FLANDERS LITERATURE

Road to Nowhere

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We sat together on the quay, feet dangling above the water, shoulders touching. First we'd watched a boat being unloaded, and then we'd had a slalom competition around the mooring posts. Then we'd dropped our bikes against the wall of the fish market and sat down beside the water. Just sitting in silence was enough for us. We never went to the park, the football pitch or the shopping centre. But still, that day, we ran into someone he knew.

"Hey, Maarten."

He jumped up like he'd been stung by a wasp, and got as far away from me as he could.

"Hey, Dylan."

I looked around. Same shirt, same hair, same shoes.

"You gotta babysit?"

He managed a smile. "Yeah. My little brother."

I was twelve at the time.

"Got any ciggies?"

He shook his head. "I was just going to buy some. You?"

Dylan grinned. "Just going to nick some. You know that pub round the corner where all the old blokes go? There's this fossil behind the bar. It works every time."

Yeah, we knew the pub. The fossil's name was Nora. We sometimes went and ate herrings there, fresh from the boat, and once every so often – after the obligatory protests – Maarten helped her to shift the empties, or to get something down from the top shelf.

Maarten glanced at me.

“He’ll keep his mouth shut, won’t you, little guy?” said Dylan.

“I don’t know, Dylan. We could just go into town.”

“Can he swim?”

“What?”

“Hey, little guy. Can you swim?”

Dylan came closer. I took a step back and felt the empty space behind me. I saw the fear in Maarten’s eyes.

“Come on, Dylan. There’s a machine at the station that you can crack dead easy.”

Dylan hesitated, just for a second, but then he gave me a shove anyway, and he stood there watching, with a grin on his face, as I lost my balance and landed in the ice-cold water. Hands in his pockets, he looked down at me. I gasped for breath as I struggled towards the ladder along the quayside.

And Maarten didn’t do a thing. He stood there grinning sheepishly, desperately trying to strike a pose that wouldn’t reveal how angry and worried he was. They walked to the bikes. I saw him glance back just as my head appeared over the quayside. I was shaking and shivering. Dylan jumped onto the back of Maarten’s bike and stuck his middle finger up at me before disappearing around the corner.

It was getting dark when he came into the shed. I was just one big lump of ice by that time. The old blanket that normally hung over the lawnmower hadn’t helped.

He gasped, and leant his bike against mine.

“Eppo? What are you doing out here?”

I was too cold to speak.

“You must be crazy. Just feel how cold you are.” He took my hands in his, pulled me close, and rubbed my back. “You’re going to be ill. You’ll catch your death out here.” He was rubbing my back harder and harder and hugging me so tight that he was almost crushing me. I felt him crying into my hair but when he looked at me again, his eyes were dry. “Come on, we need to get you warmed up.”

We went into the kitchen. I still had the mower blanket around my shoulders. Before Maarten could open his mouth, I said, “I fell off the quayside, but Maarten reached down and rescued me.”

Anke stared at us for a moment and then took me upstairs. Maarten ran the bath, while she stripped the wet clothes from my icy body.

The hot water hurt, so Anke sponged me down with lukewarm water first. I felt like a little kid, but that was okay.

She put me to bed with a cup of tea and stuck a thermometer under my armpit. When she'd left the room, Maarten came and sat on the edge of my bed.

"Why do you do that, Eppo? Why don't you tell them the truth?"

"Because you're my brother."

"I don't deserve to be your brother."

He lay down beside me, blew on my tea to cool it down, and kept my feet warm.

It was two in the morning by the time we closed the door of the restaurant behind us. A few people were still sitting outside. Bottle of wine on the table, laughing and chatting away. Worn out, Tabby and I trudged to our tent and flopped down onto the bed with our clothes still on. She had sore feet, and I made her feel my hands, which were all soft and wrinkled from the washing-up water. We slept until the afternoon, ate for free at the restaurant, and then the whole thing started all over again.

In the kitchen, I scraped the food off the plates and put everything into the big dishwasher. When the dishes came back out, hot, clean and steaming, I loaded up the trolley and rolled it all, clinking and clattering, back to the shelves. Dylan washed the pots and pans. He wasn't very talkative, but I didn't mind, because my French was limited to the absolute necessities. Dylan always cranked up the radio so loud that it was impossible to have a conversation anyway. The patron came in to take a look every now and then, and shifted a pile of plates or hung up a tea towel, but otherwise he kept out of the way. Tabby got so many tips from the customers that, when Sunday evening came around, she suggested we should stay for a bit longer. I didn't really want to, but I wasn't up for travelling by myself either.

"Okay then. A couple more days."

