

Nightparents

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An extract pp 95-99; 107-112

Original title Nachtoutders
Publisher Das Mag, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
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NOTEBOOK

The fertility lab smelled of cigars. The room was no bigger than a bedroom. White as toothpaste, a grey chair with stirrups. The doctor came in; the assistant coughed. Had he been smoking? His rubber gloves were pistachio green, his gestures firm. A syringe with a long snout, filled with a mixture of cells from her sweetheart and her best friend. The paths taken by genes, crossing and fusing in a crucible. The doctor asked Saskia if she wanted to push the plunger of the syringe in. No, thank you. This was a clinical procedure that had nothing to do with Saskia: sneaking any romanticism or involvement in would be fake.

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The IVF specialist had confirmed it was alive and the cells were dividing. The fortnight-old embryo had first resided in a petri dish and had now been transferred to the natural incubator. We monitor everything, day after day.

She was an interesting medical experiment, that girl lying there. The girl with a child inside her.

That frail body, Juli's body. Whereas Saskia's body is so tough that she hardly ever gets sick and overtakes men when she's out running. How illogical.

Nine months, three seasons, forty weeks, two hundred and eighty-two days: that's how long Juli's body had for building a complete human. No longer.

Saskia promised Juli spontaneously that she'd never say, "We're pregnant."

*

That time she went to fetch Saul from the day care centre. The father of the girl with frizzy hair like a huge swarm of wasps around her head is waiting for her at the door. As always, he's talking nineteen to the dozen. He says hi to everyone, explains, lifts baby buggies over the step, supplementing his broken Dutch with numerous gestures and a loud voice.

Fascinated by two women who fill both the male and female roles, he has fitted fragments of information together. Now he wants to put the last piece of the puzzle in place.

"God bless Shawl," he says once again. The fact that God has even given the women a boy is testimony to the unfathomability of His ways.

"Thank you."

“You made him?”

“Uh...?”

“Made by you? You made Shawl yourselves?” His articulation is exaggerated, the volume up three more notches.

“Yeah, sure. We made him,” she replies.

“Or with squirt, in hospital?” He uses his thumb to press the plunger of an imaginary syringe.

“Well...”

“Or at home?” he asks, his eyes twinkling. “With a man?” Laughing, carried away as his own fantasy runs wild.

She is speechless. And then she can't get it out of her head again. He asked the questions that she sees some people stumbling over. She should have been quicker, she could have bounced it back at him and asked what position he and his wife used when making their own children.

*

In the sultry heat of the city of Antwerp, on a square where everyone gathers around a playground and a bar in the summer, they are sitting on the grass with Saul. Juli goes off to the bar and then two small girls do what smart little girls do: track down mistakes in the world and set out to investigate. They shuffle a bit closer and gather up their courage, until the younger of the two, an impish child with a headscarf, turns to Saskia and asks, “Are you sisters?”

“We don't look much like each other, do we?” “Hee-hee, no.” “We're a couple.”

(Giggles.) “You can't be. You're both girls.”

“So are you.”

(Letting the impossible sink in.) “But we're not a couple! We're sisters!”

“Well, we are.”

“Sisters?”

“No, a couple.”

“So who's the man?”

“We're both women.”

“Whose is the baby?”

“He's ours.”

“But who had the baby in their tummy?”

The older girl nudged her kid sister. “You can see that.”

“Juli had the baby. That's her over there, in the queue by the bar. With the blond hair and blue eyes.”

“Not you?”

“No, not me.”

“So you're not a woman,” conclude the girls. “You're the man!”

*

There will be a role for Saskia's body in this child's story, she thinks before the birth. Her body will be used for comforting, for rocking to sleep. Given that babies often don't want to fall asleep, she envisages herself on many nocturnal walks, child wrapped up in a bundle on her arm, wandering through the streets, out beyond the ring road, onto the motorway, catatonic, glazed eyes fixed on the white stripes, taking the slip road while a night-time driver hoots at her, following the exit, greeting the dawn, checking her little cocoon (he's almost nodded off now), walking into the shop, wandering through Ikea, letting people look at the child, ending up in the sleeping area, crawling under the duvet, let the child sleep on, falling asleep herself and waking up after closing time.

But Saul, you always sleep like a log.

NOTEBOOK

Don't be afraid, my boy.

It's not all that serious, the game they call Life.

Take a look at where we'll start.

At the beginning, right.

Start at the beginning, my mother always said, because the rest is tricky enough.

*

In the waiting room of the fertility clinic, a sturdy woman in a carpet-like robe stood in front of them. She took them to her tiny little office. They had been practicing the roles in the kitchen. To play the role of a psychologist convincingly, Saskia had grabbed a writing pad and a pen. Juli put on a grumpy face and pretended to be Saskia. It was very important that they had a watertight alibi because they didn't want to be caught being insecure about parenthood. Someone could have told them about Saskia's doubts. Spies were everywhere – the communism of parenthood was making her bloody paranoid.

After the psychologist had regaled them for half an hour about her own exploits on fertility promotion in parliament, she did not ask them about the why. She asked Saskia how her family would respond.

