

Lemuria. Perfectly Fine.

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perfectly fine

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Revised edition 2025

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Publisher: Falinn Publishing

Photo: Vilina Shutterstock

NUR code: 334

Translation: Purperharttranslations-dottievisualpromotions.eu

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Chapter 1

"Hey, fatty!"

I stuck out my tongue at the idiot who had the nerve to insult me.

"I love you too!" I shouted back, to throw him off balance. I heard the other teenagers laughing.

What an idiot!

Why did everyone always have to have an opinion about me or others?

It made me so angry.

As if it wasn't already frustrating enough to carry around extra weight.

As if I had decided one morning to become a cheerful chubster. Well, this chubster wasn't cheerful anymore, she was terribly frustrated.

It was almost dark, though it was only just after four in the afternoon. Winter was nearly over, according to the calendar, and I was looking forward to spring.

And of course, I was going to try again to lose the thirty kilos I had gained.

But it always came back.

The compulsion was stronger than me, forcing me to gain those thirty kilos again. But no one believed that.

I'd seen several psychologists. Most said that the compulsion came from self-protection. Maybe it was true when I was growing up, but in recent years, I had made great strides in my personal development.

I had left my shyness and inability to stand up for myself far behind.

One psychologist thought there was something hidden inside me, some kind of trauma. Was I abused? Neglected?

Abandoned?

He never figured it out, and neither did I. The only thing I knew was that I didn't trust him anymore. Nothing special had happened during my childhood.

My hands were nearly frozen to the bike handlebars. If I occasionally slipped one hand into my jacket pocket, I could fool my brain.

It couldn't register both warmth and cold at the same time, so my cold hand felt a bit less cold for a moment.

Just for a moment.

Luckily, I was almost home.

I lived near the city center, in a pre-war street with tiny houses. In a few years, they would be demolished, but for now, I was fine living there.

I couldn't really afford much else.

I locked my old bike in the front yard with two locks on a rusty iron ring in the wall.

So even drunkards couldn't borrow my bike. They often staggered past my house. It was a shortcut to other neighborhoods.

When I entered the narrow hallway of my house, I felt the cozy warmth of the central heating. But I also smelled the musty, damp odor of mold from the cupboard under the stairs.

So I barricaded that door with an old chest that held my shoes.

Maybe it would stop the mold from growing.

The small living room had just enough space for a narrow dining table and a small seating area. There was a half-open kitchen with only the bare necessities. A door led to the narrow shed, another to the outside. There was no garden, just a narrow alley.

Well, I didn't complain when I sat in the sun in the front yard on a small chair. Upstairs were two bedrooms and a bathroom. Plenty of space for a single person.

When I looked in the fridge, I realized I should have done groceries. I sighed deeply. I didn't feel like cycling to the city again.

So I ate the dessert with cream that I found while thinking about what to cook.

Then I remembered the portion of rice with goulash I had in the freezer. Into the microwave, waiting for the beep.

I plopped it onto a deep plate, grabbed a fork, and settled on the couch in front of the TV.

Turning on the TV wasn't really about watching anything. It was more to drive away the silence, which was the main reason I turned it on.

"Fatty," echoed in my head again, and I hated it.

What you give energy to, grows. I didn't want this to grow into a problem in my head, affecting my confidence. Maybe I was dealing with some form of abuse, verbal abuse. Maybe I defended myself by getting thicker, forming a shield? Maybe that psychologist was right in some way, but it still didn't feel like the real reason.

Then Festival came in, the red cat from my old neighbor.

He was old, with a gray nose, but it still worked well when it came to my food.

He always sneaked into my house through the bedroom window. He'd extended his own house to mine using the gutter. And of course, I was the softie who often gave him half of my food.

Suddenly the house phone rang.

It was a sharp, metallic sound, and I jumped. I always thought I

should turn the volume down, but I never did.

“Maan.”

“Maan Groen?”

“Uh, yes.” I tried to remember if I recognized the voice, but then he started telling me about the TV show 'Dik Ingewikkeld,' and I remembered that I had signed up.

That was more than six months ago!

“You’ve been chosen for the auditions.” You need to come to Aalsmeer for an interview to see if you’ll make it to the camp in Scotland,” the voice quickly rattled off.

I immediately realized I was just one of many people he was telling this story to.

“I’ll definitely get the details by email,” I interrupted him.

“Uh, yes, all the instructions will be sent, but I need to know now if you’ll come.”

