

from Femke

Bibi has what I need. I walk him all hours in this druggy park. We go round the lake and he sniffs the ducks – they have no fear here. Nobody has any fear.

I send him into the bushes and he brings back the stick and I send him in again, and then the men come out, the young one first, the hustler, who if he recognises me always laughs. Bibi knows these boys too. I'd pass the time of day with them, but they have nothing to say. Little at first, and later, nothing.

I like the entrance. Next to it is a hotel called Shalimar. If I could afford another animal, I'd call it that. Mother named Bibi. She's psychic, everybody knows, yet she can't tell the sex of an animal. Can't pay that much attention.

I think I've exhausted this park, then something new turns up. I found out a girl was discovered in leaf mould the year I was born. That was near the hyacinths. There was a service, hyacinths were planted. If there was a plaque on some tree or bench, it's been ripped out. That was the right thing to do: parks are for the living. I'm not going to confuse the bitches by putting him in the ground here when he goes.

Bin day tomorrow, so there's that to look forward to. Here nothing good's put out, nothing to sell on I mean, though it's all right for a clothes horse for instance. I saw a man on the street yesterday pushing the buttons of a hi-fi. He wasn't too badly dressed either. Reminded me of a refugee I spoke to on a balcony at a party once. Had an iron cross on his chest. Smelled awful, but so what, so did I. Except he had a proper place. He spoke a lot about his place, how near and how nice it was. I blanked him. It only made him more interested.

No, I know where to go on nights like this. Not the streets tourists flock to before the weather turns. One street in particular I like: New Mirror Street. There are some poor there – they have a deal going that means they never leave. Only the rich sometimes move out, and what they don't want I take. I'm not the only one, God knows. But if stuff's in my hands, sweetheart, try taking it from me. (I talk like this sometimes. Don't be put off. When I bark, Bibi barks, and that soothes me. Then I can hold my breath for five minutes at a time.)

I met my ex in this park. I saw all this as a kid, was wheeled through the gates out of the park, looked up at the same old clock on the burnt church. Now it's mainly offices. I don't mind, I hated that gloomy church. Though old people could doze in it when the park was freezing. The gates are the same too. Wonderful wrought iron, with a design you think is dragons but is only plant stems. Now the man who made those gates, I'd like to speak to him for a day. Just listen and nod sometimes and let him ask me about Bibi and anything he wanted really. I wouldn't mind sitting beside a man like that.

I'm not in the mood for the market today. All that fowl hanging upside down and making Bibi excited. I'd sooner take my chances in the museum. When you're hungry, you can cope with the smell of must better than roasting chicken. It's my own fault, I shouldn't walk so much. Walking is always fatal. Each day I tell myself I'll stay still tomorrow. Tomorrow comes and I'm halfway round the city before I remember. Why should I complain? Bibi doesn't. I see hunger in his eyes sometimes, and I love him so much for trying to hide it.

'Cappuccino, with nutmeg,' I tell the boy in the coffee cart. Whenever I feel poor I spend money. This won't be much, and I avoid looking down at Bibi. There's nothing for you here, boy, anyway.

I'm talking to my dog.

I am called Femke. Some think it a beautiful name, others not. I've no opinion. That's who I am and I have to live with it. I'm not suggesting anyone call their daughter Femke. I think it's older people who like it best – maybe there were more Femkes in their day. I'd say Femke was Mother's choice, because of the two syllables, like Bibi. I have a sister called Annemieke and that was Father's doing. He'd tease mother that this was the name of the sweetheart who left him so devastated he was like an empty room for mother to walk into. By the way Mother smiled I knew it was true. Father's dead now.

Even though I am prettier than Annemieke, she was always everyone's favourite. (I exclude boys from this 'everyone'.) I've had a habit since I was twelve of tilting back my head and rolling my eyes till the whites show – tests revealed I 'elect to do it', which makes me hateful. I don't have visions or say anything memorable, though I do moan – 'eerily', I am told.

Mother used to call me twisted. There's a Chinese proverb: cut a blade of grass and you shake the universe. When I heard that, from the ex I met in the park – it was our first meeting – I tore handfuls and handfuls of grass in a frenzy.

It's nothing but a big barn where I live. There'll be people there when it's offices: the work keeps getting put back. I've lived in a place like it before, also near the harbour. I'd sneak old friends in and out, till everyone got too casual and I couldn't shift them even on days when the owner came round. I don't make the same mistake twice. It's not as if I have to explain myself. My name was mud in the squats long ago.

This place has no running water. There's a chemical toilet the owner sees to – he comes round. I almost look forward to it. He's got a bronzed complexion – maybe has a timeshare in a hot climate – and a man-in-his-mid-40s' paunch. Still thinks he can run it off.

He made a move on me once while showing me the gas heater. It came as a surprise. I hadn't been shown how to use one before and was quite interested – if I could be anything I'd be an electrician or engineer. We were both hunkered, but his knees had cracked a second or so before he put a hand on my knee. 'I think not,' was what I said. (Quite proud of that 'I think not'.) He said it had just been to balance himself. I didn't laugh. Now he mews around the place for half an hour then leaves.

There are advantages to being pretty. You know that the men who are nasty to you are psychopaths. Today you'd do well to make out my looks – I could care if there was a point. I don't want to be drawing too many glances in these streets. Men can be cruel, but when I look hard at them and they see me better, they change their tune. Except the psychos. Bibi is handy for them. He's part-Alsatian. I wouldn't say he spots them a mile off, but he knows when I'm distressed.

