

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



Oldtimers

novella

A lonely widower inherits his mother's remote farmhouse. To have something to do, he applies to the local Volunteer Center. He goes to work in his old style, park maintenance, with an old lady who lives alone on an estate. One day he enters a barn ...

Oldtimers

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Actually, in writing these stories, I proceed like a painter: in front of me is a white canvas that I want to fill with color. That blank canvas in this novella is a man with a limited existence, colorless, lonely and withdrawn. Then he encounters a cat, dog, child, horse or woman who colors that blank canvas.

This time an Oldtimer. I mean the car; the man and woman could be called oldtimers as well.

The man comes to life, which he puts at the service of the other. This does good to his atrophied altro; it fills him with a love for that other, a non-egoistic love.

A kind of reset and play, bestowed to him by the gods or fate, or simply by his own desire.

His mother's cottage, on a dead-end road toward the moor, had not changed since the 1960's. It had sagged a bit due to drying out of the peaty soil. The orchard was a wilderness, there was water, electricity and telephone. No sewer, a septic tank sufficed.

The appraiser had estimated it low because of its dilapidated condition, so the inheritance tax was not much. Josh had nevertheless taken out a mortgage loan for it; fortunately, the two hectares of land was worth something in the eyes of the local bank manager. He was lucky: shortly after the transfer, the local bank branch was closed.

With his minute early retirement pension, he was just barely making it financially. If he had to apply additional welfare he would have to "eat the house". That wouldn't be necessary: he ate little and drank even less. His bicycle was his biggest asset and his Netflix subscription his most cherished monthly expenditure.

He had started fixing up the neglected orchard, hoping to sell apples, pears and cherries. At least it provided plenty of firewood, allowing him to keep the oil stove out.

At the time, he had given up his social housing in the city with mixed feelings when his demented mother, who had been in a nursing home for some time, died and he inherited the cottage. Why had he moved to this remote area anyway?

He did not have fond memories of his childhood in this cottage, which, by the way, was much more habitable and warm back then than today. Single child, without a father from the age of eight, endless walking and later biking to school, never being able to bring a friend. That loneliness had not left him since. Even in his marriage to a woman as surly as his mother, he had experienced that loneliness as an inescapable burden that he phlegmatically endured. That had not changed when his wife died of cancer; loneliness was ingrained in his life.

Only at his job at the municipal works department of the provincial town where he lived had he experienced something of a home, of camaraderie. His last job as a driver on a garbage truck had alienated him from colleagues again, and he had gratefully accepted the offer of early retirement when the municipality outsourced garbage collection.

Now he sat in a bare room stoking an old-fashioned stove with wood that was actually not dry enough. All the dead wood he had cut with his chainsaw had gone up the previous winter.

Rain clattered against the single pane windows. Draughts made the candle flames flutter, for the power had once again failed. The wiring was in bad shape; he didn't know where the short circuit was.

Foggy because he couldn't watch a movie now either, he stared into the smoky fire. He should eat

something, but he didn't have the oomph to cook. And he should sweep the chimney, because with this wind there should be plenty of draft.

His cell phone pinged: a text message. The volunteer center in the neighboring town offered a job opening for someone who wanted to fix up a neglected garden.

'Josh.'

'Hello Josh, come in,' said the old lady. 'Would you like some coffee? Then we can talk right away.'

'Yes, ma'am. Gladly.'

Josh put his backpack and the bag with his chainsaw against the wall, laced down his work boots and walked stocking-footed behind the frail lady to an old-fashioned eat-in kitchen. The industrious woman set him a large cup and saucer, milk yes please, and a platter of apple pie.

'I have so many apples every year, the cellar is completely full of applesauce and I don't know what to do with next year's crop.'

It made him gloomy, because he was facing the same problem: huge amounts of apples with no purpose.

'I'm fixing up my old orchard. I don't know what to do with all that fruit either.'

The woman looked at him intently. 'You too, um, mister?'

'I'm just Josh.'

‘Please. My name is Mary. How big is your orchard?’

‘One-and-a-half hectare or so.’

‘How many trees?’

‘I don’t know that yet. I just laid open a piece.’

