

# Thirty Days

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**An extract**

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30

He drives through the hot, clear weather, through a landscape that remains foreign to him but which he's hesitantly starting to love. Sometimes he still misses the city, the colours, the sounds, the distraction. Here it's different, not worse. The blossom and the buzz of spring turned into a promising summer that fled an excess of rain before coming back to confuse the approaching autumn. The fields are still sodden. As if not getting dull and blotchy, the crowns of the trees nod with restrained bravura at the sky, ceaselessly: bring it on. Hop poles bear fat baubles, drunk on themselves, ready for harvest. Lonely dust whips up and is stranded in puddles. Road junction art reaches low ebbs. He's not sure whether the effect of all this is to strengthen or intoxicate him.

In a village shared by France and Belgium he sees two men walking with caps and baskets, with pigeons, perhaps. Apart from that, a lot of ponies and a farmer with spirited seagulls circling his glistening tractor. The other people are hard to see. They're behind front walls, or, like him, in cars, between front walls.

Today he's expected in a nice neighbourhood. In this region the houses are fewer than in the other scraps that make up this little country. With its liking for red brick it keeps things simple. Just the occasional Spanish hacienda among the mock farmhouses; he's yet to spot any pagodas from the Brussels Periphery. The cacophony of building styles so frequently written off as tasteless has always cheerfully endeared him; the way the houses stand next to each other like twelve-year-olds on their first day at high school, forced by pure chance into long-term togetherness, adrift in their desperation. So it pleases him to see the two modern houses in front of which he parks his van leap out of the monotony.

He lifts the tub of sponges, cloths, rollers and brushes out of the back of the van and chooses one of the pots of paint he's put ready. Pick Nick, from the Joie de Vivre collection, for the largest kitchen wall: his suggestion, their approval.

'Alphonse!' he hears as he walks across stone slabs in the short grass to the front door of one of the houses.

It's the woman who lives here, a beautiful woman with a self-assured voice. He met her the evening they chose the colours. Her sportswear looks new, the fabrics show no traces of effort, the sweat has beaded only at her temples, at the margins of her hair, which is held in a ponytail. She gives an awkward wave. He puts the paint pot down so he can squeeze her hand.

'Not been here long, have you?' she asks. 'My husband's taking our daughter to school and I thought I'd just have time for a run, but then part of the route was under water and I missed a turning.'

'I only just got here,' he says.

He's come to repaint their kitchen and living room. He estimated three days, but now he suspects he can get it done sooner; they've made meticulous preparations. The curtains and socket

covers have been removed. All the furniture is in the middle of the room, draped with sheets, and the long kitchen counter is empty.

A black dog runs ecstatically at him, skids, bangs its head on a table leg and continues no less bouncily on its original course.

‘Björn!’ the woman shouts.

‘Hi Björn,’ he says. Wagging its tail, the dog snuffles at his outstretched hand, then lets out a fart and turns round to investigate, shocked.

The woman laughs with him, until Björn’s frenzy reignites and she drags the animal by the collar to the neighbouring room, where she shuts him in. ‘I think he’s got a multiple personality!’ she shouts above the distraught howling behind the door. ‘And he misses the cat! Benny! Benny and Björn! As in ABBA?!’

The look of the dog is more reminiscent of late-seventies hard rockers, thinks Alphonse.

‘They were inseparable! If dogs and cats grow up together they can become friends!’

‘Cats usually live longer than dogs!’ he shouts back.

‘She was murdered!’ and because Björn ends his dirge while she’s saying it, she repeats: ‘Our cat was murdered.’

It’s the point of a story she’s eager to tell him, a long story smouldering behind her lips, but it’s too soon – she swallows it when she hears her husband’s car.

The husband too has an athletic build. A swimmer.

‘Hey, the Fons!’ he says, as if they’ve known each other for years. His master’s voice reactivates Björn. The man sticks up both thumbs.

He’s forgotten their first names. He must look them up in a moment.

‘Ready for the big task? I wish I could help, but there are plans that need finishing.’

He’s an architect, Alphonse reminds himself. He works at home.

‘I’ve shut him in,’ says the woman as her husband strides towards the door beyond which the howling and scratching gain volume.

‘Shut in?’ the man asks in a childish voice. ‘Is my very best friend shut in?’

Tugged back and forth between mixed and solely extreme feelings, Björn slides across the floor, trembling with irresolution.

