

Lex Noteboom

The Man With a Thousand Faces

Translated from the Dutch by Ida Blom



A.W. Bruna Uitgevers

Prologue

I wait in the bedroom because I know she will only come in here after putting her daughter to bed, finishing her wine, and locking the doors. I look at the folded pink pyjamas. When she is done downstairs, she will come to the bedroom, take the pyjamas from the bed, and put them on. Only then will she go to the bathroom.

She always does everything in the same order. Every night is the same.

I read in a scientific article that humans do almost everything unconsciously. We only really think about five per cent of our decisions – if I understood correctly. If that's true, then all of us are soldiers; we are only allowed to make decisions if something doesn't happen according to plan.

Downstairs, the floors creak. I follow the sound through the living room, to the kitchen island. There it stops. I hear glass on marble. She drinks one or two glasses of red wine while watching TV. For some reason, she won't put the empty glass in the dishwasher until tomorrow. A few seconds later, she drinks some water and then walks to the hallway.

Same routine every time.

Every night is the same.

Until tonight.

Tonight, a man wearing a balaclava is sitting in her bedroom. After tonight, opening a door will never be the same.

Again, creaking downstairs. The sound moves through the hallway to the front door. One by one, the lights are switched off.

My breathing is too superficial. I rub my hands on my trousers. It doesn't help, because I'm wearing gloves.

The plastic curtain cords rattle in their pulleys.

Should I get out my gun? Or is the fact that I'm in her bedroom enough to scare her? I hope she won't scream. Most people don't scream. Most people shriek and then freeze. They wait. But sometimes, someone lets out an uncontrollable cry. Then you have to hit them. You tap them as if you're waking them up and then they'll shut up. But not too hard, because then the screaming will last longer.

The floor creaks again; she's going to the toilet. The fan turns on and pulls the air through the wall behind me, up to the roof. The wall is buzzing, and so are my ears.

I close my eyes and breathe in and out. When I open my eyes, I look around the dark room. It's spacious, and every corner has something in it: little chairs, tables, cabinets. The more expensive the house, the more useless stuff it contains. The carpet is nice and soft, I have to give her that. I can feel it through my socks.

The toilet flushes and the fan is turned off. I stand up very slowly and look at the bedroom door, framed by cracks of yellow light from the hallway. I try to get my breathing under control, but I can't. The ringing in my ears gets louder. Maybe I snorted a bit too much. Normally I don't take over five milligrams of Moda. Why did I do more today? Why didn't I just do what I always do?

Stumbling in the hallway, then up the stairs.

Fourteen steps.

Slowly, I walk towards the bedroom door. The soft carpet reminds me of a night in Warsaw that I spent hiding under the bed of a Polish businessman. I needed to poison the man in his sleep, but the potion didn't work. The client gave me a plastic tube and a pipette, and I asked what type of poison it contained. 'The less you know, the more useful you are,' he said. They always say stuff like that. I'm only allowed to think for myself when something doesn't go according to plan. And so, I lay under that hotel bed all night, listening to the old sleeping Pole. Waiting for him to die. But the man had a wonderful sleep, and I ended up having to kill him with his head pillow before the sun rose. The

only comfort during that long fucking night was the soft carpet under the bed.

Footsteps on the landing. She will go and check on her daughter now. Her daughter is always asleep, but she checks anyway.

I snap the holster open. I hope she won't scream. If she screams, her daughter wakes up, and then we have to take care of that before I can get to my questions. Most people don't scream, though.

A few weeks ago, I read that dogs can smell the past; when they walk into a room, they know exactly where people have walked and sat. Their sense of smell goes back for days, even. Dogs know that people keep repeating their movements like they're stuck. They can predict our future.

The floor in the hallway is creaking again, so her daughter is asleep.

She's coming to the bedroom.

She's so close now that I can hear her breathing. I can hear the fabric from her sleeves as they brush against her waist. She's talking to herself. Very softly.

