Dius

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Egidius De Blaeser, known to us all as Dius Prati, was the offspring of an adulterous romance between his enterprising mother and a Sicilian paramour. The man had washed up in the provincial town of Heist-aan-Zee as the proprietor of an ice cream parlour, where it did not take him long to look up from the stracciatella, gelato al limone, and sorbetto al cioccolato and notice the ice-coloured eyes of Dius's future mother drifting in every evening. Whether he fell for those eyes or the probing tip of her tongue, the story does not tell us. In any case, according to Dius, their clandestine passion lasted only a few months; he heard about it first-hand from his mother, in a moment of open-heartedness, as she trembled in her wheelchair at her assisted living centre, just a few months before she gave up her West Flemish ghost. Dius's father must have had at least vague suspicions, especially when he compared his son's jet-black hair to his wife's bright blonde locks and his own pale crop. Of the ice-cream parlour not a trace remains; according to Dius, the shop was put up for rent again soon after his birth, and his biological father vanished just as completely.

Dius's parents kept a shoe shop in a large old pile not far from the coast; across the courtyard behind the tall house was a collection of spacious workshops, where his official father spent all day working on repairs, seated among old racks of worn-out shoes, while his wife conversed with customers in the shop. Her penetrating voice could often be heard in the studios, at least when the machines weren't rumbling away.

That's the stuff of my earliest memories, Dius once told me, the rumbling machines, the smell of warm glue, the thin layer of penetrating oil on the bearings, I can still smell it. I would sit down on the floor beside my father and squeeze my eyes tight shut to savour the scrape of the whetstone as fully as I could, and I wouldn't open them until the wheel spun to a halt, or the sound of the small hammer he used to drive thin nails into women's heels punctured my trance.

I was later a regular guest in that house, and spent my weeks there sitting on the beach, reading and dreaming of books I would never write. The second storey, where I used to stay, had a small bluestone balcony overlooking the workshops, and I would sometimes stand out on that balcony and smoke, since it wasn't permitted in the house. In the old-fashioned living room with the varnished wainscotting, a framed print was hung on the red-and-gold wallpaper depicting a well-to-do nineteenth-century family crowding around a small open carriage in the snow; beneath the print, in ornate red letters, was the phrase *Snowed Up on Christmas Eve* – words that, strangely enough, returned to my mind years later at the most unexpected moments.

I once spent a long, lazy August there with Nouka, who was constantly playing the Gipsy Kings on a small cassette recorder. That was before the major port expansion, when Heist still possessed a

hint of its lost grandeur, a melancholy ambiance, in which we, in the lingering dusk of a summer day, would stroll over to Brasserie Coupe de Nice. There Nouka would invariably order a melon ice with toasted nuts and whipped cream, putting her feet up on a white plastic chair while I tenderly wiped the sand from between her toes. Her conchiform toenails – like a line of perfect Venus clamshells, each smaller than the last – were painted a lustrous black.

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I still remember as if it were yesterday the day Dius rang the bell of the house where I lived then, in my city's historic centre. Nouka opened the heavy door; I was sitting on the top floor working on my doctoral thesis, and she knew I didn't like to be disturbed, especially in those days, when I was not exactly making great strides with my research. She called me downstairs, saying one of my students was at the door.

As I went down the long, high corridor, I saw in the doorway a young man with a halo of jet-black hair. The top buttons of his collarless white shirt were undone, revealing a gold chain glinting against his chest hair. He looked shabby yet chic, a street urchin with all the glamour of the old-fashioned scion of a noble line. He must not have been much over twenty – I remembered him in a flash from my lecture about the Italian painter Vittore Carpaccio, when he'd blurted that he could paint better dogs than that Venetian master's little turds. The whole lecture hall sank into astonished silence for a moment, until the first giggles bubbled up. Dius turned beet-red, looked around, saw the grinning faces, stood, and left the room. I was thrown for a moment myself, because his slightly laughable remark had so quickly led to awkwardness. After that my concentration was ruined – Carpaccio's dogs, some of which I must admit are quite weird, suddenly seemed to compromise all the virtuosity of that great painter. Take the strange little mutt that sits up straight with its front paws in the hands of the woman with the vacant stare in the foreground of his well-known portrait *Two Venetian Ladies*, staring at the viewer with the kind of fawning surliness that makes dogs so repulsive to those who dislike the whole subservient, hysterical species. Feeling I'd lost my grip on my students, I switched off the projector and ended the lecture early. As I left the academy building, I looked around, but Dius was nowhere in sight.

