

This Is Everlasting

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p 13-21

In his mother's room the furniture had shrunk by five years.

'A,' said Pim out of habit, 'a, b, c'. He opened a drawer in the dressing table. Hidden away behind curlers, hairnets and silk scarves he found the photo, the ribbon and the tiara. He took them out. Bitter-sweet memories. Pim examined the photo. Miss Camping and her two bridesmaids. You could already see she'd be fat later on, Yvette Bulteel. She wore a yellow sequinned dress that clashed mercilessly with her milky-white skin.

Pim moved to the landing. He could hear running water and imagined the shower cabinet in the corner of the kitchen wobbling slightly. Saturday. His mother was washing.

He went to his room and opened the cupboard. On the highest shelf, in the farthest corner, was a shoe box. No one would find it there. He grabbed the box and carefully lifted the lid. A chocolate bar wrapper, two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, a cutting from Motor Magazine, a blue checked handkerchief.

Downstairs the doorbell rang. Etienne. That lard-ass always turned up early.

'The door! Get the door!' Yvette yelled.

Pim stuffed the photo, the ribbon and the tiara into the shoebox. His mother was hardly one to miss such items anytime soon. He placed the box back in its dark corner, ran downstairs and opened the door.

Etienne's body filled the doorway.

'Here. For you,' said Etienne once they were in the kitchen. 'A boy should have a knife.' He ignored Mirza, who had fixed her teeth in his left trouser leg with a growl.

'Etienne,' was all Pim said. The pocket knife felt big and heavy in his right hand.

'Wasn't it your birthday yesterday?' asked Etienne.

'Tomorrow,' said Pim. 'Fifteen.'

'Is that you, Etienne?' Pim's mother cooed from behind the plastic shower curtain. And when the water fell silent, 'Beer?' She opened the curtain. She held her breasts and indistinct hips together with a bath towel.

'Yvette,' Etienne squawked. Then he gave Pim the knife again. 'Here. For Pim. A boy should have a knife.'

Yvette waddled out of the kitchen, wet and giggling.

'Well, what do you say? Thank you, Etienne!' she called from the stairs.

Mirza parted her jaws and gave a single, brief, high-pitched bark.

'Good dog,' said Etienne. There was a tear in his trousers.

Applause rose from the radio.

Pim pushed an ashtray closer, opened a can of beer and said, 'I'll fetch the accordion.'

Even just having to share the smell of fried bacon with fat Etienne... Pim massaged his own neck. That was a moment for him and his mother, just having eaten bacon together, the pan still on the table.

Greedily Etienne dipped a piece of bread in the congealing fat. The grease under his fingernails was embedded for eternity.

Gino works for this pig four days a week at the garage, thought Pim.

Over the edge of a framed jigsaw puzzle, the yellow sequinned dress hung on a coat hanger. Any minute now Yvette would reappear, barefoot, in one of her shiny slippers. She would force her plump body into the dress and ask Etienne to zip her up. Whatever his intentions, he'd have to fight for a more intimate moment. Next, like more or less every Saturday afternoon, Pim's mother would step into her worn-out yellow patent leather shoes.

Pim fetched a bottle from the fridge and poured a couple of fingers of white martini into a shallow glass.

'Voilà!' Yvette Mimosa, queen of the muset-te, and her cheap perfume entered the kitchen like bad actresses. She was short. On stilettos and with her hair up she hardly looked any taller. Her words were at odds with the air she aimed to exude.

'Be sure to have a tin of sardines later on.' She took a sip of martini.

'I'll see how I go,' said Pim.

Yvette adjusted a hairpin and with a mischievous gesture pulled a cigarette out of the Belga filter pack on the kitchen table.

'Yes, please,' said Etienne. He had a light ready.

'Ahhh,' said Yvette happily, and she showed off the cigarette jauntily to Pim. A magician's assistant, fleetingly. 'Be good. Lock the doors. You're a big boy.' Her hairdo disappeared into a cloud. 'We'll be back tomorrow,' she yapped, as she walked out the door.

Etienne carried the case with the accordion. Men's work. The car keys jangled on his over-sized belt.

Pim grabbed his mother's beauty case and carried it over to the mouse-grey Fiat. Mirza peed onto a wheel and took up position at a safe distance to growl at him.

'Are you pleased?' asked Etienne bluntly. 'With your knife?'

'Thank you, Etienne,' said Pim reluctantly.

The doors slammed shut. Soon it would be dusk. Pim watched the car until it was out of sight, out of the street, round the corner.

It was warm and still outside. Here the houses grew straight out of the ground, a border of dried mud covering the facades to knee height. It had been forgotten by pavers, this alley behind the high dune. Round the corner Pim could pick out the dim light of Texas café. Distant barking. People stood by their dogs around here. He picked Mirza up and went back inside.

'Quiet,' said Pim, 'stop that growling.' He switched off the radio, wanting to hear how, little by little, the silence entered the house, like a companion. He undressed, threw his clothes over the back of a kitchen chair and stood on the mat at the sink. With a damp sponge he wetted his armpits, crotch and buttocks, and he washed his feet in a tub. The shower cabinet, wet and empty, retained his mother's fragrance. Pim rubbed himself down with a tea towel, sniffed at his clothes and took them upstairs. You could hear every step sigh.

