

HÅKAN NESSER

**THE STRANGLER'S
HONEYMOON**

A VAN VEETEREN MYSTERY

*Translated from the Swedish by
Laurie Thompson*

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‘In the next life I want to be an olive tree.’

She gestured vaguely towards the hills where dusk was falling fast.

‘It can live for several hundred years, according to what I’ve read. That sounds pretty reassuring, don’t you think?’

Afterwards, he would occasionally recall that these were her last words. That comment about olive trees and reassurance. It was remarkable. As if she was taking something big and sublime with her to the other side. An inspiration, a trace of some kind of insight that she didn’t really possess.

At the same time, of course, it seemed to him a little odd that she should make such a general – and actually rather meaningless – comment, immediately after those terrible words that had sealed her fate so definitively. Which ended her life and gave their relationship its final destiny.

I love somebody else.

Needless to say, it never occurred to her that things would develop the way they did. That what happened next was the only way out – not until the very last seconds, presumably – but in a way it was typical, both of her naivety and of their relationship in general. It had frequently happened that she

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didn't grasp the full significance of things until it was too late. At a stage when it was pointless trying to put things right, and when all that could be said – absolutely everything – had already been said. When the only possibility available was decisive action. He had thought about that before.

'I've made up my mind. I know I'm hurting you, but we must go our separate ways from now on. I love somebody else.'

Then silence.

Then that comment about the olive tree.

He didn't answer. Had she expected him to answer?

It wasn't actually a question she had asked. Merely a statement. A fait accompli. What the hell could he have answered?

The balcony was not large. Six to eight square metres. A little white table with two chairs that looked exactly like all other plastic chairs and all other plastic tables in every part of the world. The same applied to the hotel. Only two floors, no dining room – hardly even a reception. They had booked the holiday at the last minute and hadn't bothered to pick and choose.

Olympos. Just a few minutes' walk up from the beach, the landlady had a moustache and it had about a dozen rooms, probably fewer.

Their colourful patterned beach towels were folded over the balcony rail to dry. They each had a glass of ouzo and were sitting within half a metre of each other; she had just had a shower, was suntanned and radiant after a whole afternoon on the beach.

A whiff of thyme from the hills formed an unholy alliance

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with the stench of low-octane petrol wafting up from the main road. And that was more or less it.

That and those words. A note suddenly began to resound in his head.

Faint and difficult to pin down, but somehow persistent. It can be heard like the trickling of a little rivulet babbling through the sound of the cicadas churring drowsily after a hot day. They sound like several hundreds, but there are probably no more than two or three of them. He stands up. Knocks back the rest of the ouzo in one swig, takes a few deep breaths.

Stands behind her; moves her hair to one side, places his hands on her naked shoulders.

She stiffens. She becomes more tense, almost imperceptibly, just a few muscles – but he notices it immediately. The tips of his fingers on her warm skin are as sensitive as tiny seismographs. He feels his way along the sharp edges of her collarbones. Feels her heart beating. She says nothing. Her left hand lets go of the wine glass on the table. Then she sits there, still. As if she were waiting.

He moves his hands in towards her neck. Notices that he has an erection.

A motorcycle with a very badly damaged silencer clatters past in the street down below. His blood starts racing through his veins, both in his hands and down below in his genitals.

Now, he thinks. Now.

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At first her struggles are like a sort of orgasm, he registers this similarity even while it is taking place. An orgasm? he thinks. Her body is arched from the soles of her bare feet on the balcony floor to his hands around her throat. The plastic chair overturns, her left hand hits the ouzo glass, which falls over backwards and lands on one of his flip-flops, rolls over a few times but doesn't break. She grabs hold of his wrists, her thin fingers squeeze so hard that her knuckles turn white, but he is stronger. Very much stronger. The motorcycle clatters up the narrow asphalt path between the olive groves – it has evidently turned off the main road. He squeezes even harder, the note inside his head is still resounding, he still has an erection.

It takes no longer than forty to fifty seconds, but those seconds seem never-ending. He doesn't think of anything in particular and when her body suddenly goes limp, he shifts his grip but maintains the pressure, goes down onto his knees and bends over her from in front. Her eyes are wide open, the edges of her contact lenses are clearly visible, her tongue is protruding slightly between her even, white teeth. He wonders fleetingly what to do with the present he has bought for her birthday. The African wooden statuette he found in the market in Argostoli that morning. An antelope leaping. Perhaps he can keep it for himself.

Or maybe he'll throw it away.

