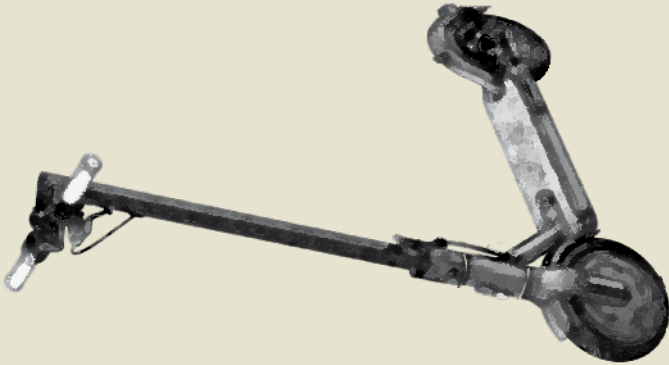


Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Dicky



novella

A child runs away from the funeral of her mother. A father she does not know. A lonely man brings her food and they become friends.

She personifies an inheritance more fatal than the incriminating information her late mother hid somewhere. A foreign secret service is on her trail.

Dicky

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Actually, in writing these stories, I proceed like a painter. In front of me is a white repainted canvas that I want to fill anew with color.

That seemingly empty canvas in these novellas is a man with an empty existence, colorless, meaningless and fed up with his days. But underneath it his fruitless past looms.

Then he encounters a cat, dog, horse, child or woman that start to color the empty sheet. The man comes to life, which he puts at the service of the other.

This delights his atrophied altro; it fills him with a unconditional love for the other, a non-egoistic love.

A kind of reset and play, given to him bestowed by the gods or fate, or simply by his own desire.

A man sat staring a little ahead on a bench in a small park. Actually, it was the garden of a former notary, now open to the public. There were ancient trees and house-high rhododendrons. There was only one path, circling from the entrance back to the entrance. The little park was still a bit wild: by the looks of it, the parks department had not yet done any harm.

The man had just taken a bite of a sandwich from the supermarket's refrigerator when a child on a scooter lingered on the path in front of him. A girl of about eight, or maybe it was a boy of about nine with long hair. Jeans, sweatshirt, cap and very dirty sneakers. He had seen it pass by a few times, probably scooting around the path. Yes, that was a probability bordering on certainty, because the path went around and there were no other paths.

Something made the man ask, 'Are you hungry? Do you want a sandwich?'

At the same time, he reached for the second sandwich from the package.

The child put the scooter on the ground, grabbed the sandwich with an incredulous expression and consumed it in an instant. It promptly got the hiccups.

'Fold double with your head to the ground,' the man advised, 'and stand like that for a minute.'

That always helped with him to calm his diaphragm.

The child did and the hiccups stopped.

The man had not spoken to a human being for days and was looking for a subject on which to continue the conversation.

All he could think of was, 'Are you still hungry? And thirsty? Shall I get you some more?'

The child nodded.

'What do you want to drink?'

It shrugged. Its face remained sternly closed.

'Then I'll bring water and drinking yogurt. Is that okay?'

When he returned from the supermarket there was a woman with a stroller sitting on the bench. Of the child no trace.

Disappointed and in a vague panic, the man walked on, rounding the path. Only when he reached the entrance again did he realize that the child was probably hiding. He turned and slowly walked back down the path, showing the food and drink at each bush.

At the house-high rhododendrons, he stopped and listened. They formed the separation to another large garden. He had a feeling the child was hiding here.

He wriggled between the many trunks and branches. Immediately he was in another universe. The huge bush was all around him. The dry earthen soil was covered with dead leaves. It smelled vaguely moldy yet fresh.

Trunks of the shrub had gutted the garden fence on the other side decades ago, roots had pushed up the masonry foundation into bits and pieces.

Near a hole in the iron fencing lay the scooter, not quite covered with barren leaves.

The man sat down on a mossy side branch, as thick as his leg, which came horizontally from a main trunk.

'I have the food and drink with me,' he whispered.

‘There’s no one else around.’

To his surprise, the child did not emerge from the hole in the fence, but tobogganed down a sloping trunk from the rhododendron’s crown.

It said nothing, grabbed the plastic bag and began eating and drinking greedily.

From the fine hands and gestures, the man made out that it was more likely to be a girl after all; boys moved differently, he thought.

‘Did you run away?’

The child looked at him suspiciously, snatched the bag of food and drink to itself and practically ran up the sloping log. The man watched it in amazement and admiration.

‘Quick reflexes,’ he muttered. ‘And tree climbing she’s good at.’