In his room he fetched clean boxers from the cupboard. One leg, the other leg. He squared his shoulders, rubbed his flat stomach and pulled his clothes on. He put the knife in his pocket.

Downstairs he took the newspaper from the kitchen counter, locked the front and back doors and went into the garden. Inside, the pan and plates were now soaking in the sink. The water would soon cool down, the fat would float to the surface. Wet mat, full ashtray, no one home.

Summer had got to work on the path behind the house. It smelt salty, of sea and horizon. Pim walked seven houses along, the dusk touching his throat and face.

Marcella's garden.

'It's me!' he called and pushed open the back door into the kitchen.

'Hello, Me,' said Sabrina in her sweetest voice.

Pim didn't say her name. If you said it too often, it would belong with you. First the name, then the girl. It was that kind of name.

Sabrina's long hair was in a ponytail, her long legs in bright green trousers. A fourteen-year-old Barbie doll. She went and stood as if stroking the fridge. 'Would you like a glass of lemonade, Pim?'

Pim threw the newspaper onto the kitchen table.

'The Latest News,' he said dramatically.

Marcella stopped ironing for a moment and smiled.

'The latest news from the day before yesterday,' said Gino.

'Doesn't bother me,' said Marcella, kissing Pim and hitting Gino with the newspaper.

'Etienne is taking my mother all the way to somewhere near Rijsel,' said Pim. 'Le Festival de l'Accordéon. They're staying in a hotel.'

'The path of temptation...' said Marcella.

'My mother can't stand that lard-ass,' said Pim. 'She's just after his car.'

'Silence is golden,' Marcella mumbled as she piled up the ironed linen.

'That's why we always have such a great time here,' Sabrina said with a smirk.

Marcella pretended she hadn't heard. 'Why don't you stay the night here?' she said, pulling at Pim's ear. 'You shouldn't be all alone in an empty house overnight...'

'You can sleep in my bed,' Sabrina suggested. She took a piece of chewing gum out of her mouth, inspected it and put it back between her teeth.

'It's summer, we'll sleep outside in the dunes,' said Gi-no hastily. 'In the tent, Pim and me.'

'The French are fond of accordion music,' said Pim, his voice breaking, afraid that anyone might say anything about anything.

The tent was too small and the canvas gave off a dull basement odour. It was sultry and still, yet sounds blew over the dune, whistling and rustling. You could hear voices in the distance.

Pim showed Gino the knife. 'From my mother,' he lied.

Gino showed him his own. 'From Etienne,' he said.

It was the same knife.

That bastard, thought Pim, but he said, 'Nice.'

The boys lay awake listening to the summer evening.

'Now we both have the same kind of knife,' Gino whispered jokingly. Pim felt his warm breath on his neck. And then his hand on his thigh.

We'll sleep outside in the dunes. It was that simple.

The wind blew a dent in the canvas. Pim pushed the hand away with a shiver. A wordless ritual. He lay motionless measuring the time. The twenty-six letters of the alphabet.

'It's my birthday tomorrow,' he said eventually.

'Exactly,' Gino rasped.

Pim was silent, but Gino's hand, back again and higher up now, on the rise of his hip, sent lightning through his body.

From the remnants of evening the boys sculpted a night for themselves. This was what they wanted. Their fingers searched greedily for what they found. Each other.

Gino lay staring at the canvas as if it were the starry sky. 'No one need know, Pimmie, this is ours.' His breathing slowed. He turned on his side, threw an arm around Pim and soon slipped off into a satisfied sleep. Pim cradled the moment. Forever, he swore, this is everlasting.

Pim walked into the garden. In his left pocket the house keys clinked cheerfully against the knife. Gino's knife. Suddenly there was laughter in his lower belly. It had been a piece of cake swapping them over, that night in the tent. In his right pocket was the folded drawing. He wanted to give it to him this evening.

And he had another thing for Gino. A surprise, a spur-of-the-moment inspiration. He couldn't put it into words any more clearly, everything he so wanted to tell him.

'I'll go to him,' Pim called to the gulls. The late sun blinded him. Yearning, reckless. They could make another trip on the motorbike, he and Gino.

'234 cc! I can do 120 kilometres an hour on this!' Gino yells into the wind.

Pim is riding pillion behind him and shouts something incomprehensible back. His arms form a lasso around his prey, his fingers interwoven as if in fervent prayer.

They ride through a village, over a bridge, past fields.

After some time Gino slows the Rebel, picking a country road. Neither of them knows where they are now.

Farmland as far as the eye can see. The ditch is dry as a bone and wide enough for two boys.

Gino leans the bike against a tree. He removes his helmet. It's been concealing a broad grin. 'I'm not allowed on the road with this stallion until the end of summer.' He's panting a little and then, unexpectedly, he pokes Pim in the stomach.

One then the other, they prance around like boxers and punch at each other with raised elbows.

Then Pim pushes Gino into the grass verge. 'Beauty and the Beast,' he laughs.

