FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Man Who Didn't Want to be Buried

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An extract

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I should be careful what I wish for. Wish fulfillment is a treacherous thing; it seldom works out the way you want it to. I had a childish wish—more a demand, really—that might now come true in a way I had never imagined possible. When I was about six years old I made my mother promise that she would never bury me if I died.

Now Nora and the girls are gone.

Ham is dead.

I'm unemployed. And it's also my fault that I had no life with Awatif. Everything's going up in smoke.

I have to salvage at least something, which is why I'm lying here on my belly under a large desk in a small office. I was not expecting this guy to be roaming around the halls and rooms fifteen minutes after the undertaker locked up. He must be a security guard. Security for a mortuary—how redundant. I can hear his footsteps on the marble floor in the hall; they're getting closer. I hope he skips this room. The notion of a security guard in a building full of corpses is as crazy as the urge I'm feeling as I lie here on my belly on the cold tiled floor. I feel like having sex. I wish Awatif was around. I wish she were with me in this room, her hands caressing my cold body. I wouldn't stop her if she'd undo my fly, take my member in her hands again and bring her mouth to my crotch to kiss me. I want physicality, I want to be touched. I don't want to die yet.

Not that I believe I have a say in the matter.

Nor am I the kind of guy who would blow up his own head in the microwave. That defines my generation: we don't take conscious overdoses, we don't shoot ourselves, we don't jump off tall buildings or in front of trains. We certainly don't establish fighting clubs solely to feel life's pain.

We're stuck with this life. We slog through all the shit as best we can until He decides to turn off the light.

That's why I'm staying here on my belly. I'll do what I have to do.

I moan. Awatif isn't here - never will be. There's only my heavy body on the cold hard floor. I can see the shadow of my face on the large dark tiles. I feel my own weight. I lie with my right cheek on the tiles. My head's hard and too heavy to hold up above the tiles for long. My torso's slightly softer and lighter. Both my arms are equally heavy. My legs feel like lead. A broken life takes its toll on a tired body. I lift my heavy head again, listening to the sound of doors being opened and closed. I kiss the floor and wait. The guard's a problem. Right now all I can do is wait for something to happen. Meanwhile my life flashes before my eyes as if I'm about to die.

Nothing much has changed, really. I'm still pretty much the same. The only difference is that I now realize this world's for winners, and I've discovered that I'm no winner, however much I would have liked that.

I'm just a regular guy.

A guy like so many. Usually I'm dressed in a pretty good but unremarkable suit. I'm clean-shaven and my hair isn't long. I don't have a diamond earring—bling's not for me. The only thing I require of my watch is that it tells me the time. I used to wear a tie. A tie used to stand for something; it emanated trustworthiness, earnestness, respectability. But this past year I felt increasingly that the customers were suspicious of my formal attire.

That's why I gradually stopped wearing a tie. I admit I still felt naked without one, so I always wore a tie to my in-laws.

I'm not conservative. Granted, I don't believe in change for change's sake, but I'm not fanatic. Everyone's a fanatic nowadays; it's an epidemic. I don't believe staunchly in anything and I'm not averse to a good debate over a cold beer once in a while.

I'm an average guy and average guys don't tend to do anything grand like change the world or kill themselves.

Now I'm lying here and I know I've got to do something. Something grand. And for once in my life I will. It's about time.

I text Bralle and tell him he can't leave yet. He has to wait until I've figured out what to do about this guard who's roaming the halls.

Suddenly I hear a woman's voice. I hold my breath. She speaks rapidly, unnaturally. Then she's interrupted by a commercial jingle and I realize the guard has turned on the radio. I breathe a sigh of relief. With the radio playing a popular song in the background I try to take stock of my life, although it wasn't all that long ago that I didn't feel ready for that.

It bothers me that I missed my opportunity, that I wasted my time so tremendously. I can't pretend that all this was merely a dress rehearsal; I'm too old to start over. But I'm also way too young to quit. I chuckle bitterly. Even when everything's destroyed, burned down, abandoned, hope will still remain. Like some kind of weed whose indestructible, resistant seeds I carry deep within my own body, it waits for the right moment to pop up in the desolate landscape of my life.

I must stay down, stay calm, wait, think—figure out how to deal with the guard. Then call Bralle and tell him to bring the van so we can do our duty—the only task I can and must still carry out.

Because I owe it to Hamid.

It's probably easier if I start at the beginning.

