

Like the Real Thing

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Max

He still exists, strangely enough.

Even if only as this block of ice floating in the tub.

He, Max, forty-eight years old.

Now he no longer wants to know who he was.

Now he's the ex-architect who doesn't want to live in a house anymore,
not even his own body as house anymore.

He's in it all the way, in it up to his neck. In that tub full of ice.

Don't think about the house.

The house is a haunted house.

Escaped from Borgerhout, Antwerp,

away from his life, away from who he was.

Now he's a man who takes ice baths at four in the morning
while it's freezing out, in a Copenhagen suburb.

He has to keep a tight rein on his mind, otherwise he'll panic.

The answer to all things: being no one, it dulls every pain.

But you have to be open to it, or else so far gone that there's nothing else you can do.

To call it "brain freeze" would be putting it mildly.

He's a forty-eight-year-old chunk of meat in a freezer.

He hears his limbs and bones creak when he moves.

He thinks about the creaky house,

keep on thinking,

stop stop.

Run it up. Fast forward.

Don't think.

About.

The house.

Six months ago he fled, like a criminal.

Once he was a good person

but who would believe that anymore?

His whole life gone topsy-turvy,
the bottom knocked out.
Meaning all gone,
so much lost,
like this tub that's draining
the ice-cold water
gone, into the garden.
He climbs out of the tub, an impossibility,
almost as impossible as the sinking Titanic
dragging itself onto dry land,
but he makes it anyway.
He creeps across the lawn.
A nightbird sits further up, waiting, on a branch.
The bird looks at him and turns its head away.
He moves across the lawn like a worm.
Calm,
stands upright.
The grass grows, the Earth turns.

Six months ago he fell out of himself.
But he's on his feet, even in the middle of the black of night,
He's standing in the big garden,
barefoot,
blades of grass prick the soles of his feet.
According to Chinese medicine, your wellbeing is in your feet,
they carry him, through the night, his body wanders all by itself.
He used to be so caught up with who he was,
with his identity and with playing architect,
a nature-lover because it went with the *métier*,
in the same way it would have been impossible
for him to wear a suit without irony, or run a newsstand,
it wouldn't have fit his social milieu, his class
even though the neighborhood was rife
with newsstands and semi-legal shops and forever-mutating cafés and snack bars.
To each his role.
He was an amiable man back then, courteous,
not shy, no longer the blushing child he'd once been.

Now he's a nature-lover who talks to birds and trees.
He's slipped out of his role.
He walks inside, the sliding glass door is like air,
he could walk right through it.
One moment of inattention. A shower of jagged shards. Over and out.
He sips at his tea with his phone in hand.
He can't call with this hot tea in his mouth.
He has no words for it anyway.

He knows he can't put it off any longer.

For his own peace of mind,
to put himself in a true state of rest,
a point from which he can start
building back up again.
For the umpteenth time he says out loud that he's
Not going to harass Manon,
but this time he really promises himself that.
For the umpteenth time as well.
He hangs the plan on a hook in his frozen
mind.
He's not going to call Manon anymore. Promised. Really, truly.

Manon

She can't stand the time between appointments.

She works and works.

She works like she's in danger of vanishing
into the sinkhole between meetings past
and her appointment with the pedicure.

A hole like in the asphalt after a flood.

Don't think about it.

Work, keep working.

Working is a good addiction.

Working keeps her on her feet.

She's surrounded. Family. Friends and girlfriends.

Work's not a distraction, work is her salvation.

Work is self-care, just like sailing.

Staying occupied, coming up with solutions.

The storms are so violent,

they uproot windmills, cables and all.

The only solution is to be creative.

Creativity is the raw material of the future,
if we're quick.

Time, that costliness, worth diamonds,

hidden deep beneath the ground,

she'd dig it up with her own hands.

A couple of million euros won't buy even
a second of time.

She'd buy a second from the past
and then rearrange the time, shuffle
it all around.

The second when it all went wrong.

If there was such a thing.
This waiting drives her up the wall.
Something has to happen.
She calls, she leaves a message.
She knows that a daughter doesn't answer
when her mama calls.
She pets the stuffed rabbit on her desk.
It's as big as a baby.
As big as Noah was fifteen years ago.

