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Plot, character, transgression
Jon Vagg

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Jon Vagg writes nonfiction books for a living. However he often has bad thoughts and gets them out of his head by writing stories. Once they are in someone else's head he feels better. He has published SF/fantasy tales in Theaker's Quarterly Fiction and elsewhere.

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"We couldn't run with this as it stands."
This is my editor talking.

"I understand you want to be cutting edge. But this is too... nasty. Too explicit. Pornographic even. I know you want to push boundaries, I can see you're lining up to be the next Poppy Z Brite, or Brett Ellis. Or in your case, with the playing with language and the experimental stuff about *what is a plot* and *what is a character*, maybe you're trying to be the next Robbe-Grillet? But I *can't sell that*. The whole experimental transgressive thing is thirty, forty years old now. It doesn't work for today's readers."

It's a no, then.

"I guess there's no way you can rewrite that would make sense. If I were you, I'd either junk it, or I'd take it to a small online-only publisher and use a pseudonym."

He looks at me like I should produce a memory stick and tell him I was joking, the real blockbuster is on the stick. I can't do that. The book is what it is. An experimental transgressive piece that won't work with today's readers, apparently.

"Look," he says. "This is the kind of thing that's hitting the best-seller lists." He takes a book, one of a dozen copies, from the shelf behind him, gives it to me. The

cover is a man and woman in sumptuous mediaeval court dress but a very contemporary pose. The woman: long chestnut hair, a breast-baring corset and sitting with long skirts artfully arranged to display slim and very beautiful legs. The man: standing behind her proprietarily, one hand on her shoulder, a feral stance, animalistic expression on his face. A leather doublet and many big rings on his fingers. They have porcelain-smooth skin, no smallpox marks or warts or bad teeth. Painters of that period wouldn't have dared depict the likely reality. Nor would they have dared pose the woman that way. They went for decorum and flattery. The contemporary take is stylish, suggestive fantasy.

The book is a historical romance. I saw it on sale at the train station when I came to this meeting.

"Take. Read. Study. Understand the way the story works. The market's crazy for it."

The receptionist who was in the outer office when I arrived has already gone when I leave. Lunch break, running some errand, I don't know. My coat is on the rack in the corner.

This is the fourteenth floor of the block, the top floor. I have to wait for the elevator.

Robbe-Grillet had this thing about segments of stories, detached from context. Italo Calvino did it too. The reader has to do more work, question their assumptions and their reading. The novel becomes a way to interrogate the world, its patterns of thought and values. I'm supposed to write something instead that gives answers, not questions. Maybe I can, but for me the answers will always be questions: points of departure, not closure.

The elevator stops at the tenth floor. I move aside, expecting someone will walk in. They don't. Instead I see:

There is a woman on the floor. She is naked. She is petite and has shoulder-length tightly curled hair, light brown. She is face-down, hogtied. My eyes immediately trace the pattern of the rope. It starts at her wrists, pins her elbows together, runs to the front of one shoulder and then around the back of her neck to cross the front of her other shoulder. It loops around the elbow tie, and goes up to loop around the rope on the back of the neck. This means it can be quickly tensioned. Her back is arched with the tension, pulling her breasts very slightly off the floor. The end of the rope runs back to wind around her ankles, which are pulled back so that her heels almost touch her buttocks.

Around her are half a dozen men, one with a camera, one with a bulbous, furry microphone. Looks like a film crew, but they all wear light blue protective coveralls, the type you expect forensic investigators to wear at a crime scene.

Behind this group, the entire space is open plan, walls painted white, bare concrete floors. This office is not let, is being refurbished.

The woman struggles in the rope.

The elevator doors close and I continue to the foyer.

The desk clerk tells me some company moved out of the tenth floor a month ago. They haven't been able to re-let it. Shrugs. "Guess it's the recession."

Two hundred yards down the street I remember the historical romance. When I picked up my coat, I put the book down. Check my bag. Not there. Retrace my steps.

What the editor doesn't know, because I've never told him, is that I do publish online. With a small press that sells erotica as download files. Using a completely different name. And it's just as well I do, because those short stories pay substantially more than any of the "literary"

novels I've published.

This time I deliberately press the button for the tenth floor. The door opens on a white, blank space. It looks infinite. A trick of perspective. Anything could happen here. Could have happened here.

On the fourteenth floor, the receptionist is back at her desk. She looks up. Small, narrow face, long frizzy hair. Wears a classic business suit, short black jacket over a white top. She looks up.

"I think I left my..."

She has the book on the corner of her desk. When she reaches out to hand it to me, I see a red mark on her wrist. The delicate herringbone imprint of rope.

She's looking at my eyes. She knows I've noticed the mark. She doesn't say anything.

"He wanted me to read it," I explain.