‘Mine is 1.3 hectares. I know someone else with another hectare.’

Josh smiled meekly. ‘That’s three and a half hectares of fruit no one is waiting for.’

‘I’ll think of something, but not right now. I have a more pressing problem.’

The woman put a drawn map in front of his nose.

‘The estate consists of many hectares, Josh, but most of it is leased or rented out. My concern now is over four hectares directly around the house. It is growing dense. I would like to lay it open again.’

‘It’s all oak, birch, alder and ash, as far as I could make out in passing,’ he replied thoughtfully.

‘No maintenance has been done for over twenty years,’ she confessed.

‘Then it has actually already become natural forest. Would you really want to flatten that?’

She looked at him uncertainly.

He took heart. ‘Maybe it will suffice if we open up a few sight lines.’

‘You’ll have to explain that to me.’

Josh scratched his head. He wasn’t very good with words.

‘What shall I say. If you can look out from certain

places in the house and you leave the forest between them intact, you get space without erasing the natural course of things... ‘

She was quicker with understanding than he was with words.

‘I’m a bit stuck on that, Josh. I am very much bothered by deer and wild boar.’

‘I saw the marks, my... Mary.’

‘Then you haven’t seen the havoc yet in my vegetable and ornamental garden.’

‘Are those on the other side of the house? You said, you mentioned an estate, but if I’m correct this is a farm?’

She smiled. ‘My late husband was a farmer and when his health declined he converted the farm to an estate. We have no children. The good fields have been leased and the damp, low-lying areas have been turned into natural areas. The farm stands on a sand embankment in the middle.’

Josh nodded, now he understood better.

‘Has the hunt been leased?’

‘No, my husband hunted himself.’

Not wanting to come across as someone who knew better, he left the conclusions to his hostess.

‘Do you think I will have less damage if I allow hunters?’

He shrugged. Actually, this question exceeded his knowledge. ‘It could, but fencing helps, too.’

‘That’s exactly what I dislike so much,’ sighed the woman. ‘Mesh everywhere.’

‘Deer and boar can also be stopped with dense hedges or electric fence.’

He became impatient; he had not come for this. ‘What can I do for you?’

She hesitated. ‘Maybe you could make a line of sight for me? Then I can see with my own eyes what you mean by it and whether I want to proceed with it.’

That was what he was waiting for. She took his advice to heart and he was able to get started right away.

On the floor plan, they jointly drew a line of sight from the kitchen that widened outward.

‘If I come across a special tree I will leave it for now,’ he announced.

‘We can decide on that later,’ she agreed.

Near the house, the wood consisted mainly of young birches, abels, ash trees, a single pick of maples and oaks. Josh laid them down in rapid succession. Pruning and disposal came later.

Over coffee, he asked, ‘There’s a lot of wood coming off. What do you want with it? I can shred the branches when I’m done felling and pruning with a rented machine. I can make the logs small for firewood or cut them off at eight and a half feet for sale as biomass.’

She shook her head. ‘No, those coal fired plants don’t get my wood. I’ve seen some logs that look thick enough to saw them into planks.’

‘Then we’ll stack those. Do you have room for that?’

‘Yes, in the big barn. There’s also a tractor with a front loader you can use.’

Josh found working on the estate infinitely more enjoyable than working on his own plot. Of course, this was also because Mary was around all the time, giving directions, dragging felled trees and providing coffee, cake and hot food at noon. She cooked on an AGA stove, fired by oil, with which she also heated the section where she lived.

The line of sight gradually fanned out; occasionally they decided to leave a tree standing, which he then pruned up so they could see under it.

The tractor in question was a huge hulk that he deployed only in dry weather; the machine was so heavy, especially with a load of logs, that it would otherwise break the ground. When it froze, he could use the tractor more often.

With a rented stump grinder behind the tractor, he removed all the stumps, and with a rented shredder, the piles of prunings were reduced to mountains of chips.

At the hot luncheon Mary complained to him once because he came on his bike every day when it was still dark and had to cycle almost an hour when it was dark again to get home.

‘Well,’ he laughed, satisfied with the results of the