He also wonders how he will spend the remaining days of the holiday as he slowly relaxes his grip and straightens his back. Her short dress has ridden up and revealed her extremely skimpy white panties. He contemplates her dark

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triangle that can be seen through the thin cotton, strokes it a few times and is aware of his steel-hard penis.

He stands up. Goes to the bathroom and masturbates. In so far as he feels anything at all afterwards, it feels odd.

Odd, and somewhat empty.

While waiting for the right moment, he lies down on his bed in the darkness of the hotel room, and smokes.

Smokes and thinks about his mother. About her undeniable gentleness, and the strange, empty feeling of freedom she left behind. *His* freedom. After her death last winter he no longer feels her eyes staring at his back all the time. There is no longer anybody who sees him exactly as he is, in every respect; nobody who rings once a week to hear how he is.

Nobody to send holiday postcards to, nobody to keep reporting to.

As long as she was alive, what he had just done would have been inconceivable, he was certain of that. Not in the way it had happened, at least. But now that the blood-relationship had been severed, quite a lot of things had become easier. For better or worse. It simply happened.

Better but also rather pointless. His personality no longer seemed to have any real substance, no backbone. That was a conclusion he kept coming back to over and over again during the past six months. Often. Life had suddenly lost its *raison d'être*. And now here he was, lying on a hotel bed on a Greek island just like any other, smoking and seeing her gentle but also stern face in his mind's eye, while his wife lies

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dead on the balcony, going cold. He has moved her closer to the wall and placed a blanket over her, and he can't really make up his mind whether or not his mother in some mysterious way – in some totally incomprehensible sense – knows what has really happened this evening. Despite everything.

He is a little annoyed at not being able to answer this question satisfactorily – nor how she would have reacted to what he has just done this hot Mediterranean evening: and after his tenth or possibly his eleventh cigarette he gets up. It is only half past midnight: night life in the bars and discotheques is still as vibrant as ever – there is no question of getting rid of the body just yet. Not by a long way. He goes out onto the balcony and stands for a while, his hands on the rail, wondering what he should do. It is not easy to lug a dead body out of a hotel without being seen – even if the place is off the beaten track, even if it is dark outside: but he is used to taking on difficult tasks. He often finds the difficulty stimulating, it makes his heart beat that bit faster and supplies some of that *raison d'être*. It is no doubt thanks to that aspect of his character that he has progressed as far in his career as he has. He has often thought about that before, it is a recurrent reflection of his. The challenge. The gamble. The *raison d'être*.

He inhales the fragrance from the olive groves, tries to experience it as if it were coming from the world's first olive tree – or the world's oldest – but he can't manage it. Her last words get in the way, and the cigarettes have deadened his sense of smell considerably.

He goes back indoors, fetches the packet from the bedside table and lights another one. Then sits down on the white

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plastic chair on the balcony again, and thinks about the fact that they had been married for nearly eight years. That is a fifth of his life, and much longer than his mother predicted when he told her that he had found a woman with whom he was going to enter a serious relationship. Much more.

Even if she had never passed her opinion as explicitly as that.

When he has finished smoking this cigarette as well, he picks up his dead wife and carries her into the room. Lays her down at an angle over the double bed, takes off her T-shirt and panties, gets another erection but ignores it.

Lucky that she's so light, he thinks. She weighs nothing at all.

He picks her up again and drapes her over his shoulders – as he will have to carry her eventually: he has only a vague idea of how rigor mortis works, and when he drops her back down onto the bed he leaves her lying in the U-shape she had assumed while hanging round the back of his head and over his powerful shoulders.

In case she starts stiffening up now.

Then he takes the tent out of the wardrobe – the light-weight nylon tent he had insisted they should take with them – and starts wrapping it round the corpse. He trusses it up, using all the loose nylon cords, and decides that it looks quite neat.

It could easily be a carpet or something of the sort.

Or a giant dolmade.

But in fact it is his wife. Naked, dead, and neatly packed

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into a two-man tent, brand Exploor. There we have it, all neat and tidy.

He wakes up at half past two after dozing off briefly. The hotel seems to be fast asleep, but there are still rowdy noises from the nightclubs along the street and the promenade. He decides to wait for another hour.

Exactly sixty minutes. He drinks coffee to keep himself awake. The night seems to be an accomplice.

His rented car is a Ford Fiesta, not one of the tiniest models, and there is plenty of room for her in the boot, thanks to the fact that she is doubled up. He opens the boot lid with his left hand and eases her down from his left shoulder by leaning forward and slightly to one side. Closes the boot, looks around then settles behind the wheel. No problem, he thinks. No sign of life anywhere. Not inside the hotel, nor out in the street. On the way out of the town he sees three living creatures: a thin little cat slinking along in the shadow of a house wall, and a street cleaner with his donkey. None of them pay him any attention. Easy, he thinks. Killing is easy.

