

Blindly

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An extract

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Jonas, 6:42 a.m., Apartment

I've just killed my dog and fed him to the fish. A bullet between the eyes. Well aimed. How did I do it.

Getting back home, well if you can call it home, wasn't easy. Here I sit, in the leather armchair, mother-of-pearl look the velvety-voiced saleslady informed me. My face is turned toward the door that leads to the entrance to this apartment, in this building, in this city.

This god-awful city. The cracked pearl on the coastline of this low-lying country. Loneliness hangs here, even in good weather, like smog over the streets. Elderly folks shuffle along the sidewalks, their only companion a cane or walker. Others, who still make do with themselves and their threadbare lives, drag a wheeled shopping tote behind them filled with groceries, drink, cat food and useless knickknacks, having allowed themselves to fall for the deceptive slogans. People love getting taken for a ride. Being screwed over from time to time gives them a grip on life. As soon as the sun drapes its watery spring rays over the decrepit, abandoned buildings, they appear on the dike: the early-retirees, men in ill-fitting shorts and correspondingly hideous socks. Knobby-kneed, varicose-veined and pasty-skinned, they trudge silently alongside their other half, who in turn are cloaked in leggings that accentuate oversized bellies and buttocks under the blandly-colored jogging suits and T-shirts emblazoned with foreign sayings they don't understand. And if they do understand them, it's baffling that they wear them at all. This city is the mother of bad taste.

Still, I love this place and my apartment overlooking the marina. Off in the distance you can see the ocean. In the evenings, halyard rings tinkle against the masts in a soft symphony, a new tune every night. The gulls glide over the boats as though they're dancing their last waltz. It's the most soothing sound there is.

Even when I was seven and stood barefoot at the open window in my pajamas, trying to count the tiny lights along the coastal road. My teddy bear pajamas that mama fringed with a band of yellow stars against a dark-blue border. Papa's hand that stroked my hair, me leaning against his thigh, the lingering scent of the dry-cleaner in his trousers. Papa, standing silently next to me. There had been enough shouting the past hour. Right after the kiddie program with the tick-tocking clock and the dog who sometimes, but not always, appeared among the sheep during the opening credits. I've

forgotten what exactly they argued about. What I remember most are the colors. The yellow of the stars on that blue border, papa's gray trousers, a gray that made you think of nighttime, the deep brown of the buffet with the white marble statuettes on top. Female torsos with nipple-less breasts. Blank white breasts. And the white of their vulva. Beautiful word, come to think of it. Vulva. And the red of mama's face. Purply red. 'Stay here then. Just make sure he's back by Monday morning, before eight. Washed and combed!' She shouted this at papa, and then she left, slamming the door behind her. Papa went to the kitchen and started washing up. I stood at the open window and listened to the halyards. Strange, isn't it, what a child remembers in order to forget other things. How we fill the drawers of our memory with worthless trifles. Memory plays a strange game with the truth. It shamelessly distorts, it magnifies, it masks and it deceives.

A love-hate relationship with this city. Today it's hate. This morning I shot my dog and fed him to the fish. Only the queen of seaside resorts, with its ebb and tide, is smutty and whorish enough to let her waters swallow him up, Tristan, that sweet-natured three-year-old dog. There was nothing the poor beast could do about it. Nor was he responsible for the fact that he saw everything. Key eyewitness to my basest deed of deeds. Every detail taken in by that loyal noggin. The dog's, at least. Not mine. That he would forever carry it all in that faithful head of his, and that I'd be reminded of it every time he laid his snout on my lap and quietly whined for a hand in his fur—that, precisely that, was what I couldn't take.

This morning, early. It was still nearly dark. Not a soul on the street. Only the old fisherman sanding the deck of his boat.

'Early bird, are ya?' I wasn't sure if it was a question or a comment. In any case, it put people on par with animals.

'Yeah,' I said.

'Finest time of day. The way the light falls on the water. Then there's silver on the sea.' The skipper had missed his calling, he should have been a poet.

'You bet.'

