

The ones she fooled

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Nona Van Looy

Schrijver: Nona Van Looy
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To my two little girls,

To my young readers,

There are a lot of things you can be. The list goes on and on. You can choose to be kind, optimistic, caring and ambitious.

But what you should never forget, is to be you.

You are beautiful.

You are worthy.

You are more than enough.

Don't try to be anything else but your old, plain self.

One

Day 2 – Thursday

Alone, afraid, hungry, cold, in pain, maybe even dead. I shook my head in an attempt to lose that thought.

I entangled my feet around the leg of the empty chair in front of me. As if I could bring her back if I held on tight. How was I supposed to concentrate today? Or tomorrow, or however long this nightmare would last? I'd barely slept and my mind was elsewhere. Obviously.

No one had spoken in thirteen minutes, until my new English teacher, Miss Van Sant, thought it was enough.

-Take your books at page 7, we'll start an exercise about individualistic and collectivist cultures!

The woman was so totally crazy. She jumped from left to right, her curly hair bouncing up and down, explaining every word of her course by waving her arms around. Her voice was equally as bouncy as the rest of her appearance. When she came closer, you could still see the small dot on her nose which I assumed used to contain a piercing of some kind. Since we saw her for the first time that morning, we all paid attention. In just a quarter of an hour, she stumbled off the steps in front of the class and accidentally bumped her hip against one of the back desks – while students were trying to work on it, of course. She smiled from ear to ear.

All. The. Time. She looked tiny in her greenish jumpsuit. I don't think she was much older than we were, maybe 24 or 25. I wondered how she could be so energized, with 20 tired 18-year-olds staring at her with their heads resting on their hands the entire hour, probably hour after hour. Observing her bizarre behaviour, I instantly knew I didn't want to become a teacher. Being all happy and enthusiastic all day long was not for me. Imagine being bad-tempered - or hangry - and not being able to show it? Must be dreadful. Deciding what I wanted to do for a living was the last thing on my mind anyway.

This was such a weird day. First day of school with Ava still missing, for the second day already. She went for a run yesterday, and never returned. In school, it seemed as if everyone was trying to avoid Olivia and I. They knew how close we were to her. I turned my head to the right to find Olivia, but it looked like her straight dark brown hair got stuck in her gum and she was trying to remove it. Great, my side-kick in this horrible nightmare we found ourselves in, is truly remarkable.

Miss Van Sant went on and on about the literature which focussed on the pressure today's students are put under, and how burnout is one of its many effects. I grinned. That didn't seem to be something I suffered from. I turned my head to the right again. Olivia got the gum out of her hair, but now she had sticky fingers. Neither she suffered from such pressure.

Although Miss Van Sant's lesson felt endless, we were eventually dismissed. We were on our way to the next class when Poppy and her crew appeared out of nowhere. Olivia and I flinched. They scrutinised us, checking us out from head to toe. It felt as if we were chess pieces, facing our opponents. Only Olivia and I were outnumbered this time, as our queen was missing.

- So, where is she?

Poppy made the first move by raising her eyebrows. She crossed her arms and another girl – Zadie? Julie? I had no clue, they all looked the same – took her example. The confidence was written all over Poppy's face. She had long, thick hair. The colour of dark chocolate. Shiny too. And it was in the exact same, perfect position every single day. I wondered whether she was able to take it off at night, to place it on her bedside table so it would still be in the same position by morning time.

- Oh right, as if we know where our missing friend is? The whole nation is looking for her, you know... Maybe it didn't get through to you that this is a serious situation.

Olivia rolled her eyes at Poppy and placed her hand on her hip. She actually seemed really strong. I knew for a fact that my nervousness was apparent. Confrontations like this weren't my strong point. I could go ahead and try to pretend but I knew they'd see right through me. I'm very aware that wouldn't make things better.

- Maybe she just got tired of you two.

Poppy said as she blinked at her herd, who all thought it was hilarious. Their laughter sounded like sparrows twittering. Before we could answer, she disappeared into the mass.

Checkmate.

-Can you believe this, Liv? Kicking us even when we're down?

I said to Olivia. She took my hand and squeezed it while we entered the classroom.

