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From the novel *De laatste keer* ('The Last Time') (2004)

Translated from the Flemish by Stephen Smith

[...]

Chapter 3

When David discovered me on 3 February 1992, I had never cooked a meal. I didn't know how to transform an unpeeled potato into a boiled one. I had never even fried an egg or a pancake. Just like Amélie Poulain I belonged to the princess generation, the girls who had always had a lackey standing ready behind their chair, a lackey called mama or papa. The generation who thought that meals appeared on the table or laundry disappeared neatly ironed into the wardrobe at the flick of a switch. Amélie Poulain's miracles required not the slightest physical exertion. She lived in lightness; she floated. I knew washing machines and dishwashers existed, but I had never used either. I had ironed handkerchiefs and pillowcases, but never trousers or a shirt, or even a T-shirt. I didn't know how to sow seeds, plant leeks or weed vegetable patches. I had never shone a shoe or mopped a floor. I had never varnished, polished or painted. Just like David, who would be turning thirty a month later, I was still living with my parents.

David, who had decided to love me, said this was wonderful. David – his friend David - had a Polish cleaning lady, she could also clean our house, and he loved cooking. If he had to work late or was abroad, I could always eat leftovers or warm up a frozen dinner. And the shopping? – That we would do together.

The Polish girl came. Her name was Alicia and she worked like I had never seen anyone work before. Compared to her my efficient parents were sluggish. When I tried to communicate to her with sign language that she could sit down and rest every now and then, she thought I was asking her to dust the chairs. When I tried to explain how she could make coffee for herself, she descaled the percolator. It was a shame all those Polish cleaning ladies didn't have work permits, because employment agencies were crying out for such workhorses. Alicia had imbibed servitude with her mother's milk. Or she'd had it hammered into her. David and I paid her what we would have paid a Belgian cleaning lady, but friends reproached us that we were undermining the economy: if you started spoiling them, they'd start to find a decent wage self-evident. And then it would just be a matter of time before they became as lazy and idle as us. They'd turn up their noses at dirty work, labour would have to be imported from another country, and we were slowly running out of countries. Alicia was indeed beginning to behave less like a robot. In the past Alicia would even have come to work on Christmas Day, said David – not my David, but the other David - but now she was spending two weeks in Poland.

Our house was always clean, but David seldom had time to cook and he never had time to go shopping. He constantly had to take people out to dinner, or he had appointments in galleries, or he had to attend a private viewing, or he was visiting somebody's studio. Whenever possible, I would go with him and afterwards we would go for a meal together somewhere, but our home-cooked meals were few and far between. My colleagues used to go shopping during their lunch breaks, or they'd stop off at a supermarket on their way home. One woman, who had five children, used to spend the whole weekend cooking one meal after another with her husband. All those meals were then stashed away in the deepfreeze, so they wouldn't even have to think about cooking for the rest of the week. They only had to eat. They kept lists of what they had cooked and when, and numbered their Tupperware containers accordingly. I never tired of hearing her explain how she and her husband tackled that titanic task. They began on Saturday at 9 a.m. when the supermarket opened and were only finished on Sunday at 6 p.m. when they sat down to dinner. They had a Smeg cooker with five burners and two ovens. In the meantime, the

children had to be taken to music lessons, dancing school and sports clubs, because they wanted to give each of them the carefree, sunny youth they would have had if they had been only children. 'The trick, Yoko, is not to think about it. You just do it.' That woman was the only one in the office who never bought sandwiches. She always brought her own richly filled rolls. 'They taste of home,' she'd say with a smile as she dunked them in her coffee. Her name was Odilla, but everyone called her Vanilla, after the *Vanilla Moon* stores. People do the weirdest things with names. For ages I didn't dare tell her my mother was a buyer for *Vanilla Moon*, but strangely enough she didn't bear any grudge against the stores. She found Vanilla every bit as nice as Odilla, and perhaps even better.

There was never any food at our place, except when the two Davids set to cooking. Then the fridge, the worktops and all the kitchen cabinets were suddenly full, as if a documentary about food were going to be filmed in our kitchen. And they invited half their circle of friends. The wine cellar was replenished and bread was baked according to my mother-in-law's recipe. The smell of that bread was a meal in itself. I used to buy muesli and cornflakes for breakfast, and coffee and milk and bread and cheese and some fruit. Every now and then, my mother or David's would give us a Tupperware container of leftovers. And my father taught me to make spaghetti sauce. He couldn't cook either until he went to live in the commune, and then he had started with spaghetti sauce. 'Everyone starts with spaghetti sauce, Yoko. No, first you learn how to fry an egg and then comes spaghetti sauce.' When he went to the market on Saturday, he used to drop by our place afterwards on his bike. I never sliced the vegetables finely enough for his liking. 'But it's so stupid! So boring!' - 'You mustn't think about it, Yoko. Just do it.' That was apparently the secret: don't think!