She shrugs. "It's very popular. Not to my taste, though."

"Oh." Surprised. Don't see why I should be. Working for a publisher doesn't mean you have to like what they publish.

"So what kind of stuff *is* to your taste?"

"You wouldn't know it." She smiles beatifically.

"Mostly I read niche things, no definable genre, the kind of thing you can only get online."

"For example...?"

She gives a name. It's my pseudonym.

"You should look out for him. I read a bit of your

manuscript. You'd find his work interesting, I think. Some of it can be quite edgy. Surrealist, but graphic too. Definitely graphic."

On the way down, the elevator stops on the eighth floor. Six guys get in and suddenly the space is crowded. They wear workmen's clothing but carry large metal flight boxes. One of them has a rucksack. A strand of light blue material escapes the flap at the top.

Paul flicked his cigarette and I said 'I love you'
Benoît Du Cann

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Benoît Du Cann was born at St Mary's Paddington, London in the late 80s. He is of French Catalan descent. He now lives in Barcelona where he teaches English and French.

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Paul visits me often. He creeps up on me. Jumps out from the cracks and fault lines in my consciousness. How things tug so easily at the fine and fragile threads.

The other day I was sitting at home, watching the Screen. It was a documentary about Lions. Two cubs were wrestling each other as the mother watched passively. When suddenly he appeared before me. There he was. Standing, sultry, cold, his left arm resting upon his hip; staring down at me in his eternal youth. The grey afternoon light echoing within his pale frame. White noise. He then slicked out of the room. The cubs played on.

I don't know why he appeared before me. He just did. Is there any real way of understanding? Yet, there he was. He stood around for a while and then left my field of vision. That was it.

He is always breaking through.

My ex wife knew of his visits. She could not carve her way into me the way he has, and this annoyed her. I don't think there was anything left to carve into.

Two years into our marriage, I told her about Paul. I owed it to her. After all, how else could I explain the visits? They say the truth sets you free. What they don't tell you is that it's also a can of worms lobbed at your head by a blundering neanderthal who goes on to rape your family in

front of your eyes.

Despite her initial shock, she was understanding.

Towards the end she grew frustrated at my vacancy. She grew weary of him and his visits. She used to sometimes call me *fag* in front of the kids. Can't blame her really. It must have been too much for her. Sometimes she'd lash out without provocation.

"Dear," I'd say, "you forgot to put the rubbish out."

"Well you're in love with someone else." She'd respond bitterly. Or some other throwaway remark.

She was wittier than I'm making her out to be. Imagine the above dialogue with mordant humor and an edge which could crack a skull open. Also I never used to call her *dear*.

At times she was more empathetic.

Once she noticed me vacate. We were sitting in our old cold apartment in the 9th, I remember the location because of our smoky breath and pert nipples. She asked: "Is he here? Now? Isaac listen to me, look at me. Is he here?". She held my head in her hands as my eyes wandered around the room following Paul. She then held me in her arms, rocking me and softly whispering into my ear until the morning rays crept up. Occasionally she would run her plush lips over my cheek and hum the tune to 'Down to the River to Pray'.

She habitually balanced within that spectrum of behaviour, but as we grew older she became more sombre. Her balance was lost and I never healed.

"I'm never going to win am I?"

"Win what?" I put the ClearBoard down. I had been thumbing through the Business section in the Herald. I look over to her with my glasses hanging off the tip of my nose. We sit in silence for a moment. I let out a sigh and widen my eyes at her inquisitively. "Well what is it darling?"

I lied. I was reading the Sports section. Also I never called her *darling*.

"You know what I mean."

My teeth lock together. Paul walks up behind her and places his hands on her shoulders. He then walks out of the room. I stand up and walk around the table. My wife looks up at me. Darting flashes of blue-grey. I punch her. It makes a satisfying crunch sound as my fist hits her jaw.

I see it play out in stills. It's beautiful. If you saw it in some art house film you would probably hail it as a masterpiece of alt cinema. My right fist comes into contact with her left cheekbone, her skin ripples under my punch. Specks of blood shoot out from her mouth and splatter, Rorschach like, onto the white tablecloth. Her head snaps to the left in a click as her neck violently twists. She falls back slowly to the floor, eyes squinting, breathing heavily. The sound of her slumping on the floor and the clatter of the rickety chair echo throughout the house. A baby starts crying. She looks up at me. Her jaw is dislocated. She places her hand over her mouth. Blood drips across her hand.

She tries to say something. Squinting in pain. I see Paul flash past in the corner of my eye.

"Meuh blust oss." She mumbles, trying to string words together, as I stand over her.

I laugh.

"You sound like a retard."

I pick up my coat and walk out the door.

I have not spoken to her or seen her since. Neither have I seen the children. I debit money into her account, when I can. I think she lives in Bordeaux now.

