

A seagull is flying in the sky above a beach. The beach has waves and several other seagulls. The title 'A WOMEN'S MAN' is written in large, bold, black letters with a white outline, centered in the upper half of the image.

A WOMEN'S MAN

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

A man alone.

Really alone, apathetic, almost dead inside, even though he is not that old.

To his own great surprise, he addresses a woman in front of a restaurant. She is also alone, but still struggling. There is still life in her.

Who is he? Who is she?

What past has made him this way? And her?

Like frightened snails, they circle each other, shooting into their shells at any sign of trouble. Will they come out?

She does. Discovering she loves women.

He does, too, at last, but it takes more

How an illegitimate child can fall from a heaven of pure bliss into an abyss of shame and humiliation. Not once, but twice. Two consecutive blows are too much for a fatherless adolescent to handle.

It takes forty years before he dares to touch a woman again.

A WOMEN'S MAN

Novel

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

A Women's Man

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boekcoop@gmail.com

www.boekencooperatie.nl

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1. First encounter

The man pulled the outer door shut behind him; carefully, so that the neighbors – left, right, upstairs, downstairs – would not be bothered. In the same stealthy way he had descended the stairs. He wasn't really old; he just felt that way. Disappointed in his life; he confessed that too with the utmost prudence so as not to cause any inconvenience. Actually, it was not so much about others: he himself wanted to remain unseen and unheard in every way. Even to his inner eye and ear. Non-existence.

The drizzle was frozen on the subzero sidewalk; carefully he shuffled to the corner. When old men fall and break something, they rarely get out of the hospital alive, was his belief.

The convenience store had disbanded! With dismay, he stared at the storefront windows taped shut with newspapers. That must have just happened. Or was he losing count of the days? Was dementia creeping into his weathered brain?

Suddenly he smelled himself: his unwashed body and clothes drenched with old sweat, the grubby collar of his jacket. Disgusted, but still as if on eggshells because of the slipperiness, he walked back to his house and let the outer door fall shut behind him with a bang. With that, all his suddenly aroused protesting energy was consumed: he snuck up the stairs as usual and slipped into his home.

In an orderly hurry, he took off his clothes, sorted through the overflowing laundry basket, loaded the old washing machine and sprinkled the required amount of washing powder into the appropriate compartment. As the machine filled with water, he turned on the shower and sought out clean clothes.

Shaven and clean, he undertook a new expedition. He was hungry and there was nothing left to eat in the house. He noticed with surprise – how long had he not actually looked around? – there were many hair salons in the neighborhood. Without consciously deciding he entered one and got a haircut. Outside again, he felt the cold wind rush through his thinning hairdo and put on his hat.

There were also many eateries in the neighborhood. Thai? No. Turkish? No. Indonesian? What did he have an appetite for?

The drizzle was windblown and the sidewalk in front of the stores was sprinkled with salt. He strolled on, deep in thought. Not having a job was nice in itself, except that he no longer had anyone to talk to, and benefits had been cut back to minimal years ago.

In front of a restaurant from which a busy murmur rang out as the door opened, he nearly bumped into a woman as he dodged the departing group of guests. She stood reading the menu displayed outside.

‘Is it some?’ he asked on a whim. It startled him. He hadn’t heard his own voice in days. At the same time, it made him curious as to why he was putting his invisibility on the line. He cleared his throat, although, physically, it was not necessary. The woman also cleared her throat.

‘If you like Italian.’

It occurred to him that she hadn’t used her voice for an extended period of time either. She looked young, but it seemed like she was a lot older than her appearance at first suggested.

He hesitated. Did he like Italian food?

‘Pizzas never attracted me that much,’ he said then. That was the truth. A truth.

The woman snorted,
'Italian cuisine has a lot more to offer than pizza.'
'Can you recommend anything?'
'I don't know. What do you like?'
'Oh well, actually I'm more of a potatoes, meat and vegetable
guy.'

She pointed with her head. 'The supermarket is still open.
Good evening.'

She went through the door into the restaurant.

Ah, what am I doing here? he thought and wanted to turn
around. His feet, however, remained in place. In his stomach
it rumbled. When the woman went inside, a gust of scent had
come out that made his mouth water.

Why not? He entered the restaurant.

Inside, it was warm and crowded with talking and laughing
people, richly appointed tables, people with faces lit from be-
low fiddling with their smartphones and crowds of serving
staff at the bar and passageway to the kitchen. The smell of
Mediterranean spices, garlic, hot olive oil and wine made him
light-headed. Eating here cost as much as a week at home, he
had seen in the blink of an eye. He could still go back.