The man must have suddenly fathomed the fragility of his own words in the given context, because he nudged his bucket a bit further, soaped up his brush and resumed his scrubbing. Then he called something else, maybe as compensation, something about the weather, barely audible. Not all of his words reached the pier. I walked with Tristan along the paravent with its pitched roof of glazed turquoise and red tiles, its proud pinnacles and pretentious crockets from back when this city was still a place where those who had it, flaunted it. The white of the countless plaster rosettes and shells hurt your eyes, papa said recently. At the end of the paravent is the bronze statue of a slightly bowed, larger-than-life harlequin. A melancholy clown against which many a dog has the habit of pissing. But not Tristan. My Tristan knows his world. He walked dutifully beside me, up the steep embankment to the dike and led me benignly to the stairs leading down to the beach. I had put on my walking shoes, so he'll have assumed it was going to be a good long hike. We went down to the water's edge. It was low tide. He walked alongside me, self-controlled, no frantic tail-wagging or mad frolicking in the waves. A dog that leads. At the water he sat calmly in front of me. So obedient. I was surprised I could do it. A bullet between his eyes. I dragged him to the water, as feed for the fish.

I hate the beach. Oh exquisite town.

Abigail, 8:12 a.m., the Temple

Abigail sits at the breakfast table she had set for herself the previous evening and holds the envelope in her hands. The logo taunts her from the upper left-hand corner. She slits it open with the sharp end of a knife. Intending to pull out the letter at once, she hesitates, slides it back in. Takes a sip of coffee and looks outside. Just there is the terrace. The boxwood hedges have grown quite high, a dark layer of moss covers the limestone statues. The ornamental shrubs next to the pool, still under its winter tarpaulin, are in full bloom. A small drift of leaves has blown up against the step to the diving board. A bit further back is the pond, whose new fountain, operational since last week, spurts water in a graceful arch from the mouths of mermaids sprawled upon a bed of water lilies. At the very back of the garden is the summer house. The creeping hydrangea winds its way through the beams of the pergola and its fresh spring foliage casts a shadow over the garden table. Abigail attentively takes it all in, the envelope still in her hands. The intensity of the scene makes her head tingle. Pinpricks. A keen observer would notice that her hands are trembling ever so slightly. She looks back at the logo, takes another sip of coffee. In the pantry, the refrigerator hums. Then she takes out the letter, lays it flat in front of her, and slowly smooths it out. An elegant caress with the palm of her hand, an attempt to alter its contents, to mollify its tone. Her eyes scan the text. She reads the last three sentences word by word. One more time. Once more. More.

She gets up, walks over to the buffet. Next to it, on the floor, is a leather bag. A birthday present from her husband, from a very long time ago. She had given it to him at dinner. Then he gave it back to her, had laid it on her plate while she was in the ladies' room, as though it were a real gift from him. That's how they did things then. It would be the last time they went to a restaurant together.

She takes this bag, made of top-grade Italian leather and with a sleek designer clasp of shiny gold-colored metal, and opens it slowly, as though stalling might make a difference. She slides the letter between a couple of folders, closes the bag, takes it with her to the closet, puts on her beige pumps, removes a coat from the coat rack, drapes it over her arm and walks to the garage. The Rover starts without a hitch, the garage door glides open. She backs down the driveway and turns onto the street. The promised sun slices through the leaves with narrow, razor-sharp rays. And yet for her, everything is dark, there in Opperborg.

Jonas, 8.24 a.m., Apartment

My neck hurts. My hands itch. I don't know how long I've been sitting here staring at the hallway door. Waiting anxiously for nothing saps your grip on time. I still have to put away my walking shoes. I just tugged them off and tossed them aside. This is completely contrary to my routine.

But I stay seated. Do not want to go to the bedroom. Anouk's presence there is still too strong. It could be her perfume, or the sound of her voice—floating, early in the evening, when the tone was still tender, or at the very end, her shrill astonishment, her screaming. Something still resonates amid the curling floral tendrils on the velvet flocked wallpaper. How often haven't I traced the pattern with my fingers? It unnerves me now, tells me she did not leave the way I wanted.

I have to force myself to stop looking at that door. What good is it. Like she might just suddenly appear there. Like I should still expect anything.

