Ruud Linssen

Book of war, mortification and love

Printed with blood.
Read at own risk.

Ruud Linssen

Book of war, mortification and love

About our voluntary suffering

Underware
Den Haag | Helsinki | Amsterdam
2010

for Roos
Robin, Rosa

Ruud Linssen

Book of war, mortification and love
About our voluntary suffering

Second warning:
This book is printed
with blood of the author.
Continue reading at own risk.

The history of this book is as perplexing as its content. Since releasing the typeface Fakir in 2006, we've been thinking about an appropriate sampler for this type family. Not being satisfied with our ideas for a Fakir publication at that time, we froze the whole publication until an idea would arise which would satisfy us.

That happened one year later. In the first year of existence of the blackletter Fakir, activities around the typeface arose with the theme of voluntary suffering. The 'let's suffer together' deal, that kind of work. A blackletter ain't the typeface with the highest legibility. Then Ruud Linssen crossed our mind. This Dutch author, poet and journalist is the perfect person to write about voluntary suffering. Why? Because he is Catholic, that might be the best answer. And if there's anyone who really knows what suffering truly means, it's him.

To our surprise, Mr. Linssen was über-enthusiastic at our first meeting. We shared some drinks and thoughts and agreed that he would write a short story about voluntary suffering. 'Give me two to three months, then I'm done.' After six months we realized we hadn't heard from Mr. Linssen yet, and discovered he was busy writing this book all the time. The story heavily started to grow beyond everybody's expectations. Things got out of hand. It took him two more years to complete this book. He basically skipped everything else in his life during that period. This book became his obsession, on the borders of healthiness.

When he delivered the final text, he mentioned that every sentence had been rewritten at least 5 times. Also: 'this book changed my life.' It gave him a new dimension, as he had never thought about the subject that much. We couldn't believe that to be true. 'Yes, it is. Suffering has already been a major theme in my life for many years. But not voluntary suffering. This makes a big difference.'

The writing of this book became an example of voluntary suffering by itself. Then it's a logical step that the complete book becomes an example of voluntary suffering. Every fiber in the book should reflect the suffering of Mr. Linssen. No, every fiber can only exist because of his suffering. Therefore this book is printed with the blood of the author.

For those who wonder 'why'? You should never ask when it's about voluntary suffering.

LET'S SUFFER TOGETHER
— Underware

CHAPTER 1

The unmarked letter

BEHIND the terraced house, where we live, lies a slope. I sometimes walk there in the evening. It is a place to retreat in thoughts, with nothing but the sound of trains over the nearby tracks. From this slope the back of the houses down below catches my eye, the row where our house lies. At most houses, garden decorations prevent you from looking inside. But some of them offer fragments of life. It is a strange sight: mankind in an evening light, cast within the frame of a window. Arranging the plates on the draining board, sitting at the table talking to someone. It tells me: their lives are important, and so are these moments.

About some people I know the stories. It is a narrow, dead-end street, with a lot of activity up front during daytime. People get together, talk about each other and themselves. And of others I can read it, like the boy who, with his jacket, is the prince of his poor family.

Man. Descendant of animals – of course. And yet he is so entirely different from anything else that roams this planet. Imagine seeing man in the unbiased mood of the first impression. The amazement about the exterior will wither in the shadow of the perplexity about his behaviour.

That behaviour can, in other of nature's appearances, be explained with the logic of the naked eye. The urge to survive explains a lot with tigers or praying mantises. With man, it's merely the beginning, this origin from the animal kingdom.

He himself, by the way, does not understand much of it. Of himself. Unless this understanding is what he wants most.

To move on, one must perceive in mankind's suffering. There alone it becomes visible who we really are. When under pressure, from ourselves, we come to know what man is worth. That is why writers, thinkers and artists have sought in suffering so many times. Exhaustingly. But strangely enough an important part of it is hardly being spoken of.

The voluntary kind.

Why would someone choose suffering? As if he is at a junction with a sign that reads in big print: do not take this road. And then takes it. It's pointless calling after him for you will not be heard.

This book is about man, about his voluntary suffering. Read it also as an admiration for that idiot. He is better off than the other madman, whose psyche offers much more second thought. The seeker of luck. Luck is no more than winning a game. And that is the second of the last whistle – an evening of enjoyment afterwards, but the next day you wake up acrossfrom the ceiling in your bedroom. Your child is crying, it's raining – you are home.

To understand voluntary suffering, I should start without the adjective: voluntary. That leads me first of all to the most mysterious part of our suffering. Melancholy. And from there to Gerard Reve. The Dutch writer felt it in all layers. It has left deep marks in his literature. That body of work, by the way, fills little more than a room. In his books he mainly

discusses himself, at home: getting up, masturbating, staring, gorging, someone at the door, a fit of rage, writing half a page, drinking, a rare conversation, fretting and boozing. It's not much. And yet it moves you. Again and again, even when reading it for the umpteenth time. It's that fight – with himself.

Often he speaks of his desire to offer comfort to his readers with his literature. One time you think it's irony, but along the way you notice that it has this magical effect. In my darkest hours I read Reve, because it gives me courage. On the 14th of October Reve writes, from his house in the village of Greonterp: "Around the cemetery most leaves have fallen off the trees already, and in the garden almost everything has finished flowering; only that holiest of flowers, a lonely chrysanthemum, has shortly begun to bloom as a sure sign that in rapid pace we are approaching again the great feast of All Souls. A distant dog barks, across a rooftop for some instants wafts the scent of an early lit stove, and just as inescapable as always are the thoughts and memories of days gone by. I must think of all those whom I once knew and who are dead now."

Man with himself. And his thoughts. His observation of the wall across from him, the garden through the window. And then the questions that all end up at the same theme: what it is – this. Like a befriended poet of mine writes: 'The whole of it, all of it, to see.' Your own room, coated in silence, can have an ominous effect. The table is here against this

wall because you wanted it to be there, and every morning still that table – on the same spot.

At home you cannot evade it, for it is everywhere: you are with yourself. That can give warmth. But the smell of the nest has a turn side: that daily rhythm with the suggestion of eternity. And that wrapped up as something pointlessly ordinary. The causal link to the wild growth of the tourism industry to me seems irrefutable. Like the growing number of channels on television, now spread out in a worldwide multitude on the Internet. And if all that no longer helps, we go to the video library. All together it is an impressive exodus.

It is melancholy that makes us run away: what else? A feeling that moves across your deepest inner world. About the colour of it at most one could remark that little light comes with it. It does not take much to feel that the essence of man is at stake here. The greatest minds have faced up to it, and have turned it into fantastic art. But what could we –ordinary mortals– do with it? Seek distraction, to avoid having to face up to ourselves. Because that's what melancholy is about. Essentially it's the experience that tells us life is too small for what we want. We ourselves are also too little. We seek for what lies beyond, in the realization that a new unreachable goal will always come into view. And here –on the terrain of square meters where we reside today– reality keeps us company, even when we don't ask for it. Eventually

the reality will come that it will end. This – whatever it may be.

Reve has faced up to it, and he stayed home. Endlessly the writer wandered there. He suffers from what psychiatry calls a tendency towards depression. Seeing a table leg for what it is: dead wood. The presence, of everything and seeing it is hopeless. And meanwhile all those thoughts do exactly what they want. He writes: 'As if I myself were to blame, that I carry with me the ineffaceable memory of twenty-nine years ago, when a woman on a Wednesday afternoon in October, in the doorway of Ploegstraat 109, 111 or 113 (...) in an autumnal, arid atmosphere, while a tepid and unruly wind was blowing, (...) said to another woman: "many vegetables and few potatoes, that doesn't make such fine food for a man."'

Melancholy is your collection of human shortcomings, slumbering in your own underworld. That I am here, and not there. Standing on a slope dreaming of the desert. And I don't mean an exotic holiday, no, the desert and being there – that dream.

And then my memories of which I alone know the reach because I am the only one left owning the images. It's useless passing it on to my children, like some salvation, because it will righteously become old man's talk. And it's too dear to me for that. Like the open space, covered with gravel, between the garage boxes behind the house where I grew

up. Seen from any angle it means nothing. But I was killed there as a soldier. You drag it with you until death comes to collect it and bury it somewhere in the fields of oblivion. Writing is searching for an order, against the current of this melancholy. Reve does it, fighting: 'If I want to put anything into words at eleven o'clock in the morning, at least something which has any coherence at all, then I had better sit at the table at a quarter to eight, before dawn breaks. That is exactly what I did the day before yesterday, Friday, because of the once-in-a-lifetime date, and as a matter of exception to be sure, in order to write, while shouting and cursing, and pissing into milk bottles to spare myself from dragging myself up and down the stairs, while drinking coffee up to eye-shimmering shortness of breath, and while wildly scratching my entire body, the poem for my thirty-ninth birthday.'

It is his sole right of existence against that powerless feeling. Next to it there is a second: fear. I used to be able to chew for half an hour on what was to become a marvellous wording in the heat of a group conversation without it ever leaving my mouth. This week I found a love letter written at the age of sixteen, after moving to another city. The sentences were beautiful, the feeling described authentically. The letter said everything I had never dared to say to her when greeting her in the school playground. The unmarked stamp on the envelope is the symbol of fear. Some think it's about intuition, and therefore belongs to the good. But it's the other way around: fear pushes away what you actually

damn well know, with the result that you do nothing out of uncertainty about what is hiding behind the next door. Maybe unhappiness. And maybe you're not able to face it. The capital difference with where you are now: clarity. This is what you have. Why would you want to lose it, if it's not all that bad? Where melancholy is about the land behind the horizon, fear aims at –oh it's never right– what comes too close.

And so you remain, because life knows no way back, motionless. You have built up so much, and now that it finally stands upright, you cling to it. Even though it won't stop life's changes. For they will come, in days that will unnoticeably slowly start coming together to the grey of time. The silence at the dinner table, across from the one you share your bed with, starts sounding more and more painful. The rituals at work, that at first seemed a comfortable handhold, obtain a surrealist dimension.

And still you do not move because the well known trading-in is now mentally more impossible than ever before. The endless repetition of certainties has eaten away your courage to the very last crumb. Meanwhile, melancholy is quickly gaining terrain in daydreams about another life. But the realist says: those are dreams, real life is not like that. For years I was afraid, with drastic consequences. If someone would have asked me back then what the worst thing would be that could happen to me, that fear would have been my answer. In all seriousness: I would have rather

walked into a minefield. And eventually the very thing I had feared happened. Fear came down. With one blow it was reality. It indeed was dreadful and yet: it might have been worse. It turned out differently from what I had thought all those motionless years.

Let's move deeper inside to understand better. I need Franz Kafka for that. It was the theme of his life. Extremely unhappy with an office job but never leaving to do what he lived for: finishing his books. Longing for marriage as a bachelor and yet fearing that commitment like something you won't come back from.