Now, on the morning when Nouka had hospitably opened the door to him, that noble stranger stood before me with slight defiance in his smile and said, May I come in? I have a surprise for you. This odd reversal, a student coming to his teacher's door in the style of a wealthy uncle bearing a gift, seemed so incongruous somehow that it briefly left me speechless. He stood waiting for my response with a light, cheerful arrogance. I could have politely turned him away, told him with measured severity how inappropriate it was to intrude on your instructor's privacy, but before I quite knew what I was doing, I had signalled to him, with a gesture of acquiescence, that he could come in. That set the tone. Dius entered the front room, and I invited him to sit. He launched into his speech.

Since he'd noticed I was a little overworked… no, nothing personal, sorry, he meant in a good way, because, you see, I… well, the thing is, I'd made a deep impression on him, or hang on a moment, no, erm… he was sorry about the whole dog thing – actually… since he so often had those sorts of thoughts during the lectures but never dared speak them aloud… he had thought – no, that wasn't what he meant either, or actually, because I…

Because I want to be your friend, he blurted, turning crimson, and he fell silent.

I stared in astonishment at the young man, who, with a mix of shyness and bravado, brought his fingertips together and fixed me with an expectant gaze.

When a human being shows himself in all his guilelessness, it can feel something like a revelation. All forms of hierarchy fell away between us. I was in my early thirties then; the age difference was ten years at most. Knocking at my door to ask if we could be friends, how loopy can you get – it reminded me of when I was small and would ask a neighbour girl, 'will you be my girlfriend', in the hope that she would share her sweets with me.

All sorts of thoughts ran through my mind – there are plenty of literary reflections on friendship; alongside love, it may be one of the greatest themes in literature. Ovid wrote renowned and sometimes heartbroken poems for his lost friends; to Seneca, a friend was a kind of alter ego; and according to Cicero, friendship is, in fact, morally superior to love, since it's more likely to be based on conscious choice than on blind passion for erotic appearances. Yet at that moment, the only thing that popped into my head is what Michel de Montaigne said about his friendship with Étienne de La Boétie: because it was he, because it was I. Something in me conceded victory to him, with the lightness of heart with which you react to unforeseen situations, *quia absurdum* – because there is no reason.

Well, well, I said. I coughed and waited.

Down the narrow street came two students, chattering in loud voices; I lived only a few hundred meters away from the institute where I taught, and was used to students walking past my house. But now there was one in my front room, who had rung my bell with a boldness that baffled me, and I seemed to be letting him have his way.

I don't mean to intrude, he said, when the silence became uncomfortable, but I have access to a large space in the northern polders, not far from the Dutch border, where you could concentrate on your work more easily. I've heard you're writing a doctoral thesis. You often look so… well, to be honest, er, tired, and I thought…

Now he lowered his head and gazed up at me, as if steeling himself for a slap in the face or a curt rejection.

I fear I was still sitting in my chair in silence, staring back at him – I felt mild irritation, fascination, and impatience all swirling together within me. It came back to me that in the early months of the academic year he'd submitted a written assignment comparing himself to a foal in a pasture full of bulls, all staring at him; evidently that was how alienated, lonely, and misplaced he felt among the other students. His handwriting lurched eccentrically forward and back, but since he wrote with a reed pen, the distended letters, formed with unequal pressure, danced diagonally across the page as if shouted up a mountainside against a gale-force wind; he filled four pages for that short assignment, while the average student fit the same number of words into only one. His confession was childish and naive, yet possessed of a strange beauty. I had put it aside in a drawer instead of sending it on to the archives with the other assignments, as I should have. Oh, and one more thing: his work had been difficult to mark. The assignment had been to define your own place in the present artistic climate. But Dius wrote about fifteenth-century tempera, the golden section in polder landscapes, and his longing to trek to Ushuaia and spot wild llamas. Or was his response an ingenious parody of some conceptual artist's manifesto, a deft satirical skewering of my assignment?