I did get entangled with one psycho. It hurts me to say it, but he looked a lot like Van Gogh. I have an affection for that bearded misfit, and not just because I'm fond of foxgloves and fields of wheat. The psycho was in tweeds even though he was practically homeless. He was all right unless I flirted. You have to flirt to make the days less dull. I spent a month in his company.

He had a passion for identifying bodies. Told the police his sister was missing and could he check any stiffs they had. I laughed at this, because it's funny. Less funny when the man is next to you drooling over the word 'suppurating'. We would walk along and look into houses, and he would really fume at all the softness we saw. Well I've felt that way too, but I was nostalgic for it at the same time. I told him so. He threw me down and tried to break my head on a bollard.

I wish I could feel the cold less. I would seriously like my puppy fat back. Annemieke probably still has hers. In her case, it might never be lost. She lives with Mother in a sort of suburban existence that's the same the world over. So I imagine. Even when we all lived in the city we had a summerhouse. It was in one of those depressing beehives of summerhouses on the outskirts, where nobody gets buried in leaf mould, and the dragonflies are the size of your hand. I found it impossible to feel haunted there. Couldn't even throw my head back.

Father died on my twelfth birthday.

There's this one place I eat where the waitress exposes an inch or two of her middle and it's just a seam of fat. She's not bad-looking, she just has that seam of fat. I'd love to roll it between my fingers. People can't tell with my jumper and parka how thin I can be. Because it does vary. Six months ago if I'd spun like a coin I'd've vanished.

Mother often had premonitions she'd speak about afterwards. I can't square the Mother I knew as a young kid with the suburban Mama of now. Back then she was a witch. Father, I think, thought so – I could see he was in awe of her. She used to brew a weird concoction to keep from catching a cold. She was something of a singer in those days. Strictly small-time operettas. I got a tongue-lashing once when I tried her cold medicine, though the taste was punishment enough. It makes me think now that it had a strong lacing of alcohol. She was capable of drinking during the day. Once father was gone, I had visions of us losing everything. Mother becoming a Baby Jane. Or perhaps that has happened, and she spends her days tormenting Annemieke, with rat for supper. A girl can dream.

My weirdness I blamed on her. This was in the time of tests. I remember sills and sills of spider plants in a long corridor with mad paintings along it. The first time Mother really hit me was to get me out of a trance. Then it became punishment for going into one.

Her job was to have old friends round and do their hair for them. I expect there was too much time spent alone, alone or with us – the way she stared through us, it was almost the same thing. (No, something in Annemieke held her attention.) At least we had dead hair to play with.

I'd watch Mother fill up with emptiness between phone-calls, in the hours waiting for Father to come. I liked those mornings when she was on the phone and sounding animated, I didn't care how much, I never feared her manic side. I knew we were in for a good day then. What scared me was her monotone. (I shivered just then, thinking about it, and I was already shivering.)

She was suspicious of me. I fed her suspicions without wanting to. The only time I took a man home and we fucked in her double bed, she knew. She got back from a weekend away and shook me to find out what I'd done. As she was shaking me, I saw a pair of my socks under her bed. She hadn't seen those, or they would have been all the proof she needed. *Christ, you are a witch*, I thought. *You made me leave them there*. I got them back when she was out the room – they had thin blue and black stripes, I've never worn socks with stripes since.

She had suspected Father too. There were odd words, tears, famously a plate smeared with ketchup thrown against a wall (blood, I told my friends), which I understood suddenly: Father was having an affair. I doubt this now. He did have a glamorous secretary, possibly more than one. I only ever saw the one. My sole time in Daddy's office. There was a man called Clark or Clerk – Clark Kent was a name I knew – who stood the whole time Father sat: I remember Father's voice being harsher than in the house. Africa was mentioned. I'd been given a toy snake with brown and beige scales and was playing with it. The secretary appeared as she was about to leave. She was wearing white gloves.

Talking about Father's death won't warm me up. One thing, though: it made us richer. Now that the money's gone – or, more likely, tied up in something – I'm glad. It's cleaner that way.

I learned all about men once Father was dead. A beautiful widow and two pubescent girls are not nothing. They came sniffing round, pawed us a little, ran off, then they'd come sniffing back. (Why do I lie? We were safe enough in our house. Only the insurance man – Mother had a lot of dealings with him – got further than the doorstep.) Mother's body had thickened before grief went to work on it. In the photo I have of the three of us from then, taken by some monkey making a display before Mother, she is alarmingly beautiful.

Holidays were worst. One man I remember: I called him Shoe Shuffle Man. We had just stepped off the boat when mechanically the music started up – twenty minutes it played for – and Mother did three or four steps of a dance with Annemieke. Always the same steps, danced from girlhood on, maybe to this day. Shoe Shuffle Man appears, sliding his moccasins across the planks, arms raised in a 'May I?' gesture, but directed towards Annemieke in order to get to Mother, who was now walking smartly into the reception area. A smoker's laugh and a few words of song, which Mother foolishly turned and smiled back at. He dogged us the whole holiday then. There was only the promenade, so it was easy for him. His grey-blue slacks were perfectly pressed. Why does that generation of men hate women? Mother despised them. She felt she shouldn't, but she did. Father at least had something gutsy about him, looked almost like Robert Mitchum at times. (I used to spend my afternoons in the cinema.) He must have seemed an odd fish to those slacked shufflers. Those Clarks or Clerks.