Like Reve, Kafka fights with existence daily and fiercely. Their lives make many things clear about man, they are magnifications of what everyone goes through. But most people can ignore it for a long time – a luxury both do not have. Their suffering does not allow being put away. In a letter to his fiancée, whom he would never marry, Kafka writes about his own house where you hear '...until well past ten in the evening the sighing of my neighbours, the talking of the people on the floor below, now and then a clatter from the kitchen. Moreover, just above the thin ceiling is the loft, and one cannot count the number of times, late in the afternoon, when I am just settling down to work, some servant girl hanging out her washing digs her heel so to speak innocently into my skull.' But he fears being worse off in some other house. The most outrageous case is the story of the

costume. His mother drags him to a tailor to pick a dancing costume. He writes: 'I was undecided, as I always was in such cases, they made me afraid that by a definite statement I would be swept away not only into an immediate unpleasantness, but beyond that into something even worse.' He tells the tailor that he doesn't want a black costume. The tailor suggests a dress suit. No, not that either. Eventually the tailor and Kafka agree on a smoking jacket. But when the latter hears that the smoking jacket must be cut out, he doesn't want that either. Undoubtedly desperate, the victim –to escape embarrassment– tries finding a final solution: a high cut smoking jacket. But the tailor's answer is devastating: no such thing exists.

It must have been a situation of sweat and clenched buttocks. It ends, after a tour through the city by Kafka, his mother and the tailor, in front of a second-hand clothes shop where Kafka saw a suit. He states that it's gone from the shop window. Going in to enquire about that particular smoking jacket – he won't do it.

Kafka: '...I used my annoyance with the pros and cons of the argument as an excuse to send the tailor away with some small order or other and an indefinite promise about the tuxedo while I, under the reproaches of my mother, remained wearily behind...'

His biggest drama –and this gets to the core– is that he himself sees it through better than anyone. He fathoms the false character of fear down to the bone. Nobody has depicted the theme in such an intense way as this writer did. With as a climax the novella 'Die Verwandlung' (The Metamorphosis). In a fantastic way he lets all the lines come together here. At his fear. And ours.

In the first paragraph, Gregor Samsa wakes up to discover he has changed into a giant insect. His legs up, the hard shield against the mattress. Kafka then writes, to close off the reader's last escape route: 'It was no dream.' Gregor Samsa lies there in hard reality. As an insect. Immediately he worries about not making it to the office in time. But it's already too late: half past six in the morning, and he had to get up at four. Now the trap closes quickly around him. Mother and father alike are banging on his bedroom door. 'Gregor, Gregor!' He really should get up now.

Not much later the managing chief from the office arrives, asking why his employee hasn't showed up yet. The latter hears the voice of his boss from his bedroom and drags his heavy body to the door in order to open it, with the objective of explaining to the managing chief that all is well. Eventually he succeeds in opening the door. Leaning in the doorway with his insect body, Gregor Samsa cries out to the managing chief: 'Now. I'll get dressed right away, pack up the collection of samples, and set off.' In a brilliant way Franz Kafka makes clear in this story to what degree a human being can get lost in himself. With a focus that defies reason: Gregor Samsa changed into an insect but he is afraid of his boss' displeasure.

Some years ago I met an actor. He had made man into a lifelong study. With the pleasure of wonder in his eyes he told me: 'Someone can break his neck on the stairs trying to save the cup and saucer in his hand.' You can see it happening: the reflex forward and two seconds later downstairs on the floor in the hallway. Cause of death: the fear that your expensive porcelain might break.

But if Kafka knows so well what fear means, why can't he break away from it? Why does he have the genius to change his main character into the most powerful metaphor for our fear, but is he himself afraid to enter a shop? I often think I am no longer afraid: it's a wonderful feeling of space in my head. Come on death, if you're looking for me – here I am. But yesterday evening on the slope I thought of my children, that one would in that case just know me as a vague memory, and the other wouldn't know me at all. And then fear tingled off again.

That's nothing compared to what it costs me to write this book: many words are written with the excruciating certainty that it's no good. And that is no writer's pose, that certainty is real. My life experience can tell me that fear has as little use as a tick in nature, still she is greatly present behind these words. What in the name of God is it? Why has Kafka penetrated so deep into the meaning, without that knowledge offering him a solution for his life? Because it is a mystery. In the core there is no answer. Which also goes for

melancholy. It often comes from nothing, at least with me. The cause is not in thinking about what is or what will pass – my melancholy always comes before the dead. I cannot name anything in my head as the source, and yet the feeling makes me stagger on my very legs. Forming a medicinal thought would be the same as raising your hand to a storm. The only thing that's left for me is to lie down on the floor in my imagination and wait. Until it passes. What really is waiting until it comes again. What else can you do?

I find inspiration in this extract from Reve. I know no other where the pen resembles a weapon of defence so closely. The writer is in bed with a fever, when imagination and reality start dancing: 'First the usual floating stuff, subsequently the devastating mortal fear, as I experienced only a few times before, mostly on the street, and only once with deadly intensity in the Bijenkorf, never in the Hema (department stores in the Netherlands RL), in Amsterdam, next the expanding and shrinking of the room, further the all but followed up whispered prompt to jump on the street from the third floor, added to this all the vain effort to speak and shout, and finally, through the door, which –I'll take an oath on it because I am sure– was both locked and latched the shuffling in of the Grinning Creature, the appearance of which is supposed to represent the malicious parody –perhaps directed by the Old Snake– of the Pentecost-event and against which one would want to seek protection at literally any breast.'

CHAPTER 2

Beyond the doctor's advice

YEARS ago I took a walk with an old man. His grandson was there, he said to his grandfather: Tell me about the war again. I had been searching for this witness for a long time. Of the Second World War, and then in Russia. Nowhere was so much blood spilt as there in the east. As a boy I was gripped by it, a comic told the tale of the Germans versus the Russians on the battlefield. The Russian sergeant who blew himself up with some hand grenades under a German tank. The march of the Germans that was stopped twelve kilometres from Moscow, and after that the retreat that ended with the fall of Berlin.

And this man, at a touching distance, had been in the heart of that battle. He had seen it. As a scout, the first line of the battlefield. Not only in the east, by the way, after that also in the west. In six years' time, his body had felt the lead of nine bullets. He tells: 'In Russia we advanced with tanks. Our tank got hit, everyone was killed immediately, everyone but me. I climbed out and went on instead of the tank, running, just a pistol in my holster, and a tank to my left and my right.' Who would do such a thing? Nobody forced him. It would have been a small effort to seek cover, but he took the place of a tank with his flesh and blood.

Man as a soldier is one of his oddest forms. Fighting, running, sheltering, shooting, pumping adrenaline, screaming, seeking to take someone's life. It has a long shadow. With many traumas that can withstand oblivion: fear, rape, the smell of flesh, the randomness of death. And yet people have

sought it since the beginning of time. Anyone who wants to understand voluntary suffering, cannot avoid this.

Two-thousand years ago, Gaius Julius Caesar attacked Britain. When he appears at the shore with his ships, he is stopped by the inland warriors on the shore. They have awaited the Romans and pelt and shoot the soldiers in the ships, that toss helplessly on the seas. The turning point comes when one of the bearers of the field sign (holy to a Roman soldier) jumps off the ship. Wading through the water he bears above his head the golden and silver eagle towards the enemy. The other soldiers start shouting at each other that they cannot let this pass. And so they follow the field sign. War requires this idiocy. What is it in the core? To a soldier an unprecedented effort, with a serious possibility of death as payment. It's more than the battles. Caesar suggested to the enemy that the Romans are everywhere while the general merely moves the same armies via long marches through the enemy grounds. Often days in a row, forty miles a day, with but short pauses. Sometimes with little food and drink. And when they arrive, they must immediately commence building fortifications and bridges. Cutting down trees, dragging them through wayward landscapes, sawing the wood and rigging.

And then the battles: every muscle tensed – hours in a row. The fight with an opponent who stakes his life just like you. Your will to survive against someone else's, the sweat

flowing under your battle harness. If you win one fight, there is the next. This reaches its climax in the most remarkable battle in Roman history. Alesia. There in the heart of Gaul, Caesar besieges his opponent Vercingetorix who has entrenched himself in the city with eighty-thousand soldiers. Outside stands half, forty-thousand Romans. But the Gauls stay where they are. They know these are fighters of great stature, out there. These Romans have been occupied with nothing but war for years. Besides, the Gauls have good hope of reinforcements. The entire country has revolted against the Roman general.

Caesar has trenches built, forty kilometres. The first half as protection against an outburst from the city. And the second half on the other side, after he is informed of the reinforcement of approximately a quarter million Gauls coming.

What motivates people to this suffering? It probably started with a longing for adventure and wealth. But it takes more to –at a one to six ratio– start the fight. Ambition. Wanting to be someone. The Roman culture is deeply soaked with this motivation. The highest honour can only be achieved in war. Poor and rich alike. It's an almost ideal suggestion of equality, with that one personal goal: casting off your mediocrity. It has been written since the first war book, without doubt the archetypical source, the Ilias: 'Always be the bravest. Always be the best.'

Caesar knows of himself that he has the talent to top this old assignment. A talent that few have been granted. Leadership. The superlative of being someone, at a level at which history personally protects you from death. Being in command of the army is the jackpot in the Roman empire. Caesar is not fulfilled with that. He wants to bust the casino. To soldiers, great leaders like Caesar are everything they cannot achieve themselves. Via their commander their life is so much more, and so is their death. When Lawrence of Arabia, in the First World War, presses his ignition from a desert crest and the train with enemy soldiers explodes, the explosives wound his foot. He is helpless in the firing range of the enemy. From the train the surviving soldiers start shooting anything that moves.

Twenty Arabs come from their cover to drag Lawrence away, seven perish under the enemy gunfire. Without their sacrifice this war would have taken a turn. Because the dynamics of the Arab battle against the Turks would falter with the death of Lawrence. The twenty understand in the flash of the moment that the Arabs cannot miss the enrapture of this man. They all have a life-threatening reflex forward at the same time, but a fundamentally different one from the one at home on the stairs where you fear your porcelain might break.

War requires this insanity. Of people who would want to come home to their wife and children tomorrow so badly, yet surrender to it anyway. Out of ambition, to themselves,

to their leader, to a cause. Not giving way at the decisive moment. It is the democratization of heroism. Like Caesar symbolises it in his report in an anonymous bearer of the field sign.

Rationally these thoughts and actions are of daily repute, bordering on stupidity. That a man loses himself so badly, to an intellectual a doubtful case to say the least. But a war cannot do without it. Who thinks with it, could be gripped by his fear. And that can be deadly. A hesitation as the fatal brake on the instinct that should have saved your life.

War forces man to stand on his foundations. At home in our own room life can be scarily small and ordinary. Your worries can blow up the smallest details. You can seek pleasure for distraction, but it does not take away the slumbering unrest. War does.