Onions were the worst. Onions were so time-consuming. First you had to top and tail them and then peel them and then cut them into rings and then chop them. Sometimes your eyes watered as if you were heartbroken. And they didn't only water, they also stung. After onions what I hated most was peppers; you had to open them up and remove all those fiddly little seeds before you could slice them. For mushrooms I soon developed my own strategy. I'd rinse them and then lay them on a wooden board and chop them all up at once. Unfortunately that didn't work with other vegetables. Actually, you were supposed to wipe mushrooms clean one by one with a piece of kitchen roll, because if you rinsed them in water they'd swell up and lose their taste. Courgettes and aubergines were the easiest. If you first sliced them lengthwise, you could hold them all together with your left hand while you sliced them crosswise. Maybe one day vegetables would be genetically manipulated so that they can be harvested ready for use. I was clearly not suited to repetitive work, or for that matter to work at all. Everyone expected that I would slowly make my way back to the employment agency or look out for a new job. I would have recovered from the blow by now and it would be better for me to see more people. I was leading a solitary existence; I was too often alone. I always avoided that topic of conversation. I had not the slightest need for activity. Unlike other people, I didn't need to have something to occupy me. I could hold a Sleep-In for months on end.

The first time I saw hate flickering in David's eyes was when he and the other David decided to make onion soup. David – the other David - was giving a party for his thirty-third birthday at which, as was traditional, onion soup would be served at midnight. He had bought twenty kilos of onions from an organic farmer and my David had put out a box of Kleenex. Organic onions are guaranteed to make you cry. I had laughingly wished them lots of luck and had gone to watch TV in the living room. Suddenly the door burst open. It was my David holding a knife in his hand and wearing the green apron I had bought him. 'Yoko, there are onions to slice.' Beneath his steely self-control, he was quivering with rage. I stood up and turned off the TV. I went to the kitchen, put on an apron and looked for a knife and a chopping board. I picked up an onion. David – the other David – blew his nose loudly. My David avoided my gaze and carried on slicing onion after onion finely with grim determination. I turned on the radio, and a little later all

three of us were bellowing along with 'Video Killed the Radio Star'. When David threw down his knife in defeat, both he and I burst out laughing.

Now he is dead, that hatred is the only thing I can really remember. I only saw it three or four times at most after that, and each time in similar circumstances. I remember much more of course, but that hatred seems to be the only thing that was really important. That was the essence. The key. No matter how lovingly and contentedly his gaze now sometimes falls on me, that hatred is etched in my memory. 'Oh yes,' I think, 'you're dead, that's why you've forgotten that hatred. Or it no longer matters. Where you are now, there aren't any onions that have to be sliced or shopping that has to be done.' It was almost as if I had seen something I wasn't supposed to that afternoon, as if I had peeked into recesses of his soul he'd have preferred to keep closed to me. And also to himself. Because he loved me. I was the love of his life. He proclaimed that to all who were willing to listen. He'd had to wait a long time for me, but his patience had been rewarded. The great art connoisseur David Meulijzer was never mistaken. People who live together cannot keep secrets from each other. The most they can do is pretend.

There were, I thought, three possibilities. One: there were two Davids - the David who loved me and the David who hated me. Two: there was only the David who hated me, and the love was pretence or some sort of mistake. Three: David loved me and the hate was of no importance, the chance result of indigestion or a rotten mood. Perhaps it was aimed at his friend who had insisted on buying all those damned onions.

But because there were also two Davids in reality - 'my' David, David Meulijzer, and 'the other' David, David Mertens, so that even their initials could lead to confusion - it now sometimes seemed to me that my husband David hated me, whereas the other David loved me. Both then and now. Memories of the dead live their own life. The real, historic person can no longer correct them.

[...]

Chapter 6

Hichi stayed at my house, at our house, five days and five nights. He ate the spaghetti I cooked for him, he watched television, he leafed through old magazines, he studied the sculptures and paintings, he repaired the shower tap. Every now and then he'd say: I want to fuck, or: I'm hungry, or: it stinks here, or: I'm hot. The great thing about Hichi was that he was saying exactly what he meant. His words and his thoughts corresponded completely. There was nothing behind them. He had no hidden agendas. When he said: it stinks here, he didn't mean: you stink, or: you are a dirty woman, or: the toilet smells after you have used it. He simply meant that the house stank, just as the whole city had once again started to stink. When he said: I am hungry, he didn't mean: you don't give me enough to eat, or: your cooking is rubbish. He simply meant he was hungry. Idem ditto for 'I want to fuck'. It didn't mean: we don't fuck enough, we fuck too much, we don't fuck well enough. It didn't even mean that at any moment he'd press me against a wall to put what he'd been saying into practice. It meant exactly what he said. Hichi lived in a literal world.

