

Masterslave

An autofiction novel

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Back cover text

The protagonist of *Masterslave* becomes entangled in growing paranoia and soon suspects that something is truly wrong, yet he knows no one would ever believe him. Increasingly isolated, he is finally abducted through a dating app into a torture camp. From there, he steps into a Europe without equal.

A splintered diary unfolds into a raw and poetic tale — pain-driven and contemplative, original and unsettling — in which every splinter slowly forms a whole. *Masterslave* crosses borders of style and theme, directly telling of power, vengeance, love and language pushed to its limits — never without a reason.

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The author disclaims any interpretation in which the work is read as a manual, justification or accusation. *Masterslave* is intended as an exploration of power, surrender, identity, love and language in their most limitless forms. Boundaries are tested and transgressed — but never without reflection or literary reason.

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Part 1

1

Call this a diary of a madman. Someone suffering from paranoid attacks, if you like. But I need to tell the truth. My truth. A truth I've been carrying with me for about two years now, accompanied by incidents that, to me, can only be explained by the actions of someone who is, at the very least, stalking me. I'm not asking for your sympathy. All I want is justice, whatever that may entail. Maybe all I want is your reading mind, instead of your listening ear.

I hope I finish this in time, because I'm afraid I don't have long. That fear is fed by the many incidents happening in my life lately — too many now to be coincidence.

I hear the “water hammer” again — that loud bang in the pipes after someone opens or closes a faucet. But I don't believe it's a real water hammer. It only strikes loudly when I'm sitting at my desk writing. Then I hear the loudest blows. It feels like someone is reading along with what I write. Or watching what I do.

If I have a panic attack, I'll tell you, because I suffer from those too. I'll tell you everything as honestly as I can, though of course I don't know whether my memories are distorted. Last week I read that all mental illnesses have been classified according to kinship, as if the illnesses themselves share genetics: a panic attack, a child of paranoia. I immediately thought of the taxonomy of all life on Earth and asked myself which came first: a sturgeon or a human being.

Strange, stranger, strangest — “strange” is a weird word, really. The Dutch language is wonderful, that only dawned on me late. After I had mastered Russian, I realized why every stem of a word has its branches and maybe even leaves: near, nearby, nearly, nearer, nearness, nearside, nearest, nearing ... And those stems are unimaginably thousands of years old, older than we can know, I think.

I often wonder whether language has genes too. Sometimes I hear people laugh and I think of the sound of birds; just listen closely. Children's loud screams or baby voices occasionally resemble certain birds' screeching. I also hear that our voices — the noises we make — have kinship with animal sounds and if that's true, then our voice — or the sounds we produce — must also be related to all the sounds that surround us: animals, rain, storms, hurricanes ... And maybe thunder is a brother to the noise of a volcano when it erupts.

Water hammer! There it was again and rather loud. Still, I find it odd that the loud water hammer only happens when I'm at my desk. It comes from the hall, and when I'm out in the hall I never hear anything. Sometimes I think the neighbors are doing it on purpose, but I know only lonely people blame the neighbors for everything. And that's understandable when your circle grows smaller.

2

In front of the entrance of the Hotel International in the heart of Moscow, I saw him standing there: not tall, but broad, and not gay. He was hanging around with other guards, or so it seemed. I was sold at once, walked up to him and said: “What do you have to offer?” He opened his coat, lifted his sweater up to his chest, looked at me and slipped his tongue out almost unnoticed, in an unnatural way. I thought: I must have him. His look was laconic, arrogant, and yet uncertain, or unpredictable. I beckoned him to come with me and together we walked

through the hall of the hotel, where Intourist also had its office, and I invited him into the restaurant. After he had taken off his coat and walked ahead of me to our table, I saw how great and small his contrast was. We sat down at a table overlooking the busy Manezhnaya Square and ordered the courses and champagne with vodka. We said nothing, we were silent and glanced now and then outside and at each other. Only after I had filled the glasses with champagne and spread caviar on a pancake for him and then for myself, did I ask him, while we raised our glasses and kept our eyes fixed on one another, how old he was. He answered: "I am twenty-one, and dominant," whereupon I said: "I am twenty-five, and submissive." And then we drank the glass down in one go and switched to vodka at once.

And so, I ended up more than drunk in the far east of Moscow, where he had abducted me. At any rate, I could not recall that we had agreed to go there. The taxi pulled up into a dark, grim courtyard surrounded by high grey apartment blocks and a group of twelve cocky boys and men. My first shock quickly turned into arousal, into longing for their power. The group walked toward me at the command of my tablemate — their leader. Apart from a few loitering teenagers, the courtyard was empty. He kept drawing my attention, not because he was the leader, but because he was also unsure in his dominant role. Everyone respected him, carried out what he said, but there was something that made him weak, something I saw, and it excited me.