She's allowed to call a little more often now,
starting tomorrow she'll be off on the sailboat.
Noah's telephone rings, maybe she's asleep already,
in Melbourne it's eight hours later than in Antwerp.
She knows that young people never answer their phone,
that they leave messages unread or respond a week later.
It has nothing to do with her.
The pedicure lady says so too,
the woman who always makes her laugh.
Sometimes she thinks it helps her more,
sometimes she thinks it's better to have her feet worked on than her head,
her therapist is crazy herself, maybe she should go to the pedicure too.
She could always suggest it.

The lady's gone to fetch a new, environmentally-friendly product.
Manon sits waiting in the leatherette chair, she's already taken off her sneakers.
The woman says it's something in between clay and gel, kind of like that gooey slime that
children play with.
Everything the woman says sounds like peals of laughter.
She talks about ordinary, everyday things, about fish oil, about Manon's soft feet and
about her own recent divorce.
Manon's heard her stories already.
It's reassuring, always hearing the same stories, she wished she'd go on repeating them
forever.
She could ask her to, she'll have her take care of her feet every day.
She remembers those jars of slime from when her daughter was little.
Noah picked out a jar of it at the shooting gallery on Sinksenfoor,
she poured it down the back of Manon's neck,
it slid down her back like a dead fish.
She puts her cell phone back in her lap.
She sends Noah a close-up of her feet.
A joke is always better than whining.
The lady comes back and asks
her to tag the salon. She laughs again.

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Her telephone lies vibrating on the wooden deck.

She's not expecting anything at the moment,
not anymore.
A call from Noah, during this sailing trip, that's all.
Maybe she's expecting something unexpected, a sign from the stars,
something she didn't know she was
waiting for,
the way people used to say sometimes about the love of one's life.
That the love of one's life was waiting at the coffee place up on the corner,
and that you knew, as soon as you saw them, right off the bat:
this the big one, this is the love of my life, here's where it starts,
this is what I've been waiting for all my life.

Her bosom buddy's been sailing since he was four,
he's at home on the water.
She told everyone she'd be unreachable for the next two weeks.
The phone keeps vibrating.
They're leaving port, the motor growls.
She gets to her feet.
His name lights up.
She hesitates. Her friend gives her the high sign: duck for the boom.
She taps the little green phone anyway.
"Manon," she hears.
His voice sends chills down her back.
"Max," she says, "this isn't a good moment."
"Manon," he says, "hold on. Just one minute."
"No," she says.
"You answered."
"Accidentally."
"I'm going crazy," he says. "I... I... I can't do it anymore, I."
"No," she says.
"I want to talk about the house," he barges in, "I want to..."
Laying it on the line, straightforward as a wrecking ball. He must have practiced this,
acting plucky, being resolute, coming straight to the point.
She's done enough negotiating herself,
spent what seemed an eternity in drawn-out Zoom conferences.
She can parallel park better than a Tesla,
always keeps her cool. But not this time.
"It's..."
"Stop it," she roars at him, above the sound of the engine.
"The house..."
"No!" She's standing there screaming on the deck, like a madwoman, like King Lear in
the storm.
The boat is rocking, there's a hard wind.
Her nose is dripping, a faucet in an abandoned house.
Her friend shouts that she should go inside.
"The house is haunted," Max says.
"Oh God, are you turning it into a ghost story now?"
"You must be going crazy too, right?"

“Don’t,” she whispers in a rage. “Don’t do that. DAYCARE.”

“What?”

“Don’t Assume You Can Assume Right Every Time. Learned it from my therapist. Why would I go crazy?”

She exhales. Sea air. The wind dies down.

Max falls silent for a moment.

In a Copenhagen suburb, a pair of geese are honking.

He says something, he says: “Manon.”

She screams: “I can’t hear you anymore.”

She shouts his name again,

there goes the connection.

She hurls her phone into the water.

It’s going to take at least fourteen days

and millions of liters of seawater

to calm down even a little.

That someone could drive her this far, unbelievable.

Her telephone belly-flops into the waves,

it sinks to the bottom of the sea,

it ends up in a tuna’s stomach.

Inside that phone there are so many photos. Pictures from Blauwstraat too.

The fish can hardly believe their eyes.

Tell.

Follow the trail of words, you know you're going to write about it, there's no getting around it any more. After what happened that one time, you know for sure. It was way past midnight, and during that period you were having a real problem with insomnia. You walked past the house and much to your amazement there was a light on. A child was walking around in there, the child stopped and looked out the window. It came as a shock.

