put an advertisement in the local newspaper to arrange a meeting place? Ah but no, he must travel further into her past to tell her about uncertainties because that had already happened. If he didn't do so, *everything* might become uncertain.

As he had done in that other MacDonald's, he closed his eyes and concentrated.

And presently he opened his eyes, to behold what was apparently the same eternal MacDonald's. However, the staff were other, different people -- and *prices were cheaper*.

About 20 per cent cheaper!

When he went to the MacToilet and glanced in the mirror, he had a shock. He looked about ten years older. Initially he was gobsmacked, but then he recalled his previous indefinable sensation of greater maturity and decided that travelling backwards along any timeline must come at a cost, of proportionate ageing. This time devotion had cost Jonathan dear – ten years of youth.

But there was one advantage! Here in the past, fewer customers were supersize. Maybe a quarter instead of a third. Presently he went to the same rubbish bin where he'd found *Death Kisses Me*. Of course that same book couldn't be there for another ten years, but instead Jonathan found *A Treasury of Turkish Proverbs: The Mother of All Proverb Dictionaries* in Turkish and in English. The back had been torn off and the last hundred pages were missing – maybe those pages had been torn out for nose-blowing or grease-wiping.

Thus commenced two weeks of MacWater, and “Love is a burning chickpea,” “An ugly woman tidies her house, a beautiful woman roams the streets...” But on the fifteen day an Elena in

her early twenties came into MacDonald's for a pee. Quickly Jonathan stationed himself outside the door to the toilets, wary of the approach of any supersize persons. As soon as Elena emerged, he blocked her way.

Calmly she said, "Will you let me past?" Ah, she hadn't recognized him! Thank God he wouldn't need to go further back in time.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I'm an inspector of the quality of the MacToilets, as customers perceive them. Could you spare me a moment for a few questions? First of all," he improvised hastily, "did you do a pee or a poo?" God, he had been overhearing too many mothers with their toddlers. It had been ages since he talked normally to anybody.

"You're a *pervert*," she exclaimed. And then her face turned pale. "Jonathan...?"

"You know who I am?" In fact, thank God she knew him – that was better than being thought a pervert.

"This isn't possible! It's a hallucination! Let me out of here!"

"Elena, my beloved, everything's all right, don't panic." He was detaining her by force, but Elena suddenly stopped opposing him.

"Your smell, I'd know it anywhere. Oh, my God, I'm dreaming... dreaming..."

"You aren't dreaming, my love. Relax. Pretend this is an enchantment and let yourself be cherished by the impossible. The impossible loves you."

Elena closed her eyes for a moment, then she began to cry.

"I must be dead! Something like this can't happen in reality."

"I need you alive! I mean: you're alive, and I need you. I've been sitting here for weeks waiting and drinking MacWater. Don't cry."

"Because my tears aren't MacWater?" She laughed crazily. "You're *young*!" And she began to dance. And he'd thought he looked ten years older!

To establish continuity and make things more probable, quickly he gabbled at her about definite uncertainty and a certain indefinability, the same phrases she had used to him – as if reciting a prayer or a magical formula. Soon they would be in bed, either at his hotel or wherever she lived.

Big mistake.

Jonathan had stopped paying attention to his surroundings. At that very moment a voice wheezed, "Move aside."

Maybe the supersize man only had enough breath for two words, however he also sounded militant. Either because of Fat Power or momentum he acted militantly: vast arms followed by a great body intruded between Jonathan and Elena, forcing them apart. When the eclipse passed, Elena had vanished.

Anguished, Jonathan returned to his table.

During their brief encounter Elena had seemed amazed by his young looks compared with when she'd last seen him, in her past. Was he condemned to sit in MacDonald's for years reading peculiar Turkish proverbs until he aged naturally sufficient to travel further back in time, to arrive – plus travel time – looking very mature? True, his most recent jump had added a decade to his apparent age, but a further decade of ageing due to a further jump seemed frankly insufficient.

He mused on the indelible image of her corpse after the night of love she had spent with him in his past, which was her future. He so wanted to be completely transparent in her eyes, for such is the nature of a true and absolute love -- there should be no secrets between them. Yet in no event should she ever learn of her own death in his arms, during her last and his first embrace! This exception to transparency hurt him, yet paradoxically further fueled his immense love, and his pain at their separation.