That one question was enough: a needle pricked under your fingernail – anticipating the hurt doesn't help ward off the pain. A box of handkerchiefs was pushed under her nose, utterly professionally, as if it was part of the procedure. She didn't dare look around, at Juli. She knew she'd blown it. And somewhere down there in the darkness, a spark of hope flickered: who knows, maybe they'd missed their chance here and the whole procedure would be aborted, the fairy tale crunching into an insurmountable obstacle. Resulting in them just being two women again, an infertile couple.

A twosome. Just that. Normal. They were playing at being a normal couple.

Tactful but resolute, the psychologist skirted right past personal family issues.

She thought it was very good that Saskia had chosen the donor. "The two of you are eliminating the biological difference by letting the non-biological mother choose."

She also talked about the importance of not calling the donor the 'father'.

"Words are important. Don't think that you're doing anything exceptional or unnatural. When we started keeping nature under control a bit, medicine began," she said, gesticulating magnanimously in her dramatic robe, pointing to the three walls that enclosed her like an insect in a matchbox. "Can you see all those folders? They're all records of fertility treatments. Most of them are heterosexual couples, but the shame can still weigh very heavily. We get people here from all over the place."

In the waiting room, they had seen Hasidic Jews, veiled women, women with bare midriffs. The welcome DVD they had received had a menu of fifty languages to choose from.

The woman stood up. The carpet surrounding her cascaded into place. How many children might she have borne? What could her personal link be to this tale of fertility? They shook her hand. She pointed to the open door, with a stuffy and airless corridor behind it. If you walked to the end of it, took the lift (the third floor was crossed out as if three was an unlucky number) and then walked past the smell of fried pork chops emanating from the cafeteria, you came to the payment machines in front of the car park. And beyond it, if the next sliding door was feeling cooperative, the big wide world awaits... where in the vast traffic jam of this country's rush hour, parents with children in the back seat are thinking of holidays and doctors' appointments. And childless couples are thinking of psychologists in home-woven carpets.

*

It's going to happen, Juli had said. We're going to be parents.
Saskia was looking for a child to practice on.
Saskia found an aubergine to practice on.
She rocked the aubergine in her arms.
Saskia would be called its mother, just like Juli.
They would be initiated into the cult of Maternity.

*

Karl's spermatozoa were still jetlagged when they drove him straight from the airport to a medical laboratory for the very first donation. They had been informed that the indicated day and hour was the time for a sperm sample. A haywire navigation system guided them to an industrial estate outside the city. They entered a gigantic room that most closely resembled a Nazi conference hall: the whole architecture was aimed at making the individual feel small. They ventured forth to the counter on the far side and stated their business politely.

"We have a donation appointment."

"You've come to hand over a sample, you mean?"

"Well, that's one way of putting it."

"Where is it?"

"Oh, er... in him." Saskia and Juli point to Karl.

"Excuse me? Sir, may I have the specimen? The sample?"

"I am the donor," says Karl.

"We thought the semen had to be... fresh," says Saskia, threatened.

"That's not the procedure. The semen has to be brought to us within twelve hours of donation."

"We're bringing it to you. Fresh. He's got it."

"I thought I'd seen everything," says one of them to the other. The holy trinity at the raised reception desk hold an intense consultation.

"I've come specially from Canada for this," Karl ventures, tense but courageous, unsure what the near future will bring and what he can contribute.

"Just flown over," says Juli. "Hardly even landed, ready to deliver the perfect sample."

The three Fates confer. With a deep sigh, one of the stern-looking ladies dives under the desk. After some rummaging, she reappears again with a plastic pot the size of a small breakfast buffet jam jar, it places high above their heads on the desk.

"And how do we get the sample into the jar now?" asks Karl, employing an unusual *pluralis majestatis*.

"Well, it's not customary, but I suppose it'll have to be done here."

"Where can we do that... I mean 'he', where can he...?"

The three heads go into conclave again.

One of them suggests the cleaners' toilet, waving vaguely in the direction of a corridor. They go to explore.

All the doors are locked, except for one broom cupboard. With a door that doesn't lock. Karl draws a deep breath and, with courage born of despair, finds a spot between the buckets, stocks of surgical gloves and barf bags.

Juli and Saskia sit down on a bench and wait. They wait for a long time. Longer. They fear the worst. After a terrible, lengthy wait, the door opens again to reveal a deathly pale Karl with drooping shoulders, bandy-legged. The last drop squeezed out painfully, as he himself put it, yielding a dollop that is barely visible to the naked eye. Saskia and July can't stop laughing.

With one hand on the handle so that nobody could come in, he'd had to do the business with the other. Above his head, he could hear Nazi jackboots stomping around. It's a miracle he managed anything at all.

Even the laboratory staffer to whom they have to hand over the goods for testing, a lab tech through and

through with a bouquet of pens in his ink-stained breast pocket, asks with the sober honesty of a scientist whether this is really the whole sample.

Karl endured that too, his masculinity humiliated to the core, that temporary castration with words, that totally unjustified ridicule when he had given everything he had in him. After a couple of hours waiting, the man with the pens told us that Karl's sperm was actually exceptionally good quality.