

Saving Fish

Annelies Verbeke

An extract

Original title Vissen reddén
Publisher De Geus, 2009

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Liz Waters

© Annelies Verbeke/Liz Waters/De Geus/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.

Chapter One, North Sea

‘A new day in the now,’ Monique Champagne sang in the bath. In the city where she lived cultural life was flourishing, litter was successfully corralled and frequent rainfall dampened the spirits. Now and then a birthday boy hanged himself from a joist or an unpredictable pet ripped out a child’s eye. But not often. The loss of good fortune here was generally less abrupt.

The plug-hole seemed to be clogged, but not dramatically. ‘A new day in the now.’ Singing again – that was good.

She dressed and put on her make-up as if she had something important in prospect, strode to the baker’s where, with a radiant smile, she took possession of a crusty loaf. Walking home again she lifted her face to the gentle drizzle and in doing so noticed a rainbow over her city. ‘How beautiful,’ she told herself.

At home Monique carefully sorted her washing. She checked labels she always checked, just to make sure. Then she ran up the stairs two at a time. She’d tidied her desk the previous evening. After turning on the laptop, she ran back down and loaded the dishwasher. Most of the cups and plates hadn’t always been hers alone, but they were now, they were now. Next she arranged the pots of herbs in the cabinet over the cooker by size and brand. It was time for an invigorating cycle ride.

That she somehow managed it every time, it occurred to her as she turned the pedals firmly and steadily, breathing the scent of the pines as deeply as she could. How again and again she landed on her toes. And that she’d believe in a guardian angel, were she religious. A flight of wild geese skimmed – braying, or so it seemed – over her head to the rainbow, which looked even more colourful now against a blue background.

Sweaty from the exertion, Monique took another bath and then made soup. She sliced vegetables, didn’t roll any meatballs on vegetarian principle, sliced even more vegetables and ate slowly in front of an empty Word page, at which she continued to stare long after the soup was finished. She gazed into the whiteness of the screen the way a Belgian soldier in Kabul gazed into infinity; nothing appeared, but if anything did appear, it might well be hostile. Monique wanted

nothing to do with hostility. Inspiration did not come. The point of a new story was hard to pin down, her readers waited, her bank balance teetered towards red, but she would wait patiently for something beautiful.

Meanwhile her eyes wandered, as they had so many afternoons in a row, to a green folder and a pile of books on the other arm of her L-shaped desk. She put the folder in her lap, leafed with intense seriousness through the newscuttings and webpage printouts she'd collected in it and sighed. The fish stocks were going from bad to worse. She re-read how thousands of kilometres of net were rolled out each day to scrape inordinate amounts of fish and much else from the seabed. Over the past fifty years, the huge commercial catch had caused a decline of ninety per cent in the large predator fish. In a single year more than a hundred thousand tons of cod had been caught illegally in the Barents Sea. In 2002 all the cod in the North Sea would have fitted into a medium-sized fishing boat. Forty thousand people lost their jobs when the last of that species was fished out of the Canadian Grand Banks. Almost all South Asia's coral reefs had been dynamited. After their fins were cut off, mutilated sharks were thrown back into the sea. The European Union had brushed aside its last chance to help the bluefin tuna survive in the Mediterranean. The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas was laughingly known as the International Conspiracy to Catch all Tuna. Subsidies for immense fishing fleets were breaking all records, as was the number of unfair quota agreements with developing countries. Aquaculture was rarely a solution, it seemed. Where wild salmon on their way to the sea swam past farmed salmon, the populations were reduced by infections. A third of all the fish caught in the wild were used to feed farmed fish. Eleven per cent of the earth's land surface was protected, only half a per cent of its seas. Three hundred and fifty million fish were killed every day for human consumption. If overfishing continued at its present rate, fish stocks would be exhausted by the middle of the century.

Monique had read most of the articles before. She was just starting to engross herself in a piece about the eutrophication of the seas when the phone rang.

'Am I speaking to Mrs Champagne in person?' an unfamiliar male voice wanted to know.

Monique confirmed it was she.

'Good morning Mrs Champagne. I'm calling to put a proposal to you. It may seem a little odd at first, but I'd like just a moment of your time to explain what it's about, because I think, I hope, it might interest you.'