An outside observer would think my neighborhood was in a perpetual state of crisis. You'd think the bomb was about to drop but, truth be told, it seldom did. Nevertheless, folks always seemed to be charging off in all directions like headless chickens, churning up a lot of dust, accomplishing nothing.

This below-the-surface agitation had also crept into our homes, into our families.

I hated that: parents who reacted to trivialities as if the world were ending. Especially my mother had an innate talent for such histrionics. Still—like I said—no bomb fell at the time, neither on our neighborhood nor on our family.

When something significant did happen—a huge election victory for an extremist party, for instance—folks reacted as if it were nothing but a pebble bouncing off their shoulder, merely a slight annoyance. That that pebble dropped onto my world like a nuclear bomb went unnoticed.

A second bomb dropped on my life years later. My own Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a fact, albeit that the interval wasn't three days but thirty years. Some sad music would be fitting here. After the bomb my life, or what was left of it, was surprisingly quiet. The past few weeks I have often had to restrain myself from rolling across the floor, pulling out my hair. I would swallow a few times as if I were trying to clear my throat and then continue with the daily routine, such as it was. There was still the day, but no routine. Nothing left to arrange, just emptiness. You can't fill your days with emptiness.

The divorce petition suddenly brought it home.

A while ago a slick young man served me with the papers and explained that I had to appear in court to hear a Judgment of Divorce based on Irreconcilable Differences. Smiling thinly, he asked me to sign the receipt. I did so meekly, wondering meanwhile why I didn't beat him up, why I let him leave unscathed with the signed documents in his leather briefcase, which he threw nonchalantly on the passenger seat of his flashy German car. But instead of slipping nimbly behind the wheel and silently driving away without another look in my direction, he came back. Placing his right hand on my left shoulder, he said, "You'll get through it, pal. My wife left me a year ago. At first I wanted to kill myself, but now I thank my lucky stars she's gone."

As he drove off I knew why I hadn't beaten him up. I had regained my self-control.

I usually analyze my options thoroughly, weighing all the pros and cons, considering all the possible consequences, only acting if there are no risks. This past year I was seldom so prudent, going with my gut too often, and my disastrous situation is the result, embodied in the divorce papers, which I held as if I were attempting to choke a reptile to death.

Upstairs in my apartment, I threw the crumpled papers on the dining room table. I went to the kitchen, opened the balcony door, lit a cigarette, and gazed in the direction of the street corner, as if I expected Nora to drive up any moment to say she was kidding. “Of course we’re not getting a divorce, silly,” she’d say. “I just wanted to give you a wake-up call, is all.”

But she didn’t drive up. When I went back inside I glanced at the papers. They looked like some crippled origami figure. Maybe that could be my hobby since I had nothing else left.

It was the third time Nora had left me. She had practically made it a sport to pack her suitcases and leave, dragging the girls along each time.

I felt relieved the first day after her departure, as usual. All the negativity took a lot out of us and the situation was a burden on the girls. They were too old to be reassured with lies. Aya and Doha knew full well that all the yelling and tears did mean something, that it could absolutely throw their little world upside down. Their leaving was probably for the best.

The first time around, Nora’s walking out did have a positive effect on our relationship. It was like drastically pruning a plant, thus giving it a chance to get stronger, with more beautiful, healthier leaves and flowers than before. Unfortunately the effect didn’t repeat itself the second time around and the third time the divorce petition hit my like a ton of bricks. It was clear that Nora was done pruning, done caring. She had simply uprooted the withered plant and now she danced on it. That’s what she was doing. I had lost all hope that she would return that evening, like the first time, purportedly so the girls could give me goodnight hugs. That first time we ended up in bed, ravenous. Later, in a magazine in the dentist’s waiting room, I saw that it’s called reconciliation sex. At that point I was still convinced I could fix everything. That nothing was irreparable.

This time there was nothing left to fix.

As I sat smoking my cigarette on the balcony, I became more furious with every inhalation. I despised her; she was a miserable traitor, pulling the rug out from under me like that.

We had two girls, both born on the same day. Sometimes I wondered if she would have needed three attempts to leave me if I hadn’t been a father. Then maybe the first time would have been sufficient. It would have saved us both a lot of crying and empty talk.

Nora never did anything on a whim; she had needed all those attempts to unravel the fabric of our marriage bit by bit, until it came apart. That way she could believe it had happened gradually, that our once so promising marriage disintegrated slowly, naturally. Her only problem was my status as father. That was her big dilemma; I was a good father and she knew it. She would rather kill herself than hurt our girls or deprive them of anything. And the girls needed me.