I was tempted to refuse, since I had impulsively signed up without knowing exactly what it entailed. But maybe it would be a fun outing, and I could learn something about my weight. And if I didn’t like it, I could always quit.

I decided I’d take my best friend Willa with me to the auditions. She would make it fun.

I agreed, and before going to bed, I texted Willa that I’d call her the next day for one of our long chats.

Willa was absolutely thrilled about the invitation I had received. She eagerly told me exactly what the program would be about. I had imagined it would be some kind of weight loss competition, but Willa had a different take on it.

She mentioned that Miller Johnson had once been quite overweight himself and was now going to host the program. He had certainly dried out nicely, she said. Six overweight participants were selected to be guided through the weight loss

process, and it was all going to take place in Scotland. There was also a professor specializing in obesity who would be involved in the program.

Well, I was curious. Perhaps there, someone would finally understand why those thirty extra kilos kept coming back every time I lost them. No matter how hard I tried or fought against them, they always seemed to be lurking, ready to ambush me. In no time, they were back where I had painstakingly worked to get rid of them.

Maybe, just maybe, the Scottish Highlands had room for a few extra kilos and could take them off my hands for good.

Willa told me she had started another diet, the one that limited carbohydrates and increased protein. Of course, I knew about that diet and how it often made a big impact initially, but in the long run? Well, for me, the weight always returned.

Of course, I tried various methods to regain control of my weight, but that urge to eat felt like a matter of life and death, and I wanted to understand why. After all, I was a product of my environment. This meant I had a relationship with certain foods because they triggered good or bad memories. I knew my parents had shown me love through treats, but that still didn't explain why those thirty extra kilos felt so crucial.

But who was I to give advice to Willa? I certainly didn't look like an expert on weight loss. How many times had I lost that extra weight? I couldn't even count it on both hands. When I found it again, I would eat healthily and manage to avoid all the junk food without a problem.

It was a big frustration for me and a constant source of sorrow for my mother, who was super slim. She couldn't understand how she had given birth to such an overweight child who just couldn't control herself.

My mother came from the planet of prejudice. She was sure it was just a matter of having strong willpower, eating less, and exercising more. I already did all that, but she didn't believe me at all. Luckily, I had a sister who came from the same planet as my mother. She could do all those things. This only reinforced my mother's belief that I was weak and, above all, lazy. My father had once told me that he loved me no matter what I looked like, though he usually agreed with my mother. That was a little comforting.

None of this made it any easier to accept myself as I was. And on top of that, I had an ex-fiancé who had cheated on me with a super-slim blonde. I had thrown him out of my house four years ago, and it had nearly destroyed me. I loved him and thought I could trust him. He didn't think I was worthy enough to stay faithful. For a long time, I felt inferior.

My mother thought I was overreacting because "men are men." I had no idea what she meant by that. Was I just supposed to accept that a man would cheat? I could never allow that.

My mother was convinced that I would remain single for the rest of my life with this attitude. Maybe she was right.

Three weeks later, Willa and I traveled to the studios in Aalsmeer. We had to wait in the cafeteria. Eventually, I was called in for my interview. Willa wasn't allowed to come in with me, but I didn't mind. I saw it as a day out. I wasn't chosen to go to Scotland anyway.

Sitting in a room full of overweight people somehow created a bond. It felt as if we all came from planet Obesity, or maybe Pesturnus. It was a recognition of my kind, or maybe it was just because I wasn't the exception anymore with my excess weight. I noticed the many anxious but hopeful looks. The world was a scary place for people who didn't fit into the "normal" mold.

Whatever that mold was, it certainly was slimmer than the one we were in.

Insecurity thrived for those of us with extra weight. And what about the need to develop an elephant's skin to cope with all the snide comments we often heard? Or you learned to joke about your weight. Most overweight people could probably moonlight as stand-up comedians, I thought sarcastically.

I wasn't in the best of moods, despite the environment. I always got angry when I felt I had to defend myself just because I looked different. But hey, who really looked exactly like everyone else? If that were the case, we'd all have come out of a copy machine. I smiled at my silly thoughts.

Then a boy suddenly grinned at me as if he understood my thoughts. He had striking, wild red curls.

I thought he had a nice, open demeanor. He was also a fellow redhead, with all the freckles to go with it.

"You're in luck," Willa said, observing us.

"Just because you're married doesn't mean I'm after a man or that I'm 'in luck.'" I pretended to be offended by her remark, but it didn't change her conviction.

