

The angel Yannick

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An extract

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‘Dad,’ I said. I sat down in front of him and rested my hands on his. I wanted to tell him about Yannick Agnel, about the most beautiful moment of my life, my perfect sitcom moment, without the shit. I wanted to tell him everything in one uninterrupted sentence, before he had the chance to open his mouth, because that’s where the shit was lurking, the scribbles of a frustrated actor, which had to be a whole lot worse than those of a derailed writer. That was the sort of stuff I had in my head, and it made me leave holes in my text, unintentional holes. And an opponent like him, of course, never misses the opportunity. He fills in your silences until there’s nothing left of you. When he was still acting in the theatre, he upstaged everyone else. He was always proud as punch when he talked about it, but it wasn’t exactly a quality for an actor to be proud of. He would have been better off doing stand-up comedy or cabaret; then he wouldn’t have had to bother about anyone else. But he’s not funny enough for that.

‘I’m dying,’ said my father. A tear rolled down his cheek, along the fold in his neck.

‘Dying?’

He nodded.

‘From what?’

‘Cancer,’ he said.

‘Cancer?’ I asked myself if I was really going to repeat every word he said. But I also realised I wanted to stretch the moment, give myself time to think. Dying, I thought, and when?

‘When?’ I asked.

‘They don’t know.’

‘They?’

‘The doctors.’

I thought about Yannick. He was going to train me for the Games in Rio. 'Will you be dead in three years?' I asked. I could have kicked myself. What a question! But I had to concentrate, Yannick had told me, just before I raced off to spread the news. I had to focus. The only thing that mattered from then on was swimming. Better not fall in love or anything like that. According to my angel Yannick, falling in love was detrimental if you wanted a career at the top. I wasn't quite sure what detrimental meant, but the look on his face when he said it was enough: no major changes in the near future. And my father was about to do something incredibly major: die. Dying wasn't really a basic need, like eating, drinking, love, sex, and in my case wanking, but it was still part of life. How was I going to concentrate when my father was dying?

'You don't say,' I said. He wanted all the attention for himself. He knew I had something earth shattering to say: I was going for gold at the Olympic Games. So he was dying. According to my mother, they once kicked my father out of the theatre, precisely because he stole everyone's lines, because he upstaged everyone, sucked up all the attention. He hadn't changed a bit. He could drop dead there and then for all I cared. At least then I could concentrate.

I walked away. I ran from my father and for my life.

And here is where my story really begins, in case you thought it already had.

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A security officer brought us to the place where my father was to change for his *performance*. That's what the girl at the reception told us with a smirk on her face. I smelt a rat. And I was right. In a loading bay, surrounded by the smell of metal and oil, my father was expected to hoist himself into a bright yellow feather outfit. He stared at it from a distance. I was expecting a stream of expletives in response to such humiliation. But he said nothing. He set the outfit to one side for a moment while he took off his jacket. I helped him with his shoes, unbuttoned his trousers and stripped them from his clammy legs. I held open the feather outfit for him to step into it. I stooped to let him lean on my shoulder and keep his balance. He almost pushed my face into his crotch. I inhaled the smell of sweat and piss mixed with the odour of a bar of sour soap wrapped in a damp used facecloth.

'Zip me up', he said light-heartedly. He pointed to his back. I only managed to pull it up halfway and was about to give it another tug when the door flew open and a man wearing a T-shirt the same colour as my father's yellow outfit marched in with a gigantic bird's head under his arm. He dumped the thing on my father's head and handed me a stack of leaflets. 'Tweedeldy-twee, toys are weeee!' he sang. 'That's what you sing every time you hand a leaflet to a child. He treated us to a second rendition. *'Tweedeldy-twee, toys are weeee!'*

My father nodded.

'And don't just give them to children. Include the parents... they control the capital.' He feigned a smile and repeated his ditty: *'Tweedeldy-twee, toys are weeee!'*

If I had had a revolver and the man a heart, I would have put a bullet in it.

Then he left, back to his shop I guessed.

My father and I stood there in the loading bay for minutes on end staring into space.

‘Shall we...’ I said. I was about to suggest we just go home, but my father interrupted me. ‘Let’s show them what we’re made of,’ he said.

We, I thought. We!

My father wanted to go outside, but he walked into the wall. I checked to see if his eyes were properly aligned with the holes in the bird’s head and they were, but he could only look straight ahead. He rested the head against the wall and pushed against it with both hands until he was back on his feet. He wobbled. I took his hand, opened the door and suggested he go out sideways because the bird’s head was broader than it was deep.

At first my father sang the tweedeldy-twee song on his own, but it sounded dull and distant inside his padded feathery head; as if he was somewhere else, and in reality he was. ‘What?’ the kids shouted as he sang at the top of his voice. ‘We can’t hear you, stupid bird!’ A few of them kicked him in the shins, much to the amusement of their parents. So after a while I sang along. I supported him by the elbow the entire day and helped him to avoid benches and bins. I also avoided school friends and people I vaguely knew. They would turn and look back at me. It was a terrible day. It couldn’t have been worse.

My father said nothing on the way back in the metro and just stared out of the window. I wondered what he might be thinking. I grabbed my bike when we arrived at his caravan. He popped the key in the lock and asked without looking back if I fancied staying for a bit.

I said no.

At that he looked dejectedly over his shoulder. ‘No?’

I shook my head. ‘I have to go somewhere’, I lied.

He nodded, but looked at me as if I’d done him an incredible injustice. I couldn’t handle it. He looked at me as if I was to blame for that entire performance in the shopping centre, just because I didn’t stay for a bit. He slowly heaved himself into his caravan. The seam of his jacket started to split. I asked myself whether I should tell him. I opened my mouth then closed it again. My father disappeared into the darkness of the open door. I thought: *if he doesn’t thank me for what I did I’m not coming back*. My father never says thanks. It’s something he doesn’t appear to find necessary.

And that’s exactly what made the day in question so sad. He turned again and stuck his head outside. I was intent on grabbing my bike before he had the chance to open his mouth, cycling off, never to return.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘For this afternoon.’

I nodded.

He slammed the door.

I cycled off.

I cycled in circles. As if that was what he deserved.

I had lied about having to go somewhere, so I cycled nowhere. Not even to my mother.

That's when I saw Ismaelle. She was sitting with her back to the window of a gallery on the Place des Vosges. The door was open. Sounds of a jazz band and people chatting wafted outside. Inside, people looked at paintings. Ismaelle was sitting on a chair that was also an artwork since it had its own price tag. I caught myself checking if she too had a price tag. Perhaps she too was a work of art. It was possible. She was beautiful, but at the same time everything about the girl was hard to find beautiful. A life-size painting of a naked woman was hanging beside her. But it looked as if the painter hadn't been in his right mind when he painted it. The arms and legs seemed broken. The breasts lay beside the body instead of on it. The vagina looked like a piece of squashed fruit. That was the only place the artist had used a little colour.

The girl yawned and twisted a curl around her finger. It looked as if she wanted to let the people in the gallery know that she was ready to go home.

I asked myself who she was. She seemed too young to be the artist responsible for the ugly painting. The painter's daughter perhaps? Or the daughter of the gallery keeper?

She looked at me. I almost jumped out of my skin, as if I still believed she was an artwork that had suddenly moved its eyes. She winked and stuck out her tongue. It made me laugh. For the first time that day. She saved it in a sense. I decided to come back, every time I felt unhappy. Not that she would be here each time to make me laugh, but if she wasn't I could always imagine her.