They must still be around somewhere, those four clumsily scribbled pages, more like a cry for help than an academic essay; even though years have passed since they were written, I know they must still be lying in one of my desk drawers.

My own painting studio's out there in the polders too, he said, it's an old guildhall, no longer in use, adjacent to a neglected park and an old country house, I can clear out a nice space for you to work there in perfect peace and quiet. You won't have to pay me rent. I won't disturb you. And I'll take care of meals.

He cocked his head and looked at me from underneath his eyebrows in something like tense anticipation, as if he feared that now I was certain to show him the door. Since I remained seated,

staring at him without replying, he gathered his courage and took a gamble: Shall the two of us drive there together on our next free Wednesday afternoon? It's a good twenty kilometres from here.

I let out a brusque, incredulous laugh.

But I don't know what possessed me – I was already picturing Nouka dubiously shaking her head and asking me if I'd taken leave of my senses: an overworked teacher who never has time for anything, let alone romantic outings with her, going off on some escapade with a student on a Wednesday afternoon instead of putting his precious time to good use? But it was too late; somewhere in my mind, a door had swung ajar, and now fresh air was wafting in, a kind of hopeful dawn of unexpected possibilities, with the potential to lift me out of the rut I'd dug for myself.

All right, I said as dryly as I could, why not.

And because he was now the one remaining silent, I added, almost shyly, That's settled, then. When will we see each other?

I'll pick you up, he said. I can do the driving. Next Wednesday at two.

I ushered him out and shrugged my shoulders apologetically when Nouka popped her head out of the living room door and raised her eyebrows at me.

I retreated to my second-floor study, where I looked into what the philosopher Immanuel Kant had to say about my faculty of judgement.

If the concept that determines causality is a concept of nature, then the principles are technical-practical; if in contrast it is a concept of freedom, then they are moral-practical.

What in God's name am I meant to do with that, I asked myself despairingly, and went to make a cup of coffee.

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The run-down delivery van – or 'camionette', as he always called it – in which Dius drove me to the polder village of Ganzevliet that Wednesday was full of obscure junk. Bags of plaster torn open, broken canvas stretchers, chisels, handsaws, and hammers, a roll of chicken wire, a roll of canvas, and in the middle of all this an old oil drum. The clanking of all these objects, combined with the roar of the worn-out engine, was so deafening that we could barely exchange a word; the suspension was more or less broken, and every bump in the road felt like a kick in the rear. At one point, he shifted gears and the stick came out of the gearbox. Dius held it up with a grin and then shoved it back into the opening, fiddled with it for a while, shifted gears again, and drove on as if nothing had happened. We passed the former military site near Eikenlo; Dius turned off towards the deserted barracks, parked the car, and said, 'Let's go for a walk first.'

I was too stupefied to say anything. The sun broke through the watery clouds, I smelled the sharp scent of poplars, the leaves of one white poplar turned and fluttered on low branches by a muddy ditch. A splotch of pigeons veered above our heads, wings flapping. I shivered, thrust my hands into the pockets of my thin jacket, and followed Dius, now frustrated and filled with regret that I wasn't sitting in my warm study, reading about my faculty of judgment.

This must have been sometime in the eighties, before mobile phones, before the internet, when the top story in the Belgian papers was a series of attacks by a Communist terror cell on NATO targets in Evere, near Brussels.

The air pressure was dropping rapidly, the sun gave off hardly any warmth. But the damp, acid soil of the forest made my nose come alive; when had I last smelled that natural freshness? Was it before I went to live in that tall, gloomy house in my old part of town? As I hurried after Dius, my lungs seemed to open, and so did my closed mind full of overearnest, racing thoughts. After about fifteen minutes on old concrete paths, we entered a part of the woods that seemed wilder and more deserted. Dius hopped off the path and over the drainage ditch, beckoning me. With a clumsy leap, I joined him; I had to grab his shoulder for a second to regain my balance. He pointed out a dark tree

stump with its roots sawn through. All around it were marks of earlier attempts to drag away the stump. Dius turned to me with a gleam in his eyes.