You can divide mankind into two groups: those who sprouted from a plan whose pros and cons were thoroughly considered, and those who were conceived out of reckless abandon, whereby horniness, sweat and blood conspire to coerce mankind into actions they will later regret. I belong to the first category. For sure.

In my mother's case you might even call it exceptionally crafty brainwork. My mother's name is Abigail de Martelaere, but let no one be fooled by her surname: 'the Martyr'.

It must have all started at the party—I'll just call it 'a party', shall I—where the De Martelaeres assembled around the dinner table at the family home, the art nouveau hotel in the capital, to remember my late Grandmother De Martelaere. I did not exist yet, at least not as a physical being, a tangible creature. But when *does* existence begin, in fact? The moment that two cells conjugate? Or is it much earlier, somewhere in history when you're already mentioned in an unguarded thought, a spoken word, a hasty annotation?

Although she was no longer there in person, there was no getting around my grandmother. The portrait of her above the fireplace in the hotel lobby was so immense that you couldn't ignore it if you tried. Granddad's doing, he liked that kind of grandeur. The artist was an acquaintance of theirs. Grandma had posed for him in an armchair flanked by two porcelain vases with over-the-top bouquets, looking straight ahead, her hands folded in her lap. Soft eyes, a thin stripe of a smile on her lips, frail shoulders, perhaps already afflicted with the insidious illness that would lead to her painful death. Granddad had commissioned the work as soon as he learned of his wife's malady. And even though the artist was a friend of the family, a thick wad of banknotes was brought in to ensure its speedy completion. It was desperation that drove Granddad to it. The futile sprint of a mortal against the swift erosion of life.

I never knew my grandmother but I have stood before that tableau with her likeness many times. There's something about the eyes. It's as though she's looking straight through you. I once told my mother it scared me a little. She answered: 'Sometimes I wish Grandma would come to life, up on that canvas. That she'd get out of that chair, pull one of the roses out of the bouquet and stick it in her hair, the way she used to do, and that I could tell her you're Jonas, her most beautiful grandson.' As she fondled my hair, I was struck by the foolishness of her words. I was, after all, the only grandchild. But I kept this to myself.

Every year, the De Martelaeres observed the anniversary of Grandma's death. Papa thought it was ridiculous that Granddad always referred to the family as the 'De Martelaeres', plural, as though it was a populous clan with a whole slew of descendents. It tells you a lot about the old man's desire to attach a sturdy branch of his own to his ancestors' aristocratic family tree, preferably with sons and correspondingly frivolous daughters-in-law. The early diagnosis of grandma's illness sabotaged his dream. No sturdy branch, then; he'd have to make do with a twig named Abigail. The *maitre* and his wife were always invited to these annual memorial dinners to evoke the suggestion of an extended family.

Granddad De Martelaere insisted that the first meal in grandmother's honor be served at the large dining table in the hotel's restaurant. The establishment was closed for the day. Extra personnel had been drummed up to give the place a thorough scrubbing, to air out the hotel, dust the chandeliers, tidy up the cellars, disinfect the kitchen from top to bottom, polish the brass and decalcify all the pipes. The letters on the sign jutting out above the massive oak entrance doors were retouched with gold paint. For Granddad, the anniversary of his wife's death was equivalent to cleaning. Gild what had gone. As though he wanted to purge and disinfect the putrid air that the

cigar-smoking stock market traders and their mistresses had exhaled behind closed hotel-room doors, the dirty deals that had been cut at the bar and cemented with hard liquor, the fingerprints left on the wine glasses by jaded couples sitting wordlessly at the breakfast table—as if to whitewash and purify it all in honor of his beloved, prematurely departed, wife.