'You'll have to wait a moment,' the owner said in passing. 'All
the tables are occupied right now.' His Dutch was correct and
yet had that indefinable accent of someone whose native lan-
guage is Latin. He didn't see the woman anywhere; she would
probably be in one of the side rooms. He sat down with one leg
on a stool near the bar. Order a lager?

At that moment, the woman came by from the restroom.
He only recognized her, without coat, tie and hat, when she

stopped behind him.

‘Still here? Risky, though.’

She smiled and didn’t walk on.

‘Um, yeah. Everything is occupied, I’ll have to wait until a table comes free.’

‘If you still want my advice, you can come sit with me. There’s a seat free at my table.’

He didn’t believe his ears. The woman looked undeniably attractive, and she asked him to have dinner with her? He could peer at her for a moment as she turned to let others pass. She was dressed in a gray, apparently self-knit turtleneck, against which her half-length, dark hair shone, a dark skirt and leggings or something.

She turned to him again and caught his gaze.

‘Will it do?’ Her eyes signaled more ostentatiously than her voice.

Shyly, he nodded.

‘I always had to inspect my sisters before they went out,’ he blurted out. ‘Fold away marks if they stuck out, and all that.’

‘Did they judge you too when you went out?’

He shook his head and stood up.

‘Or didn’t you go out?’

He coughed. ‘I was ten or twelve at the time. I’ll gladly accept your invitation.’ Wrestling with his coat, he added, ‘It smells wonderful in here. I look forward to hearing your advice.’

She helped him by pushing the collar over his shoulder so he could free an arm.

‘Thank you, I have a bit many clothes on, I think.’

‘Definitely also the heating at eighteen degrees to save gas,’ she said gingerly.

He nodded in surprise.

‘Come along, you can hang your coat over there.’

He followed her, navigating between tables – a lot less gracefully than the swaying hips in front of him, but he didn’t bump into anything.

In the back, a table was vacant. She had left her scarf on the seat to indicate it was occupied.

Excitement stirred through his stomach as he took a seat opposite her. Just before he wanted to lower himself onto the wooden chair, he remembered his good manners.

‘My name is Cor, Cor van Dam,’ and held out a hand. She was still standing, taking his hand.

‘Marian de Bruin.’

They sat down at the same time. At that moment the owner appeared like a jack-in-the-box beside their table, laid out menus and asked, somewhat insinuatingly Cor thought, ‘What would you like to drink?’

The woman responded with a smile, ‘Vino bianco, prego.’

Cor understood she was ordering white wine. He nodded. ‘For me, too, please.’ Lager seemed inappropriate to him.

He had just flipped open the menu when a clearly Italian little servant (niece, granddaughter of the boss?) brought a decanter and glasses, filled both glasses and disappeared again with a flash of white teeth in a smile that seemed genuine.

‘Do you know these people?’ he asked in a fit of insight.

‘I do come here often,’ she replied evasively. ‘Come; let’s go pick something out. Are you very hungry?’

The answer came spontaneously from his stomach area. They both shot into laughter. The first laugh in weeks, as far as he was concerned.

She bent over the small table and looked at him penetratingly. She had very young eyes, girly eyes; dark brown.

‘Honestly say. Can you afford a restaurant?’

Confused by her eyes and what she was asking, he didn’t know for a moment how to respond. Then: he rummaged in his pocket. Since his wallet had fallen apart, he carried money loose in his pocket. It included a precious, multi-folded fifty bill. The hairdresser had gotten the ten bill and the coins.

He placed it on the table and unfolded it.

‘For special occasions,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Like right now,’ he added. ‘If we don’t overdo it I could treat you.’

She grabbed his hand.

‘Please,’ he begged. ‘Grant me that favor.’

She fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief and blew her nose.

‘Okay then. Just this once,’ she muttered. ‘Because you ask it so sweetly.’ She smiled at him, but he could tell she was moved, yes, even upset.

They toasted. He closely followed all her movements and gestures. That had always been his survival strategy, in the childhood home among his bossy sisters, at school, in college and at the institute where he had worked until it was disbanded. Covert imitation made him invisible.

She spread a piece of baguette with herb butter and handed it to him. It tasted as expected, given the smells in the establishment.

‘Shall I order for both of us?’

He nodded, which seemed fine to him. He wouldn’t know what he should have chosen.

The meal was a dream. One dish after another appeared; the

white wine was succeeded by red, which he also drank too quickly. He had continued to live at home during his studies and first years at the institute, where there was always primal Dutch food – without much joy, by the way. When his mother died, he was orphaned and practically homeless from one moment to the next. He could not take on the high interest and amortization of the parental home. Fortunately, with his long period of enrollment, cheap housing was quickly found. His mother had always cooked, so his own prepared dinner usually didn't mean much.

And now he was eating real Italian food with a beautiful woman! He thought her really beautiful.