Monique suspected the man was from a telecoms company, or perhaps wanted to go through a questionnaire about her tobacco consumption. Or he might have an inane proposal linked to her profession. In the past she, the writer, had been invited to take part in quizzes, or programmes in which, adventurous and semi-famous, she'd be obliged to align herself with a camera through primeval forests and across glaciers. People had requested her literary yet unpaid accompaniment to vintage car rallies and the spitting at wine-tastings. She held her 'I'm afraid I'm busy then' at the ready.

'I saw your newspaper article, at least, article, your lyrical plea, or your what should I call it... About fish, about overfishing. I thought it was really beautiful. That is, beautiful... Arresting, rather. I read it a several times over and I thought, yes, this is... That's exactly what we're lacking, we scientists, generally speaking. Sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Sven Notello. I'm with the

IAFR, the Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research. It's a governmental organization – as I dare say you know.'

'Yes,' said Monique. She was pleased the man assumed she knew this already. She was pleased that a scientist was about to put a proposal to her. 'What precisely is it you feel you're lacking?' she inquired politely.

'Excuse me?' said Notello, confused for a second. 'Oh, in science! In science, yes! In science everything can be so terribly dry, Mrs Champagne. Mind you, that seriousness is essential. It's essential. And there are exceptions, of course. Recently I watched a talk about the learning capacity of crows, by a young biologist, what was he called again? You may have seen it. It's on YouTube. Anyway, that's beside the point. What I want to say is, your article has something we could do with: emotion.'

He spoke that last word with great emotion, Monique felt. She was beginning to wonder whether she should be pleased or on her guard. Emotion had never been the thing she was after in her writing, at least not in its raw, unprocessed form. But she realized that in her piece about fish, the product of her most recent assault on the keyboard, feelings had indeed arisen.

'Do you like travelling?' the man asked.

Monique told him that she did.

The proposal involved calling in on a number of European cities to read out her appeal during fish congresses, by way of parenthesis.

'Are there a lot of them then, fish congresses?' Monique wanted to know.

'Absolutely!' Her ignorance seemed to surprise Sven Notello a little. He began listing all the maritime congresses and readings he'd ever attended, from strictly academic affairs to lectures for a broader audience. There were a great many of them. Her travel and accommodation costs would be shared by two organizations, while a third would contribute enough for her fee.

'So I'm expected to provide a sort of playful note?' asked Monique. As she spoke the word 'note' she hoped Notello wouldn't read into it any allusion to his name.

'Well, playful, I wouldn't put it like that,' he said. 'More like: emotional.'

Notello expressed the hope that Monique would be able to offer a specific contribution that would benefit tuna stocks. He'd have liked to have seen a couple more passages about tuna in her article, but that preference, although valid, was more or less personal, he stressed.

'I'll do my best!' Monique made sure he could hear a smile in her voice.

'Is that a yes? Don't you want to hear when?' Notello too had an audible smile.

'As soon as possible,' Monique blared, a little defiantly.

'Next week Tallinn!' Notello was clearly elated.

It was exactly what she needed: saving fish. She would be new. And useful. The prospect filled her with such courage and hope that she decided it deserved a celebration on a grand scale.

On the internet she found a photograph of a school of guppies apparently wearing outlandish ball gowns. Bodies of mohair and silk and glass, with cheetah-prints and gold, fins like boas, tails of thin paper, tails like expensive paintbrushes. No better image to link fish and festivities, thought Monique. In green lettering she typed the date, the start time and her address on top, followed by the guidance: 'neither flowers nor wreaths' and 'theme/dress-code: fish/sea'. She added a quote from John L. Culliney: 'The oceans are the planet's last great living wilderness, man's only remaining frontier on Earth, and perhaps his last chance to prove himself a rational species.' Then she e-mailed the invitation to thirty-nine people and sent out another ten by post.

Monique spent the remaining time before the party that would immediately precede her departure in redoubled research into the various species of tuna and their unnatural enemies. Notello rang her again several times with more details about the trip.

In truth she'd known even a month back that this would be her direction. The newspaper article had been written with great intensity, although it was only now that she realized how little she'd known then about her subject. The more she read, the more her ecological mission obsessed her. Terms she'd generally avoided – alarm bells, final phase, better world – leapt out at her as she read. The seas, oceans and rivers were being fished out. In those empty seas Monique Champagne saw the end of all life on earth, since there in the sea was where life had begun. She imagined herself immersed in a watery nothingness, surrounded by lifeless land. Someone must do something radical, she believed, and since a far from negligible minority was doing something already, she felt guilty that her assistance had not been forthcoming up to now. True, she'd ruined an appetite or two in a restaurant when someone ordered a marine creature that was in the 'Don't Buy' column of the WWF Consumer's Guide, but her activism had never gone much further than that.

