

She Alone

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An extract

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1

There is no god but God and Mohammed is His messenger.

The Shahada. If you say it out loud, people go into spasms of panic, and you immediately make yourself a suspect.

But if you think, feel, taste it, you're integrated into the world of faith. It's that easy.

A simple sentence is the foundation on which an entire religion stands or falls.

Strange, how so much power is concealed in something so banal.

A sentence can tell us a great deal or mean nothing at all. Yet you always begin a story with one.

Once upon a time, not so long ago, someone came to interview for a dishwasher vacancy. We needed dishwashers and he was appointed immediately for a trial period. Normally I deal with applications, but I wanted to go and see my mother. They didn't need me to stick around in the restaurant for a dishwasher offering his services.

On his first day I see him bent over the sink washing up a cast iron pan. I tap him on the back. He jumps. The pan falls into the water with a splash. He wipes the foamy drips from his face with his upper arm, then turns and gives me a venomous glance, followed by a look of surprise.

'Am I that dangerous or do you have a guilty conscience?' I laugh.

He's not amused. I offer my hand and introduce myself. He pulls off a rubber glove, responding to my outstretched hand with a smile.

'I hope you're not dangerous, though you did attack me unexpectedly. And my conscience... Well, I'm good at forgetting.'

A clever comeback, I like that.

'As long as you don't forget to scrub the dirt off the pans.'

'No worries, I always wipe everything clean. I'm quite extreme in that way.'

'Dear me! Not an extremist, I hope?'

He looks at me dreamily and after a few silent seconds he says, 'Only in the mornings, before I've had my coffee.'

'So you're on the coffee? You use sugar, right?'

'Nope.'

'I thought you people put lots of sugar in your tea?'

'You people? Then you thought wrong. I don't need sugar. I'm sweet enough.'

Don't get cheeky with me, Dishwasher. It's your first day.

'And milk?'

'Always black. I don't believe in the integration of two different drinks.'

'You don't drink alone do you?'

'Always.'

'Why? Do you have a caffeine problem?'

'I can't bear the slurping of other coffee drinkers.'

'So intolerant. If you're not tolerant towards slurpers, then you have a problem. Ever thought of kicking the habit?'

'Every evening before going to bed, but the next morning the coffee is always stronger than I am.'

'Speaking of strong coffee, we go about things pretty aggressively around here. Slagging matches, intimidation, hysteria. Can you deal with that?'

'No, but I can ignore it just fine.'

'A radical who can forget and ignore. That sounds excellent. We run from eight in the morning until midnight. There's lots of work pressure and everyone's on edge. You need to be an extremist here.'

'Then I've found my niche,' he smiles.

'Just between us, there are a couple of people in this place you're welcome to behead,' I whisper in his ear.

He can't think of an answer to that one. I think he considers my last joke inappropriate. Perhaps I started out too familiar. I should keep it professional.

'You do realise you've just had your second job interview? Stefaan tends to keep it brief.'

'Hence the intense interrogation?'

'We're not done yet. Are you healthy in body and mind?'

He falls silent, his eyes look like they've turned to stone.

'Do you have any experience washing dishes?'

'At home I wash up with a sponge, Fairy liquid and lots of water.'

'That's daring,' I tease and walk back into the restaurant.

Dishwasher seems anything but a wound up radical. In the kitchen they're rigid with stress, but he radiates a certain sense of calm. I can't explain it, but Dishwasher intrigues me. He often isolates himself and it seems as if he's always in a dream world, floating like a ghost through all the yelling.

He probably doesn't feel at ease. That's why I'd like to make him feel he belongs. I act over-friendly with him and urge him not to be shy if he's hungry or wants a drink.

If he gets annoying comments – I think he's Muslim and there are lots of jerks about in a restaurant – then he should be sure to let me know. 'I'll sort it out,' I wink. Like I'm the restaurant Godfather.

'Thanks, but I can look after myself,' Dishwasher replies.

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

I see the fingers of his right hand trembling. He puts his hand in his pocket.

I smile and say, 'I'd watch out all the same. There are cooks here who can be dangerous if you get on the wrong side of them. They have sharp knives and gigantic wooden spoons.'

'I have a solution for that.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll blow myself up.'

