

Here

Joke van Leeuwen

An extract

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Translator Jonathan Reeder

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The Dog

1

Patriarch can no longer stand. Ever since being forced into early retirement, his body has continued to bloat unabated, and his knees cannot support the kilos. His son Bardo has built a bed for him that takes up nearly half the back room. Bardo wants to call the doctor from the neighboring town, but his father will have no truck with doctors, he says they're all quacks.

Mistrust was his job.

Since then, Patriarch has camped out on that bed, usually propped halfway upright amidst a landscape of pillows, facing the television at the foot of the bed and the mirror next to it, whose reflection offers a view through the narrow window. He sees the hills on the horizon and, a short distance from their house, the bare concrete rectangle on which his customs booth once stood, along the road that dead-ends against a tall fence. Back when the boom barrier was still there, he would occasionally speak to the border police of the neighboring country, but he never went any further than that. He felt it unnecessary, because it was not his country.

In his first bedridden years he manages to drag himself across the floor, through the door to the narrow corridor that leads to the W.C. and shower stall. He can hoist himself up onto the toilet or onto the reinforced stool under the shower tap. Bardo has tried to finagle a wheelchair so he can go outside, but there is no wheelchair his father's size in their country. He doesn't want one anyway, the mirror at the foot of the bed allows him to see a slice of the world. That is enough.

Later—Little One has already been born—he can no longer get out of bed, or perhaps he no longer wants people to see him crawling across the floor, so undignified without a decent uniform.

For years now, the television broadcasts a quiz show following the head of state's weekly speech. He never misses these programs: the speech because he likes to talk back at it, and the quiz because he claims he learns something, and wants to see what kind of imported prizes the winners get to take home with them, for instance a transistor radio with an antenna and a handgrip so you can carry it with you on a walk, or a spin-dryer with an opening at the top where you mustn't put your arm while it's spinning, or it will get ripped off.

- Bardo! Bardo!
- Yes, what is it?
- Did you know that the female peregrine falcon is much larger and heavier than the male?

- Is that why you called me?
- You wouldn't expect that, would you?
- I don't expect anything from peregrine falcons, I've never expected anything from peregrine falcons, I don't have the least desire to expect anything from peregrine falcons, and can I go now?

2

Patriarch is almost forty, and is still standing on both feet when he is assigned to work as a state-licensed border patrol agent and must move to a region he has no bond with whatsoever, because, according to his superiors, too many acquaintances nearby could tempt to him to look the other way now and again, even though he himself has no compulsion at all to do so, on the contrary, but rules are rules. So this is how he ended up here, on the other side of the country, close to the town with the two festivals. Onna, his much younger wife, having just given birth to Bardo, has followed him, her aversion hidden behind her eyes, but as soon as the furniture has been given a place, she at once begins weeding the neglected yard. In the middle of the grassy plot you can see from the kitchen, she tills bare a circle of earth and places a low chicken-wire fence around it, so the plants that moved here with them can get used to their new ground undisturbed.

As she digs out small hollows for their roots with a spoon, she thinks of the acquaintances in her hometown, the new experiences they will share amongst themselves, for which her ears here are too far away. Slowly but surely, her absence will no longer be an absence, and the memories of her will shrivel to a few trivial but persistent anecdotes:

- That once, in the house of a friend, she was unable to find the toilet in time and the next day the whole class knew about it.

- That she, wholly contrary to tradition, did not wait patiently but wrote a futile letter to a boy who had so filled her blossoming body to its furthest extremities with yearning that there was no place left for food.

- That during the buffet in celebration of their wedding, while everyone with a full plate in one hand, a drink in the other, and fork and knife tucked in their armpit searched for a landing spot, her husband's old pals from the orphanage started yelling 'Yum, yum, pig's bum' much too loudly.

Folks here know far better where they are.

As a small boy, when he sits on Onna's broad lap, Bardo likes to put his fingers into the damp cleft between her breasts. And if he lays his head on the cushion of her belly, he feels the swell of her breath under her dress with its sweet, sweaty smell and sometimes hears her intestines gurgle softly while she tousles his thin hair. Then he knows for sure that life is a treat, with a mother who tousles his hair like that and a father who puts those neat rubber stamps on inscrutable papers.

He is eight years old and can already tell time, for instance when his mother bicycles to the afternoon market in the village every Wednesday. He watches as she cycles off, her back erect and stately in a bright green jacket, her hands on the high handlebars.

This makes the dog that lives in a cage behind the border patrol house restless. Patriarch bought and trained him a year earlier, because his superiors felt that the border crossing where he worked was too insignificant to warrant two patrolmen. His dog is a four-footed colleague who helps him intercept smugglers, which in his estimation is a crucial secondary function but one his

superiors pooh-pooh, they call it nickel-and-dime work. He named his dog Dog, because any other name might suggest a mutual relationship outside their work, and he does not want people to refer to him and his dog in this way.