I now feel completely freed from all my mental illnesses, but I know they can return at any moment — like my most loyal friends by now. Sometimes I even seek them out. I'll go, for example, on a weekday evening to a bar around eleven and stay until closing time, four o'clock. I often see the saddest scenes there — society's fringes. Do I belong among them? I ask myself. Lately the answer has been more often: yes! I'm slipping.

I think about language almost every day. I look up words and trace their etymology. Language — or perhaps more precisely, the presence of language — feels like a god to me, or a goddess. Every day I must think of him, or her. I feel her in my vocal cords, in her throat-sounds; in the way she moves my tongue, touches my lips; how she almost whistles when she shapes an s, how she growls deep in the cave of my mouth. Language remains a mystery, though I'm convinced we'll soon uncover much more about her — by using AI to connect all kinds of data.

I saw that the leader had a young, colossal figure at his side, who always stayed close to him. He looked straight, like everyone else, yet now and then he almost gave the leader a kiss. We entered basement of a building, dim with little light and in a state of decay. I spoke to the giant boy, who at once began calling me slave and the leader Mosk. The leader, who called him “torturer,” joined the conversation in which, after drinking a red bitter liquor, we immediately shared the most perverse fantasies. They went so far, I won't name them all here, but I will bring one out. During one of our scenes, I mentioned something about snuff movies, and the torturer immediately corrected me: “They're called snuff movies.” These are films where, whether commissioned or not, torture in the context of SM ends in actual death. I looked submissively at Master Mosk. We were just drunk — or worse. Yet I had to submit myself to the twelve, which meant that each gang member gave a hard lash across my back and at the same time the leader snatched away my passport and kept it in his custody. Through the small high windows of the basement I saw some teenagers peering, and on the wall appeared a projection of a master with slaves — their slavemaster.

I have unlearned small talk; if only I could ask ordinary things, even if it were just the way. I would love to have a casual chat with a friend or a stranger about the weather, but I dive straight into the depths; “Yes, fine weather,” becomes: “What does it matter.” At times I can drive everyone away with nothing but my glance, and not even with my

glance, with nothing but my mere appearance in a bar, for instance, I can make the place drain empty: I enter, it is lively and crowded, people talking at the bar itself and in the darkroom groping, I order a beer and look around, eyes that meet mine start to stiffen, I walk through the bar and everyone who follows me freezes in their movements; I step into the darkroom and all of them stop making love; I return to the bar, order my second beer and the bar is almost deserted. It has often been said to me that whenever I enter a place everyone turns to look, and I feel it. This is a delight on strong days — when I can make a bar fill to the brim — but not on weak days.

Today I chatted with someone who told me I would no longer be allowed to message certain profiles from a certain area — if I did, he'd beat me up. His profile was all about fighting. Just fighting. I asked him which area. He said: "Moonlightpark." It seems like I'm being funneled online. As if someone decides who I may or may not contact on gay dating apps.

3

In the late eighties, I returned from Moscow with serious health issues. Some were treatable; one lingered for years and nearly killed me and cast me into a dark yet euphoric state, as if a screen had been placed before my eyes. But I went on partying, took more drugs, more sex parties, more pleasure — because you're going to die anyway. And many around me did die. It was as if you could see them drop, like on a battlefield. I used to go to a bar about three times a week — places where no one cared about safe sex. Neither did I. We all danced the dance of death, played Russian roulette, dared fate. Until, in 1996, a trial began for triple therapy, which I was allowed to join because I met the criteria. That therapy turned out to be the Holy Grail, and the world breathed a sigh of relief. Just before the trial, I knew I was going to die. I was sick often, had infections, and was taking one or two courses of

antibiotics each month. One day, lying in bed with yet another infection, I felt a great calm descend over me, as if I surrendered to death. My whole body relaxed, and the pain was gone. In my mind, I gave myself over to death. I was ready. And after I could no longer die physically, I still wanted to die in my mind. That's when I made my first suicide attempt and ended up in the hospital anyway. Strange, I should have been happy with a new lease on life, I should have embraced it, enjoyed it. But I couldn't anymore. I could only enjoy it when I knew I was going to die.

I am addicted to pain and to the chemicals it unleashes in my brain, chemicals no drug can replace. The whipping, the blows, the pounding — it is not only psychic humiliation but also true bodily punishment. Now that I am older, I interest masters only if I can go to extremes as a slave. I can go further and I want to go further. At times I think of branding, of numbers burned into my skin.