He makes me laugh, but it bothers me too. Afterwards I ask myself stupid questions. I often do that, it's that odd side of me. As a child I always asked awkward questions: Why does everything start growing? Why are some people brown? Why is the sky blue? Which was there first? The chicken or the egg? Why can't dogs talk? Why do dogs bark? I drove my family mad with them. My grandfather urged me to learn to filter my questions. Run through them in your head first and if you think it's still worth the effort, then ask. Since then I've thought twice, sometimes three times, on a good day four, because otherwise I'd want to ask him this:

Does he think I'm patronising him? And does he think I'm the type who likes to cuddle up to exotic men? He does know I mean well, doesn't he? And does he understand why I act the clown around him? Does he consider me a funny clown?

And does he like funny clowns or just consider them childish? Does it make me a childish idiot? I know I can come across as weird, but in the restaurant he's the odd one out. That's what fascinates me about him.

Dishwasher said he was good at ignoring things, but I'm not so good at dealing with that. Or am I a spoilt, attention-seeking brat who can't take no for an answer? Perhaps he uses magic and it comes through his fingers. I read somewhere that you can create attraction with vibrations, that all kinds of energies are freed up. His shaking fingers are sending a signal to my brain. That's why I can't get him out of my head. My theory won't hold water, I realise that. But I have to speak to him again in any case.

If the mountain won't come to Eva, then Eva must go to the mountain.

It's quietened down after the lunch service. I wander over to the sink. Dishwasher is sorting the dirty cutlery. He's quite slow and has long, thin fingers. I help sort some things and ask if he likes working here.

'Yeah, very much. I find washing up calming.'

He's lying. Someone who likes scrubbing pots and pans, there's no such thing, such a person has yet to be discovered.

'Always nice to hear that someone likes his job.'

He carries on sorting. He says nothing, and I'm silent for a moment too, which never happens normally. His fingers are shaking. Each finger shakes in its own way. His middle finger goes up and down, the ring finger left and right, and the little finger turns in trembling circles. He arranges the cutlery with thumb and index finger.

'Why the trembling? Are you nervous? Or do you have an alcohol problem?'

He shakes his head indignantly.

He doesn't get my sense of humour and seems nervous. Is it because of me? My appearance isn't exactly intimidating. I'm short, slight, with freckles on my face, arms and shoulders. I even have freckles on my breasts, although he has no way of knowing that. Unless he has an active imagination.

Perhaps it's my hair and he's superstitious about it. Or is he just repulsed by ginger hair? But I have thick curls too and that's rather pretty. I think it's my big frog eyes. Wide open eyes can be somehow intimidating. Eva, don't be so insecure, pull yourself together, stop playing the clueless bitch.

'Less coffee and healthier eating. Too much coffee makes you restless.'

He sneers and says it's not the coffee. He eats fairly healthily too. He's bothered by short circuits in his head. I needn't worry. The trembling fingers will soon stop.

Short circuits in his head? What does he mean by that? Has he got a screw loose? The previous dishwasher wasn't all there either. He was head-over-heels in love with the kitchen assistant. Initially we thought it was cute, but when the kitchen assistant didn't return his love, things turned nasty. He stuck his head in the washbasin. The water was extremely hot and he came out with third-degree burns. The ambulance took him away screaming. We haven't heard from him since.

The silence again. Say something, Eva, you've been standing here all this time rooted to the spot. He continues to behave like a mannequin. Okay, no time for filtering questions, so I start to bombard him. Does he work anywhere else? 'Yes, mainly as an interim thing.'

Silence.

Was he born here? 'Yes.'

Silence.

How many brothers and sisters does he have? 'Two sisters and two brothers.'

Silence.

What does he do, besides interim jobs and washing up? 'Watch TV series.'

Silence.

I feel like pricking him with a fork and asking – no, I want to scream it into his ear – would he please expand his vocabulary a bit. I ask him to accompany me to the terrace.

There I light a cigarette and ask, 'Are you a Muslim?'

That's a bit bolder.

'Yes.'

Silence.

'Practising?'

'Sometimes.'

Silence.

'Sometimes practising? Does that kind of Muslim exist too?'

'Why all the questions?' he asks.

Finally a reaction.

‘Uh... In case the chef wants to make you something. So he knows not to make anything with pork. Then he can make you chicken.’

‘I don’t eat chicken either. Chicken has to be ritually... I’m a vegetarian.’

‘How long have you been a vegetarian?’

‘I’m only a vegetarian here. It saves me a load of questions.’

‘Do you think I ask too many questions?’

He looks at me smiling and says, ‘You’re like a guard at Guantanamo Bay, but minus the torture.’

‘Perhaps that’s still to come.’

If he keeps on with the silences, next time I’ll stick his head in the washing-up water.

The wretched silence.

