

MASTERSLAVE

Marcellinus van der Eng

Masterslave – novel (autofiction)

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R.M. van der Eng

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novel

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Part 1

Call this a madman's diary. Someone suffering from paranoid attacks, if you like. But I need to tell the truth. My truth. A truth I've been carrying with me for about two years now, accompanied by incidents that, to me, can only be explained by the actions of someone who is, at the very least, stalking me. I'm not asking for your sympathy. All I want is justice, whatever that may entail. Maybe all I want is your reading mind, instead of your listening ear.

I hope I finish this in time, because I'm afraid I don't have long. That fear is fed by the many incidents happening in my life lately—too many now to be coincidence.

I hear the “water hammer” again—that loud bang in the pipes after someone opens or closes a faucet. But I don't believe it's a real water hammer. It only strikes loudly when I'm sitting at my desk writing. Then I hear the loudest blows. It feels like someone is reading along with what I write. Or watching what I do.

If I have a panic attack, I'll tell you, because I suffer from those too. I'll tell you everything as honestly as I can, though of course I don't know whether my memories are distorted.

Last week I read that all mental illnesses have been classified according to kinship, as if the illnesses themselves share genetics: a panic attack, a child of paranoia. I immediately thought of the taxonomy of all life on Earth and asked myself which came first: a sturgeon or a human being.

Strange, stranger, strangest; 'strange' is a weird word, really. The Dutch language is wonderful—that only dawned on me late. After I had mastered Russian, I realized why every stem of a word has its branches and maybe even leaves: near, nearby, nearly, nearer, nearness, nearside, near hood... And those stems are unimaginably thousands of years old, older than we can know, I think.

I often wonder whether language has genes too. Sometimes I hear people laugh and I think of the sound of birds; just listen closely. Children's loud screams or baby voices occasionally resemble certain birds' screeching. I also hear that our voices — the noises we make — have kinship with animal sounds and if that's true, then our voice — or the sounds we produce — must also be related to all the sounds that surround us: animals, rain, storms, hurricanes, etc. And maybe thunder is a brother to the noise of a volcano when it erupts.

Water hammer! There it was again and rather loud. Still, I find it odd that the loud water hammer only happens when I'm at my desk. It comes from the hall, and when I'm out in the hall I never hear anything. Sometimes I think the neighbors are doing it on purpose, but I know only lonely people blame the neighbors for everything. And that's understandable when your circle grows smaller.

Nothing was ever strange to me; I was pirouetting in the electrical workshop at vocational school. And when I had to collect my diploma there and walked forward in the big assembly hall, all the

boys in the whole school started to howl — speaking of sound and language — and while I walked up to a long table behind which all the teachers were staring at me, I knew I had to do something; there was a tension and the howling behind my back grew louder and louder and the teachers' glances more and more piercing. And once I reached the table to sign my diploma I made a triumphant ballet move, lifting my right arm and turning my torso halfway toward the boys with my head tilted upward, and then everyone burst into laughter. You see: nothing is strange!

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Whether you can speak of love, I don't know, because so far we've only been dating — but we've played a lot. A game that caught both our interest right from the start. Even though I've always had something for SM, this time it felt serious. At first we were testing each other out, and even now I don't know who made whom. What I did know was that he was the right one to go far with, and that love could also exist in pain. After our first date I immediately bought him a leather cap and a leather jock-strap. I already had boots and quite a few toys, including a sling that was always ready whenever he came over. I'd even mounted some hooks in the ceiling beams. It quickly became clear who the master was and who the slave had to be: he the master, and I the slave. For him that might've been obvious, but for me it wasn't — I was often dominant myself. Now I had to submit, or enjoy

it, I still didn't know. But we quickly moved on, and I bought heavier whips.

I now feel completely freed from all my mental illnesses, but I know they can return at any moment — like my most loyal friends by now. Sometimes I even seek them out. I'll go, for example, on a weekday evening to a bar around eleven and stay until closing time, four o'clock. I often see the saddest scenes there — society's fringes. Do I belong among them? I ask myself. Lately the answer has been more often: yes! I'm slipping.