That primal tongue that binds everything: people, cities, rites, lovers, pleasures, the lashing, the babble. Will science ever uncover that tongue — its sounds, its words — and will I live to see it? I hope at least to reach seventy-one, but that is a calculation bound to my mortgage; yes, I see myself typing it and I hear you thinking: eighteen years — and then the primal tongue exposed? Another illusion gone.

When I bought a new record by Brel, Barbara or Ferré and lost myself in a chanson, I would then look up every word I did not know. Once I knew the words, the illusion was gone; the song no longer struck me the same. Later I grew to love Ferré and Barbara more — their heavier voices matched my depressions. I did not always know this: last year, at an intake at the Jellinek clinic, I was told I had already been in treatment for mental troubles at twenty. I had forgotten. But I remember the crisis service after my first failed suicide attempt.

Moscow was the finest time of my life; I lived there in the late eighties. Before that I had already been to Moscow a few times: at seventeen as a tourist, and at twenty-four for a small guidebook on the city. For that guide I had to explore the center around the Bolshoi Theatre. I had been told to note the house numbers, but I could not find them. So I decided to draw my own map of the center, marking what stood there as far as I could see. While I was drawing — it was the time of the Cold War — a militiaman came up to me and asked what I was doing. I answered in my then still high-school Russian: “Oh, it’s for a guidebook for Latvia.” The militiaman said: “Good.”

At the moment the torturer who comes to torment me stands before me, I will recognize the guests who come to watch. They will laugh like devils, the torturer goes about his work, their rancor will bite into my wounds like the salt of an ocean; the torturer goes about his work, they ask for more, for harder, coarser, sharper, the torturer goes about his work, they turn away and leave me lying. Come, let the master care for his slave and give him what he deserves. Is this what I mean by total control, the very thing I asked of him? Now the total control. And when will total power exchange follow — even of my possessions — or has it already begun, and by whom?

Tomorrow it will be ten days since I last received a booking for my business. In 1999 I sat one evening on the roof terrace of my house in Spain, in the middle of a mountain village. I looked around and realized this village had everything: the people were kind but not intrusive, there was as yet no tourism, a few fincas had already been converted into villas with pools and many more would follow. After seven years I had gathered twenty-five holiday houses on one site. That was the basis of my business; from then on it could only grow, up to one hundred and twenty houses. I have done this work for twenty-five years now, with the rental of my own house alongside, and I have always been

reachable. That has brought me a certain isolation, but it was my own choice. Now it seems as if the isolation is being created for me. Or did I choose it after all?

To forget yourself in or through pain, to let it numb you, to be punished, humiliated ... To surrender yourself completely to someone — the master — and then forget everything through pain that dulls another pain: the real pain. In everything I see connections: the people around me, birds and people, people and trees, throat sounds and clouds, mountains and fungi, AI and a land, army and love, suffering and laughter, prophecies and lies, pandas and laziness, tenderness and lust for pain. I hope that one day the connections and the mathematical formulas, or biological data and chemical elements, will communicate with the phonemes of language, and that the primal tongue will surface — and perhaps offer a way out of this tangle of friends, enemies, neighbors, suspicion, trust, love, descendants, afflictions, hatred, vengeance, life and death. Does what I report arise from loneliness, or does loneliness arise from the search for connections between building blocks laid down four billion years ago, stacking and stacking into a castle of trust that repels suspicion and always will?

Once I was admitted to a Russian hospital. I had labyrinthitis, an inflammation of the ear, and I staggered like a drunkard. At registration I was accompanied by my Russian couple, with whom I had already spent many pleasant evenings and nights — they together, I alone, we the three. We sat in the office of the hospital's director. She hesitated whether to admit me — I had a fever of forty degrees — perhaps because I was a foreigner, or because, as I later realized, she was waiting for her grabbage (my free translation of *vzjatki*, officially bribes). Yet I was admitted, with her words: "I prefer to take him in rather than all those drunkards here." For a moment I considered calling the emergency number of my health insurance in the Netherlands, but the director would not allow it. I knew I had entered a hell, but I also knew I had to lie down. I fell onto a filthy bed, after giving my friends a

hundred dollars to buy on the black market the antibiotics the director had prescribed.

