

The Godly Gardener

Beauty and fraud in Toscane

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen

Novel



Sometimes, where people are familiar together, it happens that someone joins in, causing short circuits and patterns get disrupted.

It started with the garden.

An estate/hotel was looking for a gardener (m/f).

A man with an aura of wildness came.

A day later there was a young woman at the door, with all the required qualifications and her autistic toddler.

There was the owner's secret: a letter from the bank.

There was pressure to participate in an absurd sewage project.

Absurd? Not if you saw the bullet hole in the tire of Henry's Landrover, with which he had crashed.

There was death and there was a miraculous resurrection.

Some guests left as a different person. In them, a long-dormant transition had finally taken place.

Nor was the estate left untouched.

In the end, it was not about the precious water, but about money. Fraudulent, big money. And not a word of that part is made up, even though this is a novel.

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Colophon

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1. The Garden

To the north, thunder growled; the weather lighted at one stretch. Against the flickering sky the peaks of the central mountain massif stood out, deep black with illuminated outlines. There was hardly any distinction between the mountain peaks and the cloud mountains in the sky; they looked equally solid from this distance. Tomorrow there would be more clarity: the clouds would have moved, the mountains would still be there unchanged.

Bea wished that her difficulties would disappear as the clouds would after the rain. And that tomorrow would prove that the estate would endure as enduringly as the mountains in the distance. For a moment, her contained anger played up. What possessed these people to lay such blame on her? So unjustified! So not done! And at her age! But she was also afraid. She didn't dare show Henry the letter from the bank.

She forced her attention back to where she stood. There was an expectant atmosphere in the dim garden. The cracked earth and withering vegetation thirsted for the repose promised on the horizon.

Properly speaking, you could call this waiting, this receptivity, the essence of the weather change. The rain was the fulfillment in the material plane. Like a birth was following a pregnancy.

In fact, the loads of water approaching through the sky called for the waiting as much as the waiting of the earth and plants invited the rain. Perhaps there was no cause and effect at all. Perhaps everything rested on arrangements.

Confused by her thoughts, she turned her gaze from the northern to the western sky. The last sunlight covered the closing cloud cover from below with ominous colors. From there, her gaze wandered sideways to the reddish-lit profile of the strange visitor. He was primal, she thought, like a rock, strange, of a different order from her little world. She was uneasy about whether the man would not eventually turn out to be a threat after all.

‘You can’t see the garden very well now,’ she apologized. ‘The thunderstorm makes it dark much earlier than usual.’

Her own detached sentences evoked distaste. Why couldn’t she just say what she thought? Even her voice she thought sounded sanctimonious, untrue, unreal. Why did she apologize for the light disappearing from the garden? If the man had arrived at the appointment on time there would still have been plenty of daylight. Again exasperation flamed through her.

‘I can smell the garden, ma’am,’ the man replied. The raspy voice was barely audible. It had sounded as if he had not spoken for an eternity. She had listened more to the sounds than the meaning, which only dawned on her when she replayed his remark in her mind. He spoke the language correctly, but with a strange side sound. It wasn’t even the accent, though that too was audible. It was more that familiar overtones weren’t there and unfamiliar ones resonated. More a musical issue than speech skill, she thought.

She looked aside again, wondering if this heavy, silent man would become her gardener. Whether he could live up to her rescue plan. He had not made a convincing impression. He hadn’t said a word so far. But that could be because he was in strange surroundings, she understood. Although, was he even shy? Wasn’t that her posturing? She had dragged the man from the front door to the garden. She knew she made a confident, aristocratic impression, which upset many people, but shy? To her shock and annoyance, she had to confess that she herself was shy. Maybe that’s why she babbled so much, so she hadn’t given the man a chance to say anything.

Her reflections were interrupted by a new sensation that presented itself to her. She suddenly experienced with all her senses, with her skin itself that the garden scented; as if a lover was expected.

‘The rain is coming, ma’am. The plants are ready for it,’ his growling voice sounded. It made her have to clear her throat, as if she had a frog in her throat herself. Would he have guessed her thoughts? Could others hear her thoughts as well, like the garden? Like the plants? Perhaps she

heard their thoughts, too. It was perhaps not at all strange if her thoughts and feelings were not just hiding inside her body; that they were darting outward, looking for others to share what they were full of. She had a vision that dozens of children gathered around her. Some seemed to be watching her, listening and waiting to see what she would say or do next. She had the impression that there were also a lot of children doing their own thing and paying attention only to the approaching rain.