When the afternoon shift was over, we went swimming in the river that ran past the campsite. Tabby fell asleep on her towel. I covered her up with mine, so she wouldn't burn, and I sat there, watching the sun on the water. Kids were making dams and floating along in rubber dinghies. Two boys were hanging beneath the wooden bridge; they kept swinging towards each other and trying to hook their feet together. The sound of their laughter made my stomach clench. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried so hard not to think about him that he was the only thing I could think about.

The patron looked up when I came in. He was sitting at one of the tables, doing some paperwork, and he looked at his watch.

"Tu es trop tôt."

"Je sais, mais..."

He glanced around the place, stood up, fetched a broom and pointed outside. "Si tu veux..."

I nodded and went to sweep the area around the tables, hoping that it might brush away some of the stuff inside my head as well. Tabby arrived a little later; one side of her face was red and sunburnt. She ordered a coke and started chatting to the barman. And then she noticed me.

“You here already? I thought you’d gone for a walk or something.”

“Nah. I got bored.”

I had a swig of her coke and sat down beside her.

“We’ll leave here in two days. Okay?”

“Fantastic,” I said, wondering how I’d even managed to utter a word like that.

We’d only just left the campsite when we saw a tall, young guy with a heavy rucksack standing at the side of the road. I knew Tabby was going to stop. He was the kind of man that any woman would throw on the brakes for. I wound down the window, but he completely ignored me and asked Tabby for a ride.

“In the back, Eppo.”

I stared at her in horror.

“The back,” she repeated slowly, as if somehow I hadn’t got used to her Flemish accent yet. “He’s bigger than you. There’s no room for his legs back there.”

And I did as I was told. I got out and offered Mr Gorgeous my seat.

He didn’t even say thanks or anything. I squeezed myself in, beside his big rucksack, pushed the guitar case out of the way with my feet, and then I realized there weren’t even any seatbelts in the back. I suddenly felt very insecure.

Tabby was giggling away like a little kid. Her driving became even jerkier than before and Mr Gorgeous had to grip on to the handle above the window.

I had ceased to exist. The two of them in the front didn’t shut up for a second. I thought Tabby’s English was amusing at first, but it soon started to irritate me.

His name was Jack.

And Tabby must have told him a hundred times that I wasn’t her boyfriend, just a hitchhiker. She didn’t mention that we’d been travelling together for days. She didn’t mention we slept in the same tent every night. And she certainly didn’t mention Rob.

Later, when we stopped for a picnic, Tabby insisted he should stay. He ate all of our bread, finished off the lemonade, and all that he left of the kilo of cherries was a pile of stones.

He leaned against his rucksack, with the guitar case between us, and sat there, being all American.

“Wanna take a walk?” he asked Tabby, who immediately leaped to her feet.

“Eppo, keep an eye on the stuff, okay?”

They ambled down the dusty track, into the sunset. I didn't dare do it until they were out of earshot. Then, carefully, I popped open the locks and took the instrument out of its case. I tuned it, with my eyes closed, and that was when I realized just how much I'd missed it.

It wasn't mine, but it was better than nothing.

It took a while for my fingertips to get used to the pressure of the strings again. My right hand felt awkward, and I tried to think of a tune to play. Stanley Myers's "Cavatina" seemed appropriate, with the sun setting on the horizon and the crickets chirping in the grass.

I'd forgotten some parts of it, but my fingers still remembered.

"This is so cheesy, Ep."

"I know," I grinned. I was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wardrobe. He was lying on the bed with his hands clasped behind his head.

"But it's still really nice, though."

"Yeah, isn't it?" I had to concentrate on the piece and my fingering, but my eyes kept wandering in his direction.

"I can tell you've been practising this week."

"Yeah, I've done a bit of work on it."

I didn't tell him that, for the first time ever, even Anke had come to ask if I could please play a different tune.

"I used to have a CD player when I was little," he said. "One of those stupid plastic things with the ridiculously big buttons, you know? It ran on batteries. Had a handle and a little microphone. I dragged it around everywhere with me. Sometimes it'd be a long time... You know, when Mum was tripping out. She was there... she'd be lying on the sofa, or on the bathmat or whatever, but she wasn't really there, if you know what I mean. I must have been about five. I only had one CD and I can't even remember where I got it from. It wasn't kids' music, just... music, without anyone singing. I used to put it on when I was alone. I'd hold it up to my ear and forget that I was in this shitty flat full of junk. Sometimes I had to play the CD five times on repeat before Mum came round. Then she'd be all nice for a while until it kicked off again. She'd start accusing me of stuff or she'd get mad because I'd said I was hungry. One day, when she was in one of those moods, she chucked my CD player off the balcony."