For three days I lay there sweating: cockroaches along the walls, guarding my antibiotics, while many other patients had to endure without. On the night after the third day I awoke. My head was clear. I walked through the half-dark ward with its coughing and groaning, then through the high hall to the toilet area with squat latrines that always stank, always filthy, the drainpipe to the sewer seemingly clogged for weeks. Through the half-open window that could no longer be closed I looked up into a sky so clear; every star shone toward me, seemed to enter me, to welcome me into their domain. They were seducing me, and they were good at it. I gave myself to them and spoke: “Stars, stars, in heaven, above Russia’s hospital, cockroaches, the swarming, move along the sheets in my ward ...” I became aware of Russia lying beneath those stars on the earth. Walking back through the high hall to my ward I passed open doors and saw white corpses lying. I slowed my pace, smelled death, and walked on.

The next day I fled, still feverish and unsteady, out of the hospital, ran to a trolleybus whose doors gripped me as I entered as if to say: “We see through you.” Through the metro I reached my friends who gave me shelter. One of them would inject the antibiotics into me every day, though he had never done it before, and I was able to call my health insurer. The following day an ambulance stood ready with two very kind nurses. I was driven to another hospital. As we arrived the gates opened and we drove along an avenue into a garden, with in the background the hospital that looked like the palace of Versailles. At the entrance, an ENT doctor awaited me and I could walk straight with her to her office, filled with more equipment than I had ever seen in a Dutch ENT practice. As we walked back along the wards toward the exit it seemed I was the only patient in the hospital. At least, I saw no other patients in that colossal building.

After the twelfth lash the group began to undress. On the hooks along the walls their uniforms were hanging, ready. They were going into the night shift, I thought. I looked at the leader standing beside me and saw his giant body: training every day and steroids for years, surely since before his puberty, and over it a soft white thick layer, with only an inch left, yet he smiled at me with devilish dominance, as if to say: you like it, don't you. I knew I had found my master. The torturer growled with envy. Everyone began to dress. An outfit was offered to me as well. For a moment everyone still stood naked, and it was quiet. The torturer looked at his leader, I at my master.

Often I am jealous, and I often find that arousing, exciting. But could it be that the other — the master, the leader, the slave, the torturer — also finds it exciting? In other words: jealousy can arouse not only yourself, but also the one you are jealous of. And so the leader or master can become dependent on his slave or loyal torturer. Jealousy works like a magnet between master and slave, if you will: like love between lovers. She can endure and inflict the greatest pain. Everyone knows her, but no one speaks of her. She is wholly uncharted and unfathomable. We know her effects, but not her causes. Her force is almighty. Jealous are those who tempt misfortune, who take up the fight, and even though they know it makes no sense, still go on, seeking the loss that is no real loss. Because it still exists. It still exists. It can still look at you. But it is no longer yours: it is as far away as it is near; it cries out in pain, because in that pain it knows it can exist.

I looked at the master and the torturer with jealousy. At least, I invented them that way. For the time being they were ordinary straight boys and men, some of whom gave each other more than friendly attention, which in Russia is customary after vodka or something stronger.

I find a master–slave relation more complex than I ever thought. For could a master not become just as dependent, just as addicted to his slave, so that both roles turn reversible? The slave then holds the master in his power. If one is a true sadist and he has found a masochist who meets his needs, then it may be that only that one slave can still his sadistic hunger and so makes him dependent on that one slave. And why with a slave? If the master is a sadist, could it not be with any masochist; is it not about the pain itself? But why then does a master return to his slave? That can only mean that there is love at work, on the part of the master. And that love grows as the pain grows harsher. Could this prove that the master loves his slave? Could he love him so much that he wants his slave under his total control? Could he be working toward that, and how far does that control reach? And does the slave want it himself?

I heard the water hammer again.

The master plays with his slaves and terrorizes his slave with it, or perhaps he terrorizes all his slaves and so keeps them in his grip, makes them work for him as torturers, takes from them what he can take. He can play with his slave just as his slave can play with him. Perhaps I too can bring it about that a master becomes entirely dependent on me. And even if I so badly want that dependence, does that not mean that I am his master? Or becoming his master? That interests me, and I find it compelling that everything remains open, however fixed the rules may seem.

In Moscow I discovered I had HIV. I asked a friend who worked in a hospital if he could have my blood tested through his work. He told me I should better do it under another name and suggested Maris Ozols, because I had a Latvian accent in Russian. After a week I went to pick up the result and waited in the waiting room. He called me, and we went together into the lab. He searched for the result of the blood test, began to read it, and suddenly said: “You had better leave through the back door and not the front, and quickly. You have AIDS! Have it tested again

in the Netherlands.” I was not in panic; in fact, I felt little. Because I had a residence permit for Russia I bought a return ticket to Amsterdam. Within a week I had confirmation in the Netherlands that it was indeed HIV. There was no medication yet. That was the reason I did not tell my parents. They had already lost two sons. I had to spare them. Now my parents are no longer alive.