The man picks him up. ‘It’s a Portuguese water dog,’ he says, while the dog tries to stick its tongue into the talking mouth. ‘Our daughter’s allergic to most other breeds.’ He turns his attention and that piping voice back to the thrashing dog as he puts it down: ‘And who else has a Portuguese water dog? What am I saying, two?’

For the answer he looks to Alphonse. His hands make a graceful, giving gesture that transforms into two pointing fingers, two pistols. ‘Obama!’

‘Well anyway,’ mumbles the woman. She gives Alphonse’s forearm a brief, feeble tap, announces she’s going to take a shower and hurries out of the living room.

The man tickles Björn’s head, kneels in front of him, takes the dog by the front paws, looks deep into its round eyes and whines: ‘Your master didn’t say anything wrong, did he?’ ‘I’ll get started,’ says Alphonse.

Els and Dieter their names are, he reads on the tender. Els made him a cup of coffee before she left and Dieter’s been working upstairs for some hours now, in his study on the other side of the house. He frequently goes to the toilet.

In the absence of their inhabitants, houses often inform Alphonse about the kinds of stories they’re going to tell him. Or they mislead him, that happens too. A waste-paper basket with children’s drawings torn into tiny pieces, shrines, a hole in the plasterboard, recently kicked.

Els and Dieter’s house gives little away. They’ve tidied their things into professionally fitted cupboards and drawers. On the walls are pictures of the family in the snow, the family in swimming gear on a slide – the series runs thematically across the four seasons.

One of the living room walls consists of large glass doors that offer a view of the garden at the back of the house. Compared to the orderly interior and the front garden's manicured lawn it makes an unkempt impression. The ladder against the wooden fence reminds him he's forgotten his own. He can manage with a chair, takes off his shoes to stand on it, but it's not easy working like that.

Björn keeps him company, quiet but watching his every move. For a long time Alphonse believed that the barking of dogs could be reduced to the messages 'Don't do that!' or 'Hey!' That they had nothing else to say. Björn is not the first dog to make him doubt this. He yawns along with Alphonse when he stretches after applying the masking tape. Coincidence, thinks Alphonse, but it happens again.

He tells Dieter about it when he comes to check there's nothing he needs.

'That means he likes you,' says Dieter. 'Dogs have a lot of empathy. I read recently that they don't bark to communicate with each other. It's a language they've developed for talking with us.'

'I thought only people found yawning contagious.'

'We don't know many people who yawn when we yawn, do we, friend?' Dieter pipes at the dog. No explanation follows.

'I've forgotten my ladder,' says Alphonse. 'I could go home and fetch it, but I noticed there's a ladder in the garden.'

'Can you get it yourself?' Dieter heads upstairs.

Outside it's even hotter now. Alphonse does his best not to step in the dog mess as he crosses the garden. Doesn't Björn ever get taken for walks? In attempting to remove the ladder he notices there's one on the other side of the garden wall too. They're linked by a worn purple swim board. M and L forever is written on it in felt-tipped pen. It's a rickety structure, easy to dismantle. He leans the board against the garden wall and resolves to tie the whole lot together again more firmly later.

As he cleans the living room walls, the sound of the hard brush sends Björn to sleep. The ammonia Alphonse uses to deal with the greasier surfaces in the kitchen wakes him up again, though. He sneezes and slinks away to the hall with a look of alarm. His claws tick on the stairs. Alphonse opens the glass sliding door to dispel the stench.

When his master comes down to make himself a sandwich, the dog isn't with him.

'You want something?' asks Dieter, his thoughts clearly elsewhere.

Alphonse has his own sandwiches, but he accepts a cup of coffee.

Dieter looks past him, at the ladder, then out of the window. He walks over to it and shuts the sliding door, slowly.

Mila put the ladder there,' he says. 'Children.' He smiles apologetically, then indicates his habit of eating at the computer.

Mila is around thirteen and looks like neither of her parents. With a dramatic sweep she throws her backpack off her shoulders.

'Hello,' she says and then, dismayed: 'What's my ladder doing here?'

'Perhaps you could say hello to Alphonse first?' Her mother has come in behind her.

'I did. What's my ladder doing here?'

'I just borrowed it, because I forgot my own. I'll put it back shortly. I'll tie the swim board nice and tight. Promise.'

'But I need it now.'

'Homework first,' says Els.

'I haven't got any homework.'

'I don't believe that.'

Mila storms out of the room the moment her father comes in.

