

Don't Go to Canada

Evelien De Vlieger

An extract pp (5-14; 30-31; 33-35; 193-199)

Original title Ga niet naar Canada
Publisher Lannoo, 2014

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Laura Watkinson

© Evelien De Vlieger/Laura Watkinson/Lannoo/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 5-14

TEST test

KLARA klara

My name is Klarra. No. Klara. I should be able to type that at least.

Yes. Klara. With a K. I don't know whatever possessed my parents either.

I am all on my own here, unless you count the cat. "Here" is in my grandparents' flat. The two of them are always together. Oops. always together, i mean.

Not because they want to be. It's just a fact. Like the fact that I'm sixteen. But I'm going to be seventeen soon.

My grandparents have gone to the seaside for the weekend and I'm looking after the cat. My granddad didn't seem to be looking forward to it much. When my gran showed him her "bathing costume", my granddad looked at her like he didn't quite understand what was going on.

I don't even know if she can swim but perhaps that's not what a bathing costume is for.

I've heard that 16 is supposed to be a milestone summer. Well, summer's already started, so I'd better hurry. I've only got one more year of secondary school left.

Everyone else is doing it already. Everyone except for me. I feel way older than the other kids in my class, but that one stupid fact somehow makes me feel way younger than them.

I'd really like to surprise everyone by coming out, but what would I come out as?

I'm not interested in girls.

My parents aren't getting divorced. AS IF!!!

I'm not fat.

I'm not thin.

I don't have an incurable disease.

"There's always something going on with you," my dad says.

And I say: there's nowhere near enough going on with me.

Someone's tapping on the window. On the tenth floor!

It's the builders. They want something.

What? I can't understand what they're trying to say.

Do they want me to open the window a bit?

But they're already outside. Weird.

You are already outside!

Their English isn't very good, or maybe it's my English that's the problem...

But I'm here to look after the cat! Not to help out builders in need. It's already dangerous enough for her inside, with this typewriter bashing its little arms up and down like a lunatic.

After the prize-giving ceremony in the school gym, Klara and her parents went out for dinner at their usual Greek restaurant. The waiter with the almost excessively handsome Greek profile greeted them humbly, as he always did. Klara thought he was obnoxious. He pulled back her chair so she could be seated, like a princess, and then scurried off to fetch a bowl of olives to go with their aperitifs. The day after tomorrow they were leaving for Rhodes. Their suitcases were already packed and waiting in the hallway.

"I'd really rather stay at home," said Klara.

"Klara, why are you telling us this now?"

"I've been saying it all along. I'm almost seventeen, Mum," said Klara.

Her parents looked at each other, popping an olive into their mouths at the same moment. Nope, thought Klara, I'd rather be sitting all on my own in a sweltering flat.

“Do we have cancellation insurance?” her dad asked.

Her mum nodded.

He shrugged and took a gulp of wine.

“But what are you going to do when we’re away?” her mum asked.

“You know. This and that. Learn to type.”

Her mum almost choked on a piece of bread with tzatziki. “Learn to type? What do you need to do that for? You don’t want to be a secretary, do you?” Klara’s dad slapped her mum on the back and then rested his arm on the back of her chair. Even though Klara was sitting across from him, he didn’t so much as glance at her. He was an occupational psychologist, but he didn’t seem interested in doing any overtime at home. Her mum had never had a job but, sitting there in her pale-blue striped blouse with just enough buttons undone, she looked like the perfect secretary. She was obedient, efficient, and she always noticed everything. Even if she gossiped, she’d make sure not to cause any trouble for her boss. And, most importantly, she always saw the positive side of everything. Except for her daughter becoming a secretary, that is.

“I understand that you don’t want to go on holiday with us old folks. But why don’t you go to theatre camp? Or do that windsurfing course? I could find out if there are any places left.”

“These mezze are really good,” said Klara, topping up their glasses with translucent red wine.

She didn’t want to be a spoilsport, but she wasn’t about to start dancing the sirtaki either. “Anyway, Gran and Granddad are around, aren’t they?” she said. “And when they go to the seaside, I can look after the cat.” Klara’s mum straightened the stripes on her blouse and waved at the waiter to bring more wine.