The memory, the sight of it, went on plaguing you, it was not going to go away. You knew that you would write about it, someday.

You can't write about just anybody or simply come up with a story. First you have to be standing with your back to the wall. You've never told anyone that, but that's how it works for you, that's when you start writing.

On paper you can do more, in real life you're silent or you say what people want to hear.

You usually give a polite answer when people ask where you get your inspiration, you mumble something along the lines of it all just comes out of the blue, that everything you see and experience, every movie and every advertising brochure, every conversation can be useful and that the trick is to keep working, day in, day out.

Imagination doesn't exist. It's a lie meant to prove the great writer's genius, that fabled fairytale creature that can create something out of nothing.

Imagination is an illusion. Everything's already there. You lay out the pieces, rearrange and search. You sow your experiences across the story, they end up lying somewhere between your words. A story shows you the contours of another person, you see that better than you do your own.

As a child you built huts in the forest, the way Max tinkered with scale models and the way Manon dreamed of a career in America. That's the way you fantasized about a home amid the branches of a tree. You built a treehouse to take shelter in, and later huts in which to crawl off with your notebooks. Now you're an adult and you write. In each of these words you crouch down.

Start now. Lay your shards side by side. Enter the house.

The nineteenth-century townhouse stands looking out calmly on Blauwstraat, one of the many streets that wind their way through Borgerhout, streets tossed down like ship's hawsers on the banks of the Schelde. The house doesn't stand out among the yellow-brick constructions, the hastily tossed-up high-rises that were slapped down in the 70s, the cramped working-class houses, the chaos. Blauwstraat 48. Red front door, eight windows like the eyes of an all-seeing ogre, three stories in all. The attic the well-insulated cap. The red tongue of a front door laughs at passers-by and protects the ones who live here. All the people who have lived here have left behind a piece of their soul.

The house is in Borgerhout, supposedly the worst-but-one neighborhood in Antwerp, second only to Antwerp North. A few years ago an architect overplayed his hand by buying a little old movie theater that he planned to convert into co-housing, with a public podium and a gigantic rooftop terrace. The building costs soared, the original soil certificate turned out to be a forgery, the building permit was denied and then dealers pressed false hit-and-run charges against him after he, in a rage, had scraped with his own wreck of a Saab one of their SUVs that was blocking his driveway. A project from hell. The architect had warned Max and Manon: if they wanted a turnkey home in a neighborhood without incessant noise and pushers on the street, they could better go elsewhere.

After a recruitment interview closeby, Max had found himself a seat on a bench on a surprisingly green square. It was perfect weather for getting the flavor of the place: grey skies and a light drizzle, the eternal Belgian doldrums. People walked by, a gaggle of schoolgirls in headscarves giggled at a shared secret, an old man in jeans went jogging past. Tumult, vehicles giving gas. None of that mattered; Max sat there, he knew who he was: Manon's husband, architect with the Kayser firm, he had everything under control. He had an inheritance, he had career opportunities. Pigeons fluttered down, strutted over to inspect his shoes, picked at a crumb close to his foot. He felt understood by this neighborhood, and he told Manon that. Here you could do whatever you liked, there was so much chaos and hubbub that it didn't matter.

The next day Manon had already found what she wasn't looking for. She went to view the lovely townhouse "with great potential" at Blauwstraat 48, its garden overshadowed by a massive oak with an invisible root system that had already eaten its way under houses, wrapped itself around piping and pressed against inner walls. Even in the midst of the hectic city, nature showed that it was the one in power, Manon said elatedly, and she looked at Kim as he raised a hind leg against the tree. Manon meant it as a joke. The estate agent looked the other way.

They bought the house for a not-inconsiderable price that was still far below the market value. Manon didn't give up until she had the price she was willing to pay.

One month later they walked in the door as the new owners. The lock enveloped the key, the key had trouble turning. The front door hadn't been used for a long time and it jammed, the first to-fix item Manon wrote down. They moved their modest possessions into the house. Scattered around they found a few treasures that had belonged to previous inhabitants. In the cellar there were coal scoops, inside the bricked-up fireplace they discovered a box with silver forks and in the attic a real, taxidermized rabbit stood staring into infinity.

The staircase was the house's backbone, this was no treacherously steep set of stairs or a narrow sequence of short steps but a regal stairway that ran all the way down into the cellar, an internal tail around which the house tucked into itself, lay itself to sleep under the ground like a fossil.

