

*Tattered  
Relations*



ESA ESANDER



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# **Tattered Relations**

“Wise men avoid falling in love because they know the risk.

Then I met you, and suddenly my life began.”

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## FEBRUARY

It is early Tuesday evening in the second week of February. The clock is approaching eight and, damn it, everything inside my head hurts terribly, to freely quote poet Laine. At home I have been gulping down a few glasses of the cheapest Italian boxed red wine, stale-tasting stuff whose flavor improves only after the third glass. Both wine glasses inherited from my mother are dirty in the dishwasher. The missing four were hurled against the kitchen wall years ago by my ex-wife after she heard I had cheated on her. The shards never restored our happiness.

My head starts overflowing with supposedly logical thoughts born from a drunken mind. Obsessive thoughts, really. The wine pulled the plug loose. I can feel my joy for life disappearing down the dark sewer of jealousy. I feel nothing but pain and hatred.

When we met at the gym earlier today, my ex-woman's thoughts were clearly somewhere else. Her behavior gave it away. The more I drink, the more the anger and bitterness born from uncertainty rise to the surface. Do I know my ex-woman at all? Is my suspicion, right? Damn it, I'm going to find out, rage forces me into motion. I love pain; it means the heart is still beating.

"It's absolutely wonderful here in Seal Bay," the woman said one summer morning at my home after a wild round of morning sex. For a moment the chick thought she was in her old home, making love with her ex. Realizing the present, she looked at me awkwardly for a second, then immediately took control.

"Jari, you're allowed to say the wrong name sometimes too."

That settled it. No point apologizing. These things happen? At its best, fucking takes you to nirvana. You forget who is doing the fucking. Do I fuck you the same way your ex did? No point thinking about it. Look at the bigger picture, Jari, I've learned. If you live, you experience things.

I blow into an uncalibrated lucky drunk's breathalyzer: 0.36 per mille, nowhere near illegal. I live a few kilometers from my ex-woman's apartment. A lovesick detective awakens inside me, forcing me to investigate whether the woman who left me has a new man — something I sensed today at the gym.

Who are you showing that light to now, the light I had ignited in you during the past year, as I often did. I cannot get into the woman's apartment to check. I do not even want to. I have been blocked in every possible way. I understand the reasons for the blocking. The endless WhatsApp repetition of clichés like "I love you and you're so wonderful" exhausted that beauty.

With tears in my throat, I head near her home to relive the months we shared together. It is 10 p.m. The alcohol level in my blood is still rising because my liver is no efficient drunkard's furnace. I've lost count of the wine glasses. Completely normal. The investigation born from jealousy must continue at the crime scene. A little drunkenness will not ruin this stalking trip — unless the police do. Unlikely, since they have more important things to do, like hauling drunks to the drunk tank.

I arrive in my ex's neighborhood and park my car a little farther away. It is a typical February evening: damp snow, windless frost. Silence surrounds me. The only sound I hear is the relentless humming wave inside my head, unleashed by overwhelming rage.

I stand at the edge of a small patch of forest, facing red-brick houses designed by a well-known architectural firm. Money buys individuality: flat-roofed boxes fitted with square windows. Lazy uniqueness. I stare relentlessly at the kitchen window of an apartment on the second floor of a three-story residential building in Westend. The venetian blinds are lowered and partly shut.

I want to know what is happening in that apartment right now. Is there some damn tomcat visiting her? Through the gaps in the blinds, I can make out the seagull-shaped lamp. I have lowered, raised, closed, and opened those blinds dozens of times. For different reasons. The view from the window is breathtaking and unobstructed, so there has always

been a clear and special reason for closing them. The windows of the neighboring building in the same housing complex sit slightly diagonally to the right, so the blinds keep the third-floor neighbor from peeking inside when it is dark outside and the lights are on indoors.