The weekend at the seaside was a present for her grandparents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary. Her mum and dad had spent hours comparing the tiny colour photos of the guestrooms and the breakfast rooms in the brochure from the travel agency. Finally they’d settled on a hotel in Ostend, and that decision was followed by days of “We made the right choice, darling,” and “I think so, too, darling.”

Klara finally played her trump card: “And I can mow the grass while you’re away.” Her dad’s lawn was sacred.

My parents have gone on holiday. To Greece.

I could be eating Greek salad every day. With feta and black olives. But I’m not going to go round holding hands with my mum and dad just so I can get some olives.

With my dad, it’s the Cold War. NO COMMENT.

And my mum... Every conversation with her starts like a medical examination. So, Klara, how are you feeling?

(My grandparents never want to know how I'm feeling. Perhaps feeling this way or that way is something that started too late for their generation.) (And asking about it the entire time is definitely something that came after their time.)

Plus + + +

My mum always sees everything through nice little round windows anyway, but now she's actually going to be doing it from the comfort of a plane.

"Greek men are sex bombs," says Nikki. "Girl, I wish I could come with you."

When Nikki says "girl" like that, she actually means "you daft cow".

She says sex is like black olives. Bitter and salty. You have to overcome a certain barrier to eat them. But when you do, you discover that they're pretty good. She explained it all to me once.

Hey, just pass me the olives!

I don't want to play, cat!

I want to learn to type.

azdf hjio

azdf hjio

df df df df

jk jk jk jk

Actually, I don't really want to be able to type.

It was a bet with Peer. I can learn to type, I said. Easy as wink.

Peer has blond curls that never stop moving. Neither does his mouth. He's only been in our class since the beginning of this year. Everyone's given him a good sniff.

He's tall and lean and there's something interesting going on with his lower jaw. He's like the entire Muppet Show all by himself.

But when his expression's serious, you don't think about that.

Peer has many faces. He can fit a whole apple into one of them.

But that weird name...

What about Peer Gynt? he says.

Right from day 1, Peer's called me Special K. Because of my "special K" for Klara.

That's his sense of humour.

Now it's morphed into Spesh.

SPESH!

He's going to win our bet if I'm not careful.

sdf jkl sdf jkl sdf jkl sdf jkl

asdf jklp asdf jklp asdf jklp

I'm copying these letters from "TOUCH TYPING in a Flash!"

The typewriter's called Erika. She's making encouraging sounds.

The longer my sentences get, the more fun I'm having.

In a fflash. More or less.

The lights were on very early in the kitchen of the pretty little house where Klara had lived all her life. White-painted walls, dark-brown woodwork, bright-red, perfectly tended geraniums. Klara's mum and dad were leaving for the airport, and Klara had to get to her grandparents' place on time. The morning light was cool and transformed the house into a tranquil haven, a picture postcard. Her mum had cleaned specially before the holiday. The crocheted cushions on the sofa were freshly washed and symmetrically arranged. White lace mats covered the gleaming surfaces of the two polished oak sideboards. There was an atmosphere of perfection that Klara would never be able to match. They were going to leave the house and, when they came back, nothing would be the same. Drowsily, Klara traced along the cracks between the kitchen tiles with her bare toes. They'd woken her up so they could all have breakfast together, but her mum didn't actually eat anything, so that she wouldn't make any crumbs, and her dad never had breakfast anyway.

"I really don't understand why you're not coming with us. And is that your third bowl of Frosties?" her mum said.

"Yes. So?"

"So you won't fit into your yellow bikini."

"You think I'm fat, do you?"

"Of course not."

"That's what it sounds like."

"Ah, sweetheart, I wish I still had a bit of puppy fat. You look so healthy."

Klara had gone from childhood straight into one of those awkward stages. She wasn't fat, not even a little chubby. It was more that every part of her body seemed to be developing independently, without paying any attention to the rest. It had started with her nose and her breasts, when she was only eleven. Her nose stopped growing just in time, but so did her breasts. Then her shoulders became too wide and her feet grew a few sizes. Her knees were too fragile to support the entire structure. In some mirrors she looked weedy, and in others she looked bony. Then, to cap it all, her straight hair started to frizz at the front. A fringe of pubes: that was all she needed. Other kids got moods, but Klara got curls, and in all the wrong places, too.