He has known that in theory all his life, but now he has transferred theory into practice. He has a vague idea to the effect that this is the point of life. Man's actions are God's thoughts.

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The ravine has also been hovering in the back of his mind, but it is a somewhat shaky memory and he is forced to wait for the first pink light of dawn in order to find his way there. They passed by it a couple of days ago, travelling over the mountains on their way from Sami and the east side of the island: he remembers that she had wanted to stop there and take some photographs, that he did as she wished, but that she had difficulty in establishing the right camera angles.

Now they are here again. It's really a crevice rather than a ravine. A deep cleft inside a hairpin bend, a thirty- or forty-metre almost perpendicular drop, the bottom hidden by a tangle of thorny bushes and rubbish thrown out of car windows by less than scrupulous car passengers.

He switches off the engine and clammers out. Looks around. Listens. It's ten minutes past five: an early bird of prey hovers motionless over the barren mountainside to the south-west. Down at the bottom of the V between two other rocky precipices he can just catch a glimpse of the sea.

All is silence. And the distinct smell of a herb he recognizes but can't identify. Oregano or thyme, most probably. Or basil. He opens the boot. Wonders for a moment if he should remove the tent inside which she is wrapped, but decides not to. Nobody will ever find the body down there, and nobody will ever ask him to explain what happened to his tent. He has use of the car for two more days and will be able to drive over to the other side of the island again. Get rid of the pegs, the ropes and the bag in some other crevice. Or in the sea.

Nothing could be simpler. Nothing at all.

He looks round one more time. He picks up the big bundle

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and heaves it over the low rail. It bounces off the steep cliff walls once or twice, then crashes through the dry bushes and disappears. The bird of prey seems to react to the noise and the movement, and moves further westward.

He stands up straight. It's hard to imagine that it really is her, he thinks. Hard to believe that he really is here, doing this.

He lights another cigarette. He has smoked so much during the night that his chest is aching, but that is of minor importance. He gets back into the car and continues over the crest of the mountains.

Twelve hours later – in the middle of the hottest hour of the siesta – he opens the glass door of the travel agent's air-conditioned office in the big town square in Argostoli – the angora, as it's called. Sits down patiently on the sticky plastic chair and waits while two overweight and over-tanned women complain about the shortcomings of their hotel to the blonde girl in a blue suit behind the counter.

When he is alone with the blonde girl he adopts the most agitated tone of voice he can conjure up and explains that he has a problem with his wife.

He's lost her.

She seems to have disappeared. Just like that.

Late last night. She was going out for a late-night swim. Needless to say there might be a perfectly natural explanation, but he is worried even so. She doesn't usually vanish like this.

So perhaps he ought to do something?

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Maybe he should contact the authorities?

Or the hospital?

What did she think he ought to do?

The girl offers him a glass of water and shakes her Nordic hair in a gesture of sympathetic concern. She comes from a different country, but they understand each other well even so. They don't even need to speak English. When she turns to one side and reaches for the telephone, he catches a glimpse of one of her breasts right down to the nipple, and he feels a sudden surge of sexual excitement.

And while she tries in vain to make telephone contact during the hottest hour of the day, he begins to wonder who that other person could be, the one his wife had talked about.

The one she claimed to be in love with.

MAARDAM

AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2000

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Typical, thought Monica Kammerle as she replaced the receiver. So bloody typical. I hate her.

Her conscience pricked her immediately. As usual. As soon as she had a negative thought about her mother it emerged from the shadows and made her feel ashamed. Conscience. That internal, reproachful voice, telling her that you shouldn't have negative thoughts about your mother. That you must be a good daughter, and acclaim rather than defame.

Be grateful, not hateful, as she had read in some girl's magazine or other several years ago. At the time she thought the advice sounded so wise that she cut it out and pinned it up over her bed when they were living in Palitzerlaan.

Now they lived in Moerckstraat. The four-roomed flat in the Deijkstraat district – with high ceilings and views over the Rinderpark and the canal and the green patinated roof of the Czekar Church – had become too expensive now that there were only the two of them. They had managed to live there for three more years after her father died, but in the end the money he had left them ran out. Of course. She had known all along that they would have to move out, there was no point in pretending otherwise. Sooner or later. Her mother

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had explained that to her in great detail and unusually clearly on more than one occasion, and last spring they had moved here.

Moerckstraat.

She didn't like it.