I bend down and forward, so that I can step in if she starts screaming. Most people don't scream, though. Most people wait for what will happen, completely frozen.

'Who are you?!' That's her version of the short shriek before she stiffens.

'Sit down,' I say softly, and I point to the white chair that she drapes her clothes on every evening.

She nods but doesn't listen. She's standing still and staring at me.

'Who are you?'

Her voice trembles.

'Sit down,' I say again, 'I'm not going to hurt you.' I talk as quietly as possible, but my voice trembles a little, too.

She looks through the open door into the hallway. In the direction of her daughter's bedroom. That's how long it takes before you don't just think about yourself, but also about your child.

Everyone thinks about themselves first; I've seen it happen many times.

'If we're quiet, she won't wake up,' I say.

She nods again.

'Take a seat on the chair behind you.'

She scuffles backwards without losing sight of me. In her right hand, she has her smartphone. I don't lose sight of that.

'What do you want?' Her whole body looks tense. In two days, she will have sore thighs and her jaw will be stiff.

'You want money?' she asks. Her eyes shoot to the door, and back to me. 'I don't have cash. But I can go to an ATM for you.'

I shake my head and take a step forward to close the bedroom door. 'I just want to talk, that's all.'

The room gets dark again.

'Put your phone on the ground, next to the chair.'

She nods and puts the phone down. 'I do have some jewellery,' she says. 'Jewels.' She sweeps her hair back, over her shoulder. Why would she do that? Maybe she's trying to make herself less attractive; maybe she's afraid that I'm here to rape her, and that's why I'm in the bedroom.

When I go and sit down on the edge of the bed, her legs relax a little.

'I want to talk to you about your past life,' I say.

'My what?'

'I want to talk to you about your life before coming to America.'

She folds her arms in front of her chest. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'You know exactly what I mean.'

'Who are you?'

The balaclava is starting to get itchy. Sweat on my forehead is getting the fabric wet, and now my skin is irritated. And my ears are ringing.

'Why did you give yourself a new name?' I ask.

She takes a deep breath and sinks into the chair.

'Why did you give yourself and your child a new name? In your passport, it says 'Noëlla', but your name is Michelle. And you didn't grow up in France, but in the Netherlands.'

She asks how I know all this.

That's strange. Most people insist they have no idea what I'm talking about. But not her. This woman immediately admits that I know the truth.

'I've been searching for answers for a while,' I say.

'Are you the man who ascended from the ice?' she asks.

I'm not sure if I should answer that. I should have snorted less Moda.

'Yes, it was you. You were out on the frozen lake, waiting for us.' She looks at my hands, but the burn marks she's looking for are hidden by gloves.

'All I want is answers to my questions,' I say. 'If I get those, I'll never come back, ever.'

She's not nodding anymore. She's thinking.

'If I get answers, I won't hurt your daughter,' I try.

Immediately her eyes shoot back to my face. 'What do you want to know?' she asks.

'Who did I work for? Who was my commander?'

'What do you mean?'

She knows what I mean.

I start talking louder. 'My question is very simple: Who did I work for? Who assigned those kidnappings and executions? The rebels? The CIA? The government?'

She shakes her head. 'Do you really think the world is that simple? Like a football game between two teams?' She slides back in her chair, her arms folded.

'There must be one person who set up the operation?' My voice trembles. 'The more research I try doing, the more confusing it gets.'

'I understand why you came here,' she says and crosses her legs. 'This is about Kazichia. You want to know what the goal of your mission was. Why you were there.'

Now I'm the one nodding. 'I want to know why an innocent woman had to die. I want to know if all that misery served a purpose.'

'I wasn't as important as you think. I don't have all the answers.'

'You're part of the Lechkov family, of course you're important.'

The floor creaks. Her eyes dart to the door. Is that her daughter? Is she awake?