When he got over his diffidence – thanks to the wine probably, he mused – he dared to look at her more closely during the moments when she had her attention on her own plate and wasn't paying attention to him, whether he liked it.

Manfully, he sipped the minute espresso cup, finishing the meal. Dessert was out of the question. The heady sensation of undiluted coffee was an experience.

The bill came and Marian put in a bank note.

'The wine was for me,' she declared. Then their gazes intertwined. Helpless was he. So was she. He saw pain and sorrow, and something mischievous, a zest for life that he himself lacked. What she saw, he did not know. He dared not think about it.

Whining from her bag rudely interrupted the moment. Startled, she broke eye contact and snatched out her cell phone. No smartphone.

'Just a moment, mind you,' she excused herself with a guilty look and removed herself so he couldn't hear her.

He grabbed his coat and hers and walked after her, past the bar, outside, where he could see her standing in the characteristic pose of someone with a cell phone to the ear. He greeted the proprietor and went outside, clasping his own coat between his legs so he could put her coat around her shoulders. It was far too cold to be outside without. He put on his own coat, pulled the hat over his ears and then didn't know what to do. She stood some distance away with her back to him, completely absorbed by the conversation.

It became too uncomfortable for him and he decided to go home. He walked away from her, slowly so she could still catch up or call after him.

He looked back; she was still standing there just the same. With a sense of fatal loss, he walked down the street that led to his house.

At his front door, he hesitated. Going back?

If he didn't, she was gone forever.

He turned and stepped back the route with great strides, amazed at his continued impulsiveness. This was not how he knew himself.

His stomach area was tight and his heart was pounding in his throat. It made a free fall as he rounded the corner: she was no longer there. Shocked, he stood still.

Stupid stupid stupid, why had he run away? Not so friendly toward her; just because she was on her phone? Wait, the manager knew her, maybe he knew where she lived.

At the door of the restaurant he hesitated. Come on Cor, he exhorted himself, now don't be a coward, be a man. He was just about to push open the door when it was pulled open from the inside. They looked at each other, startled.

'Marian, may I take you home?' he stammered. They both held the handle of the door.

She hesitated.

'You forgot my scarf. Where were you so suddenly?'

'Oh, I didn't mean to disturb you.'

She slammed her eyes down in a sad gesture. 'I wish my ex had that much decency,' she muttered.

He re-breathed. He did not need to confess that he had gone home.

'Have you been married?' he asked sullenly.

'That should have been the day.'

Inside, a comment was made that he could not understand. Marian looked over and called out something. She moved to go outside at the same time he wanted to step inside. She had more presence of mind than he did and pushed him backwards, out into the street.

'It's drafty if we stay in the door.'

He still held the crutch and pulled the door closed behind her. In doing so, the distance between them became zero and they stood against each other, she with her hands on his shoulders, he with the arm with which he had closed the door around her waist.

'Did you go to the hairdresser? I can smell it.'

He didn't dare move, never stood that close to a woman before, even considering how thick their coats were.

He managed to use his voice again.

'It was getting too long. It had to be cut.'

Her eyes examined his face, her hands stayed on his shoulders.

'Who are you, Cor?'

'No one,' he blurted out. 'Until tonight then,' he added.

She nodded. 'You said that well. The same goes for me.'

He shook his head in disbelief.

'I can't imagine you were as much of a nobody as I was.' As she continued to look at him, 'At least you had a relationship. Someone who is calling you.'

She slammed her eyes down. 'Maybe. What do you know about me? What do I know about you?'

She took a step back so that they were standing apart. 'Come on, if you like you can walk me home.'

Right next to each other, but not so close they would touch, they walked the few streets to her home address.

'I live there, on the second floor,' she said gravely, while pointing to the windows. 'I don't invite you in now, because I'm ashamed of the mess. If you like, come for tea tomorrow afternoon. Four o'clock. All right?'

Cor imprinted the house number. He had nothing to write with, so he couldn't give her his address. That wasn't necessary, he realized. It was up to him to be here tomorrow or not to be here.

On the way to his house, the even strides of his long legs calmed him. He had bumped into a woman out of the blue – literally – and had addressed her out of the blue. He had never dared to do that before. Or dared ... it had never occurred to him that he could interact with a woman. That means: a woman other than his mother. He had long ago declared to himself that he was asexual. In fact, he kept men at bay as much as women. Or children. He was actually a little afraid of them. A little very afraid, he didn't know why; maybe because they were so lively and unpredictable.

Shaking his head because of his own thoughts, he hung up his coat. The place stank. He started cleaning up the kitchen and doing the dishes. It was too late to vacuum; these houses were too noisy for that. Hanging laundry was still possible, even though it was dark. It was dry weather. By the light from his bedroom and kitchen, he was busy on the balcony until all the washed clothes hung. Continuing tomorrow morning. No more TV tonight, either. Tired, he undressed, put on his pajamas and crawled into his cold bed. Washing sheets tomorrow...

