



Dimitri Verhulst

The Harvest of the Plums

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Everyone is good at something and in Mattis's case, it's being alone! Weary of mankind, he champions solitude and lives on a remote lake, where he suppresses his virility with booze, smokes like a crematorium and eats freezer meals because his stomach demands to be fed now and then. A thinker of dark thoughts with a waning belief in everything, including jazz and chess. But after too long without the clatter of civilization, he even doubts his abilities as a misanthropic loner, and considers returning to a life surrounded by parking meters in a town full of easy emptiness. Maybe it's not true that everyone is good at something. Then a woman appears on the scene. Stung by unexpected love, he recalibrates his ambitions.

Dimitri Verhulst (b. 1972) has written novels, short stories, poems, essays and plays. His novels *The Alasness of Things* and *Problemski* were both filmed. He has won just about every award an author can win: among other prizes the Libris Literature Prize and the Golden Owl Reader's Choice Award. He is adored for his humour, sharp observations and turns of phrase, as well as his perceptive characters sketches. In 2018, cinemas screened *Angel*, which was based on his 2011 book *Monologue by Someone Grown Used to Talking to Himself*. His work has been translated into twenty-nine languages.



Press quotes:

'*The Harvest of the Plums* is a rich, linguistic and witty analysis of the flawed individual's search for romantic love.' **** - *De Telegraaf*

'The story is also a pleasure to read; Mattis' monologue is smooth in tempo, amusing in tone; the images and insights into life are darkly comic. [...] Convincing is also the setting's atmosphere, both desolate and attractive at once.' - *De Standaard*

'Each and every one of the sentences that have survived the author's pruning is a treat, and reading *The Plum Harvest* pairs outstandingly well with endless summer strolls together with your love. [...] A delicious story about the splendor of love.' - *De Morgen*

'A wonderful love story.' - *Kunstof*

'Since *The Alasness of Things* was published in 2006, Verhulst has been considered a literary showboat, and rightly so. Like no other he successfully captures the many ways in which the modern individual is at a loss. [...] In his work we are all small fumblers, doomed to fail but nonetheless worthy of love. Verhulst is often unintentionally funny, as is the case in *The Plum Harvest*, which contains some hilarious highlights.' **** - *Elsevier*

'*The Harvest of the Plums* is original, refreshing, sharp and funny.' - TZUM

'*The Harvest of the Plums* is once again a wonderful read. The language and descriptions are a feast.' - *Mixedgrill*

'Dimitri Verhulst impressively leads his readers into the trap.' - *De Groene Amsterdammer*

'Verhulst's style is riveting as always.' - *Trouw*

'Rhythmic, dazzling sentences [...] Wonderfully crafted scene descriptions.' - *Het Parool*

'The unexpected is what excites in this novel. A damn good piece of work, *The Harvest of the Plums*.' - *Literair Nederland*

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by Dimitri Verhulst

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An exercise I do now and then: closing my eyes and strolling through the parental home that probably no longer exists or has been done up so much it's unrecognisable, the way I'd sometimes like to be myself after a complete revamp from the inside out. Evoking the colour of the wallpaper (washable), the patterns that make you wonder how in god's name they ever managed to become fashionable. The smell of damp in every room. The smell in the living room, strongly influenced by the newspaper lining the bottom of the birdcage, soaked with the juices of countless canary droppings and caked with seeds. Our canary (I could quote my mother, I could quote almost all my lost loves) ate seeds the way I eat crisps, with more ending up on the floor than get in through my cakehole.

Can I still find all the light switches? Yes!

In all the houses I've lived in, in all the flats of all the women I moved in with, including the ones who got fed up with me so fast I hadn't even come close to unpacking all of my boxes before I had to start looking for somewhere else to stay, I can find the light switches, all of them. I could come home drunk every night and make it to bed without smashing a single vase. My spatial memory is flawless: I don't stub my toes on anything; after my passage through the hallways all the paintings are still hanging straight. The memory of a blindfold chess player.

But maybe not. Because it's not the mind – the body itself remembers. I could never say how many steps there were in the flat where I celebrated my fortieth birthday, but my legs know. Very precisely. And they could lead me safely upstairs in the dark to this day. A half centennium later my feet still feel the cold from the floor of my grandmother's house on the way to the far too distant toilet in the night. And my leg muscles remember very clearly how hard they had to strain to jump up high enough as a little brat to finally, finally, reach the doorbell.

I think that was happiness: the moment I reached that doorbell for the first time. A thought formulated when I've mainly started doing things for the last time.