The works of art in my house confused him. It was as if someone had set up fifty different traffic signs at a busy crossroads. What were they for? And what did they mean? To Hichi a traffic sign was a traffic sign. It wasn't something to mess around with or experiment with. And it certainly wasn't something you had to deconstruct. If you wanted to see fifty of them together, you simply had to go to the warehouse where they were stored, or to the factory where they were made. Hichi talked in traffic signs. His words were equally unambiguous. No entry. Dangerous bend. Speed limit fifty per hour. No overtaking. Hunger. Sex. Thirst. In my house he had entered a world in which the Highway Code was incomprehensible to him, a world in which all the traffic signs were facing the other way. And so you could only guess what they

meant. And now he was being hemmed in by new traffic signs at record speed. To me their meaning was clear enough; Hichi didn't even notice them.

The first traffic sign that was planted next to him was a packet of condoms. David had included his card with them and written on it: 'Be careful!' He must have bought them and stuck them in my letterbox immediately after his painful meeting with Hichi. That packet went straight into the dustbin. I'd rather have died of Aids than have Hichi put on condoms that David had bought.

The next day my father was at my door. He had come straight from his school and was still wearing the tracksuit in which he had been teaching. He had rung the bell even though he had a key. David must have briefed him. He bumped into my handsome young lover almost immediately. My father shook Hichi's hand without looking at him and asked whether he could speak to me. Speak to me in private. We went to the kitchen, where my father so often cooked for me. I had just made tea, but my father didn't want tea or coffee or anything else. He wanted to talk to me.

'What's up, papa?' My father never called round for a chat. He came to cook, or he came to work in the garden, or he came to repair something. I don't know what my father would have done with his life if he hadn't been my father, but I do know that a large part of that life was now taken up by me. It wasn't clear who should be grateful to whom: me to him because he looked after me, or him to me because I let him. My father had the habit of looking me up and down with a broad smile. Something about me seemed to always put him in a cheerful mood. I was his little miracle, his wonder girl. But now he looked dejected. 'Are you bothered by the stench?' The stench had meanwhile become the topic of the day. You couldn't turn on the radio or the television without hearing about it. So far only this city was affected and there was little consensus. For every man or woman who smelt it, there was someone else who insisted nothing was wrong. Just like me, my father had a good nose for smells. He would have understood my WC offensive perfectly. But now he suddenly seemed to have lost his nose, or to be reluctant to stick it in.

'Oh, the stench,' he said.

Hichi pushed open the kitchen door. The clothes of David's I had given him were three sizes too big. He had rolled up the legs of David's trousers, but they were trailing on the floor again. He lifted his arm and shook it until the sleeve slid back and freed his hand.

'Got any sugar?' I gave him the box of sugar cubes. My father stared at the floor. Because he did gym almost every day with his pupils, vaulted over apparatuses and kicked a ball around, his body had remained young and firm. As a child I was constantly amazed at how hard his arms and legs were, and how soft and weak mine were. My mother was meanwhile expanding relentlessly.

'Why don't you sit down?' He shook his head. What he had to say to me, had to be said standing up. Hichi disappeared into the living room with the sugar.

'Your mother and I always protected you.' He looked at me with mournful eyes. Could he be going to disinherit me because I had brought home a strange young man? I nodded. What he said was true. My life would have been very different if I had grown up on a rubbish tip or been forced to commit terrible atrocities as a child soldier. Nor had my parents sold me to a child trafficker. On the other hand, all the children with whom I had been at school or in sports clubs had also been able to count upon their parents' protection. They'd also lived in homes where they got food, clothes and pocket money and where they were encouraged to do their best at school. My parents' efforts didn't seem exaggerated or abnormal. 'And after that David protected you.' I felt the advance of sorrow. An army of tears mobilised in my breast, ready for the great attack. He didn't have to remind me of David. I hadn't forgotten him. I'd never forget him. 'And now David Mertens protects you. And your mother and I are also always still there for you.'

The tears retreated. 'I don't think David Mertens is a good person. He thinks he is good, but he is not. He wants to convince the world of his goodness. Truly good people don't show off their goodness. They may even seem bad.'