Once upon a time Poppy and I got along, - but we were much younger then. Time made us change, each in a different direction. She always made me feel as if she was better than me. Smarter, more interesting, prettier,... She became a whole other person when we started school. Still, she was always seeking me out for some kind of confrontation. She knew exactly how to push my buttons. I couldn't even tell what it was that made her act in this way. All I wanted from her was to be left alone. Right then, I couldn't believe we ever had a friendship.

...

The teachers each had a different way of handling Ava's disappearance. This one for example, the history one, was ignoring the whole thing. Apart from the fact that he was covered in an equal amount of dust as the books he taught with and he wore the same costume vest to school every day – More than we'd like to admit, Olivia and I often debated whether he had only one vest or a closet filled with an abundance of vests that looked exactly the same—

Nonetheless, he meant well. He was definitely nervous, stumbling over his own words. He tried to act as if everything was fine, but him trying so hard made it even more uncomfortable. Miss Van Sant from earlier tried to play the feelings-card. Given no one felt like talking about any feelings in this group, that idea went down the drain quite quickly. Luckily the subject of the class, being our culture creating burned-out students, made us all feel better...

At break, Olivia and I hid in the hallway. This wasn't allowed, but if you were fast enough there was absolutely zero chance of getting caught.

- What do you want to do about the Ava-situation?

Olivia asked.

The Ava situation? I looked up, focussing on her rather than my chocolate chip cookies. She kept her poker face. Our friend was 'a situation' all of a sudden? I felt the key burning a hole in my pocket, but I felt it wasn't quite the time to bring this up to Olivia.

- I don't know, what can we do?

- How about we start our own investigation? I really can't stand not knowing where she is and what has happened. I can't help but wonder whether Mr Saunders has something to do with it...

- Do you reckon? Because of what happened last year?

I faced the other way, to buy myself some time and let it all sink in. Ava had had a huge argument with Mr Saunders

after his final class in June. She wouldn't say what it was about, but she was furious.

Olivia blew a bubble. Always chewing that gum.

- Indeed. Remember how she went straight home - didn't even say goodbye - and when we asked about it, she would minimize the entire thing and change the subject. Something is not right about that.

I found it incredible to think a teacher would've kidnapped her. They're all as mad as a hatter in here, sure, but hurting a student?

- So, what's the plan?

- Maybe he knows something? Let's see whether he's in the science classrooms. One simple conversation might be enough to fully rule him out...

I agreed and right away started to think of excuses as to why we would be hanging around the science classroom, just in case we were quizzed. No one would buy our sudden interest in the subject. And to be honest, with Olivia, you always needed to be prepared.

When we opened the door to the biology classroom and he wasn't there I was relieved, hoping we'd be leaving again immediately. The room was filled with didactic material. Human evolution posters, a life size skeleton, a huge projection screen. A twitch came down my neck. He once showed us a tape of an actual childbirth. We all felt a bit nauseous afterwards. Since then, I wasn't able not to think about that when I entered this room. Maybe that was his way

of preventing teenage pregnancy? A quite effective one, I must say.

- Bingo!

Olivia shouted. I did not get her excitement. She ran towards the desk and lifted a briefcase. His briefcase. No way.

- This might just be equally interesting.

- No way!

I said it out loud this time.

- Why not?

Liv said, with her nose already deep inside. I tried to swallow but my mouth was too dry.

- Could you at least guarantee you'll put everything back in the exact same spot?

I was so nervous, my stomach hurt.

She mimicked me in a silly voice.

- I heard that!

- I meant you to. Would you please calm down? We'll be fine!

I decided to keep watch by the door. Carefully, though. Maybe we forgot our books in here? Or we wanted to check whether Homo Erectus came before Neanderthal or vice versa? First one was better, no doubt. I had looked at my watch at least five times within the last three minutes. It had a small black strap, and I wore it with the clock on the inside of my wrist. I liked the subtlety of it.

- Soph, come check this out!

I hesitated, but couldn't control my curiosity. Olivia showed me his diary. Yesterday's input was just a phone number. No name, no hour, no subject. Only those eleven digits.

- Do you know that number?

I took out my mobile to check whether I did.

- Nope. Why would I?

I asked her when it hit me it was a pretty silly question, it could have been anyone's number.