I'm glad.

He doesn't have to share me now.

My funny Valentine

Jan Vander Laenen

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Jan Vander Laenen (°1960) lives in Brussels, Belgium, where he is a translator French-Dutch Italian and an Art Historian. He is a published author in Belgium, France and Italy. Two of his screenplays have been optioned in Los Angeles.

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"Contento di essere peloso. Glad to be hairy."
(slogan on www.orsiitaliani.com)

I have always managed to swallow as well as I could the countless insults hurled by my downstairs neighbour Valentin against me personally, but when he managed to sweet talk into his Brussels bed one of the most highly prized escorts and porno models from the C*** studios - a model for whose love I had to fork out a pile of money an afternoon or two ago, by the way -- and he dared to hurl this fact scornfully to my face on top of it all, I swore revenge.

Oh yes! With a little help from my faithful card reader Palette, the goddesses of vengeance heeded my devout prayers: *my funny Valentine* has in the meantime become the centre of all ridicule and disdain in Brussels gay circles, but when I think back to all his subtle little tactics to undermine my self confidence again and again, in order to hook the most beautiful men himself, and especially a year or two ago, that damned Carlo of an escort, I still feel steam coming out of my ears.

Well, alright Jan, all this is ancient history, and the only thing left for you to do is to enjoy your vengeance to the full, and to put nice down on paper how it happened that one of the most popular "bears" of Brussels, nearly like a Madame de Merteuil, in the end had to withdraw from the gay circuit, sick and heavily battered and damaged -

and it was all your doing, Jan! While I, unlike the Vicomte de Valmont did not even have to fight a duel, and am still alive and kicking.

And no, by the way, Valentin; unlike the aforementioned eighteenth century ex-lovers, I have never nurtured any feelings of lust or infatuation for you; your eyes were just a bit too grey-blue to enchant me, your topics of conversation just too superficial to stimulate me intellectually, and your body odour just not spicy enough to titillate my sensitive nostrils, although I must admit, in all humility, that you once were a particularly attractive man in a time long gone. And what were your winning assets that enabled you to nick *my conquests* from me? Oh, a burly body with broad shoulders and curvy buttocks and calves that you always emphasized by wearing short trousers and sleeveless chequered shirts, and above all, of course, of course ... now that the bear fashion is still the rage! .. your dense, very dense hair on your legs, arms, your chest and buttocks and even your back and shoulders, and with a full beard and a Hussar's moustache as the cherry on the topping.

Well, that Hussar's moustache of yours has in the meantime become your Achilles' heel, the instrument of your fall, - and I am still laughing about it!

But what I still cannot understand, is *why* you at the time took such pleasure in trying to give me complexes, while the gods had graced you with such an attractive appearance? Why did you have to keep going on and on about my alleged shortcomings, such as, in your view, an inordinate height, the thin legs of a Bantu warrior, and a nearly hairless chest, and that while the Italians say "altezza è mezza bellezza," while the Bantus are a decisively brave people, and while the absence of bodily hair is a sign of higher civilisation - in other words, that man no longer stems from apes.

Well, my explanation may sound so eighteenth century: you felt that you were above everyone else, Valentin, a queen,

but as everyone knows, each queen needs a lady-in-waiting who is a bit uglier and less striking than herself, so that she can attract all the attention during her outings - in this case the bear and leather bars of Brussels. And the triumphal attributes of queen Valentin were a few strings of bodily hair more than her lady-in-waiting, Jan...

Alright then, back to the escort. Eroticism has always been the mainspring of my life, and now that I am forty-five years old, with a series of disastrous relationships with family members, friends - such as Valentin -- and lovers behind me, I dare say that my capers with my "fellow men" of all sorts and conditions, are almost the only rays of sunshine in my lonesome and, from the literary point of view, not yet very successful Flemish existence. Needless to say, however, I was not always too picky during my hunting parties, and have counted also lesser gods among my conquests, such as men with an amputated leg, or with polio, or with psoriasis, or who were not so young any more; but to conclude from this that I do not appreciate the intimate company of drop-dead gorgeous men, would be wrong. And I almost still tremble with excitement when I think back of my afternoon with that escort!

The first time that I could behold a likeness of him was some three years ago, when he featured on the front page of a calendar of naked men, in all his dark, muscled, hairy and bearded glory. And it goes without saying that I followed his porno career closely by paying a weekly visit to his personal website, and when two years ago in the merry month of May, he announced officially on his site, that he would be gracing our Belgian capital with his presence, I was naturally very excited. And what did I do? I sent him a flattering e-mail to tell him that for me he was just about the most handsome gay man of the moment. To which he replied promptly that in addition to being a model, he was also an escort, and that for a modest sum, he was prepared to keep me company for a few ours in my bachelor's pad in Brussels. I accepted his

proposal - for the first time in my life!