Not the name of the street. Not the drab, brown-coloured building with its three low-ceilinged storeys. Not her room, not the flat, nor the dull, characterless district with its straight, narrow streets and dirty cars and shops, and not even a single tree.

I'm sixteen years old now, she had begun to think. Three more years at grammar school, then I can move away from here. Then I can look after myself.

Her conscience pricked her once more as she remained standing by the telephone, looking out of the window over the top of the net curtains at the equally dirty-brown façades on the other side of the street. The narrow, dark windows that were in the shade for eleven hours out of twelve even on quite sunny days like today.

She remembered a line in a play by Strindberg: 'You have to feel sorry for human beings.' Not just sorry for myself or for Mum, but for everybody. Every man jack. But being aware of that doesn't make it any better.

She liked having little conversations about life with herself. She didn't write them down, but kept them in the back of her mind and thought about them occasionally. Perhaps because it helped to place her in a context with other people. A sort of gloomy solidarity.

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Reminded her that she wasn't so different, despite everything. That life was like this.

That her mother was just the same as the mothers of other sixteen-year-old girls, and that loneliness was just as devastating for everybody else as well.

And maybe her mum would get well again one of these days – even if that fat psychologist woman hardly made it sound as if she believed it would happen. Better to keep an eye on it and try to keep it under control with the aid of medication. Better not to hope for too much. Better to keep your sights low.

Manic depression. That was what it was called. And it was *disciplined* medication, the psychologist had said.

Monica sighed. Shrugged, and took the recipe out of the file.

Chicken in orange with rice and broccoli sauce.

The chicken pieces had already been purchased and were in the refrigerator – she would need to buy the rest at Rijkman's. The rice, spices, oranges, salad. And ice cream sorbet for afters. She had noted it all down, and her mother had made her read out the whole list over the telephone.

Manic, she thought. A sure sign that her mother was moving into a manic phase. That was presumably why she had missed her train. She had been to tend the grave in Herzenhoeg and stayed there too long – not for the first time.

But her late arrival and the evening meal business were not a problem. Not as far as her mother was concerned: there were virtually no problems when she was in this state. She was experiencing what would be a brief high – it seldom

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lasted longer than a week. While it lasted there was no reason why everything shouldn't go like clockwork.

And the medicine was doubtless here at home in the bathroom cupboard. As usual. Monica didn't even need to check in order to know that.

Wouldn't it be better to postpone the dinner? she had suggested. He was due to arrive at eight o'clock; surely he wouldn't want to hang around until half past eleven waiting for her mother to get home?

Her mother had explained that of course he would want to hang around: that was something an innocent sixteen-year-old couldn't possibly understand. She had already checked with him when he rang her mobile. So could she please be a good daughter and do what her mother had asked her to do?

Monica tore the page out of her notebook and took the necessary money out of the housekeeping kitty. She saw that it was already half past five, so she had better get moving if she was going to avoid disappointing her mother's lover.

Lover? she thought as she pushed her trolley around the shelves, trying to find what she was looking for. She didn't like the word, but that's what her mother called him.

My lover.

Monica preferred the actual person to what her mother called him, in fact. Thought he was much better. For once.

Just think if this could be it, she thought. Just think if they could make up their minds to try and live together.

But it seemed pretty unlikely. As far as she knew they had

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only met a few times – and most of them did a runner after three or four.

Nevertheless she allowed herself the childish hope that he would move in with them, and she tried to conjure up his image in her mind's eye. Quite tall and well built. Probably around forty. Hair greying at the temples, and warm eyes that reminded her a little of her dad's.

And he had such a nice voice, that was perhaps the most important thing of all. Yes, now that she came to think of it, that was nearly always how she judged people.

By their voice, and the way in which they shook hands. Those were two things that couldn't be falsified. That was no doubt something she had read in another girls' magazine ages ago, but it didn't matter. It was true, that was the main thing. You could lie with so many other things: your lips, your eyes, your gestures.

But never with your voice and the way you shook hands.

As far as she was concerned, he scored especially highly on those two aspects of character: a calm, deep voice which gave words exactly their right value and never rushed things, and a hand which was big and warm and neither pressed too hard nor felt as if the owner would rather pull it away. It was almost a pleasure in itself to shake hands with him.

She smiled slightly at her thoughts, and turned her attention to her shopping list. What a brilliant assessor of human character I am, she thought. I've only met him for about ten minutes in all. I ought to become a psychologist or something.

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As she prepared the food, she began thinking – as usual – about Loneliness. With a capital L: that was how she often saw it written. Presumably in order to give it some sort of extra dignity.

