

His Name Is David

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p 9-11

I LEAVE THIS downtrodden life a young man: strong in body, clear in mind. It is not what I want, but I haven't been asked. They've tied me to a post. A few metres behind me is a beech tree, massive on the verge of bloom. Looking through the frost-covered branches, I see blue sky, a trail of cloud slicing across it unhindered. The ground is cold. I feel a sense of timelessness I've never experienced before, as the morning dew slowly seeping into the fabric of my trousers grows tepid. By noon, I'll be as cold as the earth, as the frost on the branches of the beech. As the air.

I lose control of my bladder, staining myself with the comforting warmth of my own body. I shall undoubtedly be forgiven the disgrace.

Spring is near. The days are lengthening already. Soon, the sun will mercilessly smother winter. Then man and beast will bow down expectantly, and new life bloom: butterflies emerging from cocoons, buds bursting into blossom. They will mate fluttering over my soldier's grave, the butterflies.

The men in front of me are tossing crumbs to the squabbling magpies and jackdaws. In the field lies the carcass of a cow, one of its legs pointing stiffly at the sun. Then I see him. Galloping straight toward me, he jerks at the reins just metres away from the men. The stallion rears up, forelegs flailing in the air, spraying flecks of froth around. Clods of earth fly from its hooves. A soldier rushes up, grabs the reins and calms the horse with loving strokes over its muzzle. The officer dismounts, nods at his freezing men and turns to look at me. He is my executioner. I hope he's a good man. A righteous human being. Not a monument to a murderous war. Looking up at him hurts my neck.

'Is there anything you want to say, David? A last confession, perhaps? I can arrange it for you,' he says.

He's nice. He knows my name. Two frost-blue eyes in a weary face. I could say that I don't believe in life after death, that I've never yearned for a god who is dead and buried, that my father taught me faith is a weakness of mankind, and that a confession, to me, would make as little sense as it would bring me salvation. I could also say that, though I honestly tried to make something of life, my mother's forgiveness is the only thing I want from it now. Looking at him, I know my words would touch him. His hair looks like a wilted dandelion. He would make an effort to listen to me, to

understand, and perhaps make a few meaningful remarks. Will his face be the last thing I see as the bullets cut through the tissue of my heart? I don't know his name.

Or should I close my eyes when the rifles are shouldered and the black barrels aimed at me? Look to the inside? At my little brother, crawling through the garden on his knees; at my parents, standing in the small, sunlit kitchen together? Or at the class I used to teach, the boys of Year Six? Marcus in front. They would undoubtedly come to my rescue. Brandishing their wooden sabres and bows. Their hands, which must have grown even larger and coarser by now, unfastening the ropes around my wrists, cutting the strands with the pocket knives they aren't allowed to carry.

I'd better not think about the two loves of my life.

A command rings out. The soldiers take up position behind a line. Standing closer now. I look at each of them in turn. They are strangers. I turn my face to the side, pitying the soldiers of my platoon who are forced to watch from a distance, and shake my head at the officer, who is still bent over to talk to me, asking if there is anything he can do. Then he suddenly falls silent. He has understood. He realises that at this stage, words would be nothing but a hindrance.

Am I afraid? They're about to kill me, after all. Aiming at the white ribbon pinned to my uniform, on the spot behind which my heart is hammering away. So loud, I hear it thudding in my throat, in my temples. The heartbeat of the life they want to take from me.

I'm not afraid. I did my best.

p 12-17

WHEN THE TIME is ripe, the fledgling chicks clamber to the edge of their nest and jump. Occasionally, one ends up floundering in a puddle, others are plucked out of the air by a bird of prey before having felt the power of their wings. The majority, however, flap away into the distance, their tiny bird hearts driven by a primeval power. Just like I did, on the day I closed my parents' front door behind me and soared to Ghent railway station like a young seagull, taming the turbulent wind beneath my feathers. Despite the suitcase I lugged with me, my feet hardly seemed to touch the ground as I walked to the station, heart pounding in my chest. I had taken my leap and no one around me had the faintest idea: the man in the three-piece suit crossing my path with his walking stick stared straight ahead, the costermonger didn't even notice me walk by. Not even the railway official who pushed my train tickets over the counter toward me with stubby fingers knew I was flying the coop that day, to a corner of the country I'd never been before; though he might have recognized the hope in my eyes, the restlessness in my limbs.

I pulled myself up by the metal pole, gripping my suitcase tightly, and looked for a window seat. My destination was Ypres. From there, I would take the tram to Elverdinge. It was early in the morning; I expected to arrive shortly after noon. I'd never heard of the village of Elverdinge until that particular morning about a week ago, when Father uttered the name at the table. I did know a little about Ypres, the city of cats. In the Middle Ages, cats were thrown from the roof of the Cloth Hall for good luck.

