

Nightland

Jan de Leeuw

An extract pp (5-18)

Original title Het nachtland
Publisher Davidsfonds/Infodok, 2005

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Nancy Forrest-Flier

© Jan de Leeuw/Nancy Forrest-Flier/Davidsfonds-Infodok/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

.

.

.

.

.

.

A

point ,

a

black

dot on an

empty plain,

that's what he'd

be to a bird passing

over the lake. But the

birds were gone. The snow

had obliterated every sign of life.

Only the tapering tail of his footprints

betrayed his progress in this white wilderness.

Invisible razor blades of ice gyrated through the

air and drew red lines of pain in his lungs. The cold

penetrated to his bones. His fingers had become lumps

of brittle flesh in his mittens. His tears froze and fell like

icy pearls in the snow. His brain had stopped working.

One hour ago he had still been anxiously wondering if he was walking around in circles. But not now. This frozen lake had no shores. He would gladly have laid down on the ice, his head on his backpack and his arms wrapped around his knees as the snow gently covered him up. He was so tired. He hadn't slept the whole night. But if he stopped he would freeze to death, so he kept on walking. When the glittering of the snow became too painful he shut his eyes.

It was pleasant there in his head, far away from his heavy legs and his cold hands. Sometimes a memory crept past and he warmed himself at a stove, at fireworks, hot milk, sand castles on the beach and little red lights on a Christmas tree. He stumbled and opened his eyes once again. Black spots glided over the snow. They slid away under his glance and dozed in the corners of his eyes. There were no black spots, that he knew. It was hunger. He fished the last chocolate bar out of his backpack and bit down so hard that the crack reverberated across the lake like a shot.

The spots slowly dissolved. But one shadow insistently remained and kept growing as he walked toward it. Had he reached the other side of the lake after all? Not daring to hope he hurried on, afraid that the spot would be absorbed by the endless white before he arrived.

It was not the long-awaited shore but a small island in the ice. The trees thrust their black branches into the air and implored heaven for mercy. Coiled around their trunks was a barbed wire of brambles, and rotting leaves crept out from under the snow. If he had expected help he was in for a disappointment. It had been years since any human being had set foot here.

He walked around the island and stopped when he saw tracks. They led up to the island, wound their way over a low hill there and disappeared in the bushes.

So he wasn't alone after all in this sea of ice. He followed the tracks over the hill but stopped when he looked and saw the animal lying down below. It was a hare, as white as the snow, its forepaw caught in a wolf trap. The snow was turning red. Slowly he approached. The animal wanted to run away but the jaws of the trap refused to open, and after a couple of frantic jumps the hare dropped from exhaustion.

"Take it easy. I'm here now."

He stroked the hare, hoping to calm it. The heart pounded wildly as if an even smaller, wilder animal lay hidden under the white fur.

He swept the snow from the trap and pulled with all his might, but he couldn't force the iron teeth apart. He searched for a branch to use as a lever, but all the branches he squeezed through the teeth of the trap broke off the minute he applied his weight to them. He had to think of something else. Each time a branch broke the hare pulled on the trap and the snow grew redder and redder.

He took out his pocket knife and forced it between the teeth. The trap seemed as if it were about to give way, but then the blade broke. It shot into the air and whizzed just past his ear, sinking into the snow a few feet away. Terrified, the hare tugged at the trap, but it was shackled around a tree with a heavy chain. It would be summer before he had dug it out with his hands. He was at a loss.

He could easily leave the island. It wasn't his wolf trap. For all he knew there could be even more traps lying under all this snow. The longer he walked around here the more dangerous it became. But he couldn't just walk away. His fingers had felt the heart of the hare. He had to do something. But what? He couldn't release the animal and he couldn't let it starve either.

There was no getting around it. He would have to kill the hare.

He looked at the pocket knife in his hands. It still had another blade. He took off his mittens, blew some life into his fingers and laid the hare in his lap.

"Just relax, little guy, it'll be over soon."

His fingers sank into the warm fur. Was he really going to kill the only living creature in this wilderness? But he had no choice. Leaving someone behind like this was the worst thing you could do.

The hare seemed to know what was coming. It twisted itself loose, crept as far away from him as it could and jerked on the trap so hard that it tightened.

An idea began to gleam in his dark head like a star. He didn't have to kill the animal. There was another possibility. He sat on the trap, took the leg in one hand, and with a few strokes cut through the fur and the sinews.

