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Craving

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World Editions

Published in Great Britain in 2015 by World Editions Ltd., London

www.worldeditions.org

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Cover design Multitude

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First published as *Dorst* in the Netherlands in 2012 by De Geus BV,
Post office box 1878, 4801 BW Breda

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available on request from
the British Library

ISBN 978-94-6238-007-3

Typeset in Minion Pro

This book was published with the support of the
Dutch Foundation for Literature

Nederlands
letterenfonds
dutch foundation
for literature

Distribution Europe (except the Netherlands and Belgium):

Turnaround Publishers Services, London, UK

Distribution the Netherlands and Belgium: Centraal Boekhuis,

Culemborg, the Netherlands

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For the first time in her life, Elisabeth unexpectedly runs into her daughter. She comes out of the chemist's on the Overtoom, is about to cross over to the tram stop when she sees her daughter cycling along the other side of the street. Her daughter sees her too. Elisabeth stops walking. Her daughter stops pedalling, but doesn't yet brake. The entire expanse of the Overtoom separates them: two bike paths, two lanes of traffic, and a double tramline. Elisabeth realises at once that she has to tell her daughter that she is dying, and smiles like a person about to tell a joke.

She often finds making conversation with her daughter difficult, but now she really does have something to say to her. A split second later it occurs to her that you mustn't convey news like that with too much enthusiasm and perhaps not here, either. In the meantime, she crosses the Overtoom and thinks about her doctor, how he keeps asking her: 'Are you telling people?' and how nice it would be to be able to give the right answer at her next appointment. She crosses between two cars. Her daughter brakes and gets off her bike. Elisabeth clutches the plastic bag from the chemist's containing morphine plasters and cough mixture. The bag is proof of her illness, as though her words alone wouldn't be enough. The bag is also her excuse, because she hadn't really wanted to say it, here, so inappropriately on the street, but the bag has given her away. Hasn't it? Yes? And now, so abruptly, Elisabeth is crossing the Overtoom, slips behind a tram, because it isn't right, her child on one side

of the street and she on the other. It isn't right to run into your daughter unexpectedly.

The daughter used to be there all the time, and later, when she wasn't, Elisabeth would be the one who had dropped her off. Later still there were visiting arrangements and in recent years not much at all. In any case, the birthdays remained. Things had always been clear-cut and she'd got used to not thinking about the daughter when the daughter wasn't there. She existed at prearranged times. But now there she was on her bike, while they hadn't planned to meet and it was wrong and had to be resolved, transformed, assimilated, she still has a tramline to cross, just behind a taxi that toots its horn and causes her coat to whip up. Her daughter pulls her bike up onto the pavement. The final lane is empty.

Elisabeth notices at once that her daughter has gained even more weight and blurts out, 'Have you had your hair cut again?' because she's terrified her daughter can read that last thought about her weight. Elisabeth likes to talk about their hair. They have the same hairdresser.

'No,' her daughter says.

'Different colour then?'

'No.'

'But you still go to the same hairdresser's?'

'Yes.'

'Me too,' Elisabeth says.

Her daughter nods. It begins to drizzle.

'Where are you going?' is too nosy, so this: 'I thought you lived on the other side of town.'

'I have to move out soon, the landlord's given me notice.'

'Oh,' Elisabeth says, 'I didn't know.'

‘How could you have known?’

‘I... I don’t know.’

‘I only just found out myself.’

‘No, then I couldn’t have known.’ The rain becomes heavier.

‘We’re getting wet,’ Elisabeth says.

Her daughter immediately goes to get back on her bike and says, ‘We’ll call, OK?’

‘My little monster,’ Elisabeth says. Her father had always called her that. He still did. It sounded funny when he said it. Her daughter gapes at her. Then her lips move. Go away, she says, silently. Elisabeth isn’t supposed to hear and she respects that; her stomach hurts, but she hasn’t heard it. Her daughter’s short hair lies flat and wet against her skull. Elisabeth thinks of towels, she wants to dry her daughter, but her daughter turns away from her, one foot already on the pedal.

So Elisabeth is forced to say, ‘I’ve got some news.’ Done it. Her daughter turns back to her.

‘What is it?’

‘Sorry,’ she says, ‘I’m going about this the wrong way, it’s nothing nice.’

‘What is it?’

‘But I don’t want you to take it badly.’ She slowly lifts up the plastic bag from the chemist’s. She holds the bag aloft using both hands, its logo clearly visible.

‘You might be wondering: why isn’t she at work?’

Her daughter ignores the bag.

‘What?’

‘I’ve just been to the chemist’s.’

‘And?’

‘It’s the doctor. He said it.’ She lets the bag drop.

'What did the doctor say?'

'That I need to tell people.'

'What, Mum?'

'That I might die. But we don't know when, you know. It might be months.'

'Die?'

'Of cancer.'

'Cancer?'

'It's an umbrella term for a lot of different illnesses actually. It just sounds so horrible.'