6

Still naked, I walked toward him, very slowly, tormentingly slowly, and now it was not even two meters — I saw that he too was moving, our glances spying each other’s bodies — it was again that same look as in the heart of Moscow: the uncertainty that in each other’s gaze became certainty, certainty of searching, of overcoming, of doing what cannot be done — here among twelve members, who saw him as their leader. The torturer kept his distance, everyone kept their distance, everyone knew, everyone was witness to the coming pain of a traditional past. We had drawn close to within less than half a meter, a distance that could no longer lie, a distance already too short, for us and for the others. But no one spoke, everyone was silent. One more step and we were there, we had reached it, we kept looking at each other now, the doubt was gone, we spoke a little, to kill the shame, but it became a whisper, softer and ever softer, we hardly heard what we said, but we drew nearer and nearer, as if to whisper something in each other’s ear, to excuse our approach for the others and for ourselves. I knew nothing, he knew everything, I heard his breath, trembling breath, breath that kept going because the goal had to be reached: now our glances ... our glances let themselves for a moment sink deeply into each other, deep into freedom, deeper and deeper — there was no one else — only us. Would we kiss, would we lock lips, what was the nearness for, the intent was already to go further: shame closed our eyes, I felt the breath, the warmth of the whole body, and suddenly the lips, softly, with the

greatest hesitation, pressed upon mine — would we go further, did we go further, this could not ... yet it did ... we allowed it; the kiss was born, the unknown kiss, the numbing, caressing, painful, cutting kiss: the touch of tongues let truth come together; equal in unevenness, equal in being lost, equal in awareness of desire, equal through blood in us both: blood through a bite of the tongue, in despair for the softest and sorest instant.

So it happened that night in East Moscow that in an unforeseen haze we began to make love and he bit into my tongue — the blood-kiss — staining my chest blood-red, and I became his possession: he my master, his torturer my tormentor. It passed unnoticed, as if we had introduced this ritual by nature itself, as if it had existed for centuries. At least that is what everyone thought. It was shamanism: an incantation of fear, an old heathen rite of subjection and of power. Shamanism not handed down by tradition but by intuition, for no one here knew of its existence; it was only perceived, desired, cherished and sharpened by pain.

The twelve gang members who, after watching men making love, began kissing each other until six, struck by abrupt shame, delivered the blood-kiss, and six slaves were left with split tongues.

In the late eighties the first blood-kiss was delivered, in that block of flats on the edge of Moscow. The first rite, after which many would follow. No one knew with each new rite where it came from; it simply arose — by a group, a leader, a loner, in a bar, in a flat, in a house, in a glance, in the transfer of love where love was forbidden: through shame, desire, habit and lust for pain, like the assassin who already made his entrance then. I look back now with my eyes forward. The blood-kiss that mutes.

By then I had furnished my entire home in Amsterdam: a sling, a confinement, hooks, whips, a cage and a cross of metal ... During his unexpected visits, I surrendered to him; he did with me what he wanted. I seemed to be digging my own grave. He was still that Muscovite,

straight and hugely dominant man, with that doubt he played with because he knew it drew me in. In my mind I was more the master, he more the slave, but we did not dare to surrender to it. He did not dare to surrender himself so far as to convince himself he was straight. It was that tension that bound us and aroused us; if we let it go, we would truly enter the darkness. I served him and his manhood as the mightiest and greatest, and he whipped me to pieces for the lack of it.

Is hard SM really sex, and is sex love? Is there fear in love? If so, then there is love in pain.

I no longer feel the net around me. It is as if it has left me. I am too old and too ugly — even for a snuff movie — to be killed. Worth nothing, not even as a torture-slave, not even for death. Probably for that too, they chase the youngest and finest men — we do not know. Why do I not take the step myself? Why do I not travel to some dark profile, knowing it will be my end? Shall I go? Can I find him there? It is easily arranged. I have had invitations many times in which everything was clear between the words. But I always turned them down. Once — and that one was serious — a profile invited me to a small village in Eastern Europe. I had to report to a guesthouse and be examined ...

Would Master Mosk also keep contact with dark profiles — with a profile seated on a throne, with the unknown master-profile that follows me, with the many torturer-profiles that have visited me? Do they too serve him as torturers through the net, going further — even further than the master himself? Does he hold them in his power, does he make them train slaves for him as well? And for what, for what end?

I am already caught in a net — perhaps many are caught in that net.