When Willa believed something, she stuck to it.

"Look, there's Miller Johnson," she suddenly said, pointing eagerly to a man walking towards us.

Miller turned out to be a tall, muscular man with medium-length dark hair, a distinctive goatee, and light eyes.

Had he been overweight? If so, he was indeed in great shape now!

I suddenly caught his gaze. He nodded at me with a triumphant smile. It intrigued me.

What was he so triumphant about?

He also had strange eye color. It was gray, very unusual. For a moment, I had a *déjà vu* feeling.

Maybe he triggered a memory, though I had no idea what memory it might have been.

“Maan Groen!” I was startled out of my thoughts when I was called.

I stood up and followed the super-slim girl who was beckoning me. She was holding a list and made a quick checkmark with an irritated gesture.

It was so old-fashioned. Doesn't everyone have an iPad for this kind of thing now?

She probably loved her job, as she looked at me in annoyance when I tried to strike up a conversation, as if she was wondering why I dared speak to her.

She led me into a small room where an older man sat behind a desk. He didn't even look up when I walked in.

Great, another instance of being ignored. Story of my life.

There was a desk, another door, books about TV and film, a mirrored window with what I felt were three people behind it. A coffee cup on the desk had left a ring on the wood, and there was an old briefcase on the floor, with a squashed fly on the window.

I registered all of this in a split second.

This type of information always came to me instantly. I was especially sensitive to the atmosphere and my surroundings. Scanning my environment provided protection, especially if I knew where danger might come from.

I had already noticed that the man wore red socks, had a fountain pen in his shirt pocket (probably because he wasn't wearing his white coat), and I could tell he was still thinking

about something he had written as his lips moved silently while he read.

I had already registered all of that in my mind as I walked toward him.

I sat down.

"Mrs. Groen," he mumbled, still focused on the paper in front of him.

"Maan," I corrected him, suppressing the urge to rest my head on his paper to grab his attention.

I smiled because, as a visual thinker, I immediately pictured it. Suddenly, he looked up at me through his glasses. His light grey eyes pierced into mine. It felt like he was literally entering my personal space with his gaze.

I instinctively leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. I tried to shield myself from him. I was very alert due to his posture.

"Overweight," he said slowly.

Again, I had to hold myself back from shouting that he was wrong. I was sitting here because I had those beautiful brown-green eyes.

He brought out anger in me, or maybe it was self-defense.

"Guilty," I responded.

And immediately, it was clear that humor wasn't part of his agenda or the papers in front of him.

He asked why I felt guilty, his serious gaze fixed on me. His eyes were the same pale grey as Miller's, I realized. Strange.

I began telling the story about those thirty kilos that had haunted me all my life and always seemed to reappear as soon as I lost them.

Suddenly, I had his full attention, which surprised me.

"Thirty kilos?" he asked, looking at me over his round glasses.

"Exactly thirty kilos? To the kilogram?"

I nodded. Yes, I couldn't help it. Every time, exactly thirty kilos, as if that was my benchmark.

"Are you very sensitive to others? Do you pick up on their energy?" he asked suddenly.

I had his full attention now, to the point that it was unsettling. I nodded.

"Yes, I think they call it HSP," I said vaguely, feeling his intense gaze. It was as if he wanted to look inside my mind.

"Does anyone else in your family have this heightened sensitivity?"

"No, I'm the only one. The black sheep of the family," I replied.

His pen suddenly scribbled furiously across the paper.

Although I was still able to read upside down, his handwriting was illegible.

At least I no longer had to complain about his attention.

Then, a tall, dark-haired woman entered.

She wore high heels and a striking red dress.

I immediately felt out of place in my plain jeans and oversized shirt.

She smiled at me, and I immediately noticed her perfectly done lips, but also how the makeup concealed the tired bags under her eyes. I could see the uncertain look in her brown eyes and the slight tremble in her hand. She was tense.

She introduced herself as Ann Roy, the psychologist, and gave me a limp handshake. She indicated that she wasn't very assertive, at least not according to my standards.

She sat down with us at the short end of the desk. She placed her papers on the dried coffee stains, which she seemed to overlook.

She asked when my overweight had started and how I would feel if I suddenly lost it.

I had never really thought about that.

I was actually glad she asked the question. It might give me some new insights.

"I'd feel light, like I might float away or disappear. Exposed and naked," I reflected. "And mostly, very unsafe."