Wondering whether she would be able to overcome it now that she was starting in a new class at school, or if everything would turn out to be the same old story. Loneliness, her only reliable companion.

Would she still not dare to invite new classmates to her home? Because of a mum who put both herself and her daughter to shame the moment anybody new stepped over the threshold.

Or posed a threat of doing so, at least. Who could lie under a blanket on the sofa in the living room in broad daylight – with a carving knife and a bottle of sleeping pills on the coffee table beside her, begging in a loud voice for her daughter to help her to commit suicide.

Or float around in the bathtub barely alive, surrounded by her own vomit and with two empty wine bottles standing on the floor.

Or at the other extreme: as high as a kite, instructing young twelve-year-olds about the most efficient ways of masturbating – since sex lessons at school nowadays were such a lot of rubbish.

No, she thought. No, three more years will be more than enough – I don't want to end up like that.

And the men. The boyfriends who came and went, always during the manic weeks in the spring and the autumn, each

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of them even worse than the previous one, none of whom she ever saw more than three or four times.

Apart from Henry Schitt, who claimed to be a writer and smoked hash all day long for four weeks, either in the bathroom or out on the balcony, until Monica plucked up enough courage to phone Auntie Barbara up in Chadow.

Auntie Barbara hadn't intervened personally, of course: she never did. But she had arranged for two social workers to call round and throw out Henry. And for her sister to be placed in medical care for a few hours.

And to be given some more medicine.

That was in the spring, a year-and-a-half ago; and things had in fact become rather better after that. As long as the medication wasn't left unused in the bathroom cupboard because her mother had been feeling so well that she didn't think she needed to take it any more.

And now this Benjamin Kerran.

When she thought about him, it occurred to her that this was the first time during all those years that she hadn't heard the shout for her father echoing inside her chest. Her own shout inside her own body.

Benjamin? The only thing she had against him was in fact his name. He was much too big to be called Benjamin. And vigorous and warm and lively. A Benjamin ought to be small and skinny with misted-up glasses and a face covered in pimples and blackheads. And bad breath – just like Benjamin Kuhn-pomp, who had spent a term in her class in year five, and who

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was, as far as she was concerned, the model for all Benjamins the world over.

But now here she was, cooking a meal for a quite different Benjamin.

A Benjamin who was her mother's lover, and was welcome to stay with them for as long as he wished.

As far as Monica was concerned, she was keen to do her best not to frighten him off – that much was clear, and she was determined to carry it off. She checked the temperature and put the casserole with the chicken into the oven. It was only half past seven: if she skipped washing her hair, she would have time for a shower before he arrived.

'You don't need to sit here entertaining an old fart just because your mum was delayed. You mustn't let me interfere with your plans.'

She laughed and scraped up the final, runny lump of sorbet from her plate.

'You are not an old fart, and I don't have any plans for this evening. Have you had enough?'

He smiled and patted his stomach.

'I couldn't even force down another raisin. Is it your mum who's taught you how to cook? That was really delicious. An old bachelor like me isn't used to feasts of this quality, believe you me.'

'Oh, come off it!' she managed to come out with, and could feel that she was blushing.

'Let's put some foil over the remains, so that we can warm

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them up when your mum gets back. I'll see to the washing up.'

'No, I . . .'

'Enough of that. Sit down and watch the telly, and I'll sort all this out. Or read a book. Incidentally, speaking of books . . .'

He stood up and went out into the hall. Fished around in a plastic carrier bag he had left on the hat shelf, then came back in.

'Here you are. A little present as a thank you for the meal.'

He placed a flat, gift-wrapped little parcel on the table in front of her.

'For me? But why?'

'Why not?'

He started clearing the table.

'You might not like it, but you sometimes have to take a chance.'

She ran her finger over the fancy ribbons.

'Aren't you going to open it? I've got something for your mum as well, so she won't need to feel jealous.'

She slid the ribbon over the corner of the packet and tore open the wine-red paper. She took out the book, and couldn't conceal her delight.

'Blake!' she exclaimed. 'How did you know?'

He came over to her and stood behind her with his hands on the back of her chair.

'*Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. I happened to notice that you had *Tyger, Tyger, burning bright* pinned up on your noticeboard – it was your mum who insisted that I should take a look at your room – forgive me for intruding. Anyway,

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I thought he must be a favourite of yours . . . And it's a beautiful book, with all the paintings and so on.'

She started thumbing through, and when she saw the mystical illustrations and the ornate script, she could feel that tears were not far distant. In order to keep them at bay she stood up and gave him a hug.

He laughed, and hugged her as well.