His yearning grew uncontrollably till it was a blazing forest fire from which he must flee -- to dive into the life-saving lake of her presence, as it were. As the Turks say in the section on *Yokluk*, or Absence: *Hasret ateşten gömlektir*, Longing is a shirt of fire. Consequently he forgot all

about time and age, shutting his eyes and concentrating. He scarcely even heard, “Hey, I can’t get my power wheelchair past...”

MacPrices were even cheaper. *The Mother of All Proverb Dictionaries* had disappeared, praise be to Allah. Only one supersize customer was in the establishment.

Like a swimmer after surfacing, Jonathan ran his hand over his hair, and found not much hair, so he went to the MacToilet to check in the mirror.

A sixty-year-old Jonathan, approximately, looked back at him! Maybe 58, maybe 62, no way to be certain. Evidently going back in time was like trying to reach the speed of light! In the case of space travel the more you accelerated, the more your mass increased until masswise you were supersize, although the same in appearance. In the case of time travel, the further you went the more rapidly *your age* increased. If he had to go back another couple of years, probably he’d become 100 years old. Where had his intervening life gone to? It had been used as time-fuel.

How could he possibly appeal erotically to an even younger Elena?

As a sixty-year-old man approximately, Jonathan was out of place among the many youngsters who visited the MacDonald’s. They might regard him as a sort of MacTeenophile. So now he needed to remain vigilant while giving even less appearance of staring round repeatedly. Fortunately the same waste bin came to his rescue once more (or for the first time), suggesting that destiny was perhaps collaborating with him.

This time the discarded book was entitled *Golf Rules Explained*. “Golf is a lonely game,” advised the book. Likewise, trying to find Elena! “Golf is difficult because we make it so. All manner of inhibitions and fears rise up in the mind of a man about to hit a golf ball, some of them demons of his own creation and some impressed on to his imagination by the daunting sight of the way ahead...” Yes, this was wise. Jonathan must relax.

“Know your own ball”: that was good advice too, but Jonathan was sure he would recognise his beloved at any age. Above the age of 13, anyway! Below that age, for the sake of decency he would have to let her grow up a bit, even if he himself continued ageing.

In golf sometimes you needed to drop a ball vertically over your shoulder to put it back into play. Beware, if you had a big bottom and the ball bounced off your bum! Sitting in MacSeats for weeks, or years, might well be enlarging Jonathan’s bottom, yet what could he do about this? Perform callisthenics or yoga in the MacToilet?

Fortunately, only ten days passed before unmistakably a young Elena came into MacDonald’s with a girlfriend – not to pee, but to eat! All youngsters go through a phase in which they think that fast food is good. Having learned patience, Jonathan observed her dirtying her lips with ketchup and slowly sucking a milk shake through a straw, offering an involuntarily wonderful show of spontaneous sensuality. She wasn’t more than seventeen, he estimated. Her look was pure and completely innocent, yet in her eyes he already caught glimpses of the light that in the years to come would irradiate that look of hers. Uniquely in the history of the world, Jonathan was looking at the girl who later would have been the love of his life before any of this happened. In fact new verbal tenses were required to express his experience.

By now he was wary of MacToilets, which had proved dangerous and were in any case unpoetical even though they got cleaned every hour. Igniting Elena’s love for him couldn’t be a simple and immediate affair. If he failed this time, the entire bubble of reality where he had seemingly lived for the greatest part of his life might dissolve into nothing, leaving less trace in the universe than a bubble of soap that pops!

Besides, that girlfriend was with Elena. An old man making an approach in such company would cause embarrassment or giggles or even screams. When Elena left the MacBuilding, he followed at a discreet distance, pretending to study the book about golf.

And after he had discovered where Elena lived, he went to an Indian restaurant. Finally, some interesting dishes!

Elena knew that she was a special girl, yet this was a source of worry. Most of her girlfriends already had a boyfriend, or at least they'd had one. Why couldn't she find a boy who interested her? She hadn't the slightest idea what she was looking for, but she knew exactly what didn't interest her, and the world seemed full of uninteresting boys. Maybe this was because psychologically males mature later than females. She could only wait and wait, and try to understand herself better. By doing so, perhaps she would discover what exactly she wanted from life, and from men. Meanwhile the intact energy of her youth gave her the strength to tolerate the big mystery.