'He is very concerned about you.' I burst out laughing. David Mertens was indeed very concerned about me. As if he had been listening behind the door, Hichi re-entered the kitchen. I felt for his hand in David's sweater sleeve and pressed my lips against the palm. It was an unfair battle. Hichi and I had been having sex not half an hour before. We had been panting and screaming and sweating together. My father was the past. He was everything I should have broken away from a long time ago.

'Can't Hichi be present?'

'Preferably not.' I closed my eyes and again pressed my lips against his palm. Naturally I had never done such a thing to my father or my mother. And maybe never even to David. My father waited to continue until Hichi had left the room.

'You are in love.'

'In love?' I laughed. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe I am in love.'

'How old is that boy?'

'No idea.'

'What does he live on?'

'He is the Belgian ambassador to the United Nations.'

'Yoko, your mother and I never told you why we...'

'...why you left the commune.' He bit his lip. 'You left the commune on the advice of a psychiatrist. You told me. You must have told me a hundred times. Or two hundred. I'm sorry I didn't fit in there, papa. I'm sorry I ruined your dream. But at the end of the day, it's John Lennon's fault.'

'That man told us you needed a sheltered, safe environment in which everything happened according to fixed agreements and habits. In the commune the children belonged a bit to everybody and everybody took turns at parenting. People came to stay for a week, two weeks, a month, and then they disappeared again. You couldn't cope with that. You needed stability. The other children loved it, but you used to wake up crying in the night. You ate next to nothing. And you used to hide yourself in cupboards.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

'How odd.'

My father nodded. 'That psychiatrist said...'

'I know what he said. You told me. I was a child then, papa. A toddler. Every child needs to feel secure. And if it doesn't feel secure, it will crawl into a cupboard.'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. The other children didn't feel insecure there. They flourished! Their parents said it was all our fault of course, that we were doing it all wrong, giving you the wrong signals.'

'And spoiling me too much.'

'That too. Vera claimed it was because of the oranges. You loved oranges. We'd slice an orange in half for you and you'd sit there licking it for hours.' He smiled at the memory and I also had to smile. How could I be angry with the man who used to slice oranges in half for me? And so much else, of course.

'I thought oranges were good for you?'

'According to her, they made you nervous. And you were nervous. And she said we gave you too much milk. Milk alone would have been no problem but in combination with oranges it was disastrous. But according to the psychiatrist, what made you nervous was people like Vera, who wanted to bring you up when your mother and I were already doing that. It sowed confusion. You needed clarity. Need clarity.'

'Did you come here to tell me I loved oranges when I was little?'

He smiled. 'My little Yoko, it's so awful.' There were tears in his eyes. My father missed David. Those two had got on like a house on fire, even though my father didn't know the first thing about art and David didn't have a clue about sport. 'That psychiatrist said we shouldn't tempt fate.'

'But you didn't tempt fate. You moved out and I grew up into a fine young woman of whom you can be justifiably proud. Things don't always go as planned, but they usually turn out for the best. Look at me. Take a good look at me.'

'You mustn't tempt fate, Yoko. There are things you can't cope with. You still have to rest a lot. The accident...'

'Did David phone you?'

He nodded. 'He loves you, Yoko.'

'I know that.' Yoko Debondt, condemned to eternal rest. Sleep, baby, sleep, while David tends the sheep.

'He is a good person. Whatever you think or say. What would you have done without him? Or do? Thanks to him...'

'I am not going to marry David Mertens, papa.'

'You don't have to marry him, Yoko.'

'I don't want to not-marry him either, papa. I don't want to have sex with him.' It was a strange thing to say to my father. It implied the existence of men with whom I did want to have sex. It implied that I had sex. 'I'm sure there are lots of women on earth who would want to. Or who would certainly want to in exchange for a little money.' I remembered my attempt to seduce him. Was I simply after revenge because he had rejected me?

'Have you still got food in the house?'

'No. My father neglects me.' He smiled. 'But don't worry, I'm going shopping later.' If my father were ever old and helpless and confined to a wheelchair, I'd pick out the juiciest oranges for him and slice them in two with a razor sharp knife. I'd take his dentures from his mouth and tell him: lick.

That was the second traffic sign. 'No entry. Enter at your own risk. In the event of an accident, the management cannot be held liable for any damage and/or injury.' I was like the brave little tin soldier, struggling all alone against the stream. I thought about *Casablanca* and about Ingrid Bergman, who during filming didn't know which man she would be choosing in the final scene. Whether the heart or the head would triumph. Or the cunt. Even the director didn't know with which man she'd ultimately be flying to her destiny. People said the power of the film lay in that very uncertainty. And then I thought about what happened when two dogs fought for a bone, and about the stench that had hit the city and had heralded the arrival of Hichi. I phoned Alicia and told her she needn't come this week.