"And make sure Granddad takes the travel binoculars. So he doesn't get bored."

"I hope for Gran's sake that he doesn't spend the whole time peering through his binoculars," said Klara with a mouth full of Frosties.

"He's too old to break that habit now. Anyway, when he's looking through his binoculars, at least he's not going on about Canada. That's even more annoying for Gran."

"So it's okay for him to sit there all the time with those things in front of his face?"

"Oh, it brings the world closer for him, and your gran can handle it. She's a strong woman. Why do you always have to be so negative?"

Then Klara's dad took over. He'd already checked three times that his asthma inhaler was in the hand luggage. "You know how to use the mower, don't you? Make sure you keep it on the lowest setting."

"Yup."

"Do you really have to read while we're eating, just as we're about to leave?"

"I'm not bothering anyone, am I?"

"I don't think it's appropriate. And you haven't finished your cereal yet."

"I've had enough."

"You've filled that bowl and now you're going to eat it. Soon you'll have all the time in the world to read."

That's what you think, thought Klara, spooning the sloppy mush into her mouth. Sugar would be good for the hangover that Peer had given her the evening before.

"Oh, leave her be, darling," her mum said, bumping her hip against his shoulder. Her dad grunted and smiled as if she'd pressed the right button and then he put his hand on her bum. Even at this ungodly hour they looked happy to be together.

Klara swigged back the rest of the sugary milk and slammed her book shut. Crusade in Jeans; the boy on the cover had reminded her of Peer. "You absolutely must read this book," the librarian had said. But now she couldn't help thinking about all the denim-clad laps that this book had rested on

and about the crusade that she'd like to make into certain people's jeans. She decided not to take the book to her grandparents' place.

"So you know everything you need to know about looking after your gran and granddad's flat, eh? And make sure you get there on time. They're counting on you."

p 30-31

Creston, British Columbia

March 1931

My dear friend Désiré,

Perhaps we shall see each other soon, but perhaps not.

I have made a huge mistake, one that I cannot rectify. The Mounties might not even be looking for me but, now that I have left, I must keep on going, eastwards, in a straight line.

If they catch me, I want you to have this. They won't refuse to send a letter to my homeland as a last request, will they?

I can feel everything pulling at me to stay here and still I need to get away. That's why I have to write it all down. What is written on paper, remains. If I should cross the path of the Mounties, I shall send this notebook to you. And we will see each other again, won't we? We must, Désiré, even if we have to wait thirty years.

I have brought along my bundle of clothes, my Kodak and a few small items from the camp. The other men weren't there. Our tent was empty. I said farewell to no one. I'm leaving my dream behind. I have to go back, to go home.

Where should I begin? So much has happened to me here. You don't have to make much effort in Canada for all kinds of things to happen to you.

I can still see myself standing there, early in the morning at the station in Nevele, with just a few possessions under my arm, but full of enthusiasm, waiting for the tram that would take me to Ghent. It seems like a lifetime ago, but it's not that long, a year and a half, almost two.

From Ghent, I caught the train to Antwerp, where I stepped off into an immense hall, with no idea which way to go. Should I head left or right? That happened a number of times on my journey, as Antwerp was only the first of many stops. It wasn't until I reached Kootenay Lake, even before I met Mary, that I stopped wondering which way to go. You know how that is, don't you, Des? The feeling of having arrived. Well, I knew that I had arrived too.

On the train was a family from Ertvelde who were loaded up with baggage and eager to board the ship: a mother and father, with their three children. The eldest daughter glanced at me repeatedly, but her father kept her on a tight rein, and he was right to do so. If I had a girl from Ertvelde, Canada would never be mine and besides she wasn't that appealing. I hadn't run away from our farm to pal up with a girl from back home, no matter how big their Canadian patch of land might be. We talked about our plans and the mother gave me some liquorice root to chew on because I had such a bad cold. She spoke to me as if I were one of her children, but those sticks of hers certainly saved me on the boat. For ten days, I sucked on a brown twig while everyone else was hanging over the rail and throwing up their guts. My cold had vanished too. It seems they know a thing or two in Ertvelde – about medicine at least. I can't speak for the rest.

