

The Year of the Dog

Stefan Brijs

An extract (7-9; 30-41)

Original title Zonder liefde
Publisher Atlas Contact, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Michele Hutchison

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p 7-9

The first time I saw her was on a Wednesday in September or October. In the provincial town where I lived back then, an arthouse film was shown once a week, introduced by an expert. ‘Quality Films’ the series was called. The word ‘arthouse’ would have scared off potential customers, myself included; nevertheless, it seemed to me that there were only film buffs in the room. I could see nothing but middle-aged men, sitting apart from each other, with one or two empty seats between them. Some of them still had their coats on, as though they wanted to be able to walk out if the film disappointed. The speaker, a large fleshy man with a full beard and dark glasses, had already started – in search of the toilets because there was unlikely to be an interval, I’d got lost in the catacombs of the building – and so as not to make anyone stand up, I sat down in the nearest free place next to the aisle. That’s how I ended up next to her. I flipped down the seat and sat down without taking off my coat. She took her arm from the armrest and folded her hands in her lap.

During the introduction, which lasted about twenty minutes, I tried to get a first impression of her as unobtrusively as possible. She had a sharply-defined profile, her dark blond, slightly wavy hair reached halfway down her neck and covered her ears, her wrists were thin, her fingers long and slender. She was wearing a cream-coloured blouse and dark-brown trousers. Her attention was entirely focused on the speaker, whose appearance reminded me of Bud Spencer – the actor who mainly plays Terence Hill’s somewhat clumsy, overweight brute of a sidekick in spaghetti westerns. These were also the first words I said to her, and I would have forgotten them a long time ago if I hadn’t made such a gaffe.

‘He looks like Bud Spencer,’ I said when the speaker had finished and gestured to the projector that the lights could be dimmed.

‘He’s my father,’ she said brusquely. She put on her glasses and the film started.

I watched many films with her, in that same arts centre, at home on video and on the TV – we had the same taste. At the end of the film, she always remained seated until the entire credits had rolled. Sometimes she suggested a film, other times I would, a few times we went to a play or a dance performance.

I don’t remember which film we saw that first time. Perhaps I would have remembered it if I’d realized that our friendship would begin there. However, that evening I only found out her name. At the end of the film, her father invited anyone wanting to chat to join him in the pub. I went along because I didn’t want to go home, where nobody except my dog was waiting for me. Our group comprised of about five or six people. She sat diagonally across from me and, like me, took little part in the conversation; her father and another man in his fifties were the real talkers. She didn’t seem very focussed. Her gaze wandered regularly around the cafe without lingering on anything or anyone. She looked tired, pale, thin – but she was still attractive. She had a narrow face,

large pale-blue tending towards grey eyes, pronounced cheekbones, a fairly broad mouth but thin lips. There was something refined about her, something uncommonly elegant. She stood out without wanting to, not resembling her father in any way. I judged her to be my age, perhaps a little older – which turned out to be the case, I was twenty-seven, she had turned twenty-nine a few weeks earlier.

At a certain point someone said her name. Eve: the first woman, the woman who drove humankind from paradise by tasting the forbidden fruit. But I had misheard. It was Ava, after the actress Ava Gardner – an idea of her father's. She was never keen on it.

'Ava. A-V-A', she corrected me.

'A palindrome,' I said.

That was a week later. I went to the Quality Film night again. Had I hoped to see her again? At least I still remember the film: *The Man Who Had His Hair Cut Short*, based on the novel by Johan Daisne, a book I discussed with my students every school year.

She was there. She came into the room shortly after me and although several places were free, she sat down next to me. Had I read the book? she asked almost immediately after she had installed herself.

That's how it started.

[summary: After the film, Paul and Ava have their first conversation, which starts off fairly generally but soon moves on to their previous relationships. Ava is a company doctor for the national railways, Paul teaches Dutch and English at a secondary school. Ava has just come out of a five-year relationship, having left her boyfriend for the umpteenth time, now for good, and has moved back in with her mother. Paul has been cheated on and left by his wife Christine, a childhood sweetheart to whom he was married for three years. He is still getting over this and lives alone with his dog Fjodor. Ava isn't looking for a new relationship at the moment; Paul finds her attractive but she's not his "type". A few days later, Ava calls Paul and asks if she can stay over at his house. She has had a fight with her mother. That evening she asks Paul said about his failed relationship with Christine. He tells how they started growing apart right from the very beginning and, towards the end, barely did anything together anymore. Nevertheless Paul was "satisfied" with the situation, a word that Ava hates. She talks about how she lost her virginity to a stranger on a train when she was 18. Ava spends the night in the guest room, Paul listening from his bedroom to every sound she makes and masturbating to calm his turmoil. The next morning Ava leaves for work early.]