Only when he placed a hot pitcher by his feet did he become warm and able to sleep.

It was still dark when he awoke from an exhausting dream. His body was not yet ready for any action in the cold house. Even his full bladder had to wait. He felt peaceful and knew he had a sleepy smile on his face. From the inside, it felt very quite different from the bland nothingness that normally marked his countenance.

And all that happened because of an encounter with a woman. A woman who called herself Marian, which he felt was not her true name. Was his true name actually Cor? Why not Nelis? He smiled, deeper now. Or Jan, as his father had been called. He had the same baptismal names: Cornelis Johannes. Jo and Han, Johan and Hannes were also names he could carry.

Excitedly, he got out of bed, pulled the bedspread around his shoulders and set the thermostat in the living room to 21. So, an act of defiance! All the other radiators were closed. Those in the shower and kitchen he turned open. Living in opulence for a moment. This afternoon he went out, then the central heating could go out, too.

At 3:30 he could no longer stand it and headed out the door. He had already bought a modest bouquet in the supermarket in the morning.

Via a long detour through streets he had never been to in the more than ten years he had lived here, he reached the goal that his entire being had been focused on since the previous evening.

He walked up the long granite exterior stairs and rang the doorbell at exactly four o'clock.

The light in the vestibule came on, the door opened.

'Hi Cor. Right on time. Come in.'

Her appearance rendered him speechless. She wore an old-pink mohair sweater with a loose neckline on a dark red skirt with many pleats down to her bare feet. In the ceiling light, her chestnut hair shone.

She smiled seeing the admiration in his eyes.

'Come in man, it's way too cold for an open door.'

His gaze moved from her hair to the flowers in his hand. The color palette reflected the colors she wore. Mechanically, he stepped inside. To close the door, she forced herself between him and the wall, her shoulder and hip touching him. He reached out to give her the bouquet.

'Oh, flowers, how sweet! And just the right colors! How did you know?'

He laughed a little. Yes, how did he know?

She helped him again with his coat, which was actually too tight. He was wearing the only clothes that looked a little decent, but were dead boring. His gray office pants, a plaid shirt and the dark blue vest that had still belonged to his father, above the shiny polished black shoes he had last worn at his mother's funeral.

She sniffed him.

'You should air your house more often, Cor.'

He nodded. 'I was dying there,' he stammered out in a hoarse voice.

She looked at him perceptively, shook her head and pulled him into the living room by his hand.

'I have herbal tea and regular tea, which do you prefer?'

'I've been drinking plain tea all my life, now let me choose herbal tea.'

She disappeared into the kitchen. He had to restrain an impulse to go after her. A moment later she re-entered with a teapot in her hand and set it cautiously on a small table.

'Just let it brew,' she murmured. There was a sudden tension between them that caught him off guard. She jumped up. 'Oh, your flowers! I still have to put them in a vase.'

So he wasn't the only one bothered by it.

She had selected a red, bulbous vase for the bouquet and set it on the dining table with a certain triumph. Her movements were dashing, quite different from the evening before, when she was cautious in everything.

She sat down with a thud in the old chair opposite the couch, where he was sitting.

'Cor, there are a few things that are bothering me. The first is your name. I don't want to call you Cor...'

He raised his hand.

'Do you know I've been thinking about that all day? My Christian names are Cornelis Johannes. Is there anything you like better about that?'

She looked at him in surprise.

'How talkative you are all of a sudden.'

'You do that to me.'

'What the hell! Did I do it again!'

'Don't be angry. It's just your zest for life that invites me to be heard.'

Tears appeared in her eyes.

'No one has ever said that to me before,' she sobbed.

'I ... I've never had such thoughts before either,' he stammered, upside down from her suddenly evoked emotion. 'Let alone spoken them.'

He pulled the handkerchief that had been there, folded for ten or more years, out of his pocket, wanted to hand it to her and to bridge the distance he slid off the couch onto his knees, hobbled toward her and did what he had never done to anyone before: he dabbed her tears. She grabbed his hand and pressed her cheek against it.

'Are you by the way a sneaky poet?'

Cor, meanwhile intoxicated by her scent, a mixture of a light perfume, mothballs and the exudation of her moved body, replied, 'Maybe so.'

That was quite different from the denial that had been on his lips.

He would have liked to sit leaning against her chair like that forever, his hand with the handkerchief pressed against her face by her hand.

'The tea should be brewed by now, don't you think?' came her little voice.

With a sigh that seemed to come from a distant region inside him, he withdrew his hand.

'Yes, I think so. Shall I pour?'

He heard himself say this and was reminded of his mother,