

# Wild Woman

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**An extract pp. 11-19**

**Original title** Wildevrouw  
**Publisher** De Bezige Bij, 2020

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** David Colmer

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**p. 11-19**

When a man has entrusted three wives to the Earth, one after the other, with two of them leaving this world with a child in the womb, he sees his seed as cursed. The last one died after giving birth to a son. The first two, in labour. Laden like a ship with its hold full of future, they sank in the depths of death before they could dock with their cargo. The first felt despised and had a terror for my ways. The second pissed on me from a great height and acted like I was a bull in bed. The third looked into the black of my eyes and knew enough.

The first encaged me without knowing. The second terrified me like a torturer rattling his implements in advance. The third was so outspoken, I thought she was mocking me and the world. And looking back, always looking back, you realise how mad it all was; as if the life each of them tried to live with me was half dream and half reality, without knowing, without my knowing, where the dream began and where it had already been eroded by waking life. No – be honest – without knowing anything about each other at all. And yet, with each of them, I longed from the very beginning to become one with a woman I could call my own, without knowing if that woman desired the same thing. It was a longing for *more*, for an intensity we would both share, for something all-surpassing, the unity of true love in each other's hearts. But how do you convey that to someone else? It remains an impossible dream you try to capture in bed and in the daytime you don't talk about it. Maybe the things that happen between a man and a woman take place in an eternal purgatory, waiting for the moment of liberation that will allow one or both to ascend. But that would mean the number of days we are compelled to spend there could be reduced by paying off some money-grubbing, pinch-mouthed priest who reaches out from a cloud of incense to receive your filthy lucre so even more churches can be built, so there can be even more gorging and boozing under the symbol of equality among swindlers, while the ordinary people remain infected with fear and subservience. Is there really a purgatory, people ask openly, or is that domain imposed on us by Your devout servants as a way to make even more money?

Maybe purgatory exists mainly as a room in everyone's mind where pain lives on, and mine is crowded with dead women.

Margreet, the midwife, pressed a polished whinstone into the palm of Godelieve, my first wife's hand while helping her during labour. Godelieve... only her name remains. "I am here for you," my first wife said. Was I there for her? In bed she reached out to me, more from duty than lust. She wanted a son in her womb as soon as possible and I don't know if that was from devotion or simply because it was expected of her. Pregnant, she was at her most beautiful, as if there had been something hidden inside of her, previously timid and fearful, that was able to blossom thanks to our deed, our willing it together.

Often I wanted her to keep her gaze fixed on me while I looked at her, which she rarely consented to. Sometimes, before going to bed, I would raise her nightgown to look at her swelling belly and mumble "May God's blessing be upon you." After which she pushed the hem back down and answered, "It already is. I'm sure of that. Our son is blessed. He's blessed because he is awaited." That wish was in vain. After a struggle that took far too long, I heard my wife cry out so loudly I rushed into the room and found a battlefield, as if a bloodthirsty demon had been let loose upon her. With her legs spread wide on the birthing chair, my wife sighed her last and her head fell back. In that silence something dropped to the floor. In my astonishment, not yet realising that I had just lost wife *and* child, I picked up the stone. "It's Oriental jasper," Margreet said. She shook her head, "It's helped me so many times." I passed it to her. The midwife turned her head away from me as she slipped it into a pouch. "It wasn't the stone..." I answered before sorrow opened its black maw and swallowed me whole.