'Madam holiday?' she asked.

'Yes, madam holiday.'

'Why are you looking at me?' We were lying in bed, the bed in which I had always lain with David. And I was indeed looking at him. In fact, I was smiling at him. A smile someone other than Hichi would have described as 'blissful'.

'I like looking at you.'

'Why?'

'I think you are beautiful.'

'I have to pee.'

'How can you pee with an erection?' I lay my hand on his belly just above his penis.

'Don't.'

I climbed on top of him and moved slowly to and fro. 'Piss. Piss in me.' I pressed his wrists against the mattress and pressed my tongue into his mouth.

'I have to piss!' He pushed me away. Soon, I thought. My nipples were glowing. The ice age was over. The desert finally crossed.

The hopscotch game you used to draw on the pavement or the playground with a piece of chalk and then hop from square to square until you ended up in heaven. That's what sex was like. A steep ladder you climbed. Sometimes it brought you to heaven and sometimes it didn't. That was okay too. Perhaps you were feeling too lazy for the climb, or too languid. Ten rungs up, three down, five up. Heaven was not homogeneous, it was no absolute superlative. Heaven, heavenlier, heavenliest. A heaven of aluminium and one of pewter; one of plastic and one of cardboard, delicious, delightful heavens that many women hopped in and out of. Then you had a heaven of bronze and one of silver, where it was already a lot less crowded. And then you had the super-deluxe, crème de la crème, summit of delight, Valhalla and nirvana, heaven of gold, where an average woman ended up ten or twenty times at most in her entire life. Hichi catapulted me past St. Peter and his weighty book, past the mewling and moaning women in the lower regions. With a cry of delight I sank into deep, soft cushions. I was the rose that bloomed; the stove that was soundly stoked, the proud Amazon who galloped freely across the tundra with her hair streaming.

Erogenous and heterogeneous. It sounded like a slogan, an artistic platform, a heavenly manifesto.

Thea erected the third traffic sign. Hichi and I had breakfasted royally at her place - croissants, yoghurt, fruit juice, cappuccino, crusty French bread, soft boiled egg, slice of cheese. Hichi had gone to the toilet, to get to which you had to go down some steep stairs into the cellar beneath café Hamam. 'Wherever did you find him?' She flopped down into the chair next to mine. I smiled. Thea laid her hand on my arm. 'You're looking good.' She hugged me and gave me a kiss. 'I bet you two stay in bed all day.' She looked at me searchingly for a moment and then hugged me again. For months this had been my favourite place: under Thea's arm and against her soft breasts. 'I can see it in your eyes. Well it was about time, Yoko!' In Thea's arms, I never felt like arguing or disagreeing with her. I was like the lotus-eater who forgot everyone and everything and sank away into the eternal now. 'You have a beautiful body, Yoko. Use it. Fuck. There are lots of boys like him around.' Again she looked at me searchingly. 'You're not going to tie yourself to a man just because you've fucked him?' Hichi returned from the toilet. 'I've know her much longer than you have,' said Thea. She looked him provocatively in the eyes. 'Wherever did you come from?' But naturally Hichi didn't answer.

When I stood those three traffic signs in a row, they all said the same thing: Hichi was purely physical, and thus the negation or supplementation of everything I had known with David. In the world in which I had previously been living, the body had been an instrument, the necessary carrier or container of the soul. Physical pleasure was raised to a higher level by skilful intervention. Eating became savouring, fucking was always making love and love by definition was to be more valued than sex. Art tried to smash its way out of that cerebral cage. Machines that produced turds, performances in which blood flowed, a cabinet full of used condoms, the decaying fly-besieged head of a cow, reminded man of his physical, mortal state. We were no angels. We fucked, pissed, shit, vomited, gorged, drank, stank. But art was bound by the nature of art. No matter how many turds the shit machine squeezed out, it would eventually spin a golden thread with which the robes of archangels would be woven. Art appealed to interpretative powers, gave rise to statement, reflection and essay. With Hichi I entered the lost animal paradise. We sniffed each other's genitals, plucked fleas from each other's fur, licked each other clean. Farewell division, farewell duality. We were flesh, blood, muscles, cells, hunger, thirst, lust, sleep. Those who set up the traffic signs had realised that in the blink of an eye: Hichi was sex. Or rather: Hichi plus Yoko was sex. Nothing more, but also nothing less.