Every Sunday lunchtime Elena would visit her beloved grandparents. She adored the *Borscht* soup such as only her grandmother knew how to make -- alternatively the *Kapustnyak* soup -- followed by a dish of *Vareniki z Tvorogom* or *Ghalushki Poltavskie*. But what she was really crazy about was *Nalystniki*, also known as *Deruny*, small potato pancakes made in an unique way, and of course drowned in *Uzvar*, a refreshing beverage made from berries. One fine Sunday, Elena found a new guest at the home of the grandparents. Her grandparents were very gregarious, although in common with all old people they had a stable circle of friends. Rarely indeed would new acquaintances pop up in their life. This was one of those exceptions.

The newcomer had become friendly with Grandfather at the city golf club, which was where Grandfather and his friends played chess now they were incapable of playing golf due to arthritis or lack of breath. People who formerly played golf, and who liked the club house, graduated to chess. The newcomer seemed to know a lot about golf, even though he didn't possess any golf clubs, consequently chess was ideal for him too.

When you have lunch at your grandparents you don't expect originality, but the comfort of a familiar experience. However, conversation that lunchtime was more original than usual, with strange speculations about time, and even some Turkish proverbs, such as *Vakit gelmeden horoz ötmez*, The cock does not crow until the time comes. So when it came time for the new guest to leave, Elena felt a bit guilty not to have not paid more attention to his name earlier on when he was introduced.

As she shook his hand, she frowned and said: "Mister..."
"Call me Jonathan," the guest answered, gazing into her eyes in a strangely significant way. However, she forgot about him later that afternoon.

In the months which followed, Elena became accustomed to Jonathan's presence in her grandparents' home on Sundays. Grandfather had really taken a shine to him. Within the 60-year-old body there seemed to be quite a youthful soul, yet a wise one with an interesting vision of the world -- which Elena realized was helping her discover a lot regarding *her own* vision of the world. It wasn't that Jonathan taught her anything but rather that she discovered inside herself concepts for which until then there had been no words. She felt she was evolving. All week long she was looking forward to Sundays.

Yet her evolution had no urgent timetable -- to understand yourself too quickly might imply you were banal.

Finally a chance came to see Jonathan outside of the bosom of the family. He mentioned that he had a couple of invitations to a private viewing at a gallery specialising in modern art, and Elena grasped this opportunity to hear his opinions in a different setting.

The exhibition consisted of broken, reassembled clocks on which dead chickens lay, some still in their plumes with boiled eggs forced into their mouths, some plucked, some roasted, though all were varnished to delay putrefaction

Jonathan commented, "*Ay gör, oruç tut; ay gör, bayram eyle.*"

"Don't count your chickens till they're hatched?" She understood him perfectly.

"And soon," he said, "*tempus fungus.*" Yes, mould would grow on the dead birds.

A young woman was carrying around a tray of drumsticks and quail eggs.

"Cluck," he said.

“Yuck,” she said.

“Would you prefer to go to a café for a latte?”

Thus the pretext of the art show evaporated, allowing them to leave rapidly for a lovely conversation about entirely different matters in a coffee house.

From that day onward, they frequently met in town. By seeing Jonathan thus, Elena began to perceive much more of herself too. His understanding of her helped her greatly to explore herself, although, as often happens, knowledge generated more enigmas than it resolved. One day, while they were lunching in a Pakistani restaurant, she said impulsively:

“There’s a question I’d like to ask, but I don’t want you to feel I’m intruding.”

“Don’t worry,” replied Jonathan. “You can’t possibly offend me.”

“Well then, in a purely hypothetical way, would you ever consider the idea of making love to someone much younger than you?”

“Woman or man?” he asked.

“I don’t know your tastes for sure, but I would more or less have thought a woman.”

“Are you asking if I could feel *interest* in a woman much younger than me -- or whether some moral imperative would prevent me from making love with her?”

“I don’t exactly know. Maybe both.”

“Mature men never stop liking young women, Elena, unless the men are brain-dead. And I can’t think of a meaningful rule that would rule out such a possibility.”

“Have you ever followed any rules when it comes to love?”

