Wanderland

Paul Baeten Gronda

An extract

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The gluey scent of the mimosa wafted into the cab. This was not Manchester; this was not L.A. Here you could smell flowers before you could see them. I breathed in everything I missed. Warm sand beneath our feet, the ocean splashing on our skin, as if people could be nothing but temperature and surface. "Do you smell that?" I asked Aslan. He concentrated on the road that ran between the fields, pretending he hadn't heard me.

My name is Igor Nast, and I am the only child from my mother, Ann Delhaye's, only marriage. I was sitting on a bench in Venice when my half-brother Robert Nast, the second child of his mother Gertrude Schiller, called to inform me that our father was ill and close to death. The next morning I went looking for a taxi driver who would drive me from Venice to my father's house in Lucerne, Switzerland. The taxi driver I found was Aslan.

As the gate slid open, we slowly pulled into the drive of a small estate on Lake Lucerne. Once we passed the gate, Aslan had to drive over a kind of grassy dune. He straightened his spine and craned his neck to catch a glimpse of where his car was headed. It was the first time I had visited my father there, and like Aslan, I wondered what lay ahead. Then the tall spruce trees, the imported oleanders, and the old, waterless fountain came into sight on the other side of the hill. Below us, a scant few feet above Lake Lucerne, was the house where my father had been living for more than ten years. That was, undoubtedly, a record for him.

The architecture gave the impression of dating back to the late nineteenth century. The high front and sides of the house were painted a dirty salmon pink, which went pretty well with the green of the shutters—a green you might use in a painting to fill in the small petals of an olive tree or accentuate the points of light on the Atlantic in autumn. I checked the address again and said, "Yes, this must be it." Aslan had parked the taxi a polite distance from the front door and asked for the second time whether I was sure this was the right place.

My eldest stepbrother, Hans Nast, Jr., stood waiting on the wide stone steps. He wore ironed Bermuda shorts and a buttonless green polo shirt. It was a hot day, but Hans Junior's pores emitted not one bead of perspiration. He looked like a man who kept everything under control—even his sweat.

Hans Junior shook my hand, laying his free left hand on my upper arm. His aftershave was strong but not insistent. "So glad you could make it, Igor," he said. "I know how busy you are." Then he pointed out that I had just enough time to freshen up and change before we sat down to supper. It had been a long time since I'd gone any place where suppers were sat down to. Hans introduced a kind of waiter in a spotless white tracksuit to me as Mr. Daniel.

"Mr. Nast," said Mr. Daniel, extending his hand.

"Hi, Daniel, I'm Igor," I said, shaking his hand as democratically as I could. My fraternizing seemed to strike Hans Junior as inappropriate.

"Come on," he said. "You can give that colorful backpack of yours to Mr. Daniel."

On the inside, the house resembled a former monastery refurbished by a pimp. From the entrance hall, you could see the tall living room windows and, beyond them, the sparkling lake. I followed Hans Junior up the broad staircase to what he called the sleeping quarters. This turned out to be a long corridor on the second floor. We came to a door that was ajar, and through it I saw a man in white clothing sitting on the bed. He looked as if he was in prayer.

"This is where Anthony and I are sleeping," Hans Junior said. His tone was reassuring, as if to let me know where I could find them if I had a nightmare or wet my pants. "Hey, Tony, Igor's here."

"Hello," the man said without looking.

"He takes all that yoga nonsense super seriously," Hans Junior said, without lowering his voice.

"Fuck you, Hanzi," Anthony replied, wheeling his arms, giving his head a quick wipe with a white hand towel, and then coming over to shake my hand. "Welcome," he said. "I'm Anthony. It's great to meet a real live painter."

My father had been living in that house for ten years, and a perfect stranger who did yoga was welcoming me.

"Hi," I said.

Then my half-blood-relatives showed their faces, one by one.

"Hey, maestro!" my American half-brother Davy cried as he came out of the bathroom. Though I hadn't seen Davy since the time he'd dropped his Game Boy in a swimming pool and spent the rest of the vacation blubbing, he came at me as if we were old buddies. He had grown taller than me, had his hair cut short, and looked like he spent plenty of time at the gym. But he still had the same childlike blue eyes that I remembered. Eyes that told all, that made him unsuited to lie or pretend.

"Hi, Davy," I said. Davy tucked his shirt into his pants.

Through the milky glass of the old bathroom door, I saw a vague silhouette moving. "Hi," I called out.