I spent dozens of nights in that apartment, month after month. Usually, I sat on the couch in a T-shirt, wearing the light blue soft lounge shorts the woman had bought for me. No underwear. In the evenings we watched some streaming series together. The woman sat on the floor in front of me, between my legs, leaning against the couch. I often massaged her shoulders. Whenever she became excited, the owner of the apartment would turn toward me and pull my shorts down to my ankles, stretch both hands behind my back, and slowly take my gradually hardening cock deep into her mouth. The woman enjoyed giving me pleasure. We used the blinds to prevent the neighbor from spying on our games of love, the delicious little obscenities of everyday life.

Over the months we spent together, I learned that real desire increases the sexual potency of a sixty-five-year-old man like me. By nature's own method. In the mornings, when I got out of bed, I would open the kitchen blinds slightly. Wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt, I sat at the table with my morning coffee, bringing food over from the pale wooden kitchen counter.

A few weeks have passed since my last visit to the apartment — to its hallway. I came to collect the rest of my belongings. I had been thrown out of our relationship. As we exchanged shopping bags in the hallway, you still wanted one last kiss. You leaned casually against the edge of the hallway counter and received my kiss just as before. You pressed your hips against me. This was your way of saying goodbye. Teasing me with passionate kisses.

I can still feel that kiss, and the thousands before it. You cannot store kisses, embraces, fucking, or holding hands in a warehouse — only in memory, from where they gradually fade into the mixed-waste landfill of recollections. Without acts of love, kisses, touch, a human being begins to wither and decay. A man's cock wilts from uselessness.

You and I lived for months on the same frequency of love. We nourished each other's affection. It showed in us whenever we were together, and it could be sensed even when we were apart. We radiated happiness and pleasure. Your beautiful expressive face, capable of turning into a smile in an instant, was your natural state. I loved you with all my heart, and you in your own golden way, because I learned that showing genuine emotions is difficult for you.

I shiver in the bushes of Westend. Surely a man is allowed to behave foolishly when he is crazed by jealousy, not fully responsible for himself, drunk on wine, for fuck's sake. Passion and the fever of longing are doing their work on me. Half my life has been taken away. I have been abandoned. Retired from a happy relationship. I want to know who the hell took my woman from me. Your new love — though a new man is probably nothing of the sort. He has simply been lucky enough to climb onto my woman. What kind of man entered my ex's barn after me? Younger, at least, and I doubt there was any polite handshake in the hallway. Definitely not. Straight to bed — my imagination tortures me.

In my confused mind, a supposedly clever idea emerges. I go to the parking lot to see whether there is a strange car there, one I have never seen before. My car belongs there, for fuck's sake. In the middle guest parking space stands an ancient BMW X5. Parked squarely in the center of the spot. I have never seen that car before. I have parked my own car in those spaces dozens of times overnight, sometimes even for several days. I know exactly which cars and brands have been stored there alongside my old Audi.

Marinated in poisonous jealousy, detective Jari Holmes takes a photo of the BMW's license plate. The vehicle belongs to Sebastian, an intelligent marine engineering engineer. Social media reveals the handsome man is fifty-nine years old and still active in working life. Years younger than me. That is exactly what my woman calculated — there has to be potential to live an active life together for years ahead. Your obsession is trying out new men. I am too old. Though sometimes I wasn't, back when you did not want to hang around dating apps advertising yourself.

I feel triumphant. I have uncovered something I wanted to know. I wonder what connects the owner of the BMW to my ex-woman. The housing company has dozens of apartments. What the hell is it to me what you, a grown woman, do with your life? Why am I behaving this sickly? I need treatment! Perhaps it should begin with a lobotomy, cutting out the center of my emotions. And if that does not help, then we can try something even stronger.

My ex-woman is more — better, sexier, more beautiful, more intelligent, more complete — than anything I had ever experienced before. The renewer of my life. A love carved deep into the soul cannot simply be switched off by the abandoned party. A total fury of frustration tightens around me; my heart pounds. Now truth itself has become synonymous with pain.