Roos was well-known everywhere, the daughter of a cloth merchant. Her father was one of my regulars and had seen with his own eyes how many people I welcomed to my inn on the Zand every day, people who were often wealthy and powerful and whispered matters of great import to each other. She was his last unwed daughter and he offered me her hand, somewhat bashfully, while she stood by to await my appraisal. But it was Roos who appraised me. Her green eyes accepted no authority, neither her father's nor any man's. To his dismay, she shrugged after looking me over and said, "He doesn't seem as terrible as the rest." I burst out laughing to hide my discomfort. She was unapproachable and kept it that way. Her small stature and furious glares made others recoil. She was impervious to almost everything. She never said a word about what had happened to me and if I accidentally called her Godelieve, she always adopted an inquiring look, as if waiting for a clarification or an explanation of a name she'd never heard before. She cried out all kinds of things when I entered her. If I was gloomy, she whispered, "Come here, Bear," suddenly so gentle it took my breath away. I wanted to be there for her, but she wouldn't allow it. No compliments, no beautiful gifts, no words stolen from a master of rhetoric. She was who she was. She brought me a deep calm, simply by acting like my past had never existed. She did not avoid Margreet, but visited her often for advice. When she got pregnant, she insisted on seeking out her opinion as a midwife as to whether we were expecting a boy or a girl. "Your belly inclines left," she said, "it will be a girl." She gave Roos a bloodstone to hold during labour.

"She's strong," she told me, "but we still have to be careful and the stone helps against the bleeding." At my wit's end with worry, I left the two of them alone. I didn't hear much groaning. Two hours later the midwife stood before me, speechless and with blood-drenched hands. "You're no longer welcome in this house," I roared. She nodded, but said she wanted to wash my wife's body first. I permitted it, and when she took leave from me afterwards, my fury had turned into such terrified desperation that I could no longer speak. You'd think that would be the end of it, that a man would not want to subject himself to more after going through so much, but you'd be fooling yourself. You simply get as much as you are able to bear.

Clara found me herself. No father came to offer her hand; no family member approached me as a go-between. She appeared in my inn on her own. I was no longer searching and wanted to keep all women at arm's length. My plan was to booze my way to perdition. People began avoiding me. A lot of customers stayed away. Those who remained were there to drink the night away in my company and usually at my expense. At first I often thought that Clara had been sent by Old Nick, or perhaps by You, because at that time I no longer saw much difference between You and the devil. She had dark eyes and suddenly put her hand on mine. A widow who had lost her husband before they'd had children, she had seen pain at first hand, though she herself seemed free of it. It took her a while to convince me to look into her eyes, but in the end I thought I could lose myself in them, and who knows, maybe shuck off everything that had happened by making love night after night, like a rider in full gallop on his horse. Sometimes, when I was sitting on the side of the bed exhausted, I heard her quiet laughter. When I asked, "What?" she always said,

"More!" It drove me mad with desire and made me feel like the dark blood in my veins had been let. In the inn I was in a permanent reverie. Her "more" echoed through my thoughts and I kept seeing

my head between her wet thighs. When she turned out to be pregnant, she ignored my fears and insisted we marry. She kept her eyes on the prize and went to Margreet for counsel, although I'd strictly forbidden it. "That woman is a curse!" I exclaimed when I found out. My wife calmly told me that I shouldn't be too quick to say things like that. Margreet had brought countless healthy children into the world. Even after what I had been through, very few women in town doubted her skill. Who knows, maybe I was the one who was cursed, maybe I was being punished for sins I didn't even know about. Who knows, maybe it wasn't a curse at all, because how could someone forget his own sins? I didn't oppose her because she had spoken with a smile, which I found deeply confusing. Could life really be that simple? Clara and Margreet even became friends. And as her pregnancy progressed, I let myself be convinced. Calamity had been allayed by a laugh, by a light-heartedness I'd always thought impossible. The contractions wouldn't start. Margreet stirred powdered ergot into a glass of beer and gave it to my wife to drink. "Don't worry, Bear," Clara said when she saw the concern in my eyes. "It's dried cockspur rye to help open my womb. Go outside so I can give birth to your son!" It was like an amusing pageant-play in which the two dead women had simply left the stage.

I heard the child cry and rushed in. Margreet was standing there with my son in her arms.

A miracle. A curse.

The birthing chair was empty. Clara was twitching on the bed and frothing at the mouth, as if struck by lightning. The midwife pushed my son into my

arms and tried to stop Clara's shuddering. It went on and on. I called out to You, as loud as I could.

Help her!

Margreet tried to make Clara drink some kind of powder. In vain. Her twitching made it impossible.

I wept, spoke her name, scarcely recognising her anymore. There was one more cry.

Then nothing.

Even the child fell silent.

