

Love, so to speak

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An extract

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I couldn't say when this story really began. Perhaps in the chemistry of animals and stars that have long since ceased to exist, somewhere in the plasma of unimaginably distant times. But it's not my job to find out. I'm not a scientist. In fact, I don't even expect to find an explanation for what happened. I'll make no such claims. When I think back to the past, I see no light – at most a few sparks in the darkness of my own brain and those of the others involved, the pattern of will-o'-the-wisps we were to one another. We lived, we drifted, and some of us have since died. The story I can fashion from this begins some twenty-six years ago, on the last Saturday in June, 1986, the day Jasper Fielinckx lost both his parents.

Early in the morning, troubled by all kinds of thoughts but completely ignorant of what was to come, he entered the haze of dew that hung over the front lawn of his parental home. The springy grass massaged the soles of his feet. The fresh wetness seeped between his toes. As he walked past the privet hedge that separated their garden from the neighbours', remnants of nocturnal coolness brushed against his arms. A magpie that had lost its quills to something or other didn't appear to be the least bit bothered by its bedraggled appearance and hopped briskly across the lawn.

Jasper barely noticed these details. As a seventeen-year-old he had other things on his mind than the charms of a summer's morning. There, above a roof across the street, hovered the fireball that's the sun, sparkling in a bath of smooth azure. Pretty enough, this explosion of hydrogen one-hundred-and-fifty million kilometres away and nice weather we're having here on earth, but none of this could compete with the sulphurous storm raging within.

The Fielinckx family was about to set off for the fairly pricey but not overly fashionable seaside resort on the Ligurian coast, just below Italy's western armpit, where they'd also spent their summer holidays in previous years. Mother and father, brother and sister had the same number of miles ahead of them, and all four would be covering them in the same car. Even so, husband and wife, son and daughter had very different feelings about this annual event.

Let's start with the youngest: Jasper didn't really know who to aim the harpoon of his rage at.

At himself, because he failed to push through his plan of not joining them this year?

At his mother, who was adamant that the time wasn't ripe and the need to change the status quo non-existing?

At his father, who lacked either the energy or the fantasy to understand just what compelling reasons a boy his age might have for staying at home?

Or at his sister who, although two years older, didn't pave the way for freedom, but happily bowed to mother's will? Oh sure, every now and then she'd produce some disparaging noises, as if to say the situation was really rather amusing. The little brother in the foul mood who was so emphatically ignored by the mother it was plain for all to see; the father who was supposedly completely preoccupied with the practical side of the trip. Kristien appeared to find it all hilarious. But Jasper saw her cheerfulness primarily as an expression of powerless docility.

A scene from a year ago came to mind. A strip of shingle, a bay among the rocks. There weren't many people. A couple of families with small children, nothing that was of any interest to him whatsoever. Friction with the beach had given the turquoise plane of the Ligurian Sea a gentle, languid undulation, allowing its crystal crest to gain a beggarly bit of height before toppling and crashing onto a slope of round pebbles. The wave was partially absorbed by the shingle, the remainder ran back to the sea, gathering energy for a next, identical move in this endless game.

It felt as if the sluggish rhythm of the surf meant to slow down his pulse even further. But something inside him continued to resist. All the power he had left was concentrated in his gaze. He imagined the laser beams of his eyes, fed by sheer mental energy, cutting along the line of the horizon, separating the blue of the sky from the blue of the sea. Through the opening, from a future beyond the horizon, a wave would roll in – not a wave of water, but a surge of courage and confidence which would lift his heart and give his life momentum.

One day there'd be some point to washing your hair twice a week and changing your underwear every day, to reading all those books and to being as eloquent, highly-strung and original as he was. One day, promises would be fulfilled and he'd lead a life that reflected his talents and desires.

He swore, in silence but in all solemnity, that this would be the very last time he joined his parents on holiday.

That was then. Now, exactly a year later, he was about to set off again with those very same oldies. And with his sister.

'Hey, Romeo, don't forget to put your bag in the car,' she yelled, referring to the bag of books he had left on the drive.

