Margriete

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p 7-11

There is no more water.

The rivers are covered with a crust of ice as thick as the walls surrounding her native city. Nevertheless, she would rather have travelled by boat than undergo this constant jerking and jolting of a journey by land. But sailing was not an option. According to her brother, it was never possible. Maaseik and Ghent are not linked by one river. And so, they jostle over the frozen ground, from inn to abbey, from abbey to inn.

Look outside.

The fields are drab, and the sky is overcast as if it will never be spring again. She draws her cloak more closely around her body, digs her hands deeper into her fur muff, and tries not to think of home. So of course, she thinks of home. About everything that was safe and self-evident. About her father, who could do so much but whose mind gradually strayed until he was finally released. And about her mother, who held her. My youngest, she said, my little girl. And then softer. My Margriete. They took turns kissing each other's hands. The youngest kissed first, quick and timid. The oldest followed, deep and gentle as if to make it last. They sat together at the table for a long time that day without saying a word, long enough for the sun's rays to glide across the table to the floor. They knew it would be a long time before they saw each other again. Someday, perhaps, in eternity. When their mother died, her oldest brother travelled back to his birthplace. He came for his mother but also for her, the youngest.

She still has her brother, that's something. He, too, is old, having lived for almost half a century. He could be her father. And to some extent, he is. He is wise, learned, and he taught her everything she knows. Or no, that is not true. Her mother taught her a lot; she sang lullabies and spoke softly, told stories. She melted butter and honey on her daughter's tongue to keep it supple. Because a flexible tongue, kept sweet, is better able to form words. Her mother taught her listening, talking. And reading. She still loves butter and honey; they give her an appetite for stories. And in turn, stories make her hungry for butter and honey. Of all the things her mother taught her, reading is dearest to her. But her brother, the older man now dozing, swaying back and forth and softly snoring, taught her the best thing a human can learn. He gave her a taste for the art of painting. And when he saw how much her appetite was growing, he taught her more, everything he knew and could do. He taught her and Jan and Lambert, just like their father had once taught him.

The materials. A painter without an understanding of materials is a lost cause, a hack. As he told them time after time. The work had to survive its maker; a hack would never manage that. A lack of material expertise was unforgivable and a disgrace to professional painters. He went on and on until they were bored to tears. But he believed in repetition, and it worked because they knew everything

now and would never forget.

She soon realised she was allowed privileges beyond the reach of other girls. Because she was a woman, she would primarily devote herself to painting miniatures. The way parchment behaved. Which paintbrushes she should use, and how. How to lick the point to make it finer, until she was familiar not only with the colour of gold and lapis lazuli but its taste.

And then?

Hubert generously introduced her and their two brothers to the art of painting large panels. Here too, she eagerly observed and learned. About champagne chalk and dead-burned gypsum, animal skin glue and bone glue. How it all had to be melted and thickened in warm water – never boiling! And then, alum was carefully added to make the bond indelible. Just a touch, right before use. After that, the grounding could begin. Thin as a veil, like he taught them. Four layers. Or better still, five. Be patient. Don't dry it in the sun. Or near the fire, because the surface would crack and tear. Waiting. Always waiting.

And then?

Learning from the Italians, who called the Flemish 'oltramontani' – those from over the Alps. The Italians believed we could only paint with tempera. But Hubert could do it all, and better than anyone. He searched and experimented and stumbled and stood up again. He made a mixture supplemented with walnut oil and linseed oil, boiled it to a varnish that made the colours glossy and fiery; then he added an emulsion of resin. He demonstrated the recipe until they had completely mastered it. And he was right, entirely correct. His colours glowed more deeply and vibrantly than those of any other painter. And she – she and her brothers – knew the secret.

He is a good man, her oldest brother, a gentleman. And the best painter in the County of Loon. He is known as far as Ghent and beyond.

And that's the reason they are now jolting over these endless, frozen roads.

The horses are steaming; they trudge further, heavy, and tired. Time is running out. It will soon be dusk. They want to reach Ghent before curfew.

Her fingers are cold and blue again, and her toes numb. She longs for a bed that isn't stained by the fleas and sweat of the previous occupants. For the peace and quiet of a house without braying drunkards. For warmth, dry warmth especially. She has no idea what to expect. But Hubert assures her it will be good.

She looks out the window of the coach. The largest city in the Low Countries looms cold and grey over the white landscape.

At dusk, they arrive at the Saint Clare Gate. A woman gawks at them, expressionless. She shakes the rattle she holds to warn of her leprosy but makes no attempt to beg. Bloody sores cover her cheeks and lips. Her woollen clothing, grey with red threads to camouflage the dripping blood, matches her face. She stops moving as if she's already frozen. The town guard reads the letter Hubert shows him and allows them to enter. A man wearing a brown chaperon urinates into a large barrel and sleepily watches as the coach passes by. Hubert mutters that the tanners will be pleased with the extra fluid. His eyes laugh, but not his mouth. He is too tired for that.

