

Thieves of Passion

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An extract pp (3-6; 7-9)

Original title Dieven van vuur
Publisher De Bezige Bij, 2014

Translation Dutch into English
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p 3-6

That morning the exterminator came. In the living room, on the first floor of our house, he froze in front of the record cabinet. A yellow bottle in his one hand, a long metal nozzle in the other. He whistled.

‘How many records is that?’

‘Two thousand,’ I said.

‘Wow.’

He tilted his head and started reading the spines.

‘All jazz,’ I said.

‘Oh.’

There was a silence. He kept his head cocked to one side. They all do. I thought about his curiosity, budding enthusiasm perhaps, slowly seeping out of his body, streaming onto the floor alongside his arms and legs. Not long now, a few seconds, and I would be able to see it at his feet: a puddle of incomprehension.

He kept staring. The tendons in his neck tensed up. This would not last much longer.

Through the tall, narrow windows at the front, the sun broke through - a hesitant smile. They all come up with something to finish what can no longer turn into a conversation.

‘Hmm. Jazz, right? I don’t know anything about it.’

I nodded and said: ‘Me neither.’

The head of the exterminator tipped back and, relieved, straightened itself on his torso.

From our living room two French doors open out onto a small balcony. Not at the front and not at the back of the house either, but on the inside. I never know how to explain. A shaft cuts straight through our house. That is basically it. I like living here. It is a tasteful apartment, smooth but elegant and irrational - like a young woman. Designed by Claus and Kaan. Two renowned architects, reportedly. In case they read this, I would like to say: if you ever design a house again, please bear in mind the storage space. A few years back, we filled up their shaft on the ground floor and had it turned into an extra bedroom for the children.

Whenever I smoke a cigarette on the balcony, my back turned towards the living room as I stand on the decking between flower pots with withered plants, then on my left I have a scrawny ivy – brave, but hopeless – attempting to cover a filthy concrete wall; and on my right there is a wood-panelled wall behind which lies the corridor connecting our living room with the kitchen. Across the skylights of our bedroom, I can peer through the window on the other side, into our kitchen. Particularly at night time, when the rest of the house is dark and the built-in halogen lights underneath the kitchen cabinets shed their light on the espresso machine, the spice rack, a half-

eaten sandwich and other things that form a natural part of the habitat we call our work top, this sight can make me feel intensely happy.

I remember the day the first wasps came. Through the slats in the wooden panelling they crawled into the cavity of the wall to my right. I often find myself on the balcony, smoking, wandering through my mind like a curious tourist; this time of year I'm usually musing about the past.

Our shadows settle in the places we leave behind. And for this reason it confuses us to go back there, if only in our thoughts. We do not expect the emptiness, the desolation and bleakness of what we thought was effervescent and full, like the glasses of champagne we could not yet afford. What else were we but fools longing for a wild youth, neglecting their appearance, longing to be admired, burning their lungs just for laughs? (It's a miracle we're alive still, even though most of us breathe with squeaking noises and make pitiable lists of whom ended up in our bed or whom we merely kissed or almost had in some other way.)

Yet what is left for us? What can we think back on? The things and events that could have been decisive. They dance, defiantly, on the incomprehensible notes jumping up against the record cabinet without stopping to consider. Wasps, indeed, looking for their nest.

It's not a supporting wall, so hardly more than some wood, plaster and insulating material. Wasps flew back and forth for weeks on end. The colony seemed to grow with each new cigarette. When I called the extermination company, they told me that the wasps would destroy my wall from inside with their nest. I had to think in terms of thousands to tens of thousands of wasps reducing everything in that cavity to grit. One day they would all come out from those slats at once and fly out. I showed the exterminator the balcony. The idea is that the wasps will get the mixture on their body, take it into the nest and poison the queen. The queen will die and the nest will be abandoned. I asked the guy if he was sure it would work.

'Oh yes,' he said. 'That queen is so going kaput.'

We looked up to those slats in the panelling, as if they were jazz records. A nasty little worm ate its way through the back of my head (where for reasons I do not quite understand myself, I believe our conscience to be located). It was no more than a slight, annoying itch – the worst kind.

After I had shown the exterminator to the door, I walked into the living room and stood in front of the record cabinet. I recognized a row of identical spines: the upper half orange, the bottom all black. Without even looking, I took an album off the shelf and walked towards the record player.