David and my father looked on, gnashing their teeth and hoping to limit the damage. Thea rejoiced and saw me choosing the path of lust and licentiousness. I saw the boy with the plastic bags on his feet and my desire to be a good fairy. I saw the row of shoes David would never again wear, the thick layer of dust under which the leather was losing its suppleness. They saw a procession of interchangeable Hichi's: wild boys with a luscious body. I saw him. Unique. Irreproducible.

Hichi in the morning in my bed. He has thrown off the duvet. He is lying on his side; his sinewy body forms an S. A wolf, I think. His penis is erect. He is sleeping.

Hichi's body, which is a world to me. The continents and all the oceans. The distant journeys I undertake. The Eldorado I discover. The land of plenty, where the fruit drops into your mouth. The golden city where the fountains spout chocolate. After the tears a chuckle finally bubbled up inside me. I understood nothing of the woman I had become, the woman who was crying one minute then laughing again the next, of the joy that was bursting out of all of her pores because her lover was lying next to her. Hichi didn't even try to understand it. He was in a house; he had clothes, food and a bed. Soon he would have none of these anymore. But for the time being, the plastic bags were a thing of the past. David's shoes would carry him far. Little statues of emaciated people stood on the mantelpiece. Above the bed an empty wooden bobbin was hanging on nylon thread. When he asked the woman why it was hanging there, she answered with a laugh: 'That's art.'

The traffic signs kept shooting up like mushrooms.

'Personally,' said the shop assistant, 'I think the pearl-grey shirt looks better on sir than the purple.'

'And what does sir himself think?'

Hichi stared at his metamorphosis in the mirror. The clothes were for his visit to the museum. Time after time I had 'caught' him staring at the sculptures and drawings in my house, like a street kid setting his eyes on an electric train set for the very first time. Behind his wary, concentrated gaze, I suspected an upheaval that was turning his familiar, literal way of thinking on its head. I knew exactly what I wanted to show him in the museum. But first he had to go to the hairdresser, and he had to have a shave, and then he had to put on clothes that fitted him properly and about which nobody would wonder whether David hadn't once worn such a jacket or shirt.

I was like the teacher who has discovered genius in the socially disadvantaged pupil. Michèle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*. Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* and *Good Will Hunting*, Julie Walters in *Billy Elliott*. To Thea's annoyance, I had not thought that much of *Billy Elliott*. 'I don't understand you,' she'd said. 'Don't you like fairy tales?' - 'Is *Billy Elliott* a fairy tale?' - 'Of course it's a fairy tale! Just like *Amélie Poulain*!' - 'So why do they pretend it's real?' - 'Because... because... because fairy tales sometimes really happen.'

Hichi's hand skimmed over the pearl-grey shirt. The material glistened without glittering, making the shirt look distinguished, stylish and expensive. And it was expensive. Very expensive. But just a little less expensive than the purple.

'Is it cotton?' I asked.

'Interwoven with silk thread,' said the shop assistant. That sounded extremely chic. I'd deliberately gone to a shop that didn't exist when David was still alive. If they were to have any hope of paying off its design interior, they'd have to shamelessly overcharge their customers.

'Take them both, Hichi,' I said bravely.

'I'm sure sir will look very handsome in them both.' He was one of those butler-like assistants, who never showed any emotion. Even if you were to tickle them, they'd retain their steely expression.

'Sir should have been a model,' I said with a smile. Hichi was still gazing at himself in the mirror. Perhaps we had stumbled into *My Fair Lady* and I was Professor Higgins coaching Audrey Hepburn for the ball at which she'd be presented to the queen. The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain. But I didn't want to transform or educate Hichi. I wanted to show him David's museum.

'Will sir be requiring anything else?' Sir already had a pair of trousers, socks, underwear and two shirts. Sir still required a jacket. Sir chose an anthracite coloured linen jacket. Sir had taste, that much was certain. The shop assistant took Hichi by the shoulders and nodded contentedly, and Hichi was also satisfied; the jacket fitted him like a glove.

'Will sir be keeping it on?'

'No,' I answered.

'No?' asked Hichi.

'No,' I said. Hichi obediently disappeared into the fitting cubicle. The sales assistant wrapped the jacket in tissue paper as if it were a costly jewel.

'Has the stench had any influence on your sales?'

'No, madam.'

'And it doesn't bother you?'

'No, madam.'

'Well it does me. It's only will power stops me vomiting.'

He finally reacted, worried I'd vomit all over his posh shop. 'Madam isn't feeling well?'

'I'm fine. But that stench is enough to make anybody vomit.'

Hichi came out of the fitting cubicle in David's baggy clothes. He once again looked like a lanky layabout.