Earlier today I sensed that someone else will be closing your venetian blinds from now on, although blinds themselves were not on my mind at the time. I had seen you — now my ex-woman — cheerful at the gym. Your beautiful flawless face radiated happiness; it had been cared for.

When I drove into the parking garage, I noticed my ex had had her car washed — something that for her is a signal of an upcoming encounter. When we met at the gym, she cheerfully said, “Next I’m going for a foot treatment.”

That treatment affects every part of the body. I have tried it myself. You can feel it in your balls when the pedicurist presses the nerve endings in the soles of your feet.

As she left the gym, my ex-woman walked up to me and said, “Ciao and bye.” Her gym bag swung toward my crotch. She glanced at me, and on her face, there was a flicker of pity and superiority. The groomed, cheerful female figure disappeared energetically toward the exit. She does not care at all how I feel? She is thinking only: here comes spring and fun men. A newly available woman, ready for all kinds of pleasure.

When we broke up, I realized that a new experience awaited her tonight. During our months of intense togetherness, I had learned to read her moods, her feelings, her thoughts, her gaze; to listen to her speech and

words and interpret their meanings; to observe her presence and behavior in different situations.

At the gym I continue grinding through chest exercises with clenched teeth, trying to suffocate the burning pain and loss inside me. I know that all the tenderness and physical intimacy we once shared will disappear into the fog of forgetfulness once my ex-woman has vanished from my life. Something light and new for her; the heaviness of abandonment for me.

The woman wants to enjoy you men one cock at a time, I imagine. These thoughts do nothing to warm my body as I stand completely alone in the freezing Westend night. I shiver from the cold. An aura migraine begins shaking my head.

The agonizing experiences of separation are nothing new to me, an aging man wallowing in bitterness and self-pity, chilled to the bone. Women have left me in every possible way. By text message, by email, by phone call, by blocking me, by saying it to my face, by disappearing without a word, and once, long ago in my youth, by letter. Without warning, out of spite, because of a spouse or a new partner, for revenge, or simply because that was how they felt.

My toes curl in pain, my fingers are numb. I continue the desperate and pointless surveillance of the apartment. The icy wind blowing from the sea freezes my balls. Let them drop uselessly into the snow. I need to piss more and more, and my mind roars: "Be a man. At your age you should have learned to endure life's setbacks."

I suppose I am neither an adult nor much of a man, because being abandoned only pisses me off more as I grow older. Adult dating games are a brutal world where people chase love — or something resembling it. To love and to be loved. The world is full of love that never meets its target, glances that pass by, cancelled encounters, abandonments, hopes of being embraced, accepted, receiving a morning kiss, sharing morning coffee, receiving tenderness or giving sex to a loved one from behind or from whatever angle the moment demands.

Everyone has their own love story. The story of my life ended a little while ago. My woman sawed me off from herself for good. Never say never, they say. But now there is no way back to what once was. Ahead lies total darkness, emptiness, and loneliness. Morning coffees forever alone.

I parked my car farther away because every resident in the housing company recognizes my faded yellow, worn-out Audi and knows how it is connected to the woman on the second floor.

Across from my ex's home, on the third floor, lives my former supervisor Rauno, whom I often met out in the yard as we reminisced about our years working together. The encounters were nothing unusual, since I visited the woman frequently and we often went walking together. I still occasionally run into Rauno, a gifted intellectual in many ways, at the daytime coffee gatherings of retired old men reliving their youth.

I feel like I am standing on the outer edge of my own life, staring blankly at the woman's illuminated window, holding back a scream of nighttime misery. My head is numb from longing and wine. My upper stomach cramps violently. Both my gut and my skull feel as though they are collapsing like dead stars.

All our wonderful, shared memories have been washed away. In their place, hopeless longing and poisonous jealousy burst from the folds of my brain. The woman left my side without warning. Shock, rage, and fury paralyzed me. As a special education teacher, she had thoroughly lectured me about feelings of anger and how one should learn to control them. With just a few words she shattered my life into pieces.