We sit opposite each other in the dark bedroom, in silence. She watches the door, I watch her. The white in her eye lights up in the dark.

'Tell me the truth,' I whisper. 'I've had enough of all the lies. Tell me the truth, and I'll spare you both. Who is the Man with a Thousand Faces? And how did he gain so much influence?'

She swallows. 'I didn't know. I didn't know about the war with the rebels or the Man with a Thousand Faces. All I did was try to escape. All I wanted was to get my kids home.'

I stand up and pull my gun from its holster under my coat. She dives forward, but I push her back into her chair and press the barrel against her forehead.

'Please,' she whispers and looks up. Her eyes well up with tears. 'If you shoot me, you definitely won't get any answers.'

'That's true.' I press the gun to her thigh.

She stretches her arms out in front of her. 'I'm telling you the truth, I swear. I flew to Stolia for a funeral. That was my first visit to Kazichia, and we were supposed to stay for a few days. I got stuck there. I was a prisoner.' She lowers her arms and takes a deep breath. 'We're both looking for answers. We both want to understand what happened. Maybe we can help each other.'

'You know *exactly* what happened.'

'If only. Why do you think I'm living here? Under a different name? I do lie about everything. My whole life is a lie. I did not grow up in Paris, I didn't work for an IT company, and I didn't lose my husband Gabriël to cancer because Gabriël never existed. I lie about everything because I have to hide.' She leans forward, and her wet eyes glisten like glass. 'All I want is safety. That's why I'm here. I'm not part of the Lechkov family anymore. I'm scared of those people. I wish I had never met them.'

I press the gun to her head again. 'I might as well shoot you, then. You're useless to me.'

'We can help each other,' she repeats and points to the bed. 'Sit down again. Ask me something else. Maybe I know the answer. Sit down.'

I do as she tells me.

'We met out on a frozen lake. In that lake, there's a secret island – an island that's not in the atlas. And on that island, there's a house. Did you go in there?'

She nods.

'Did you go down to the basement?'

'Yes,' she says. 'It's like a recording studio; there are four cameras and a chair in the middle, and the walls are painted green.'

'In that basement, an innocent woman was filmed and tortured, for hours. I want to know why the Lechkov family did that. And I want to know what that basement has to do with the Man with a Thousand Faces.'

She looks at the door and then smiles at me. A slight smile.

'Why are you smiling?'

'I don't know exactly what they did to that woman. I don't know what happened on that island, but together with you I can find out.' She gets up. 'We want the same thing. We want answers. People who want the same thing don't have to point guns at each other. I have an open bottle of wine left downstairs, but maybe you knew that.'

'Yes. I did.'

'Let's go to the kitchen so my daughter doesn't wake up and have a glass of wine while we find out what happened. I'll tell my story, and you tell yours. We'll cover everything that happened in Kazichia, from beginning to end. Together we will find out the truth. Together, we can expose the Man with a Thousand Faces.'

Before I respond, she starts towards the door. I watch her leave the room like I'm not even here anymore. Before she disappears, she turns round. 'Come on, we can talk. But be quiet in the hallway.'

I nod and do what she says.

I. The Last Lechkov

The grey metallic BMW 7 series stops on the east side of Schiphol, by the gate for the private hangars. A smiling customs officer walks over to the car in big steps and takes three passports from the driver. While he hurries back to his station to check passenger records, it gets quiet inside the car.

The first passport the man opens belongs to Michelle Verdier Lechkova, born on 7th June 1986 in Zutphen. Michelle is in the back seat of the car. She is quiet because she feels like throwing up. During her first pregnancy, she was fine, but this time round, she's tired, grumpy, and nauseous. Every little hurdle seems impossible to overcome, which is why she called their favourite resort in Dubai the day before arriving; she needs sun and a pool, stat. And the villa of the resort turned out to be available. 'How lucky,' she told the resort manager, and she read out her credit card number. But Michelle knew that it was not a question of luck. The manager covered the phone with his hand and told his co-worker that the villa needed to become available immediately. 'The guests that are there now need to be moved to a suite,' he said. 'Think of an excuse. It's for Mrs *Lechkov*.' Michelle pretended not to hear them, but 'Lechkov' sounded more like a warning than a last name.