'So there, little lady – that wasn't much, let's be honest! Time to leave me in peace now here in the kitchen.'

'You're so nice. I hope . . .'

'Well, what do you hope?'

'I hope everything goes well with you and my mum. You would be so good for her . . . For us.'

She hadn't meant to say that, but it was done now. He held her shoulders, at arm's length, and eyed her with a somewhat confused expression on his face.

'We'll see what happens,' he said.

Then he steered her out of the kitchen.

When he came and sat beside her on the sofa, it was twenty past ten. There was over an hour to go before her mother would arrive. She had started watching a French film on the telly, but switched off after a quarter of an hour. She switched on the reading lamp and went over to Blake instead.

'Read something for me,' he said.

She suddenly felt her mouth go dry.

'My English isn't all that good.'

'Nor is mine. But I think all young people speak like native

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Brits nowadays. Do you have a favourite poem? You don't need to feel embarrassed if you slip up.'

She thought for a moment, then leafed back through a few pages.

'Maybe this one.'

'Let's hear it.'

She cleared her throat, closed her eyes for two seconds, then started reading.

*'O Rose thou art sick
The invisible worm
That flies in the night
In the howling storm*

*Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy'*

She closed the book and waited for his reaction.

'Lovely,' he said. 'And sad. It's called "The Sick Rose", isn't it?'

She nodded.

'But it's really about people. I realize that you've had a bit of a rough time. If you want to tell me about it I'd be glad to listen.'

She knew immediately that that was exactly what she wanted to do. But was it appropriate? she wondered. And if she did tell him, how far should she go? And where should she begin?

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'If you don't want to, then of course you shouldn't. We can sit here in silence, Or talk about football. Or ropey TV programmes, or the perilous state of hedgehogs in the contemporary world . . .'

'You are just like my dad,' she said with a laugh. 'You really are. We used to sit here on this sofa, reading aloud to each other. When I was little, that is – he did most of the reading, of course. I used to sit on his lap.'

Three seconds passed before she burst out crying.

Then she sat on his lap.

Afterwards she had trouble in remembering what they had talked about.

If they had said all that much in fact, or just sat there in silence for most of the time.

Probably the latter.

But she remembered that he smelled nice. She remembered the rough texture of his shirt, and his regular, deep breaths against her back. The warmth he radiated, and his strong hands that occasionally caressed her arms and her hair.

And she remembered that it was shortly after the old wall clock over the television struck eleven that she felt that sudden movement inside her that ought not to have stirred at all.

And that at almost exactly the same moment a part of him also moved and made its presence felt, in a way that was absolutely forbidden.

3

He rang to apologize the very next day.

In the late afternoon: her mother was at some preliminary meeting for people who had been out of work for quite a long time, but were now being launched back into the labour market. Perhaps she had told him about that, so that he knew when it would be a suitable time to phone her.

‘Please forgive me, Monica,’ he said. ‘No, you shouldn’t do that, in fact. It was unforgivable.’

She didn’t know what to say.

‘There were two of us involved,’ she said.

‘No,’ he insisted. ‘It was entirely my fault. I don’t understand how I could have let it happen. I was a bit tired, of course, and I’m only human – but for God’s sake, that’s no excuse. It’s probably best if you don’t ever see me again.’

He fell silent, and she thought she could hear his bad conscience in the receiver.

‘We didn’t go all that far,’ she said. ‘And I must accept some of the blame. You’re not a child any longer when you’re sixteen years old.’

‘Rubbish,’ he said. ‘I’m in a relationship with your mother. This is the kind of thing you read about in dodgy magazines.’

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'Do you read dodgy magazines?' she asked. 'I didn't realize that.'

He burst out laughing, but checked himself.

'No,' he said. 'But maybe I should, in order to discover what I shouldn't do. But it won't happen any more, I promise you that. It's probably best that I put an end to my relationship with your mother as well . . .'

'No,' she said. 'Don't do that.'

He paused before responding.

'Why not?'

'Because . . . Because you are good for her. She likes you and you like her. I like you as well – not like last night, that was an accident.'

He seemed to hesitate again.

'I rang to apologize, and . . . and to say that I thought it was best to accept the consequences and leave both of you in peace from now on.'

'But you didn't tell Mum that?'

He sighed.

'No, I didn't tell your mum that. That would have been the correct thing to do, of course, but I didn't know how she would take it. And if you're a coward, that's what you are. So you see what a shit I am.'

'You're not a shit. Pack it in now, there were two of us on that sofa and I'm not utterly unaccountable for my actions.'

'I'm sorry.'

Silence once again. She could feel thoughts buzzing round inside her head like a swarm of bees.

