

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



A courtyard full of finds

novella

A man with an old Landrover and an invalid son has settled in a remote town in northern France. The war elsewhere and the closure of the cement works have driven out many of the inhabitants and summer visitors. The man is interested in just one thing: an estate where perhaps no one has lived for a century.

He sets out to investigate and discovers some disturbing things in the courtyard.

On the terrace of the only restaurant open, a young psychologist is fascinated by the way father and son communicate.

Because he and she are blocked by past experiences, Yuri, who can't speak, has a lot of work to do.

And what the bomb squad discovers at the yard... you wouldn't wish it on even the angriest neighbor.

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In fact, when I write these stories, I proceed like a painter: I have a blank canvas in front of me that I want to fill with color.

In this case, the blank canvas is a man's nomadic existence, revolving around his love and care for a little boy who can't speak or move. He takes him everywhere, in a wheelchair or on his back.

In this story, he encounters situations that will turn his solitary existence upside down, including an irrepressible need to move into an abandoned property and build a new life. To put down roots.

A woman enters the picture.

But the estate has secrets, and the woman is not exempt from them either.

The little boy manages to bring them together.

Both man and woman gain a new life, which they put at the service of the other. This fills them with a love for the other, a love that is not selfish.

A kind of reset and play, given to them by the gods, or fate, or simply by their own desire.

1. First findings

The court was a disaster.

Or rather: it was a walled-off part of the world, once a secluded garden, but from the looks of it, it had served as a dump for a long time and was now a proliferation of vicious and very large plants that stung, rankled, hooked and stunk – especially the spring balsam.

He quickly closed the door again.

It was the outer door of the kitchen, at least of the room that had served as a kitchen, long ago, judging by the green copper pump and a grit-covered stone slab beneath it. There was no stove or cooking area.

He swept the debris aside. It was a blue stone slab with a gutter in the middle - a sink - that led to a hole in the wall where a burr vine had once grown and died inside.

No trace of tiles on the gray stone walls. There were on the floor: cracked and worn tiles were visible among the debris of the ceiling that had come down, which had also been the floor of the room above.

He looked up and got rain splashes in his face. The tiled roof of the upper floor showed a large hole.

He tried the outside door again; it had opened

the first time without much creaking and, closed again, still fit into the frame.

Good door, he thought, and good hinges. He waded to the window and was able to open it without much difficulty, though brambles and ivy pressed against it on the outside. Good windows too, he thought, and closed the oak halves where old but unbroken glass rattled in the bars.

The kitchen was at the end of a long, red-tiled hallway that had doors on either side.

These too worked as doors should and opened on empty rooms with charred fire pits and floors of yellow glazed tile. There was no debris here. Then the roof over the living quarters is still intact, he thought, and examined the ceilings of dark, tiller-trimmed beams and wide floorboards, looking for wet spots.

The manor had nowhere ceilings of thatch and plaster.

Strange, he thought. Usually houses of this era have them. The walls, on the other hand, were roughly plastered, not smoothed out but bumpy according to the contours of the stones.

He refrained from inspecting the upstairs. That could be done later; at least now he had the impression that the roof was not leaking, except for the one above the kitchen.

He stepped out through the simple but heavy

front door and pulled it shut. Another good door, he thought.

It was a solidly built house that had lasted two centuries on its own; a house with a strong spirit. A solitary spirit too: he had clearly felt inside that it welcomed him, that it yearned to be inhabited, to have fire in the fireplace and people laughing in the kitchen.

Along a path of flat stones through the front yard recently battered with a brush cutter, he walked to the driveway, where the real estate agent was waiting by his shiny Golf.

'And? Do you like it?' was his strained question. He was a very young real estate agent and apparently to show his boss that he could sell anything he boasted about, saddling him with this semi-ruin.

'Come come,' mused the man. 'This manor has been empty for at least a hundred years, and above the kitchen the roof has collapsed.'

'You have to look through that,' rattled the real estate agent. 'This is a unique and authentic early 19th century mansion on over two hectares of private land...'

'That is entirely overgrown...' The man had no intention of correcting the salesman, for the mansion was much older and indeed still entirely in its old condition. A rarity.

‘Matter of a brush cutter and a chainsaw, sir.’

‘Did vagrants or gypsies live here? The yard behind is full of garbage and car parts.’

‘That is unknown, sir. According to my chief, Mrs. Delmonte, no one has lived there for the last thirty or forty years.’

‘Perhaps seasonal workers, grape pickers,’ the man suggested. ‘You can inform your mistress in advance that the heirs are asking a price far too high. I will consider making an offer tomorrow.’

The broker sighed. ‘I told her that too, but the heirs seem to have been bickering about this for forty years.’

‘A few more years and it won’t have to, then things will collapse by themselves. Now it’s still worth something.’

‘Good, I’m already glad you’re going to make an offer,’ the young man confided and shook his hand.

The man watched the shiny black Golf as it carefully tried to maneuver around the potholes along the road of broken asphalt.

He stood for a long time looking at the roof of hand-formed tiles, the four chimneys, the artfully jointed façade of uncut stone with the windows intact. Only a single window glass was broken.

He had studied the property on a satellite photo and knew the way to the creek that bordered the

vineyards on the opposite slope. There was a mystery associated with this property and he wanted to know what. It seemed like it had a message for him.