'Madam is paying?' I nodded. The shop assistant made a slight bow. 'Traffic sign number four. Madam is paying. Madam has money, sir does not. Madam has a different sir's money.'

'What do you want from me?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all.'

'You're not the first woman who has bought me gifts.'

I blushed. 'The last one must have been long ago.' I spoke each word slowly and looked him straight in the eye. Hichi didn't blush. His hand began to stroke my breast. He bit my neck and licked my ear. I hated that, even when Hichi did it. He pressed hard on my nipple, sucked wildly at my ear. 'Which is wettest now. Your cunt or your ear?' My hand shot out to slap his face, but he grabbed it and twisted it behind my back. His thumb kept on massaging my nipple; his tongue was licking my ear. 'Cunt or ear, Yoko? Cunt or ear?'

'Cunt,' I screamed. The next thing I knew Hichi was fucking me against the washbasin. My trousers were around my ankles and I was holding on to the rim of the basin. Every time he rammed into me, my arms automatically folded and my breasts slammed against the rim. His body thrashed against mine harder and harder until he fell against me spent. His trousers were also around his ankles. Or rather: David's trousers were around his ankles.

'I had a blackout. The one moment I was saying 'cunt' and the next you were standing here fucking me.'

'Nothing happened. You needn't worry.'

'I swear it. I can't remember a thing.'

'Calm down,' he said. 'You have to learn to stay calm.' But he was also trembling.

David on the answering machine. 'Yoko, it's me David. Can you call me?'

While he was shaving, I lay my head against his back. 'We should have bought you an overcoat too.' Hichi didn't answer. 'If you like, we can get you an overcoat tomorrow? One you can zip a fleece into.'

'It's summer.'

'But after summer it's autumn and winter.' Neither of us said a word about where he would be by then. Or where I would be. The thought never even crossed my mind. Hichi straightened his back and pulled his head deep down into his neck. I slid off him as if he were a greasy pole. It was a shame you couldn't Velcro yourself to another person, couldn't be a little backpack he carried with him everywhere. Or that you couldn't slice his body open, climb inside and then close it up behind you. The razor skimmed expertly over his throat. David always nicked himself. Blood mingled with the shaving foam and later trickled from the wounds onto the collar of his shirt. He never allowed me to shave him. 'No way,' he'd say with a laugh. 'I'm not a pig that has to be slaughtered!' The rasping dance of the razor over a rugged skin. David used to stick bits of toilet paper on the nicks to stop them bleeding. Sometimes he'd forget about them, not an attractive sight. But unlike Hichi he shaved himself every day. If he had an appointment in the evening, he'd shave himself twice: first in the morning at our house and then again in the late afternoon at the museum. He was a very smooth man.

Hichi tapped his razor against the rim of the washbasin. 'This razorblade is blunt.'

'I'm not surprised.' When would David have bought those blades? A day, a week, a month before the accident? 'Good thing we can't see into the future,' I said. I ran my index finger down Hichi's backbone. You could make an incision there, open up the body and then quickly duck away inside. 'Shall we eat first and then go to the hairdresser, or go to the hairdresser first and then eat?' Fucking was temporarily out of the question; we were all fucked out. Hichi bent forward to wash away the last of the shaving foam. David had bought that too, but the aftershave had been a gift from his mother. The bottle was half full. Hichi sniffed it.

'Haven't you got anything else?'

'No.' He splashed the aftershave onto his cheeks. Now both my men were in the bathroom. I brushed my cheek against his. 'That razor wasn't blunt at all.' I could never fall for a man who used an electric razor.

'Have you got any scissors?' I nodded. He took a lock of his hair, held it up and snipped off a piece. Lock after lock came off. Every now and then, he'd run his fingers through his hair and study the effect. Then he'd take another lock. He looked more boyish now his hair was no longer falling into his eyes. He studied the result in the mirror for ages. Then he put down the scissors and unpacked his new clothes from the tissue paper. He held the pearl-grey shirt up in front of himself first, but it was the purple he finally chose to wear. 'Happy?'

I nodded. Sir looked great.

'From now on everything is art. The museum begins at this stop.' The tracks of line eight ran through the city like a thread. If you followed them in the one direction, they'd take you to the museum; in the other, you'd pass by our house. It was our personal line. David and I always got on and off a little further away than we had to, so that we would pass by our house on both the outward and the homeward journey. If the tram had to shuffle along behind a queue of cars because the lights at the junction were red, we could then stare into our house for minutes on end, just like the people we'd seen staring in at us. If the tram stopped outside our house in the evening, when it was lit up, then it was as if we were looking out through our window at a row of Hopper paintings. We believed we had a right to our own seats, the way some people used to have their own church pews with a little nameplate screwed to them. Those people were excused Pew money, and so David and I thought we should be allowed to ride free of charge. But only on tram eight, of course.

