

Renate Dorrestein

The Darkness that Divides Us

Translated from the Dutch
by Hester Velmans

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A is for Abacus

We must at some point have made up our minds never to exchange another word with her, because, as if by prearrangement, there was always a deathly silence the moment she came into view. We'd clamp our lips shut and look the other way when we saw her coming into the schoolyard or when we passed her in the street, playing hopscotch or marbles all by herself.

When had it started? It must have been the year we learned to read, in Miss Joyce's class. So long ago, anyway, that it was as if a ring, faint but unmistakable, had gradually been drawn round her, marking the spot where she was standing, walking, or sitting: a sign that she had been singled out as a target. As the scapegoat.

Our silence did not mean we didn't have anything to say to her. We wanted there to be no mistake about that, and that's why we often lay in wait for her after school. Four of us, or six, or, if there was nothing else going on, a bunch more.

We'd hide in the shrubbery on the old village green, behind the hornbeam hedge whose leaves in spring were the colour of chocolate. In front of the hedge stood a bench overgrown with brambles. In the old days, when the green was still being maintained, it was a popular spot for courting couples. Now it was mostly deserted. But it wasn't considered particularly unsafe, since it was overlooked by all

the houses surrounding the green; anybody could see what was happening out there, unless everybody happened to be looking the other way at the exact same time.

Elbowing one another in the ribs, we hid behind the hedge. The moist earth was crawling with spiders that tried to scramble away on buckling legs when you held a match to them. They made a popping sound as they burned; the shrivelled little ball gave off a measly puff of smoke.

As soon as we saw her coming, we put away our matches and ducked. We were packed so close together that we were just one big huddle of quivering muscle and flaring nostrils.

On the other side of the hedge we heard her pace slacken. Her footsteps slowed until she came to a sudden halt. She was weighing her chances, probably: her after-school tutoring session had run a little longer than usual, dinner smells were already wafting out of the open windows, the street was empty; all the kids had been called inside. Maybe today was her lucky day. She started fidgeting, her fingers plucking at a hem, as if trying to find something to hold on to. Her clothes were always a muddy colour. It was only to be expected of those Luducos, our mothers said, shaking their heads. Men didn't know how to do the laundry, nor did they have a clue about dressing a little girl properly. 'The poor child,' they said.

We stared at each other, our cheeks bulging with excitement. Nobody wanted to go first, or worse, last. That thought spurred us to leap out, all together at the same time, to block her way. Arms crossed, legs planted wide, chins raised. A human barricade.

Her mouth and eyes rounded into perfect Os, her face

grew so pale that the freckles looked like ants crawling across her nose, and her carroty plaits, which she had grown long again just to annoy us, sprang loose from the shock.

There was a total silence all around. No sound of telephones ringing in any of the houses. No pan clanging on any cooker. No baby even dared to start crying. No housewife was chatting with a neighbour over the hedge. Even the brambles stopped growing as we thrust the scrap of paper with our latest ultimatum at her, at eye level so that she could read it. She had trouble working out what it said. But we had plenty of time. We gazed at her, relaxed, as drops of sweat welled on her upper lip. When she was finally done deciphering our message word for word, we stuffed the piece of paper down her throat to make sure it wouldn't be used against us. Obediently she chewed and swallowed it. She kept her eyes down, but we were only too aware how blue they were, as blue and brazen as ever, despite her cowering demeanour. The picture of innocence, she was. Oh, she was good. We gave her a shove, sending her stumbling across the deserted square with our promise churning in her gut: 'We gonna get you, scumbag.'

The moment she disappeared from view we were overcome with the urge to shake ourselves like dazed, wet dogs. Suddenly we felt a pressing need for noise. We started making a racket, yelling whatever came into our heads, to convince ourselves we had every right to put her on notice that for the rest of her days her life was going to be a living hell. Tomorrow we would make her pay. Or, better yet, a few days from now. Just as she began to think she was safe again, we'd give it to her good, we would. This year was our

last chance: soon we'd be turning twelve, and at the end of the summer vacation we were all going to different schools. At home they had already started gazing at us sentimentally, reminiscing about our happy childhood, which, they said, was very nearly over.

All of us—most of us, anyway—were born here, in the sole modern housing estate of a sleepy little town that would have fallen off the map long ago if a stretch of no-man's-land squeezed between canal and motorway hadn't appealed to a bunch of builders as a prime piece of property.

Our fathers smugly declared they had been the very first residents to move here. Pioneers of sorts, they were. In those days there wasn't another housing estate anywhere else in the whole entire country, I kid you not! The national TV news had come to film the prime minister inaugurating the first house—at least that's what our mothers told us, their eyes still glowing with pride. They'd lost no time spiffing up the place, planting bamboo and embellishing their yards with droll garden ornaments. Then they were off to the salon to have their hair highlighted.

Your dad did have to earn good money if you wanted your own little plot of split-level property here, but in relative terms the prices were a joke. For a similar chunk of dough in Amsterdam, you'd be in a third-floor walk-up with no view. And here you had all that fresh air into the bargain.

That first summer on the housing estate, our parents barbecued up a storm. The whole neighbourhood joined in; after all, pioneers have an obligation to eat well, they have to set an example! Our mums made potato salad by

the bathtub, our dads tied on aprons and sharpened their carving knives. In winter everyone pitched in to erect a colossal Christmas tree in the new shopping-mall square, where the wind howled so fiercely that they'd needed gallons of mulled wine not to get blown off their feet. And by the time summer came round again, we were born, one after another, in dribs and drabs, but pretty close in age all the same, as if the bank had threatened to foreclose on the mortgage unless a baby was produced by a certain date.