It destroys all ballast in your head. This is it. Everything you need to survive – yourself, your weapons and your platoon. And the adventure is serious this time, because it's about the future. And your life is part of it, literally. This pure existence, at the edge of death, with your body powerful and trained, your mind sharp.

There is also a reverse side, but at first you refuse to believe. You have, upon embarking on a journey to strange beaches, that strange feeling of immortality. That you won't fall over that final edge. That's why a war is so suitable for young people because death is such an unreal dimension

then. It is double-hearted. Because every soldier, no matter how green, will know, somewhere in the back of his head that he –in the face of the battlefield– could fall with his face to the ground. War is the flirt with death. Think of Russian roulette. Imagine: holding the gun to your head, pulling the trigger and then... still having life. You open your eyes and existence is sharper than ever before. War is the same roulette only without the boredom and the emptiness. The flirt with death is now filled with the interest of your country and people. It's a rock solid alibi.

The Argentinean Che Guevara believes with all he has that he fights for the poor and the outcasts. That their fate is the stake of the war he is fighting. Like in 1968 with a few communist revolutionaries in the Bolivian jungle. At a certain moment they will leave some killed soldiers of the enemy in the bushes; there is no time to bury them. After a couple of days the guerrillas pass the same spot. In his diary Guevara notes: 'Nature had turned them into beautifully clean skeletons.'

This cheerful cynicism marks him. It's his way of living with the dark in himself. During the revolution in Cuba, ten years earlier, he has already been through everything. After that magical victory he goes back into the jungle in the late sixties. The Bolivian jungle. Goal: a new revolution. In other words war in overdrive. A guerrillero is very vulnerable, for there are few of them against a large government army. And

so he must constantly be in motion. Strike here and be gone. As far as possible. Always cautious for an ambush by the enemy. Never knowing what is lurking behind the next tree. It comes with an immense, personal pressure.

Even more absurd is the standard that Che Guevara imposes on himself and his fellow warriors. Being good. It is his trademark to send war prisoners back in their underwear. It means that the government soldiers go back to their headquarters with a lot of new information. Stealing food is prohibited. The revolutionaries must buy it from civilians.

Often there is nothing, sometimes for days in a row. Once, after a couple of days without water, a few revolutionaries drink their own urine, causing diarrhoea. Another prohibition: seeking release by running amok, raping and murdering among citizens, like Caesar often allows. According to Guevara, revolutionaries are the highest kind of people, and that should show.

Next to that he forces himself to be the example. That he is heavily asthmatic, will certainly help. It is like a sport to him not to complain, though the jungle only worsens the illness. In Bolivia he once hits a horse in the neck with a machete, so powerful is the sudden grasp of the asthma on him. He worryingly concludes that he is starting to lose 'control'.

It's a crucial word, control. In his diary Guevara writes lovingly about an old friend who died in his presence that afternoon. Without shock about the friend's skull that stays on his retina as a bloody mass.

He is the man with the ultimate grip on himself. It's a life condition under those extreme circumstances. Emotional outbursts do not only break down your own personality, in an isolated group they also endanger the others. It distracts, it creates chaos and it affects morality. That is why hard discipline must destroy all personal whims. War –and certainly a revolution in the jungle– forces to what parapsychology likes to sell in its books. Being in balance with yourself. Guevara carefully notes the personal development of his soldiers. Some turn out to be capable of fantastic achievements, suddenly they have the overview and take the initiative while others appear to be increasingly less able to cope with the hardships.

It is miraculous that –following their journeys– you can also be exhausted after a day of shopping. Under that exhaustion there apparently lies an immense reservoir that can be opened by war. When you collapse a first time, it's possible to rise again without there being time to recover. It happens when you want it to. And after the next moment in which all energy slips at the nth path you have to chop through the jungle, there is another resurrection, the last one this time. After that you totally collapse, but even from that you can rise again. Descending further into yourself like this, leaving more and more emotional ballast, you recognize what you are.

You often see it in these survival shows on television: people who want to get everything out of themselves. Sweat-

ing, moaning, drudging and whimpering. To the limit beyond which your health enters a dangerous zone. War does not have that limit. You have to continue because the enemy bullet is an even greater risk. And it proves to be possible, there is an entire world beyond the doctor's advice. The revolutionaries all keep going on. Again and again. Because they believe victory is achievable, and that their leader can make it come true, like he's done before. But this time a superpower –the United States– has personally opened chase after them, their advisors and the CIA are in the country to assist the government army of Bolivia. That other superpower –the Soviet Union– has betrayed them, they have blocked support to the Argentineans because they fear it will undermine their own powerbase in South America.

Nevertheless, he causes a stir in just about the entire continent with his twenty revolutionaries. Right-wing governments are extremely alert, from fear that the revolution might spread to their country. In Bolivia itself, students and miners have risen against the government when they hear a living myth from the jungle is fighting for their freedom. The rebel leader writes in his diary that he would stand a fair chance at a breakthrough if he had a couple of dozen men more, which is not so remarkable because he conquered Cuba with a couple of hundred rebels. In Bolivia, Guevara waits for the farmers to join him. In vain. Eventually, the revolutionaries get caught in an army ambush. Most are killed, Guevara is wounded and captured. A last picture of

him alive shows the communist leader completely ruined. When a few days later, on his prison bed, he finds a Belgian Uzi pointed at him, the convinced atheist shouts at his murderer: 'Shoot, don't be afraid! Shoot!'

He believes in an ideal, like an achievable dream; that the world can really be turned to good. As long as man is willing to make sacrifices, like Che Guevara does when he looks into the barrel in the trembling hands of a Bolivian soldier.

But there was also a personal motivation for him and the revolutionaries, which is essential in this argumentation. War is –in essence– not fought by a bunch of ignorant sheep being led to the slaughter. Many Roman soldiers sign up for another term after they have served their contract. They have seen it all, and want more. Is it a choice out of poverty, because they can't build up another life? Nonsense. Many revolutionaries in Bolivia are Cubans. Veterans who know exactly what is waiting for them, and yet they make that same choice again. While they enjoy great admiration in their country. What has determined that choice?

When two thousand years earlier at Alesia, the attack of the Gauls commences from two sides at the same time, Caesar sees the threatening defeat happen after many hours. He then uses his final reserve, led by himself for the first time. Over his shoulders, a red cloak, so his soldiers can see that their leader himself is in their midst.

They win.

The Romans found something in themselves there. Melancholy and fear will never have been so far away as at the moment those fighters recognized the cloak of their leader over their shoulders. They are lifted high above real life, and it is more realistic than ever before. The crux is this one: the voluntary suffering cleans up in fear and melancholy. But never definitively. Go back to daily life, and after a while there is a lot of work to do again.

In philosophical books, war is often linked to the destructive force of man. And that is just. In this there are more than enough reasons to seriously dissuade this voluntary suffering. You huddle against the side of evil. Hoping not to get contaminated by it. Guevara and his guerrillas are magnificent exceptions, but masses of people end up on the dark side of the war path: confidently shooting innocent civilians under loud applause from your fellow soldiers.

Many cannot stand the pressure of war. A gunshot resounds, the sound is coming at you. Dead? No – you are still breathing. And later the same game, where others around you lose the light in their eyes, or see limbs being ripped from their bodies. The survivors become more and more like victims. They wanted to get away from ordinary life, with its fear and melancholy, but are eventually overpowered by a lasting darkness far greater than anything they ever knew.

The most threatening thing about war is that other people need little pressure to submit to evil. It brings along lawlessness. When a battle takes place on such a scale, of life and death, on the chaos of the battlefield, it is unworkable to apply the rules strictly. If they don't directly contribute to victory, that is. In battle, all boundaries fade. And then the temptation of doing anything you please comes up. The setting makes it possible. It gives rise to an unknown evil in some.

War is madness on a scale of both merely a head to entire continents, every soldier knows that, yet approaches it. It marks men going in the wrong direction. What he seeks in essence is the means and the goal at the same time. Also one of the most honourable virtues ever.

Courage.

He who finds it in his deeds, has become separated from himself. The Romans want to win from the Gauls, naturally, but in essence war is about man wanting to conquer himself. In the hardest reality. Seen from the good, one could say that every soldier puts his life at stake. The best thing that can be said about war is the devotion with which he commits himself to it. Free from everything in daily life.

There are moments in history that illustrate it in a way that takes your breath away. Like the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae. I quote it here, also because the moment spreads across an impressive panorama of war themes.

The Spartans have been posted there – 25 centuries ago –

to stop the march of the Persians. The number, three hundred, comes from mythical tradition; the Spartans have over three thousand allied soldiers around them, who have been partially forced and partially convinced into taking part. It is complete idiocy because Greek scouts have just reported that the Persians are on their way with an army of millions (in reality an estimate of a quarter million). Though Spartans are known to be legendary fighters, they must have felt a hint of fear at the light trembling of the earth as the enemy approaches. They would have cast away that dark feeling immediately, because from their childhood onwards they have been taught that that will be their downfall. They stand. Their act rises above all logic, which is a condition for courage. The moment is also an impressive act of leadership, for the Spartan king Leonidas is in their midst. They have been positioned there because Greece as they know it, goes along the most narrow ridge. When the Persians crowd the country, everything will change for adults, children and many generations yet to be born. Countless will die or be deported as slaves. Their houses and fields will burn. A part will at best lose their culture and freedom.

The men of the Greek peninsula are not suicidal for they have positioned themselves in a narrow mountain pass where they stand the best chance. On the spot where the Persian titan power has to pass but can only charge with some at a time. The Spartans choose this spot because they truly attempt at turning the tide of their country. When the

confrontation begins, the little army deflects attack upon attack. The battle scene is macabre like a war alone can offer. The warriors wait, in the narrow space between the mountain faces, for the next wave of opponents, they stand there among torn torsos, cleft heads, the stench of rot and buzzing flies.

And yet a common intimacy must have occurred; the soldiers together in that almost cosy passage, body to body, with the same fate of a certain death over everyone's head.

Time and time again they engage in battle together, in the fluent movement of a trained collective. They use tactics such as retreating and suddenly turning around and charging at the enemy as a block. With pleasure, so it seems, the Spartans fight. Their sequence of victories in the mountain pass must have allowed a faith to grow slowly that they can make the impossible happen. But the third day, in the early morning, melancholy sets in. The message comes that the Persians have reached the other side via a secret passage. And then the Spartans and their companions know it's over. They prepare. Leonidas tells his men: 'Eat a good breakfast for tonight we dine in the underworld.' These are words of sadness but even more of reconciliation with what will come. Yes, they are killed, all of them, because they believe that surrender is for ordinary people. To realize what war is, something so radically different from ordinary life, one must know the following. All of those three hundred Spartans are fathers, deliberately picked with a message to the enemy:

there will always be a next generation. After this battle three hundred Spartan families will be fatherless.