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The very next day Ava made up with her mother, who had apologized on the phone and almost begged her to come back.

'But she's only doing it to clear her conscience. And now she'll be as sweet as pie to me for a while, until her mood suddenly changes. At which point the slightest sigh will be enough to cause a storm.' This was what Ava told me when we went for a drink a week later, after the film.

'Then why did you go back?'

'To clear my conscience,' she said with a pitying smile.

'Why?'

'I've always got along better with my dad. I was his favourite and my little sister was my mum's favourite. When they got divorced this became painfully clear. My mum got custody and every two weeks we spent a weekend at my dad's. For a long time, my sister refused to visit him. She said it

was his fault that Mum cried so much. Well, she was just repeating what my mum told her, you see. I didn't mind her not coming along. I spent hundreds of hours on my own with my dad at the cinema. And often on Sunday nights I'd refuse to go home to my mum's. My dad didn't mind. Nothing really bothered him. She'd go totally crazy though, threaten to call the police and stuff like that... So I do have some things to make up for.'

'Why did your parents break up? Did he have someone else? Or did she?'

'I don't think so. They were simply like chalk and cheese, fire and water. At the beginning that must have created steam, but in the end there was only smoke left. They fought like cats and dogs.'

'They were probably too different,' I concluded, thinking about myself and Christine.

'Maybe. But love isn't an abacus, is it?'

'What do you mean?' This expression must have come from one of the esoteric books she read.

'That you keep count of how many things you have in common with your partner and how many you don't. That's not what love's about.'

'I think it might be. Ultimately.'

She looked at me as though I was telling her something completely new.

'I'm speaking from experience, as you know,' I added.

A glimmer of doubt appeared on her face, then she shook her head and said, 'I refuse to believe it.'

'What...'

'Shall we go home? I have to get up early tomorrow. Just let me get the bill.' She pushed back her chair and stood up to go to the bar.

I looked at my watch, it wasn't even eleven yet.

It didn't become clear to me until our next date what had so suddenly upset her. She had a different conception of love than I'd ever had. But it took her a while to admit it. Her disappointment at the failure of her relationship ran deeper than she'd let on.

That day – a Saturday – we'd gone to look for a place for her to rent. I was to drive her around my neighbourhood, a place she'd never gone house-hunting in before because she didn't know anyone there.

Before we set off, we looked at the housing ads in the paper and made a few phone calls, but the houses we'd picked all turned out to be taken.

'That's what always happens,' she said, disappointed. 'If you don't pounce immediately, they're gone.'

Nevertheless, we'd begun the hunt in a good mood. One day luck would be on her side, we told ourselves. The places that I showed her might, in any case, appeal and occasionally she pointed out a house in which she could picture herself living, so that I could get a good idea of what she was looking for. Every time we saw a sign on the side of the road in the distance, our hopes flared up – 'Quick! Speed up!' she cried – until we got there and discovered that it was student digs, or a studio flat, or that the constant roar of a nearby busy road was clearly audible.

The more we roamed, the more and more despondent we became, also because we were confronted with the rest of humanity, who seemed to have it all sorted. At times we felt like we were driving through the set of an advert for a new family car or through a home interiors catalogue and the only - poor - comfort we could offer ourselves was the cynical notion that behind all those facades, a lot of unspoken suffering must be hidden.

After more than two hours of searching, I decided to show her one last area, adjacent to a well-to-do neighbourhood, where a jumble of narrow, winding streets led through a network of what used to be fish-farming ponds, a rather swampy area with the odd little house, probably the former homes of supervisors or workmen.

When I mentioned the name of the neighbourhood Ava promptly asked me to turn back. She didn't want to live there.

I gave her a questioning look.

'Peter's parents live there,' she said.

Peter. I'd only heard his name once before. All the other times – the few times she'd mentioned him – she'd simply said 'my boyfriend', not even 'my ex' or 'my old boyfriend.'

'Is that a problem?' I asked.

'He visits them quite often and I'd rather not see him again.'

What did I know about him at that moment? Not much. That he was the same age as her and did something with computers. They'd met at a party and had moved in together when Ava graduated. Their relationship had lasted five years. Then they'd each gone their separate ways. Amicably. That's what she'd told me on our first date. Now she seemed to be hinting that their break up might not have been so amiable, as though one of them had cheated or they'd argued. But I was wrong.

'I'm worried I'd change my mind if I saw him again,' she said. 'That I'd want to get back together again...Like all the other times... We've promised to leave each other be. It's over. He was done with it this time too.'