An album by Archie Shepp: *On This Night*.

I lifted the lid of the record player. The vinyl slid smoothly out of its sleeve. And although it shone and seemed clean, I let the arm hover a little while as I held an anti-static brush against the rotating record. Then I opened the volume on the stereo and pushed the lever down. A dry click. The needle dropped, hit the vinyl, jumped up again and picked a groove. I briefly enjoyed the crackling noise from the speakers and the hollow tap when I closed the lid. Then: a jumpy, atonal piano tune swirling through the room. A thin female voice began to sing. Drums rolling in the background. Soon after, the bassist fell in. They played as if wanting to have nothing to do with each other. Only every so often would they come together in a simple melody line, which they repeated several times, to then immediately fall back into the chaos of the start. A teasing game which went on for minutes until finally the music fell into a familiar blues rhythm and Archie Shepp put his saxophone to his lips. I closed my eyes and my mind went back to the first of those nights, all those years ago. It was a quick succession of razor sharp images. A trailer of the past.

The way we cut through the darkness. Bennie behind the wheel. Smoking. Short toxic puffs, greedily inhaling while he drums on the gearstick with the tips of his fingers. Erratically. Pissed. He

has been drinking, but he says he's fine. Jelle says nothing. He stares straight ahead, and I, in the rear seat, can see the triumphant smile playing on his lips straight through his skull, the anticipation for the stories we'll be telling in the pub later on.

The way we break into the building, inconsiderate, having lost all sense of reality. Jelle, the guide. His white sneakers dancing silently on a ladder followed by me, the idiot, unaware where we are going, rigid and stiff, overcome by the kind of cold lingering in bare, empty properties.

The way we rejoice in things we know nothing about. Jazz records. A stuffed fish. Letters. From the start, the discovery, the reckless raids that follow, the fear and anxiety that will eventually overtake us.

I could see it all. That morning, the morning of the exterminator. Outside the wasps unsuspectingly carried the poison into their nest. Inside the music of *On This Night* seized the room, slipped down the hallway and into the kitchen, cut through to the staircase, thus spreading, step-by-step, further up and down until the whole house seemed to sing.

p7-9

I.

I do not remember when exactly men in Antwerp started greeting each other with kisses, but I do know there was a time they did not. A time when we would simply raise our hand and say 'aye' or utter some incomprehensible noises, as young boys do, their nonchalance thrown around their shoulders like a used leather jacket.

But then one night in the mid-nineties, a little later perhaps, not that it matters, perhaps in the weeks leading up to Christmas - the city streets hidden underneath a roof of multicolored light hoses, the air as cold as the beer served inside - I find myself surprised by Jelle, a friend whom until then I had always taken quite seriously.

I'm at Bar Tabac in Antwerp South, or South. It's one of the cafes on the quays that flank the former Southern Docks - I come here more often. Jelle and I could crawl home from there if we would need to. I live on the other side of the docks, near the Water Gate, a stately seventeenth-century arch, which has already been moved twice over time and currently stands, somewhat lost, on a roundabout, torn from its walls, no longer opening onto anything. We've been living here for a few months now. Why? Oh, well. All that we can say is that we think we should be here. We come from the same types of villages, orderly suburbs of the city. We've both just experienced our first great love - girls our mothers had the best conversations with. Sometimes, when we sit together on the quay along the Scheldt smoking a joint, I can feel those villages and I can hear the people we left behind, tossing and turning in their tiny beds. I can see their dreams still, dreams as wide as the river on the banks of which we sit.

Bar Tabac is not my favorite pub. And that night, I am not there because I want to be either. I ended up there by the sheer coincidence which governs the Southern nights. Only with hindsight can you establish whether this chance was fortunate or not. Tabac is a musicians' pub. This is the time when the Antwerp based rock band dEUS had their major breakthrough. They were among the first to kiss other men. Cool guys, always moving in slow motion. Their hit 'Suds & Soda' is the Antwerp equivalent of Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', a rousing anthem for the young and impatient, and their local fame has exploded since England gave in too. Now we see them on MTV every day. Antwerp boys. Boys our age. This is a first. 'And quite baffling to anyone who is not tone

deaf,' as Maurice will put it later.