Guevara wrote a letter that was handed to his five children after he died. 'If one day you must read this letter, it will be because I am no longer among you. You will almost not remember me and the littlest ones will remember nothing at all. Your father has been a man who acted according to his beliefs and certainly has been faithful to his convictions. (...) Above all, try always to be able to feel deeply any injustice committed against any person in any part of the world. It is the most beautiful quality of a revolutionary. Until always, little children. I still hope to see you again. A really big kiss and a hug from Papa.'

CHAPTER 3

Among lepers

THE monks walk in, over the lecterns lights flash on, one by one, like tiny clouds in the great darkness of the church. The lectern wood resounds when the prayer books come out.

It is one of my memories that doesn't go away. I am sitting above the small gathering, on the bottom of the balcony, through the balusters I see the scene down below. A monk rings the bell outside using a long rope. The ringing goes beyond the nightland as a sign to the world that in here the early morning prayer is starting. With their croaking voices, the monks start a Gregorian chant while an autumn storm starts battering against the monastery walls. The nine –below me– keep singing. Closer still than the nature outside is the deeply silent darkness up ahead in the church.

Half a century there was a flourishing religious life going on between these walls. Many monks and an abbot who was one of the powerful clergymen. At the time of my arrival, the majority who are left are old.

I'm staying in the pilgrim's section. Furniture, carpeting, seventies wallpaper and very old wine in a hallway cupboard, for guests. And for the rest, silence from the surrounding landscape everywhere. Outside the youngest monk is at work in the gardens. He has a merriment that ought to get on your nerves but doesn't. His old fellow monks could star in a movie about the Middle Ages, without any makeup. One of them spreads an impressive burst of laughter.

As radically as a soldier seeks the core of existence in the heart of reality, at the border with death, as radically as that a monk seeks to get away from that reality. Like a soldier seeks mass for his ego a monk tries to erase that ego entirely. The latter feels within himself for God and in the end the unification with Him. Both deliver a hard fight, each in their own way, but the lay brother goes further. He abstains from alcohol, adrenaline, victory, lust, adventure. His only companion: discipline and obedience. Lifelong. And yet the romance of the monastery appeals to many. To me too. That is why I went to the balcony of the crypt that early morning to attend the matins. And that is the reason for my fascination for the documentary 'Into the silence': the long corridors, the rays of sunlight, the footsteps. But the movie has a breaking point: I start twitching on my seat when the same monk kneels down in his cell, for the fifth time I believe. The same shot over and over again, only the light differs. This confrontation with yourself, day in, day out until death – it is incomprehendable that a person does not go crazy. Doesn't anything happen? Is life switched off in a monastery cell? There is a misconception about monks and with it religion as a whole that needs to be cleared here. It is often represented as 'seeing the light', that the solution is found at once. To everything. End of story, so says the suggestion; the rest of your life as an epitaph.

If not, it must be a big blow, so I think. Prayer must be a world of its own, with countless roads to get lost along.

Mohammed Atta was praying when he crashed his airplane into one of the Twin Towers. Godfrey of Bouillon must also have turned to God as he and his crusaders flooded the streets of Jerusalem with the blood of thirty thousand Jews and Muslims.

Amongst monks it is no different. They must seek the good, it is not given to them as luggage. Some years ago I visited another –former– monastery. Ancient walls in , erected by Franciscans, now abandoned spaces. Here, the monks of poverty had laid silence upon themselves for centuries. The one exception was a room where they debated current affairs. The constructor had designed the vaulting in such a way that they produced a tremendous echo. Shouting would pose a threat to one's eardrums. That the echo was necessary says a lot about monastery life.

The few square metres of the monastery cell are probably like life outside the walls. Only more intense: the despair, the resignation, the grief, the tears of happiness – and then despair again. If you want to flee from that cell, which is so simple in ordinary life, you literally hit a wall. The monk has nothing but himself and the belief that he is not alone. Those who eventually see the light after an inner fight of years can be counted on one hand. The rest keep believing, sometimes fighting despair, until the end arrives.

To get closer, a monk must separate himself from the world. That surpasses voluntary suffering. Nowhere is the theme of

this book so present as in the monasteries. In such a variety of gradations. The guide told us that most monks in that Portuguese monastery didn't live past the age of forty. One look in a cell was enough to understand that. They were coupled huts made of rough plaster, with a surface areas of a metre and a half, the ceiling so low that one can only kneel or lie. Under an open window. The furniture was a mat to sleep on, the only rug is the trampled earth. One of the monks still found it too luxurious and went to live on a nearby hilltop in a rock cave. He lived to the age of ninety.

The Spanish Pedro de Alcantára was famous in the sixteenth century for his fasting. Teresa of Avila met him for the first time halfway through her life. In her own view, until that point Teresa had not taken things seriously as a nun. Her turning point comes with this hermit who does not look women in the eye but sees them as walking trees. And yet they must have been equal as they found each other; the old woman who to the world was wearing holiness around her shoulders already, and the old man with an extremely starved bent body, cleaved feet, ragged clothes too small for him, his body caked with dirt.

For the first time Teresa has the feeling someone understands her: her visions and the accompanying emotions of hurricane strength. This man seems, as she writes, to be speaking from personal experience. They have met several times in that small cell, where the inhabitant sleeps while

sitting, his head on a stone in the wall, for no longer than an hour and a half a night. Pedro de Alcantára confirms to her that she is not an idiot, that there is no need to be afraid like other believers imply. Looking at it from modern times, it is hard to believe that Teresa regularly practiced self-flagellation, wore a belt with inward spikes around her waist and tied nettles around her wrists. This is minute compared to her suffering from inside. Doctors have thoroughly examined her. The conclusion is that she had too many symptoms for one disease. She suffered regular fevers, pain in her chest, pain in her jaws and teeth, a sore back, sounds in her head, nervous attacks and nausea. On one occasion, she spent three years in bed, paralysed. Diagnoses range from meningitis to hysterical epilepsy. Remarkably enough, even these physical horrors may have been voluntary. The source for this assumption is the work of 20th century psychoanalysts who examined her symptoms. Teresa is said to have –either deliberately or unknowingly– brought these illnesses upon herself. She never complained about it.

The difference between what two people can endure can be immense. I'm not talking about complainers and persisters, but similar circumstances under which one would die and the other would live. Quite a few monks from those old times would astonish a modern day medic. On the path of their voluntary suffering, they find a way in which to bear incredible burdens.

Although you cannot escape the impression that a lot of them lose their way, even in the light of the different times they lived in. Like Catalina de Cordana who made a cavern her home and only ate roots and berries. Which she only ate on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, so they say; the other days she ate nothing. The people say she sometimes beats herself for hours with a heavy chain. Or Catarina of Siena who, tending a severely ill nurse, drinks the pus from her abdominal wound.

When Teresa is standing by a pond one day, staring, she is interrupted from her thinking by a nurse who, in great admiration, asks her a question. Teresa responds annoyed: 'Please jump into the pond.' It must have surprised her that her words were immediately obeyed.

Teresa of Avila transcends this. You recognize a woman of importance. She chooses for what she says herself: the middle road. No exaggeration. The secret of her inner success, and possibly a lesson to many religious people: no high self-esteem. Her entire life, she remains on guard for what she thinks to be countless weaknesses. At the same time, she is time and time again struck by what can barely be described. Sometimes nuns cling to her, literally, because she levitates. At those moments she is ashamed of herself.

After her meeting with the hermit Pedro de Alcantára, she will found several monasteries in Spain. For her own order: the Discalced Carmelites who survive on gifts. And that in utter simplicity. She sees the travelling as her ultimate

trial; and if not that, the diplomatic fight with the authorities. She would much rather stay in her own convent cell. But she does it because she achieves in one day what others cannot do in years. And of course, she thinks of it as her divine task.

At the age of 67, she sets out on a last journey to found a monastery, already very ill (probably with disseminated cervical cancer). It is a journey of black ice and downpour, the roads flooded with water, whereby the carriage is in continuous peril of being washed away. For the first time she turns to God, who answers her that that's the way he treats his friends. Then that must be the reason why you have so few, Teresa snaps at him. Not much later, she will die far from home in a strange bed. After her funeral her body will be excavated five times to take relics from her bones.

Suffering in the Catholic tradition has always been held in high esteem. With as a well-known example the whip with which some flagellate themselves in the monasteries. By the outside world it is seen primarily as repentance for sins. But the most important use –I think– is as a weapon for becoming separate from the world. He who has no fear of pain, who doesn't comply to it – obtains a beginning of untouchability over himself. Like we are fascinated by the one who keeps holding his hand above the candle. In the Catholic tradition that makes you but a dilettante. Compare Saint Lawrence who –put on a grill by his executioner– said after a while: 'This side is done, turn me over.'

He lies there frying because the local ruler had asked him to turn in all ecclesiastical art treasures and he answered: set me free and I will collect them. Back on the street he handed them all out to the poor. After that he goes to the tyrant, surrounded by poor people, with the words: here are your treasures. That was enough to light the fire.

It's devotion. This inner miracle is carried through increasingly further by Catholic examples such as Lawrence. It has everything to do with Jesus who extradited himself to be nailed to the cross. Like nothing else, this act of voluntary suffering inspired our imagination. To a soldier this is different. The best among them don't avoid danger but their way of dealing with it has a practical foundation. They have to be able to stand it when necessary. If they succeed in that, it increases their braveness at the same time – read their ego.

But nobody on the battlefield walks towards the enemy saying: here I am. With arms down. In Christianity there are many characters like that. They don't do this to prove themselves, but from the opposite motive: they put everything outside themselves. It is no longer about them but about divine providence or whatever you wish to call it. To hand out the final blow to suffering.

The founder of the Franciscan order, Francis of Assisi, is among the most legendary victors over suffering. Devotion is the key-word in his life. As a young merchant from a rich family he donates all his possessions to the poor. To go about begging, dressed in rags, like one of them. To live

like his example, Christ. What Francis does is exceptional in those days. The people are divided into classes; between them are the strongest walls. He who is born rich, will stay rich until he dies. Likewise, the poor don't stand a chance in escaping their fate. They fall prey to food scarcity and deadly diseases every day. Francis joins them, amidst the city dirt and mud.

Initially he and his monks are met with a great lack of understanding. They are thought to be conmen or lunatics, also because they look like savages. Often they are forced to sleep in porticoes because they have no other place to go. By the old and the young they are treated like scum, cursed, beaten and sometimes even robbed of their miserable clothes. And yet it must have been a liberation: to let go of everything and live from one day to the next; as close to the earth as can be. To have nothing and therefore be free of sorrow over what you must keep.

Begging, choosing poverty, is at the same time a continuous confirmation of their own punity. Francis and his followers do not make their self-esteem even smaller, they just show it more profoundly in their rags. Later, when admired by the masses, he would long for the days when he was a nobody.