The military policeman has entered Michelle's information and opens the second passport. The document belongs to Alexa Lechkova, three years old, born in Amsterdam. The girl sits beside her mother in the car and stares out the window holding her stuffed dog. Alexa is quiet too, but for an entirely different reason;

her parents were fighting before they started driving. Alexa doesn't understand what her parents were talking about but can tell that the silence in the car is tense. It feels like something is about to happen. But what? She stares out the window at the flags behind the hangars, which are being pulled this way and that by the gusts of wind.

When Alexa's information has been entered, the military policeman opens up the last document. The passport photo shows a man with a rough face, a broad nose, and soft eyes. Daniel Petar Lechkov, born in 1982 in the former Soviet state of Kazichia. But the passport is Dutch. Daniel is sitting next to the driver and quietly texting. He is trying to reach his family because something strange has happened; that morning he had fourteen missed calls from his mother – his mother, who normally never calls. On the off chance that she wants to talk to him, she lets him know through one of her assistants. Even when his father had collapsed on the steps of the Kazichian parliament, Daniel received a text with a request for a call.

And now fourteen missed calls . . .

Daniel wanted to delay the trip to Dubai immediately. Fourteen missed calls, fourteen reasons to worry. But Michelle dismissed it as a malfunction or a mistake. That angered him. He didn't think she should prioritise a few days of holiday time over his family's wellbeing – *their* family's wellbeing. Michelle said that he wasn't understanding enough. She needed rest, did he not get that? Because Alexa was visibly shaken by their discussion, he restrained himself. But he was still worried, and on the way to Schiphol he had tried to reach his mother or his uncle. Nobody responded. And he couldn't find anything about his country of birth on any of the international news sites.

Not yet.

Because over three thousand kilometres east, just outside the capital city of Kazichia, something happened that night that would make international headlines. Between a badly maintained two-lane road and the narrow Kazichian shoreline lay the wreck of a Rolls-Royce. The road was scattered with glass and showed dark red streaks of oil and blood. On the side of the wreck, a hole was

sawed to free the driver. But when the firemen pulled the man from the car, and one of them started performing CPR on him along the grey-blue surf, it was already too late. The victim had passed away. The fireman stopped, and when he leaned back, he took a good look at the deceased man's face. He jumped back in shock.

'Lechkov!' he shouted to the paramedics running out to the beach. 'It's President Lechkov!'

The name sounded like a warning.

The military policeman returns the passports to the driver and breaks the silence in the car. 'Have a great holiday, Mr and Mrs Lechkov.' Nobody responds. The gate opens, and while the car enters the grounds of Schiphol, the smile on the man's face disappears. 'Lechkov,' he mumbles to himself while trudging back to his station, and that second time, it sounds more like a curse word than a name.

A few dozen metres away, the BMW stops by the Lechkovs' private jet. Daniel helps Michelle get out of the car and tells her that she can board the jet – he'll take Alexa and get the bags through security. Grateful, she hoists herself up the steps of the plane, and while the flight attendant welcomes her, she promises herself to make peace. It's not fair to push Daniel away when he's talking about his family, especially when he's worried. She likes to pretend her last name is just as powerful as any other name, but she knows that just isn't true.

Daniel has lifted Alexa from the car, but when he feels his phone vibrate in his pocket, he sets her down and pulls out the device.

'*Tsvali,*' a woman's voice says. 'Are you there?'

'Mum?'

'It's Vigo.'

Daniel looks at the plane and sees his wife behind one of the windows, closing her eyes.

'Daniel, do you hear me?' Maika Lechkova asks. 'You need to get back to the family now. Your brother is dead.'