Unmoving, the two people stood in the motionless garden, where plants, flowers and the earth itself tempted the rain-soaked sky to pour out its life-giving water. Bea began to glow all over her body; she became almost liquid from it.

How long had they stood like this? The thunderstorm was suddenly fearfully close. High above their heads pounded implosions, whose echoes seemed to roll away over the thunderheads. Light discharges behind the cumuli showed in flickering purple and blue the still-captured images of the swirling masses of clouds.

In her awe of the mighty display, she could imagine that Donar might see the thunderclouds from above as droplets of milk spread in his teacup like rapidly growing cauliflowers. She smiled internally at her fantasy and was suddenly unafraid.

Thunder suddenly thumped close, the ground trembled. The smells grew heavier and thicker. The willows along the creek below rustled loudly in the moments of silence when the thumping of the thunder died away for a moment.

‘I hear water flowing, down the slope, ma’am. Are you using it for irrigation?’

‘No, it’s too far down. We don’t have a pump. There is normally enough water for the garden. That whole mountain over there to your left is full of it, and all the springs are on our land.’

She saw his profile outlined against the weather-lit sky.

‘People here call it the Water Mountain. The slope you see belongs to the estate. The other side doesn’t. That one is steep and dry; all the water comes to the surface here.’

‘That means an an enviable wealth, ma’am.’

She did not answer; she experienced an almost shameful pride that she was the owner of it. It wasn’t just that: there was a playful joy involved.

She felt included in the midst of a group of elated ... what? Were they those children? At least they were not afraid, on the contrary.... they seemed to be feeding off the electricity in the air. The almost joyful excitement increased with each heartbeat, she stood almost gasping for breath her legs went limp as if from a rising orgasm....

The fulfillment came calmly; large drops tapped on leaves and made dull thuds on the dusty earth. A moment later the rain came with an all-consuming rumble. A curtain of tepid water splashed down, so dense that Bea had to gasp for breath. It was like standing under a waterfall. She wouldn’t have missed the experience for anything.

It lasted only a short time. The core of the thunderstorm passed them by. The crackling lightning strikes she so feared did not occur.

The flood of water gradually subsided to a steady rain. The earth smelled contentedly of warm mud and wet moss. She imagined that the sense of presence around her had dissolved. Vaguely she had the idea that all the children in the garden were busy stirring in mud and shaking plants to splash each other wet.

2. The Gardener

Bea turned and entered the veranda. She heard the man behind her sopping through the mud. She shivered in her wet clothes. Not because she felt catty or cold, more like a shudder of passing pleasure.

The man removed his outer clothes in one fluid motion, leaving them carelessly on the shelves of the porch as he stepped back into the garden. Bea stared perplexed at his muscular, black-haired back. His broad buttocks and thighs strained with each step in the wet pants.

Angry, she went inside. To just take off his clothes in front of her! Dripping, she walked to the bathroom. To the left, in the sitting room, Henry sat by the open window. She smelled his pipe. The familiar scent restored something of her confidence. The glimpse she caught of his wheelchair spoiled it again. Henry had become so distant since the accident. She hardly knew him anymore.

In dry clothes and with a scarf wrapped around her wet hair, she sat down on the veranda. She wanted to get out on her own, without having to ask Henry's advice. That man didn't fit an inch into the picture she had formed of the gardener she had asked for in her ad. But she was willing to admit to herself that she was quite impressed by the man's earthy, almost sensual appearance.

It was now completely dark except for the bands of light shining from the windows of the house behind her. The rain had stopped. She heard the last veils rustling away. The dripping of trees and bushes remained; these were sounds that belonged to the garden. The bubbling brook contributed to the audible landscape as basso continuo. Here and there brief rumbles sounded in the night darkness, as if children were shaking the wet branches.

She sat as if enchanted.

She was not surprised when the man appeared around the corner of the garage. He was wearing dark clothes; his bare feet stood out wonderfully

lightly. She remembered that he was carrying a backpack that he had set down in the garage.

Without any sign that he noticed her, the man stuffed the wet bundle of clothes under his arm and stepped off the veranda, with the obvious intention of disappearing into the darkness.

‘Stay!’ she spoke urgently.

It surprised herself. She had not intended to say that at all.