Bird's-eye maple root, he said in delight. This trunk is worth its weight in gold. Will you help me carry it to the car? There's no way I can manage it alone. I swallowed away something hard to define. Dius kneeled, pried the stump from the soil, and tried to lift it.

Will you grab the other side?

And seeing the annoyance in my eyes, he said, This is rare wood, only the old generation of foresters still knows about this. I want to have it sliced paper-thin to use as veneer. I'll make a desk out of it, where you can write. You'll see, it'll be unique. My gift to you.

I stared at the clump of wood encrusted with mud and moss. I felt something like disgust at the senseless vegetable proliferation evoked by the dark, obscene nakedness of the mass, as if it symbolised the senselessness of this whole endeavour, of my meekness in agreeing to come along, and ultimately of my whole directionless life.

All I remember of that half hour of heaving and hauling is the cold, oozy layer it left on my hands, which were unaccustomed to heavy labour, the shapeless mass that kept slipping away, the puffing and panting and picking up that bloody stump again, the pain in my back, Dius laughing and egging me on, always insisting it wasn't much further – and the blisters on my palms afterwards. After we'd mustered all our strength to lift the stump into the car, he drove on into town, stopped at a chicken stall, ordered two whole roast chickens with a large side of fried potatoes, and stepped jovially back into the car, where I was stewing in the passenger seat. Whistling a merry tune, he started the wheezing engine, and we rattled down an old sett-paved road along marshy meadows and rows of poplars tilting in the polder wind. In the back of the car, the stump and the oil drum were rolling back and forth into each other in an ear-splitting battle. Dius seemed to be growing cheerier by the minute.

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What is poetic life? I had never pondered that question before setting foot in the old guildhall in Ganzevliet. A place filled with stray objects whose paths had crossed there, a collection of disconnected things, a load of odds and ends, fragments of furniture from interiors and workshops, a few musical instruments, knick-knacks, a sloppy stack of old books, two small Javanese kris daggers, the skull of a goat alongside a human's, a chunk of rough granite that looked like a huge ginger root, with a thick plank of unplaned wood on top – this whole storehouse of accidental, whimsical forms, appearing before me like a secret treasure chamber, bore a strong, unmistakable resemblance to what we call inspiration – a congealed cloud of pure coincidence, objects that in their homeless state have reverted to an existence as mere Things. Compared to this, my own study at home, with its spartan racks of books in alphabetical order and its perpetually tidy desk, seemed like a failure of imagination in the guise of academic propriety.

In the back of that ramshackle interior was a harmonium, and beside it an unfinished scene that made a mythical impression, belonging more to the sixteenth century than to the late twentieth. The smell of turpentine, linseed oil, and siccative assailed me.

In bygone days, I told myself, the dignitaries and burghers of this region had attended performances by the amateur theatre troupe, or concerts by the local brass band – hence the tuba, the alphorn, and the broken clarinet lying in a far corner, on a dust-strewn writing desk missing a leg, propped up with some spare piece of stainless steel. Against the pale white rafters high above, a small, disoriented bird was flitting back and forth. Panicked by our arrival, it darted straight into a high pivot window and fell like a rag, immediately lost among the unfathomable mess. I stared open-mouthed. By this time Dius had made his way to the small room that might once have held the reception desk, which he had transformed into a primitive kitchen. He fetched cutlery from the racks and placed glasses and plates on a large board on trestles. He spooned out the potatoes, tossed the

chickens onto an old pewter serving tray with an oak-leaf design, went over to an old record player, and a few moments later the music of Lassus resounded through the building: *Vinum bonum et suave,* the divine Orlando di Lasso, my weakness, the music I played on those desperate late nights when I sought consolation for my far-from-heroic life. For a moment, I gasped for breath; Dius made a sweeping gesture, inviting me to sit down. He speared one of the chickens on a carving fork, threw it onto his plate, and commenced the attack. It was five p.m., and outside the guildhall, the sunlight was slowly sinking away. Through the high windows on the north side, I saw a few yellowing treetops leaning in the wind, and above them, low clouds with golden edges scudding overhead. The wind whipped with dull thuds around the old, high roof.