The smoke of a cigar curled upward. I watched the plume of smoke as it dragged itself over the back of the seat like a ghost, drifting toward me. That morning, my father explained to me that the name of Elverdinge was a male first name, derived from the names Athal and Fritho by a list of phonetic laws (which he also recited to me). He had read up on it, had even discussed it with a professor. I was drowsy and hungry. Besides, I'd become used to his reeling off long lists of the most trivial facts. Ever since my little brother's untimely death, almost four years ago at the time, he had dedicated himself with even more tenacity than before to Professor Pekhart's theory of the Quaternity. Knowledge, in the useless form of randomly amassed facts, had become his faith, had lifted his spirits again after a deep depression. Never needed a confessional, a holy water font or the Blessed Trinity, he said. Mother was frying eggs and a juicy slice of bacon. The smell drove the night air out of the kitchen. My father went on talking. I sat out his speech, and after a long pause that seemed to signal its end, tucked into the breakfast placed in front of me.

Afterward, he asked me how much I remembered of what he'd told me. Wiping my mouth on the dishcloth, I mumbled something about founding father Elverd and his followers. He was silent for a while, before reiterating the whole string of phonetic laws that had led to the place name Elverdinge, and closing with the remark that science and knowledge were based on repetition. It was one of the things Professor Pekhart had taught him. Then he rose, bent down to me and shook my hand across the table, congratulating me on my first job as a teacher in Elverdinge. I sat rooted to my chair. Had he gone mad overnight? Elverdinge? Mother wept, rubbing her expressionless eyes. She sat down beside me, on what used to be my brother Henri's chair, and started buttering a slice of bread with shaking hands. I didn't dare look at her for very long, out of fear of what I would read in her eyes. These days, my parents rarely sat on the sofa together the way they used to, a cup of coffee with a drop of milk on the table at their feet. When my father wasn't working, he spent his time in the shed. I was in the way. I was the wedge driven deep into the log of their marriage. After Ratface's death—how he used to laugh about the nickname I had given him—I went to university, even though I no longer wanted to. They made me. I did my best. The academic years flew by almost in a haze, as if time itself wanted to get away as quickly as possible from the day Ratface died.

'I have been able to get the position for you,' Father said. 'It took some doing, but you are to be the teacher of Year Six at Elverdinge boys' school.' Mother stared at the slice of bread that was still lying on the board in front of her, open and glistening with butter.

'Thank you,' I murmured.

'It is time,' Father said.

He was putting on a brave face.

'Time you stood on your own two feet.'

I nodded, surprised at the feeling of excitement and adventure bubbling up in me.

They gave me an envelope with money. To buy food and coals in the winter—expensive things, Father said. And a suit, as a schoolmaster should always look his best, Mother said. She had folded the slice into a sandwich.

'You are expected at the school next week. So you can get to know the place. The pupils won't be there of course, it's still the summer holidays. But you'll meet the Mother Superior, and get to see

the timetable, books and so on. You can move into the house I rented for you. Everything has been arranged,' Father said.

I thanked him. They were holding hands. I had not seen them this close together for a long time. My father's side whiskers looked like tufts of wool torn from a sheep. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat.

The closer we got to the village of Elverdinge—the tram had just passed the stop in Brielen, the village before Elverdinge—the edgier I felt. Wheat country. Meadows with islets of daisies and buttercups. Fields of maize. Everything slowly drifted past me. Occasionally, some boys would leap on the footboard to chug along for a bit before being chased off by the ticket collector. My belly rumbled with a mixture of excitement and fear. It was one of those summer days on which the sky was blue from morning till night. A cheerfully bright pale blue at first. And later, after sunset, a deep and melancholy indigo. I could make out the grey outline of a hill on the horizon. I had never been this far to the west of the country. The tram passed the first houses, and I could hear the driver's call over the click-clacking of the rails and the whistling steam. The ticket collector sprang to his feet, shouted 'Elverdinge station' and disappeared into the next carriage, shouting the same thing again.

We came to a halt opposite the Belle Vue pub. A red flag flapped above the door. Without a glance at their passengers, the stoker, engine driver and ticket collector hurried inside. I put my hand on my suitcase, which I had placed in the aisle beside my seat. Only after the last passenger had walked past—a woman carrying bags that were bursting at the seams—did I leave the carriage. I walked toward the church tower and stopped in front of a large town house. Two square herb gardens bordered by boxwood hedges flanked the path to the front door, accentuating the building's symmetry. The door swung open, and seeing a man in a black cassock and a wooden cross on a string around his neck stroll out, I realized it was the presbytery. I wanted to go on, but the priest motioned me to wait. He hastened toward me, leaving the door ajar.