'Hello!' he says crossly. She doesn't reply, runs up the stairs.

'Puberty. We're not going to escape it,' Dieter chuckles. 'You don't think of that when you're in it yourself, that your own children will do it all to you eventually.'

'It's not that bad,' says Els.

She wants to know if he has any children.

'I don't think so.'

They find that funny and something gleams in their eyes, slight curiosity, slight suspicion. Alphonse resolves not to make the same corny joke any more.

He fetches the cable ties from his van. On the opposite side of the house he attaches both ladders to the swim board.

'I'll be seeing your neighbours soon, by the way,' he says, back in the kitchen.

Els and Dieter stare at him as if there's a hatchet embedded in his skull. Why the neighbours, they want to know. He explains that he's taking them some colour swatches, so they can select a colour – as soon as he's finished here he'll make a start there.

Dieter wraps his arms round his head. Els slaps a painted wall with the flat of her hand. 'Damn,' she says, looking first at her Pick Nick-pink hand then at the skeletal fingers on the wall. 'Sorry.'

Alphonse presses a cloth to the mouth of a bottle of turpentine and holds her hand in his to clean it. For a moment she stands there like a crestfallen child, her fingers wide open so that his resolute, fatherly wiping can find all the paint. Then her rage flares up again. 'That's totally weird of them! Really, it's downright weird!'

He takes a small, new roller out of its packaging and skims it breezily over the handprint like a lightweight steamroller. It works.

'Everything we do, they copy,' Dieter explains. 'No idea what's going on in those people's heads. They see your van out front and before you know it their kitchen's in need of a new colour too.'

'Their bedrooms.' They haven't heard him.

'It's been going on for years. We get a house, they get a house. We have a baby, they have a baby. We get a new car or take a trip across the United States, they do too.' Els glumly removes traces of paint from under her fingernails. 'What are we meant to do? Move?'

'We're not moving.' It's Mila who's spoken. They didn't hear her coming downstairs and as she crosses the living room to open the glass sliding door they stand motionless next to the granite worktop and stare at her.

Els waits until she's outside before going on: 'It's even got to the point that they've started interfering in our lives. That they think they can make certain adjustments to our lives.'

Dieter wants to interrupt her. His mouth points in her direction and the lips purse several times, backed up by an index finger describing the path of a powerful insect.

'We don't know that,' he says eventually.

'I'll be back tomorrow,' says Alphonse.

They thank him, somewhat startled at the abrupt ending and slightly dismayed at how much they've divulged, but they haven't told him the whole story yet.

Before he steps into the hall, he sees them on a flying carpet floating above the garden wall: two thirteen-year-old girls, throwing their smiling faces forward and back.

He catches another glimpse of the girls through the window in the rear wall of the neighbours' house before he's led to an armchair. The couple sit in two separate chairs to his left, each with one leg thrown over the other. They're slightly rounder and smaller than Els and Dieter. Between him and the couple, bubbles tinkle in the glass of tonic they've put on the coffee table for him. At his feet pants an attentive small dog of an indeterminate breed. As Alphonse picks up the glass and

puts it to his mouth, the animal seems to hold its breath.

‘Where are you from?’ the woman wants to know.

‘From Brussels,’ he says. ‘I’ve been living here for almost nine months now.’

‘Yes, yes,’ the woman enunciates. ‘But where are you actually from?’

‘From Brussels he said, didn’t he?’ Her husband stands up nervously. ‘Would you like an olive, Mr. Er?’ he asks. ‘Cheese?’

‘No, thank you. And just call me Alphonse.’

‘We’re Sieglinde and Ronny. I’ll go and get some all the same,’ says the woman after her husband has sat down again. She goes to the kitchen, which is walled off from the living room. It sounds as if she’s emptying all the cupboards.

‘How did you get on next door?’ the man asks. He’s obviously trying to make his question sound neutral.

‘I think I’ll be done by tomorrow evening.’

‘Didn’t she say anything, Els, when she heard you’d be coming to see us?’ Sieglinde puts down the little bowls of olives and cheese, cocktail sticks and a holder with napkins beside them.

Alphonse doesn’t immediately know how to answer that. ‘It seemed to interest them,’ he says.

Ronny sniffs. ‘No doubt!’ exclaims Sieglinde. ‘She’s crazy, Alfredo!’

He wasn’t expecting them to be so forthright.

‘Alphonse,’ Ronny corrects her before he can.