The hardest part was accepting that Nora, the person closest to my heart, was now the opponent. She had gone to the other side—to the Outside World. Whatever happened in the outside world, until that process server came I had always known I could go home, where the girls looked forward to seeing me, convinced that I was the strongest, smartest, sweetest daddy ever.

Even though things hadn't been great between us for a while, Nora had been there to reassure me after each blow. But her patience ran out. She no longer understood what I was doing.

She used the girls as pawns from the beginning. Whatever happened, where they were concerned I was going to lose.

It didn't take much to turn my world upside down. She demonstrated that quite effectively the first time she left. All she had to do was take the girls. I came home to an apartment that was empty despite the fact that everything was still in its place—the girls' shoes and backpacks in the hallway, Aya's pink pajama peeking from the laundry basket.

It was all still there. The furniture, the CD's, the books, the photos, a framed pencil drawing a talented artist in Montmartre had done of us during our first wedding anniversary. The place was neat and tidy, as always. Nora was pretty obsessive when it came to cleaning. Toys or random stacks of old newspapers and magazines drove her nuts. Yet it felt like the ceiling had crashed down on me, like I had entered a war zone.

Strange how sometimes you only remember the trivial details of life's important moments.

For instance, the thing that stands out about departure number two is a spoiling fruit salad, half eaten by the girls, wilting in bowls. I came home from the office that day and stood in the doorway to the dining room for several minutes, gazing at the hurriedly abandoned table where that homemade fruit salad was fermenting in its own juices. The pieces of apple and banana had turned brown, the color of a life in decay. The bright, fluorescent greenish yellow hue of Aya's bowl, with its protruding orange rabbit ears, did nothing to soften the gloomy scene. Doha's was orange with yellow rabbit ears so they could be told apart, but she refused to eat from such a childish plastic bowl; she wanted to be treated like us adults, so she ate from the same dishware as we did.

For a long time I stood there, taking in the sad tableau. The butt-ugly plastic bowl, the disgusting fruit salad, spoons scattered willy-nilly across the table. I suddenly had trouble breathing; the mess on the table was getting to me. One of the girls' cups had tipped over and lay in a puddle of milk; there were cookie crumbs, an opened packet of wet wipes.

I was furious and my anger was intensified by a gnawing hunger. I had hardly eaten a thing all day and I had looked forward to coming home and having something warm, even if it was only a cup of coffee, some bread. It was unforgiveable that Nora had taken the girls again. I remember turning around and leaving the apartment, dining room mess and all, petulantly intending to go to some bar and get drunk.

Nora hated that; it was one of the many things she wanted me to change. "I'm sick of your drinking," she would say. "It's just wrong!" A lot of things were wrong in her eyes. Greeting my female colleagues with a kiss on the cheek was wrong, smoking so much was wrong, not visiting her parents more often, not exercising, fasting but not praying. . .

I agreed that I had to make some changes, but none of them came easy. I drank occasionally, but I felt guilty about it because it was wrong. It wasn't how I was raised, how either of us was raised. At the same time, despite the guilty feeling, I was convinced I wasn't doing any harm. Nora was too uptight, making a mountain out of a molehill, interfering with my business. I was a grown man. I kept to minimal rules, such as not drinking in front of the girls or other relatives or acquaintances,

and never drinking during Ramadan or if I wanted to have sex with Nora. I felt that that should be enough.

The second time around I went to get her back myself. I wanted my life back, my girls, our family and—despite everything—her as well. She had always been the one who kept it all together. I thought that if I got them back everything would be better. It would be a new beginning. We both needed that, a second chance to change direction.

At her parents' house I vowed to give her the life we both envisioned when we promised each other —shortly after meeting—to be faithful and to be married according to our families' rituals and customs. But even as I promised her all this I knew I couldn't keep any part of it. I think she knew it too. She just pretended to believe me to keep the gray ghost of the end of our marriage at bay a little longer.

The last time she left I turned onto our street in the evening and I immediately knew the apartment was abandoned again. Her car wasn't there. It seemed as if the entire street was deserted, given up on. I hesitated at the front door, dreading entering the empty apartment. It was as if someone had died there and I wasn't sure where the body had been placed. Reluctantly I grabbed the key, opened the door and shuffled across the hallway to the living room. I had just been released after five days in jail. Nora had finally found her reason to leave for good.