The animal thrashed about wildly. When he hit the bone with his knife the hare let out a shriek that reverberated across the entire lake, but he couldn't stop now. He forced himself to look. The bone was shattered all right. Once more he pushed on the knife with all his strength and finally he was through. The hare slipped away.

He leaned against a tree and waited for the nausea to subside. When he lifted up his head, he saw the animal in the distance hopping across the ice on three legs.

Christmas Day began with a scream.

Had I been dreaming? What time was it? Six-thirty, according to the unalterable alarm clock. Still much too early to get up. I snuggled back under the covers, until I heard it again: “Niel!!! Niiiiieeeeeell!!!”

Not again, I thought, not again the arguing and screaming.

I pulled the pillow down over my ears, but I wasn’t going to get off that easily.

“Emmmmaaaa!!!”

“I’m coming!” I called back. I threw a blanket over my shoulders and walked in my bare feet to my brother’s room, where the screaming was coming from.

His bed was empty.

Mama was rooting around in the little pile of bedclothes that lay on the floor as if he were hidden between the folds of the sheets, but she pounced on me as soon as she saw me standing in the doorway. She hadn’t made herself up yet and her bathrobe flew open as she shook me.

“Where is he, Emma? We haven’t got time for games. Where is he?”

What was she talking about? It was Christmas Day, six-thirty in the morning. A normal person would still be lying in bed right now with slight indigestion.

“He’s gone and hid himself just to drive me crazy. I know it for sure. That brother of yours is going to be the death of me.”

She opened his closet and pushed the jackets apart.

“Come on, don’t just stand there yawning. Start looking downstairs. I’ll look upstairs.”

Why am I getting yelled at, I thought. I haven’t done anything wrong. I’m not the one who’s spent the last months snarling and being irritating. I’m not the one who smashes Christmas presents to bits. After the fight last night Niel had gone into hiding. So what? He’d show up when he got hungry enough.

I walked downstairs but stopped halfway. Something was wrong. The hall was emptier than usual.

“Mama?”

I myself could hear how small and frightened my voice sounded.

“What is it?” she called. “Did you find him? Tell him he’ll really be sorry when I get my hands on him.”

“Mama, his bike is gone.”

This could be his salvation. The animal would hop to its burrow, and that meant land. The tracks weren't difficult to follow. The hare had written his route in red ink in the snow.

He picked up the severed foot and stuck it in his pocket. On this journey he could use all the luck he could get.

When he got to the little hill he looked around. Wasn't that a black dot on the horizon? A tree? That had to be the shore. The foot was working already.

But trees don't zigzag across the lake. The dot grew, took on arms and legs and became a man who occasionally slipped on the ice but scrambled back up again and ran onto the island. He wore a dark blue uniform with gold buttons, but he was barefooted. His hair was dripping with sweat.

All this time he had longed for a sign of life, but the hare had left a bitter taste in his mouth and he slipped back between the trees. There was something strange about this barefooted man. And he didn't appear to be alone. On the horizon more dots popped up. A group of horsemen were close on his heels. Their horses, accompanied by a pack of hounds, flew across the ice. The horsemen themselves howled and laughed, undaunted by the risk of a fatal fall. Gliding in their midst was a coach drawn by four grey horses. On the box sat a dwarf in a red suit. The hunted man saw they were gaining on him. He ran on toward the island, and then he noticed tracks in the snow.

The boy withdrew into the bushes, but he was too late. The man had seen him. For one moment they stood eye to eye. Then the man took a turn and ran in the direction of the sun.

The dogs loitered around the island. Here they smelled more than the barefooted man. The boy made himself as small as possible.

The horsemen, too, stood still and let their steaming horses rest. The men in the group wore the same uniform as the hunted man. Embroidered on the backs of their fur-trimmed cloaks was a large eye. But most of the horsemen were actually horsewomen. They wore trousers beneath their cloaks and each had a large bow hanging on her saddle.

“Why are we stopping?”

A woman stuck her head out of the coach. Her eyes were even blacker than the hair that flowed from beneath her golden crown, and the lips in her pale face were red. Hare's blood red.

“The dogs have picked up another scent, your majesty.”

He had never seen a woman so beautiful. He suspected she'd be even more beautiful once those severe lips relaxed into a laugh. Her dark, warm voice rubbed up against him like a cat.

“The scent of a hare! Are you stopping the hunt for that? I can see our prey walking around with my own eyes. Let’s get going or we’ll be too late. If the dogs catch him they won’t leave anything for us.”