She nodded, as though it was an answer she had been expecting, while the professor scribbled intensely.

That surprised me greatly.

"Have you ever felt like your parents weren't really your parents because they didn't know as much about life and people as you did?"

Now my attention was fully engaged, because that was exactly something I often wondered about in the past.

Well, not just in the past – I still wondered about it sometimes.

Why couldn't they see what I saw about the connections between people?

Or couldn't they feel how words truly affected others, how they reached deep or even hurt them?

I had to confirm Ann's assumption.

She continued with her statements.

Did I feel alone in the world? Did people around me drain my energy? Was I a magnet for babies and animals? Was I afraid of showing my emotions out of fear of losing control? Did I often feel pain between my shoulder blades?

I had to answer yes to everything. Gradually, I began to wonder if this was even about my weight anymore.

I felt muscle tension building in my body, a possible sign of danger. It was in my chest and abdomen. It made me uncomfortable and a bit nauseous.

The professor and Ann exchanged a meaningful look.

It felt like they had found something they had been searching for.

Although I had no idea what it was.

The door opened again. Miller Johnson appeared as if summoned.

He walked up to me, shaking my hand enthusiastically as if we were long-lost friends.

"Congratulations, you're coming with us to Scotland," he said with a smile, and his grey eyes looked at me with an inviting gleam. "I'm really looking forward to it."

Well, I was looking forward to it too, especially if he kept looking at me like that.

"You have beautiful eyes," he said softly, which completely caught me off guard.

"Thank you."

But suddenly, I felt anger hanging in the room. I saw it in the professor's eyes when he looked at Miller.

Did I see something in Miller's movements that looked like fear? Was he retreating?

I felt dizzy. So much information came to me all at once that it made me feel nauseous.

What was going on?

Willa was absolutely thrilled that I was chosen for the trip to Scotland. Honestly, that seemed like the best part of the whole ordeal. Scotland had a certain allure for me, though I had no idea why. Finally, I would get to know the country.

The weight loss would probably happen again through eating the weirdest foods that no one would ever buy at home.

And the training schedule would, of course, be harsh and unforgiving, something you could never maintain for long.

Probably not even a week. But I was going to try my best.

The program was of course designed to boost the TV channel's ratings. I didn't quite understand the professor's role in it.

Was he a researcher, or had he already figured out why obesity existed in the world? It intrigued me.

But at least I'd scored a vacation abroad. And I could finally get rid of those thirty kilos. Maybe I'd learn something more about myself too. That couldn't hurt.

On the train home, Willa and I couldn't stop laughing.

One of those laughs where the giggle kept getting triggered over and over.

It drew annoyed looks from other passengers, who, of course, couldn't see the humor in the situation.

Simply because there wasn't any.

It was more of an uncontrollable outburst of emotions.

Eventually, the storm passed.

I told Willa about all the strange things that had happened in the office, but she shrugged indifferently.

"You always have the weirdest things happen to you. Maybe they can explain what those thirty kilos mean?" Willa said as she pulled a bar of chocolate from her bag and broke it in half.

Because, according to her, it was always a good time for chocolate.

She was right; strange things always seemed to happen in my life. For example, when I was a child, I knew when my grandmother was going to pass away. I had felt sad about its months in advance. I had even told my grandmother that I would miss her when she died, which made my mother furious. I had even been punished for saying such a thing. According to my mom, you didn't say things like that. But when my grandmother passed away, my mom didn't respond to what I had predicted.

"By the way, the guy with the red hair that you had a thing with

is also going to Scotland," Willa informed me.

"Really? Well, at least I'll know someone there," I said.

There were still four other people to meet, and we all had one thing in common – extra weight.

Before I knew it, I was on my way to Edinburgh, Scotland. And I was quite nervous about it. The possibilities of what could happen on such a trip had run through my head at least ten times. It was supposed to reassure me, but it didn't.

I was on a small plane with five other people who were overweight, all of whom I had met at Schiphol.

The candidates for "Dik Ingewikkeld" (Complicatedly Overweight) weren't hard to miss.

They were Fay, Lola, Siem, Daaf, and Mats.

Siem was the redhead I had already seen in the cafeteria. He was sitting next to me, smiling at me.

"You have beautiful eyes," he said softly.

"Smooth talker," I replied, laughing.

Immediately, I realized I had put up a wall around myself again.