The escort! Carlo! Oh yes, I experienced moments of sheer ecstasy upon seeing and pawing his body that seemed to me to have become a very hairy flesh and blood version of the Farnese Hercules; naturally, he was also a good kisser, he smelled just heavenly under his arms and between his legs too, thanks to his well-balanced muscle diet, and to top it off, I had his grey-white load of sperm fall in my open mouth. Before leaving, he cut off a bit of his public hair for me with a pair of scissors, as a memento of our love afternoon, though I felt rather uncomfortable when he left. Wasn't I, Jan, still a little too young, to resort to escorts to satisfy my erotic needs? Wasn't I still attractive enough for the moment to seek my pleasures in Brussels for free? And what if my adventure with Carlo was leaked to the rather gossipy gay circles of Brussels? Would people laugh with me? Would they say that I was squandering my money? Or would they begin to have doubts about how my manhood functioned?

"Jan, after all," I laughed my doubts away a bit later, "you have no accounts to render to anyone, and as to the money well, you paid for a work of art; your caper with Carlo was like a meal in a grand restaurant, or like attending an exclusive opera performance. You must have to stay away from the gay circuit for a few evenings so as not to bump into Carlo - for what can be done if he is rather indiscreet and for instance nods in a friendly way in the midst of the "Duquesnoy" - and that's the end of it."

That's the end of it. Well, not quite. No, ... Brussels is and remains a village, as I discovered three evening later, when I got a phone call from Valentin.

"Jan, could you perhaps cut my hair with the electric shaver?"

"Well, come on up," I replied.

And up he did come, with his usual false grin under his Hussar's moustache, and took a seat in the kitchen; I put a towel round his shoulders, and started to shave his head down to a millimetre.

"You haven't gone out these last nights," he opened the conversation. "We did not see you in the "Duquesnoy."

"No, I have stayed home."

"With the necessary bottles of wine."

First dig.

"Your little legs seem to have got thinner" - I was wearing shorts.

"Yes, Valentin, not everyone can have such strong calves as your."

Second dig.

"Carlo was here in Brussels, you know, that naked model that you find so handsome. The one on the C*** calendars."

"Oh," was my only comment.

"More beautiful on the photo than in real life. Although. But not difficult to get in bed. Well, I managed to get him in my bed without any effort. For free."

"For free," I now echoed back nervously.

"He had already been in our building. For a well-paying customer," and here, my dear Valentin produced his typical sneering laughter, and looked at me straight in the eye.

And of course I was boiling with anger, but luckily I did not lose my serene expression. I continued to shave his head cleanly, whereby Valentin trimmed his full beard and Hussar's moustache slightly in front of a mirror, and said goodbye, leaving me behind frustrated, with a kitchen floor full of hair from his moustache, beard and head, that I had to wipe off with my brush and pan myself.

Well, yes, I naturally felt like throwing a glass against the wall from anger, but luckily the phone rang that very moment.

It was Paulette, a seventy-year old card reader and sorceress from Alsace, who has been a good friend of mine for many, many years. It was she, in fact, who predicted, when I was in my early twenties, that I would become a real writer, that I would never be recognised in my own country, but that my writings, though not yet hatched at the time, could count on an increasing acceptance abroad.

And naturally, I told her the whole story about this damned escort Carlo, and the mean digs of Valentin, and I added, still shimmering with anger, that I would to curse my so-called friend and downstairs neighbour."

"Easy enough," was Paulette's bland reply, "do you have a personal possession of his?"

"Paulette!" I cried out a bit shocked.

"Oh, it need not be anything fatal or dramatic, but with an object or other of his, I can see that this person will disappear from your life discretely, leaving you unscathed."

I immediately thought of his moustache hair, his most typical attribute.

And.. and? Well, some two years have passed since I entrusted Paulette with a clipping of Valentin's

moustache.

And... and? Well, Paulette is a very competent sorceress, and even the devil in person could not have come up with a better punishment for my good friend and downstairs neighbour. Valentin just came down with "alopecia areata universalis," you know, the most serious form of hair loss, whereby the really pitiful victim not only gradually lost the hair on his head, in circular clippings, but also his eyebrows, eyelashes, bodily hair, and naturally also his moustache, however long and thick it may have been and kept in form with brilliantine.

Well, nuff said, this insignificant event took place more than two years ago, and rumours went about in the false Brussels gay circles to the effect that Valentin had caught the virus during a scat party in "Het vagevuur" [The Purgatory] in Eindhoven, and the last time that I saw him, a month or so ago, he was bald as a billiard ball, and was emptying his apartment together with his brothers. Apparently he now lives with his elderly mother in backward Limburg, where no one will bother him, and certainly not I, the free and gay bird that I am....