

Solace

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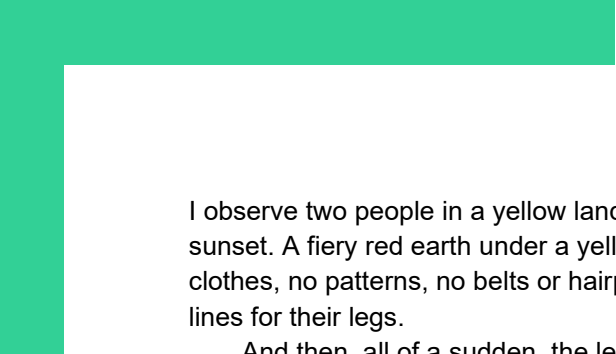
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p 5-8

I knew that she would come one day. I didn't know that she would choose this kind of evening, with the rain and wind laying into each other like jealous brothers, the kind of evening most people choose to spend sulking in the safety of their homes.

The moment I saw her, I forgot how you're supposed to behave when someone tries to contact you, when someone presses your doorbell – which usually does tend to mean 'let's talk to one another'. I stood on the doorstep in the pouring rain and all I could do was look at her.



I observe two people in a yellow landscape, two silhouettes who are in turn watching an inverted sunset. A fiery red earth under a yellow sky. People conjured from black strokes. No details to their clothes, no patterns, no belts or hairpins. Only human contours: small heads, broad torsos, two thin lines for their legs.

And then, all of a sudden, the legs walk out of the painting.

As usual when it rained, I climbed onto a chair in the living room and pressed a towel to the ceiling, hoping that this time it would fully absorb the moisture – all of it, including the invisible moisture lurking deeper behind the wooden beams.

When the doorbell rang, the towel fell to the floor with a dull thud. Other doorbells give a gentle tinkle, like a music box or a sweet chord played on a piano, but mine makes a hideous noise that pierces the skull.

I carried the dripping wet towel to the bathroom and stopped in front of the mirror. My eyes looked hollow, like something had been scooped out.

Then I returned to the living room and looked through the window. The pouring rain was beating down into the pale glow of the streetlight. The wind chased the branches back and forth like whips, and the traffic lights sprinkled semi-translucent red, white and green flakes into the curtain of falling water.

I threw a final quick glance up at the ceiling before going downstairs. The front door swung open with a force that could be mistaken for aggression. I had already started to apologize, but fell abruptly silent when I saw who had appeared on my doorstep.

I couldn't say her name. I just stood there and looked at her while her name echoed around in my head like a stubborn mantra – *Ms Ilara Ms Ilara Ms Ilara* – but I didn't say or do anything, I didn't hug her.

It was her, but it wasn't her. Her hair stuck to her head in dripping wet clumps and her skin was paler than it used to be. She wasn't wearing a raincoat; her clothes looked like they'd been glued to her body for weeks. There were invisible little weights in the corners of her mouth that pulled her cheeks down. Her face was wet, from the tears or the rain, it wasn't clear which. It seemed to me that the tears and the rain had nothing to do with this particular situation – that they were a part of her, like her eyes, that there was nothing temporary about them whatsoever.

I meet Viola precisely one week before she is going to die. It's her mother who rings me up. She's still alive, she says, perhaps it's not something you're used to? She sounds calm, as if she's put on the armour she wears for this kind of conversation.

Viola's room is an extravagant blend of a top-tier hospital room and an unruly teenager's apocalyptic refuge. The walls are filled with posters of pop stars from magazines, the floor littered with clothes, jewellery, beauty products and peculiar-looking gadgets. Amid all the chaos stands an adjustable epoxy bed, with side panels, a remote control and three IV drips with dangling tubes.

It takes a moment before I notice the girl, although it seems she's been openly staring at me from her wheelchair in the corner of the room all this time. She has ash-blonde hair. She doesn't look eighteen, as her mother had said, but closer to thirteen, a child secretly hanging out in her big sister's room.

You're Viola?

If you call me Violina even once, I'm out of here. Don't look so surprised. My steed is fast like you wouldn't believe. And heavy! Your toes will be pulp before you know what's hit you.

Viola's mother shrugs and leaves the room.

So you're the celebrant? Strange word. Sounds like you're celebrating that I'm no longer going to be around. I guess you don't mind either way, do you? At the end of the day, you'll go back to your life as if nothing happened. Put on a nice suit, say something sentimental at the crematorium, cash out, and go home to watch TV with your wife and kid.

Something like that, I say. Although I don't have a TV, or a wife or a kid.

She huffs and turns to the window.

Some people would say celebrant, but I prefer the term eulogist. Your parents have asked me to say a few words at your funeral.