'Do it yourself,' replied Jasper, lying on his back in the grass, without making the slightest effort to get to his feet.

'I thought I was supposed to keep my hands of your stuff?'

Oh, wasn't she clever? But for his part, she could drop dead. For his part, everybody could drop dead. He felt he'd already dropped dead himself. That's why he was lying dead still here on the lawn.

In a minute, all four of them would be sitting in the car and tomorrow they'd be back on the pebble beach. His parents would be reading a book or a magazine, seated beside each other on identical deck chairs. Not far from them would be his sister, lying on a beach towel, also reading or else tanning herself. All in swimming trunks or swimming costumes, all shiny with the same suntan oil. Every once in a while, a completely inconsequential remark would break the general inertia.

Jasper would be sitting a bit further away, with his back to the others, drenched in the same almond scent as the others, his head enveloped by blue, blue and yet more blue as far as the eye could see.

What would he have to come up with this time to keep the listlessness bearable? He wouldn't be able to tell himself that this would be the very last time. Abstract fantasies about future fulfilment wouldn't do. After all, this year his reason for not wanting to come along was more concrete, more painfully concrete, than last year.

'Dad says you should put that bag in the car,' Kristien yelled again. 'And don't forget to take out the books you want to read while we're on the road.'

'Piss off!'

'Are we supposed to wait on you hand and foot? Spoilt brat!'

'You don't have to wait on me at all. Just go and leave me alone! That's all I ask. That's all I need to be happy.'

'Jesus! Aren't we melodramatic today?'

It was really beneath him to overreact in this way. He wasn't a kid anymore. But the situation turned him into one. Why in God's name were they doing this to him? Why were they doing it to themselves? Why hadn't he managed to get what he wanted?

'Don't be silly,' his mother had said a couple of months earlier. 'What would you do here by yourself all that time? And what would the house look like after a week? What would you look like?'

'I can take care of myself, mum.'

'I'm not so sure about that. Besides, your sister doesn't feel the need to stay home, does she?'

'Is that what she says?'

'She hasn't said anything to the contrary.'

'You just haven't discussed it yet.'

'There's nothing to discuss,' his mother said sharply. 'Everybody's going and that's that. I'm not leaving my children behind.'

It would have been pretty pointless to get his father involved. When it came to family matters, his parents always spoke with one voice, that's to say with his mother's voice. In such matters, the husband really never disagrees with his wife. In fact, does he ever?

When Jasper raised the issue again a couple of weeks later – against his better judgement – there was a seasoned hint of reproach, possibly even sorrow, in his mother's words. It wouldn't be a holiday for her if she was in Italy and her son all by himself here in Belgium. She wouldn't be able to relax for a minute. She'd worry about him all the time. Think about him all the time. Surely that wasn't what he wanted? And it wasn't what she wanted either. Maybe things could be different next year, but this year he'd have to come along as usual. Had he completely forgotten how much he used to enjoy it?

That's when he should have persevered, he realised later. But he'd been taken aback, been touched, or at least silenced by the somewhat hoarse, unusually dark timbre of her voice.

And now it was too late, of course! Any tenderness was long gone. He had no choice but to grin and bear it for the next three weeks and to put up with a total sapping of intelligence and emotion.

Such a shame! His intelligence and overflowing emotion were begging to be unleashed at the right target, to be deployed in the conquest of, if not the whole world, then an exceptionally important part of it, namely the stronghold of mind and body which, in the shape of Girl A, regularly walked down his street because she lived only a couple of hundred yards away in a side street.

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Jasper knew her name. Her father was a teacher at the college where his own father and mother taught physics and Dutch respectively, and where he himself went to school. Girl A went to a different school, strangely enough, and in some respects this was probably for the best. It seemed unlikely that he, who'd always been and genuinely wanted to be top of his class, could muster the necessary concentration if he bumped into her in the schoolyard every day. Not least because she was three years younger and he had no idea how to talk to her. Day in day out the age difference would have been a barrier between them, an invisible mountain you could see through but certainly not walk or talk through. Day in day out he would have been searching in vain for something to say to her. Sooner or later his nerves, so well-versed in processing and reproducing course material, would no doubt have crumbled – bearing in mind the many hours of mental paralysis a casual encounter on the street could produce.