"I mostly bring miracles into the world," the distraught midwife sobbed. "To you, I bring death. No lecher's, no devil-worshipper's, no blackguard's home has seen so much death." She looked at me as if I owed her an answer, something that explained my pain, excused my fate, exorcised the mystery of my incomprehensible misfortune.

My wife was lying on the conjugal bed, a dead woman whose breasts were swollen with milk for an as-yet unused mouth, a mouth that suddenly let out a blood-chilling bawl, as if the child knew his mother's last act on earth had been to press him out of her body. "He's alive," I said hoarsely. Margreet nodded while trying to soothe him, but kept her gaze fixed on his mother, my third wife, who had been mauled between the thighs as by a wolf, her beautiful eyes closed like those of a saint who has given her heart and soul, all life gone.

Thinking back on it, I see myself with my fists raised to You, cursing loudly without crossing myself afterwards. Fury had sunk its teeth into me and fear had me in its jaws as well, the two of them fighting over me like a pair of vicious curs, growling and shaking their heads furiously. I roared "no" so many times, I lost my voice. I wished Margreet to hell, abused her as a witch and shouted that she should die on a pyre or with a rope around her neck. Who knows, maybe I attacked her physically too. I don't remember. I've also forgotten the Cellite brothers with their wide, dark-brown tunics, faces half hidden under their black hoods, who came to coffin my wife's body and take it away, just as they'd done with my two previous wives, as if clearing away offal from a butcher's shop. I know nothing about the funeral at St. Andrew's: not whether I cried or cursed myself at the top of my voice or hardly spoke. I slept, that's all I remember. I see myself staggering into the hall, opening the door of an empty bedroom and burying myself in a bed. I wanted to stay in that dark cave. Every time I closed my eyes, I hoped to die. I kept them shut tight. I saw bright writhing forms. Devils or dragons, I hoped, come to claim me or encouraging me to let myself be swallowed up completely by the darkness. I can't explain why I got up yet and, weak and ailing, descended to the kitchen. It was morning. I sat at the table and looked at Margreet's back as she bent over the soup she was making. My son was lying next to her in a

cradle, sound asleep. I was distraught, as if I had to learn everything again from scratch. I was sitting there like a ghost that has been called back, someone who has been forced to renounce his craving for death without being told why. Margreet hadn't left. She had taken charge, keeping the inn running and caring for my son. Now she put a bowl of soup in front of me without a word. The spoon in my hand seemed far too heavy, but I ate. I swallowed one spoonful at a time while keeping my eyes fixed on my son, who slowly woke and cowered quietly, after which Margreet took his little fist and pressed it to her lips. And then I was ashamed of myself for wishing her dead at the stake. I saw it in the tears welling in Margreet's eyes, I had seen it in the folds of the bloody sheets around my wife's thighs, I saw it in my much-too-hairy son, who looked like my wife hadn't coupled with me but with a wild animal. It was You above and You alone. Your finger was pointing at me. I saw the direct and unconditional love Margreet was giving my son. Blaming her was madness. Blasphemous, even. It meant that I had not recognised Your hand.

Three women had taught me about life. All three were granted a short span and in hindsight their words became precious. Their deaths cut me so badly I began to see my balls as my greatest enemy; my virility, a killer in the womb with my cock as its weapon. That was how this curse struck me. Three times You had shown me a birthing chair covered with blood that had poured from a ravaged woman. Death was not stalking *me*, but the women I gave my love to, making me feel more cursed in my inn than in hell, being roasted on a spit over a pit that stank of brimstone and excrement. For years I saw my love as a jinxed keg in my cellar, untapped because no one wanted to drink from it. No more women near me, no body touching mine, nothing left to share.

And that is only the start of this story.

These three women haunted my life for years.

The curse remained the curse. I didn't know why I had been subjected to so much misery.

And it wasn't over.

Another trial came, one that forced me to turn my back on everything I had.

A fourth woman came into my life.

A woman I was never able to call my own.

She was a wild woman and she came from the North. She said

just one sentence.

As shocking as her words were, it was only after she'd spoken that I felt my heart again.