'Watch what you say, man.' Gino raises his left leg and trips Pim up. Then everything happens very fast. He's already sitting legs apart on top of him and pushes his head back into the tall grass.

Pim surrenders. Gino has a man's hands. The corners of his mouth are already framed by those mature bulges. His straight nose, his tanned skin... A landscape Pim would never tire of.

'What are you thinking about?' Gino rasps.

When will Pim find the courage to tell him the truth? 'You forgot the tent,' he blurts out.

Gino silences him with forceful lips.

The silence is lasting.

Pim ran hurriedly along the path behind the gardens. Here the twilight turned everything blue. The seventh house. No motorbike in the shed. Pim grasped the newspaper tightly. Gino had already gone out. Or was the horse ready in the street, the cowboy still in the shower?

'It's me,' called Pim. There was a question mark in his voice.

In the shiny clean kitchen Marcella was sitting on a chair at the table sewing on a button. She didn't look up, but stitched on through her words.

'Hi there. Just sewing on a button from my apron. Gino has gone to Dunkirk. Why doesn't he look for a sweetheart closer to home? She wanted to go dancing, that girl. In De Panne!'

'De Panne,' Pim echoed. He hardly had breath even for that one word. Distractedly he put the newspaper down somewhere, found a chair to lean on.

'Her name's Françoise,' said Sabrina emphatically, rolling the French r.

Pim wasn't stupid. Françoise. He'd heard it before. But hadn't wanted to understand. His heart was climbing into his throat.

The TV was on. The colours were too bright, the sound too low.

'Gino and dancing,' said Marcella, and she pointed with the needle at the lamp above the kitchen table. Her cheeks were eternally ruddy, as if she rented out beach chairs or dug up potatoes, when in fact she washed bottles at the dairy factory for a living.

Not his mother's, Gino didn't inherit that black hair and those deep eyes from his mother, Pim thought, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Marcella bit through the thread, which snapped leaving the button in place. Then she pulled the sleeveless light-blue apron on. All buttoned up. 'Little children grow up,' she sighed, and with a girlish gesture she swept a few greasy strands behind an ear. 'I must wash that hair of mine sometime.'

Sabrina batted her long eyelashes and said something about lemonade.

Pim guessed at the distance between Dunkirk and De Panne.

'Perhaps he'll bring her round sometime soon,' said Marcella.

'Françoise,' said Sabrina yet again. She let the second part of the name drag on after the first like a bridal veil.

In his thoughts Pim sketched the empty space Gino had left behind.

The tiles on the walls, the mirror on the sideboard, the copper plates on the wall, everything gleamed and sparkled like the chrome of the Honda. Between Gino's legs there was space for a Harley Davidson, Pim thought. He was staring at the moving images on the television, but he saw a boy with a helmet and black leather jacket. A hero from a film. His hero. So he was picking up a girl in Dunkirk.

Françoise. The thought of the ease with which she would clasp her arms around Gino's hips...

Pim opened his mouth. 'The motorbike,' was all he said.

'Oui, oui,' Sabrina chattered in the tone of, 'Well done!'

'Don't make such a song and a dance,' said Marcella. And to Pim, 'Even second hand, a bike like that costs a bomb. And an apprentice's piggybank is soon empty. Time for Mother to knuckle down! Oh well, it's always been Gino's dream. And there are so many things you can save on.' It was quiet for a moment, then she said, 'Sugar sachets.'

'Mother...' Sabrina groaned.

'You're the only one I'd tell, Pim,' Marcella whispered. 'Sugar sachets. I get them from the used trays in the factory cafeteria. The doctor says I shouldn't have any sugar myself, but...'

'Mother!' said Sabrina in a strict tone.

'They throw them away, those sachets. Even if they're unopened,' said Marcella. 'And I've been doing my own hair for two years now, it all adds up.'

'Pim would like a sandwich,' said Sabrina briskly. 'Right, Pim?' She tried to catch his eye.

'And yesterday for the first time Gino...' Marcella left a brief silence, '...went to work in the motorway restaurant,' she said proudly. 'On Friday evening and all day on Sunday. Always willing to earn a little on the side. Washing vegetables, flipping burgers... The pay's not bad. Ah, those little bits here and there... And he's doing well at the garage, Etienne tells me. He's learning fast, our Gino. If there's anything wrong with the bike... he can do it all himself.' Marcella wiped some imaginary crumbs from the tablecloth. 'The boy's not work-shy by any means.'

Pim blushed.

Upstairs you could hear Sabrina closing a door.

Pim wanted to get away from the fluorescent lamps.

'Gino's late,' said Marcella. 'But what can you do? Eighteen. And that girl wants to dance, but he has to go to work tomorrow morning.'

'The newspaper boy is off again,' said Pim stoically.

'And I'll get to bed early for once,' sighed Marcella. 'I've been feeling so tired recently.'

Pim didn't know what to say.

'Are you sure you don't want a drink?' said Marcella by the door. 'You're off to the Texas.'

'Yes,' said Pim. Although he'd have preferred to go to De Panne.

He set off at a run and heard Sabrina call after him out of the upstairs window. But the wind swept her words to the dead end of the alleyway.