“My only rule, probably of genetic origin, is that I can only love one woman totally during my life, and once she’s been found all other women are uninteresting to me any more.”

“Oh...,” said Elena. “Your woman must be a very lucky person.”

“My opinion too. But suppose she doesn’t know?”

Elena laughed. “You’re joking!”

“In that case, I’d still be a virgin. What year is it now? Hmm, I’m positive I’ll lose my virginity within the next 40 years. Probably, when you’re my present age. It’s the universe which jokes. You too are made to love only one person, Elena.”

“How do you know that?”

“I remember the future very well.”

She laughed again. “You’re funny.”

“Not just me. It’s life which is funny.”

“I imagine one can see it like that.”

“Likewise with many tragedies. Only the fact that they’re fundamentally funny stops them from being ridiculous.”

“So now life’s a tragedy?”

“Elena, it’s the mother... or rather, the *matrioshka* of all tragedies. Open the big doll up, and it contains a more miniature tragedy – and so on. That’s what ultimately makes it funny.”

“Life can be a beautiful tragedy.”

He nodded. “If you interpret it in the right way.”

“You’ve lived a lot more than me. How have you interpreted it?”

“I’ve done my best.”

“And are you satisfied?”

“I’ve no complaints. It would make no sense to.”

“I hope I’ll be able to interpret life in the right way too myself.”

“Oh, you will.”

“How do you know?”

Jonathan winked. “I’ve been in the future and I’ve taken a peek.”

Of course she laughed again. “When *I’m* in the future, I’ll come back and tell you if you were right.”

It was Jonathan’s turn to smile. “No need! I’ll be around to listen to you when you’re old.”

“You do like to dream.”

“Don’t dreams shape reality?”

“That sounds such a cliché.”

“Dreams are ancient enough to be allowed to be clichés. After all this time they can hardly be original.”

“You always have an answer ready! There’s really no way to have the last word with you.”

Did a shadow of pain cloud his eyes?

“The last word,” he said, “is when the mother of tragedies happens.”

“So that can only happen once?”

“Once is more than enough -- once contains all other tragedies.”

“I think I understand.”

“Not yet you don’t. But there’s no hurry.”

She said archly, “Presumably you’re right about that too.”

“Being right isn’t necessarily a pleasure.”

Elena felt provocative. “Would making love with me necessarily be a pleasure?”

“*Inevitably* is a more appropriate word.”

Of course Elena did not know that their love might be a powerful necessity, but not something inevitable.

Time typically passes, and the things that must happen, usually happen. Or not. This time they did.

Elena and Jonathan had been dining together often at many exotic restaurants in the city, but on that particular evening for the first time they were in Jonathan’s flat – he’d offered to outdo those restaurants, or at least to try.

Soft light came from two tall candles on the dining table. The dinner was as extravagant as he’d promised. To describe it couldn’t possibly honour him enough since describing tastes is senseless. Yet we might mention the starters of sea urchin in lettuce parcels, since the insides of sea urchins resemble little brown labia which taste the way rockpools smell at low tide.

Sitting opposite her, Jonathan watched her with a piercing gaze, in which something was making itself manifest. Was it happiness, was it melancholy? Was the light too dim to distinguish between sadness and joy? Had she drunk too much Red Paradox Cabernet? All Elena could tell was that a strong feeling had arisen inside herself.

What Jonathan represented to her had undergone a sea-change into something rich and strange. No longer did she see the somewhat elderly person whom anyone else would have seen, but someone so rich in significations that he almost eluded objective scrutiny. Who knows how many times female eyes must have seen that profound unexpected beauty in Jonathan during his long life! Yet perhaps right now she was the only person able to perceive that beauty in its wonderful totality. She would like to think she was unique, and that to all other women, blinded by banality, Jonathan would seem merely a man of sixty-something. And she believed that he perceived her completely.

When he spoke to her he was talking to her in her entirety, not to any petty secondary part of her the way other people commonly did. When he listened to her, he heard what she was actually saying, not what ordinary listeners would hear, namely their own preconceived notions.

