

# Ruby's Arm, 2055

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*It's the year 2055 and like every summer, a young man's obsession for his ex-girlfriend returns. Only this year, he doesn't know where she is. After he betrays the people who gave refuge to him after his city flooded, he tries to decide where to go next: the Siberian coast, a newly founded Netherlands, situated in the French Alps, or the flooded province of Friesland.*

Each summer, I felt homesick for her – it was a delusion, that lasted for about three weeks and during which sugar-coated memories obtruded themselves, then fused into the urge to visit her and tell her I still loved her. This year, for the first time, I did not know where she was.

I broke off branches from a shrivelled grapevine and placed them on the edge of the basin. The ground was cracked and crumbling at the edges. The basin was empty; the layer of duckweed that used to lie on the water had dried up and turned a dark brown. A smell of decay hung in the air, that of a compost heap shortly before it's ready to be used, or the liquid manure my mother made



in buckets in the barn – I was no longer sure; decay always smelt like decay, sweet and bitter, overcooked cauliflower or leftover brine from jars of preserved carrots and peas. I felt ants crawling underneath my legs. Nick's father had explained how, from the basin, the water had flowed from various pipes to the base of the vines. My escape route would start here tonight. Nick's parents were the people I had betrayed.

Shrivelled branches, intertwined into a road barricade, lay on the mountainside. Above rose the neighbour's sign:

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Inside, in the hall, I took off all of my clothes. The house had warmed up. I brushed myself down and checked my arms, legs, neck, shoulders and stomach for strange lumps, rashes and ticks. Apart from six new mosquito bites, I didn't see any irregularities. I deposited the clothes I had worn outside in a sealed plastic bag and put on clean clothes. Nick's mother had hung them on my hook on the coat rack. It was tough to get them on, their fabric clung to my skin.

My bed was in the former utility room in the basement. I had the camp bed in the corner, wedged in between kitchen counters and more camp beds and inflatable mattresses. On it, I could sit with my back against the steel door of an old fridge. Next to the fridge was a semi-circular window overlooking a concrete ventilation hole, crawling



with spiders. At night I would often lie there looking at their silhouettes in the dim light. But not tonight. My escape route had been planned. I would climb over the kitchen counter to the door and, from there, I'd be able to sneak out unseen via the hall. During these past few days, I had put my things in my rucksack at the entrance, one by one. Another four items were still underneath my pillow: a polaroid of myself with Nick and Kester, and showing what I was sure, or what I had fooled myself into thinking, was Ruby's arm; a notebook, in which I wrote down my memories of her hoping that they would finally vacate my head ('a feast in her village; people stealing a level crossing barrier. I give someone my lighter.');

also, a long cable and an old smartphone.

The cable could be connected to a modem behind the fridge, giving me internet access. But right now there were others in the room who could see me: a bit further along, two Dutchmen were lying on their camp beds, listlessly leafing through their books with photos of the Scheveningse pier, which had been destroyed during the 2053 flood disaster. Tomorrow I would be gone and Nick's father would find the modem behind the fridge. Then he would know that they had been given the fine for disproportionate use of power because of me. That I was the reason their neighbours no longer greeted them. And that I wouldn't be able to pay him off, after having paid two hundred euros per month for eighteen months during my stay in their holiday home in the Alsace. Board, lodging and work if possible – but there was no work here. The vineyards had turned brown.



I didn't say goodbye to anyone. The smartphone was charged. Without internet it would hold out for about a day and a half; enough for a map with a route that would take me across the border, to the Baden-Baden train station. Nick's parents would not start to miss me until the morning. Taking me in, as his mother had called it when I turned up eighteen months ago, had felt like solace to them. Nick was in a French village in the Alps, where he was trying to set up a new Netherlands with a group of climate deniers. Free from outside influences, back to tradition – that had been the idea, but the reality was that people without Dutch parents had been kept out, and the village was forever in a heap discussing the smallest matters. I occasionally used my internet to view Nick's profile and saw countless manifests and messages. The last one was about whether the pigs they were keeping should be processed into 'slavinken', Dutch meat rolls, or pork chops, and which of these options was the most Dutch.

Getting off the property was easy. I walked along the mountain road and tried not to step into potholes where the tarmac had melted away. The moon and stars were the only available light. The valley looked ghostly. Freakish shadows were created by dead branches, half-collapsed houses and trees that had fallen over. There was a rustling along the road. I had probably already picked up a few tick bites; I'd have to inspect myself thoroughly before I'd be allowed onto the train.

With Ruby I had often walked along dark roads,



through forests and villages, through the city. It had been four years ago since we were together and each summer my obsession for her would return, but I reassured myself by knowing things were going well for her, I knew where she lived and with whom, and what she was doing. Her profile had been empty for a year now. It had become a habit to check online behind the fridge to see if there had been any action on that page, a sign of life, so that I knew where she was, would have an aim, a place to make for. Over the past few weeks, my obsession had gotten worse and I found myself wanting to grab the phone every minute to see if something had happened. I had nowhere to go to, I had nothing to say about my own life, I was sitting in a basement illegally using power, speeding up the end of the world; there was nothing heroic about me. She could be anywhere. Perhaps she had died. Perhaps she was living in China and her behaviour was being monitored so closely that she was leading a subdued life, she would never be spontaneous again, would never run into the gardens of unknown people to see how far she could get before she would be caught. Perhaps she had started to work for one of the farmers along the Siberian coast, and she was taking part in illegal nighttime digging for gold and oil, selling her information to Shell. Our houses had been washed away. We could do anything, we could do nothing.