‘Sorry. For years she’s been telling anyone who’ll listen that we’re copying them. We could say the same about them, but we don’t, because we’re still in command of our faculties!’

‘It all came out one time, at a party,’ Ronny goes on. ‘A party right here in our house, too. They were our guests. First they sulked in a corner for some reason or other...’

‘Well. *She* did.’

‘Then they had a lot to drink as usual, and suddenly it was “another coincidence” that we had a dark-blue Peugeot. It’s not even the same model! And look, didn’t that chandelier seem familiar to them and that shrub at the bottom of the garden and I don’t know what else.’

‘Well, who cares, but the idea that we brought Lana into the world purely because they’d just had a child. Tell me, Albert, who thinks that way?’

‘Alphonse.’

‘Pardon me. Who thinks that way? I was in my late twenties, everyone around us was having their first baby then. I was four months gone before I realized she was pregnant as well. But no, we were copying them. How full of yourself do you have to be to think something like that is even within the realms of possibility?’

While speaking, Sieglinde and Ronny have stood up to perform an angular dance that for Ronny has ended with a punch to his own thigh and in Sieglinde’s case is still ebbing away in the index finger that’s tapping the middle of her forehead like a woodpecker’s beak.

Alphonse settles into the backrest of the chair. When a confession starts as energetically as this, it usually lasts a long time.

‘And if it’d stopped there, but no, no, it gets even more absurd.’ Sieglinde is now bending down on the coffee table like a she-ape, weight on her fists, buttocks in the air, nostrils wide, like her eyes, enlarged by her glasses. ‘Did she say anything about her pussy?’

Alphonse has to let the question sink in. ‘It’s dead, I believe?’

‘She said rather more, I’ll bet. Her story is that we killed their cat.’

‘Yes, and why we did that is even more interesting. We killed it because our own cat was run over and because they think that we think that they did it – we, incidentally, don’t ask ourselves who was responsible, we assume it was an accident – and that’s why we, eye for an eye...’

‘Cat for a cat!’

‘... killed the animal by – get this – piercing it with a dart! A dart from a blowpipe! We shot

a poisoned dart at it!

‘Because that’s what we’re like, Alphonse! That’s what we get up to!’

‘Alphonse,’ says Ronny.

‘That’s what I said.’

For the bedroom ceilings he recommends Balanced Mood, from the Colores del Mundo collection. They agree that the pale bluish-green he slides out of the colour swatch will suit perfectly.

On the way home Alphonse crosses wide fields on narrow roads. The low sun gilds the stalks of the tall grain and an indefinable longing. No one knows that in the mornings, still brittle and directionless after the embrace of sleep, he rarely listens to music because its immediacy is almost impossible for him to bear. Now he puts on the radio and when he looks up there’s an oncoming vehicle making no attempt to slow down. He drives close to the edge of a maize field and stops the car to listen.

Duke Ellington’s ‘Caravan’, in a version by Dizzy Gillespie. He knows it. Camels trek through the desert, but the trumpet sets fountains playing. The water flows over his shoulders, down his back. That strange violin solo, too. When the track finishes, he switches the radio off.

He eats pasta left over from the previous day. Does he find it peaceful or merely quiet without Kat? He hopes the yoga retreat has given her what she expected of it, even if he doesn’t know quite what that was.

She isn’t answering her phone. He needs to return Amadou’s call. Why does he keep putting it off? His friend getting in touch again after all these years made him so happy he immediately invited Amadou to come and stay for a short holiday. He’ll bring his new girlfriend with him. In a large part of his memory Amadou walks at his side. There’s no reason to avoid him now.

Or he could start up Skype and see his mother. She’s always there, in a full house, surrounded by people who need her advice or just want to be with her, some of them feeding off the results of her goodness.

He’s tired and he can’t seem to shower away the fatigue. What he feels is getting harder and harder to name. He knows what it isn’t. It’s not anything that hurts. On the contrary. But it’s waiting for something.

The bleep of the phone, the landline this time, gets through the water in his ears. He turns off the tap and wraps himself in a bath robe. He guesses Dieter.

‘Alphonse?’ It’s Sieglinde.

‘Yes,’ he says.

‘I just wanted to call you. Because we rather let ourselves go today and because we’re not proud of it. We’d also like to thank you for listening.’

‘That’s alright. Don’t cry.’

‘It’s out of our control, know what I mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay. Sorry to disturb you. Have a good night.’

‘Sleep well.’