

Morgan

BAS STEMAN

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MY LOVE

A NOVEL

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Nieuw Amsterdam

First edition 2018
Eighth edition 2021

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Cover design Nico Richter

Cover photo © beeldbankwo2.nl – NIOD

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NUR 301

ISBN 978 90 468 2813 7

www.nieuwamsterdam.nl

www.bassteman.nl



Though lovers be lost love shall not

Dylan Thomas

For Glenys (†), Siân, and all the others...

Prologue

Up there everything is different. First you come loose from the ground, you're swallowed by the heavens, move in all directions on the wind. Then gravity sucks you back to earth. An island rushes towards you. The altimeter counts down tens of metres per second. Despite wearing goggles, tears burn your eyes; your stomach swells. Adrenaline flings you into an orgasmic tunnel of speed and abandon.

I want that too, I thought.

Specks drifted in an endless firmament. Later they turned out to be colourful canopies from which people dangled, shrieking with excitement. A few metres from the ground the enigmatic Anne pulled up her legs; her chute bulged like a huge cushion. She landed. Boisterously embraced her tandem master. Pressed her lips against his cheek. The others also returned to earth howling. The instructors unfastened their chest straps, helped the over-joyous step out of their rigs and field pack their parachutes. Radiating heroism they passed me on their way back to the hangar.

'Next group get ready!' One of the instructors shouted. His face brown as a sailor's, his blond hair dry as rope.

'You, you and you, and those two there,' he pointed, 'jump-suits on, follow my instructions.'

'Yes!' I heard beside me. Laughing colleagues hurried ahead to the hangar, a large open space with about as much atmosphere

as a school gymnasium: shelves full of clothing along the wall, grubby floor mats with waiting parachutes lined up like rucksacks. I straightened my back, followed directions. It was going to happen. In a few minutes, I'd go up, up, and away. A tandem jump was the ultimate, they said. The station's TV ratings had risen so sharply in recent months that the editors-in-chief had decided to treat all forty-four of us to a free fall.

Anne was just to my right on the bench. She'd removed her jumpsuit, pulled up her hair with an elastic band, and was laughing with the others. In shreds of conversation I overheard her say that she felt like a bird, something about weightlessness and never wanting anything else.

A Cessna roared as it climbed above our heads.

I kicked off my trainers, took a jumpsuit from the rack, and found a spot on a bench in between the clothing left behind by those now jammed into a plane a few kilometres above the ground.

'Get a move on, folks!' The instructor called. 'About thirty minutes, then it's your turn.'

I was relieved to see all their faces tighten. Some laughed to calm their nerves. I tried to ignore the dumb 'your chute not opening' jokes. A parachute jump was statistically less risky than plummeting down a mountain on a racing bike with narrow tyres. I sighed.

As soon as I wormed myself into the jumpsuit, dizziness overwhelmed me. The light grew misty, as if it might snow at any moment. Thousands of ashen-grey dots, transparent spots, spun wildly in front of my eyes, merging into an expanse of white. My throat tightened. I felt a deep chill inside my chest. My T-shirt was glued to my back by sweat.

What the fuck was this? Was I going to throw up?

I didn't know what to think. I was shaking. My hands sought the bench behind me. Better sit down.

On the mats I saw my group practising for their jumps, curving like human bananas, with hollowed backs, their lower legs and shoulders simultaneously retracted from the floor. The instructor pointed at me, curling his index finger and moving his lips, but I was shrouded in a mist that cut me off from my surroundings. It muffled every sound. I had the feeling I was completely alone. On my own. Surrounded by a threatening silence. I heard nothing, only the roaring in my head: Don't do it!

I couldn't think anymore. I hid my face. From a great height I saw myself lying there: a speck in a green sea. Above me a flawless sky.

Slowly, I caught my breath and the world around me came back into focus.

'Planning on joining us?' the jump instructor said tapping my shoulder. I had a sour taste in my mouth; I swallowed and looked up. 'Well?' he asked more forcefully.

I carefully shook my head and mumbled, barely audible, that I was going to die. From his bemused gaze I saw he'd understood me.

'Not likely.' He planted his feet in front of me, put his hands under my armpits in an effort to pull me to a standing position. 'C'mon.'