The dwarf cracked his whip, the horsewomen dug their spurs into the flanks of the sweating horses, and soon the whole procession was out of sight.

He crept between the bushes and bent over the tangle of half moons that the horses had danced into the snow. So he hadn’t dreamt it. He hadn’t conjured up these people himself, as he thought he had. The arrival of the man had followed so quickly on the freeing of the hare that it seemed as if he had also cut a gash in the world with his knife and had sliced a piece of cruelty from the air. So these were the inhabitants of the region he was traveling through. He knew from his father’s drawing that they could be merciless. He looked with a soft heart towards the place where the hunted man had disappeared over the horizon.

The tracks of the hare ran to the right, those of the horsewomen to the left. He hesitated only a moment and followed the blood.

Mama called the police in a state of panic. Her son was missing. His bike and his backpack were gone.

“Maybe he went out for a short bike ride,” they wondered.

Bike ride? She had screamed through the telephone. In the middle of the night, with such a heavy frost? Had they lost their minds up there at the police station, or were they just not interested in looking for a child?

After mobilizing the police she called her girlfriends. Was Niel with them?

Why did she want to know? Because he had run away after a quarrel.

Quarrel. War was a better word. They had screamed terrible things at each other, and with everyone sitting around watching. Mama’s girlfriends were used to it, but Robin, the new guest, had looked up in surprise.

Someone should have warned him that Christmas Eve is a difficult day for our family and that for months now Niel had been making life impossible for mama. Someone should have told him that we only celebrated Christmas with mama’s girlfriends and that it was very strange for us to have a man at the table.

But the poor man didn’t have a clue when he rang the bell and Niel opened the door.

Surely he noticed Niel recoil when it wasn't one of mama's girlfriends at the door but a man in a blue suit with gold buttons. I had walked to the door, too, and when I saw Niel's mouth I knew that this evening would not end well.

"You must be Niel," the man laughed.

Niels had not laughed back and went to push the door shut, but fortunately Linda, one of mama's girlfriends, came into the hall.

"Now what have you got for us, Niel?" She looked over our heads at Robin.

"If it's the Three Kings they're too early."

"A king is aiming a bit too high," laughed the man, "but I did bring gifts."

"Gifts? Did you hear that, Niel? And you let this man stand at the door?"

She pulled him inside.

"I hope you've got something better than frankincense and myrrh in your pocket to calm down this wild bunch. Look what I've found, girls," and she pushed Robin into the kitchen.

I knew right away who he was. Robin. One of mama's co-workers from the advertising agency. Whenever she gabbed on the phone with her girlfriends I sometimes heard her mention his name. In the last few months she'd also been telling us how nice he was and how well his copy matched her drawings. Niel usually left the room when she started talking about Robin.

And that's what he did now. He slammed the front door so hard that the whole house shook. I saw how furious he was as he walked into the living room. I knew what he'd do there. Sulk, of course. And rattle the packages once more that were lying under the Christmas tree. He could rattle as much as he liked, but the infrared viewer he had been whining about for years wasn't there. Mother thought it was much too expensive. Anyway, a viewer like that wasn't a toy for a twelve-year-old.

I let him sulk. I wanted to take a look at this Robin.

In the kitchen things were getting lively. The girlfriends had relieved the man of his packages and pushed a glass of wine in his hand. He didn't have a chance to take a drink because they were bombarding him with questions on every side. Was Stella at the office really so unbearable? Didn't he agree that she walked around like a woman of fifty? What a shame to waste her talents like that, since she had the legs of a young girl even though she was almost forty. Mama protested, the others laughed. With every answer Robin worked himself deeper and deeper into a corner. Fortunately he caught a glimpse of me. He winked and took a package out of his bag.

"Is it too early for presents?"

It was never too early for presents. And all the attention shifted to me, as he had hoped.

"Oooh!" they cried when a bracelet slipped out of the package.

“It’s a star.”

“A starfish.”

“Is it gold?”

“Let’s see.”

“Bet that cost a bundle.”

Twenty hands grabbed for it, but Robin was too fast for them. He fastened the bracelet carefully around my wrist. It fit perfectly.

“That’s too much,” said mama. “You shouldn’t have done it, Robin.”

“There’s only one Christmas.”

He reached for another package lying on the counter.

“And this is for Niel... where is he anyway?”

“I’ll get him,” I called, but when I got to the living room he had disappeared. The music coming from upstairs told me all I had to know. He was in his room.