She had first come to his attention more than two years ago. At the time she couldn't have been more than twelve. Literally a child. A beautiful child who, judging by her clothes and the carefully groomed profusion of rust-coloured curls, was aware of her beauty, but nonetheless still a girl whose figure boasted precious few curves.

He had bumped into her on the street. She had come towards him, passed him and barely looked at him. And yet her sideways and quite possibly entirely casual glance had taken his breath away. That crown of dancing fire on his midriff, those legs of glass on which he limped on – were they the symptoms of what was generally referred to as 'love at first sight'? In and of itself he didn't mind at all. It was about time, as some classmates and his sister too had reminded him more than once. But why fall in love with a girl who had practically no breasts and might not even be menstruating yet?

The feeling that came over him felt like a sudden craving for chocolate, except infinitely stronger. Never before had someone given him a stomach-ache that lasted for hours, without the exchange of even a single word. An overwhelming beginning, sure, but of what?

The second time he saw her she was in the company of a girlfriend. An insignificant wisp of a girl she was having an animated conversation with. Jasper kind of hoped it was about him, but felt pretty sure it wasn't. So far there'd been nothing to suggest that he'd attracted her attention in any way. He was, certainly with the girlfriend in tow, determined not to show that the situation was rather different for him.

Suddenly the pair burst into giggles, rippling, shaking with delight. The unfamiliar child roared with carefree, candid and exuberant laughter – an innocent acoustic spasm that reflected exactly the little that could be reflected. Her cheerful little head and nothing more. All in all a rather silly sound. But the twinkling melody that came from the throat of Girl A resonated with a kind of murmur in which Jasper heard the totality of her body, the many hidden folds, the compact fullness inside; a hoarse, even slightly vulgar and revealing undertone from a lower register; an impurity that struck his ears as something much more authentic than the clear tones of her laughter. Besides, the fact that she turned to face him totally unexpectedly and looked him straight in the eye, still giggling, nearly caused him to faint with fright and ecstasy. In the greatest panic he scurried away, taking days to recover from his amorous *fata morgana*, the dizzying idea that within this still childish shape a fully formed woman was waiting for him.

He was only fifteen and hadn't been practicing the art of masturbation for very long, albeit with great dedication. While doing it he studiously avoided using her image for his gratification. He was no dirty old man chasing children! Luckily reality had all kinds of more adult material available for his fantasy to indulge in: TV presenters, figure skaters, girls in his own year, some of his sister's female friends and even a young biology teacher, made up of curves and volumes whose powers to tantalise he allowed himself to savour fully.

He didn't understand what his body could want from Girl A. And if it wasn't his body, what was it his mind wanted?

He allowed himself to go as far as to stand in front of the mirror and slowly, very slowly bring his face to the looking-glass, pretending it was her who saw his lips approach, ready for a kiss, and imagining the longing it evoked in her. It wasn't his own longing he was trying to feel – that he was familiar with – but hers. But how could he get her to feel it too? And how would he ever find out whether she did or not? By talking to her of course! But what do you say to a twelve-year-old?

All things considered, the situation was hopeless, and intensely humiliating to boot. After a couple of months he began to see it as his sad duty to put her out of his mind. Whenever he left the house he would, if necessary, make a detour. He declared her street off-limits. And since he'd already figured out when and where her bus from school stopped he could now use this knowledge, originally deployed to cross paths with her as often as possible, to achieve the exact opposite. He had discovered that she was a member of a swimming club, knew what group she was in and what time she went training. At first it was difficult, and it actually hurt him to stop himself from hanging around the pool at those moments.

Luckily the results were not too long in coming. Six months later he had already forgotten that he was trying to avoid her. She simply vanished, first from the street, then seemingly from his memory too.