I saw the family again on the boat. The father looked green as he puffed away on his pipe. I'd rather not have a clear memory of the sea crossing, but all kinds of things are coming back to me now, so I shall write them down anyway.

I'm about to take another journey on a boat, Désiré, this time in the opposite direction. It's just as well I didn't know much about the sea crossing that first time. Planks without a mattress make an uncomfortable bed, and it's even worse when there's a puddle of vomit sliding across the floor beneath, like batter in a hot frying pan. Every morning, everything was sprayed with disinfectant that stank even worse than the stench that was already in the air. Of course, conditions were only that dire in third class. But at least I was third class on that crossing; I have no idea which deck I'll find refuge on this time. That's how low I've sunk.

On the crossing, I noted down a few addresses and names, but I can't recall any of the faces. We were together for ten days, but we were all wearing our own blinkers. The only one I can picture now is Tuur. I saw him again in Winnipeg and he had only one eye, which made him rather memorable.

If I'd gone with the girl from Ertvelde, maybe I'd own a ranch now; life takes such strange twists and turns. The Canadian state had given her parents a parcel of land of 20 hectares for absolutely nothing, Désiré – completely free! That's the way things work here. But I chose a different path, and now that path has taken a very sharp turn. I am leaving as I came: without a franc or a dollar to my name.

I soon spent what little money I had on the ticket for the crossing. The Metagama swallowed my fortune in one gulp; even the fair in Nevele was nothing in comparison. It was a monster of a ship, a mastodon, and it took me to the country that was quickly becoming number one in the world.

We embarked on the first of the month, without knowing exactly when we would arrive, but we knew that it would be at least ten days until our feet were on solid ground again. Ten days, maybe eleven. That's a long time. My mind was made up, however, and there was no point reconsidering. The wide ocean is a very different matter from the pond at Overmere-Donk.

When I got off the boat in St. John, again I didn't know whether to head left or right. But there was little time for doubt, my friend, because I was immediately approached by a sturdy fellow from Winnipeg who was looking for labourers. Phil was his name, and he worked for the Canadian Pacific Railways, the world's most powerful company for transportation on land and at sea. I already sensed that this Phil would turn out to be

an invaluable acquaintance. Together with five other fortunate men, I went with him. We all climbed onto the train and travelled for another five days.

I'm giving you the short version, Désiré, because it doesn't really matter. I'm not going to elaborate about every tiny little detail. I'll tell you all the ins and outs if and when I arrive back on our continent. The train journey went fine; we saw the country and we were well fed. There were no seasick people either, so it certainly smelled better than the boat. And a man doesn't need much to play cards. I could already speak a few words of English, but not enough for a good conversation, the kind we've enjoyed so much in the past, you and I. I can say that, can't I, Des, as your affectionate friend?

p193-199

Here I am again.

Force of habit.

I have to get back to Peer.

(BY THE WAY.

PEER CALLED ME SPESH.

Just now.)

But I'm not going to go into that now.

Where have they got to?

Go on, Kittycat, I'll let you have a go on the DustBuster if you tell me.

Okay, okay. I'll wait until they get back.

The notebook was still where she'd thrown it, half-covered by her messy pile of typed sheets of paper on the dark-brown desk in her gran's room. There was no way her gran could have put the notebook back in exactly the same way. With a sigh of relief, Klara returned it to its usual place, right at the bottom of her granddad's chest of drawers. She crouched there for a moment, with the window ledge at eye level, and briefly considered fetching the binoculars, but then went back to the living room. The whole flat smelled of baked apples with brown sugar.

They'd kissed just now, in the pitch black of the garage. Klara and Peer.

It happened under the coatrack where the winter coats were hanging, which was softer than the cold brick wall, a vertical bed they could lie on while standing.