One by one, I realised my colleagues were staring at me. My head was spinning. Was my blood pressure too low? A loud cry pushed the enormous weight from my chest, 'No!'

Laughter rippled through the hangar.

'Seems our cyclist here can't muster the nerve,' someone tauntingly said.

'It's the greatest. Man up! You don't get to do this every day!'

I shook my head and felt much too dizzy to stand. Flying like a bird, being shot through the air like a rocket, letting my body fall like a ton of bricks was now something I couldn't fathom. A profound anguish consumed me.

‘Then don’t do it!’ someone called out.

Slapping each other on the shoulders, they crowded together at the exit, grinning – men and women, each with their tandem master. At the door the instructor turned towards me, ‘We’ll be back in half an hour, maybe you’ll feel differently then.’ A burst of cheering sounded from outside: the exuberant cries of my colleagues who’d just landed, welcomed back by those about to soar high in the sky.

The hangar was deserted. I sat quietly on the bench just staring out in front of me. Stunned, drained, as if I’d cycled up a mountain. A body in standby mode. Hopefully my refusal to jump would quickly be forgotten. I unzipped my jumpsuit with trembling fingers. Before I hung it back on the hook, my hand slowly slid over the fabric’s smooth surface. Unconsciously I was saying goodbye, letting go, or perhaps not. I was looking for an explanation, but I didn’t want to look too deeply.

‘Are you okay?’

A silhouette in iridescent light was speaking to me. Anne. Eye contact – lightning struck my body, tried to exit through my feet. She touched me with a fleeting gesture, ran her fingertips over my back.

I stuttered something like, ‘I’m working on it.’

She must have noticed the tremor in my voice.

‘You’re white as a ghost, sweating all over,’ she said. ‘Should I get someone?’

‘Please, no. Anyway, I’m already feeling better.’

I closed my eyes and shook my head to gather my thoughts. Anne stayed a while longer, a distant look on her face. She was simply there. A few minutes later my breathing calmed down and the colour returned to my cheeks.

‘I’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘Thanks.’

She stood up and slowly walked towards the gaping doors of

the hangar. Had she expected me to say something else? She gradually transformed into a shadowy apparition, her contours fading first, then with a few steps, she dissolved into the daylight.

Embarrassed by what had happened, avoiding eye contact, I found a spot outside on the grass. My thoughts swirled. Gazing at the sky I slipped far, far, away.

The Departure

Coat and scarf on, just a few steps, you hear the door close behind you... if only it were that simple. As much as I looked forward to leaving, something kept me from making a move, choosing a direction, embarking down an unfamiliar path – to see what I might encounter, what was waiting for me.

‘You really need to do this on your own.’ Anne said, lit from behind in the doorway, blowing a kiss through the air, waiting until I started the engine. With her dressing gown wafting in the wind she looked like she had wings. She said something, words carried off by currents of air. I understood what she’d often said before: that I’d come so far, that I was getting closer, and above all, that I had to go this last stretch alone. That every soul has its own journey...

As long as I’m in time. I held up my hand and waved to Anne, then accelerated and drove through the night to the Port of Calais.

After I left she most likely went back upstairs to our warm bed and fell asleep again. Or she read more of the book I’d seen lying next to her pillow, or listened to music, or perhaps she dozed off on the sofa downstairs. Whenever she surrendered to sleep, she was transformed from a woman into a child with tucked-up legs and a boundless imagination.

Nobody sleeps as small as she does. It began with her.

Anne

Cigarette smoke snaked into the lights above the bar. The light fell across faces I knew from the TV station. Some were already three sheets to the wind, trying to maintain their balance, find solid ground. Others grabbed handfuls of peanuts much too eagerly, howled with laughter, or hung on the bar with a finger in the air, hoping to order. Behind them bodies danced, contorted, underexposed like in a grainy film.

Carrying four glasses of beer, Tom fought his way through the writhing forms on the dance floor. His face changing colour from the revolving lights. He was my guest tonight. Because it was a gala, he was dressed in black tie, his battle suit. Anyone who knew him was aware of what this meant: the swankier the clothing, the wilder the party.

‘So,’ he said sinking into the fake leather sofa beside me, ‘where’s the blonde?’

