

Sample translation from

Holland

by Rodaan Al Galidi

(Amsterdam: De Kade, 2020)

Translation by David Doherty

Pages 69 to 74

Lidewij never asked me about Iraq. Once in a while she'd say it was strange that I had another family far away and a mother who must be worried about me, but she never asked me about them. When Calvin told me Daniëlle was worried about Lidewij, I started to watch her more closely. I didn't yet know that she, like many other Dutch people, was more open than I thought and that instead of watching her closely I would have been better off simply asking her 'How are you doing?'

But before I tell you more about Lidewij, I want you to get to know the rest of the Van der Weerde family a little better, starting with Calvin. I see him as a member of the family too. And I wasn't the only one to feel that way, as I found out when he was arrested by the immigration police in Breda and Daniëlle spent days trying to fix things and would disappear for hours on end, until one evening she returned with Calvin. Daniëlle's concern had saved him spending any longer locked in a cell as an illegal immigrant. I remember her car rolling to a halt in the drive that evening and Calvin getting out, flashing his broad white smile. This time Diesel went bounding up to Calvin, tail swishing as if he knew the guy had been under lock and key.

'Where were you?' I asked him, back in the shed.

'City break,' he chuckled.

'Was it a small cell?'

'Nah, man. They only locked me up at night. During the day I was always in the rec room or in an office, with Daniëlle. That cell was all in her mind, if you ask me. I sure as hell wasn't in it.' He laughed and we hugged. 'Did Nienke ask after me?' he asked. 'Or Elisa?' Calvin knew a lot of women and girls in our small town. He'd had them all, without one of them ever having him. He slept with older women for money. Not that they paid him for sex, but they gave him money because they felt sorry for a poor asylum seeker without a residence permit. He spent the cash they gave him on younger

women. Even when he bought new shoes or expensive cologne, he said it wasn't for himself but for the girls. He ran his own company like Daniëlle, he told me, only his core business was his dick. He liked to brag about where it had been.

After a while I began to recognise when Calvin's penis was off to work and when it was out for some fun. If Calvin looked the part of an asylum seeker, in shabby clothes and worn out shoes, he was off to see an older lady. If he left the shed in his new clothes, smelling sweet and with a chunky watch on his wrist, he was going to see a girl. When I asked him if he ever sent money to his family he said, 'The Dutch aren't the only ones whose companies have rules. Same goes for my dick. Anything it wangles from an old lady goes straight to girls who need a helping hand. The older generation looks after the young.'

Calvin never tired of telling me that seeing Lidewij was playing with fire.

'Damn it, Samir. Keep that heart of yours in check, man! Slam your foot on the brake, not on the gas.'

'My heart's not a car,' I sputtered. 'I wouldn't even know where to find the brake.'

'Ha! Lidewij's the most dangerous girl in this town!' he said. 'Except for Helma, that is.'

'Helma?'

'Oh, just some bitch.' He waved a dismissive hand. 'Lives over the way. You've probably seen her but didn't notice. Keep it that way.'

'Why?'

'Because. Watch out for Lidewij, and that goes double for Helma. I'm not kidding, Samir. Do what you like around here. Do Daniëlle for all I care, even though it would leave us on the street with no future in this country. But forget I ever mentioned the name Helma.' Yet in the queue at the local

supermarket, it was Calvin himself who poked me in the ribs and pointed out a young woman as ‘that bitch Helma.’

But before we go any further, I have to tell you about a dramatic event in the family: the death of Edward.

I was up early one morning to fetch supplies from the DIY store with Daniëlle. The fence at the bottom of the garden needed fixing. But as soon as I set foot in the house, I could see that Daniëlle was pale and confused. Before she said a word, I knew something terrible had happened.

‘Sorry, Samir, I can’t go now. We’ll do the fence another time, okay?’

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Yes. Edward’s in a bad way. It’s so sudden.’ There was pain in her voice and a lump in her throat. Tessa came into the office and, without even noticing I was there, she threw her arms around Daniëlle and burst into tears.

Sorrow pitched its dark tent over the house of the Van der Weerde family. It even took possession of Diesel’s tail, which stopped swishing and hung from his backside like a dead branch. But... who was Edward? An uncle, a friend of the family, Tessa’s best friend? Sorrow took hold of me too and it seemed stupid to ask. It would mean admitting I was sad about Edward’s condition without even knowing who he was. He definitely couldn’t be Tessa’s boyfriend, because if Calvin was to be believed she only went out with Moroccans and I’ve yet to meet a Moroccan who answers to the name Edward.

Tessa could not stop crying. Daniëlle made soothing sounds to comfort her and I went back to the shed, where Calvin was still sleeping like a baby. I made some tea and waited for him to wake up.

‘Hey Calvin, who’s this guy Edward?’ I asked.

‘Tessa’s rabbit,’ said Calvin. ‘Why?’

I know the death of a family pet can be a painful thing but my imagination had turned Edward into a natty gent in a suit and tie. And now I had to change him into a rabbit. I burst out laughing.

Edward the Silent, Edward the Tranquil filled the house with a profound sadness. I hope you won't think badly of us but during that time, when Edward lay on his deathbed of straw, Calvin and I steered clear of the family.

In Iraq I had seen many kinds of sorrow. The sorrow of war, murder and death. The sorrow of poverty, sickness and injustice. Of loss, of disappearance, of fleeing your home. But I had never seen sorrow paralyse a family like the imminent death of Edward the bunny. Calvin and I were scared that their sorrow would make us laugh and we thought that wouldn't be a nice thing to do. Our fear of laughing only made the urge to laugh stronger. Calvin stuffed his toothbrush, toothpaste and a few pairs of underpants in a bag.

'Samir,' he said. 'I'm bowing out for a while. Text me when that damn rabbit is dead and buried.'

When it was decided that the rabbit should not be allowed to suffer needlessly and was to be put out of its misery, Tessa came to the shed for the first time. With tears in her eyes, she told me that if I wanted to say my goodbyes to Edward, I had until quarter past twelve. I prayed to every god, prophet and heaven I knew to let me take my leave of the rabbit without a fit of the giggles. At ten to twelve I closed my eyes and practised reverse meditation. Normally, I calmed my thoughts with waterfalls, sunsets and butterflies. Now I did the opposite. I thought of the blasted corpses I had seen, the rocket attacks and bombings, of Chaweng prison in Thailand, of asylum seekers and ice-cold cells, and when I had finally absorbed enough misery to stop a single laugh from reaching my lips, I steeled myself and headed for the house. Within seconds it dawned on me that everyone was smartly dressed and I felt a fool for toddling over in my slippers and zebra-print pyjama pants to say goodbye. Tessa's disappointed look was enough to make me turn silently on my heel and dash back to the shed. Quick as I could, I put on my best clothes and a pair of Calvin's smartest shoes, though

his feet are a full size smaller than mine, and went back to pay the rabbit my last respects.

‘My room,’ Tessa said. I climbed the stairs, relieved to be alone. There was a smell of incense and the gentle sound of classical music. The curtains were closed and the only light came from a dim lamp and a couple of tealight candles. It was impossible not to laugh but suddenly, there in Tessa’s room, my fear of laughing turned to fear of crying. Tessa had made her room a place of farewell. On every wall hung handwritten poems and the pictures of Edward she had drawn as a child. There were photos of Tessa with Edward from the age of seven. The rabbit was Tessa’s time, her childhood, her feelings from the age of seven up to that moment. It was not the rabbit but her childhood that was to be given a lethal injection. This was her farewell to childhood and it moved me, deeply.