'What have you got then?'

'Oh, it's all a bit technical.'

'Huh?'

'It started in my kidneys but...'

'How long?'

'Must have been years ago.'

'No. How long have you known?'

Elisabeth thinks of the hairdresser, the first person she told. She goes every other month and her new appointment is for next week, in which case it has to be more than...

'How long, Mum?'

'We'll get drenched if we keep on standing here like this.'

'How long?'

'I'm working it out.'

'Days? Weeks?'

'I'm counting.'

'Months?'

'Well, not months.'

'Christ.' Her daughter looks angry.

'I shouldn't have told you, should I?'

'But... are they treating you?'

'Not at the moment, no.'

‘Are they going to treat you?’

‘If they can think of something.’

‘And can they?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘... and so?’

‘Sorry,’ Elisabeth says, ‘I shouldn’t have told you like this. We’re getting soaked.’ The bag is now hidden behind her back.

‘So you... might... but not definitely?’

‘You’re not likely to live a long time with something like this.’

‘Not likely?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Christ.’

‘We’ll call each other. Let’s call. Yes? We’ll call?’

And then Elisabeth crosses back over the Overtoom as quickly as she can. She slips and falls on the first tramline, but scrambles up again. As fast as she wanted to get to her daughter, this is how fast, no, faster, she wants to get away from her. The trams ring their bells and Elisabeth remembers the way her daughter had painted her room.

‘I just start to paint when I feel like it,’ she had explained, ‘I don’t put on old clothes, I don’t tape up anything, because if I think about all the preparation, I stop wanting to do it. I just start, and then it takes me just as long to clean up the mess and get all the paint spots off as the painting itself.’

This was exactly what Elisabeth had just done. She had just started, at the wrong time, at the wrong place, in the wrong clothes. She had done it all in one go and now she would have to clean up the mess and hope that the result was better than before she’d started the job.

She walks to the tram stop without looking back and thinks about her hairdresser; her conversations with him never go wrong. Words exchanged between her and the hairdresser tinkle like loose change: short, quick melodies.

‘The trouble I’ve been having...’

‘Go on.’

‘The pain in my back, you know...’

‘Yes, you said.’

‘Turned out to be cancer.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘Riddled with it.’

‘Aw, honey.’

‘I saw it with my own eyes. On the scans.’

‘And now?’

‘Now they’re seeing if they can stop it.’

‘And can they?’

‘They’re seeing.’

‘They’re seeing.’

‘Yes.’

‘You poor thing.’

‘Don’t tell the girl. You know—that you knew first.’

‘She doesn’t know yet?’

‘I don’t see her that often.’

‘No, right.’

‘No more than you do.’

‘She needs another colouring appointment.’

‘She dyes it?’

‘Highlights.’

There aren’t any inappropriate words at the hairdresser’s. As he dries her hair, they speak loudly. She can shout out words above

the racket that would need to be whispered in other places.

Then the hairdresser hollers, 'That woman upstairs isn't doing too well!'

Elisabeth asks, 'What's the matter with her?'

The hairdresser says, 'Stroke, I think.'

Elisabeth: 'Talking funny, is she?'

The hairdresser turns off the dryer and does an impression.

Sometimes a customer will be sitting there waiting, a man reading a newspaper. Of course the hairdresser knows he can hear everything, but the hairdresser doesn't give a damn. The hairdresser doesn't talk to customers who aren't in the chair. But Elisabeth is bothered by their silent witness. One of the ones who always seems to be there. One of the ones who pretends not to notice but whose very existence makes things inappropriate.

My mother is dying, Coco thinks, wanting to say the words out loud. She knows to whom and she is also looking forward to being comforted by him. The feeling in her stomach resembles being in love, she can still remember it from last year, though it might be hunger too. Funny, the way she can just keep on cycling; she still knows the way to the deli on the Rozengracht. Getting into the right lane at the big crossing goes as smoothly as usual, she takes the tram rails diagonally. It's not that she'd expected her emotions to make cycling impossible, she is far from sentimental, but she does long for a fitting reaction. She would like to stop and reflect, and this feeling does really seem like hunger. It's not that far to the snack bar on the Kinkerstraat that has RAS super fries, crispy on the outside, soft in the middle.

As she approaches the snack bar, she sees that the blue lettering on the façade no longer spells 'De Vork' but 'Corner Inn'—there's a new owner, and now she realises that the feeling in her stomach is not love, it is not hunger but panic, because bloody hell, they must still have RAS super fries, mustn't they?

It isn't until after she's ordered, 'One RAS fries and two battered sausages, please,' until after she's paid (did he hear her properly?) and the sausages have been dipped into the batter, and the man has turned his back and used the concealed RAS fries machine, that now she sighs, turns around, and sits down at a table in the window in relief, a view of the key-cutting shop on the other side of the street. She slumps into the hard plastic bucket seat, is happy, thinks calmly: what was that other nice