Ever since he’d caught a glimpse of a new colleague of mine leaving our building, he seemed obsessed with her. ‘Haven’t seen her,’ I replied as I took a sip, spellbound by the throbbing shadows on the floor.

Our editor-in-chief had opened the September gathering with a speech about the new television season, how distinctive our programming was, that our coverage was the most innovative of the era, that every evening a million viewers tuned in and – yes, that called for a toast. Whatever... Churning out the TV news these days was something of a trick, a proven formu-

la: a solid opening; a catchy sometimes tendentious voice-over; a few quotes, finished off with a dozen powerful images with music under; all that in three, or four minutes. Journalism was certainly interesting, but unfulfilling in a creative sense. My ambition had shifted from daily newscasts to writing books and filming longer, in-depth pieces – special reports and documentaries made with conviction.

‘She’s still a juicy piece of ass,’ Tom said, nodding in the direction of one of our female anchors.

‘For sure.’

‘There!’ he blurted out. He sprung to his feet, adjusted his dinner jacket, and dived headfirst into the crowd. For him a broadcasting party – for that matter any party – was much like an evening of European Cup Football: it was all about scoring. He surfaced again at the bar, where he deployed his stud charm offensive at the ‘new girl on the block’. Lightheaded from a bit too much beer I walked out of the room, towards the glare of blue neon anti-junkie lights in the lavatories. The stench of piss filled the air by the Men’s WC. My tired reflection stared back at me in the mirror. Not the best look for seducing women. I washed my hands, splashed water on my face, and returned to the bacchanal.

These days my body felt heavy, as if weighed down by an invisible sack of sand. I nervously fiddled with the top button of my shirt to open it. I plucked a glass of red wine from a tray and looked for a place on a sofa, in viewing distance of the insanity.

Tom apparently needed to devote all his energy to his mission. Every now and then his handsome face popped up in the crowd or his laugh roared above the din. I observed my learned friend hanging on the neck of the blonde. Five minutes later he was doing the Twist with her in the middle of the dance floor. As if he knew I was watching him, he turned his sweaty face in

my direction and stuck both his arms in the air. He gestured that I should join him. I demonstratively raised my glass and stayed seated. At that moment, I felt a hand on my shoulder. My eyes swivelled right, only to rest upon a woman with wavy hair coloured blue by the lights. Anne. *Anne*.

‘How’s only the lonely doing?’

‘Just taking in the party,’ I said.

She jumped right in. ‘It was wonderful, that clockmaker in that atelier under the Rijksmuseum...’ referring to a documentary of mine that had just been aired.

The loud music cut off her sentence. My eyes were pulled towards the dance floor, where Tom – with a huge unlit cigar clenched between his teeth and one hand on the coveted blonde’s hip – was headed in the direction of the bar again.

‘That man with his silver-grey forelock and lazy eye. How he simply belonged there, amongst those beautiful antique clocks, timepieces that have been ticking on the same spot for centuries. What an effort to restore all those musical mechanisms and get the sound right, magnificent,’ Anne continued. ‘Also moving.’

My body relaxed, and I felt myself sinking into the fake leather. I leaned towards her. ‘That the clockmaker himself is out of step with time makes him a beautiful but tragic figure.’

‘How were the reactions? Too poetic, right?’

A familiar story. As far back as I could remember, one way or another, I was always misunderstood. In kindergarten, my drawings were too gory. Later my curiosity was seen as stubbornness. Nowadays, when I wanted my stories to have a deeper context, I wasn’t tough enough for objective, dry journalism. I’d learned to take this as a compliment.

She suggested we sit somewhere quieter. Her eyes wandered over to a narrow corridor with a pale leather sofa flanked by two metal flower boxes with large plants. ‘There?’

I grabbed a second glass of wine from a tray on the table in front of us. 'Red?'

She nodded and said, 'That poem, about an autumn day when we'll all fade away like leaves, who's it by?'

I hesitated. I hadn't told anyone that the poem which introduced the broadcast was from my own hand. Would have only caused a stir: *documentary filmmaker gives his own poetry a platform on TV*. Fortunately, nobody asked about it. And once again, the editor-in-chief had managed to send me a super-motivating e-mail, 'In retrospect, not the type of programmes we're actually interested in.'

