

Daughter

Lenny Peeters

An extract pp 5-22

Original title Dochter
Publisher Prometheus, 2017

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Laura Vroomen

© Lenny Peeters/Laura Vroomen/Prometheus/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

I stick the knife into the ground and wipe my hands on my jumper. It wasn't even all that difficult. Except at the back of the neck, where I had to press a bit harder. The rest was easy enough.

The spotted guinea pig sniffs the upturned soil. When it suddenly sits up and tilts its head, I stand still. Footsteps. Around the house. They move away again.

I quickly carry on, fill up the hole and place pebbles in pretty circles on the stamped-down soil.

The spotted one is gone before the first cars arrive. I hear screeching brakes. Voices and shouting. Blue light fills the garden.

'What's your name?' Ordinary words, but they sound dark. I'd better watch out.

'What's your name?'

Daughter, I think to myself. Daughter, of course.

The woman asks me where I live. In our house. That of father and me. There's more she wants to know. Where I'm from. I shrug my shoulders. When I was born. Quite a while ago. When the garden was still full of medicine flowers. I used the petals to treat the guinea pigs. Every day at the same time. I no longer do that now. And in the vegetable garden the rabbits and wild goats have gobbled up the last of the veggies. Nettles and coarse grass are all that grows there now.

She asks if I work. Of course I work. There's always plenty to do around the house. She asks what happened and why. I look at my boots. I want to take them off and scratch my feet, but I don't know how with these bags around my hands.

'Silence won't get you anywhere.' She raises her finger the way father used to do when he was angry. Sometimes he'd wag it in front of my eyes. And then I'd find it even harder to listen.

She wants the whole story. From the beginning, she says. From this morning. 'You got up. You had breakfast. And then what?'

The cuckoo calls.

I count.

'Three?'

Father shakes the carrots he's pulled out of the ground and wipes them clean on his trousers.

'Five,' he says. 'Not long now and you'll be just as good at it as me.'

He leans his rake against the fence around the vegetable garden and makes his way to the kitchen with the carrots and a handful of French beans. His trouser pockets are bulging with potatoes. I wait for him to pull the door shut behind him.

It's time.

I sweep aside the leaves and twigs under the oak tree and open my box of things. There were slippers in it before. Father brought them home in the wheelbarrow. Two large slippers with teeth made of fabric and furry ears. 'Rabbit heads,' father said. No way. Rabbits are brown or white or black. Never pink. Father ought to know that.

The fur looked soft, like the tiny feathers birds lose, but when father put the slippers on me and the rabbit ears touched my feet I screamed. It felt as if father squeezed my neck. Shivers all the way down to my rear. I took the slippers off again. Father said I didn't have to wear them if I didn't want to, but that it was a shame, because they'd been slashed.

'Do these slippers have cuts in them?' I asked.

He scrunched up the paper from the slipper box and threw it into the wood basket.

I took another look. I couldn't see any cuts. Just ears, eyes, teeth and whiskers. Father must be mistaken. He ought to wear glasses. He says so himself. He rubs his eyes and complains they're going downhill fast. I can't see anything wrong with them. Eyes can only go downhill if you gouge them out and roll them away.

Father has a habit of saying strange things. Gutbucket. Or wisecrack, when he's crying with laughter. This morning he said I'd been eating biscuits behind his back again. No, I haven't! I yelled. He said it isn't right to lie about these things, but I'm not. I'd eaten the biscuits in bed, under my blanket.

I never wore the rabbit slippers again. They were left against the far wall in the kitchen until an animal gnawed holes in the front and father chucked them out.

Now I keep things in the slipper box. A smaller box with paper tissues that fits snugly. A plate. A pair of rusty scissors I found in the shed. A small brush. A thimble. Cotton buds and sellotape. A small twig from our oak tree. A towel. I unfold it and put the plate on.

I use the scissors to snip the herbs into small pieces. Lady's mantle. Angelica. Pilewort. Father makes tea with it when he has to spend a long time on the bench with the hole. Marigolds. Mallow. The snippets fall onto the plate.

There comes Jonas. Right on time. He stops among the bushes on the border between our gardens. That's how his mother wants it. She came over to tell us one day.

