

Tears, idle tears

It started when Maud was about forty. Officially it wasn't even autumn yet, more like the end of August, when the sun starts to radiate a tired but lovely golden mist exposing the first discoloured leaves. She was sitting in the Crathes Castle Gardens, where a landscaping artist had placed yellow chrysanthemums and dahlias next to trees just beginning to show their autumn colours. It was a silent, clear morning – school had just started and childrens' voices no longer disturbed the quiet, serene atmosphere. Some foreign tourists wandered and wondered, but they respected Mauds meditations. She occupied the bench as if this part of the garden was her personal room. A room of her own.

She was completely happy. Yes, she was. When a drop fell on her hand she looked up at the amazingly blue sky. There were no clouds, no clouds at all. She was enjoying their tour of Scotland – Rob had a conference in Aberdeen and the children were happily staying with friends for the week. Maud was touring the castle gardens around the city and happy. Completely happy. Another drop fell on her hand. She touched her cheeks. They were wet as if she were sitting in pouring rain. Which was not something she would do, not at sensible forty. Tears slid from her eyes but she was not crying, I mean, her nose was completely unblocked and her breathing regular and slow. And anyway, who would be crying surrounded by such beauty, such joyful colours?

She left the garden through the small gate in its old walls and walked over the velvety grass – no clovers or thistles in sight – towards the restaurant. 'I would like a salmon sandwich,' she told the waiter. And when he looked at her, searchingly, she said: 'Allergies. The curse of the garden lover.' He smiled, relieved.

It happened once more, that week. She was sitting on the towering cliffs south of Aberdeen, munching one of those triangular, store-bought sandwiches (bacon and egg, not at all bad), totally enjoying herself, blessing the weather and the beautiful sea and the person that had once placed a bench here. Suddenly there was a dark, soggy spot on the pale brown bread. She looked down the cliff, to see if the sea had started foaming so wildly that salty drops had jumped up from there – she had also visited the 'devil's cauldron' where that was indeed the case. But this sea was calm and soothing. Drops hung from her chin like a chilly beard. Probably the wind. Or the sun, scattering sparkles on the waves.

It didn't happen again, that year.

But next year, my God, it was worse. It was the first day after the summer holidays, a Monday that smelled vaguely of autumn, and after Rob had left for work, and Fred and Paula were off to school on their bikes, Maud decided to go to Scheveningen to celebrate her first day of freedom. She took the tram in Rijswijk, and dreamily sat there, looking out the window but not seeing much, not seeing anything in fact, had it started to rain? Had the tram passed a garden sprinkler or someone eagerly washing his car? But when she wiped her eyes her vision improved, her hands were wet as if she had wiped a steamed up window, and dark spots dotted her light blue summer trousers.

'Are you not feeling alright Madam?' an elderly gentleman inquired.

'It is nothing,' she said, cheerfully, wasn't she on her way to the beach? 'Something wrong with my tear ducts.'

She saw the black signet ring on his mottled hand, and her tear ducts emitted a veritable wave of liquid, the dikes of her eyelids had no chance to contain it. The gentleman handed her a soft, ironed handkerchief and said she was welcome to keep it. She used it as an emergency dike – for each eye in turn. She decided to go and see the doctor, may be one could have something wrong with tear ducts.

He said she might try voluntary work. She dutifully went to the hospital, where she arranged patients' flowers, and made sure every ward had roughly the same amount of flowers. And if patients died before their flowers did, she took them to another ward for their last days. She never cried.

That is – until it was August again, and she almost tripped over a puddle in one of the chilly green corridors. A puddle that had splashed from her own eyes just a second before. A nurse took her by the arm, into a cubicle with a chair and a lamp. 'You may have SAD,' said the nurse.

Maud laughed (she was not crying, remember?) and asked: 'Isn't one supposed to BE sad?'

'No no no,' the nurse replied proudly. 'This is a new disorder. Newly discovered I mean. SAD. Stands for Seasonal Affective Disorder – people get gloomy because summer is over.'

Maud thought about this. She wasn't gloomy, and if she was it wasn't because summer was over – she didn't like summer all that much, people were so busy trying to have fun. In autumn you could finally be who you were once again. But on the other hand, it would be useful to have a name for unexplained tears. She looked up at the nurse, and asked: 'Is there anything they can do about it?' The nurse handed her a leaflet, with pictures of happy people, basking in the bright light of a special kind of lamp.

Maud bought the lamp, and every August she took it out of its box, placed it on the table and soaked up the light. She felt a fraud – outside the sun was giving its last performance and here she sat, crying – well, no, wet-eyed – and stocking up on artificial luxes. Ridiculous, but it went on for years. Rob hardly noticed, he was never around when it happened, he was always at work when August sunshine came along.

The children left home, that's how it goes. Paula wanted to become a landscape architect, although she wasn't all that interested in gardens as such. She wanted to be the one to put in little hand made trees in project developer's scale models of suburbia. Hand made by her mother, that is. Fred went to university to study Dutch – he had this dream to become a poet, but his father urged him to earn a degree, so that he could always be a teacher. After the first year his dream had evaporated. He would never be able to compete with Marsman, Slauerhoff, Bloem – so what was the point? It was August when he said this to his mother, his second year was about to start, he had come home to pick up a new set of sheets his mother said he needed.

Maud was sitting opposite him in the garden, the low sun tanning her face. She nodded and smiled because she always agreed with her children, she had vowed to never, ever force them to do anything they didn't like. The nodding movement unleashed a flood. The words 'wet T-shirt contest' briefly flashed through Fred's mind. 'Mom? What 's wrong?'

Maud looked at her son as if he was a merman in an aquarium, his face palely floating in the water, his fish tail forever preventing him from walking on his own two feet – unless, that is, he gave up singing. Then he would be able to walk on feet, and maybe they wouldn't hurt that much if he was wearing sensible shoes, I mean, the little mermaid probably had been forced to wear princessy slippers. Maud wiped her eyes, drained the aquarium and said sternly to her son: 'Is the crocus less beautiful than the orchid?'

He, being a poet, understood. She saw that he did, but she went inside nevertheless, to get Marsman's complete works, to find these words about crocuses and orchids that had been unlocked so suddenly in her mind.

'What did you want to be when you were little?' asked Fred, when she came back into the garden.

'I wanted to grow orchids,' she said. 'But I became a secretary. (Her father signing the application form for the course, his black signet ring briefly flashing in the bright light illuminating his desk.) In August 1971 I was learning to type blindly instead of getting my fingers dirty and smell earth and flowers, and hear nothing but the showers on the hothouse. I met your father because of that decision, and I got you and Paula. But I didn't get to grow my own blossoms, I was just a piece of functional green in other people's lives. Please Fred, don't let it happen to you. It upsets the tear ducts no end.'

Hella Kuipers (2003)