In the valley I found half of a shed that seemed suitable for the night. A pine tree was lying on top of the roof. It had fallen in such a way that it had closed off the shed. The ground was covered in a layer of caked mud with dried



pine needles; just about firm enough for me to place the blanket from my backpack on it and sleep for a few hours.

The telephone had run out of juice sooner than I had hoped. During the night, I woke up itching. I had to use the flashlight a few times to see if there were any creatures inside the shed. At one point I thought I heard footsteps. I saw light flashing through the cracks. It was another fourteen hours of walking to Baden-Baden. I had three boiled potatoes and a bottle of tepid water.

Inside, it was a degree cooler than outside, but that was all there was to it. The winds were up again and drove in waves of hot air. I removed six ticks with the tick remover; if I did not have Lyme's disease after this I would thank my lucky stars. At the same time, it might be an excuse for when I would be picked up, confused and lonely, a sick refugee.

From Baden-Baden, I wanted to take the train through Germany, up north. There, I would cross the border to Groningen and travel onwards to Friesland, where Kester was. There was no other option. There was nowhere else I could go, no work that I could do without people eventually finding out that it had been my ecological footprint that had shut down the refugee shelter in the Alsace and had driven Nick's parents into debt.

I took the polaroid photo out of my notebook. On the pages it had been wedged in between, I had written a recollection of an afternoon on the beach. Ruby and I were lying on the sand, which had dried after the rain



but still felt cold. We were bored. We walked over to the nearest dam, watched pale crabs floating out to sea on the tide and then washing up on the beach again whilst trying to crawl sideways towards the rocks. Ruby saw where the crabs were trying to go: between the rocks, there were more crabs, like bees in a beehive, and when we looked closer we saw, hidden underneath the stones, the queen; a flat white crab two times bigger than the rest. Ruby decided to dig her out. Using a plastic scoop given to her by one of the children that had come running towards us, she began to scrape away the sand around the crab. But the sand began to move; it gave her a fright, they were even more crabs. They crawled out of sight, deeper in and amongst the rocks. The queen did not move. I wanted to leave her where she was, but Ruby managed to get her off the rocks. She caught her on a frisbee. For a moment, the crab remained upside down. We were afraid she had died. Ruby turned her over and took her back to our towels. The children on the beach all came over to see the queen. The queen woke up and slowly began to toddle over the frisbee. She blew bubbles along her front legs, we looked up what it meant: she felt threatened. I wanted to return the crab to where we found her, Ruby wanted to keep her as a pet. We left the crab on the frisbee. Before we went home, we put her back in the sea.

I was lying on my blanket in the shed, trying to sleep. Sweat was trickling down into my eyes. Heat cramp, heat stroke, heat exhaustion, heat syncope. Rest lying down. Mix water with a teaspoon of kitchen salt.



The polaroid showed me with Nick and Kester. We were living in Amsterdam at the time, did not have a care in the world, drank beer on a café terrace, had our photo taken. The last time I spoke to Kester, two days before my escape, I told him about the maddening flood of memories of *her*, the obsession that was getting out of hand, the detailed search for a sign of Ruby's life on the internet. He had said I should let go of her. That the obsession symbolised something else, something bigger, that I had to figure it out. He sent me a photo from the camp just south of Leeuwarden. He was living there with a group of members of the communist party in makeshift houseboats, which were tied up to former electricity masts and the remnants of concrete foundations. The photo showed a tanned young man with plumped lips. He was standing on a bar, wearing nothing but red underpants and a red shirt, which he had tied up to leave his stomach muscles exposed. He was dancing, while intently looking at his own reflection in the water.

Night fell, the air cooled down. My bottle of water had long been empty. I was thirsty. Tonight, I wanted to walk for six hours and cross the German border. I left the blanket behind, it had become too dirty. I had eaten two potatoes. Although it was a little fresher outside than it had been in the afternoon, it still felt like I was living inside an oven. My clothes were damp with drying sweat. Hopefully I'd be able to find water somewhere soon.

The road continued through the hills. It had many



bends. At some places, the crash barriers had melted. Strange shapes rose up from gardens and vineyards. In between, the houses stood like fortresses, surrounded by lightning conductors and split trees. The silence was briefly interrupted by an echo, far away, the barking of a dog. When there was nothing more I could do, Kester had said, I could make my way to him in Friesland, to the comrades with whom we had been in the communist party. There, I'd be able to party, drink the alcohol they distilled themselves, and paddle on a rubber ring through the dirty water from one bar to the next, until the world would inevitably end, or we would die of some terrible water disease that undoubtedly would manifest itself soon. He would wait for me there.

Here, in these mountains, there was no water to be found. Every so often, I sneaked closer to a house, to see if there were jerrycans, or some of those wind turbines attached to air conditioning units that caught condensation. In the next village, windows had candles in front of them and the chances increased of me being seen. A sign down the road stated that Baden-Baden was another thirty kilometres away.

The houses were positioned increasingly closer together. At the gates there were altars and chapels, brick shrines full of candles and hulking statues of the Virgin Mary. That might be a place to find water. Wine and hosts. Flowers in a vase. Floating candles. In the distance, a church loomed; its spire struck by lightning, broken off. I had to see if there was water, the thirst was killing me. Holding one



sip of water in your mouth for ten seconds could feel the same as taking ten sips.

From the opposite side of the road, I was able to make out a small chapel at a gate, behind which was a drive. The house was far away. The two silhouettes on either side of the chapel had to be broken off tree trunks. Very quietly, I crept closer. Moonlight shone through a gap in the stones. I quickly stepped inside. A dog barked, the light of a torch shone in my eyes —