Back in those days we had no idea how that worked, babies getting born. We had no concept of all that's involved, or of the possible consequences. We simply appeared out of nowhere, from one moment to the next, to our parents' immense joy. They leaned over our cribs, they cradled us in their arms—carefully, because we were such precious little darlings—and showed us that we really had the best of both worlds: bathrooms with all mod cons and hygienic stainless-steel kitchens, but also the countryside outside our back doors, brimming with cow parsley in bloom and mud that would ooze into our wellies when we were a little older, squishy and delicious.

We sucked air into our lungs and screeched with delight. We hollered so loudly that we could hear one another right through the walls right and left of us and across the street. This, too, was part of the deal: little friends our own age, thrown in for free. What fun it would be to grow up together—first steps, first words, first tooth, first bloody lip. And we'd ride our tricycles together! Where else could you ride a tricycle as safely as down our lane?

We had it made. We were in clover. As if the whole world knew exactly what we deserved.

The heart of the original village consisted of four narrow streets around a central square. It was there that our mummies headed every day to do their shopping.

Shaking their highlighted curls, they parked our pushchairs inside the musty-smelling greengrocer's; the man's fingers were so swollen with arthritis that he had trouble wrapping the crisp fresh lettuce in newspaper, and if you didn't have the exact change on you, you had to slip behind the counter and help yourself from the till. No place else in the world had such tasty vegetables, our mothers assured him, I really mean it, Mr De Vries. They squatted down in their tight jeans and handed us carrots to suck on. Then they dawdled for a while longer, hoping for a chat; it wasn't as if they had that many people to talk to, but Mr De Vries just went on silently weighing the split peas, and, suddenly embarrassed, they fled from the gloomy shop, needing to put distance between themselves and old age and aching bones and hard work—out, out!

Once safely outside, they collected themselves. They bent down and with flushed cheeks made shushing noises into our perambulators. You could tell how glad they were that we, even more than they, were helplessly dependent on things beyond our control. After all, *they* didn't need anyone to wipe their little bums. They stuffed the lettuce firmly into the pushchair's shopping net, and once again we felt ourselves going bumpity-bump over the cobblestones. Overhead we could see blue skies with the odd cloud here and there that looked like an elephant, or a chicken. Then we'd pop our thumbs into our mouths, because nobody was asking our opinion anyway.

The butcher's. Meat slaughtered on the premises.

The baker's. A country brown loaf.

When our mums were done with their shopping, they'd gather on the village green across from the former rectory. We lay dozing on plaid blankets, snuggled against their hips. Their tanned, pale, or freckled faces glistened in the sun; they dabbed their necks, their voices brayed. Even in our semi-comatose state it made us uneasy, we got itchy, we began to whinge for no reason, just to get their attention. Their panic was understandable. To be twenty years old, far from the big city, banished to a brand-new housing estate in some itty-bitty backwater no one's ever heard of, left to cope all by yourself in this suburban Wild West while your husband was stuck somewhere out there in a traffic jam—but then they would shake themselves, grabbing their painted toenails or the ends of their bleached hair and then tugging as hard as they could, and they were off again, shrieking with hysterical laughter. There was always something to gossip about. There was always some scandal you could freely dish the dirt on, even in the presence of infants. And there were always good snacks, too, to be shared around.

The summer we first opened our astonished eyes, the treat was often strawberries: it was a great year for them, they were as big as duck eggs, the whole world reeked of their sweet, cloying aroma. With their tapered fingernails our mothers pinched the stems from the berries, they bit them in half and gently prodded the pieces into our drooling mouths. The juice ran down our chins, staining our baby knits.

'Watch out for wasps,' Lucy's mother cautioned.

In the sea of maternal bodies she was the only one you

could have picked out blindfolded. That was because she smelled of patchouli, whereas our mothers all smelled of Yves Saint Laurent's Paris. Because *our* mummies had our daddies, they had real husbands who could afford to buy them perfume recommended in *Avenue* magazine, and a closet full of sexy summer frocks besides.

Lucy's mum, in her slinky, home-made, invariably black dresses, with her sleek black hair, was the exception in more ways than one, because she was the only one who lived in the old village. Oh, not very long, she replied when asked how long she'd been there, and laughed. Even though our mums couldn't find out as much about her as they'd like, they were fond of her. She was the merriest of them all and could always be counted on to come up with a solution to any problem. She could tell your fortune with the help of a deck of Tarot cards. There was no point looking back, she would say, you should always look ahead at what was next. 'Look, this is the Three of Cups. The card of friendship,' she told our uprooted mothers. 'That's the most important card in the deck'

In unison we burped and in unison we produced stinky nappies. We slept, we had the colic, we learned you were supposed to chortle if someone cooed 'ta-ta' at you, we stuffed things into our mouths, we grew. We grew like cabbages. At first we reconnoitred the world on our hands and knees, but soon we started walking and pulling breakables off tabletops. We explored electric outlets and discovered the stairs. We said 'Mama' for the first time and were practically hugged to death. Every new milestone was recorded for posterity by video cameras. As far as we knew,