But she, she feels revived. She pokes her head out the window and looks at the city that will soon be hers. A row of high towers points to the darkening evening sky.

Artisans' houses stand in the drained marshland on the city's outskirts. Smoke coils from a hole in each roof. A blanket of smog covers the city. She inhales deeply. This is the scent of security and warmth, the smell of coming home. Her eyes sting, but naturally, that's from the smoke and the soot. And the fatigue. The street is blocked by a cart unloading its cargo of large barrels. Margriete glances sideways towards a young woman leaning against the wall of a house. Her face is childishly round, her chin slightly pointed. Despite the growing darkness, almost everything about her is bright:

her eyes, her straw-blonde hair, her yellow garb. She is terribly young and gazes imploringly at every man who passes by, more desperate than self-assured. Then the girl sees Margriete. Her eyes are practically transparent. Both avert their gaze. Margriete feels her shame. Or is it her own shame? Then, out of the corner of her eye, she sees a man talking to the girl. They disappear into a lane. The coach is moving again.

After passing the waddle and daub houses and the side streets filled with the manure of pigs, cows and geese, the inner city rises to breath-taking heights. Broadly paved roads with stone houses, some six stories tall. There are flags, intricate sculptures, and baldachins. The intense colours, contrasts, gold, vermilion and white – illuminated by torches – invigorate the semi-darkness and dissolve every hint of greyness.

The sparkling violence of the massive water mill tears open the ice on the Scheldt River and pushes it aside.

'We are almost there,' Hubert says.

Just a little while and she'll be warm again.

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p 85-92

She is amazed by the strange little beings called children. Most of them are noisy and filthy. Sometimes they are adorable and funny. They are rarely beautiful, with their small pig's noses or – what also occurs – those pointy, weaselly little faces. They are only rarely clever. But no matter how unattractive children are, they do something to women. Or mothers, in any case. Mothers wrap themselves around their tiny, helpless sprouts as if to protect them from storms, from the evil eye, to guard them against all the world's tribulations. It makes them restless, a love instantly tempered by grief for what is yet to come, because most of these kiddies won't live long enough to outgrow the breast. Therefore, sensible mothers do not become attached to their babies; they wait until they are strong enough to survive independently. But few women can manage that; she assumes it's not easy. But she is certain that's what she would do if she ever became a mother.
Became a mother.

The idea weighs like a stone upon her chest, so heavy she can hardly breathe. She could be spared all that worry and heartache. It's a blessing; that's what it is. She thinks of her friend Cateline, caged for life by anxiety and motherly love for her simpleminded son. She thinks of Lysbette, grieving because she was unable to have children. And now she is too old. Margriete doesn't understand Lysbette's longing, but she weeps for her grief. Children can even cause pain by never being born. They can do that. But not to her, never to her. Deciding to remain a virgin could mean her liberation. Freedom to stay the way she is now, as free as a woman can be. Independent and respected.

Poor mothers, doubly poor mothers. Only later, when they become widows and renounce a second marriage, are they more highly regarded than she is now. Because a woman who understands sexual gratification and chooses to forgo it ranks higher than a virgin. Widows deserve their status; she will never be jealous of them.

Back home, in front of the mirror, she takes off the horned headdress Lysbette had given her. She removes it slowly, solemnly, as if performing a ritual. She shakes her head. Her tresses cascade over her shoulders and breasts and part of her face. Such freedom is still possible and allowed. For now. And possibly forever. She smiles at the free woman in the mirror. Only those who are no longer virgins tie up their hair. Free women have unbound hair.

Doubt rises again.

Remaining a virgin could relieve her of much, but not of desire. It's difficult for her to even think about it, but she must if she wants to find a solution. For desire, that cursed yearning. The warmth runs from her lower abdomen to the small knob between her legs and then, like water around a river stone, it flows faster, more intensely, until everything shimmers and swells. It only ceases when she touches herself gently but firmly. She wants to touch herself, and she doesn't want to. Because before it stops, it becomes more intense. She loses everything and she loses herself, which is why she has shown weakness and deep shame. She is sure that evidence of her actions can be seen on her. It's unimaginable that others cannot smell her lust, that they cannot see what she has been doing.

And then the embarrassment returns, and she must pray.

Sometimes it occurs on a daily basis; sometimes, it doesn't happen for a week. Each time, she is relieved and prays in gratitude, happy because she thinks her deliverance is complete. Until Arend pops into her head again, or, on a summer's day, she sees some thin fabric clinging to a faceless stranger's warm skin.

She tries to remain reasonable. She prays again, which seems like the only sensible thing to do. She prays to her patron saint; sometimes, it helps.

In the name of God,
May Saint Margaret destroy all devils,
demons and all evil spirits
with all her powers
and may the Holy Spirit
make my head and heart
light and free of all evil.
Before the moon has been full three times,
may all evil thoughts and dreams have left me,
once and for all
Amen.

