

That night, Mercy disappeared. Why did she want to hurt him? Her abandoning him, left him feeling truly pathetic. He must be, otherwise, why would Folkert have invited him for Christmas dinner?

She must have thought he was joking when he'd mentioned marriage. But why hadn't she just talked to him about it? She had been able to rely on him all these years. He had done everything for her. And to leave without saying goodbye... that hurt.

He explained the situation to Folkert. "Maybe I should go to the police? I don't like the situation at all. Mercy wouldn't just leave. She's not like that."

"Didn't she leave a letter, or something?" asked Folkert. "Have you looked everywhere? Under her pillow?"

He had looked everywhere, and not found anything. Even between the pages of the bible she'd left behind. She'd taken nothing with her, only the clothes she was wearing; gone, like a thief in the night. She had had to use the key to open the double lock. Melchior had found it in the letter box, so there was no room for doubt: she wasn't coming back.

"I just don't understand," he said.

"You didn't notice anything unusual? She was her normal self? Did she say anything that seems strange, with hindsight?"

"She didn't call me 'sir'."

"She didn't call you 'sir'."

Melchior can hear her voice in his head. Mi-ster Am-ba-ah-ah-ssa-do-oh-or pl-ease.

"You know what I think?" said Folkert. "I think she's doing what seems most sensible to her. You mustn't take it personally. And I certainly wouldn't go to the police. You're her guarantor, aren't you?"

Was he? He hadn't realised. He had thought of her as being more the responsibility of the Foreign Office, than his.

"And I'd even thought of a solution. I would have married her if necessary." As Melchior spoke, he almost sobbed. Folkert ignored Melchior's display of emotion and went on, "I'm sure she'll marry someone. Mercy knows how to look after herself." It was after he'd said this, that Folkert invited him to Christmas dinner.

Melchior thanked Folkert, warmly. He swallowed the role of lonely friend who was only welcome at such times as Christmas. He wasn't so keen on dinners where small children were present, though, and Nikki wouldn't be there, she'd booked a cheap flight to the Canary Islands.

"You're not telling me you're going to spend Christmas alone?" Folkert asked.

"It'll be wonderful," said Melchior, "Liberating. I'm not so keen on obligatory festivities. The BBC will almost certainly lay on an edifying evening. There's bound to be *Scrooge* or *The Little Match Girl*. It's not as if I'll be the first person who didn't want to celebrate Christmas." And there was nothing wrong with the ready-made Christmas meals they sold in the supermarket these days. A dried out turkey couldn't match them. With a good Riesling. He'd have a great time.

He could manage without Mercy. He could even wash his own underwear, if necessary. But why should he? These days new underwear, shirts and socks cost almost nothing at Hema. He couldn't care less that his shirts were crumpled. As long as he kept his jacket done up, no-one saw. He got his five a day: brown bread with crab salad or tuna salad, even cucumber salad, a bit of everything one needed. It was fine. He did wish that summer would get a move on. Mainly, because the mornings were so cold. If he wanted to fetch the paper, he had to go down the dark communal staircase. It had an unfriendly chill about it. Not a place to make a person happy. But

the two week free subscription to the newspaper, made up for that.

One morning, there was leaflet in the letterbox.

It said 'Happy Birthday!' on the front, above a picture of a young, sporty looking man. The other side congratulated him on his birthday. It wasn't a personal greeting. '28? 32? Older? Younger? Who cares anyway? Feeling great has no age!' It was from a tanning salon. He'd been in once. Not to try and get a tan, but because there were some pretty students working behind the counter and clients got free coffee. He'd liked the atmosphere. He'd enjoyed lying on the sunbed. It warmed his bones and sent him to sleep.

For his birthday, they were offering him a five euro discount. A charming gesture. He should thank the students, maybe take a cake in with him. Had he given his year of birth when he'd signed up? He hoped not, otherwise the girls would know he was sixty.

He had a visitor that day. Leandra's doorbell didn't seem to want to work; it sounded hesitant. Someone had sent him flowers. A smart bouquet with a gold-coloured sticker and ribbons attached to it. Two long twigs dangled from among the flowers.

"Oh, how nice," Melchior said to the delivery boy, who pushed a blond lock behind his ear. "Thank you for bringing them to me personally. Would you like a coffee? I'm sure you could do with a break." Luckily he'd been organised enough to buy a Christmas log, so he had something to offer to anyone who dropped by. But the delivery boy just said, "There's a card with them," and left.