He turned and looked at her. The light from the open door behind her shone right on his face. It was a powerful face with a kind of mocking expression. Black hair stuck stealthily to his skull. A strong hook-nose emerged between sharp creases. The eyebrows were thick and dark above the pinched eyes and continued above the root of the nose, where two frowns were permanently etched beside them. The full, curved lips were tight, framed by a dark one-day beard. Finally, his chin was round, looked hard with a dimple in the middle. The man stood with one foot already on the path, the other still on the steps, ready to continue the descent, his free hand on the railing, frozen in the impetus to go. He looked intently into her eyes.

Bea felt herself weakening internally, powerless to assess the situation correctly. Outwardly she tried not to show any of her uncertainty, as if then all hell would break loose. That was how she had been raised. In uncertain moments, she derived a kind of protection from it.

She noticed distressed that she was in the process of winning the confrontation and losing the man. He did not make it difficult for her in that regard.

Through the crust of her pride a plea welled up. Now why was he leaving? Just because she had gotten angry that he had simply taken off his clothes in front of her? Then how could he have noticed, he was already gone, out into the garden when she felt her anger rising. Could he catch her feelings?

Involuntarily, she stretched out her hand.

A hint of hesitation trailed over his unbecoming facial expression like a soothing haze. Or was it a smile? She did not know and dared not as-

sume she had seen correctly. She realized that the slightest wrong move, word or facial expression would make this wonderful man disappear forever. Her heart was beating like mad.

‘Stay,’ she said again, almost inaudibly. ‘Please.’ It was the flattering question of a child not wanting to stay alone. Her invitation echoed that she accepted him as he was and that he could stay if he wanted to. Her decision was based on nothing; at least it felt that way. It was as if the decision had been made outside of her. As if it had been fixed for a long time.

Nothing about him moved, but the tightness softened from his muscles. The decisive move, away from her and the house, would not be made. The die had fallen the right way. She sighed deeply and pointed to a chair beside her.

‘Won’t you sit down?’ she looked at his muddied feet. ‘Tomorrow we’ll clean the floor.’

She looked up at him with wide-open eyes as he ascended the two steps of the veranda again. Wavering, he lowered himself into the designated chair. The old rattan furniture creaked under his weight.

For a moment, she didn’t know what to do next. Instead, she looked at her own bare feet. The turmoil inside her calmed down; gradually she was able to form coherent thoughts again.

‘I would like to know more about you,’ she began, ‘but perhaps you would like something to eat and drink first? You’ve had a long journey.’ Being a hostess was a way of life with her. It was largely beyond her conscious control.

The man nodded, a rumbling from his stomach confirming her assumption.

‘Wait here, I’ll heat up some food,’ she said hastily and scrambled up with quick gestures. ‘What would you like to drink? Something hot, tea or coffee? Or beer, wine?’

He hesitated and totally unexpectedly launched a kind of roguish look, which confounded her.

‘Please water first, because I am very thirsty. But may I perhaps also

have a glass of wine? I am hungry for that.'

'You're welcome.' It pleased her that he said honestly what he wanted.

There was no one in the old-fashioned, spacious kitchen. She turned on the electric oven. The dish she had eaten only a little of that evening, in a kind of anxious anticipation of the announced but absent visit, was still lukewarm and would be hot soon enough. With a carafe of water, an already opened bottle of wine and glasses on a tray, she returned to the veranda.

She pulled up a table with her foot and poured her guest two glasses, one with colorless and the other with bright red god's water. She was almost as proud of their spring water as she was of their wine. She set the tray on another small table and went to get the food. She herself also took a plate. On second thought, she also brought a portion to her husband, who looked up gratefully, musing over a book.

'Thank you,' he said softly. 'I'm craving that now.'

She saw that he was provided with wine, glass, ashtray and napkin and left him in the semi-dark room, in the circle of light from the reading lamp behind his wheelchair.

3. His story

Her guest accepted the warm plate with an acknowledging look. Blowing on each bite, he ate carefully of the hot pie. He smacked appreciatively, involuntarily it seemed. She watched with an eager gaze, how he moved, how he held the cutlery. He wielded the wine glass almost tenderly in the bowl of his hand, the stem with the foot sticking out between his fingers like the leg of a chick.

‘Tell us a little about you,’ she asked, when his plate was empty. ‘We were expecting you here this afternoon. Were you delayed?’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ the man replied. ‘The train had hit a bovine. It took almost four hours before we could continue.’

‘A bovine! Where then? How...?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am,’ the man said, apologetically spreading out his arms. ‘I was startled awake when I fell off the bench because of the hard braking. I don’t know where the train was at the time, but at least another hour’s ride from the town where I had to take the bus to your village. It is a wild, uninhabited area there. It was a bovine from a wandering herd. The animal was dead and the train was damaged. A locomotive had to come from the other side to drag us on.’