'They're bums, her and her father. You know that, don't you darling? She caressed his cheek and looked at the guinea pigs as if they were rats. Jonas said nothing. When father talks to me and I look away, he gets annoyed. And when he asks if I've understood and I don't answer, I'm sent to my room. I quickly nodded on Jonas's behalf and smiled at his mother. I wanted her to caress my cheek and call me darling too, but I know she'll only talk to me when I'm in her garden. One time, when I found an escaped guinea pig on the lawn outside her house, and kissed and stroked its throbbing belly, the window opened.

Jonas's mother waved at me. Her nails sparkled in the sunshine. 'Get out of here. And take that creature with you. I don't want it nibbling my flowers.' The flowers were brightly coloured like her nails. The guinea pig would never eat them.

Sourpuss, I thought to myself. Face-ache. That's what father sometimes mutters when we hear her grumble in the garden.

She kept looking at me.

Maybe there was something she wanted to ask. How father gets my favourite dress so clean. With bile soap. He buys it in the village. And my hair is as long and shiny as it is because we rub it with honey.

She called out to Jonas.

'Will you tell the girl next door that she should play in her own garden?'

Which he did of course. We're friends. And friends like to talk to each other. Jonas and I talk every day.

'Mouse kiss!' he says as soon as he appears among the bushes with his hands in his pockets.

We pucker up our lips and push them out as far as possible until they touch. The first time he tried to give me a kiss on the mouth, I didn't want it. I also don't like it when father's goodnight kiss lands there. 'How about a little kiss then?' Jonas asked. 'Like little mice do?' He sucked in his cheeks and pursed his lips. That was alright with me. Now I look forward to our mouse kiss all day.

I take a step back. Time for our song. Jonas whispers the words and I sing them while rocking a guinea pig back and forth. Every now and then he glances at father who's working further down in the garden. Maybe he'd like to hear him say it's a beautiful song.

'Itty bitty slip of a girl,' I sing,

'Go on then and give's a twirl.

Dirty clothes and dirty feet.

Mummy's gone and disappeared.

Daddy's crying in his beard.'

Jonas snaps his fingers while we sing.

Sometimes he changes the words. I don't like it when he does that. New words can only join in when I've heard them often enough.

When we're done I straighten my dress. It's tight under the armpits and only just covers my rear, but it's red. My favourite colour. I hope Jonas likes it. He often asks me to wear a dress. 'And your hair in braids, like Heidi from the mountains.' I don't know her and I don't like to hear him talk about her. But I would like to know how long they've been friends and whether she lives in the village too. Whether she comes over to stay sometimes. And whether he does the mouse kiss with her. But I don't ask. I'm afraid he'll bring her over and that I'll have to look at her dress and braids.

Elastic bands are something I can't bear, but this morning I picked flowers with long stems and asked father to pin them into my hair.

At first he said he didn't have the right fingers for such finicky work.

'But you *can* cut slugs in half! Even really tiny ones!'

'Do you want them to eat all of our lettuce? I thought you had a tiara with flowers?'

'They're made out of plastic!'

'Ask a friend at school to help you. I bet she'll know how to do it and will probably enjoy it too.'

I wanted to tell him that I don't like the smell of his coffee breath, but that I still give him a goodnight kiss every evening. And that the dust in his beard often makes me sneeze, but that I always crawl onto his lap when he tells me an insect story.

I waited in the kitchen until he got up from his armchair, grumbling, and pulled my chair outside into the light. He cursed the stems that snapped and the petals that fell out. He threw away the daisies. 'Shame,' he said. 'They're for the rabbits. Stay put. I'm going to get stronger flowers.' He returned with his arms full of dandelions, tansies, ox-eye daisies and a few rhubarb leaves.

'Only the red rhubarb leaves,' I said.

'I know, I know,' he muttered, but sometimes he forgets that green things make me queasy and there'll suddenly be a green shirt among the shopping, or he'll decorate the edge of my plate with green strips of pepper.

I sat as still as possible while he attached the last few stems with hair grips. 'We ought to rub your ends again soon,' he said before he straightened up. 'They feel dry.' He went inside to fetch the shaving mirror. I waited with bated breath until he held it in front of my face.

'Happy?'