Every day I think about language or look up words and check their etymology. Language — or better: languageness — is like a god or goddess to me; I have to think of it every day, feel it through vocal cords, through its throat-sounds; how it moves my tongue, touches my lips; how it nearly whistles when it says an s, how it growls deep in the cave of my mouth. Language remains a mystery, but I'm convinced we'll soon discover a lot more by combining all kinds of data through AI.

Last week I met again with my slave, whom I've known for two years now — a strangely young presence in my life. When he first came in, he seemed straight, but immediately said sir to me. From the start we could share the darkest fantasies during our play. They often went so far I won't name them all here, but I will bring one out. During one of our scenes, I said something about sniff movies, to which my slave immediately corrected me: "They're called snuff movies." These are films where, whether commissioned or not, torture in the context of SM leads to actual death.

I've unlearned small talk. I wish I could just ask normal things, even if it's only the way somewhere. I would love to have a simple chat with a friend or stranger about the weather, but I go straight to the deep end. "Yes, nice weather," becomes: "What difference does it make." Sometimes just my glance is enough to drive everyone away — and not even that; sometimes just my presence. I walk into a bar — it's lively, crowded, people chatting at the bar and making out in the darkroom — I order a beer and look around. Eyes that meet mine go rigid. I walk through the bar, everyone watching me stiffens. I enter the darkroom — everyone stops. I return to the bar, order my second beer, and it's nearly empty. People have told me often that when I walk in, everyone looks at me — and I feel it. It's great on strong days, when I can fill a bar. But not on weak ones.

Today I chatted with someone who told me I would no longer be allowed to chat with certain profiles from a specific neighborhood if he beat me in a fight. His profile was all about fighting — just fighting. I asked him which neighborhood, and he said: "De Pijp."

Pain releases chemicals in the brain with a numbing effect. I always notice that after my master has whipped me hard. Am I that sick and twisted? And how far do I want, or dare, to go? Why have I shared my abduction, torture, and punishment fantasies with strangers, especially in Eastern Europe? Am I the only one who does that? Should I come out with it? I don't think so. I believe many more people have far darker fantasies — and I don't exclude Mr. Kremlin from that.

It seems like I'm being funneled online. As if someone decides who I may or may not contact on gay dating apps. In recent months I've received messages — especially from Germany — with ominous invitations. I was far gone in terms of drug use then, so I went along with it and was even on the verge of traveling to one of those profiles. I had already looked up the address they gave me, mapped the train route, and, filled with fearful excitement — literally and figuratively overtaken — I was looking forward to the meeting with that unknown dominant master from Germany who had already given me all sorts of orders. This wasn't even the first time I'd gotten such an offer, but thankfully my paranoid brain always stopped me just in time.

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Late in the eighties, I returned from Moscow with three STDs: gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV. The first two were cured after a short time, the last one cast me into a dark yet euphoric state, as if a screen had been placed before my eyes. But I went on partying, took more drugs, more sex parties, more pleasure—because you're going to die anyway. And many around me did die. It was as if you could see them drop, like on a battlefield. I used to go to a bar about three times a week, the Argos Bar, where they weren't strict about safe sex—and neither was I. We all danced the dance of death, played Russian roulette, dared fate. Until, in 1996, a trial began for triple therapy, which I was allowed to join

because I met the criteria. That therapy turned out to be the Holy Grail, and the world breathed a sigh of relief.

Just before the trial, I knew I was going to die. I was sick often, had infections, and was taking one or two courses of antibiotics each month. One day, lying in bed with yet another infection, I felt a great calm descend over me, as if I surrendered to death. My whole body relaxed, and the pain was gone. In my mind, I gave myself over to death. I was ready. And after I could no longer die physically, I still wanted to die in my mind. That's when I made my first suicide attempt and ended up in the hospital anyway.

Strange, I should have been happy with a new lease on life, I should have embraced it, enjoyed it. But I couldn't anymore. I could only enjoy it when I knew I was going to die.