It feels as though a bone-dry breakup bun has lodged in my throat and I am beginning to choke. Help me now, for fuck's sake. Doesn't anyone know how to help? Therapy?

"How do you feel now, Jari? Could you share your sorrow with those of us present? Please, thank you."

"No, I fucking can't. There are no words."

I do not know how to put this misery into language. Not in Finnish, not in any dictionary, are there words capable of describing this feeling.

I realize sorrow is not bottomless after all, because now, standing on trembling legs in the snowy bushes of Westend, I know I have reached absolute bottom. I must be a delusional criminal or something worse. The building stands far away, yet it feels like a massive weight collapsing on top of me, a confident and hostile beast ready to swallow a paranoid stalker whole while defending its resident. All the other windows in the building are dark, as they should be in a true sleeping suburb. In the neighboring building, Rauno is asleep, because at home he lives a very regular life. Business trips were something else entirely.

The woman is usually not active this late at night; the kitchen lights normally go out by 10:30 p.m. at the latest, after which the beauty who takes care of herself goes to bed. But tonight the lights are still on, even though it is already eleven. I have been shivering here for an hour. Staring at whether my ex's lights remain on. Am I going crazy? I probably already am.

I stop reminiscing and spying in the woods and walk back to my car. I have been thrown out of a loving relationship. Once again, I am an old man living alone. I can feel an overwhelming wave of grief rising inside me; my body trembles, my upper stomach tightens. Where could I get help?

Cold and numbed by descending drunkenness, I drive home gripping the steering wheel with frozen hands. Snow falls one flake at a time. The weather does not make driving difficult. Then, as if from nowhere, a police car pulls out from a side street and begins following me.

Hell.

I am a drunk driver, only meters away from getting caught. Instantly I check my speed, the headlights, my lane position. I breathe deeply, keep both hands firmly on the wheel, and stare straight ahead.

I see myself on the front page of a tabloid:

“Blind drunk, jealousy-crazed stalker crashes into lamppost in Espoo.”

We drive one behind the other along the park road in Westend before the police car accelerates toward the motorway ramp while I turn left toward home. A DUI arrest would have crowned the entire hellish day. Maybe I would have gotten treatment that way, I think.

At home I pour a full glass of wine down my throat — the red wine on the table now warm and turning to vinegar — and collapse onto the bed.

I wake the next morning around six with my head pounding. Sleep came only in short fragments — tossing around, searching for the right position, which in a pre-psychotic state is pointless because no such position exists. Into the mind of the jealous and groggy detective pops yet another idea. I will drive to the sleeping suburb of Westend to see what is happening there now. When alone, the woman sleeps at least until eight or nine. The insane thought is to go and shadow whether my ex is already awake.

Pain pounds at my forehead trying to break into my hungover skull, but 600 milligrams of ibuprofen softens it and my body turns cottony. I pack my training clothes because there is a gym nearby where I can try to suffocate my emotions by tormenting myself physically.

Last night I suspected my former love had another man in her apartment. The jealousy triggered by that — the loss, defeat, abandonment, the forced suppression of passion — is the worst poison imaginable for this male. I wonder what kind of woman she really is. In thirty seconds, she traded our functioning love for a dating app and returned to the starting blocks of building relationships. Accepting this is impossible for me. I cannot swallow it no matter how hard I try. Too large a piece to gulp down at once. I feel myself choking. The thought tastes so awful I cannot even chew it. Spitting it out does not help because everything exists only inside my head, a hellish, immaterial feeling.

“Write it away,” someone once said.

But a litany of curse words would not be literature — only pure dadaism, subconscious chaos.

I dress warmly and as unrecognizably as possible. I park my car in the same place as during the night. It is a little after seven. The windows of all the nearby buildings are still dark, but lights burn in my ex's kitchen and living room. Through the gap in the downward-tilted blinds I see a figure sitting beside the kitchen window. That is where she likes to spend time, writing work-related things and occasionally gazing outside.