Slightly out of keeping with her passionate fixation on a better future was the diligence with which, between her research sessions, she pushed a trolley along supermarket aisles. For the last time, she told herself, she was risking a hernia lugging crates of beer and cases of wine, and she thought long and hard about the dishes that would encourage her guests – replete but not overfull – to step onto the dance floor.

The prospect of a leaving party creased a determined smile into her face. Even after the trolley chassis bruised her shins for the second time and the car boot lid came down on her head as she was loading, the smile persisted. A passer-by looked away in fright.

While cooking, Monique Champagne sang along to numbers that had been recorded during the Second World War but were all about love. Louder and louder she sang, high and long and gutturally. She stretched her voice to the limits; now and then her airways narrowed and she could manage only a painful cough. With floury fingers she grabbed the hot tea she'd made for herself, gargled her throat back into condition and carried on singing and kneading.

Monique Champagne was good at parties. She'd been brought up to it; do your best for others, perfectionism, confetti. An hour and a half before the first guests were due she had everything under control. On the oven-rack warm snacks were preparing themselves for the heat, an abacus of cherry tomatoes and mozzarella balls waited in the fridge surrounded by intricate vegetarian appetizers, and the stereo performed an exemplary shuffle into the next mood-setting intro.

Monique cast a final glance across the streamers of blue paper fish swimming from the dust-free bookcase to all four corners of the lounge. Then she hurried to the bathroom.

A short bath, she resolved. Under water she probed her lean body like a disappointed butcher. She'd once been more muscular, firmer. She'd have to do something about that, fast. Cycling wasn't enough. Her number one priority, after all, was to look healthy.

After Monique had rinsed the conditioner out of her hair she held the shower-head between her legs. She didn't touch anything and there was no need, to her relief, to dream anything up. Foaming and uninterrupted the stream of water did thorough job; the spreading, the swelling, the moisture. Her cheeks barely had time to redden. When she sighed at the end, a thin ripple broke against the edge of the bath. That was all. Vitality, Monique thought approvingly.

Fifteen minutes before the time on the invitation, the doorbell rang. On stockinged feet and with only one eye made up, she hurried to the door. There stood Jan and An, who found the combination of their names so banal that they preferred everyone to call them Jean and Nana, which hardly anyone did. They'd named the baby in the carry-cot they were using to push the door further open Dolf, in the conviction that it was morally acceptable again but still very rare. Jan and An, both wearing slapdash shell necklaces, pulled two crumpled sailor hats out from between the nappies and put them on their heads.

'Yes, we're a bit early because Dolf woke up,' Jan explained.

'So we couldn't manage much in the way of fancy dress and we'll have to leave fairly early, sorry,' An added apologetically, as if expecting Monique to give her a beating.

Monique didn't understand the logic behind their announcements but blamed herself for that.

'No problem, come in, getting big, oh thanks,' she muttered, during the exchange of welcoming kisses and joyful glances at the child and the wine label. Then it was her turn to apologize. She wasn't quite ready yet. To illustrate the fact, she pointed to her one made-up eye, which put Jan in mind of Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange* – a connection An and Monique beamingly endorsed. An thought she looked great and that what she was wearing was great and that her hair was a great colour. After fetching both parents something to drink, Monique put on the tuna-suit she'd made the night before. 'Great the way you've made that,' said An.

When she turned on the oven, the doorbell rang again, followed by an urgent shriek from Dolf. It was Diederik. She'd expected him to be the first guest to arrive because he was always the first. Perhaps the application of a black eye-patch had slowed him down a bit. Since he wasn't otherwise dressed as a pirate, it looked more like treatment for a lazy eye.

'Am I late?' he asked in a panic when he heard Jan and An's voices.

Monique reassured him.

'Happy birthday,' said Diederik dejectedly, handing her a book he'd wrapped in newspaper.

Monique explained amicably that he needn't have done that, it wasn't her birthday, only a leaving party. This came as a blow to Diederik. It was his seventh leaving party in a month – always for people who meant a lot to him. Some were celebrating their emigration, but most had cancer and were probably celebrating for the last time. As she listened, Monique stroked Diederik's shoulder good-naturedly. She'd known him for a long while. The lies he came out with grew more extravagant and tragic by the year. He was quite often moved to tears by the misfortune he'd invented for himself. This particular aberration had driven a lot of people away. Monique felt inclined to shut him out of her life but decided it wasn't the moment to break off contact. She even kept her mouth shut when she saw Diederik attach a pellet of snot to the underside of the table.