Melchior walked upstairs with the flowers before he read the card. He drew out the pleasure of the surprise. He ran the tap for a moment, so he wouldn't be putting the flowers in ice-cold water. He took the Christmas log out of its wrapper anyway, and had a bite. It felt rather crude, putting it directly in his mouth, but the idea of cutting himself a piece seemed too much like hard work. Why bother?

The flowers were from Leandra. "Happy 60<sup>th</sup>. I also wanted to let you know that I need my flat back from the 1<sup>st</sup> of March."

What on earth did that mean? The 1<sup>st</sup> of March? Was she almost better, but not quite? Or was she taking him into account by giving him a little time? He could call her to find out. He could even offer to pay the rent if need be. But that ran counter to all his feelings. All in all, he'd spent enough on Leandra. The astonishing cost of the clinic where she'd needed to hide away had eaten an enormous hole in his savings; and there hadn't been that much left after the conference. The travel, the brunches, dinners, boat trips. A colour printer for her. All the massages and manicures because of her illness, all the quacks, with their powders or needles. He'd not pinched his pennies.

And what about him? He'd like to be spoilt every now and then. It was his sixtieth birthday, after all. A milestone.

He remembered how he had taken his mother to the Grand Hotel Kurhaus for her sixtieth birthday. Despite all her grumbling. He didn't need to come especially for her birthday, did he? Perhaps she was compensating for never having been able to come for his birthday, when he was at boarding school. But what had surprised him was the fact that she'd wondered whether the Hotel Kurhaus wasn't an extravagance. They would never eat enough to justify the expense of the buffet. He ignored her remarks. He picked her up from the Château Bleu apartment complex on the edge of the woods near The Hague. After his father's death, Melchior had organised a place for her there, because it had everything she would need. A garage, a garden, even a restaurant. What he had liked most about the brochure was that it had said, in capital letters: Château Bleu is not an old people's home.

He gave her his arm and held the taxi door open for her. The other residents could see all

this from their balconies, and it was clear his mother enjoyed that. She even waved to the security camera by the door. Melchior said, "Maybe this makes up for your not having a surprise party?" A neighbour's children had planned a whole day of activities for her, his mother had told him. "I hate surprise parties," she said now, "you know that."

She did indeed take only one plateful from the buffet and the only alcohol she drank was a glass of amaretto with her coffee. "What a waste," she said, nodding in the direction of the buffet. "It'll just be thrown away." This wasn't how he remembered his mother. She'd never seemed to be averse to the luxury she'd lived in as a diplomat's wife. But he kept smiling, because that's what they did. After two sips of amaretto, she leant forwards and put her hand on his.

"Patrick," she said. His father. Melchior didn't dare to correct her straight away. "You know I don't really need it, don't you?" There was something desperate about her voice as if she were sinking deeper inside a problem and hoped that someone would save her. Or was she scared of losing him?

Tentatively, he said, "Melchior, not Patrick." He would always be there for her, he decided that then, once and for all. But she let go of his hand, leant back in her chair again and smiled at the flowers on the table. "Gosh, did I really say that? Have you seen the daisies? Beautiful, aren't they?" There were no daisies, they were gardenias. It wasn't long after that that she did need to go into an old people's home.

The Kurhaus! What a good idea. He would treat himself to the renowned New Year's buffet. The perfect present to himself. Symbolic too, in the sense of a new start.

He called the Kurhaus. The only way to be sure of a place at the buffet was to book a room, the woman told him. And he was lucky, someone had cancelled that day. A room with a sea view.

"Shall I put the two of you down for the New Year's Eve five course gala dinner and dancing in the *Kurzaal*?" she said. The two of you. Had he automatically talked about a couple, or had she just assumed?

"That's very nice of you, but how much will it cost us, if I might ask?" Us or me, he'd sort that out when he arrived.

"Our New Year's package comes to 490 euros in total, for two people. With the gala dinner and brunch. And the gala dinner includes aperitifs and coffee."

"You make it sound very tempting. I don't really like talking about money, but what if - just so I know - what if we didn't have the gala dinner. How much would that come to, approximately?"

"That would be 270 euros for the room. And two times 55 euros for the brunch. So, 380 euros."

She waited. She was a polite woman. She didn't want to force anything on him. "So you won't be eating on New Year's Eve," she confirmed. She was clever, too.

*This was an excerpt from 'The Consul General's Wife' by Aliefka Bijlsma. It is "The sad and tragi-comic tale of an aging diplomat and his downfall, which reverberates through the lives of those around him. The Consul General's Wife is an astute portrait of universal human foibles, set against the intriguingly unfamiliar backdrop of modern Embassy life." (Emma Garman on Words Without Borders).*

*It is available on:*

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