Bardo never goes to the market with his mother, because if he sits on the back of her bicycle with his feet in the floppy double saddlebags there won't be enough room left for the groceries. He knows that he will be home alone for an hour, and that his father is just over there in the border patrol house and must not be disturbed, unless it is absolutely necessary.

Usually it is not absolutely necessary.

He lies on the sofa for a bit, staring at the ceiling, and imagines he can walk on it like the flies, past the hanging lamp that, upside-down, becomes a toadstool. Then he ambles through the door to the back room with the narrow window in the corner, which lets in less light than the large one in the front room.

There is a desk where his father seldom sits and that his mother is not allowed to use, because the back room is not her territory. To write something, she either sits at the kitchen table or on the sofa, bent over the coffee table, which is shaped like a painter's palette with a larger-than-life-sized thumbhole.

He gets a soft ball from his bedroom and tries to lob it into the hole in the coffee table, again and again: lob, fetch, lob, fetch, and every time he aims well, he cheers for himself as though he is a crowd.

He stops abruptly, he has had enough, he lies back on the sofa and looks out the window at the hasty clouds. The quiet inside hums, until the clock with a sun and a moon on its face rattles and strikes the new hour.

His mother should be back, but she has not come.

He walks to the border patrol house to tell his father she's not there yet, and inside he sees a strange woman, her head bowed, standing next to the wood stove, on a plastic sheet with roses. Something oily drips out from under her clothes, down her legs and into her shoes. His father looks at her as if this is how it should be and does not notice his son.

Maybe what he wanted to tell him wasn't necessary enough to disturb him. Maybe what he is doing with that woman really is necessary.

In his parents' bedroom he opens the wardrobe with his mother's dresses. On the inside of the door is a full-length mirror. He hitches up his school shirt and his undershirt, examines close up how his breathing makes the bulge that is his small belly move up and down, and thinks of the woman on that oily sheet.

His mother is still not there yet.

Again he walks out to his father. Halfway there, he sees him running toward him and that the dog behind the border patrol house can no longer hold in his pee.

They drive to a city twenty kilometers from the town. There's a hospital there, with a sickly smell in the corridors. Patients in beds on wheels, parked in the corridor, are waiting their turn to disappear behind a door, and his father also disappears behind a door and leaves him behind on a bench in a waiting area. A nurse takes him under her wing, she is nice to him, her breath smells sour, she strokes his hair, which is something only his mother is allowed to do.

She was sideswiped, he hears, but he does not know what they mean by that, swipe is taking something that isn't yours, how can you swipe someone's side.

Five days later, the coffin with Onna inside is lowered into a hole on the other side of the country. Onna's family and all the people she used to know have to walk past and throw a bit of dirt onto his mother. The wind tousles his hair.

Now you have to be grown-up, Patriarch says when they get home.

Later, this is the image Bardo sees before him: his mother cycles off, dignified, on the bike saddle hidden by her backside, she glances back at him, but her loving gaze is just as faded as on the snapshot his father once pinned against the wallpaper, with a thumbtack straight through her perm.

The superiors

3

Opportunities, Bardo argues, but Patriarch thinks it is irresponsible to give one's manpower to the neighboring country just for the sake of money, while he'll be treated like a second-class person there and so much needs to be done here. Is this what he's allowing to happen to him, is he being swayed by his girlfriend, the one whose ribs you can count, because she also works across the border, or by the mentality there, while his own head of state, in his weekly televised speech, condemns as turncoats those who have allowed themselves to be brainwashed by the other side, and that such things could mean the end of what he called One's Own Being? Those people in the neighboring country, moreover, are not the least bit interested in what we have to offer here, he says, except when they controlled the industry and the brown coal mine that they abandoned when it stopped being profitable, and they didn't even turn it into a lake like they'd promised, and surely Bardo is fond of his country's own traditions? Those folks over there have absolutely no such warm traditions, well, yes, they have something or other to do with chocolate, and a greasy dish that cements their insides shut as soon as they've swallowed it, but this isn't nearly as fine a way of expressing solidarity, if they even have any, as traditions here, for instance simply throwing soft textile balls at things during the spring festival or eating pastries in the colors of the national flag together, and singing a song that everyone knows the words to, even if they don't understand what it all means, but no matter, because even though it might not seem like much, sharing experiences works just fine with soft balls and a song, which those people over there lack and are therefore lonelier, even with their spin-dryers instead of wringers, and those insane potato-peeling gadgets, while nearly everyone has been given hands and fingers to hold a paring knife with and can peel their potatoes much more precisely than those machines that hurl the potatoes around in the hope that some bits of peel will fly off—loneliness is a big problem there, you know, sometimes they find dead people who have been lying there dead for a year without anyone knowing, that kind of thing doesn't happen here; here, we have solidarity, doesn't that include Bardo, too? And didn't he get to study here? He's got his country and its taxpayers to thank for that, after all, and he mustn't think this country is lagging behind the neighbors, it only looks that way, and by the way, the world's oldest water mill is here, not far from the orphanage where he grew up, they used to go there on field trips, that thing still works, you know, you have to have respect for that, instead of him, the son of a state-licensed border patrol officer, doing just what the others do, while he tries to point out the consequences of someone who comes cycling back over the border with, say, a new hair dryer, because hair dryers are cheaper in the neighboring country—and that's allowed, everyone is free to bring a new hair dryer over the border, even though the head of state has plans to cut back on imports, to give this country's own products more of a chance—so that if someone crosses the