"Sorry," I said. "Thanks for the compliment, I'm just not used to getting them."

"I understand," he replied. "It's easier to build a wall than to lay your soul out on the table."

"It's a bit cold, though," I couldn't help but add.

Siem laughed loudly.

"Sorry!" I could hardly stop laughing. "I'm a visual thinker, and what I saw was hilarious."

Siem chuckled just as loudly. "I'm also a visual thinker."

The mood in the small plane lightened as the journey went on. It made sense, considering everyone was probably as nervous as I was.

As an overweight person, you do have your own tools for not

being too vulnerable. A wall, of any kind, sometimes offers protection.

First, you make sure you're safe. Then, you can lower your guard. At least that's how it worked for me.

The journey also made me feel confused. The question of who I really was kept coming up, and I couldn't seem to get a hold of it. It felt like the real me was locked away, and that was strange because that wasn't something I had experienced before.

It made me uneasy and a little anxious, as if it was a matter of life or death to figure it out. Luckily, I shook the feeling off before we landed in Scotland.

It was cold at the airport. We were met by a man holding a sign that said "Dik Ingewikkeld."

Everyone gathered around. We were all taken to a black limousine that would drive us to our destination.

A film crew was there. We even had to get in and out of the car four times before we finally left.

Well, that was promising – what could go wrong with an entry scene?

The weather was a bit like in the Netherlands with all the rain.

"Does anyone know what's expected of us?" Fay asked.

She had short light brown hair, brown eyes, and was about my size.

"I think it's something like a diet and of course, intense exercise. And they'll probably be filming us the whole time," Mats grumbled.

He wore his long hair in a ponytail. His skin was an attractive light brown, and his dark hair made his green eyes stand out in an intriguing contrast.

When he looked at me directly, something in his gaze suddenly hit me deeply. It felt as though it was going straight inside, like I

was completely unprotected. We stared at each other for a moment.

I felt uneasy, like he was touching something in me that I had buried deep inside. It trembled in me like a nervous twitch, and then it faded away.

"I think we're expecting a typical weight-loss program, but has anyone actually seen anything about it on paper?" Mats asked, his gaze still on me.

He was confusing me, and it was a rather uncomfortable feeling. I felt so incredibly vulnerable.

It was as if he was about to open a door inside me.

I didn't understand it at all.

"I haven't read anything about it," Daaf answered Mats' question. He was a blonde guy with wild, curly hair and beautiful blue eyes.

"Do you think they have entirely different ideas about what they want to do with us?" Lola tossed her long black braid over her shoulder. "I mean, we're going to lose weight, right? That's why I signed up."

"They can't force us to do anything, though," I said.

It suddenly occurred to me that it was stupid I hadn't asked clearly what was expected of me. I didn't know myself like this. I usually investigated everything before agreeing to anything. But then, suddenly, following a diet regimen in Scotland seemed all-encompassing, and I hadn't used my brain?

"We probably got tricked because we thought we could become famous," Daaf laughed.

"Famous? With what?" Fay laughed loudly. "With the biggest butt?"

Everyone laughed, but the question still lingered in the air.

I really couldn't understand why I had blindly gone along with it. It was very strange.

Miller Johnson welcomed us warmly at Tulloch Castle, an ancient castle in the town of Dingwall.

I had never heard of it before. If they had dropped me off on the street at that moment, I would never have made it back to an airport to go home.

Because I had no idea where that was in Scotland. Luckily, I still had my phone, I thought, grinning.

My attention was like a butterfly, flitting from flower to flower. I heard Miller say something about the hotel rules and other guests who were there, but honestly, I didn't really take it in.

Besides, I absolutely hated rules.

I felt more like a rebellious teenager who wouldn't listen to the parent who told me I had to do something. Maybe that's exactly what he triggered with the way he spoke. I found him arrogant and self-absorbed, and not at all attractive anymore.

We were all given a key to a hotel room.

We had a few hours to unpack and look around.

I always liked that, making a place my own by exploring it so it felt familiar. It was going to be my new home for next month.

In the evening, there was a group dinner planned, and further information would be provided about what we would be doing, Miller confided.

Well, I was curious to see what would come out of that. And what was to come.

I had been assigned a large hotel room. It had a spacious balcony with two French doors. It was wonderful; at least I could enjoy the sun if it decided to make an appearance. There was a seating area by a fireplace and a writing desk. A door led to a luxurious bathroom with a bathtub and a separate shower.