After a heavy downpour the garden vomited a few buckets of paint, which didn't bode well for the rest of the soil. But they'd been expecting that. The ground in Borgerhout was lamentably bad. Not to mention the air: particulate matter was pumped into the neighborhood by way of heavy traffic on the ring road, and sprinkled on all by the charter flights passing over their heads.

They had the biggest of the trees chopped down. Max meant to do it himself at first, to save money, but after he had placed an iron chain around the trunk and the chainsaw refused to start, he realized that this was no coincidence. Manon stood shouting to him from the patio, and he acted as though he was doing what she wanted, but in fact the leaden electric saw kept slipping from his hands. The final invoice, however, hurt: seventeen hundred euros to have something destroyed, it was decadent. But oh well, too much shade makes one despondent, too much sun makes things burn. They left the younger trees standing, they referred to themselves as nature lovers. In the garden they would organize barbecues and parties. You bought a house like a dream, with vague traces and meanings you couldn't completely fathom.

They were going to plant a tree for each of their children, the way they'd seen families do in the past, and in old movies too. They laughed about having to do a lot of practicing in order to get that family, and for a time their practice area was the open strip behind the tottering woodpile. Max liked feeling the wood prick against his back, the splinters, until Manon pulled him to her, against her hips, together one straight line, and his dark eyes looked into hers, looked into the depths of her, they tumbled forward, he kept his eyes on her as he went into her slowly. They had sex so often there against the woodpile, it became their shtick, lumberjacks that they were. Until their next-door neighbors gave them a tour of their house, and Max and Manon saw that they had a view of their entire garden.

Max could estimate how much work the renovation would be, but that was without taking the contractor into account. The three contractors. The arguments that weren't worth their while. Manon exercised her veto on linoleum, Max his on home-automation, even though it was handy to have your oatmeal heat itself in the microwave in the morning. Manon picked up the electric drill and could plaster walls like a pro, but she grumbled about the handle and the work gloves made for a giant, while Max worked on the plans to open up the back of the house and turn it into one huge window, a giant accordion across the whole breadth of it, on which to play a homey melody.

The lid of the roof was lifted and the ceiling equipped with an extra quilt to keep out the cold. The house was now awarded a solid "B" on the energy-efficiency report. The B of burghers, of broadminded by-passers from the borough of Borgerhout, the same could be said of everyone who lived here in one of the most closely populated spots in Europe, a total of one hundred and seventy-seven different nationalities in all. Borgerhout, once a leafy suburb of trees and greenery, now a simmering, blasted patch of earth that kept trying to regain its footing. The authentic tiles in the kitchen, a stylized floral pattern, and the buffed-up parquet floors – it cost them a small fortune. Fortunately, they could count on financial support from Manon's parents, but not awfully much.

Meanwhile, more and more friends moved into the neighborhood and began, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world, to bear children. On more than one occasion, Manon's parents dropped the broad hint that they would spend less time abroad if they had grandchildren. At playgrounds, childless Max and Manon met up with couples they knew, the conversations were interrupted by howling children, and a few years later every conversation was decimated, reduced to chats of a few minutes in length; the children

demanded constant attention or had to be dragged from a puddle or were waiting to receive applause for their whoosh down the highest sliding board.

During the next phase, after four months of hard labor at the weekends and the ongoing campout amid clouds of dust on the first floor, they hired more workers. Not much is needed to turn a pile of bricks into a trauma. All the relationships that have suffered shipwreck on the shoals of a renovation, stubborn moisture and plugged drains, it's laughable. But Max and Manon took the hurdle of the Dragged-Out Renovation pretty much in stride: they agreed in concert to put aside half the plans they'd made. "We've decided to keep more of the authentic elements," was the way they justified it to themselves and their friends. The entrance hall remained a stately, high-ceilinged corridor done up in marble. The front door went on jamming. Kim enjoyed standing guard behind it, and went mad whenever the postman came by.

Kim was their little, ironic poodle. He had the dull gaze of a professor with eyes shot from too much reading. He was perfectly happy, he had absolutely no ambition to get along further in life, or to climb any higher than the stairs to the bedroom, where he napped on the bed.

Max and Manon, M&M, they said, as though that had never been done before, the joke of the century, the love of the universe. Everything for the very first time, their love the greatest the world had ever seen.