I had pulled the car over in the meantime. 'Do you want to carry on looking or shall we go for a drink?'

'Let's just go for a drink.'

I drove to a watermill that had been converted into a café, not far from my house. There was just one table occupied. We sat down next to a small window through which we could see the wooden paddles of the watermill and hear the rush of the stream. Ava ordered a glass of white wine, I ordered a Trappist beer. We clinked glasses to better luck next time and discussed the neighbourhoods we'd crossed off along the way and the houses she'd liked.

Then I said, 'Peter...'

She took a sip of wine and began, 'I saw him for the first time at a friends' barbecue. There were about thirty people there. Peter and I were both on our own. I'd just come out of a relationship that had lasted nearly two years and I was determined not to start a new relationship right away. But then I saw him. He was sitting a little further down the table and I couldn't take my eyes off him. Nor could he keep his off me.'

'Love at first sight,' I said.

'Much more,' Ava said emphatically. 'I was struck by an overwhelming desire for him. I broke out in a sweat. My heart beat faster. I was completely bowled over.'

I must have given her a scornful look, because she leaned towards me and said in a slightly subdued voice, 'I can't express it any other way. I was burning up inside with wanton desire. Really.' Wanton desire. Ava is the only woman I have ever heard use that term. 'And Peter experienced the same thing. He saw me and was lost. After a while, he came to sit with me and we started talking. But every word we spoke just delayed what we both wanted to take place as quickly as possible. We didn't leave the party until it was late enough to do so without being rude. He went first, and I soon followed. I drove after him to his flat. At the time, I was still studying, my final year, and I lived with my mum at the weekend. He already had a job.'

'Did he take the initiative?' I asked, curious.

'No, I did. I'd have spent my whole life blaming myself if I hadn't.'

Her openness surprised me. She'd abandoned all caution. I sat up straighter.

'What attracted you to him so much?' I had absolutely no idea what kind of men she fell for.

'What attracted me to him?' She pondered for a moment as she swished the wine around in her glass. 'Everything. Absolutely everything. I can't say what it was exactly. Even if I'd only seen him from behind, I'd have fallen in love with him immediately.'

'But was he good looking?' I insisted. 'Did he look like George Clooney? Or maybe more like Tom Cruise?'

She shook her head laughing. 'My sister thought he looked like Kevin Bacon.'

'Oh, Mr *Footloose*.'

'Yes, but not as bendy,' she laughed again.

'I see...'

'But I didn't just fall for his looks, in case you're thinking that.'

'In the first instance you did, though?'

'No, then it would have been different.'

'In what way?'

'Then you sleep together and that's it. But when I saw Peter it was as though I knew him on the inside too, his character, his whole being. I knew right away it was going to be – *had* to be more with him. That I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. Hasn't that ever happened to you?'

'Not that I know of, no. Not with Christine. But maybe she wasn't the one...'

'I'm not talking about anyone being the one,' Ava interrupted me, 'but about an uncontrollable longing...'

'For sex?'

'For *him*. To be with him. To feel him. Touch him. Day and night. Forever.'

'Lust then.'

'No, Paul.' She shook her head vigorously. 'Passion.' She said it with intensity, as though she were naming a divinity.

'Passion.' I repeated. It sounded a lot more boring coming out of my mouth.

The waiter had approached our table without us noticing. He asked if we wanted another drink. His gaze didn't betray whether he'd caught anything of our conversation. Ava ordered a second glass of wine, I took another Trappist.

While waiting for our order, Ava stared out the window. A wistful expression appeared on her face. I was reminded of an incident a few days earlier when she'd revealed a completely different side of her character. We had been to the cinema and afterwards we had a drink in a trendy place where the music was too loud to be able to talk to each other at a normal volume.

We had one drink and were about to leave when someone approached us, a good-looking guy with a confident air, who thought he had seen Ava before. He began to chat away comfortably with her – I didn't seem to exist to him – keeping his mouth close to her ear and constantly touching her arm or shoulder. Ava responded in a distinctly aloof and chilly fashion, only giving a polite nod once in a while, otherwise staring ahead with the emotionless face of a sphinx, until he understood that there was nothing to be had and slunk off. I saw him saying something to a friend behind her back and I was almost certain he had used the words 'ice queen'.

As soon as the waiter had brought our drinks, Ava continued the conversation.

'After that party I stayed with him for a whole week. He called in sick at work, I didn't go to my lectures. We barely got out of bed.'

'Spare me the details,' I said hurriedly. The more she told me, the more it seemed like I'd lived like a marmot for the last ten years.