‘Am I being too nosy?’

‘No, it’s all fine.’

‘I’ll ask one more to get it out of my system and then I’ll leave you in peace.’

What should I ask him now? Say something, Eva, there are no stupid questions today, only stupid answers.

‘Where do you come from?’

‘Waasdorp.’

‘I mean originally.’

‘Morocco.’

‘I thought you were Italian or Spanish. You don’t look like a Moroccan.’

‘Nice try, but I don’t believe you. I look very much like a Moroccan. And my name sounds very Moroccan too. You’re trying to clean me up a bit, making an Italian of me. There’s nothing wrong with Moroccans, even if they’re Muslim, even if they’re loud and tend to band together. I’m Flemish of Moroccan origin. Or call me an immigrant. That sounds far cooler and avoids confusion too. Or say Muslim. Perhaps that’s better, because that word is timeless. But now I’m getting into a muddle. Honestly, I don’t care what you think.’

He grins and says the pots and pans are missing him. Fingers vibrating, he walks away.

He’s cagey about a simple conversation. I don’t interest him. There’s no reciprocity. No fascination. Not a single question for me. Besides trembling fingers he also has long toes. It’s pretty clear. He’s here to earn money, and doesn’t give a toss about the rest.

You probably live with your mother or you've moved back in with her. Not working out? Do you feel worthless, like no one understands you? Are you considering suicide? Don't do it, we can help you. Drive the wicked devil from your body and use that impulse to aim higher. Transcend yourself and finally become the hero who has always been inside you. Commit an act of heroism. Launch an attack. Show how great your power is. Make sure they don't forget you. Take revenge on those who ridicule you, who despise you. Take revenge, because you are chosen. Even if you take faith with a pinch of salt, it's the intention that counts. Your ambition will be rewarded with a crown in the gardens of bliss.

What are you waiting for, heroic warrior? You have plenty of autonomy. Be creative and self-reliant. Parents and children, believers and non-believers. An attack does not discriminate.

Take your time, plan your attack carefully. Avoid contact with likeminded spirits. Avoid the risk of discovery. Do it on your own initiative. That way it's impossible for the government to keep an eye on you. That way it's impossible for the government to take action.

We do-it-yourself recruiters argue for do-it-yourself terrorists wherever possible. The more fear, the better we like it. Thanks to your help people are not only afraid, but angry too. Thanks to you they will see every Muslim as a potential do-it-yourself terrorist. Thanks to you they will jeer at Muslims, attack them, murder them. That's what we hope for. That's our deepest desire. Because only then can the fight really begin.

We look forward to it.

I feel sick and rejected. I want to stab myself in the foot with a carving knife or plunge my head into the sink. Because of him I feel insecure and hurt. Just to be clear here, I'd never actually stab myself in the foot. Yes, Eva has crazy thoughts, but they're filtered in good time. Yes, I think he's an arrogant prick and I'm an idiot for paying him so much attention. Yes, it could get out of hand and that's why I'm thinking of nipping it in the bud, I'm his boss and he's still in his trial period. I can say that it's quiet at Restaurant All Cook Up and we currently have enough dishwashers. He was the last one in, so logically he should be the first one out. But if it gets busier again, I'll call him first. I always use that story when I sack someone. I always sleep badly afterwards. I always think I've ruined their life. Because he got sacked his wife wants to split up and he's not allowed to see his kids ever again. Because I fired him he's hung himself from a tree. Dishwasher is difficult to sack. Dishwashers don't grow on trees. The work's so dirty, I'm happy if anyone turns up at all. Of all jobs dishwasher lies right at the bottom of the pile. Only prostitutes and beggars are lower on the social ladder. We need Dishwasher, without him we have a problem. Not that he's special – he's slow – but the other dishwashers are even slower.

He works faster than seventy-year-old Rosette for example. Her voice is shrill, her farts even more so. Rosette has no teeth left. She doesn't like to wear her false teeth and only puts them in for special occasions. Every half hour she takes a few minutes' break to smoke a cigarette and leaves the other dishwashers behind in the stink of her farts. She's very slow, but I wouldn't think for a second of sacking her. You let an elderly woman work without her false teeth and fart as much as she wants.

And then there's Hendrik, a decent guy of fifty with a mental handicap. Hendrik has big yellowy teeth and when he mumbles – he doesn't speak out loud – he spits up lots of saliva. Hendrik always wears a red Jupiler cap. After his shift he drinks a cold Jupiler. He looks forward to that.