Granddad sat at the head of the table. Lobster was served—never a party of his without lobster, always Bellevue. There was small talk about life’s vicissitudes. Granddad never said a word. This is how it always was. With guests he was hospitable, flamboyant, to the personnel he was succinct and courteous, in the cocoon of the immediate family he was uptight and taciturn. He maintained his silence during the veal kidneys in red wine sauce and the rack of lamb with seasonal trimmings, all the way until dessert. While the port was being poured, Papa—who as Mama’s boyfriend had just been introduced to the family as Karel van Immerseel—excused himself to go to the toilet. The conversation ground to a halt. At once the space was filled by the acoustic decor that always goes with sudden silences: the scrape of cutlery on porcelain plates, the gentle tick of a wedding ring against a glass, a napkin gliding to the floor (yes, even this you can hear), the scuff of a chair. Then Granddad spoke. ‘Your late mother...’ pausing to ascertain whether he had the company’s full attention, that no one was still chewing, that no one budged, barely even blinked, that every eye was directed at him.

‘... Your late mother always intended that the possessions, assets and properties in her name would only become heritable once there was a grandchild. Until then we’re not to pay out a single cent. You know what you have to do.’

‘Is it much?’ Mama asked.

‘That’s all,’ the old De Martelaere said. ‘But just one more thing. I want the child to have a father. So none of that modern nonsense. Because I know you.’ He laid a hand fleetingly on her shoulder, a gesture that must have nestled in her head, her brain, and traveled along the tiny nerve paths that emanate from it, following the minuscule network into all her veins and organs, like a spider’s web fanning out over her entire being.

Papa came back in. ‘That’s a fine painting of the woman in the hallway,’ he said hesitantly. ‘She has, how shall I put it, something likeable about her.’

Papa. He was the fly destined to be caught in that web. Call it innocence or stupidity, it won’t make much difference in the balance of his happiness.

Papa. It was good to hear his voice tonight. So far away. Always so far away.

For other people it seems so simple. Disappearing.

Karel, 8:31 a.m., B&B guest room

He’s been lying in bed for several hours, hands clasped behind his head, staring at the shadows on the wall. The light from the bar across the street projects silhouettes of the branches of an old oak tree against the white plasterwork. They are constantly in motion. It’s perpetually windy here. The branches appear to wave, to beckon: get out of bed, never mind that it’s still early, get dressed, pack your suitcase, go outside, walk to the harbor and wait there. Wait until the first ferry comes to take

you away. Homeward. Toward your worries. Make sure you're ready. Do not turn your back on anything or anyone. Certainly not your child.

'Papa, are you home?' his son asked earlier, in the black of the night. There was a strange disturbance on line, as though a second Jonas was standing in between them. Another Jonas, a Jonas he did not know.

'No, son, I'm on Spiekeroog.'

'Away again?'

The dark sound in those two words. A sunken anger from many tides ago. *Away again*. It hit him hard.

'But you know...'

Silence on the other end. What did Jonas know? What should he know? What was a son supposed to know about his father, after all? 'Is something wrong?' he finally asked.

'You have to come, Papa. Fast.'

Something from long ago came through in his voice. Jonas on the sea dike with a polyester toy car in the shape of a bear. They'd rented it for the day, his birthday. Jonas was a proud six-year-old who gleefully rode his 'Baloo' over the dike. It was going so well. The sea breeze played with his long locks. A merry Mowgli, not yet double-crossed by the human race. His little legs pedaled fearlessly, until one of the pedals snapped and he went crashing down the dike, landing in the white sand. He lay there bawling, the broken pedal next to him. He had taken Jonas by the hand and told him a story, about things that can break, about people who break too, he had mentioned this as an aside, but that everything could be fixed, even sadness. A father does his fair share of lying. He got Jonas laughing again by putting on a clownish act of stumbling his way up the bank with that piece of junk, sliding and tumbling back down a few times. Once they'd reached the top, he pretended to trip and tossed the pedal with a grotesque arch into a garbage can. 'Good riddance,' he laughed. 'Now let's go find another animal. The jungle's full of them.' He dragged the broken buggy behind him. Sand had gotten into the ball bearings, making it grate and chafe. Like it does to a child's spirit.

'What is it, son?'

'She's gonna have me locked up.'

'What do you mean?'

'Honest, she's going to have me put away.'

'But how...'

Connection broken. Karel cursed. Dump worry on your father and then sneak off like a thief in the night.