Most of the women and one of the men were dressed as glamorous mermaids. Monique also counted two octopuses, a jumbo mussel, something with shells, a lobster and four shrimp-fishermen. In the middle of the brimming lounge the elastic broke on Diederik's eye-patch. Monique turned up the music and carried one tray after another of glasses and edibles around the room. Everywhere she went she engaged in brief exchanges that ended in laughter.

'Hey,' said a solicitous mermaid, poking her long nails into the tuna-suit. 'You look tired. Everything okay?'

Monique said everything was fine, and smiled. The mermaid, however, wanted to know whether that was true, whether everything really was alright. Monique was trying to give her a reassuring look as she wormed her way past when another mermaid buttonholed her.

'Monique,' this one said. 'I'm so glad I'm not in your shoes. You really are amazingly strong.'

'Oh, but to me it's a privilege to have a chance to inform people all over Europe about the woeful state of the fish stocks.'

The mermaid mumbled that wasn't what she meant. One of the shrimpers laid his hand on the right fin of Monique's tuna-suit.

'Don't let yourself get too carried away by all those stressed-out eco-warriors.'

He told her that people who didn't believe mankind would always find solutions to things before it was too late ought to be on tranquillizers. His mermaid trod on his toe. He took the hint.

'You're very sweet,' he said to Monique. 'We need sweet people like you.'

He thought she'd have to admit all the same that fish were primitive creatures. If your memory was so short that when swimming around a bowl you continually imagined yourself in a new world, then 'primitive' was the word.

The laughter stopped when the guests saw Monique's face.

'That memory business is a stupid myth,' she said. 'If a fish gets away it won't take bait on a hook a second time. And they aren't "primitive" either. They're perfectly adapted for life underwater.' She was so angry that no one around her could do anything but nod, other than a guest who mumbled softly and affirmatively: 'Hmm. Darwinism.'

'Have you seen Thomas?' a mermaid inquired. She was the fifth that evening to ask Monique the same question.

'No,' Monique snapped at her.

Someone who had detected an urgent need for a change of subject wanted to know whether she was working on anything new. A new book, she meant, aside from the fish stuff. Monique replied cheerfully that she was no longer a writer. She'd sworn off literature completely, reading included. For years she'd dutifully read at least one work of fiction a week, alternating between classics and new writing, but all she read about now was fish. In fact fish were the underdogs of the animal kingdom. No one seemed to be able to summon any empathy for them. Even people who called themselves vegetarians often ate fish.

'Fish aren't easy to observe, they don't make noises people can hear and they don't have facial expressions or gestures we can interpret as indicating fear or pain. But that doesn't mean fish don't feel those things!'

Monique had spoken with passion.

'No, of course it doesn't,' said a shrimper's mermaid, her empathy so intense it was almost greedy. 'Fish have feelings too.' She bit her lip, stricken, and gave her shrimper a meaningful look.

'Monique,' said the jumbo mussel, who was hard to understand. 'Whatever happens, you can always come to us.'

In the middle of the room, the octopuses were dancing. As Monique walked past them they opened their mouths for the first time since their arrival and tried to persuade the hostess to take to the floor. Monique declined, saying it was beautiful to see the two of them showing their love, and wondered whether she ought to throw out the crackers that were going soggy on the coffee table. The lobster a friend had brought, who'd been calling Monique princess all evening, asked whether she'd got anything stronger than wine. Monique fetched an expensive bottle of whisky someone had given her, which she'd been planning to use as a present for someone else. It turned out to be the kind you could knock back easily.

For the rest of the evening she crept around the walls of her crowded house, allowing herself to be cuddled by anyone who felt the urge. The partygoers stayed. They were enjoying themselves or waiting to. Glasses were knocked off window sills, names forgotten, conversations repeated. An old classmate freed his shoulders from an arm, someone scratched himself longer than normal, a woman on stilettos rattled on: 'I'm glad I'm into my thirties. You're not? Why not? Oh, I am, life's a lot better, isn't it? Why not? I think it is. I'm really glad I'm into my thirties!'