I'm addicted to pain and the chemicals it releases in my brain—chemicals no drug or medication can replace. The whipping, the blows, the pounding, it's not just the humiliation, it's real physical punishment. I've reached the age where I'm only interesting to masters if I can go to extremes as a slave. And I can go much further—and want to. I often think about being branded with my master's mark or my slave number.

That primal language that binds everything together: people, cities, nations, enemies, friends, pleasures, floggings, ramblings... Will science ever uncover the primal tongue—and when? What sounds, what words? Before I die? I hope to live until I'm eighty-one—but that's pegged to my mortgage. Yes, I see myself typing

it—and I hear you thinking. Eighteen years then—for the primal tongue to be unearthed? One more illusion shattered!

Back when I bought a new record by Jacques Brel, or Barbara, or Léo Ferré, and heard a beautiful song that completely absorbed me, I'd look up every word I didn't know and make a quick translation for myself—and then the illusion was gone. At least, the chanson no longer had the same impact as the first time I heard it.

Later I came to prefer the chansons of Barbara and Ferré, because they were darker and more aligned with my depressions, which emerged after I turned twenty. I know this because last year, during an intake at the Jellinek clinic for a potential detox program, they told me I had already been treated for mental issues at the age of twenty. I was surprised—I had forgotten. But I clearly remember that around 1998, after a suicide attempt, I was admitted to the crisis center. Still, to my surprise, I had already been depressed at twenty. I remember my dark moods well, and how I quit the Scapino Dance Academy because I really wanted to study. I loved dancing, but that academy was more a springboard for me to get from my small town to Amsterdam and explore the world, though I still remember the dancing fondly. Only, I tended to gain weight, which soon led to anorexia problems, once culminating in a ten-kilo loss after a bad throat infection. 'Could I already have had HIV back then?' I only wonder about that now. It was around 1981 when the first newspaper articles appeared about a deadly disease in New York.

Moscow was the best time of my life. I lived there for two years in the late eighties. I'd already been there a few times: once as a tourist at seventeen, and again at twenty-four to work on a guidebook. I had to explore the area around the Bolshoi Theatre and note house numbers—but I couldn't find them, so I started drawing a map with everything I could observe. And while I was drawing—this was still during the Cold War—a militia officer came up and asked what I was doing. In my high school Russian, I replied, 'Oh, it's for a guidebook for Latvia.' He replied, 'Good.'

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When the torturer who comes to torment me stands before me, I will recognize the guests who came to watch. They'll laugh like devils, the torturer does his work, their hatred will bite into my wounds like the salt of an ocean; the torturer does his work, they ask for more, for harder, rougher and sharper, the torturer does his work, they turn away and leave me behind.

Come, let my master take care of his slave and give him what he deserves. Is this what I meant by "total control," which I've begged him for so often? Is this it: does he already have me in his grip, is it *he* who sends me strange chats from fake profiles? One of them must be his. I'm described in it as his super slave, the one who trains other slaves for him, the one they must obey. So now total control – and when will *total power exchange* follow – including my possessions – or has it already begun, and by whom?

Tomorrow it will be ten days since I received a reservation for my business.

I was sitting one evening in 1999 on the rooftop terrace of my house in Spain, in the middle of a mountain village. I looked around and realized this little village had it all: the people were friendly but not pushy, no tourism yet, a few *fincas* had been turned into villas with pools, many more would follow. After seven years I had collected twenty-five holiday homes on a website. That was the basis of my company. After that it could only grow – and it did, to as many as one hundred and twenty homes. I’ve done this work for twenty-five years now, including the rental of my own house, always reachable. That gave me a kind of isolation. But I chose it. Now it seems like it’s being imposed on me. Or did I choose this too?