It was the biggest and most beautiful crown I'd ever seen. And the strongest. Much stronger than my neighbour's in school. On her birthday the girl wore one made with purple and white flowers. 'Clover,' I said to her girlfriends who had gathered around our desk. 'Knapweed.' I kneeled on my chair so I could see the top of her head. 'And the small white ones are wood anemones. They

need a lot of water.' Nobody listened, but after arithmetic the first braided stems were already coming undone. During recess the flowers dangled upside-down and fell to the ground. I picked them up, put them in the washbasin by the toilets and left the tap running.

Father knows everything there is to know about strong flowers. 'Why don't you leave the crown in a bucket of cold water tonight,' he said, 'then you can wear it again tomorrow. And maybe the day after tomorrow as well.'

'Give us a twirl,' Jonas says.

He knows I'm good at that. Long and fast. It would look lovely, with my dress flying higher and higher and the flowers brilliant in the sunshine, but the guinea pig mustn't become nauseous, so I only twirl once. Carefully. Step by step. With the guinea pig pressed against my stomach.

Jonas just nods. Shame. When I go fast, he sometimes whistles or clicks his tongue.

I put the guinea pig on its back on a towel and hold it tight. It tries to get away. They always do. And squeak loudly. I wish they'd stop that. It would be a lot easier if they lay still.

'What are you doing?' Jonas asked the first time I treated a guinea pig.

'It's a secret.'

He squatted down. 'If you tell me, I'll give you my biscuits.' He showed me a shiny packet.

'Ginger snaps?'

'No,' he said, 'better.'

'Syrup waffles!'

'Choco kisses.'

Choco kisses?

I shook my head. 'Those aren't biscuits.' If they were, father would have bought them at some point.

'Want to see?' Jonas ripped open the packet. I saw round, brown buns.

'Chocolate,' Jonas said, 'with white marshmallow inside.' He showed me by sinking his teeth into one before sliding the packet over to me.

I didn't give it another glance. Biscuits are flat. They aren't covered in chocolate on the outside and never contain white marshmallow.

I stopped the guinea pig from getting away with one hand, placed snippets of lady's mantel on its rear and pushed them in with the cotton bud.

'Will you tell me now?'

'A secret's a secret.' I wiped the cotton bud on my trousers and took marigold petals from the plate.

'Secrets need to be shared.'

Is that right? I thought father had said something different. I looked over to him. He waved from where he stood among the rhubarb stalks and revealed the gap between his teeth when he laughed.

'Why don't you ask our neighbour if he'd like a glass of lemonade?' he yelled.

Maybe I'd misunderstood, and it's only guinea pigs who keep secrets.

I take the thimble inside to fetch honey from the jar in the kitchen cabinet. I rub it onto the guinea pig's rear and press a paper tissue against it. Now comes the hard part: holding the wriggling little body in place with my knee while I tear the sellotape. I know how long the strips should be. Long enough to go round the belly twice. I pull it tight before I pick up the next guinea pig. The tissue clings to the honey. Even so, it comes off almost at once and catches in the grass as soon as the guinea pig starts scurrying through the run. The tape doesn't really stick to the fur either. I look at Jonas. He shakes his head. We can't go on like this. We need to find fabric tape. The kind the

doctor has. I was allowed to touch it after I'd tumbled off the barrel, but he didn't give me any. I don't know what we'll do when the sellotape runs out. Maybe father will give me twine. He uses it to hang the rabbits from the beam. One time he'd left the roll in the shed. I'd just finished the treatment when he walked up to me.

'Did you take some of this?' He brandished the roll.

I nodded.

He wanted to know why.

I pointed to the guinea pigs.

He crouched down, untied the twine around one of the bellies and stared at the snippets protruding from the hole.

The next day I couldn't find the box. It's always in the same place, behind the bucket under the sink in the kitchen. Now there was just dust and dirt. I checked the container next to it and rummaged among the empty bottles and rags. Had I left the box outside the previous evening? I had a look, but it wasn't under the oak tree and not in the run where the guinea pigs lay panting on their sides. I thought about it. Father and Jonas would never take the box. They know how important the treatment is.

Who else comes here?

The doctor. Of course. When he comes over for a drink of something. But I've never seen his shiny shoes traipsing through the grass. He always takes the path.

I walked over to father in the garden.

'Has Heidi been here?'