Hichi put his arm around me and pulled me to him. I pressed my nose into his new shirt, so I wouldn't have to smell the stench. His vigorous young heart was beating calmly. We waited for the tram.

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'I'm dead too, Yoko.'

'What do you mean?' In Hichi's case, something of a superfluous question. Hichi said what he said.

'I no longer exist. I am as dead as your husband. Look.' He carefully took a death certificate out of his wallet. There it was, in black and white: Hieronymus Boris Gielen had been born on 1 January 1980 and had died exactly twenty years later on 1 January 2000. Hichi's face was totally devoid of emotion. He appeared to believe the document. It said he was dead, so he was dead.

'But you're not dead.'

'I am. I've been to the town hall. I can have as many copies of this certificate as I want. But they can't bring me back to life.'

'Of course they can. Poor Hichi! You're the first victim of the millennium virus that I've met. You remember all those problems they were expecting? They even set up a crisis centre? Well that's where you should have reported this.'

Hichi shook his head. At the employment agency we called that the 'you-don't-understand-what-I'm-trying-to-tell-you-and-how-could-you-understand-it-you-just-sit-here-in-your-cosy-little-office-you-don't-know-what-it-is-like-to-be-in-debt-to-be-thrown-out-of-your-house-to-be-abandoned-by-your-husband/wife' shake. But madam, we'd say, why don't you take a computer course? Or: sir, why don't you look for somebody to mind your children after school? And then they'd give that stubborn shake of the head. 'I'm sorry, madam, but I can't help you if you won't help yourself.' That was to a woman who kept being fired because she came to work with a bottle of whisky in her handbag. 'What do you know about life,' she'd said. 'Have you got a husband?' I nodded. 'Does he knock you about? Does he drink? Does he bring other women home?' Keep your distance. Don't think you can solve their problems. They won't thank you for it. If we didn't have any work for them, they sometimes spat in our face.

Keep your distance, I thought. Don't think you can solve his problems.

'Perhaps somebody registered you as dead for a joke. Somebody who was trying to steal your identity.' I was talking like someone who got everything she knew about life from newspapers and magazines. Millennium virus. Theft of identity. Such things happened. Of course they happened. People even wrote about them. Hichi paid no heed to my words. He'd said what he had to say. I only had to lift my hand to touch him, but an unbridgeable chasm had opened up between us: he was dead; I was alive.

He folded the document on which it stated that he was dead carefully in four and put it back in his wallet. 'And my identity card is no longer valid.' The identity Hieronymus Boris Gielen no longer existed. It had not been stolen but discontinued. It had become obsolete. It was like the twenty and fifty franc notes that had long ago been taken out of circulation and replaced by coins. And soon all Belgian currency would disappear, just as all people would one day die.

'But you're alive, Hichi. Anyone can see that you're alive. You're a foundling with no name and address. You were raised by wolves and now a hunter has discovered you.' Hichi didn't even shake his head anymore. It was disastrous that this should have happened to him of all people. David would have had a good laugh about it. He'd have seen it as a metaphor for twenty-first century man and for the dictatorship of bureaucracy. And he'd have known precisely whom to get hold of to get himself resurrected that very same day. 'Listen, Hichi, that friend of mine we saw in the museum is a lawyer. He can sort it out for you. If need be, we'll write a letter to the king.'

But Hichi was reluctant to rejoin the living. He'd dwell among us like a zombie. A hollow man. A ghost. That was naturally what I made of it. Or what David would have made of it. The obsolete man, who has been replaced by robots. A not inconceivable scenario for a science

fiction film. But Hichi lived in literality. And in literality he was dead. The last and most tricky traffic sign had been set between us.

When I woke up the next morning, Hichi wasn't lying next to me. He had taken the clothes I had bought him, the sculpture of the nine-breasted woman and the money that was in my wallet. Two pairs of shoes had disappeared from David's wardrobe, the fine leather ones we'd always jokingly called his dancing shoes, and the sturdy walking shoes I had given him the first day. It was a weird thought that the one dead man would be walking around in the shoes of the other dead man. And that I had sought comfort for the death of the one in the arms of the other. There was a note on the table: 'I'll be back.' Le revenant. The dead who refused to leave the living in peace. But he was not dead. Hiëronymus Boris Gielen. He's dead, people would tell me. The person about whom you are inquiring died on 1 January 2000.

The fantasies began that very same day.