Slowly their work starts spreading more light. Medieval people tend towards the heavenly, as a reward for their tough life on earth. They see Francis as the loner who draws such radical conclusions from this desire. Still it remains to

be a long and hard fight for him. One can pinpoint exactly when he really breaks through it. When he first enters a house, which other healthy people stay away from as far as possible. When, like Jesus, he finds himself among lepers. He will return regularly to nurse them and give them love. There, among the mutilated and the dying, he must have truly felt what it is like to let go. Of everything.

And still it does not disconnect you from the world. It is a task that is practically impossible. Because the world is within you. Look at our sexuality. The physical rite is hardly different from the here and now. From the deepest part of us. To Francis, probably a great admirer of women, this is hard to battle using prayer alone. At moments like this, he immerses himself in a pool of icy water to fight the images on his retina. Once, it is said to have been so fierce he takes off his monk's habit and starts publicly thrashing himself. If that doesn't do it, he throws himself out in the snow and builds seven snowmen with his bare hands.

He fears no means to keep himself from straying. It is heroic but simplicity remains his base. Distancing himself from feelings that life offers in so many colorations. Like every monk tries, with the simplest thoughts that are the core of prayer. Letting the same words flow through you countless times. To evict all that is needless – what we cling to so much in daily life – from your inner world. Pure because you want to be. It is shown best by the archetypical source: Anthony, the first monk. The Egyptian, born in the third century of our

calendar era, inhabits a small abandoned fort when he is about 35. He barricades the door from inside, having only bread and water with him. Every half year, admirers lower fresh bread and water through a hole in the roof. That's all. He has created his own solitary confinement, and will not leave it for twenty years. The most remarkable part is that he returns into the world as fresh as a daisy; he will live for another fifty years.

Our inner world must be endless. Anthony himself says about it: 'The Greeks live abroad and cross the sea, but we have no need to depart from home for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for the sake of virtue. For the Lord aforetime hath said, "The kingdom of heaven is within you." '

A kingdom sounds rosy for what it is. Later, Anthony will tell many a time about unwanted visitors. He calls them demons. Under the conditions he puts himself in, he starts seeing apparitions and hearing voices. He is happy when the divine extends towards him but the other – the dark side – is felt equally strong. In human figures who thrash him, so he recounts. Or strange hyenas that enclose him at night with bare teeth and piercing eyes.

Anthony has gone further than what is thought to be possible within human standards. The only way that leads so deep, is that of voluntary suffering. He has fought through with prayer and faith. And by seeing every day as that one day. No future, no past – just today. Like the soldiers, Anthony called upon a reservoir within himself. But it has to be deeper. After two decades of solitary confinement most, if they survive at all, will come out with a permanent subscription to insanity.

Not him. Back in the world, he turns out to be enlightened and is followed by many others who lock themselves in vaults. Anthony has turned into a person who is immediately recognized in company, also by those who have never seen him before. It's the eyes. They show something that seems out of this world.

After some years among people, he retreats once more into the landscape of the utmost simplicity. The desert. There, on a mountain, under the sun that pounds on all life like a fist, he acquires more special gifts. Like all monks and nuns after him, by the way, among whom Teresa and Francis: the ability to see the future and cure people. The best thing about people like Anthony and Francis is that they retain their love and compassion for other people. They may rise to astonishing heights, it is no reason to look down on others. You see them looking at people and their despair with an almost intense feeling. The way they are themselves, in fact. Human. What separates them from the others, is divine mercy. But that is nothing to aspire to, it is not their own.

Their love for the earthly existence has only become stronger. Because they have created space for it inside themselves. No word of disdain will have crossed their lips after their conversion. Hate is proof that you are still entan-

gled within the world, that you find important what in its core proves to be meaningless. It's a fertile soil for fear and melancholy.

Buddhism has perhaps voiced it most aptly. According to those from the East, such feelings should be rooted out, should one want to achieve any form of success. A documentary about the fourteenth Dalai Lama illustrates it beautifully. When he comes out through the door of his quarters, there is a skinny man with his family waiting for him. With a trembling voice the man says: I am going to die within days. The Dalai Lama gives him some advice for when the moment comes and then puts his hand on the man's head for a couple of seconds. After that, the Tibetan monk turns towards the camera, still with that special smile. He has plenty of memories –about the suffering, bleeding and dying of his people– to make every bit of joy wither. But he has made it. Even an atheist –who, so to say, has seen the post-mortal void with his very eyes– must acknowledge that people like him have done something remarkable to themselves.

Firstly and lastly, it is an earthly fight. Read what Francis says about joy; his words show what kind of man he was. First he sums up what cannot be true inner joy to him. Mind the word 'if' at the end: even for him –one of the great advocates of voluntary suffering– victory is not self-evident. But if he succeeds, suffering would collapse on the spot. To a fellow monk Francis says: 'Write down, what true joy is. A messenger arrives to tell that all Magisters of Paris have entered the Order of Francis. Write down: that is not true joy. Next: all prelates across the mountain, archbishops, bishops. Next: the King of France and the Queen of England. Write: that is not true joy. Next: that I cure the ill and do many miracles; I tell you there is no true joy in any of that. But then what is true joy? I return from Perugia and arrive in the middle of the night, it is winter, it is muddy, and it is so cold icicles are hanging from my habit and beat against my legs until they bleed. And so, covered in mud and cold and ice, I come to the door. After I have been knocking and calling for a long time, a monk arrives and asks: Who is there? And I answer: brother Francis. And he says: Go away, this is no hour to be walking the streets, you cannot come in. And when I persist he answers: Go away. You are too simple and too underdeveloped. You don't have to come here, there are so many of us, of such high esteem, that we don't need you. And when I remain at the door and beg: For the love of God, please admit me for one night. And he says: No way. Go to the brothers of the cross at the leper house and try over there. I tell you, if I stay patient then and do not get irritated: that is true joy, and true virtue, and profit for the soul.'

CHAPTER 4

A grove

I have stayed here. Though the existence of both soldiers and monks has appealed to me since the earliest of times. That is the voluntary suffering of which I think I understand the meaning. I can –so I think– feel what it's like going through the jungle. Not as a tourist but as a revolutionary. The tight-lipped mouth when an expedition through the wilderness just keeps going on, days on end.

I have seen the first part of the movie Lawrence of Arabia countless times. If only for the moment when the main character – an Englishman in the desert for the first time – refuses water because his Arabian companion does not drink either. I'm not fooling myself: I would have drank, and sooner. And yet I would want to put myself in that position, where it becomes clear what I'm made of. I would have wanted to start that journey around the world like Francis of Assisi made within himself. Even more, I would want to be in such exceptional circumstances where your life is so palpable you can almost touch it. But I stayed here. Eventually. For good reason.

Man: 'Farewell, my light, farewell, you for whom I would willingly die.'

Some time ago, in a half-dream I thought: what balance would I make up when it becomes clear that death is on its way to me? That it has been a full life. At least half of the glass exists of a single component: love. That has been my terrain of voluntary suffering. And I am not alone in that to make my first and last understatement of this book. Woman: 'Just as the weary desire shade and the thirsty long for water, so I desire to see you. Nothing will ever be so laborious for my body, nothing so dangerous for my soul, that I would not expend out of care for you.' Soldiers and monks are small minorities compared to the masses who plummet themselves into love to suffer there completely voluntarily, ending in suicide, crimes of passion, fights getting out of hand and sometimes half wars. Through the centuries, all that blood must be enough to fill a small sea. Let alone the tears that have been shed for love.

Biologists state that man needs love to reproduce. As a stimulant. It's nonsense. Reproduction is aided by but one inner factor: unrestrained salacity. Love is the means to prevent man from reproducing like a rabbit colony. Think of all the rituals, enveloping movements, letters unanswered, wrong directions, misunderstandings, fearful premonitions and more letters unanswered – it's an unprecedented attack on reproduction. In the core I don't think it's about intercourse. Love is the simplest thing, wanting to be with her. To see her; the way she walks, looks at you and how a word is on her lips. In reality it may not seem much, but you know the biggest things lie in this. And perhaps more still you want to slide your fingers down her right thigh. What could end in dropping down, with body and soul into the most intimate thing she has – it really is about those few square centimetres of her right thigh. Like with her, who rules the crowded bar with her dark eyes.

Man: 'My beauty, you who are incomparably sweeter than all sweet things. May you prolong your years as happily as I wish for you, for nothing better is needed.'

Woman: 'Know that in you lies my death and my life.'

Frisky should be the word that marks her. In each case she brilliantly plays out her femininity: so simple as the best summer yet as untouchable as women can be. She is not only untouchable to me, but more so to herself. She can open up to you; and still you are in the nebula of her inner world. She herself has no problem with that: 'I don't know why either.' It is not frivolity, for dreams sometimes turn her eyes dark.

Woman: 'Just as fire cannot be extinguished or suppressed by any material, unless water, by nature its powerful remedy, is applied, so my love cannot be cured by any means – only by you can it be healed. My mind is bothered by not knowing through what gift I can enrich you. Glory of young men, companion of poets, how handsome you are in appearance yet more distinguished in feeling. Your presence is my joy, your absence my sorrow; in either case, I love you.'

At a certain moment, on a gentle spring night, when I stand before her at the bar, suddenly something shifts in the air between us. It begins. By then I am already half a veteran, I know about love. No need in explaining to me that at first sight suffering does not belong here. Only later when the edges of insanity open up before your feet. I have been there

and have returned, more mature, free. Confident too against this suffering that may well be the most powerful of all: melancholy, fear, combinations of those and a whole range of other dark feelings whose name can but be guessed. I know, here before her –as she smiles and I return a playful sentence– what is expected of me. Balance. Great desires have no place right now. Space more so. It's pointless giving in completely to desire and trying to hide that from her at the same time. It makes you move in a ridiculous way.

I do not allow losing myself because I need myself very much in those possibly extreme circumstances that await me. The utmost thing I will allow, is this thought: let's see how deep this rabbit hole goes. To discover if she is still down there at the bottom. Like the one I have been searching for all my life, of whom I believe she exists with all my heart.

But for now there is only our brief exchange of words, after which we are driven apart in the crowd. I put that out of my mind. And continue the night with my friends. In the time that follows, we will drift past each other more and more often. Until the big subject is brought up, several times, by both of us: dinner at my place.

Man: 'You are buried inside my breast for eternity, from which tomb you will never emerge as long as I live. There you lie, there you rest. You keep me company right until I fall asleep; while I sleep you never leave me, and after I wake I see you, as soon as I open my eyes, even before the light of

day itself. To others I address my words, to you my intention. I often stumble over words, because my thought is far from them.' I feel powerful. So powerful that on the night of the dinner I suggest we watch 'The English patient': the most beautiful thing by someone else that I can show of my intimacy. The story of the one, and that in the desert. Halfway through the movie I walk away and, when returning, I fall over her, she over me and we over each other. That night, the pause button will not be touched by anyone.