She nodded and continued to look at him. She had a feeling he hadn’t spoken yet.

‘But you came anyway,’ she encouraged him when he remained silent. He nodded and looked at her inscrutably. No, she thought, he’s not looking inscrutable, he’s grieving. Hastily she wanted to say something so as not to prolong the painful silence, but he was ahead of her.

‘Yes,’ he said. His gaze wandered into the dark garden. ‘That stupid animal.’ He looked at her again; there was an anger around his eyes. ‘It wouldn’t have been necessary at all if better care had been taken.’

She didn’t understand what he was referring to. Who should watch a wild cow? She poured herself a glass of wine to give herself an attitude.

‘But I came anyway,’ he repeated her comment.

He looked down at his feet, which had left black prints and smudges on the wooden boards. 'I am grateful to you that you still wanted to receive me.'

'Yes, but that goes without saying, doesn't it? Besides, you have nowhere else to go at this hour of the day. Of course you are our guest.' She shook her head as if to deny that there could be the slightest doubt about that. 'Even if you had knocked on the door in the middle of the night.'

He hesitated. 'You are still looking for a gardener, right? Have others responded to the vacancy?'

She shook her head. However, he continued to look at her inquiringly. She could sense nothing impertinent in his behavior or expression, yet it felt as if she were being questioned. Agitated, she searched her brain for an approach to the situation that would bring the initiative back to her side. She found only loose thoughts and fragments. What was happening to her anyway? What was it about this man that so upset her?

'What do you want me to do?' he asked her as she continued to look around confused. Apologizing, he added, 'I suppose you want to see if I'm a good gardener first.'

'Yes.' She was able to refocus on the topic of conversation. The man was just coming for the post of gardener. She had thought long and hard about that, had made a whole plan once she had decided to place an ad. And today that had been thwarted because that letter had come from the bank. That was the real source of her confusion! Of course, the man himself was not ordinary either....

'A problem has arisen, after I posted the vacancy on the Wwoofers site,' she began hastily, before losing her superiority altogether. 'For now, we can only offer you a position as a volunteer, for board and lodging. Much as I would love to have a permanent gardener.' She looked at him to see how that would fall. He did not respond, however, and continued to look at her.

'I mean,' she continued hastily, 'we had already anticipated that.... I mean, that you would come and sleep on the estate for the time being.'

Only ... well, there's actually no living quarters for internal staff.' She chose her words carefully, careful not to talk out of turn, because that sometimes happened to her. She found the word 'staff' so derogatory. In this case, that is, because she did consider the woman from the village who came to clean daily and worked as a chambermaid to be staff.

'When you called this morning that you were coming today I made a bed for you in the caravan at the back of the orchard. I'm sorry, that's the only available guest room at the moment. The guest-houses are all occupied. After the season we might see if we can find something more comfortable.'

He raised his hands to stop her flood of words, a faint smile around his wide mouth.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Don't bother. In fact, you are doing me a great favor with that caravan, ma'am. I prefer to sleep in the garden or among the trees. I'm not very fond of houses. Shall I start first thing tomorrow, then?'

'Gladly,' she sighed, relieved that it was all so convenient. 'The garden hasn't been kept up for weeks. You can have your fill tomorrow.'

'It looks quite flourishing otherwise, though it's a bit on the dry side. Have you done the garden so far?'

'No way, if only; I've got my hands full with the guests, the kitchen and everything else,' she laughed apologetically. 'No, we had a pensioner from the village do the garden. But he's old and couldn't come for a while.'

He shrugged.

'You don't like being in a house you said? Would you like to tell me why?'

She saw his hesitation; a fleeting pull of pain and sorrow seemed to slide across his dark countenance. It happened so fast she thought she imagined it, because when he opened his mouth his face looked as inscrutable as ever.

'I was once buried under the rubble of my own house, ma'am,' he began in a soft voice. 'That was quite a plighted experience.'

A pull of great sorrow crossed his face.

‘It wasn’t an earthquake,’ he continued in a low tone. ‘It was a grenade. Miraculously I was unharmed, I was just working in the garage, but my wife and my child were dead. Not by debris, but torn apart by shrapnel. I found them and buried them, in the garden, under the almond tree. It was just blooming.’

Bea shivered in horror, tears springing to her eyes. She couldn’t say anything, didn’t dare make a sound or move.

After a deep sigh, he grabbed the wine glass and knocked back the contents. She immediately filled it and he took a second, large sip.