He was sorry that the child had disappeared so abruptly; on the other hand, he had apparently guessed correctly. It shocked him, on reflection that an eight-year-old girl had to survive homeless.

Indecisively, he sat for a while. He knew, and could feel it too, that he was being watched suspiciously. Would he leave some money behind? Would the child dare show up in the supermarket to buy food? Not very likely, he considered.

Would he buy clothes for her, it, him (he hesitated again)? But what kind of underwear would fit?

He decided to go to the department store and buy boys’ clothes. A girl could wear boy underpants; a boy could not wear girl panties very well.

He whispered insistently, 'I'll buy you some clothes. Yours are dirty; it arouses suspicion. I'll wash them at my house.'

In the department store he bought the same kind of clothes the child was wearing and, as an extra, a rain jacket, because the nice weather would soon turn, it was predicted. In a neighboring shoe store, he asked the saleswoman what size an eight-year-old girl was and bought a pair of sneakers similar to the child's. Replenished with new food and drink, he walked to the park. Ahead of him walked a couple of old people with a little dog, and when they were out of sight he ducked under the rhododendron.

At the gate, the scooter had disappeared.

Would the child have sought a new hiding place? That seemed to him a probability bordering on certainty. Not knowing how to do anything else, he buried the bags of groceries under a pile of barren leaves.

He decided to sit for a while longer. He had nothing else to do anyway.

He opened a can of beer and a bag of chips from his own groceries and waited.

The child was clever and crept closer on the other side of the fence. Extremely carefully, it pulled the groceries toward it and disappeared again just as soundlessly. He had not looked, but had heard it breathing and rustling leaves when there was no wind.

'I won't betray you,' he whispered as loudly as he could. 'Bring your old clothes in a bag to this place, and I'll come and pick them up tomorrow to wash them.'

With these words he stood up, indecisive. Finally he trudged out of the park, deep in thought. Who was this child? Why had it run away?

He walked the long way to the industrial park where he rented part of a vacant company house, along with a woman who was very busy with what appeared to be business things. He knew her from an ict project at the ROC where he had been a temporary teacher. Apparently, she had also gone downhill. With him it had been an embarrassment when he had had to confess that he had wanted to favor female students with higher grades in exchange for sex. It had brought him nothing but disgrace, dismissal, divorce from his wife, no access arrangement with their two children, leaving home and hearth behind, a laborious process for benefits, therapy and community service instead of a sentence of imprisonment, and finally an empty and meaningless life in a remote industrial park. Thanks to the ict woman, he had been able to rent part of the house; they shared only the bathroom. He rarely used that. In the double garage, part of his share, he usually sponged off with hot water from the little boiler under the sink in the garage. The spacious kitchen belonged to her share. The shared washing machine was in the garage with him.

The next morning it was raining, as predicted, and the temperature had dropped at least ten degrees. Instead of staying in bed to masturbate a bit, he got up early, excited like a child on his birthday.

He put on his rain suit; it was blowing so briskly that

an umbrella would not hold for long and cycling would be no fun.

When he arrived at the little park, the rain stopped. There was no one in sight and he slid expectantly under the rhododendron.

No trace of the child, nor a bag of dirty clothes.

Deeper disappointed than he wanted to admit to himself, he dabbled around, occasionally whispering that he was there. Quite uselessly, he made enough noise. He felt unable to climb the sloping trunk. Besides, it was highly unlikely that the child would still be hiding at the top of the bush. No, he could zero in on that probability.

He sat down in his old seat to consider where the child might have gone. Left at all? That was possible, of course, but he considered the chances of that to be less than 50%. The probability it was nearby was greater than 50%. He carried coffee in a thermos and bought sweet rolls along the way. Thinking would surely improve if he took a cup of coffee and a coffee roll. He had concluded earlier that the child was most likely exceptionally smart.

Where would a smart child hide if he no longer trusted the old hiding place? Certainly it would choose for a hide-out with a view of the old. He thought that so likely that he could take it as a premise. An obvious place would be the garden behind the fence. Problem: Did people live there? Was there a dog?

Upon closer inspection, the hole in the dislocated fence was not large enough for his stature. It was rather substantial, though he was losing weight. At least, his pants were beginning to sag.

Nevertheless, he stuck his head through and looked straight into the child's eyes. To his surprise his eyes filled with tears of happiness.

Before he had thought of anything he could say, the child had shoved the department store bag in his face and disappeared. The bag contained the dirty clothes. So that had worked.