It helps. For a while, anyway. And when the urges rise again after seven days in the doldrums, she pushes them roughly away. She must deny her desire and purify her thoughts. Just as she would let her head decide whether or not to love children, she should let her intellect decide on this, too. Her head must be stronger than her weak body. Her head can be stronger. She can decide what she wants and can feel.

But it's about as helpful as trying to push oil to the bottom of a goblet of water.

And so, she implores Him again. Why? Why isn't simply making a decision enough?

He does not answer; her prayer remains a quiet monologue, falling on deaf ears.

'But that's completely natural,' Cateline replies, after she'd related her heated story in hushed tones. They sit at opposite ends of a wooden bathtub with a chessboard between them. But they've hardly made three moves. Having such a conversation here was an ungodly idea, but Cateline insisted; she felt dirty after attending two sweaty deliveries in one morning. But they only dare to continue when the chit-chat in the neighbouring tubs resumes and grows louder. Stewing in public baths is the perfect place to pick up gossip and other juicy tidbits.

'Even the most pious prigs are familiar with that longing,' Cateline says. 'The convents are filled with yearning flesh.' She laughs at her words.

'Is that so? When I think about the abbess, and some of the others, I'm not so sure. Even Christine de Pizan makes me wonder. We are permitted to evolve and do anything a man can do, yet we must be stronger than men. The only good woman is a pious, virtuous woman. I believe I am

pious, or at least I try to be. But I don't know if I am as virtuous as I should be. Christine makes it sound like a matter of course. I feel almost unworthy because I may never be strong enough.'

'Oh yes, Christine. And where do all those stories about lusty women come from, do you think?'

The woman in the neighbouring bath covers her mouth with her hand while trying to catch the eye of her bathing partner. Then, stony-faced, they pick up their wine glasses and drink

'Those tales are all written by men.'

'Well, most are. But not all. You're familiar with Hildegard van Bingen?'

'Who isn't?'

'Have you ever read her writings?'

'Fragments. Long excerpts, with my mother. Before, back home.'

'She was great. Come with me. I feel clean enough now.'

They hoist themselves out of the bath and wind sheets around their bodies.

Back in Cateline's kitchen, it smells of herbs and garlic. Cateline locates a leather-covered book and flips through the handwritten pages filled with drawings of plants and partially crossed out and amended recipes. Finally, she finds a densely covered page. 'I copied this myself, years ago, from a woman who had copied it in turn.' She laughed. 'It's been making the rounds among women. A widely shared secret. Read it.'

It is one long sentence, and Margriete reads it aloud without stopping for breath.

'When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings forth sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act…'

Cateline looks at her, friendly but sharp. 'Written three hundred years ago by a nun.' She crows, triumphant. 'But that's not doing her justice. Hildegard was much more than a nun.'

'So much more,' Margriete echoes, 'she wrote poems, composed music, and wrote about philosophy and the sciences.'

'And about plants and herbs,' Cateline adds.

'And things that are almost entirely unknown to us, like the cosmos. She was…'

'She was everything, or almost everything.'

'Nevertheless, she was also a nun, and I can't help wondering: how did she know all those things as a nun?'

'Sometimes you still sound so young,' Cateline laughed.

'But I *am* young.'

'Yes, but I forget that sometimes. I am old enough to be your mother.'

'You'd be a very young mother.'

'There are plenty of those. But what I mean is: you know how women talk with each other about everything. And I do mean everything. Much more than men. And while Hildegard was a nun, she was also a woman who felt what other women feel.'

'Would she… no, I cannot think it.'

'You are allowed to think anything.'

'And also to speak freely?'

'Women talk about everything.'

'Could she have aroused the heat she speaks of in herself?'

'Do other women sometimes do that?'

'I don't know. I assume that some do.'

'Many,' Cateline asserts decidedly.

'You?'

'Who's to say? You?'

'Who's to say?'

'If it eases your mind, I once read that it's a waste for men, but it's useful for women because it removes toxic substances from the body. And do you know *Women's Secrets*? I was once allowed a brief peek in it, but only because I am a midwife. It states that men must use their seed wisely because there is a finite amount. They risk drying out, and then they perish. But for women, it is the other way around. They can become ill when they are unable to have relations.'

'That's bad news for me. And for you.'

'Not really; you just have to tie things together.'

'And remove the toxic substances from my body myself?'

Cateline's eyebrows shoot up, and she grins.

'Is it true that it helps?' Margriete asks.

'I don't know. Is everything that's written true?'

'You mean it's up to me to decide if I believe it or not? May I use this information to ease my conscience?'

'If it helps: I like to believe it. This has become a very peculiar conversation.'

'Strange but fascinating. I thought I knew a lot about Hildegard, but this is new to me.'

She nods towards the leather binding. 'Can you help me?'

'With what?'

'Let's say I'd rather not feel anything anymore. Can you make it stop?'

'I'm sorry.'

'There must be something.'

'Of course there is. I could place leeches on your temples; the pain would silence all your thoughts and feelings. But they would return, stronger than ever.'

'It might help. Why don't we give it a try?'

'Perish the thought. I'm not a quack. And you are my friend.'
