

WE ARE LIGHT

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Translated by Michele Hutchison

We are the night. We bring the dark and drunkenness, cat fights, sleep and sleeplessness, sex and death. Those wanting to die in peace, without too much fuss or ado, often choose to do so in our – the night's – company, as the nearly-bereaved slumber on. In this country, many cancer patients, people with weak hearts and lungs, and the exhausted elderly, breathe their last breath at night, almost unnoticed. But we are no strangers to less peaceful ways of dying: fights, traffic accidents, murder and manslaughter. You wouldn't want to hear about the atrocities we've witnessed – not even if you like horror films and have a strong stomach, and, besides, we don't want to talk about it. There are more interesting ways for people to die, like the woman who has our attention at this moment. In her case, the recognizable elements of a peaceful death coincide with disturbingly abnormal circumstances.

Recognizable: a sitting room with 1990s furniture, tasteless ornaments on the wall – big coloured metal butterflies, old musical instruments of varying sizes – and in this room, a sleeping woman with wispy grey hair, so thin and weakened that her heart could give out at any minute. Next to her a relative, her sister, judging from the shape of her face, clasping both hands in her own as though she's trying to keep this near-dead human alive.

Abnormal: everything else, particularly the fact that the sisters are lying on inflatable beds in the middle of the room, and the presence of the other people: a middle-aged man and a somewhat younger woman, watching from a red sofa. They have almost as little flesh on their bones as the dying woman; their cheeks have caved in, their eyes are deep in their sockets. Although they don't appear to be on the brink of death, we can see their skeletons jutting through their skin. And the way they are breathing, as though afraid of taking in too much oxygen at once, tells us that although they may not be dead, nor are they entirely alive. Maybe that's why they are sitting there with the windows closed, in the stuffy heat of the past summer's day, with no lights switched on so that only a thin orange beam from a streetlight in front of the window falls through the curtains into the room, cutting diagonally across the beds of the two recumbent women.

We've seen these airbeds here before. Usually there are four of them; the dying woman, her sister, and the two other people lying beside each other on the floor asleep. Not much else happens. They're no night owls, aside from the woman on the sofa, who

often lies staring up at the ceiling, eyes wide open, her stomach noisily rumbling, churning under her fleece blanket. From time to time, she grimaces. She balls her fists. She bites her knuckles. She sucks on her bottom lip. Sometimes she does fall asleep after a couple of hours but repeatedly, every hour or so, crawls out quietly from beneath her blanket to creep to the toilet to drink some water from the tap.

She gives us the impression she's hungry, but we've never been able to catch her taking a nocturnal trip to the fridge, unlike many others who can't sleep due to the brewing emptiness in their bellies. In the three years we've seen her like this, we've only seen her in the kitchen once. She stood in front of the slow juicer for a long time, stroking its side as though it were a gentle, sweet pet, and then knelt at the fridge, pressing her forehead to its door. She stayed there for more than an hour, not moving. Then she rested her hand on the handle. We saw the muscles and tendons of her hand tense as she squeezed with all her might. Her elbow moved upward slightly, and she let go. She stood up. Faltered. Grabbed the work top. Leaned forward, head between her knees. Straightened up again, slower now. She took a step. Her eyes roved around the colourless darkness and then stopped at an apple in the fruit dish on the counter. She walked to it but didn't pick it up. She leaned forward, bringing her nose right up to it and then stared at the apple.

If we'd have been able to speak we would have shouted, 'Eat then, woman, eat! Nobody's stopping you.' But she didn't eat. When she managed to pry herself away from the apple and tiptoe back to the sitting room, she came upon the oldest of the four, the one now dying, awake, eyes open. She stood there, startled, caught in her flatmate's gaze, a gaze that was expressionless: no recognition, no disapproval, no reassurance. Nothing. And in the same expressionless manner, the staring eyes closed again. Our hungry friend let her shoulders sink, slowly moved on again and lay down on her airbed, waiting for day to break.

As the earth's night, we are not easily unsettled, but we do find it striking that people in a country such as this would voluntarily suffer from hunger, with food literally within hand's reach. As though they wanted to protest against the abundance given to them.

And now death has arrived in hunger's wake, not for our chronic insomniac, but for her flatmate.

'She's gone,' says the sister, now sitting upright on her airbed, without letting go of the dead woman's hands. 'I felt her pass... so smoothly. It was beautiful...special... don't you think?'

She looks at the other two, her eyes inquisitive. They are breathing even more cautiously than before. 'Did you see that? Did you see how calm she became when I took

her hands? She could finally let go... let herself go. Beautiful that it happened that way, right? That we didn't try to hold her back. Right? Petrus? Muriel?

Petrus and Muriel don't move a muscle. Their faces remain taut as their eyes dart about, searching for something they can't find in the shadowy darkness. At last Muriel says, 'Beautiful, yes.'

'What about you, Petrus? How does it feel to you? Anything to share?'

Petrus closes his eyes and shakes his head as though plagued by an insect that he doesn't dare slap away. His forehead is shiny with sweat.

'Never mind,' the sister says. 'It's difficult to truly open up to everything you're feeling at such an intense moment. It's difficult, I understand that, really I do.'

Without a word, Petrus gets up from the sofa, opens the back door and goes into the garden.

'Alright, Petrus,' the sister says, and to Muriel: 'It's OK. Just a bit of denial. Doesn't matter. It'll all come later. Elisabeth is the most important person now. Can you pass me the phone? And the GP's number? I think it's better if I stay with her a while. I think she'd appreciate that.'

Muriel gets up, goes to a rucksack in the corner of the room, takes out a mobile phone and gives it to the sister. 'I just have to look up the number.' She sits down at the table and opens a laptop.