As he'd said "when I was little", I'd stopped breathing. He never talked about the past. Ever. It was like he had no past. If you asked him about it, he got mad.

I'd just carried on playing the guitar as he talked to the ceiling, and I tried not to make any mistakes, not to spoil anything.

When he fell silent, I went on playing, all the way to the end. The hush filled the entire room. I fiddled with my tuning keys and didn't know what to say, but I didn't need to say anything, because he spoke first. "I think that tune was on the CD," he said.

“You okay listening to it?”

“Only if it’s you who’s playing it.”

I was so caught up in the music that I only realized they were back when their shadows fell over me.

I looked up, expecting an earful from the American – I know I can’t stand other people getting their sticky fingers on my guitar – but he gave me a round of applause and said, “Didn’t know you could play, dude! Sounds awesome.”

Tabby just stood there, looking. “I don’t know anything about you.”

“Ditto.”

“Hey, play some more.”

Jack made a fire. We decided to sleep out in the open and I played the guitar all evening, until my fingers were sore and the fire had gone out. Jack and Tabby were lying next to each other. I saw Jack slide closer and slowly put his arm around her waist. Just as slowly, she picked up his hand and moved it. I snorted to myself. Jack raised his head, looked at me, and then rolled over, away from her.

It was still warm. I lay on top of my sleeping bag, looking up at the stars. That night, I fell straight to sleep, as if I’d been playing a lullaby for myself.

I’d soon had enough of Jack. I was fed up with having to sit on the back seat and listen to his stories. About running into a bear in Canada. About spending the night in the tunnels beneath Las Vegas. About being robbed in London and having to busk to make money for a while.

But Tabby thought it was all “awesome” and kept asking him question after question.

Jack pushed back his seat, so I had even less room in the back. Then he rolled down the window and stuck both of his feet out. Tabby screamed with laughter.

“Hey, this is the life. Isn’t this a fucking great road trip?” he yelled. “Look at us! We’re in France. The sun’s shining. It’s like being in a road movie. I tell ya, I’m not going home for a veeeery loooong time.”

Luckily, the next time we stopped, he met someone he knew. After an enthusiastic reunion, accompanied by endless shrieks of “amaaazing”, “unbelievable” and “fucking great”, our ways parted.

I went back to my usual seat and Tabby filled the silence by telling me all of Jack’s stories over again. As if the back seat was another dimension and I hadn’t been there all along. I turned up the radio in protest.

The motorway was becoming wider and less built-up, and for the first time in ages we got up to a decent speed. It even kept Tabby quiet.

“You sure we’re not on a toll road?” I asked after a while.

“No. But I like it like this. We can just keep on driving for a change. See where we end up.”

It was late in the afternoon. The rolling landscape stretched out on both sides of the road, and there wasn’t much traffic. Tabby hummed along with the songs she knew. I sat there gazing at the horizon until, suddenly, I turned to stone. From the inside out.

I recognized it straightaway. Even with the DJ waffling French all over the intro. Without any warning, the song was transmitted into the ether, unleashed upon my ears, and the music ruthlessly winkled out all of the memories that I’d so carefully and painstakingly hidden in the farthest reaches of my mind. All that time and effort was wiped out in seconds.

Ice flowed through my veins. I couldn’t even turn off the radio. The notes dropped like pebbles into my stomach.

Tabby hadn’t noticed she was sitting beside a statue. She selected a nail to bite and then started picking her nose.

“Stop.”

Had I said it, or just thought it? “Stop, Tabby. Stop!”

“Stop? Here? Why?”

“Just stop.”

“Do you need to pee again? We only just...”

“Let me out. I want to get out!”

I threw open the door. The road surface flashed past beneath me. I heard her scream, but most of all I heard that song. I knew every word and I could have sung along if I’d wanted to.

We lurched onto the grass verge. I stumbled out of the car, staggered a few steps and fell onto my knees in the grass.

Shivering, I puked up.

“Eppo, are you okay?”

She put her hand on my back. I felt cold.

“Are you crying?”

“Leave me alone, Tabby.”

Shakily, I walked away from her and looked around. Nothing. There was nothing there. Long grass full of wild flowers and thistles. A tree nearby. I went and sat beneath it. With my back against the trunk and my head tilted upwards, I looked into the branches. Lime tree. The light played in the

leaves, which rustled gently in the warm breeze. Slowly, I pulled myself together. I gasped for air as I stilled the shivers in my body and stuffed all of those thoughts back into the nooks and crannies where they'd been before. It wasn't easy. They seemed to have grown. Like an inflatable paddling pool or an airbed that you can never get back into the box it came in.

Tabby walked over and sat beside me, in silence.

I was glad. Because of her sitting there, but mainly because of the silence.