

Fifteen Wild Summers

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An extract pp (5-11; 159-160)

Original title Vijftien wilde zomers
Publisher Davidsfonds, 2012

Translation Dutch into English
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p 5-11

Can dead eyes see? Can a heart that doesn't beat anymore still break?

There's a forest between the city and the village, in the middle of the fields. Once a tail end of the primeval forest that stretched across the whole of Europe, now just a handful of trees and bags bulging with household rubbish. There's a clearing in this forest where a birch broke down, tired of being a tree, and formed a natural bench between the nettles. It's the ideal spot to wait for the girl of your dreams. The waiting is maybe even the best part of Wednesday afternoon, if you know she is coming, if you can almost hear the rattling of her bicycle.

Orphee is wearing a green blazer and a green skirt, shorter than school regulation allows. She pushes her way through the nettles and I shiver as the hairy leaves caress her thighs. She doesn't sit astride the trunk like she used to, laughing quietly, so that I don't know if she's shocking just me or also herself. Today she doesn't laugh. She lets the backpack slide from her shoulders and shakes it out.

She doesn't turn around. She doesn't search for my shade beneath the trees. I don't have to come closer, I can guess what lies there. They are the CDs I gave her, the tracks I gathered with such care and that could express so much better than I could what she meant for me; they are the books with scenarios of our future life, when the world had approved of our love and we, hunted lovers, were shacking up together in Paris or New York, poor but happy, until we found success, me as a celebrated writer and she as a successful photographer; they are the pictures of each other that lie there in a heap. She picks one up. Is it one from the set we took here in the forest, when we knew for sure we were alone?

Her mouth contorts, her face breaks and her shoulders shake. I want to run to her and wrap my arms around her, but that's impossible. I am the one who did that to her.

She sniffs and wipes the tears from her eyes. She pulls out a lighter from her pocket and bends over the stuff. I can hear the lighter rasp. It scrapes over my spine. With her hand she protects the flame. It's such a typical gesture, almost masculine. I've seen it a hundred time when she lit a cigarette. My tough Orphee. My rebel girlfriend, my smoker. She knew how I hated the smoking. 'I'm not your property', she said and with every puff she blew her obstinacy in my face.

And with that one gesture, that small dam of fingers over the shivering flame, she breaks my heart. With that flame she sets fire to our life.

The books catch fire. The plastic cases of the CDs melt. She coughs as the sharp smoke glides into her throat en she kicks the photos further into the flames. The paper curls up, our bodies scorch, our skin gets blisters that burst, just before the pictures catch fire. It doesn't go fast enough for her.

She rips up the photos and throws the shreds into the fire. The hot air takes them along and there we go, Orphee and Thomas, into the sky, laughing.

The corn has just been sown. Where the wheels from the machines draw grooves into the mud, puddles of grey sky quiver. They look like graveyards, but don't be mistaken, life already stirs beneath the surface. Between these bare fields lies the road, more holes than asphalt and strewn with corpses of little animals. The drivers can't help it. Unexpected bends take away their sight and if hedgehogs and weasels throw themselves under the wheels with contempt for death, breaking is useless. A gravelled path splits off from the road, winds through the forest and then turns back. Nobody takes that path. It's a detour, more mud than anything else in winter. Who wants to get to his destination fast – and who doesn't want that – takes the road.

In one of the bends is a wooden cross. Home crafts. A picture in a plastic cover is pricked into the wood with a red drawing pin. There's a name carved into the wood. At the bottom of the cross lie plastic roses. A few withered daisies in half a bottle of Evian hang their heads. Here a car, unhappy with a handful of rodents, caught a bigger prey. There's a dog always hanging around the cross. It can't be a coincidence. It's a black dog, not too small, not too big, like you imagine when you hear the word 'dog'. He looks like he has walked right out of one of the stories from my grandfather. One of those vague ghosts that lived in the imagination of the village people a hundred years ago, together with the Witte Wieven, the demons of the water and the talking horse's heads, a black dog you met at dusk at abandoned places, that grew before your eyes and chased after you all night long, until you ended up at the farmhouse at the break of dawn, covered in sweat and noticed your hair had turned grey overnight.

Before, I would have made up my own story: the dog that mourns at the grave of his owner, that doesn't eat or drink anymore until he dies at the cross from sadness and hunger, head on his paws, tongue from his mouth. But this isn't a grave and the boy on the picture didn't have a dog.

My grandfather doesn't search behind my eyes for who I have become, for the stranger that crawled out of the children's body and now, almost an enemy, wanders about the parental house. He still thinks I'm ten, just like on those Wednesday afternoons I brought him food for a whole week, he doesn't doubt I want to hear his stories. Sometimes he asks me how I'm doing and how my mother is, his discontented daughter. But he rarely waits for an answer.

Nothing ever changes around here. The table oil-cloth with the sunflowers has a few more holes, where a cigarette rolled off the ashtray, and the comfortable chair that almost leans against the stove, has grown a little more around grandfather's body, but the rest is the same as before. On the mantelpiece stands a naked girl in plaster, unashamed, next to an emaciated Christ and the picture of a smiling married couple. Those are my great-grandparents. Thanks to the stories of my grandfather I know them better than I know some of my classmates. It's weird seeing them together like that, full of hope for a better future, while you know how painful their life was. They themselves don't know anything yet, frozen in time, forever leaning against each other in the photographer's office, she with eternally fresh flowers in hand, he with hair shining with youth and brilliantine.

Nothing seems to change around here. But when my grandfather takes off his hat, his blue grey hair is a lot thinner than before.