'Who?' He didn't look up. He wiped bits of slug from the scissors and crept over to the cucumbers on his knees.

'Heidi,' I said, 'from the mountains. I think she lives in the village.'

'No,' he said, without looking up. 'Is she a new friend of yours?'

'Definitely not!' I almost shouted it. 'Friends don't steal each other's boxes!'

My eyes were stinging. I went inside, to my room, and lay under the blanket on my bed.

Father came and sat by my side.

He said he'd taken the box away and would only put it back if I stopped treating the guinea pigs in their holes.

'You can only use the cotton buds to clean their ears,' he said.

Holes are holes, right?

'And not inside. Just very carefully on the outside. Okay?'

I clenched my fists under the blanket.

'Otherwise I'll never give you another guinea pig.'

I'll make my own guinea pigs.

'I'll come and check every now and then,' father said.

The following evening the box was back.

Now I push the cotton bud further in so the snippets no longer poke out of the guinea pigs' holes.

Jonas watches. 'Deeper!' He gives the sign to insert the cotton bud all the way. I try. Jonas knows what's good for guinea pigs. He's learning about it in school. The guinea pig squeaks and thrashes about. 'Place a hand over its eyes,' Jonas says. 'If it can't see anything, it won't know how to escape.' Some do know though. We have to pull them out of the bushes by their hind legs, the cotton bud still in their rears. Jonas's mother throws open the kitchen window.

'Home!' she yells. 'Now!'

'Witch,' Jonas mutters, 'she always ruins everything.'

It's true. He'd be better off without a mother too. Then we could spend as much time together as we'd like. Or maybe he should whisper. I've often thought that to myself. If he did his mother

might forget he's here and the guinea pigs might not tremble so badly. I can see the whites of their eyes when he begins to talk loudly during the treatment. Whispering will do. One day I'll tell him.

The kitchen window slams shut. Jonas turns around again. He looks at a guinea pig that's lying still on the towel, its eyes half-closed as if about to nod off. I know better. I can feel the heart beating fast under my hand. If I'm not careful, it will run off before I get a chance to wrap a tissue around the belly.

'They must learn to listen,' Jonas says.

That's true. I can't even wear a crown of flowers. A few stems come undone when I'm forced to retrieve guinea pigs from the bushes and my party dress is stained by the branches and the moss.

'Maybe we ought to try the stakes.'

Last time he watched father throw nets over the berry bushes. He asked how we attach the nets to the ground.

'With stakes,' I said. If we don't, birds will fly under the nets and pick at our blackberries and raspberries. Jonas looked pleased. In school he'd just learned how to treat naughty guinea pigs with stakes.

'How?'

'You put two stakes in the ground, tie a rope in between, slip the guinea pig under and hammer the stakes in further until the rope is pulled tightly across its head. We'd be able to treat one badly behaved guinea pig after another without having to hold them down.'

'Isn't that dangerous?'

'You don't believe me? This is how vets do it. Just ask your father.' I can't. Father mustn't know about the treatment anymore. I told Jonas about the box that went missing.

'Have you had a chance to take some stakes?' he now asks.

'Father counts them,' I quickly say.

That's not true, but I'm afraid that if we hammer the stakes in too deep the guinea pigs might get injured or even beheaded.

Jonas bites his lip. 'A collar? We'll tie a rope to it and then I'll hold the other end.'

'I don't have a collar,' I say. The guinea pigs have never worn one. I'm worried they'd accidentally hang themselves and end up like the rabbits on our beam.

'Or what if we wrap a scarf around them? One of those thin granny scarves? My mother has a basket full of them. She won't notice if I take a few.' I look at his mother. I see her moving behind the window. Jonas sees it too.

'I have to go,' he says, 'think about it.' There's no need. I reckon it's a good idea. The guinea pigs will look nice in colourful scarves. And if they're still inside the run in autumn, they can certainly use one. Maybe Jonas can bring the entire basket, so the guinea pigs can try them on. And if his mother won't notice anyway, we can select a few dark scarves to tie around their eyes during treatment.

I purse my lips, but Jonas is already sauntering off, with a last, brief glance over his shoulder and a wave.

'See you tomorrow,' I whisper.

And as father comes towards me frowning, I pull the cotton bud out of the guinea pig and start cleaning its ears, very gently on the outside.