By the summer I read the *Dictionnaire français* – from A to Z, from *a* to *zythum* – I already had numerous houses I could visit in my memory. A whole street full. If I could play Monopoly with my life history, the money would come pouring in. Parental homes, boarding schools, the houses and holiday homes of aunts who looked after me, the attics of my early adulthood, extensions, flats where you heard the upstairs neighbours' turds clattering down the pipes and the cries of the battered woman downstairs, where it felt like you could hear her teeth breaking on the clenched fist, and gradually the better class of building I unexpectedly found myself able to afford, with gardens that were more work than fun. And soon one more house for me to remember will be added to the list, perhaps the most beautiful I will have ever inhabited, the most beautiful I ever will inhabit, on a lake and surrounded by magnificent trees for me to string myself up from.

Too cowardly to live and too scared of death, I finally decided to sell the place.

As a topic, suicide is very fruitful and I suspect that everyone, even those who are happy, must have wondered at least once or twice in their life how they would put an end to it if the need arose. A mental exercise to while away the time. Doesn't even require dice or playing cards.

My preference swung continually from the noose to the bullet and back. Tick-tock, tick-tock. Until the day I shot my dog.

My dog Here, a Bernese Mountain Dog, affectionate, intelligent, loyal and easily bored. When he got sick of letting silent but deadly farts rip on my rug in his sleep, four Beaufort easily, he would demand action. If I didn't have the time or desire to horse about with this colossus, he'd take a bottle of wine from my rack and run outside with it, knowing I couldn't bear to watch as he lugged one bottle after the other out to hide in the garden or the adjacent woods.

Here wasn't my dog. And he probably wasn't called Here either, because nobody is practical enough to name a dog after the main way you call it. He walked into my garden one day, settled down on the grass in the complete conviction that I would become attached to him, and then looked at me with an expression that enquired what time dinner would be served. And hardly strayed from my side from that point on.

I didn't even mind that much. When dogs meet other dogs, they bite and bark. Unless it's to fuck, and then preferably quickly, they much, much prefer the company of humans. And I, a human, preferred the company of a dog. It was a perfect match.

The village's dour inhabitants had always considered greetings, no matter how dry and cursory, a waste of energy, but the moment they saw me with the dog, they overflowed with friendliness and loquaciousness. I existed thanks to the dog. And then Here got sick. His whole body was covered with lumps, my bottles stayed where they were supposed to stay, the whole house stank of wet canine farts. The closest vet was forty kilometres inland, but there was no way I could get Here there in my car. He answered every attempt to pick him up with a bite. Although they could have been harder – this dog was easily capable of defingering me with a single snap – these nips were still vicious enough to make it clear that I shouldn't even think of having him put to sleep somewhere else. When I called the vet, she informed me with the characteristic national gobbiness that she had no desire to undertake a long drive for something as silly as euthanizing a pet. People in these parts were expected to be self-reliant, and the lady (who, despite her loud mezzo-soprano, barked down the phone more than I'd ever heard my dog bark, making me imagine her as the gingerbread witch in the

opera *Hänsel und Gretel*) chastised me for my inadequate manliness and total alienation from nature. If drips like me had their way they'd be calling her out to administer humane injections to roasting chickens!

Knusper, knusper, Knäuschen, wer knuspert mir am Häuschen?

The dog was dying a miserable death, which inspired the neighbourhood cats to trip merrily through the garden, catch me if you can, and in an eruption of heroism I asked the tree feller across the road if he could lend me a pistol. He had just popped a wad of chewing tobacco into his mouth and that was more than enough for him to be going on with; my presence made his day almost unbearable. What the pistol was for didn't interest him. When I started talking about the dog, he held up his right hand to shut me up, as if to say, 'Save your breath, it's your business, no explanation needed!' What he really couldn't understand was my not having any weapons of my own in the house. That was more worrisome than the possibility of me doing something unbecoming with that lethal, steel seven.

'Do you know it works?'

I bluffed.

'How many bullets?'

'One'll do!' I boasted and he gave me three.

After Pope John gave birth to a child in 855, revealing herself to be a Pope Joan, subsequent leaders of the church were checked to make sure they were in possession of a pair of testes. There are many ways to determine the sex of a man, some of which must be quite pleasant, but where I lived the irrefutable proof was furnished by being a good shot and drinking a concoction of your own manufacture, a kind of vodka to the power of x, generally taken with a snack of fermented herring. The forester served me up both, the greatest form of hospitality shown me since I'd settled here. It had been a long time since my social life had looked so rosy. Admittedly, my expectations regarding rotten herring turned out to be accurate and I had the utmost difficulty getting the extremely salty, mucky delicacy down. My handling of the bottle, however, bordered on the impressive and went some distance towards compensating for my ignorance of firearms.