I know! Can you believe it? They can't even manage that! But listen, Mr Willem the funeral speaker, I do understand. Of course it's all very sad for them, but it's also a bit embarrassing, isn't it – they've had eight years to get used to the idea, and still they don't know what to say. But you know what, I'm actually curious, we can treat it as an experiment. So what's the story? Let's see. Girl, ten years of age, gets diagnosed with an acute case of leukaemia, sticks it out for eight more years but never gets the chance to start living her life. Others develop breasts, kiss boys and go to university, while she becomes an expert in chemotherapy and develops a *complicated* relationship with her own blood cells, an army of tiny little soldiers that are with her one day and against her the next. The highlight of Viola's life? Has to be the bone marrow transplant, followed by a short period of happiness when she finally learns to swim and even has a period. *She's finally become a woman*, the parents cry. That's before the final blow, one year later: Viola relapses and is declared terminal. Nothing to be done – just like that, she's dropped by the medical experts. Cancer treatment seamlessly transitions into end-of-life care.

I want to say something, but Viola sticks up her hand like a police officer stopping traffic.

The final phase of Viola Rademakers's pitiful existence: the conversation with the funeral speaker. His name is Willem, he is taller than most men, he perks up his ears and scribbles in a notepad.

Viola—

You couldn't imagine how many professionals I've had to tell about myself.

What do you want to do?

Want to do?

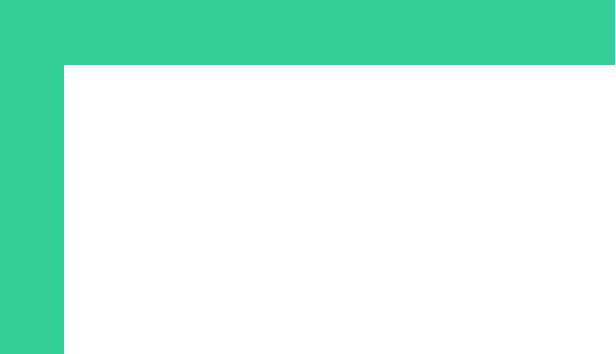
Yes. Anything.

What do I want to do?

I nod, and she lets out an almost wistful sigh before she starts talking.

I want to get out of here, to get up out of this horrible wheelchair and go out, I want to eat greasy chips and heaps of chocolate, I want to dance, study, join a boozy student club where I have to fish sweets from heaps of expired flour using only my tongue; I want to travel, to learn Spanish and bag myself a Chilean surfer, say, and spend the night on a beach in his suntanned arms, yes, that sounds like a good time to me. I feel like doing all those things, but you know, Willem the funeral speaker, and excuse me because I won't pussyfoot around, but all of this is simply impossible because I'm going to die, and no, I don't want to die. I don't want to live with this ridiculous body anymore. I'm done, I've had it with the pain and the diarrhoea and all the pity, I've completely had it, but no, I don't want to die.

Her eyes are glassy. Sweat has beaded on her temples.



Let's go.

Go?

She looks at me with astonishment.

Okay, let's go.

It's October, yet Viola puts on a pair of ski socks, a woolly hat and a sheepskin coat. We escape through the utility room and I push the wheelchair down the street at speed. I want her to feel the wind on her cheeks, the blood in her veins, her accelerated heartbeat.

After half an hour, we hear the cries of a fairground ride, and loud basses accompanying nasal voices who are trying to lure customers into casinos.

Ten minutes later, we're in the dodgems. Viola's hat flies off her head, uncovering white hair that reflects all the fairground colours in turn.

After the dodgems she wants chips. She manages to eat three, and she relishes them. I shovel down the rest.

Are we still going to talk about my life or have you forgotten what they hired you for?

I choke on a chip.

There once was a girl with platinum-blond hair.

She slaps my thigh hard.

My hair isn't blond. It's auburn and wavy and it reaches down to my shoulders. The chemo made it fall out and then this gross chemo hair came in its place, but it isn't my hair.

There once was a girl with gross chemo hair—

She whacks my shoulder.

You're flouting every single rule of your profession, I'm sure of it.

The flickering fairground lights dance across her pale face. I catch a glimpse of the woman she could become one day.

Could have become.

Don't collapse, man, Viola says and slaps my chest. We're not done yet.

What did you have in mind?

I've never had a drink.

I stay silent.

Look, Willem the funeral speaker, I get that you don't want to upset my family, but this isn't actually any of their business. I'm of age, and I should have been dead by now. I've got nothing to lose. Besides, I got it from a reliable source that there's an excellent cocktail bar just around the corner from here.

They're having a drag show at the bar. Viola squeals when a drag queen presses her ample bosom into her face. Then she gives an artist wearing a mermaid costume an enthusiastic applause and goes berserk when this artist gets a bad score. She is moved to tears when a convincing Madonna impersonator dedicates a song to her.

After the show, we go out. Viola lifts herself out of her wheelchair and sits down next to me on the bench.

Her head drops against my shoulder.

Are you all right?

Interesting question to ask someone who's going to die.

This really is bad timing for me.

Why?

We could have fallen in love.

She squeezes my thigh.

Or have you got someone? You said you live alone, but that doesn't mean anything. I'd never want to live with my boyfriend. You have to escape each other's grossness from time to time. Like, I honestly don't need to know how anyone removes their nose hairs, just to give an example.

Willem the funeral speaker? Hello?

There is someone in my flat.

Of course. I knew it.

But we don't live together.