The next day I am still lord and master of myself. I write to a friend, with the smell of machismo, about her 'fable body'. For the rest I keep distance in the days after, also to arm myself. And it works. It stays that way until after a sequel to the night, and the sequel to that. What defines us is the game. The moving past each other, with silent looks and alternating distances; never before was I with a woman where words have so little to say.

And then comes a night where I'm standing in her doorway, and run my hand along her face. She does not recede, but her eyes say like only she can: no further. And I answer: goodnight. In other words: it's good like this. And still I mean it.

Woman: 'Although I wanted to write back to you, the magnitude of the task, being beyond my powers, drove me back. Indeed I wanted to but could not, I began then grew weak, I persisted but collapsed, my shoulders buckling under the weight.'

Meanwhile, as we go on, the moments string together that do not fray, not even as a memory. These I release. I am wearing a jacket, she is wearing a sweater. I am standing before the open hotel window, she is lying on the window sill with her waist. I dance, in dreamy paces, while the wriggling upper part of her body hangs out and night blends into her face. And then, at home, the desire starts against which the Buddhists warn you so, suddenly it grows rank like a disease. Wanting to be with her, whatever she's doing. The time in which you don't think of her, dissolves. In a split second, so it seems. It starts to get really bad when you call her for a few last words and she doesn't answer the phone. Ten minutes ago you saw her in person, less than a metre from that phone. It's the middle of the night. Your desperate head leaves no space to think how much you are being grasped by voluntary suffering right now. When hours later you stare at the ceiling in dismay, you find the old feeling return. But it's a last convulsion.

After twenty-four hours the suffering fully breaks through. Moments will follow on, when you turn around in middle of the street because you expect some other place to give you a better chance of meeting her. You have started organising coincidence, as an impulse for grasping what is happening to you.

This suffering has a number of essentially different aspects from the suffering among soldiers and monks. For your feeling it has nothing to do with what it's about here, love. It

jumps up on you from behind. On the surface it seems as if you have been surrendered to the gods. The voluntariness is in not walking away from her but making do with it.

Though you started it off to find the opposite, the end of all suffering. What love can do in such a magnificent way: you look inside yourself at a lost moment and in surprise you conclude that fear and melancholy have packed their bags. It has not gone along the path of voluntary suffering, but through her who sits on the couch and watches TV, as her leg lies across yours. But the enlightenment has a price, that is claimed not much later as a phone switches to the answering machine. Then the suffering returns, stronger and greater than it ever was.

Man: 'Know that although love may be a universal thing, it has nevertheless been condensed into so confined a place that I would boldly assert that it reigns in us alone – that is, it has made its very home in me and you. For the two of us have a love that is pure, nurtured, and sincere, since nothing is sweet or carefree for the other unless it has mutual benefit. We say yes equally, we say no equally, we feel the same about everything. This can be easily shown by the way that you often anticipate my thoughts: what I think about writing, you write first, and, I remember well, you have said the same thing about yourself.'

It is often said that in love you are merged with another person, which is of course impossible. But you do come close to that unity. You enter her like she enters you. Give

her a few words and sometimes you can follow them into her shiny eyes. You can retrieve your stroking fingers in the goose bumps on her skin. Especially for the western, who only believe their eyes, it couldn't be better.

In that mixture of two people you recognize yourself in the other, who at the same time is changing before your eyes. Nothing remains the same, not you and not her. This is how we find the greatest thing daily life can offer us. Loneliness falls as under a scythe. There is nothing but the two of you. Work, fear, friends, war – they literally do not exist. Read the letters by Abelard and Heloise and you will know what I mean. It's not hard to imagine, how they made love nine hundred years ago. Approaching each other with controlled haste, shaking inside when their bodies touch; ripping the clothes from their body. And another time, postponing that moment with unbearable slowness.

Love is not his, not hers. It is new. Like Abelard says. He never felt the physical jolts, when her buttocks are outlined in her clothing, before. They come from nothing, clumsily depicted in art by the bow and arrow of the chubby Cupid. Love lies close to mystery because it seems out of this world, and probably is. At the same time it has all the pitfalls of daily life at hand, only with sharp spikes at the bottom.

A large series of letters, that, through recent scientific investigations can almost certainly be attributed to Abelard and Heloise, show it razor-sharp like no other literature. It's a double account of a love affair, before the dramatic separa-

tion. A feeling, if we can still call this feeling, that plays havoc like a hurricane. And yet both undergo this force voluntarily. Several times they almost come apart but a letter from one is enough to find the other back. Heloise writes it literally in one of the letters: it is my will.

Man: 'So tell me, sweetest, for how long shall I be tortured, for how long shall I burn inside with blazing flames and not extinguish them with the refreshment of your sweetest speech? Much still remains to be said. Day after day I burn more for your love, while you grow cold.'

Woman: 'I believe that you are not unaware, my sweet light, that ashes placed on a sleeping fire never put it out and that, even if they prevent it from giving light, they cannot keep it from burning for ever.'

Man: 'I am not sure what I should say to you, because I love you so much that I cannot manage to express the extent of my love. The matter has come to such a point, greatest repose of my life, to such a point, I declare, that I cannot even find words for your outstanding virtues.'

Long silence.

Woman, briefly: 'Nothing can stop me from constantly seeing you with my mind's eye…'

Silence.

Man: 'An unavoidable matter has intervened and put its left foot against my desire. I am guilty, I who compelled you to sin.'

Woman: 'Take your complaints away from me, I will not hear your words any more. For where I expected many good things to be of benefit to me, there emerged instead tearful sighs of the heart.'

One morning I wake up in her bed and softly hear the door open and close. She hasn't said a thing. I get up and stare ahead of me. Then my legs start going through the room because I'm sure she's going to see him. Which wouldn't be a problem, if I weren't suspecting there to be more than friendship. Walking becomes pacing.

This is insane: even if it's true, I must destroy this feeling. I know it. But my legs go through the room faster and faster. I almost scream at myself, no, not again. But in a second I slip into some clothes –I don't remember anything about the distance to outside the house– and I am standing in the middle of the street. I look around like a madman to see where she is. Gone, out of my sight. Should I go deeper into the autumn, after her, in my T-shirt, or should I go and get my coat first? What should I say to her when I find her? Then, I suddenly see myself, the hurried movements of my body. Like a psychiatric patient.

Man: 'I am not sure what I should say to you, because I love you so much that I cannot manage to express the ex-

tent of my love. The matter has come to such a point, greatest repose of my life, to such a point, I declare, that I cannot even find words for your outstanding virtues.'

I have to find a way back, I whisper out loud, as I turn around to go inside. And that is proving that this suffering is voluntary. Away from her, and then seeing if she'll approach me. If not, that's fine too. But this medicine from the beginning, both an outer and inner restraint, is now much harder to acquire. A whole world has been added from which I must move away to find my freedom back.

I am fighting a feeling, while I gather my stuff from her room, which is the last thing I'm waiting for. Anger. Desire to destroy her inside me. Better to destroy it all, erase her from within me. That it has been nothing.

Man: 'You have tossed me half dead into the midst of the waves, you who have inflicted new wounds on my wounds and added new sorrows to my sorrows.'

Woman: 'You who have almost forgotten me, my sweet, when shall I see you? Allow at least one happy hour for me.'

Man: 'God willing, I shall keep aside for you, sweetest, many very sweet and joyful hours. Farewell, my spirit.'

Destroying the other inside yourself is a desire to which masses give in when love races towards its dramatic end. Mutually waging a total war with the help of lawyers after twenty years together. At the cost of your fortune, and by that I mean the two decades of your life that you throw in the garbage. Only because she wants to go on without you. She

hurt you, the bitch. Oh that damned ego. Everything seems to be the counterpart of what it was once meant to be.

Woman: I marvel at how, without any force of compulsion, you could be removed from me so quickly, you whom I have secured to my heart with the tenacious anchor of love. That is why I have taken to ashes and sackcloth, and why night and day tears drop from my eyes. What more? Above all, I am pierced by the sharpest arrow of pain, and harder than steel would be the man who stands firm, unmoved by my sighs of misery.'

The dark side of love: from the feelings that hide there you can read how deeply love is connected with daily life. It is capable of reducing us to the smallest man. And often very simply, because on the inside you have very little to put away. After all, you haven't locked yourself in a monastery cell for twenty years.

See me. I act like an addict. It happens that I, standing before her in the doorway, let the tears roll down my cheeks. She gives me her look of which the intensity does not lie but the space between us remains.

I do not want this. Smallness. You would think that it is vanity, which may be partially right. But my feeling tells me that above all I want to take good care of what was given to me. Myself. That is why I intend to take her with me if I have to go on alone. Every memory of her in itself is a good reason for that. But how do I take them along in my memory without losing myself in her again at the same time?

What I do next, walking across the street, sitting behind my desk, is meditate through the metaphor of war. I stand – presumably in the American Civil War- halfway up a hill between narrow elms, with my regiment. In the chaos around me, I realise that I won't reach the top. Regroup, regroup, I shout, while another man's blood splashes in my face.

This metaphor goes on endlessly in my head. In various forms, sometimes, where I lead a platoon, probably in one of the Peloponnesian wars. We set up in the evening at the edge of a small grove. Half kneeling, one foot in the sand, spears ready. That grove is my deepest vulnerability. Across from us, the sea rustles in the darkness. We wait.

This is how –very slowly– I find the way back. With moments of great happiness when I feel free from her. Meanwhile she makes no move towards me, she stays where she is as I retreat further and further. Until she comes out of a bar with a boy one day. She sees me, I see her. We've made it.

Woman: 'Through loving you, I searched for you; searching for you, I found you; finding you, I desired you; desiring you, I chose you; choosing you, I placed you before everyone else in my heart, and picked you alone out of thousands, in order to make a pledge with you. Birds love the shady parts of the woods, fish hide in the streams of water, stags climb mountains, I love you with a steadfast and whole mind.'

CHAPTER 5

The meaning of life

FROM the surrounding Mountains, Trogir can be seen beautifully for what the city is: a small peninsula in a bay by the Adriatic Sea. The Croatian city was already there when on the other side of the Mediterranean, Cleopatra had herself taken to Alexandria. Wrapped in a bale of rags. Her next master plan. As the Egyptian queen and the Roman emperor made love on that first night, people here went about their daily business.

Thirteen centuries later, the city blossomed when Saint Francis of Assisi hosted what may well be the most famous Christmas party ever on the Italian side of the Adriatic sea. In the woods at Greccio. People came from all over the world. Arriving that night, they lit candles and walked towards the living nativity scene full of expectation. The forest paths were like luminous brooks, a witness recounted.