'That's kind of you, Muriel,' the sister says, 'very kind. It's lovely that we're together, that we were all together with Elisabeth. She must have felt that. She *can* feel that. Because I can sense she's still in the room. Can't you?'

'What,' Muriel says in a flat tone.

'That's she's still with us: Elisabeth. Actually I can feel her presence quite strongly. But of course I am her sister.'

Muriel squeezes her eyes shut and frowns. Then she opens her eyes. The blue-white light of the laptop makes her face even more ghostly than before. 'Yes,' she says, 'yes, I can feel her too, yes.' She nods at Elisabeth's body and looks back at the screen. 'It says here to call the out-of-hours service at night.' She begins to read out numbers that the sister types into the mobile phone.

'Yes, hello. Melodie van Hellingen speaking. I'm calling about my sister.'

From here we fast-forward a bit, analogous to the experience of anyone who has stayed awake all night – at first time passes slowly, but then, suddenly, it is morning.

A discussion unfolds with the out-of-hours' receptionist. The receptionist says she'll send the duty doctor, but Melodie thinks it would be better if her own GP came to certify the death because this was an unusual case, her sister, in terms of her medical file, but also because of the emotional bond, and if their own GP really can't come, it's important that the duty doctor reads the whole case file, and on the other end of the line, we see the receptionist roll her eyes and then ask Melodie in an exaggeratedly friendly tone whether she can tell her briefly how exactly her sister died, and Melodie says it was all very beautiful because Elisabeth was able to let go at last, because life had been a battle for her, and as the receptionist says, 'hm, hm,' and 'yes,' she glances at the patient's date of birth and types up something about a muddled story and 'possible suicide?' and then she says to Melodie that unfortunately the duty doctor will have to come and he won't have access to the medical file, but that she can count on his professionalism, and all in all Melodie finds it a cold way of going about things, an impersonal system in which rules matter more than people, but the receptionist doesn't have time to hear Melodie out, the lights are flashing for other incoming calls, so she says goodbye in a firm but friendly voice, hangs up and completes her notes for the doctor who will come to examine Elisabeth van Hellingen's body.

Melodie has a bad feeling about the phone call, she says to Muriel, and to Petrus, who has come back into the room; she doesn't like being treated in such a business-like manner, certainly not after something so special, intimate but also sad has taken place, and she's saying this without knowing how unpleasantly she's going to be treated later, because the system involves rules and procedures that your regular, critical civilian has no idea of, and the duty doctor, who has by now rung the doorbell and come inside to examine the dead woman, carefully following the legal procedure, and with little empathy, Melodie thinks because he insists she turns on the light and that all three flatmates leave the sitting room so that he can look at the body without being disturbed, despite Melodie telling him that bright light and the absence of her flatmates is unpleasant for Elisabeth, and on top of this he cuts her off when she tries to answer his questions; he doesn't want to know anything about their childhood and the weak constitution Elisabeth was born with, and their sick mother with whom she had a good moment of connection recently, he is only interested in their diet, and when Elisabeth last ate or drank anything and where she might have taken mind-altering substances at all, and finally he says that unfortunately he has too many doubts about whether she died of natural causes, and it doesn't matter how often Melodie repeats that it happened very naturally – backed up by the nods of the two other flatmates who have once more taken up position on the red sofa – he can only go on his own observations and what he observes is an unpleasant, suffocating atmosphere and a seriously low bodyweight, both in terms of the deceased but also her flatmates so that he has too many questions about the circumstances of Ms Van Hellingen's death, her not being in the full bloom of youth but also not nearly old

enough to just suddenly die, and they can shout as loudly as they like, they can jump up and down, but if there is cause for doubt, it is his legal duty to inform the local coroner, who must then alert the police, and without listening to any of their further objections, he goes into the garden to phone the coroner, which, like the receptionist from earlier, causes him to be accused of coldness when he returns to the sitting room.

Wrongly, we think; the locum may have a deep furrow in the middle of his forehead but not because he is cold or hard but because he takes things seriously, and that's why we'd rather use the word 'unflappable' to describe the way he allows Melodie's protests to slide off him, and sits down on the sofa with the three bereaved, two of them paralysed and one inexpressibly outraged, to wait for the police to arrive and take over the case, and as he goes on his way to the next house-call and the incident begins to take shape in his mind as an interesting case study for the locum's lunch next week, the detective who has been sent along with two uniformed colleagues, stays behind to keep an eye on everything until the coroner arrives, which unfortunately is a long wait – it seems that several suspicious deaths have occurred in the last few hours – and not until the coroner has arrived for a second examination of the body, and despite Melodie's protests the group have once again left the room, can the detective, after consulting the specialist medical examiner and the assistant prosecutor, figure out whether a criminal investigation needs to be launched, during which her two colleagues remain upstairs to listen to Melodie and give her the opportunity – quickly then, very quickly – to call her father and bring him up to date on the situation, as the duty detective, after interviewing the three survivors, goes downstairs to make the necessary phone calls with the assistant prosecutor to ask whether the flatmates should be detained, and if so, based on which article of law, and as soon as they are in agreement, she goes back upstairs with a cool, if not to say frosty expression on her face, to apprehend the flatmates on suspicion of culpable homicide and to read them their rights, and then there is a phase of upheaval as they wait for a third police officer, and once he has arrived to be able to take away the third suspect, Muriel, Petrus and Melodie are driven to the police station, each in a separate car, as the detective and the coroner remain behind at the crime scene, and we would have liked to have stayed a little longer with the three detainees, and with Muriel in particular, who, all other emotions aside, is still suffering from gnawing hunger, but before everything continues, forced on by the unrelenting turning of the earth, we begin to withdraw behind the western horizon, where other interesting deaths and sleepless humans await us.