He rummages through the kitchen cabinet.

'Soup, soup, soup', I hear him mumble. Now I don't bring him anything anymore, he has to resort to canned food.

'Pumpkin soup', he says. 'That's been a while.'

He opens the can, pours its content into a pan and puts it onto the stove.

'Pumpkins. We haven't seen those in the village for a long time. Remember?'

Is he talking to me? Sometimes he seems to forget about me and starts to tell a new story to his wife, his parents or his brother. It isn't surprising he talks to the dead. The living rarely visit him. The handful of friends that is left, only come to see him when their daughters-in-law allow it. He has to make do with the ghosts of the past. They like to come, because he doesn't look down on them. Sometimes he stares at them so penetrating that I turn around, almost convinced I will see someone standing in the shadows.

'Have I ever told you about the pumpkin in the village?'

I know all of his stories.

'In the village they haven't eaten pumpkin soup for over more than sixty year. The memories are too painful. It's a tragic story. And long. I don't want to bore you with it.'

He ogles from underneath his hat. It doesn't matter what I say. He will tell the story anyway. That's why I'm here. He summoned me as a listener.

'It all happened a long time ago, on the farmhouse of farmer Sanders. He had a large farm, at the top of the hill, just before you enter the village.'

Soon after, he has already forgotten about me.

There's a bouillabaisse on the hot plate at home. My mother, who used to lack time and desire to slave in the kitchen after a long day at work, who never understood why she should work for over an hour for something that would be guzzled down in three minutes, my mother, who without a doubt thinks the microwave oven is the most important invention of the last century, can't be dragged away from the cooker lately.

Not because she suddenly discovered her love for home-cooked meals or finally gave in to the countless cooking shows on TV. She herself barely eats from the plates she carries to the living room every day. But the kitchen became her fortress. She hides there for my father and the evening. Preferably, she would cook until it's time to go to bed, but if she lingers too long, my father threatens to lend a helping hand. Rather than having him next to her, close to sharp kitchen knives, that could disappear in a thigh or chest before you know it, she hurries to be done with cooking before nine o'clock.

My father is already at the table. He closes his laptop when she enters the living room with a steaming bowl.

'It smells delicious', he says. He smiles. She smiles back. It's the smile of two strangers that are trapped together in an elevator and try to make the best of it.

'Bouillabaisse', she says quite redundantly.

He bends over the bowl. Everything is in it: shrimps, pieces of salmon, lobster. There's enough for ten people.

My mother takes three plates and three soup spoons from the cupboard. She puts the plates on the table. My father freezes. She notices, but continues setting the table. She carefully puts the spoons next to the plates. My father follows her with his eyes. His hands clench into fists.

My mother takes the spoon, stirs in the bowl and serves the bouillabaisse into his plate.

‘More?’ she asks. He doesn’t answer. It’s quiet in the room.

She fills her own plate and brings the spoon back to the bowl. She hesitates, just for a second. Then the spoon disappears into the soup with a squishy splash. When she pulls it up again, a piece of fish rises out of the overfull spoon, a rosy island in a yellow sea. Very carefully – she doesn’t want to lose a drop – my mother takes the spoon from the bowl to the third plate.

‘Eva’, my father says. It’s a warning. The spoon hovers above the plate. Then she pours the bouillabaisse into the plate.

Even before the last drop can leave the spoon, my father grabs the plate and throws it across the room. It goes over my mother’s head and when it hits the wall, tiny slivers of porcelain fly through the room. Immediately, the hot soup follows, a mash that splashes in all directions. The carpet is covered with shrimps. My father disappears into his study. My mother fetches a bucket and starts to scrub the walls.

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They’re having a fight when I hear my name and join them.

‘I’m not Thomas.’

They’re standing at the edge of the dance floor, Bram in a white T-shirt, Orphee in a light blue blouse. He doesn’t care about the glances from the dancers around them, but Orphee wants to leave.

‘Go ahead and leave’, he screams. ‘Walk away when you don’t get what you want.’ But soon after he follows her.

She’s sitting on the stairs outside, smoking. He sits down beside her.

‘It’s impossible’, he says. ‘I can’t replace him.’

‘But I’m not asking you to?’

‘Maybe not out loud. But I can see it in your eyes. Everything I say and do is compared to that dead half god.’

‘You’re imagining things.’

‘No. I’m not imagining anything.’

He grabs her wrist. Her cigarette flies from her hands and rolls down the stairs.

‘A few months ago you did this.’ He releases her wrist. ‘And now you’ve forgotten about him? I find that hard to believe.’

‘Then why am I sitting here?’

'Because you're tired of staying at home. Because you want a diversion. I am the rebound, it's as simple as that, and it's about time I realize that.'

'That isn't true, Bram.'

'No. Then prove it.'

'What do you want me to do? To slit my other wrist? Would you be happy then?'

'Tell me honestly you didn't think about him just now when I kissed you.'

'Even if it is that way...'

'I knew it.' He clenches his fists.

'I don't say it's like that, but even if it was, you shouldn't blow it out of proportion. Dead or not, Thomas was my previous boyfriend. It isn't that weird if I still think about him sometimes. What do you want, that I slide from my virginal girls' room straight into your arms? You're not the first...'

'Oh, that's a huge comfort', Bram yells.

'But you might be the best.'

'I bet', he says, but he finds it hard to suppress a smile.

'And if you want prove...'

She kisses him like she isn't thinking about me anymore. But I'm still here. I'm bend over them, an invisible shadow. She's lying.

But it's a convincing lie.