'You're looking at the poet,' I said, waiting for a glint of surprise in her eyes, but I immediately added that I hadn't written any poems for years.

'What a shame,' she murmured. Anne paused for a while and sipped her wine. She gave me a quizzical look, then grinned, as if she'd finally figured me out. Soft opalescent irises, deep black pupils, her lips parted. 'So now I have a better understanding of who you are, who's hiding behind that ball of energy.'

Something shifted in me, went tilt, jolted as the light from her eyes pierced my skin, flowed like lava through my body, made me glow.

I didn't know what to say. I put the glass to my lips, sucked air into my cheeks, let the wine roll around on my tongue as if I knew what I was doing, and tried to avoid her gaze. In a strange way, I felt like I could trust her.

She took a sip and her mouth relaxed. 'You know, you're a hard one to read. One moment you're telling corny jokes at the coffee machine, and ten seconds later you're talking about whether we're free to think what we think over Cup-a-Soup.'

'I have something to confess. Sitting here watching all this madness, I find it utterly moving. Because everyone on the dance floor is busy dying... 24/7.'

‘Well, aren’t you the cheerful one?’ Anne said, as she drank and listened.

‘Zoom out,’ I continued. ‘The further away you are, the more ludicrous this earthly escapade seems. There on the dance floor is the party, a lusty bunch full of happiness and hormones. We’re observing from a short distance away, less than ten metres, and we see the tragedy of it all, the party and the dancers. In any case, I do. It all has no meaning. Imagine: we zoom out even more. You’re hanging in mid-air, a bird above Amsterdam, the POV changes, this party disappears in the chaos of the city. Everyone is busy, in search of their own party. Observed from the moon or from another galaxy, we’re simply pathetic. Why make a special effort? All those hours in front of a mirror just to get your face on television, dog-eat-dog, to fight each other, to wage war? It all makes no sense. At least... if there isn’t something greater, something we’re not aware of, cosmically speaking, we’re totally pointless. It’s as if we simply don’t matter. Sometimes I think it needs to be like this: pointless. That it’s our destiny.’

The muffled sound of my voice revealed the embarrassment I felt for the pretentious drivel I was now spouting.

‘So, so, melancholy man, your very own version of *Metaphysics for Dummies*?’ she said.

‘Science made easy.’

‘And that’s why you were moping all alone?’

I shrugged my shoulders and glanced at her apologetically. ‘Never mind. Somehow, at this time of year, I’m always too down for dance parties.’

‘Autumn blues?’

‘Maybe that’s it: the September doldrums.’

‘Well, brood no more, just zoom in! If it’s all pointless anyway, immense and unfathomable, then you’re better off celebrating. Might as well dance!’

Her eyes sparkled. She could have laughed at me, but she didn't. She slowly sipped her wine and gracefully crossed one leg over the other.

The big band paused; a DJ removed 1980s eighties music from his briefcase. In no time a colleague covered in a tiger print managed to strip herself of any hint of the erotic. Encircled by a group of women doing the same disco steps, she belted out 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' together with them.

Anne softly squeezed my thigh. I knocked back the wine, took her hand and said, 'Okay, here we go.'

That evening was filled with a modest attempt at dancing, discussions about what kind of television we'd make if it was only up to us, the new book I was working on, countries we'd both visited and those still on the list.

Tom appeared from behind the Men's lavatory door – a fleeting shadow drying his hands on his trousers. Perhaps he wondered where I was, but before I could call his name, he'd disappeared again.

After closing time, Anne and I walked along the water as the cafes began to shut down for the night. We sat on a wall. Her gaze drifted to the dreamlike reflection of illuminated houses on the canal. She calmly chose her words, formulated her sentences carefully, spoke with admiration about people who inspired her, and about films that I absolutely had to see. In turn I told her about books that moved me, about the feeling of freedom cycling gave me, and about my years of friendship with Tom, who was now a doctor. 'Time can't be captured,' I said, as I stretched out my arm. 'I never wear a watch.'

Finally, I confessed that originally I'd had no desire to go to a party but that it'd been a nice evening thanks to her. She smiled and brushed my cheek with the back of her hand. My mobile lit up.