Communion between herself and Jonathan had become a spiritual phenomenon of absolute intensity. People are like soap bubbles which float in the air of the world. The bubbles wander at random. Every now and then they bounce against another bubble. Sometimes two bubbles fuse into a single one, bigger and more brilliant. Sooner or later all bubbles pop, shrinking to the insignificance of a droplet, but while the bright bubble endures, that’s of no importance. Right now she and Jonathan were within the wonderful bubble of communion.

When does the first kiss become inevitable? What of time itself, during the kiss which inaugurates a timeless love? What of space when the first kiss abolishes all distance? And why do questions regarding love have to sound so kitschy and commonplace?

Then their kisses diffused and diversified, and seemingly without transition the dining room became a room with a large soft bed. Clothes were a useless relic. Nothing could intrude upon the bubble of Elena and Jonathan, impenetrable for now by the ordinary world, a bubble in which warm and beautiful things were happening.

Jonathan paid attention to every inch of Elena before finally paying tribute at the ultimate shrine. The heat within the bubble crescendoed.

"I've been waiting so long for this moment," Elena murmured, her words surprising even herself. Objectively it wasn't so much time, yet of a sudden it seemed an eternity.

"I've been waiting all my life," he whispered. Indeed this was true, even though decades of life had disappeared as time-fuel.

"I already felt you were inside me for a long time. Shall we erase the gap between imagination and reality?"

"Yes, yes."

The embrace was long and very sweet and filled Elena with enchanting emotions.

She cried out, clutching Jonathan to her with all her force. In the soft aftermath she and he exchanged long effusions and sweet words.

"I love you Jonathan."

"I love you too."

"So now you've finally lost your virginity," she said with such a sweet smile.

"I've *regained* my virginity," he answered. "It isn't time yet to lose it."

"You always say such funny things."

"Why should I chose tragic things?"

"Jonathan, I've no way to compare, but I'm sure you're the perfect lover."

"It was you who taught me."

Elena gazed passionately into his eyes. Her cheeks were enflamed.

"I want you," she said from the depths of her.

And they began making love again.

Elena recalled things she'd heard about the diminished potency of elderly men. Those must be groundless legends! At least, they didn't apply to Jonathan. Very soon thought was replaced by atavistic sensations and she cried out again as her whole universe became a synonym for ultimate pleasure. How could life be so wonderful? For the rest of the night they embraced, scorning wasteful sleep, kissing, chatting, joking, loving.

As dawn brightened, the force was with Jonathan once more. Elena thought herself the luckiest girl in the world. She felt as if Jonathan were channeling power from the entire cosmos to dispense to her during this first night of love of her young life. He was the pole around which all the love of the universe gravitated and concentrated itself so as to be rhythmically pumped into her till she exploded with ultimate joy. The universe itself was loving her, and Jonathan was he whom the universe had created to show its love for her. She knew she would love Jonathan forever.

His orgasm erupted within her at the very moment when she screamed the climax of her pleasure. Their cries mingled in primordial melody which should last forever in that bubble of time.

But then came a discord – a strangled sound from Jonathan's throat as he sank heavily upon her and moved no more.

"Jonathan...?"

No answer came.

"Jonathan!"

And she understood and screamed again more loudly than ever before. Though not, this time, from pleasure.

Years later, after she met the younger Jonathan in MacDonald's, and he gabbled to her about uncertainty and indefinability, and she found his abandoned book of Turkish proverbs, she vowed that she must study Physics until she understood the nature of time.

After she met him again and a supersize customer intruded, she found his copy of *Death Kisses Me*.

He had kissed her and initiated her in the past and had died. In a way this made Jonathan's life, and their love, immortal, since unlike everybody else in the history of the world Jonathan certainly wouldn't die any year *after* he was born,. When he departed from her on his time-crusade, how would she cope with his absence? Probably that would become more obvious as the intervening years went by, likewise spent coping with his absence -- a special love demands special sacrifices, as in the case of Héloïse and Abelard, or Tristan and Isolde. Meanwhile, she had something to look forward to in later life, which was more than most people did. On no account must she go looking for Jonathan prematurely!

She redoubled her studies of Physics. Occasionally she reread *Death Kisses Me* and *The Mother of All Proverb Dictionaries*. Despite transparency and communion, she must never let the even younger Jonathan scrutinize those two books -- otherwise what fresh experience could he occupy himself with in MacDonald's? Certainly not the MacMenu.

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