Forgetting yourself in pain, or through pain. Letting it numb you, punish you, humiliate you... Surrendering yourself to someone – the master – completely in everything and then forgetting everything through pain that dulls another pain – the real one. I see patterns in everything: people around me, between birds and people, people and trees, throat sounds and clouds, mountains and molds, AI and a country, army and love, suffering and laughter, prophecies and lies, pandas and laziness, a Finn and painlust. I hope one day patterns and mathematical formulas or biological data and chemical elements will be able to communicate with phonemes of language, and so the primal tongue will arise and offer a way out of this confusing tangle of friends, enemies,

neighbors, suspicion, trust, love, descendants, hurt, hate, revenge, life and death.

Does what I write spring from loneliness – or is the loneliness born from the search for patterns between the building blocks of four billion years ago, stacking and stacking until they form a castle of trust that keeps suspicion at bay and always will?

Once I was admitted to a Russian hospital. I had labyrinthitis, an inflammation of the inner ear, and I staggered like a drunk. At check-in I was accompanied by my Russian friends, Masha and Sasha, with whom I had already spent many fun evenings and nights – they as a couple, me alone. We sat in the office of the hospital director. She hesitated about admitting me – I had a fever of forty degrees – probably because I was a foreigner or because, and I realized this later, she was waiting for her “grabbing money” – my translation of *vzyatki*, officially: bribes. But I was admitted without it, with her words: “I’d rather admit him than all those drunks here.” I wanted to call the emergency number of my Dutch insurance, but the director forbade it. I knew I had ended up in hell, but I also knew I had to lie down. I collapsed on a filthy bed after handing my friends a hundred dollars to buy black-market antibiotics that the director had prescribed.

I lay there sweating for three days: cockroaches along the walls, guarding my antibiotics; many other patients had to recover without any. On the third night I awoke, my head clear. I walked through the half-dark hall with its coughing and groaning, then through the tall corridor to the toilet space – squatting toilets that

always stank and were filthy, the sewer pipe had seemed blocked for weeks. Through the half-open window – it couldn't be closed anymore – I looked into the sky, so clear; every star beamed toward me, into me, to welcome me into their realm. They were seducing me, and they knew how. I surrendered to them and spoke aloud: “Stars, stars, above hospital Russia, cockroaches, the scuttle, past my sheets and through my ward...” I became aware of Russia lying under those stars on earth. Returning through the tall corridor, I passed open doors and saw white corpses. I slowed my pace, smelled death, and kept walking.

The next day I fled the hospital, still feverish, a bit unsteady. I ran to a trolleybus, and the doors grabbed me as I entered, as if to say: “We’ve seen through you.” Via the metro I reached my friends who took me in. Sasha would give me my antibiotic injections daily, though he’d never done that before, and I could call my insurance company. The next day an ambulance was waiting, with two very kind nurses, and I was driven to a hospital. As we arrived, the gates opened, and we drove up an avenue into a garden, with the hospital in the background looking like the Palace of Versailles. At the entrance an ENT doctor was waiting, and I could follow her straight to her room, full of equipment – more than I had ever seen in a Dutch ENT room. As we walked back past the wards toward the exit, it seemed like I was the only patient in the hospital. At least, I saw no others in that enormous place.

I'm jealous. Often I find that exciting, even arousing. But could it be that my master and my slave find it exciting too? It seems like they're making each other jealous, simply by being with me separately. Could it be that, if they really are dating and I go completely silent for a while, and they can't see me for six months, that their own tension fades too? In other words: jealousy can arouse not only yourself, but also the one you're jealous of. And so the master can become dependent on the jealousy of his slave.

A master-slave dynamic is far more complex than I ever thought. Couldn't the master become addicted to his slave—so much so that the roles reverse? The slave gains power over the master. If one is a true sadist, and he's found a masochist who meets his needs, it can happen that only this one slave satisfies his hunger—and so he becomes dependent on him. But why that one slave? If the master's a sadist, can't he get what he needs from any masochist? Isn't it just about the pain? Then why does the master keep returning—almost ten years now—to his slave? It can only mean there's love involved, from his side too. And that this love keeps growing, because the pain keeps getting more intense. Could this prove the master loves me? Could he love me so much that he wants total control over me? Is that what he's working toward—and how far does that control go? And do I want it?