'I must say I think you are treating this less seriously than

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you should,' he said in the end. 'Maybe we should meet and talk it over properly.'

She thought for a moment.

'Why not?' she said. 'It wouldn't do any harm. When and where?'

'When do you have time?'

'Whenever suits you. I don't go back to school until next week.'

He proposed a walk in Wollerims Park the following evening, and she thought that sounded like a good idea.

The following evening was a Wednesday, and one of the hottest days of the whole summer. After quite a short walk they sat down on a bench under one of the weeping willow trees next to the canal, and talked for over an hour. Afterwards they went for a walk through the town. Along Langgraacht, through Landsloorn and out to Megsje Bojs. She did most of the talking. Spoke about her childhood, her father's death, her mother. About her difficulties at school, and her girlfriends who kept letting her down. He listened and asked a few questions. When they turned off onto one of the pedestrian paths through the woods, she linked arms with him; when they had come deeper into the woods where there were no more lights, he put an arm around her shoulder, and by shortly after midnight they had become lovers for real.

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And they carried on meeting.

After the evening and the night in Megsje Bojs, she heard nothing from him for almost four days. Then he rang late on the Sunday evening when she was alone at home again. He apologized once again, insisted that what he had done was unforgivable, and that what they had been doing must stop before it ended up disastrously.

They talked for about ten minutes, then arranged to meet for one last time and sort everything out. He collected her from school on the Tuesday, they drove out to the coast in his car, and after a long walk along the beach they made love in a dip among the dunes.

When they went their separate ways neither of them said a word about putting a stop to what was now happening, and during the first couple of weeks she was back at school he came to visit them in Moerckstraat twice. On both occasions he spent the night with her mother, and in the badly sound-proofed flat she could hear them making love until well into the early hours.

But she knew that one of these days he would come back to her. It's madness, she thought. It's sheer lunacy.

But she did nothing – nothing at all – to put a stop to it.

Not yet.

School was the same old story. Her hopes that things would change now that she was starting in the sixth form were soon shattered.

At the venerable old Bungeläroverket Sixth Form College –

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which her father had attended in his day – she found herself in a class consisting mainly of new and unknown faces. But there were quite a few well-known faces as well, and it wasn't long before she realized that these old so-called friends from the Deijkstraaskola had made up their minds to keep her in the role they had carved out and assigned to her alone, once and for all.

It was not difficult to see that her new classmates had been informed about various things. That they knew quite a bit about her already, despite the fact that they were only a few days into the new term. Her home circumstances, and the state of her mother, for instance. The story about the vomit in the bathtub that she had confided to a very reliable girlfriend a few years ago was by no means a thing of the past just because she had moved to a new school. And the same applied to her mother's masturbation lesson. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that such stories had acquired new legs.

In other words, her reputation was already established. Monica Kammerle was a bit odd. No wonder. With a mother like she had. Not surprising that she tended to keep herself to herself, the poor thing.

And when she thought about Benjamin and what went on in her home, she had to admit that they were right.

She really was odd. She was different from the others.

She and her mother as well.

Possibly even Benjamin. When she made love with him for the third time – at home in Moerckstraat one morning when

her mother was attending her work experience course and she was playing truant from a sports day – it struck her how little she knew about him.

His name. Benjamin Kerran.

His age. Thirty-nine. Exactly the same age her father would have been, and one year younger than her mother. The occasional strands of grey hair around Benjamin's temples might have led most people to assume that he was a little older than that. Forty-odd, perhaps.

Job? She didn't really know. He worked in local government – she didn't recall his ever having been more precise than that.

Home address? No idea. Surely it was preposterous that she didn't know where he lived? They had never met in his home – only outdoors, or at her flat in Moerckstraat when her mother was out of the way. Surely it was a bit odd that they had never made use of his home – always assuming that he lived alone. She decided that she would find out his address the next time they met. He wasn't in the telephone directory, she had established that as soon as she had started to wonder about the question.

Of course, she could ask her mother about such details. Obviously, Monica had legitimate reasons to know some details about her mother's lover no matter what the circumstances.

Even in circumstances that were rather more normal than these.

And what about his life in general? What did she know about his life?

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Hardly anything. He had been married, he had mentioned that: but it was evidently a long time ago. He had never said anything about any children.

So presumably there aren't any, Monica thought.

It's strange, she thought. Strange that I know so little about the only lover I've had in my life. Still have.

But at the same time she realized that it wasn't really all that odd. The main topic of conversation between them had always been her. Every time they had met.