Hendrik does the washing up because he's the chairman of the local indoor football team. The footballers take advantage of his handicap. He pays for everything, supplies clean kit, pays for a round after the match and feels good because his players call him the chairman.

You let people with a handicap work in a red Jupiler cap and mumble and drool as much as they want. As far as I'm concerned the entire kitchen floor could be covered in saliva.

Hendrik and Rosette are happy here. That's because they have meaning here. Everyone on the planet wants to have meaning. What else do you live for? We have to maintain that illusion, don't we?

Where was I? Well, Hendrik and Rosette don't work any better, and certainly not any faster. But they are more likeable than the silent, arrogant Dishwasher with his Waasdorp accent.

From that day on I try to avoid the washing up. But I need dessert dishes. I take some dishes. Suddenly he grabs me by the arm.

I have my hands full, he's blocking my way, I can't move in any direction.

'Eva, recently I mentioned TV series. Do you know this series by any chance? What's it called again... Have you ever seen Game of Thrones?'

I shake my head.

'No? I have to visit my parents tomorrow... Why am I talking about my parents? Sorry, I was talking about a series.'

I wanted to say you're missing out. In fact I'm jealous of you because you can still watch all the episodes of Game of Thrones. Tomorrow I have to go to the dentist, the last time she was angry because I forgot my appointment. She said she'd keep note of it. Why am I talking about my dentist?'

'I don't know.'

'Game of Thrones is about seven kingdoms fighting for power. Well worth the effort. You know why? It's dark, humorous, the women aren't clichéd, they're really strong and funny. Okay, there's a lot of naked scenes and that's not so great, but a series has to be imperfect, that's what makes it perfect. You know what I mean?'

'Not really. Do you have a problem with nakedness?'

'I have no problem whatsoever with nakedness. The more the merrier. No, that's not what I meant. It's because they break all the Hollywood rules. The hero can die at any moment. In other series that would never happen, we'd never put up with it. But here the hero can also be a bastard. That's how people are. Heroes and bastards. We're all part hero and mostly bastard. But that's life, as they

say on the street. And if you really want to know life you have to live on the street. That's the street slogan.'

I smile politely. He starts to stutter a little.

'And even if you don't get the series, you'll still love it. You don't need to understand it, there's a red-haired woman with freckles who looks a bit like you. I find your freckles crazily attractive. Okay... I shouldn't have said that, but I was thinking it. Am I doing it again now? My apologies for my stupid prattle. I'm not like this normally.

It's because of the short circuits in my head. It's as if the short circuits grab me by the throat and can give me an unexpected thump inside my head at any moment that makes my thoughts unconsciously switch off. It's not so terrible, the thumps don't hurt.

Sorry again and please don't think I'm using underhand seduction tricks. I can't seduce anyone, I'm terrible at it. I know you don't believe me and you think I'm mental. But that's not so bad, people often don't believe immigrants. I'm no hypochondriac either. I'm just not a hundred percent. But that's not negative, that's positive.'

Every word that rolls out of his mouth he also jots in the air. It's as if he's writing on an invisible blackboard.

'I know I'm boring you, but I want to say one last thing about the series. There are dragons flying about, icemen roaming around and my favourite character is a dwarf. It's really a must.'

I tell him I'll remember the name of the series and leave him stammering and writing in the air.

3

As if I'm sitting in a class. Around me I see different men and women dutifully taking notes. On the blackboard a man writes in chalk, CITIZENSHIP COURSE FOR NATIVES.

The man turns and smiles at us. He looks a bit like Osama Bin Laden.

'Welcome everyone. Glad you've come. I know we live in difficult times. We must not grow apart, but rather towards one another. After that growth we must have intercourse, we must fuck one another as hard as possible. Because that's the only way we'll get things done. It's a metaphor, dear students. But I'll give you a tip. The big secret is integration. Adapt. Shift towards the immigrant, the non-white citizen. Mix a bit of water in the wine. Even if it's haram. Not that the wine's haram. The water you put in the wine.

There's uproar and voices scream, 'Us, adapt? Have you gone completely mad?'

Osama Bin Laden grins and says, 'Nothing is compulsory, but if we don't do it, he'll stay limp and not stand up again. Is that what we want? You know what happens then. Frustration, low self-image, anxiety. No more satisfaction.'

I raise my hand.

'Yes, madam.'

'I try to talk, but he doesn't say much. And when he talks it's very confusing.'

'Go on!'

'He talks about short circuits in his head, but I think it's an excuse.'