‘Excuse me,’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘It’s very difficult to tell. I speak your language, but I can’t express myself very well in it.’

‘I understand very well,’ she whispered. She swallowed away a sob and shuddered. It was not those few labored sentences that had touched her so. She had seen images in her mind, like snatches from the television news; she had tasted the dust, the hot blast gases; she had smelled the odors of earth ripped open, pulverized stone and blood.

Without averting his gaze, he continued his story in short, monotonous sentences.

‘Due to the shelling, the town slowly fell into ruins. I enlisted in the local militia and learned to fight in the mountains. I was a natural, they said. I ambushed countless bandits at their guns and killed them with my knife. I never used a shooting weapon.’ He smiled smugly for a moment. ‘Nor was it difficult. They were almost always drunk and not paying attention. Their guns I blew up with their own hand grenades.’ A pull of deep disgust didn’t make his face any prettier. ‘I got tired of it. I moved away from the area. I had learned how to stay invisible and live off what nature provides. I was on the road for a long time and not seen by any human being. Some time later I found myself in your country.’

Again, almost uncontrollably, he took a gulp from his glass. Again she filled it to the brim. He looked menacingly at his glass and then somewhat guiltily at her.

‘Excuse me; I don’t do your precious wine justice. But sometimes um...’

he searched for the right words, ‘swallowing large glasses of wine is a... relief. A man needs that from time to time,’ he explained circumspectly.

‘It’s fine,’ she reassured him. ‘I’m happy to do you a favor. But go on. You arrived in this country and then?’

‘Yes. I traveled at night through virtually uninhabited regions; I could thus cross many borders unseen. Without having the required papers, I mean.’

He looked at her.

She merely nodded and looked him straight in the eye.

‘We don’t attach much importance to formalities,’ she stated calmly. ‘My husband and I consider ourselves citizens of the world before anything else.’ She smiled for a moment. ‘We look at people differently. Not at what’s on their papers, or their money, or prestige. We look at a person’s being. I haven’t fathomed your being by a long shot,’ she confessed, ‘but even in the first minutes of our meeting I wanted you to stay here.’

He nodded. As if he didn’t expect anything else.

It had been a test, she realized, whether she would offer him refuge as an illegal refugee or, on the contrary, refuse him because he had no passport. As far as she was concerned, unnecessary, but of course he had to be on his guard.

‘How did you actually get our ad?’

The man shrugged. ‘I took a hotel in a town near the border, bought clothes and a few newspapers and magazines to get an impression of the country. I looked for work and lodging. Someone helped me search the Internet; that’s how I came across your ad.’

‘You spent months traveling through Europe and no one ever saw you?’ she continued after a brief silence. It intrigued her how this man had lived in the wild.

‘You know, until a few years ago I was an ordinary, nice man. I had my garage and a thriving gas station, I sang in a choir, I spoke four languages because we performed a lot, and I was deliriously happy with my wife and my little daughter. I single-handedly built my house...’ He shook

his head in defiant incomprehension. ‘Look how I am now. I’ve lost everything. My wife and child are dead. My garage, my cars, my house are destroyed. I have gained twice the weight; I look like a gorilla. I have killed many men with these two hands. I have lived like an animal in the wilderness from what I could catch, pick or steal.’ With his dark head in his large hands, he indeed had something of an ape-like wild man, huddled against the world.

‘Is the war in your country over now?’ asked Bea, who had no idea exactly where he was coming from. There were so many major and minor skirmishes in the east. She wasn’t just curious. Intuitively, she was trying to keep him talking.

‘No.’

‘Why did you move in this direction in the first place?’

It seemed like an important question, though she didn’t know why.

When he did not answer, she put her hand on his arm again.

‘Why did you come to this country?’

He shrugged. When she insisted by lightly squeezing his arm he raised his head.

‘I don’t know why, ma’am. I didn’t think, I chose the paths that looked promising. I woke up, as it were, climbing onto the bank after swimming across the border river. And I speak the national language by my singing in the choir.’

‘Then you actually came here almost directly?’ she observed.

He smiled. ‘I hear in your voice a great affection. I am very happy about that, I cannot say how happy.’

‘What is your name?’

‘Please give me a new name. The old one belonged to another person. I lost that one along the way.’

She looked at him brooding over a name. It pleased her that she could give him a new name. She decided to call him Don, after her late son, but ‘Angèl’ came out of her mouth, in Mediterranean pronunciation. With wide eyes, she looked at her guest, who reacted to her dismay with surprise.