Testiculos habet.

The spirits made me manic enough to put the dog out of his misery that white night as I walked back to the home I would soon sell. He was lying in the garden, asleep. The first shot did the job. In the back of the head. He didn't feel a thing. If you ask me he still thinks he'll wake up soon next to a bowl of delicious greasy sludge. But the whole thing felt so filthy, so loud, so completely un-me, that I realised I could never shoot myself out of this world.

Tick-tock, tick

Tock.

That only left the trees.

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The first time I visited Elma at home, when she was finally, cautiously willing to receive me there, many weeks after our wash in the lake, I saw him: her husband! As large as life on expensive photographic paper, in a frame with reflective glass to help the portrait stand up to time better than the model. Ever since she had doled out a few words about him, I had been imagining what he looked like and although I had never been able to resist festooning him with a moustache in my fantasies, I had understood from Elma's adoration that he must have been strong and handsome. And that he had also radiated intelligence, which is almost asking too much for a single body. But when I saw his portrait hanging in the middle of her living room, I had to admit that my imagination hadn't done him justice, and not just because of the moustache he, of course, did not have.

His beauty demoted me. Someone who makes his way through the world with a widow is, perhaps, too willing to embrace an existence as a consolation prize, but I suddenly realised that I was less even than that. Elma couldn't find me anything but ugly. And it was in fact my ugliness that had made it easier for her to start a relationship with me. My ugliness, my stupidity, my clumsiness, my zero-ness. By downgrading in

love, Elma had honoured her husband. Sometimes people see unhappiness as a duty. Suffering is overrated, many people long for it.

She saw me looking at the portrait, quite aware of how the confrontation was making me feel, and waited for me to say something.

Men with symmetrical ankles have more success with women. I didn't say that, but I thought it. It was a sentence I had once read in a moronic magazine in a dentist's waiting room and as I read it I was embarrassed to be doing so. Simply reading something like that made me an accessory to our ever more rampant stupidity.

The essence of the welfare states can be found in women's magazines, in the newspapers' weekend supplements, between the recipes for dishes with ingredients that are impossible to find. Unfortunately I have a good memory for trivialities and later there was many a time I found myself lying in the bath with healthier teeth but staring mournfully at my ankles.

And looking at the photo of that man, the love of Elma's life, I couldn't help but think of his ankles, and how each was a reflection of the other.

The bizarre thing was that in the few stories Elma had told me about him he had remained completely nameless. He was her husband, not an entry in a filing system. Her husband, whose life had been snuffed out by a truck three years earlier, that was who he was, and that was enough. But now that I had a face to stick onto him, I found myself wanting to be able to do the same with a name. Simply because I, as her sweetheart, or lover if she preferred to put it that way, found it difficult to always have to talk about 'her husband'.

She understood.

Erik.

The most banal thing about him was undoubtedly his name, and that was no fault of his own.

More difficult than a photo of Erik, were the photos of Erik and Elma I found all over the house. They were stuck on the fridge with magnets, decorating all kinds of furniture, gathering dust on tabourets and side

tables. A mug I would never drink from, even if it were permitted me, sported a picture of the happy couple.

Photos, photos, photos everywhere. I even had to endure them kissing and looking out at me from a perpetual calendar on the toilet wall. The calendar listed birthdays, including his. (I had already seen that the doorbell and letterbox also considered him immortal.)

And of course, wedding snaps in more or less every room of the house, which, despite the bride and groom's affected poses – on the shore of a swanny pond no less – betrayed the fact that these two loved each other heart and soul..

Inevitably, I began imagining them making love with Elma on and under that five-star body, okay, four-and-a-half-star body of his, a horrific fantasy I was unable to resist. And I inevitably tormented myself with the thought that with him, Elma did reach orgasm. Those two were made for each other, the photos didn't lie. The looks that passed between them could start a fire.

Looks I would never get from Elma. Never could get. And which I, out of piety, could not even expect.

It's always dangerous to make statements about the eroticism of previous generations. Children tend to depict their parents as too tame and too prudish in the bedroom, always the bedroom, never the coal shed, never the kitchen, never on the cellar steps. But when I think of my grandparents, I feel like I'd be close to the truth by stating that fun and variation were their last concern. Deeply religious, they lived their subjugated lives in transit to the Kingdom of God. Earthly existence was an interlude best dedicated to work and prayer. As they only brought girls into the world, I believe that in her whole, very long life long my mother's mother only saw *one* single penis. And in that, I'm probably being much too optimistic and it would probably be safer to say that in her whole, very long life she only *felt* one single penis. Under the blankets, in the completely darkened room, suppressing and cursing every sign of pleasure. If only they were in the state of grace of plants, which reproduce asexually. Humans: you should be able to graft them

and grow them from cuttings. That would have saved the world a lot of misery. Budding is better than bedding. An opinion I have sometimes subscribed to myself.