border with one of those things, he will stop that person, usually a woman, and ask why she felt it necessary to buy a hair dryer in the next country, an apparatus requiring an electrical socket, while wet hair just dries by itself, has she ever met anyone with wet hair that never dried, someone whose hair stayed wet their whole life? Does she stop to think that the energy being used because she can't just wait patiently for her hair to dry by itself is then not available for another use, while energy is a costly commodity and it's no surprise that the utilities sometimes break down?

Then he lets a person like that cycle off.

But at least he's said it.

4

The address Mara had given Bardo is an hour's journey from the border.

On the other side of the boom barrier the road crosses another, wider, one that leads to the small city where Mara works and from where a bus leaves every hour for the provincial capital. The roads in the neighboring country are well maintained, there are hardly any cracks or potholes, which, says Patriarch, only makes people drive faster and cause more fatal accidents, therefore potholes are actually more conducive to road safety.

They have agreed to meet at the bus station, Mara will go there after work to see him off. The men who had given her the address are only at the house in the weekend, so although it's Wednesday and he will probably be back again soon, she wants this to be a way to get used to the idea that her Bardo will be somewhere she has never been. Nor he himself, for that matter. He has only been in the small city where she stands behind the glass showcase of jewelry once before.

That was twelve years ago, when his mother was cross with Patriarch and showed it by doing what he forbade her to do: she crossed the border on her bicycle, little Bardo on the back, one leg in each saddlebag, his fists squeezing two pleats into her bright green jacket.

He stared wide-eyed at the mannequins in the shop windows; their faces were not peeling and they had real hair, not painted-on. There was a live woman in the middle of it all, wearing funny oversized socks, who had undressed two of the mannequins. He had gawked at the smooth bodies, he had never seen a real woman naked before, so he thought the mannequins were made to look like real women and that breasts were just bare bulges and there was nothing between their legs except a patch of tautly-pulled skin.

He and his mother walked hand-in-hand into the department store. An escalator raced upward, he wanted to go up on his own, but he hesitated, the stairs did not wait for him. He grabbed hold of the handrail, felt it pull him upward, lost his balance and fell back against his mother's body.

These things are dangerous, she said, and we were given legs so we can walk up stairs ourselves.

One floor higher, she directed him back down and held onto him, against his will, until he had to jump onto the floor.

People have been killed on escalators, she said, they got their scarf caught in them or fell into something, escalators can't be trusted, we're lucky not to have them, but there, now you know they exist, just don't tell your father you've been on one.

They did not buy anything, she said they would have to exchange money for that, but she had seen so many nice pointless things that she felt like buying something pointless, just for the sake of it.

Bardo did not yet know what the word pointless meant, but if it was for sale, he wanted something pointless, too.

They cycled back when it started getting dark, his jacket flapping in the wind.

Look at the lights, she said, those adverts. Do you see? It's like shouting, they shout here with light.

Behind a streaked window, Bardo waits for the bus to take him to the provincial capital. Outside, Mara gestures with her arms and hands but he can't make out what she means. They wait for the when the time comes for them to wave.

Once outside the small city, he watches the landscape slide past; it is flatter than in his own country, and there is noticeably more traffic on the road. The bus is one-quarter full. Diagonally across from him sit two boisterous men who laugh at what they say before they've finished saying it. They are drinking beer; he can smell it.

He dozes off and bolts awake when the bus rides into the city, down a street with such narrow sidewalks that he could peer into people's houses if they didn't have heavy lace curtains in all the windows. All he sees now are the stiff houseplants standing indestructibly in a row on the windowsills.

He gets out at a large bus station. There is a city map, behind glass on which someone has scrawled an illegible slogan over an entire outlying district. The house on the slip of paper turns out to be in a neighborhood that the bus has already driven through.

Three quarters of an hour later he stands before a narrow row house. A scrap of faded cotton covers the window from the inside, the pane is grimy, as though no one lives there, but the doorbell works.