Even though he had brought provisions for several days last time, he still put the bag of sweet rolls and cans of chocolate milk behind the fence. He pulled out and walked home. It was raining again, but that did not bother him. Contact with the child had appeared intact. It had not had wet hair, the image came to mind, so it had managed to find a dry shelter.

The next day he bought not beer, his most regular expense, but a waterproof army sleeping bag in a dump. It had gotten chilly and he didn't want the child to catch a cold.

A day later, the backpack with the sleeping bag had disappeared behind the fence. It occurred to him to walk around to see where that neglected garden belonged to.

It was a once distinguished street with large villas from the 19th century, a few of which still stood in their former glory. The rest had either been converted into offices or replaced by soulless apartment buildings.

The notary house still housed a notary's office, but it was no longer lived in. The villa next door was for rent/for sale.

The man stood in front of the fence of the front yard, whose grass had been cut, the hedge shorn and the pond empty, staring at the back of the house.

Several cars stopped in front of the property. A man who was probably the real estate agent said as he opened the gate: 'If you are interested, you are too late. I'm pretty much so far with these applicants.'

Did he look like a candidate then? Now yes, even rich people walked in casual clothes.

If not the applicants for whom the broker had opened the gate: an older couple in expensive clothes stepped out of a new Bentley. Yes, the villa and that couple matched perfectly. But where was his child to go?

He shocked at his own thought: my child. It is not my child. Protégé then, that sounded better, less ... possessive.

At home, the man couldn't find his feet. What was to be done with that child? Should he buy a tent? But surely the garden would be taken care of by a landscaper; then it could no longer hide there.

He couldn't stand it at home and walked to the little park for the second time that day, ducking under the rhododendron and trying to make whispered contact. Why had that child become so shy? It had stepped freely around the park and had stayed alone when he was eating because it was so hungry.

There was no response to his calls and dejectedly he strolled home.

That evening he noticed an ad in the free door-to-door paper he picked up from the mailbox: the police were looking for a runaway child... With a jolt, he grabbed the leaflet and read the summary notice several times before sitting up on his bed, trembling with worry. The police

had searched the park and surrounding area in response to an eyewitness who thought he had seen the wanted child there. It was an eight-year-old girl, Dinja S., dressed in the clothes that were now in his clothes dryer, with an electric scooter. She had disappeared at her mother's funeral. A father was not mentioned.

Another notice next to it pronounced that the famous mayor's historic villa from the 19th century had been sold and that the botanical garden with valuable trees, shrubs and plants would be restored to its former glory by a specialized landscaping firm, the new owners announced.

Both messages plunged him into a melancholy that rivaled that after his conviction.

What could he still do? What was he still allowed to do? Was a former teacher convicted of lewd proposals to under-age girls allowed to associate with an eight-year-old girl?

He smacked himself in the head. He wasn't a pedophile after all! Those students had been sixteen or so and looked and acted like grown women, very confusing.

He put on his coat and took his bike this time to go to the park.

Meanwhile, the entrance gate was closed. Skittishly he cycled on. How on earth could he get in touch with the child? He cycled around to the avenue where the villas were located.

Near a restaurant he put his bike in a rack and walked toward the newly sold villa. The avenue was deserted and he stepped with a pounding heart over the low wall that separated the front yard from the sidewalk. By the

light of his cell phone, he wandered through the overgrown garden to the back. Here he dared to make noise and whispered as loudly as he could, 'Dinja! Make yourself heard! The police are looking for you and maybe gardeners will come tomorrow to clean up this garden. You have to get out of here! I can take you to a safer place!'

Even several repetitions of the message produced no response. He found the spot where the fence had been dismantled; but no sign of life, no trace of the child, no response to his increasingly desperate and louder calls.

Perhaps she had become so frightened by the police's search that she had fled to who knows where.

He was scurrying back to the front when his foot snagged. He fell forward and hurt himself dearly. Her scooter! He had tripped over her hidden scooter!

His hands were full of blood and soil and his left shin was skinned. Fortunately, a branch had only grazed his cheek and not hit his eye.

Sitting on the earth, he rubbed his hands on his pants, not noticing that they were dirtied by black and red smudges. Her scooter. Had she left and left it behind, or was she still around?

He gently called her name a few times. No response.

Now what? He couldn't sit here all night. Besides, his injuries were beginning to hurt.

Finally he decided to go home, albeit reluctantly. At home he took care of his injuries; the pants would just have to wait for a cleaning in the bucket of water in which he had put them away.

Early the next morning he was at the sold villa; what