My conscience babbles:

“Stop it, Jari. You lost. Why torture yourself? Go home. For months you got to ride this roller coaster of love, passion, breakups, and kisses coated in surprises. You were abandoned, yes, but you also experienced so much beauty in life.”

My conscience continues, trying to comfort me:

“Your life, your relationship, was filled with joy and happiness during those last three months. It is a shame that the execution of your emotional life happened so suddenly. You could not prepare for separation, just as no one in war can prepare for the bullet that kills them. It strikes without announcing the time beforehand.”

A person unexpectedly abandoned in a relationship sinks into a coma. Emotional life shuts down, but the heart keeps beating. And for absolutely nothing? Of course not, because life itself is nothing but pure suffering.

My reason, slowly stirring awake in the freezing air, keeps repeating:

“Jari, raise your eyes from your feet and look forward. Accept reality. Try to grow beyond this. Keep living. One day, you will find new love.”

I laugh quietly inside my head.

“My conscience, you do not know your master, and for fuck's sake, be quiet. I must fight this one-man war against myself all the way to the

end. The back wall of the hatred gnawing at me is nowhere near yet. I want to lean into the hatred. Feel its presence. I will stop only when hatred feels familiar and safe. At least it is something to feel, think about, despise. I enjoy bitterness. All of them are better than an empty, thoughtless head. The woman taught me to love hatred, and I want to be a model student."

I walk from my spying place to the parking lot of my ex's housing complex. Yesterday's old BMW is gone. Fresh tire tracks in the lightly snow-covered ground reveal that my woman's new cock has departed.

The cock left the building. Leaving behind the bed heated by the woman, where she remained alone dreaming.

You had drunk your morning coffees together, and your first night was probably pleasurable. Awareness of the events unleashes fury that surges through my body, washing over every cell. I am skiing down the pitch-black slope of lost love.

I slink away from the parking lot toward my car and, through the gap between the buildings, catch one final glimpse: the light goes out in the woman's kitchen. I imagine my ex walking back to her warm bed perfumed with the scent of lovemaking. She stretches for a moment and tries to let sleep embrace her once again, with the fresh memory of morning sex lingering in her mind.

I sit down in my car. A light flashes on my phone screen. I have received an email. The time is 7:30 a.m.

"Jari, I have started seeing another man. You and I will never meet again or get back together. Take care. — E."

My ex has written a self-assured summary of the love-filled night she just spent. The woman has found the right one. A new alpha male has entered her life. She tested — that is, fucked — the new man for one night and decided he would become a longer-term partner. My ex is infuriatingly open. You are seeing each other, making love, existing together.

Tattered Relationships by Esa Esander is an emotionally intense contemporary novel exploring modern relationships, aging, jealousy, sexuality, and the desperate human need for intimacy. Jari, a sixty-five-year-old divorced entrepreneur, believes life and passion are already behind him—until he meets Emilia. She is a charismatic and intelligent woman who awakens emotions he thought were long gone. What begins as a hopeful late-life romance slowly turns into an addictive emotional roller coaster filled with longing, erotic tension, vulnerability, heartbreak, and obsession. The novel dives fearlessly into the modern dating culture among older adults, which is rapidly shifting as more seniors look for companionship later in life. Re-entering this scene often requires rediscovering sexuality and intimacy after divorce, a process that can bring up deep-seated vulnerabilities regarding body image and aging. However, these new relationships are frequently complicated by past emotional baggage, causing issues like dependency, jealousy, a profound sense of loneliness, and the fear of abandonment to resurface. Despite these psychological hurdles, the primary driving force for most seniors remains the timeless search for genuine human connection. Esander's writing combines psychological depth, raw honesty, erotic tension, dark humor, and emotional realism. The result is a gripping and deeply human story about people trying to love—and survive love—later in life. Some connections leave beautiful scars.

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