'It is an excuse, he's manipulating you, he wants you to stroke him.'

'Stroke him?'

'Yes. But you mustn't do that. You have to strangle him.'

'Strangle him?'

'Yes. Strangle him with both hands until he begs for forgiveness.'

'And then?'

'Then he'll talk.'

A cigarette with Rosette. It's cold, I feel the biting wind and think back to my crazy dream. Rosette starts talking about her varicose veins and her blood pressure, which has risen again.

'I've been itchy a lot recently, perhaps it's because of the new boy. With all those hot spices they put in their food. I can't handle that. It might be getting into the water through his pores and entering my body that way. I'll ask my doctor again just to be sure,' says Rosette.

'I don't think it's because of the new boy. It'll probably be some allergy or other. But check with the doctor anyway. How's the new dishwasher doing?'

'He's a lovely boy and very helpful. He's a little shy and he doesn't talk much. As if he's on another planet.'

'But he's working well?'

Rosette sniffs and spits away a green gob of phlegm. If Rosette spits several times in a row, it means she's in a rage. If she just does it once, she's in a good mood.

'The new boy does his best. And he's well brought up for a Moroccan boy. Or is he a Turk? I don't know, I must ask him sometime.'

'He describes himself as Flemish of Moroccan origin.'

'He shouldn't overcomplicate things, in the end it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. They're not much different from us. There are good and bad everywhere. My daughter is married to an Albanian. In the beginning I was afraid of him because of all those stories about Albanians. Now I

have two grandchildren and they're such lovely girls. Most foreign boys are good men. It's just the ones who blow themselves up who spoil it for the rest.'

'Come on, let's go back in. It's much too cold out here.'

Two kitchen assistants are shouting at each other, it almost gets physical because one stole the other's flat leaf parsley. I sigh and wonder why I ever came to work in a restaurant. If I could turn back time, I would choose something else.

It was all quite impulsive. Stefaan is twelve years older than me. He was a decent lawyer, but his true passion is cooking. I had just got my journalism diploma, didn't walk straight into a job, and before I knew it we were forging plans to start a restaurant.

Not long afterwards we found a location, his parents came along with a bunch of money, we opened up and in no time the restaurant was a warzone.

The pressure is high. There's an enormous amount at stake. The food, the service, everything has to be immaculate to the finest detail. The competition is cutthroat. Still, we never had financial problems. Stefaan and I complement one another. His domain is the kitchen and I'm the boss in the restaurant, but we make the most important decisions together.

Busy evenings are a battle in which the staff practically drink one another's blood. Our guests are strict and demanding. The customer is king, but there are limits. Sometimes I feel like hitting them over the head with a glowing hot pan. Then I'd drag them by the hair. Their heads would go through the slicer like overripe Spanish ham. I stick to an exaggeratedly friendly laugh.

When the last customer leaves, we have to take a moment to recover. It doesn't always happen, but I consider it important to have a drink with the staff who are still around. Dishwasher is the last to join us; he still has to mop the kitchen. He always drinks the same thing. Coffee without milk or sugar.

I keep an eye on Dishwasher. That evening barely a word comes out of his mouth. He smiles at my boyfriend's silly jokes.

It's forced. My boyfriend's ego likes to be pepped up, Dishwasher knows that.

Not that he's an arse licker. In a group he's intelligent enough to exhibit social interaction. If he doesn't then he will stand out and he wants to avoid that. He likes the anonymity of washing up. No one is interested in him and he'd like to keep it that way.

I've already had a few drinks and ask Dishwasher if he wouldn't like something stronger. As if stung by a wasp, he retorts that drink is the devil. All eyes are on him now. Before anyone can react, I start to ridicule him outright, saying, 'It can talk! But Dishwasher, surely you'd be better off having a drink. Always so silent and frustrated. Alcohol relaxes you, makes you less shy.'

He continues to smile mischievously, which makes me all the more venomous. I move closer and whisper in his ear, 'Perhaps you should drink so much that you have memory loss the next day. Then if you do things which are forbidden by your god... you won't be bothered by your conscience, because you'll have forgotten everything.'

He smells of a scent I can't place, but I'm immediately several degrees closer to sober. Stefaan gives me a kiss and rubs my shoulder proudly. Then he wanders over to Dishwasher with an air of menace. He looks straight at him. Then he bends his knees. They stand nose to nose. Dishwasher does not look intimidated. Stefaan grins arrogantly and sings,

'A well I bless my soul.

What's wrong with me?

I'm itching like a man on a

fuzzy tree.