Out of frustration he slammed his cell phone onto the nightstand. The wooden cover came loose and clattered to the ground. It was decorated with a stylized drawing of a bird perched on a branch. A gift from Evie. He bent over to pick it up, banged his head against the white marble tabletop, and a half-full wine glass, evidence of the previous night's binge drinking, went crashing to the floor. Another curse and a sharp pain on his temple. The red wine stain bled slowly across the Culture section of a newspaper for intellectuals. An article about poets who recite verses at the graves of the lonely and the abandoned. Death and poetry, always a successful cocktail.

Later that night he tried to return Jonas's call. He needed more information. He did not want to rush back for nothing. What did he mean, locked up? How much more locked up could he—Jonas, of all people—possibly get? How many more doors, chains, locks? But he wouldn't say this, of course. Jonas was upset. That much was clear. He held the phone to his ear, waiting. *The number you have dialed is not available at this time.*

A few shadow-branches bend forward and lick his suitcase with their leaves. The case contains his notes and photos of *Die Seeschwalbe*. The old beach bungalow, their summer dream. Since yesterday, a plan buried deep under the sand dunes. A washed-away desire.

They'd made it a late one last night. He and old Schmidt had gone chough- and oystercatcher-spotting. After that Schmidt told him everything, on the old pontoon with its deep cracks and clefts. Wedged into one of the crevices was a bottle cap from that beer that's not really beer but manages to park itself on drink menus the world over, that Heineken-from-hell that real beer drinkers in his mother's bar would recoil from as though it were Satan's aperitif. His youth had been drenched in a parade of alcohol-sodden characters, a procession of inebriated mugs straight out of an Ensor painting. Schmidt brought out a bottle of whiskey. An attempt to wash away the disillusionment. They polished off the entire bottle. He still had a bad case of cotton mouth. Back in his room he proceeded to open a bottle of Dornfelder and pour himself a glass, but was too disgusted to finish it. He lay down on the bed with the newspaper. All he could hear was the wind. It swirled through his thoughts.

And then Jonas. In the middle of the night. With that phone call. You could hardly call it a conversation, but the words whipped and whirled through the recesses of his mind. He'd been lying awake since, tried to phone back twice. *Le numéro que vous avez composé n'est pas attribué.*

He lay there mulling things over. The sheets crackled and creased from his tossing in that too-warm bed with the branches on the walls and the wind surrounding the house. What had that shrew done now? What new fiction had she dreamt up? That she could still rattle the boy so badly, after all this time. He'd heard fear in the voice of one of the two Jonases on the other end of the line. A fear that made him uneasy.

Karel sits on the edge of the bed. The darkest hour is just before sunrise, a football coach had said in a radio interview last week, after having lost a degradation match. The verbal calisthenics of a loser. The darkest hour for his wallet, maybe. The night isn't dark just before dawn. The night is at its blackest around 1 a.m. A few hours ago. The hour he had doused with whisky.

One more try. ...*kan uw oproep niet beantwoorden.*

He stands up. Walks to the bathroom. It looks like staggering. The tap water is cold, almost too cold to drink, but it does wash the bad taste out of his mouth. Been like this for years, by the way. Abigail used to hassle him about it every morning. He opens the wardrobe door, picks up his suitcase and lays it on the bed. The room is a mess. Who cares? He's on his own here. The nesting urge brought on by solitude. He finds the folder from the ferry service with his underwear; departure times are listed on the middle page. He counts on his fingers. Should be able to make it. A shower and a quick breakfast downstairs at the landlady's will refresh him. Tidying up takes longer than he thought. He still has the tendency to take over a space, to stake out the boundaries of his existence. It relaxes him. Abigail couldn't stand it. His socks are all the way under the bed. He squats, stretches his arm out as far as it will go. As he pulls back, his shirt catches on a loose mattress spring. A tear above the shoulder. Still, he'll keep this one on, the other shirt stinks of fish from helping Herr Schmidt clean eels. Among a little pile of seashells on the nightstand are his car keys. Just in time he notices the bath towel he'd stuffed into the pillowcase to give it some body. His head is pounding.