'As you wish,' Ava said with an amused smile. 'From then onwards, we spent every weekend together in his flat. Sometimes he'd come to mine during the week. He'd come straight from work and stay the night. As soon as he left, I'd count the hours until I saw him again. I barely slept. But I didn't need to – wanting him kept me going.'

'So the sparks kept on flying?'

'You could put it that way.'

'But passion fades, doesn't it? As time goes by...'

'I don't want it to fade,' she interrupted fiercely. 'I want it to go on forever.'

She looked me in the eye and suddenly I saw the despair in hers because she knew all too well that though she might long for never-ending passion, it would always slip out of her hands.

She had left Peter three times, every time she felt the fire was going out of their relationship. First she had stayed away for one month, then for two months, the last time almost six months,

always hoping that when she returned it would flare up again. And it did, but for briefer and briefer periods. The last time she was already regretting it by the time they lay in bed. She had rolled over and that was that. She had lain motionless beside him for nights on end, not touching him, furious with herself.

‘Eventually *he’d* had enough of it. Enough of me. His patience had run out.’

All those times, he’d waited for her, given her space, refrained from coming after her because he knew it would have the opposite effect.

‘I should never have moved in with him,’ she said after a brief pause. ‘But I wanted to be with him as much as possible. And the passion would never fade. That’s not what it felt like. Not this time.’

‘Not this time?’

‘My relationship before that had failed for the same reason. But at the time I blamed it on my boyfriend. I felt he wasn’t doing his best, he was too easily satisfied. But it was my fault.’

‘Being satisfied isn’t your strongest suit, Ava.’

‘Apparently not, no, and I don’t know whether I want it to be. A relationship has to remain passionate. You have to keep wanting each other physically.’

‘You sound like Lady Chatterley,’ I said. ‘Have you read that, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*?’

‘Yes, and I’ve seen the film... but she finds passion with a lover...’

‘With a forester.’ I’d always loved that word.

Ava didn’t seem to have heard me. ‘But I want passion with my *own* husband,’ she said, suddenly fired up again. ‘He has to be a husband *and* a lover. I want us to be friends *and* sleep together.’ She took a deep breath, and then said, rather quietly, ‘I don’t want anyone else, Paul. I don’t want to cheat. I never cheated on Peter during those five years.... Well, I once slept with someone else but that was during one of our many break-ups. I wanted to know if I could feel what I’d lost with him with somebody else.’

‘Well?’

‘It was mechanical. Sex. Nothing more than that.’ She pushed aside her still half-full wine glass. ‘I shouldn’t have ordered a second.’

‘So what now?’ I asked.

‘Now? Nothing. Find a house. Finally start to lead my own life.’

‘And passion? On the back burner?’

‘Don’t joke about it.’

‘I’m not. But... it surprises me.’

‘What does?’

‘Hearing all this...’

She leaned forward with a jerk and sniped, ‘Why do you think your wife left you?’

I hadn’t expected this attack and even Ava seemed shocked by her own reaction. In a calmer tone she said, ‘Every woman wants passion.’

‘Christine and I didn’t have anything in common,’ I said, offended. ‘Passion couldn’t have saved our relationship. And passion doesn’t last. Everybody knows that. You want the impossible. You’re going to be looking for a long time.’

Her face tightened. For a moment it seemed she was going to hold it against me, then she said, ‘Let’s drop the subject.’ And she abruptly averted her eyes from mine.

I should have told her then that she was right. But if I’d admitted that, I would have had to talk about the last weeks I spent with Christine, and I preferred not to think about that. We’d made love like we hadn’t done in years. Intense. Long. In many different ways. And she’d always taken the initiative, even in things we’d never done before. An uncontrollable lust had taken hold of her. It was only when I found out that she’d been cheating on me all along that I realized that it wasn’t me turning her on, but her new friend, whom she probably thought about when I was on top of or

beneath her. She found with him the passion that had never existed between us - as I realized from my conversation with Ava.

In the car on the way home, Ava stared ahead in silence and the longer we didn't talk, the more uncomfortable I felt. She had confided in me and I had pretty much laughed at her confession. Her having broken off the conversation was a sign that I had hurt her. She had not said a word since. I glanced at her, but she ignored my gaze. Did she regret telling me? Was she thinking about our future together? Would she leave and never come back? The thought frightened me. I had to apologize to her. Still, it was a while before I was able to do so. It wasn't until we drove into my street that I said, 'I'm sorry I was so blunt.'

'Blunt?' Ava replied with some amazement. 'You weren't at all blunt.'

'Oh.'

'What makes you think that?'

'...'

I pulled into the drive and killed the engine. Ava reached to open her door, hesitated briefly and then turned to me. 'Paul, would you mind terribly if I stayed at yours tonight? I don't feel like going back to my mum's.'