'Mr Verbocht?'

My surprise must have been written all over my face, as he went on to explain to me in detail how he had reached that conclusion. He also knew about my appointments both at the boys' school and with Mr Vantomme, the landlord of the house I would live in during the coming school year. To my annoyance, he'd even made inquiries about my appearance.

'So you see, I recognized you the moment I saw you walk past,' he said. 'I would like offer you a cup of coffee, but I'm about to conduct a funeral and need to make some preparations.' He said it with the same seriousness he had put into his earlier explanation. 'I'll pay a visit when you are properly settled in.'

'All right, Father,' I said.

He shook my hand and went back inside. I heard the bolt slide across. I hadn't gone ten metres when I heard footsteps and he was standing behind me again.

'I forgot to tell you, the boys' school and your house are that way,' he said, pointing his arm to the other side of the crossing where I had got off the tram.

'You've been given the addresses, I hope?' he asked.

‘Yes, I have. Thank you, Father,’ I said. I made no move to follow his instructions. He gave me a doubtful look, twiddled his thumbs for a while and eventually turned to go, glancing over his shoulder one last time before disappearing between the two angular herb gardens. I decided to continue my walk. I had not been given an exact time I should be at the school. One thing he didn’t know, at least. Further on, I came to a surprisingly plain square paved with rounded cobbles. From the corner of my eye, I saw the door of the pub on the corner opening. An old man was placed firmly on a stool in the fresh air. Bending over, he spewed a thick stream of vomit on the ground between his shoes. The man who had pressed him down on the chair, and who now seemed to be watching over him, was short but broadshouldered. He noticed me. I said hello. The bell of the bakery door tinkled and two boys came out, digging their fingers into the white, round sides of the loaves they carried. They shot me a guilty look, stuck out their tongues and ran away. I turned round and started walking in the direction of the boys’ school.

p 18-19

THE MOTHER SUPERIOR placed the list of names on her desk. Each name was marked with a stern black dot. She read them out loud, rhythmically tapping her index finger. I listened, more to the way she read than her actual words. When she stopped and looked at me, I was afraid she would ask me to repeat the names. For some reason, one name *had* registered: Marcus Verschoppen. I don’t remember what made it stand out from the others, as she went on to tell me some trivialities about each of the eight boys’ backgrounds. She hoped I would remember the facts, though her tone of voice, punctuated by her ticking nail, did not seem to express much confidence. She nevertheless considered it her duty to provide a new teacher with all the relevant information. Could it have been her slight hesitation when reading the name, as if silently saying more than she put into words, making the rhythm of her ticking finger falter? She ended by saying I was in luck, I’d be able to see the boys, if I wanted to, because at this very moment they were being taught—she hastily thumbed through a little red book lying on the desk before continuing—Catechism in classroom four. Experience had shown that the boys found learning the texts by heart difficult, so they started them early, in August. I suddenly wondered how on earth my father had managed to get me a job as a teacher in a Catholic school. I wasn’t christened, hadn’t attended church as a child, had not received my first Communion and had never been instructed in religious subjects. The finger had stopped tapping and was frozen in mid-air like a hook.

‘The classroom is at the end of the corridor,’ she said. The hook straightened out as she pointed in its direction. ‘Incidentally, it will also be your classroom.’

So there I was, on a Friday afternoon under a sunny cotton-wool sky, peeking in through the window of my classroom. And there they were. Caught in a shaft of light slanting down from the tall window. My class. The boy in the first row was sitting on his own. He was wearing a smart white shirt. His hair was combed to the side, parted on the right. I would have bet my last cent on his name being Marcus Verschoppen. I recognized the twins, too: scrawny, ginger-haired boys. I looked at the sombre walls, the portraits of the Belgian Kings, the cupboard with its halo of grime, and high above the blackboard, directly over the portrait of King Leopold II, Jesus Christ.

In my mind, I started decorating the almost maliciously bare classroom with wall charts, drawings by the boys and poems. I imagined the children’s voices and the music that would bring it back to life. I would even put these abandoned windowsills to use. I jumped when a hard object hit the window with a bang, cracking the pane. It was then they spotted me—a new face, caught peering in

through the window. They stared at me for several seconds, united in uncertainty, until the lips of the boy in the second row moved. Then came the laughter, collective, a bomb of voices exploding into the outdoors through the gap underneath the door. I turned and walked away.