They were both wet from the rain. But not wet like yesterday when she'd swum across the lake. A layer of drizzle hung around them, like a damp aura, a mist that dissolved at the slightest touch.

For once, Klara was thinking about nothing at all. She was like the mist herself, dissolving...

But then a thought fizzed inside her mind like a sparkler catching fire: the notebook! It was still out! Somewhere in among her stack of paper and her typing book, in her gran's room.

"I've got to go back," she said.

"Back?" asked Peer.

It felt strange to be able to speak with those same mouths.

"Yeah, I have to, Peer. I've got to go back to my grandparents' place for something. Something important."

"Life-or-death important?" he asked.

"Yes," said Klara, smoothing herself and her clothes back to normal. "Wait for me!"

She took Peer's bike and pedalled hard around the corner. Gran had better not decide to do a bit of tidying up, she thought. After her nap, she sometimes had the urge to straighten up a few things here and there. To shake the dust out of the doilies. To gather up the sections of the newspaper that they'd read. Klara could picture her walking back and forth between cupboards and windows. It was as if she needed to measure the dimensions of the flat every day, a surveyor of their small world. Klara knew that if her gran found her Maurice's notebook, she wouldn't be able to resist. Dripping with sweat, she arrived at the wrapped-up building. She leaned Peer's bike against the wall, opened the glass door, and went inside.

The lift awarded points for her nerves: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, PING – 10! And then: no one home.

Klara went to look in the kitchen. A whole tray of apples was baking in the oven. So her grandparents couldn't have been out for long. Her heart was thumping, even though the notebook was tidied away and there was no evidence of her betrayal. Lucky I know where the blood-pressure pills are, she thought. And the indigestion tablets, because her gran had used outrageous amounts of sugar and butter again. The apples were almost ready.

She took a plastic bag, went back to her gran's room, gathered up her papers and put them in the bag. Now that typing had lost its appeal, she thought she might as well put the typewriter away.

My dearest Erika,

It's not going to work out between us.

I'm sorry.

We can still be friends.

But now I have to get back to Peer.

Quickly! Otherwise, before I know it, I'll be sitting here with Gran and Granddad, eating baked apples.

Okay then. Bye.

Klara

If Klara had been looking through Roger Melkebeek's binoculars, she could have seen her granddad peering through the gap in the green netting.

She could have seen her gran coming out of the laundrette, hugging the empty laundry bag, telling herself not to forget the apples, and that Maurice wouldn't remember about them.

She could have seen Bilal, up at the flat next to theirs, being offered a glass of buttermilk and grenadine syrup by the postman, and the window shutting before Bilal could thank him, and then the face that Bilal pulled as he took his first sip.

She could have seen Peer come slouching along, his shoulders high and his hands deep in his pockets, but with a hint of a smile on his lips, so slight that only she could see it.

She could have seen her granddad putting his whole head through the netting, looking around approvingly at the work that had been done, then up and down and back again, and then saying something to himself. Then she could have seen the rest of his body curling into view, like a beige snail against the green of the netting.

She could have seen him falling from that light-green heart into the depths, head first, ten storeys down, past worlds he did not know because he had only ever looked at the building opposite, and wondering why he was seeing everything upside down, why it was happening so quickly, why his head hurt so much, why he could no longer open his eyes, and then giving up and thinking it might be time for a nap – where was Martha? And then thinking about the apples and that they'd be cooked by now and that Martha would forgive him for forgetting about the oven. She'd be back on time, just as she had always, always been back on time; Martha, his bold, beloved Martha would once again save the apples and they would taste of his whole life, of its beginning and its end. And then going to sleep, all at once, and thinking: *Désiré*, Des! Your affectionate sultan is on his way. And even before he landed on the grass like an overripe apple, he was back in Canada, with Mary, in her arms, where he could stop dreaming, where everything stopped. Of course, she couldn't have seen all that, but she might have thought it.

But Klara was not in the building opposite.

Klara was walking past the round table in her grandparents' flat as the smell of burning apples crept into the room. She went into the kitchen, turned off the oven, and headed out of the front door with a skip, and then into the lift, and downstairs, to Peer.