His progress over the last few hours had been very slow. Each movement had to be forced. The cold in his feet had gone from unbearable to inhuman, until it made him cry out. But the pain disappeared and his feet were now senseless blocks of ice that splintered off more and more with each step. He didn’t dare remove his shoes out of fear that his toes would break off.

He no longer thought about the father he was going to find after all those years. If anything popped up in his head at all it was the hunted man, before he disappeared again and left him alone with only the crunching of the snow to keep him company. His body was a stepping machine, but one that was grinding down and could come to a halt at any moment.

A blood-red sun began to set, and he and his shadow stumbled through a red world. Soon it would be night, and he would no longer be able to find the hare’s tracks. Then he would wander aimlessly across the frozen lake until fatigue and the cold got him.

A black stripe appeared on the horizon. Was it the shore? Was it just the feathers of a raven’s carcass, blown by the wind? He stumbled toward it as fast as his cramped legs would allow. Too late. The sun had melted a path through the ice and it was night.

Neither the crescent moon nor the timid first stars gave enough illumination, and the emptiness that had sucked itself full of red light had now disappeared. He walked around in a dense darkness and the panic he had repressed for so long twisted itself free.

He was so close to the shore. But how could he be sure that was heading for it there in the dark? Now that he could no longer see the hare's tracks his chances of missing the shore grew with every step. Waiting for morning was no solution either, not in this murderous cold. He had to keep on walking and suppress the panic that was gnawing on his last bit of strength.

Then he saw the lights.

Flames popped up in the darkness one by one. They formed a string of lights in the sky. He couldn't see any lighthouses, not on a lake. These were beacons. A beacon would be on the mainland. He didn't need the hare's tracks any more.

With renewed strength he walked in the direction of the light until he stumbled on the shore. He pulled himself up on bushes and nettles. He wouldn't feel the pain in his hands until later on. He had almost kissed the frozen mud, so relieved was he to be standing on firm ground again.

But when he finally had scrambled up the shore, the trees obstructed his view of the beacons. Stay calm. Don't panic. He mustn't get lost now. He would aim for one of the lights and not let it out of his sight.

The branches caught his clothes, but that didn't bother him. Nor was he put off by the sudden noise of the night animals in the forest, an explosion of sound after the silence of the lake. Just a moment more and he would see people again.

He had keep his wits about him. This was a strange, cruel land. Who knew what they did with uninvited guests. Surely, though, they'd give him food and let him warm himself? He'd be happy enough with a bit of bread and cheese. His stomach growled and rumbled.

He walked further and the growling grew louder.

And then he stopped. This wasn't his stomach, nor was it the grumbling of innocent night creatures. This was the growling of a carnivore. For the first time since walking across the lake he felt the darkness pressing down on him. The beacons were suddenly far away, and he realized that he was all by himself, walking around in a dark and strange forest, and he had no idea what was leering at him there in the shelter of darkness.

Should he take his chances and run? That wasn't smart. The beast, or whatever it was, would easily catch up with him. He didn't dare shout. Who would hear him? Only the beast, who would immediately know where he was. The other animals had slipped away and it was deathly quiet under the trees. But that didn't mean the beast had disappeared.

He groped around in his pants pockets, found the knife, clicked it open and listened. Nothing. He was an easy prey standing here like this, with a trembling knife in his hand. The beast could creep up on him on any side. He had to find shelter. When after what seemed like an eternity the crescent moon slid behind a cloud, he saw an old oak standing right in front of him. With his back to the tree he had more protection. He would sneak up to it as soon as he heard the growling again.

He looked up.

There, in the crown of the tree, he saw them. Seven wolves, white as snow. They sat immobile in the branches. Only their green eyes flickered in the dark.

For a moment he stood there, paralyzed by disbelief and fear. Then he screamed and ran away.

With each step he walked further and further from the light, deeper into the forest. That wasn't wise, but he had no choice. He dove under branches and ran through the brambles. He didn't dare look back, but he knew they were there. Every now and then they howled, spurring each other on.

He had no idea where he was running to. The forest seemed endless. And they were catching up with him. Every now and then he'd see a white shadow to the left or the right. They were playing with him. They could have gotten him long ago, but they preferred to stalk him a little longer. Not much longer, though. He had no more energy to flee. Panic paralyzed his movements. It wasn't worth the effort, whispered a voice in his head. He might as well give up. There was no one to help him here.

He shook the voice off. Run, his body cried. He walked on blindly, too fast, unable to avoid the shadow that appeared before him. A solid blow, a flash of light and pain. And nothing more.