It is past now, but Trogir is still standing. Cities are the true oaks. Trees, turtles and elders cannot withstand the long breath of time. But these houses have been saturating themselves with daily life for centuries.

I wait here in the main square Ivana Pavla, against a wall. In my hands a toy lion, bought just down the street in a trinket shop. For the youngest of our family. I look forward to her first inquisitive look. My head is full of thoughts like a panorama. These are the moments to write.

Not far from here is the holiday park where we are staying, by the sea and easily accessible via the main road. In the

evening, discos send bouncing signals to the windows of our house. Sometimes, like a flight ahead, we sit on the terrace, in the immediate shadow of the Balkan music. Places of silence are unreachable for us because the baby monitor cannot go further than 150 metres. Croatia is, like I ironically said to my friends beforehand: 'Child-friendly yet still slightly exotic.' A holiday park yet still Trogir. But it is nothing like the jungle or the desert – let alone Greccio or Alesia. Any voluntary suffering is stupefied here. Life is small. And that is why it comes to me so much.

The most threatening are the tourists who swarm the streets, past the tall, terraced houses. As if they are looking for something, even way into the smallest alleys. Sometimes during a walk you suddenly have to evade them because they abruptly stop at a street corner where their cameras aim at an old steeple in one harmonic movement. It annoys me because it is everywhere.

I don't know if reality will come even closer, tomorrow, as we visit a nature reserve. After pushing the pram along the paths for half a day, I will meet someone who at first gives me a feeling of recognition. After which I will notice it's me. A tall mirror at the pay desk will tell me there is not the slightest difference between me and my environment: a sweaty head, a worn-out look and a callous T-shirt behind a pram of happy orange. That is how tomorrow I will look exactly like what I am. A tourist. But for now I await that first

look of my family, with her in the centre behind the pram; perhaps with her sunglasses in her long blonde hair.

Our beginning can compete with the great love stories. In those first hours the ordinary was nowhere. It was as if angels writhed against the ceiling of the establishment where we met. Earlier that evening, reality had already been clothed in strange colours. It started at a friend's place: at one point we found ourselves throwing a large bread knife at a door. The metal had difficulty gripping the the wood. After several attempts, I saw home owner B run away at a trot. Not much later he was standing before me, the solution in hand. An air rifle. I have seldom seen him as special as then, shooting at the door, reloading while singing: 'I'm 34 already, I'm 34 already, I'm 34 already!'

After that came a long conversation with a girl in a bar: she told me how her cousin and one of the greatest Dutch writers –as dead as he was– was still the centre of her family. Meanwhile, non-verbal things happened but neither her hand nor mine crossed.

Somewhere near midnight, on the edge of a stage I stared ahead. Reminiscing about the night, that really had yet to begin. Suddenly a stranger was standing next to me. Agitatedly he said: 'My sister really likes you, surely you can see? Look, there she is.' I followed his finger, saw a woman looking at us from the twilight in the corner of the room. I walked up to her. Suddenly so many things happened that

half a day seemed like minutes. Little was said, we danced, laughed, looked, kissed, made love, and sometimes even all of those at the same time.

Somewhere during those hours of the sleeping Netherlands, I heard that it was not her brother who had come up to me. It was her husband. They had started a one-time game that had gradually got out of hand. And still I have not given away everything of what happened in the hours with which she announced herself. She who now walks the streets of Trogir with our children, and has been gone much longer than the said fifteen minutes.

Voluntary suffering has been kept perfectly to one side in the becoming of our story. There were complications in the beginning, of course, but they were not ours. They were outsiders banging on our windows. Slowly we slipped into the daily life in which we find ourselves now.

In movies and books, you hear very little of this daily life whereas it is almost everything. See all the quarters and streets where all big events are limited to a screen. My diversion at home, on the trip to the supermarket, is whether or not the tramp is at the entrance, and if yes whether or not I will give him something. He says 'oh' beautifully, as if he is genuinely surprised by my financial gesture. That is about as much adventure an ordinary day has. I wanted it like this. In this moment of clear self-reflection in the Trogir square, I say that sentence to myself. During that fight of half a life,

to find the way to her, I have longed for this daily life. With her, the love of my life. I have fantasized about that. Again and again. About what opens beyond the wild desire. Coming home, finally.

It has been like that for years. It's time to draw up the balance. How different is my life now from those Franciscan monks in Spain? Hardly. It's true there are many more insignificant things but none of them makes a real difference from the existence within those few square metres between those sober monastery walls. The ascetics realise this. That's why they strip existence to get rid of all the nonsense that I stay attached to. It's tempting, this radical cleanup. The voluntary suffering of the monk would be my only alternative to ordinary life. A soldier must be capable of killing another human being; that –imagine it as a knife fight– makes me recoil.

So why not choose the liberty of great silence in the monastery? Then I would have had to let her go, in the instant that we stood in front of one another. I asked her what her name was. Because I wanted to find the essence. In people, my great love in the first place. Though the monks know how to destroy an incredible amount of nonsense, along with it they lose what I want to keep hold of. The other, here in this life.

That is why I kept ordinary reality. It means I must keep futilities at arm's length every day, not even just because they are imposed on me. Then I wouldn't fill so much time

with nothing. Because I don't know what to do with it, with the hours, no matter how busy I am. And if I make myself useful, William Faulkner heads me off. The writer says: 'One of the saddest things is that the only thing a man can do for eight hours a day, day after day, is work. You can't eat eight hours a day, nor drink for eight hours a day, nor make love for eight hours – all you can do for eight hours is work.'

Then what do you do with it, life, without voluntary suffering? It's the question that makes me despair so often. I'm not the only one. I see just about all my friends fight existence. Undoubtedly I have selected these men and women on that basis. On the other hand: these personalities were all over my direct vicinity, people asking questions about life as if they are wildly beating around. And sometimes desperately cling to the draining board.

They are an example. My friends appear to have always been foot soldiers of the ordinary life, as students, and later bachelors with their first jobs. Never in the news, but always battling the everyday routine of things from within. They prefer to dwell on the edges of the masses, where work and social rituals do not make too many demands.

And yet the ordinary breaks them, as they try with all their force to stay upright. They shift gradually further and further towards the centre. It's a marvellous drama to see

how they drink themselves nearer to the floor at every next birthday party.

The thirst for alcohol must come from melancholy. The feeling that is so difficult to catch rationally, yet is felt with so much more strength. With me too. I'd rather have a big hit of fear because at least it has direction. That, in my opinion, is not trifling. Fear is demonstrable. A hairy spider larger than death itself, but it is about something. I can even imagine this fear from the subconscious is a red herring. For melancholy. The other way around is much harder to imagine.

Right, so what is melancholy, to get back to it one last time? I could be wrong, but I think it's about a desire for voluntary suffering. The common term for that: to live grand and compellingly. What some call adventure but which is nothing more than a high-level pastime.

In voluntary suffering you seek the core of all existence, and that inside yourself. That is unreachable via a short path, without the suffering, because that way you never lose the burden. That is the way you take yourself to the limit, searching for the final answer. It is highly uncertain whether or not you will ever find this Holy Grail but you know: this is really about something. In the attempt you can catastrophically fail but that does not alter the case. On the contrary. All or nothing, those are the stakes of voluntary suffering.

The ordinary life, like mine, has melancholy as an alternative. A few years ago, this could be accompanied by a certain melodrama with me. I felt darkness hitting me and saw

–in slow motion– how, in vain, my hand gripped for support. A certain heroism still existed. And now? I smoke a cigarette in the doorway of my house and see the familiar bush next to me. Only one thought comes to me. Leaves. After that, I empty the dishwasher and reply to some e-mails. Not one moment of reality goes deeper than a couple of centimetres. I can think of what lies below, mystery, but there is no way of reaching it.

Suffering deepens itself. It must have something to do with my fatherhood. Beforehand, nobody can really explain to you what it means. Like you can't see around the next corner. You can only fantasize about what's next. By the time it comes, at the birth of your children, incredibly intense feelings and impressions come to you. But around that you are encircled by a cordon of practical matters.

It reminds one of guerrillas in the jungle. You have to do so much: organize, confer, escape from conflict, go on, adjust after all. An extra complication is the fact that a family has no leader. It's a strange miniature democracy between two adults with which the votes always threaten to strike and, unasked for, the children give important advice. That happens every day. And the next morning, imperturbably new kilometres open themselves up. No other species –from the elephants to bacteria– engage in this order. Man alone sees good in this: together on a heap across a tiny piece of time.

The loss of freedom could be parried with some meditation about a monastery cell. It becomes really difficult, after

your children have joined you, when this question comes to you: where should I go?

At first I didn't notice the question, because of the sensation of the city where I moved to after a life in the country. Her city. When in the beginning I had brought our first-born to school I could feel –going home past the old buildings– a rare freedom. But time has a damned annoying characteristic. Of an unspeakable banality. You get used to everything. Now the second one is here, I think: in a while I'll be standing here at the same gate to the same school. Damn it.

It's a perilous situation. When I want to break from it, I can only do it through her. After all, she is the one I have been searching for, for half a lifetime: the essence of everything, then I must find the opening through her as well.

She who thinks like me. Look at her panicked look, at a birthday party when she is confronted with chairs put in a neat circle. She lets boasting drop dead, unnoticeable to the speaker. A picture that approaches her reality, does not exist, the way she stands aside from the dance floor with her high boots: superior without spilling a drop of that in her appearance.

She is the great reason, so I realize here in Trogir, why I wanted children. Of course, also because of the vain desire to see yourself in those toddlers, racing through the living room. But in the end, that is of secondary importance. Above all, a child is unification. Irreversible. You come together, in

the highest degree, within that pile of chubby flesh and elastic bones. Forever. And it's completely new. That existence sizeably narrows with childbirth, you accept.

Because no matter how much you fret over yourself, how many books you look into, eventually you get back to the right of any amateur poet. It's love. That must be the grail. Guevara fought for that; his intense feelings with the suffering of so many people in ordinary, hard life. Francis and Teresa have sought the love of the Highest with all their heart.

My space is much smaller. The centre of my heart and thinking is eventually she. Like my answer to the deepest question from melancholy: what it is – this. This essential question, connected to daily life like no other, has emerged like never before since I've become a father. Because I am on top of reality every day. Now that my freedom is decreasing, there is really no escape.

Inside, this narrowing work is at its best a big piece of self-development. And hobbies are nothing more than modest pastimes, otherwise they form a direct threat to my mental well-being.

Then what? It must be that strange mixture of world and mystery. Love. For another. But it comes with large consequences. Strangely enough, love opens in the clouds but eventually you have to climb down the mountain. You want to be with her forever like it is often whispered in B movies. So you must come down. The only way not to lose her, leads into a valley of shadows.

In other words, you must shift to the centre, like my friends do. Deep down, you must find the other, over and over again. In daily life where desire is a mental exercise, because you know she will be there soon, around the corner of a street, and if you're unlucky, in a bad mood.