His intended walk was thwarted by a two-meter-high wilderness of brambles, saplings and nettles where a path had once been. The mystery, if indeed it could be found where the boundary of the property crossed the creek, would have to wait. He walked back to his old Landrover and studied the satellite photo he had printed and the description he had obtained at the real estate office in the town.

‘Two comma three hectares of own land,’ he read aloud. ‘More land purchase is possible. It includes a forest of over twelve hectares, but that has been offered to the municipality, and some neglected vineyards promised to neighbors.’

The silent figure in the wheelchair smiled knowingly. Although his son could not talk or walk, it knew how to tell him everything with its eyes and the rest of its face.

‘Yes, you know me. This is a challenge I can’t avoid.’ He grinned and Yuri grinned back.

‘Tomorrow is your ten and a half year birthday. I had actually wanted to give you this estate as a present, but I will at least make an offer.’

He bent down and gently kissed his son, who of-

ferred his mouth with shining eyes.

He still had no temptation to leave and, drooping on the handlebars, kept looking at the building.

‘There’s something about it,’ he muttered and looked at Yuri. ‘Can you feel anything?’

He lowered his eyes for a moment.

‘Not anything nasty, I believe.’

First he gave an affirmation, then a denial.

‘You mean a treasure? Or dead bodies in the closet?’

The blue eyes looked at him sternly.

‘No and yes, then, but not quite no; maybe a historical find?’

One eye closed, then the other.

‘Both historical finds, then, but then what? Antique stuff? Dangerous stuff?’

The telling eyes squinted for a moment and then continued to look at him sternly. Always when he communicated with his son like this he wanted to caress him, but it was precisely at such times that Yuri wanted to stay on top of things.

‘Antique stuff, nice and not nice, but that’s not the point,’ he translated his son’s body language. A picture popped into his head for a moment. ‘A water mill! That must be the nice surprise.’

The sensitive mouth with red lips in the pale face departed into a smile.

The man kissed his son again.

‘Thank you, my dear, you knew all along.’

Blue eyes filled with tears.

‘I’m going to discover the secrets with you, dear. Don’t be afraid of me leaving you in the car. I have the back harness with me; I carry you on all my trips where we can’t go with the wheelchair. You’re not that heavy.’

That was an understatement they were both aware of. Because of his paralysis, Yuri had been unable to develop muscles and grow. He was no taller than a six-year-old child and consisted of a light shell with thin bones. Only his beautiful head was of normal size, with an expressive face and short-cropped brown hair, on a thin neck whose muscles did work, thank God.

‘Then I have to buy the forest and vineyards with it,’ he muttered. ‘How am I going to finance that?’

As such, he was not particularly keen on becoming the owner of neglected vineyards, nor the owner of a neglected forest. But he suspected that the remnants of the water mill, if they existed at all, were located at the intersection of forest, vineyards and the grounds around the manor house.

‘I can’t resell those orchards and the forest, but I can rent or lease them out.’ He looked quickly at Yuri to see what he thought, but the kid had fallen asleep.

He decided to bid for the three parts and to an-

nounce his intention to lease or sell the forest to the municipality and the vineyards to the château that bordered it, after a possible change in boundaries.

Satisfied with his conclusions, he stroked Yuri's silky hair – which did not wake him up – and drove at a walking pace back to the town, where he had rented a room in a gîte.

With his sleeping son in his arms, he ordered dinner from his hosts, who would have it delivered by a local restaurant.

After dinner, he put his son to sleep and seated himself in an easy chair next to the bed. Time to think. For example, about how he wanted to organize his life going forward. Now that he appeared so fond of this estate, it essentially meant he wanted to settle there. Away from the Netherlands, emigrating. What actually still tied him to the Netherlands? Not that apartment in Amsterdam for which he paid so much rent.

What was he doing here, in this remote corner? He had to confess that this abandoned mansion especially triggered him, something you could only find in remote regions. It was a challenge, just something he needed to give his life some structure, a direction to get out of that wandering. Could he do that? Could the restless energy that had made him build the web store only to sell it find a focus there?

Or was he fooling himself? He had a romantic image of living in France, in the countryside, living off the land. That's how honest he was with himself. Was he wandering around France so much just to avoid being in Holland, or was he really looking for a base there? Good questions. Maybe tomorrow he'd have some answers.

He broke off his stream of thought when in it loomed the cause of Yuri's paralysis, with the hatred he had to fight as rising vomit, hatred for those responsible for the accident....

But he couldn't sleep from it. Could this estate put him back on track with himself? It evoked sadness for who he had been, for what he had lost.

2. Found

The next morning they had a sumptuous breakfast on the terrace of the cottage; he fed his son a croissant soaked in warm milk. Yuri could operate his electric wheelchair by himself; the muscles of his hands – situated in his arms – were, strangely enough, hardly paralyzed while he could not move his arms. So eating by himself was out of the question.

‘Those two are just in love with each other,’ Yuri’s mother had exclaimed in exasperation. In that she had been right, he had confessed then, and it had remained so all the years, to both their delight.

The man had a vague feeling that the morning had brought no answers to questions he had apparently been asking; in fact, he had forgotten even most of his brooding from the previous evening. Staying with Yuri had become central to his life.

The man marched and his son buzzed beside him down the gently sloping street to the modest center, where the brokerage was located. They kept to the poorly maintained roadway; the sidewalks were too narrow and uneven for a wheelchair. The few passing cars made a wide turn around them.

The young broker turned out to be off to an appointment and the boss lady received them personally.