dEUS can be held responsible for the rise of the 'Antwerp scene'; in the slipstream of their success, South, in those years, floods with even more visionary musicians who also want to re-invent pop music using untuned violins and broken microphones. The entire area is populated by the types who wear undershirts, *marcellekes*, no matter the season. Bar Tabac is their pub. The Steiner School Types, I call them, which makes Jelle chuckle, because that is where most of them received their 'training'. I have adopted these inverted commas from my parents, who had sent me to proper Catholic schools and universities, not realizing that I would leave those not only with a first-rate degree, but also with an appearance that makes surviving Antwerp in the nineties pretty hard. I'm locked in an armour of moral and duty, elemental politeness and a great sense of responsibility. I fail a lack of academic training and good manners required to belong here, plus I have a tendency to see life from a rational and realistic perspective. On top of that, I am employed. I have a steady job, as it is called: I am an editor at the monthly magazine *Building Work*, the journal of the National Construction Confederacy in Brussels. The Contractors Association. I write about the newest type of concrete mixer and the latest developments in construction waste disposal. Each morning I take the seven-thirty-train at Berchem station. An hour later I step out of the elevator on the eleventh floor of a huge office building in Lombard Street in the center of Brussels and I enter my name in the register at the rustic wooden table in the hall.

I remember the smell that was there, stale and heavy, as if the fragrance itself was not sure what it was doing there either, and I remember walking through the corridor, past the office of our director (a distinguished man in a suit, sharp stripes combed into his grey hair) and thinking back on the day he had offered me the job. His self-assured manner when he told me I had a bright future ahead of me whilst shoving a cup of coffee in my direction with a sinister smile.

That is where I sit each day. Behind my computer, opposite Eddy, my fellow editor, twenty-three years of service, always in a good mood, wearing those dark rimmed glasses that are trendy these days. He likes Märklin model trains.

And I guess the eighties have only just gone. I am not quite used to the idea that anything is possible. Those Steiner School Types have a lead which is very hard to catch-up on, no matter how much marijuana you smoke. I am lucky to know Jelle. He is never out of place. It is his talent. Without saying a word himself, just with a certain look he gives those talking to him, he effortlessly falls into the discourse of someone shamelessly claiming they will bring a new dimension to rock 'n' roll before long, the kind of musicians who see no obstructions, not in their limited talent, nor in the impressionability and the benevolence of the world around them. A conviction which is usually based on the latest rehearsal of their collective, named after an unpublished novella by a Russian poet who died at a young age, during which their guitarist played the banjo with a bow. Thus creating an *ohmygodsUPERAMAZING* sound which simply has to, in the not too distant future, lead to world domination. And Jelle listens, sympathetically, nods, and often gets himself a free pint out of it.

The pub is no larger than a hundred square feet. Worn wooden stools. Fourth hand armchairs. The modular ceiling damp and soaked in nicotine, like the conversations people have, slowly and shrewdly, eyes already focused on the next person who needs to know about a jam session at The Scene or an after party at the Hacienda, a pint and a cigarette in the same hand, whispering, a little too loudly, the name of an American producer who was once the assistant to the assistant to the producer of the album *Doolittle* by the Pixies, except when they happened to be recording *Doolittle*, and how enthusiastic he was about that new demo tape. Then a swing of the slightly tilted head as they brush away an imaginary strand of hair, marking the end of the conversation, shoulders and arms glistening with sweat, wading slowly through the cigarette fog until their free arm lands upon the fragile shoulders of a frail girl with dyed black hair and a nose piercing, a graphic design student perhaps who plays bass or - bonus points - drums.

I am not exaggerating. I am trying to keep it convincing. Sometimes on nights like these it can be

so awfully hot in Bar Tabac that you can see the condensing egos stream down from the walls and the windows in thick, heavy drops.

The way those Steiner School Types moved through that pub. Smooth. Heavily. Body and limbs along bodies and limbs. Snakes about to strangle me.

At such moments, I thought I could see exactly what I missed and did wrong and longed for. Their lives seemed more authentic than mine, could even draw me in like a black hole. I had done everything as I should, according to certain standards, and this was exactly why I could never be like them, no matter how hard I would try. This realization was shattering. The armour was too heavy, impossible to shake off. A deafening clang with each step I made.

And so I'm sat there, against my will and by sheer coincidence, that godforsaken night, when Jelle comes to find and kiss me. That night? That well-defined first night? Yes.

Unthinkable for it to have been any other night.