'Alright, fine, but I've been saying for years handball's sick,' said her interlocutor.

This is the age when pleasantly eccentric threatens to tip over into insane, thought Monique.

She saw Diederik staring mournfully at a paper streamer and asked him what was wrong.

‘Everything,’ Diederik bellowed above the music. For a second it seemed a story might follow that he hadn’t made up. Then he went on: ‘That streamer, for instance. My father invented those. Didn’t take out a patent. Died poor. My childhood could have looked very different.’

Monique handed him a beer, which Diederik was supposed to refuse since earlier in the evening he’d affected an alcohol allergy.

Monique turned discreetly on her axis, slowly, very slowly, so that no one would notice she was doing it so she could look. Lips smiled to reveal teeth soaked in red wine; a red nose buried itself in a sweaty bosom. Most of her friends didn’t seem unhappy. Monique had become fairly adept at warming to them and in return the friends had more than once provided a welcome distraction. Nevertheless she knew she wouldn’t miss them after tonight. Not for a moment.

Motionless, she stared long and hard at the guppies on the invitation, hanging in multiple copies on the walls. It seemed for a few seconds as if the fish were swimming separately in all directions, frantic and deranged. No, they were dancing, Monique decided. They were mimicking fireworks. It wasn’t as if they were fleeing a bomb attack at a ball.

At five fifteen in the morning, earlier than Monique had expected, the party suddenly subsided. She was struck by how generously her guests wished her well as they left. A marvellous time; all the luck in the world; have incredible fun. There was no end to it. One mermaid said: ‘Enjoy, Monique, enjoy’ and gave her such a penetrating look as she said it that for a second Monique thought the woman was using a code and meant something else entirely, something of immense importance that she failed to grasp.

The dismantling of parties was another thing at which Monique Champagne was extremely proficient. She never left the clearing up to the following day. Sometimes she took such delight in pouring away beer residues and extinguishing candles that she wondered if she didn’t secretly regard this as the highpoint. She took off her tuna-suit. Then she upturned the six ashtrays and two bowls of leftover crisps onto a paper tablecloth and used it to wrap the mixture of ash and paprika. Like a hostile present, she thought, holding the paper ball in her arms. Before stuffing it into the bin she paced back and forth through the house for a while, unable to part with it straight away.

For once she didn’t start washing the sticky floors immediately. She shook the last cigarette out of an abandoned pack. Although she’d stopped smoking a year and a half before, she inhaled as deeply as she could. When the cigarette was finished, she ran through the dark morning in rubber boots to her car. She wanted to greet her future ally. To see the sea. It was only a forty-five minute drive.

For the first time Monique noticed what was written on the inside of the fogged-up windscreen on the passenger side: ‘Monique my little flower.’ That must have been there for a while, she thought, vigorously rubbing at it. The wind whistled daintily through a tiny crack in the glass. It sounded artificial, like someone imitating the noise.

She parked next to a statue in a coastal town she hadn’t visited in two decades. The buildings facing the dyke were so ugly that you had to turn your back. Monique did so. She walked away from them, behind a discarded half kite, which was being carried towards the water by the wind. No hint of dawn, no trace of the day.

She'd forgotten how wide the beach was here. Or perhaps it only seemed so, because she was alone. Glistening black water caressed the dark sand, less of it by the minute, further and further out. Monique had imagined a meeting with the tide, had expected the North Sea to storm her way like a wild child delighted to see her. She attached no symbolic significance to the ebb-tide. She didn't require gratitude in advance from this sea whose oyster beds, bluefin tuna and six-foot cod had disappeared a hundred years ago, this sea full of ships, fishermen, gas platforms, windmills and noise, where sand was extracted and dredgings were dumped, where the armed forces and tourists demanded their share, where fish were thrown back dead and the seabed teemed with cables and leads. The sea would carry the scars of its exhausting experiences but not bleed to death completely. Recovery, that's what it was all about, Monique Champagne was convinced. The thought grabbed her by the throat. Recovery.

I am your servant, she thought. After one more check there was no one around, nor any dogs, she planted her knees in the wet sand and repeated aloud, in a low, languid voice that seemed to rise up out of a dream: 'I am your servant.' Although she was intensely embarrassed by this overwrought and thoroughly unscientific moment of reflection, she nevertheless felt it necessary to stare at the sea and the sky until they brightened. The wind tied tight little knots in her hair. There was sure to be something poetic in her look now.