Out of paradise wandering in the harsh world. Without great drama inside which reality automatically stays alive. The drama Heloise kept with her for a lifetime. After her definitive separation from Abelard, she writes to him from a monastery: 'In my case, the pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet – they never displease me, and can scarcely be banished from my toughts. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing them awakenend longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep.'

She never knew the reality behind that dream, being with him day in, day out. But I did with her. It would have been the greatest thing for Heloise. As it is to me. A terraced house with her, our children, an old cat and a slope I sometimes walk across in the evening. No wine on Friday afternoon because the laundry has still to be folded. All of this was present in my imagination long ago, when I was trying so hard to take an advance on what I own now. I have what I've always wanted. It's a marvellous reality when I can detach myself from things and really see it. The ordinary can be the most special thing. Like nothing else a heart-rending play.

Recently, when I was watching her from the garden in the evening in our house, I saw her like never before. She was in the kitchen wondering what she wanted, for the moment, while behind her pensive look she was clearly doing secret dances inside herself. Seeing that – it is so much more than amorousness delivering cartloads of feelings to you unasked.

It is clear to me, I think almost out loud, with behind me the shadow of the cathedral built in honour of Lawrence. I must keep on playing, after all, life keeps on playing too. Guevara was always on the move in order to escape the government army. The Buddhists say the same with their stately language: it's the road that counts. And I must walk it, with her who must have always been connected to me.

A cynic will call it a homemade fairy tale with which I try to escape melancholy. According to him, existence is futile, a great love exchangeable for another two kilometres further. How else can it be that almost everyone finds his chosen one around the corner when there are billions of candidates? My answer, in the spirit of Reve: love doesn't make it difficult for you, it has everything well organized. According to logic, I'm digging a hole for myself. But give me a reason why I'm stuck with it, if it's not the truth. Fear of the black hole? At this point, I'm staring darkness in the face every day, without backing off. If not for my belief in love, I would have filled this darkness with the great, continuing triumph

of my self-interest. With the added advantages I would have made it too.

Instead, I did the opposite. Voluntarily, yes. But strangely enough, without voluntary suffering. There is only suffering, in my case melancholy that returned unasked after amorousness. And which now sometimes batters love at hurricane strength. It's a fascinating paradox, for this suffering is also voluntary. After all, I can escape into the monastery cell tomorrow. And maybe the voluntary aspect goes even further. The decision to have children is also voluntary; think alone of the labour pains of a woman. It is unimaginable what they give you, children, their surrender and vulnerability, but it is also a test you give yourself. You did it because you wanted to get even closer to someone else. It's an ultimate act of making love touchable. Closer to the answer of all answers.

There is a vast philosophical contradiction here. On the one hand, many western minds say total reality is a product of cause and consequence. We do not interfere with anything and are subjected to a cosmic domino of which the first stone was pushed over by the Big Bang. A game that keeps on continuing down to these words pushing stones over in the mind of the reader. His thoughts are determined by the chemistry behind his eyes. If that is true, this book is fiction: voluntary action as a fantasy. On the other hand mystery, which I think lies directly under this, says the exact

opposite. Everything is choice. Our will is the deepest secret of the world.

Behold the possibilities: A or B – no C.

Give me voluntary action. The most important thing you do with it, I think is about love. The free will to answer this call. Or not. As a starting point but also, and that really makes it difficult, again and again after that. All the big words from amorousness are empty if they cannot survive time. Amidst the suffering. Life is the competition between love and inner darkness. Two Titans against each other, the outcome unknown. Because to put it mildly: it won't be easy ploughing through all those years. Together within a few square metres, with a lot of repetition and a few variations.

Even now, we are in a phase where the rituals are like a warm daily bath. I cling more and more to our little routines. When I say something, I just about know what her reply will be. In the summer when I get home, having called beforehand to tell her when I will be home, as she likes me to do, the chances are that she will be on the doorstep, smiling, smoking a cigar. Of all the people in the world, she is my most familiar territory.

And that is exactly why it will be such a long journey, and there will be temptations, of what's new, of the flesh or worse of the mind, to which we may or may not submit ourselves. What you love now can annoy you tomorrow. Because you are hurt. Or feel misunderstood. You will change, she will change. No doubt, catastrophes will strike among which

perhaps even the worst. Death, illness and other scorching grief – it might be at the door already.

I don't know if we'll make it. If love will triumph. But if I climb to a higher level, I get to what's important. My belief. That she is the one. And that we will make it. What exactly? After all, she is already with me, connected through our children: where else should I go? There must be a goal, even in love. That is where the meaning of life will have to be fought over eventually, that it was the truth.

As I spot her in the crowd, with her sunglasses over her eyes which make her look like an actress, I conclude with a story, as simple as daily life. About a singer and songwriter from Venlo, a city on the Dutch and German border. His name is Funs van Grinsven. When I wonder where to go to, as a kind of inspiration I end up in that story. An ideal of the future, from his past. From everyday reality. That is what my life aims at. To get that far – it will be an honourable battle.

It is 2003, the summer is mercilessly hot for the 94-year old Funs van Grinsven. He stopped eating and drinking, so his daughter Anne-Jean van Grinsven will tell not much later at his funeral. At a certain moment, her father wakes up at the hospital. He sees a woman sitting close by. His daughter says about her: 'She was sitting in the corner of the room, he was lying in bed and addressed her in a friendly manner, saying "Hello madam, may I ask who you are?" My heart broke. "You are just as beautiful as my wife Mary. We have been so happy together for the past 57 years. She

is a proud woman. She is the best thing that ever happened to me in my life. And where are you from?" She answered: "Minneapolis". And then daddy's astonished and surprised face: "My wife too."'

'It's like Shakespeare', mum said, associating this scene with the Comedy of Errors. She walked up to his bed, grabbed his hand and they kissed.

Selected literature

ATHANASIUS VAN ALEXANDRIË: Verleidingen in de woestijn, Het leven van de heilige Antonius (translation Vincent van Hunink) Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak en Van Gennep, 2002.

TERESA OF AVILA: The Life of Teresa of Jesus: The Autobiography of Teresa of Avila (Translated by E. Allison Peers). New York: Random House, 1991.

MAX BROD: Franz Kafka, eine Biographie (Franz Kafka, a Biography, 1937; later collected in Über Franz Kafka, 1974).

JULIUS CAESAR: The Gallic War, Seven Commentaries on The Gallic War with an Eighth Commentary by Aulus Hirtius. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008

.TOM HOLLAND: Persian Fire: The First World Empire and the Battle for the West. London: Abacus, 2005.

FRANZ KAFKA: The Metamorphosis (translation Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC).

T. E. LAWRENCE: Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Hants: Castle Hill, 1997. (8 copies were first printed by the Oxford Times printing works on a proofing press, 1922.)

CONSTANT J. MEWS: The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard. Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

HELENE NOLTHENIUS: De man uit het dal van Spoleto. Franciscus tussen zijn tijdgenoten. Amsterdam: Querido, 1995.

BETTY RADICE: The Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974.

GERARD REVE: Op weg naar het einde. Amsterdam: Geert van Oorschot, 1963.

GERARD REVE: Nader tot u. Amsterdam: Geert van Oorschot, 1966.

CHE GUEVARA: The Diary of Che Guevara - Bolivia: November 7, 1966 - October 7, 1967 (edited by Robert Sheer). New York: Bantam Books, 1968.

JEAN STEIN: The Paris Review Interviews: William Faulkner, The Art of Fiction No. 12 – Interviewed by Jean Stein. Paris: The Paris Review, Issue 12, Spring 1956.

categories of biblical suffering

suffering locations

sufferers

thanks for suffering together

Wim Beurskens
Daan Doesborgh
Ed Eringa
Koen Eykhout
Henk Gianotten
Anne-Jean van Grinsven
Bas de Haan
Johan Hauser
Bas Jacobs
Peter Janssen
Jan de Jong
Jip de Jong
Thijs Lenssen
Hans Liebregts
Pascalle Mansvelders
Hilla Moscovich
Bas Poell
Edwin Smet
Steven van Harn
Arjen Vellinga
Hans Wageningen
Jur ter Wal
Wytske Zaal

WANNA GET THE FULL VOLUNTARY SUFFERING EXPERIENCE?

STEP 1

Write down the page numbers of every page in this book containing the word 'pain'.

STEP 2

Send the page numbers to the publisher and earn the *Authentic Martyr Certificate*.

Translation from Dutch to English by Daan Doesborgh, except:

CHAPTER 1: Translation Gerard Reve: Wim Beurskens [FROM: Op weg naar het einde. Amsterdam: Geert van Oorschot, 1963] & [FROM: Nader tot u. Amsterdam: Geert van Oorschot, 1966.]

CHAPTER 1: Translation Franz Kafka: Ian Johnston [FROM: The Metamorphosis]

CHAPTER 1: Translation first quote Franz Kafka: G. Humphreys Robert. [FROM: Max Brod, Franz Kafka, an autobiography. New York: First Da Capo Press, 1995.]

CHAPTER 1: Translation second and third quote Franz Kafka: Joseph Kresh. [FROM: Diaries 1912. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1988.]

CHAPTER 5: Translation quote Heloïse: Betty Radice. [FROM: The Letters of Abelard and Heloise. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974.]

Contact the publisher:
Underware
Groenewegje 137
2515 LR Den Haag
the Netherlands
info@underware.nl
www.underware.nl

NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

The Book of war, mortification and love is printed with blood of the author. The book comes with a CD which contains – among other things – a movie about the laborious production process. A journey in chemical research, printing experiments and medical issues. Yes, the production process was an example of voluntary suffering by itself.

No human beings were injured during the production process of this book. The blood has been tapped in a proficient way by a professional doctor. The blood has been carefully tested on diseases; and officially approved. We don't want anyone to get ill by reading a book.

Colophon

TITLE:
Book of war, mortification and love
About our voluntary suffering

AUTHOR:
Ruud Linssen

PUBLISHER:
Underware

PUBLISHED:
July 2010

DESIGN:
Underware

TYPEFACE:
Fakir, a blackletter with a holy kiss

PRINTING:
Jan de Jong

BINDING:
Herman van Waarden

TRANSLATION:
Daan Doesborgh

SPELLCHECKING:
Marie Gallagher

ISBN:
978-90-76984-09-4

About the Book of war, mortification and love:

Why do we choose to suffer voluntarily? Why do we choose family life, a monk's cell or a blood-drenched battlefield?

These essays on voluntary suffering took Dutch poet and journalist Ruud Linssen more than two years to complete. Linssen herein links personal observations with historical and literary examples.

As this book is also a type specimen of the typeface Fakir, it is set in this blackletter.

And to stress the suffering: this book is printed in the author's blood.

ISBN 978-90-76984-09-4
WWW.UNDERWARE.NL