My friends I'm acting wild as a bug.

I'm in love I'm all shook up.'

Oh no, he thinks he's Elvis Presley again.

The next day I've failed to forget about it and my conscience is bothering me. I'm furious with myself and inclined to bang my head against the wall. Then I consider sticking my head in the oven.

I go to Dishwasher who is already busy and offer my apologies.

He smiles and says, 'It's okay, I provoked you by calling drink the devil. I shouldn't have said that. I have nothing against alcohol, perhaps I should drink more so that I learn to appreciate it.'

'I'm not sure I can recommend alcohol.'

'We'll have to get drunk together sometime, that'll do it.'

'I think it's better if you do that alone.'

Does he want to get drunk with me? That would be inappropriate.

Dishwasher has a point. Drink is the devil. But it's a delicious devil.

All Cook Up is often a mixture of bad theatre and a psychiatric institution. Sometimes it's the backdrop to real tragedies. Like the evening which will remain forever engraved in my memory, that evening the waitress was raped by the sommelier. It still makes me feel sick to think of it. The waitress was called Hilde and I only saw her once afterwards. I wanted to talk to her about it. I wanted to support her and tell her I was on her side and how terrible I thought it was. If she needed help she could always come to me.

To no avail. I phoned her, knocked on her door, but she didn't want anything more to do with anyone from the restaurant. I can understand that, she didn't want to be confronted with it.

Hilde is very attractive, with big breasts, and not all that clever. All the clichés about dumb blondes apply to her. Or I'm jealous of her, that'll be it.

Hilde turned out to be not only a hard worker but cheerful too. Too cheerful sometimes. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Her cheerfulness was infectious. But some men interpret that cheerfulness in a different way.

After her shift Hilde had drunk and flirted with Filip, the sommelier. Then she'd probably exchanged tongues with him. There had been something in the air between those two for some time.

It got later, the chemistry blew away and the air began to turn nasty. Hilde didn't feel like flirting anymore. That can happen, I can understand that. The sommelier – Stefaan's best friend, by coincidence – has foul-smelling breath.

Bad breath, I'm allergic to that. I can really smell it when someone has a cavity in his tooth. And the sommelier had masses of cavities. How can a sommelier promote wine while puffing the smell of sewers out of his mouth? It wouldn't surprise me if some customers thought he cleaned his teeth with excrement.

Not that I'm one to keep quiet about such things. I confronted him about his bad breath.

Told him he had to use the right toothpaste. Mouthwash would help too. Flossing, that was seriously underestimated. He needed to drink litres of green tea and visit the dentist regularly. Breath problem solved.

But no, instead of cleaning his teeth, he rapes a waitress... Anyway, I read the police report. He left her with cuts and bruises.

That evening the police came with flashing lights. We were sitting with the rest of the staff having a glass of red wine and a half-drunken discussion about socialists subtly destroying the self-employed.

Dishwasher, who was the last one still working, went to throw the rubbish bags into the container. That's where he found her, he tells me later. At first he thought he heard a bird, but it turned out to be Hilde.

As soon as he sees her, he calls the police and my boyfriend doesn't take kindly to that. Dishwasher has skipped the hierarchy.

'You're the boss when I'm working on the pots and pans and for the rest you can keep your mouth shut.'

Dishwasher says it slowly, in a deeply resonant voice. There's so much power in his intonation that my boyfriend, who is almost two metres tall, suddenly looks very diminutive.

Dishwasher stands up and shows his teeth. I receive a smile, and then I'm furious with Filip. I want to beat him to a pulp with a rolling pin. I need to knock out all his filthy teeth one by one, that'll rid him of his bad breath. Then I'll penetrate him with the same rolling pin. So that he feels what rape means. I sacked him immediately and sleep very well.

A few months later Filip has to go to court. He denies everything and says he regularly has sex with Hilde. He's not the only one, various cooks and waiters have had it off with her. She's built up a

reputation as a slut and he and his colleagues greedily exploit that. You know how men are, he says grinning at the judge. And perhaps Hilde wanted to get rid of that reputation by faking a rape.

I'm mad with rage. Fortunately Hilde isn't there that day, because his explanation is like a second rape for her.

The judge doesn't believe a word of his story and the rapist gets a couple of months. Two months for rape? Can you believe that? What's wrong with ten years? What's wrong with twenty years? What's wrong with a whipping and hacking his dick off? Two months isn't a punishment. He might even be reappointed, because he's Stefaan's best friend. My boyfriend. My ex.