Lately we've discovered a new game. Or rather, I introduced it. I bought him a tough, tight leather shirt—but in brown. Color means a lot in the gay scene.

I heard the water hammer again.

Once I woke up around three in the night, I think. A strange sound. I thought my little brother—he was nineteen then, I was twenty-one—who slept in the room next to mine, was swinging his legs up and down off the side of his bed. Then I fell back asleep. Early in the morning my brother knocked on my door and said my other brother, lying just outside our rooms, looked odd. I got up, walked out, turned left, and saw him on the bed. It had to be him. A blanket completely covered him. Only his right wrist stuck out. I said to my little brother: “Go downstairs.” He walked off down the open staircase without saying anything. I took a few steps toward my brother’s body and felt his wrist. Ice cold. I knew he was dead.

I stayed calm, because I immediately thought of my parents, who were asleep a floor below. It was early morning. I went down the two flights of stairs to the hallway, told my little brother to stay in the living room, picked up the phone book, found the doctor’s number, and the moment I said: “You need to come, I think my brother is dead,” it really hit me that he was. My brother and I waited for the doctor together. It was freezing in the living room. My jaw wouldn’t stop chattering. The doctor arrived, I went upstairs with him, he yanked off the blanket, and I saw my brother lying there with a garbage bag around his head. I ran screaming into my room and buried my head in the pillow so no one would hear me. Then the doctor went to my parents. I wasn’t there for that.

I'd conquered my childhood fears, and now I feared becoming afraid again. At the cremation I gave a speech, ending with: "When we get home later, let's not immediately think about the Brussels sprouts on the stove." And a little later, in the chapel, a beautiful boy I didn't know gave me a kiss.

The master plays with his slaves. He terrorizes me with them—or maybe he terrorizes them all and keeps them in check that way. Makes them work for him. Takes what he can get. He can play his slave just like the slave plays him. Maybe I can make the master completely dependent on me that way. And if I long for that dependence so badly—doesn't that mean I'm the master? Or becoming one? That interests me. I find it fascinating how everything stays open, no matter how fixed the rules seem.

In Moscow, sometime in the eighties, I found out I was HIV-positive. I asked the boyfriend of a friend, a cardiologist, if I could get a blood test through his clinic. He said it'd be better to do it under another name, and suggested Maris Ozols, because my Russian had a Latvian accent. A week later I picked up the result. I was waiting in the reception area. He called me in. We went to the lab together. He searched for the report, started reading it, and suddenly said: "You'd better leave through the back door, not the front—and fast. You have AIDS. Get retested in the Netherlands." I wasn't panicking. I didn't feel much of anything. I went home to my boyfriend, telling him. I had a residence permit, so I bought a round-trip ticket from Moscow to Amsterdam. Within a week I had confirmation in the Netherlands. It was HIV. There were no medications yet. That's why I didn't tell my

parents. They had already lost one son. I had to spare them. They're no longer alive now.

Later I'd use the name Maris Ozols more often in Russia. Though they managed to find me in a city of fourteen million—people often called my boyfriend and asked for me. Later I realized the cardiologist must have passed on my real name or address.

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I can barely feel it around me anymore. It's as if it has left me. I'm too old and too ugly—even for a snuff movie—to be murdered. Worthless now, not even as a torture slave. Or maybe exactly as a torture slave—maybe that's reserved for the most beautiful and youngest.

Is hard SM even sex? And is sex love? Is there fear in love? If so, then there's love in pain.

Why don't I take the step? Why don't I travel to one of those shadowy profiles somewhere toward Eastern Europe, where you know it will be your end? Should I go for it? It's easy to arrange. I've had many invitations where everything was clear between the lines. And yet, I always turned them down. Once—one that was serious—a profile invited me to a small town in central Germany. I had to report to a specific hotel and would be inspected. I told my master, and he said: "Even if you had to go to his house, at least you'd know where he lives."