You don't live together but she lives there and you live there too?

Yes.

Why is she in your flat?

I don't know exactly.

What do you mean, you don't know?

She hasn't told me.

She just showed up one day and moved in with you?

Something like that.

That's weird.

She was looking for a place to sleep.

Ah, you could have just said.

Said what?

You're a shelter.

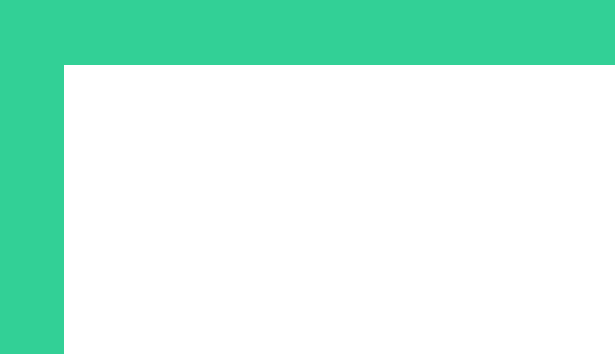
The dizzying focus she brings to a salamander's eye.

She uses her finest-bristled paintbrush, the kind of brush that gets on the nerves of everyone except the most patient kind of people.

She holds it between her thumb and index finger, that little stick with just a few bristles which you need an extremely steady hand to wield, because before you know it those bristles have shot sideways and caused undesired lines to appear on the page that completely throw off the balance of the image.

She barely taps the paper with the bristles. Perhaps it shouldn't even be called painting. Hour after hour, she keeps barely tapping, until the vertical pupil of the creature is looking straight into you.

I have a difficult time hanging up her drawings. Sometimes I secretly take photos which I print and keep at home.



The best thing about having a memory is that you can leave all kinds of things in there that you don't need to share with anyone at all. It's an infinitely expandable space, as large as the entire universe, but it's just for you.

I remember the day when I had my first piece published in the school newspaper, how Ms Ilara walked through the school with the paper clasped under her arm. All day she went about the school with the paper under her arm.

You go on home if they're waiting for you. I should probably get going, too.

I don't think you'll be able to attach that hook while holding the parrot.

Her face is marble. That face wasn't born; it was polished into being.

Ms Ilara?

I hand her the bird and screw in the hook.

I don't need to be anywhere, miss.

Good, then let's continue a bit longer.

Are they expecting you anywhere?

I shake my head.

No husband cooking for you?

This makes me laugh as I step down the ladder. We've hung the macaw so high that only the most stubborn ceiling-starers will take note of its existence.

Why are you laughing?

I live alone. Well, with Lucy.

Lucy?

My goat.

She thinks I'm joking.

Really.

You have a goat?

A very special goat.

Tell me more.

So I tell her about Lucy. I tell her how one day Lucy was just there in my living room, and I hadn't heard her come in; how she looked straight in my eyes and turned her head sharply when I took a step towards her, how she seemed to raise an eyebrow in disdain, and how a few seconds later she was smelling my fingers, my nails, the skin between my fingers, my wrist, the palms of my hands, as if trying to determine which side I was on; how she licked me and I knew that everything would be all right.

I was startled, but I said, hey Lucy. The name was there right away. I knew she was called Lucy. Then she flung her head in her neck.

I've since learned that goats are very bendy creatures, they're far more flexible than human beings. But back then the movement terrified me. I looked as if her skull had snapped off her spine. Then she turned around and walked out of my house.

But she came back?

Every day for weeks. Usually she walked right on into the living room, exploring around cupboard doors and investigating loose items of clothing. She likes things you can pull apart – scarves with loose ends, newspaper sheets.

She chose you.

I thought she was beautiful, with that doe neck of hers and those white socks and that strange horn she has. She has one horn, a cracked curl on her head.

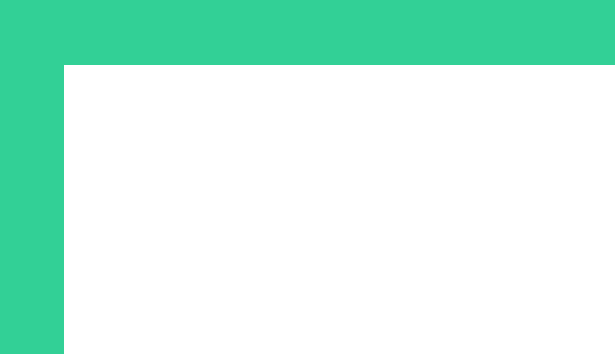
Why just one?

Most farm goats are dehorned so they can't hurt anyone. But goats' horns are made of tissue with nerves, so dehorning hurts them. Lucy must have put up a fight, that's how she is. And so she got disfigured for life.

We talk all night. About our families and our missing fathers; about her brothers, six-year-old Tristan and nine-year-old Manuel. She has sympathy for her mother and she doesn't hate her father. She understands that life with three children didn't turn out the way he'd imagined.

Fathers are decoration, she said.

I put a hand on her shoulder, but her shoulder is too big and my hand is too small. I'd need a far bigger hand to offer consolation.



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