"Pleased to meet you!" a woman replied, as she kicked the door open with her outstretched foot and, from the toilet where she sat, waved to me and held out her hand. She was a slender woman with long legs and a broad smile.

Hans Junior turned away from her and mumbled something about finding a bedroom for me. Her name was Céline Barra and she was French, he whispered to me as we walked on. He felt she lacked a sense of propriety.

Hans Junior described the bedroom he'd picked for me in glowing terms: the best one in the house, especially because it had a fireplace. Since this was the kind of house with a fireplace in almost every room, I suspected it of being rat-infested, or having large gaps between the floorboards so that everything that went on there could be followed from the room below.

The bedroom had a small skylight that offered a view of the lake, but only if you climbed up on a stool. There was a stool. There was not much else: a bed, a small round table with a simple

chair, and then that stool, underneath a small sink with a rusty faucet which, Hans Junior was quick to warn me, produced only brown water.

Behind Hans Junior, who was standing in the doorway with his head slightly bent, I saw his Anthony strolling down the corridor in a snow-white bathrobe. Further off, Céline was warbling with laughter, a high-pitched sound that reverberated against the slanted ceiling of my new room. The atmosphere in this part of the house was more summer vacation than house of mourning. My father himself was nowhere to be found.

Hans Junior tapped intently on his telephone, sometimes nodding his head and sometimes shaking it no with a meaningful click of his tongue. Hans Junior was a money-mover. Or that's how he had once explained it to me. I presumed that's what he was up to that very moment—moving money.

The small window let in a distorted polygon of light. Not enough, that much was clear. Not the light you would normally expect to see there at that hour. That light would have drawn you outside. It would have warmed your room and made it seem bigger than it really was. Instead, everything was in its true proportions: a small, damp back corner of a house that, without the sun, was merely a ramshackle building on mucky soil.

I took my own telephone out of my jacket pocket and saw that my agent, Frank Sonntag, had called me four times. I turned the thing off and put it in the drawer of the round table. When I'd called him from Venice to tell him I couldn't stay for the opening because of my father's imminent death, he said, "You have a father?" Right after that, he said, "You do what you have to do, I'll take care of everything. Don't you worry, I'll take care of everything."

Hans Junior was still in the doorway. He put his phone in his pocket, said, "So," and nodded approvingly, as if we had just completed some little task together. "Think you can find your way around?" he asked.

I looked around the empty room. The stool in the corner, the bed, the table with my backpack on it. He looked around too. The stool. The table. The bed.

"Yes," I said.

"Great."

I fished a new pair of green socks out of the backpack. Hans stayed put, watching me. I laid out the socks on the table. I was attached to my socks.

"Isn't he home?" I asked.

"He? You mean Papa?" Hans Junior asked. "Sure he is. You thought maybe he was out jogging?"

I've never understood why a grown man would call his father Papa. Hans Junior was one of the financial whiz kids who had made a fortune in the 2008 crash. He'd called me after hearing the news about my mother. But after the formulaic part of the conversation, he forgot his original reason for calling and started talking about financial markets the way most people talk about fruit and vegetables. Ripe. Rotten. Take a bite. Dump it.

Hans Junior checked his watch. "In twenty-three minutes we'll be having dinner with Papa."

"That's awfully prompt for a man on his deathbed," I said.

"What's that?"

"Forget it. I'll see you there."

"Good. By the way, Igor, an ironed shirt isn't required, but it would be appreciated."

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Charlie Days had left the sliding glass door open and then I'd gone to sleep and when I woke up in the late afternoon I noticed that something had changed. That was day one. The day of my arrival in Lucerne was day one thousand. The thousandth day since I'd noticed. I should have tried to figure out what it was exactly. I had paced from one end to the other of the cloud house and then walked down the hill into town. I thought maybe there was a fire or some disaster. It was possible. Sometimes people did set things on fire. Disasters happened.

But I didn't smell or hear anything out of the ordinary. People didn't seem to be panicking or running for their lives. Later I figured out what was going on. A day or two later, three days at most, my first impressions were confirmed, and the truth could no longer be denied. But day one was when Charlie Days left the sliding door open in the morning and I fell asleep before noon.

Had it gotten so out of hand since then that it was like a disaster movie? No, not yet. The change was still hard to pin down a lot of the time, and most people didn't even seem to give it much thought. Actually, no one seemed to give it any thought at all—even though the signs were everywhere.

You could see it in people's skin, which looked duller each day, or in the sunlight reflected from lakes and fountains. You could feel it in your body, which was gaining weight and losing its drive. You could tell by the nervous glances people gave each other, the growing restlessness of animals. Dogs and crows seemed especially sensitive to it. Dogs looked at you the way they do before a big storm, and birds circled over the cities as if driven by madness.