- Save it in your phone.

She's going to want to call it. I rolled my eyes. I won't be the one dialling this number.

- Do you realise it might be his wife?

- Why would he write his wife's number in his diary?

I opened my mouth to answer, but I didn't know what to say.

- And do you really believe he even has a wife?

I hated it when she was right. Olivia kept opening folders, joking whether I needed some tests to see if I would still be able to pass. It didn't even seem to cross her mind that what we were doing was very wrong.

I sat down on his chair, behind his desk, with all those empty seats staring back at me. Nope, becoming a teacher would not be for me. I wondered how much time had passed since someone had cleaned this classroom. The desk was sticky and cobwebs covered the cupboards. Out of nervousness, I peeled off my nail polish underneath the desk.

- Look around, will you? The sooner we've cleared this room, the sooner we'll be able to leave.

Hesitantly, I flipped through the documents on top of his desk. Nothing peculiar.

I shoved the chair I was in backwards and crawled underneath the desk. I was startled and didn't really know how to react. My first reaction was to grab my phone and take a picture of a plastic bag which was stuck under desk with tape.

- Um, Olivia, ...

- What?

She saw me opening the bag and came to see what was inside.

- I know that girl!

She exclaimed.

- She's one year younger than us.

I turned the picture over. On its back were her name, class and phone number.

- These are all pictures of girls. Look, that's Poppy!

When I spotted the last one, I dropped them all to the floor. I stared directly into Ava's blue eyes, even from the ground she was looking back at me. This picture was taken in summertime, I could tell because her pixie cut was even blonder than usual. On the bottom he wrote "taken care of".

- This man is going to wish he was never born. Take those pictures with you!

Olivia said.

Carefully, as if damage to the image would mean damage to Ava, I picked them up and placed them in my backpack.

Liv grabbed my arm and pointed towards the computer, the one linked to the child-birth-screen. I bit my lip.

- Are you any good at guessing passwords?

I covered my eyes with my hand. Olivia sat down and started typing. I noticed the desk had two drawers. Both with a lock. I quickly checked on Liv, but she was too busy coming up with names Mr Saunders might give his pets (if he even had any) and entering them as passwords, to be concerned with what I was doing. Slowly and silently I took the key out of my pocket and placed it inside the first drawer. It went into the lock but didn't turn. My heart stopped. I tried the other one as well. Same outcome. I didn't know if I should be relieved or disappointed. After I'd safely put the key away, I twisted my wrist and checked my watch for about the millionth time. We couldn't stay any longer, it was already too late.

- Liv, we must go!

- Just one moment. Maybe Theodore? A dachshund? No? Was she serious? My hands started trembling. I clenched my fists to stop them.

I took her hand and dragged her outside, crossing Mr Saunders in the hallway. We were lucky. I smiled awkwardly at him. His smile was just as awkward, but it always was. I didn't even know what look Olivia gave him, I was too caught up with my own reaction.

- We're calling that number at lunchtime!

Olivia yelled at me right before we went our separate ways. She took a Spanish course, I had psychology. My nerves

were calming down by the minute. Sometimes I wished I could be more like her. She didn't care whatsoever. Should we have been caught, she would have talked herself out of it effortlessly. A life without stress, so dreamy. Even when I go to a restaurant, for example, I regularly order something I don't want to eat. Only because I get nervous when the waiter or waitress catches me off guard.

- I'm sure you guys almost couldn't resist coming back to school for the past couple of weeks?

Mr Walters commented sarcastically. I tried to ignore him, but he stopped moving and his eyes held on to mine.

- Barely.

I replied after I decided it would probably be the easy way out. He laughed out loud. It was a roar of laughter even. He was a small man I didn't expect that sound coming out of his mouth. He brushed his stubble beard with his right hand up and down several times.

Lila sat next to me. I always imagined she was the perfect daughter-in-law. Her hair was long and blonde, almost white even. Clever, hardworking girl. As I come to think of it, she sat with us in biology last year, taught by Mr Saunders. She stroke her hair behind her ear and frowned as a reaction to something Mr Walters had said. My eyes lingered on her hand that still hadn't left her hair.

- Can I ask you something?

I whispered so softly I hoped Lila heard what I said.

- Sure.