Monica Kammerle. Monica Kammerle's childhood and youth. Her mum and dad. Her teachers, her old unreliable friends, her favourite hobbies and favourite books. Her thoughts about everything under the sun, and how she felt when he touched her in various ways. And when he was inside her.

But what about him? Nothing. It was hardly his fault. She liked to talk, and she liked him listening to her. To be perfectly honest, you could say that she wasn't much more than a self-centred sixteen-year-old who liked to contemplate her own navel and never looked beyond the end of her own nose.

On the other hand, she had never had anybody to listen to her since her father died. That's life, she supposed. You have certain needs, and if you had an opportunity to satisfy them, that was what you did of course.

Apart from the phenomenon of Monica Kammerle there was really only one topic of conversation to which they devoted any time.

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Their relationship.

The forbidden fact that she had the same lover as her mother. The fact that she, Monica Kammerle, sixteen years of age, and he, Benjamin Kerran, thirty-nine, spent their time *screwing* each other. From in front and from behind. With mouths and tongues and hands and everything possible. Screwing away like the very devil. She soon realized that she felt a sort of delight mixed with horror, a rather stimulating dismay, as soon as they began talking about it.

As if they had invented it. As if no other person was aware that you could act like that.

Or as if putting all the disgusting actions into words somehow made it all acceptable. By talking about it. She was quite sure that he felt the same way about it as she did.

We are well aware that we are doing wrong, and so we can allow ourselves to do it, she said on one occasion.

And so we can allow ourselves to do it?

At first she believed that.

At first she was really no more than a willing victim in his arms – she was bright enough to be aware of that.

Because she enjoyed what he did to her. Everything – almost everything.

And she enjoyed what he allowed her to do with him. And the fact that he enjoyed it as well.

He told her on one occasion that there are other cultures in which they introduce young girls to sex by letting them go with experienced, grown-up men. Perhaps that's not a bad idea.

Monica agreed. Not a bad idea at all.

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After a night that Benjamin had spent in her mother's bed before leaving shortly before dawn, she confided in her daughter that he was the best lover she had ever had.

Monica was inclined to agree, but she said nothing. There was no doubt that Benjamin had a strong and positive influence on her mother, it was impossible not to notice that. The manic high she had enjoyed during the latter part of August had come to an end. She was taking her medicine regularly – as far as Monica could judge by checking the medicine cupboard – and she seemed to be healthier and more relaxed than Monica could recall her being at any time since her father's death.

She was attending her work therapy classes four times a week, cooking meals, shopping and doing the laundry. Almost like a real mother. She had never been so patient and focused. Not as far as Monica could remember, in any case.

So touch wood, she thought. What we are doing might be lunacy – but we are living in a different culture, as it were.

She smiled at the thought. If only her classmates knew . . .

The need to confide in somebody, to tell at least one other person what was going on, cropped up a few days later: to be more precise, the early morning when he left her mother in her bedroom and came to hers instead.

It was early one Wednesday morning at the beginning of September. Shortly after five o'clock. As far as she could make out Benjamin and her mother had been on a trip to Behrensee, and got back home quite late. She was already

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asleep in bed when they returned, and had only a vague recollection of hearing them in the hall.

She was woken up by him caressing her nipple. He held a warning finger to his lips and nodded in the direction of her mother's bedroom. Took her hand, placed it on his rock-hard penis and looked suggestively at her.

There was something hungry in his eyes, she noted, but at the same time something entreating, almost like a dog.

And although she was only sixteen years old – and had been a virgin as recently as eighteen days ago – she read in that look of his something about the balancing act that is a hidden component of bodily love. Had crystal-clear insight – although she was only half awake – into all the bottomless pits that lurked behind the most gentle touches and modest glances.

How quickly something could go wrong. And how easily something could go wrong.

She hesitated for a moment. Made sure that he at least closed the door properly. Then nodded and allowed him to penetrate her doggy-fashion.

It hurt, wasn't at all like it usually was. She hadn't been properly prepared, it hurt and he was much rougher than usual. He seemed to be interested only in satisfying his own needs, and after a minute or so he ejaculated all over her back without her having been anywhere near to an orgasm.

Without her having experienced an ounce of pleasure.

He mumbled an apology and went back to her mother's bedroom. No, this was nothing like it usually was, and for the first time she was filled with a surge of extreme disgust.

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No doubt he would tell her mother that he'd just nipped out to the loo. If she happened to wake up. Hell's bells.

She got out of bed. Staggered to the bathroom and threw up until she felt completely drained. Showered and showered and showered.

His dark secret love does thy life destroy, she thought. No, I can't go on like this. I need to talk to somebody.