Colors were nowhere near what they once had been. Orange hues were browner; yellows had faded to beige or completely vanished into filthy white. The outlines of buildings, leaves, eyes, and mouths were blurring. At first I thought it was smog, but the phenomenon was just as perceptible in the Alps or on a transatlantic flight. Everything seemed to leak into everything else, like a watercolor onto which someone had spilled a glass of water. Days became more like dusks, and the nights were so dark that there was no hint of direction or height—only the dizzying depths. Sure, that may be normal in Reykjavík or Oslo in the winter months, but not in Brussels or London, not in Madrid, not in Los Angeles. Not here in Switzerland. I had become afraid of the nights.

I had become afraid because I saw that the sunlight was gradually fading. That sounds crazy, but it was the plain truth.

Meanwhile, everyone seemed to go on doing whatever they considered important enough in the limited time remaining. People moved through the dull glow of artificial light, their heads under the lampposts planted everywhere like weeping metal willows. They sat in front of bright screens or in the sourceless light of office spaces. Parks were lit a romantic yellow; restaurants chose their ambiance to suit the tastes of their intended customers. Hospitals, police stations, and clinics were vast blocks of white, analytical light designed to let nothing escape notice.

At first, I would ask people whether they, too, had noticed anything strange. I received many different answers, none of which went to the crux of the issue. I discovered that people are scared. It became clearer and clearer to me that what motivates us is not sex, and not the desire for conquest or beauty, but pure fear. Since time immemorial, fear has backed us into corner after corner, sent us scattering, and come after us with violence, disease, and pain, and yet we make it seem, through history, as if that zigzag of panicked leaps forms one straight line. In schoolbooks we draw a horizontal, two-dimensional surface, our illusion of advance planning and progress. The

truth is that we do not charge into the future but flee from the past.

When I asked people if they, too, had noticed anything, they would say, often in a whisper or a conspiratorial tone, "Finally, someone else has realized." Then they would describe how the world would soon be brought to an end by the Quran, fracking, overconsumption of sugar, all sorts of cancers caused by all sorts of radiation, an African virus lying dormant in Sierra Leone or Liberia, the dominance of the Chinese, nationalism, a temperature rise of two degrees Celsius, an alien invasion, overpopulation, the pharmaceutical industry, driverless cars, fruit and vegetable monopolies, urban anomie, the decline of education, online dating, North Korea, stress, or the rising infertility of our women.

Yet no one arrived at the point that had been so plain to see for the past one thousand days—namely, that it was gradually getting darker. Although the process was slow and may have been difficult to recognize for people who did not constantly work with light and color, all the same, the sunlight was gradually fading. The process might continue for another hundred years—maybe a thousand. But even if it took ten thousand years, or ten million, the cosmos does not run on human time. No man or woman should be able to discern in one lifetime how the heavens conduct their affairs. It's not good for a person. We're not built for that.

All this had led, of course, to many sleepless nights. At least for the first eighteen months. I felt as if I were the first to observe this phenomenon and had a duty to inform the others. I combed the internet for people who had detected the same shift. This yielded a handful of forums about cosmological matters, but all I found there were lunatics and dreamers.

Having noticed the odd reactions when I raised the topic, I tried to demonstrate the loss of light objectively, with a photometer. That only seemed to fuel their skepticism. They would quickly become bogged down in irrelevant details: Why on earth do you have a photometer in your pocket? Are you a photographer? When I told them I was a painter, they didn't even seem to believe that. "You should spend a little less time inhaling paint fumes," they would say. As soon as people start to suspect you're crazy, anything you tell them seems to reinforce that impression—even facts that prove the opposite.

After a while I stopped talking about it. Maybe the phenomenon would end one day, or maybe not. Maybe nothing would change and we would gradually fade away. In any case, it was not a problem I could solve. I was a painter and already found the world challenging enough when I didn't have a canvas to serve as a filter.

Since then, I had acted as if life required no plan or compass but could simply be discovered moment by moment—as if you were exploring unknown territory by night with a small pocket flashlight and could not see farther than the next place your foot would land. Most days, it seemed that this method more or less worked. I thought to myself, I will keep this up for a while, and one day it will be over, and then there will be room again for a vision of the future that goes beyond the next few hours or half a day. That was what I'd believed every day for the past one thousand days, and now I was in a house in Switzerland with a dying father and did not know what remained of that belief.