Our parents' generation was one of pioneers. Women became more independent, the family courts had to pull up an extra bench.

Meanwhile it's not inconceivable that a partner has a little bit of history with someone else. Maybe there's even a chance, although it's uncomfortable to think back on, that I sometimes felt jealous because a girlfriend had amused herself with someone else before me. Because I was still way too callow for love. And because I saw my romantic ideal of being the One and Only going up in flames. Back when I was mad about Hamlet. When I reread Hamlet so often I *was* Hamlet. But fairly soon, I would have found it terrible to be tied to an inexperienced girl. I wasn't into initiations.

Being able to bungle and botch together seemed so fantastic to me. Love is something you have to learn. And then one day, bruised and battered but fully qualified (more or less), being able to merge together with the one who really mattered.

Elma.

But Elma's ex was not an ex. I was entangled in unfair competition with a corpse. Someone who fate had denied the time he needed to bore her, to disillusion her. On the contrary. Grief drove her to idolise him, to put him on a pedestal, his failings glossed over. What I felt was not all-too ridiculous jealousy of somebody who had preceded me, it was jealousy of somebody who was still present. Stubbornly so. Nothing could have bound her to him more tightly than his dying. When we made love, he was watching.

A crime of passion was my only chance: I had to murder a dead man.

Although I obediently cleared the path to my letterbox, the postman was leaning on my doorbell again the next day. Again with a letter from Elma. His plan to have a drink with me again seemed unwavering, given that this time he'd brought his own bottle. Not red wine, that was too airy-fairy, gutsier stuff with the colour and possibly also the taste of acetone. The belief that these throat-burning beverages purified your insides like some kind of sacrament was strong and remained intact even after a number of tough guys had drunk themselves coin-sized holes in their stomachs.

This time her letter went into detail about the themes she had raised more cautiously the day before, expanding on loss and lust in sentences the postman savoured as I read them out loud. Everywhere he went he was seen as a messenger of doom, bills, recriminations, tax forms. He was welcomed by barking dogs. It had been a long time since envelopes were licked for love. But this time Petrus was a bearer of beauty, someone was finally looking forward to his arrival and that made his profession a little more bearable again.

That was how it would go: every day he would hand me a love letter I then read to him over a shot of ether. My address would become the title of his favourite serial. It had a certain romanticism.

But the next day Petrus did his bit for the suicide statistics (carbon monoxide, the gentle death), and his replacement began his first workday by delivering the mourning cards, one of which I turned out to have earned as well.

Elma's letters were something to look forward to. She was growing as a writer, each one was longer and more beautiful than the one before and it really was time I took the trouble of replying. She began to express that concern after five letters. Where was I? Why wasn't I writing back? Did I still love her?

Like a monk who can no longer get by without the intoxicating routine of his breviary prayers, I started looking out anxiously for the post and was disturbed when the postie ignored my house. Fanatical newspaper readers in the analogue era knew the feeling of being robbed of their daily rhythm when there were strikes. Without print, it wasn't a real breakfast. And I didn't have a lunch without a letter from Elma.

To compensate I dug up old letters from someone else. I wasn't the kind of person who keeps things, but strangely enough I still had a pile of sultry epistles from a woman I briefly had something with around the time of her paper wedding anniversary. Liesbeth. Like her, I was being unfaithful to someone, so in that regard we were equal, also because we had both grown tired of wanting to convert every conquest into a relationship, and neither of us had any intention of crowning our sex with a joint bank account. Although it didn't go any further than two very merry, tender and unforgettable shags, our romp resulted in a long correspondence full of harmless sleaze. It had been a while since I had reread these letters and they amused me. More than that: they gave me an idea.

Had Erik never cheated on Elma? He was human, wasn't he? And would Elma feel differently if she became aware of his infidelity?

The old letters from my very temporary mistress had everything I needed. To start with, female handwriting. In not one was I addressed by name, but always with lascivious and grossly exaggerated pet names. I mean: *warrior* sounded much too bold for me. And these missives had another advantage: they weren't dated!

They could just as well have been sent to someone else, at some other time. If I hid these letters amongst Erik's things, there was a chance Elma would one day find them. His secret past as an adulterer would be revealed. And that would free up a lot of room in her heart.

Translated by David Colmer