

They Will Find Us Here

Anne Eekhout

Translated by Suzanne Heukensfeldt Jansen

They can bite, cut your soul into pieces. That's what they say, at least. Two lovers have fled from nameless creatures to a high cliff. Waiting for salvation. Via heart resonance they try to send an emergency signal. But their call for help may just as well be their downfall.

His story is different. His story might start earlier, or maybe later. Perhaps his story will focus on the danger. Or on the events of the past decade. How the initial euphoria about this life-changing breakthrough changed, switched into amazement, confusion, unease, and then into genuine, ancient fear. But my story is about us. About the us that we were. He and I resonate together. How we knew that we could only be saved if we stayed being whatever it was that jeopardises us. How I believe that they will never, never understand this.

Don't look down. His shoes are at least six sizes bigger than mine. If I feel a tingling in my throat as we walk

along the edge, he must feel it even more. The edge is wide enough for our feet, but too narrow for my fear. It's the void below that threatens to grab me. You must remember that this void does not have arms. The rocks rise high. I've never been very good at estimating distances, but we are at least fifty metres above the ground. Only the tops of some trees reach this high. Behind the treetops, far away, lies the world, strangely peaceful. So peaceful that I don't dare to look at it. We don't hold on to each other. Better to rely on our own ability to keep our balance than to try restoring each other's imbalance. But soon enough, when we're there, I won't let go of him. I will clasp my body around his, like a baby orangutan. Our skin will touch, our cares will melt into one, our hearts will beat in tandem. For a brief moment. For a very brief moment.

Don't look down. It's another twelve metres or so to the plateau. Easy peasy. I hear his breathing; concentrated, enduring. I don't believe that this breathing will ever stop, it's what I trust in. You have to place your trust in something. When they came, last week, we were unprepared. Of course we had our backpacks ready. Water, tins, torch, a couple of clothes, rope, blankets, a knife. What we did not have was confidence. We had shallow breathing, we had trembling fingers with which we tied the laces in our shoes. We had jerky, raised shoulders. We had looks in which we tried to cover up our fear with irrational heroism.

I tried to ward off the thought that we're caught in a trap. Bad thoughts are of no use. But that doesn't mean they're not real.

They can bite, cut your soul into pieces. That's what they say, at least. My mother turned into a shell when they had bitten into her heart. An empty shell, only there to remind everyone who she used to be. We had to end her life. That's not something you should think about, it's no use. But it was true.

The last few metres. His breathing becomes louder. My fingertips scrape along the dust on the rock face and dampen it. Cold sweat streams out of the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet, and along my hairline. I suspect I'll have more grip with slightly damp hands, something to do with evolution, with survival, but because of my body's response I register my fear even more, which doesn't improve things. Evolution was the beginning and the end. It's no longer needed. We have changed our state, enabled ourselves to become the slowest, ugliest and most stupid. The most redundant. We have evolved out of the scheme of things. I don't think we did it on purpose. I just think that, even then, we were too stupid to see this would happen.

He's got there. He turns himself around towards me and smiles, and for a brief moment I feel the happiness of our beginning, before everything: his smile, the garden, us and the pints of Guinness in a cloud of sunshine, coloring everything, rendering it almost unreal. The image floods my belly, all the way up to my heart. He reaches out his hand and – one, two, three steps – hauls me in. Very carefully still, we step towards the middle of the plateau. There, simultaneously, closely together, we sink towards the ground.

I, or both of us, conked out for a moment, or fell asleep. The sun is setting. I feel his arms around me, his fingers relaxed against my stomach, as they can guard everything in me against everything.

When I think of how it was before we left, I'm thinking of the morning we looked out over the stream behind our house, and the sparkling, when the sun shone on it, as if we'd had our own diamondiferous vein at the end of the garden, which was, in fact, the case. The only thing we needed was coffee, that view and each other.

I could have died there.

'Where are we going?' I asked before we set off. Our backpacks were standing ready at the door. We waited. What were we waiting for? Why weren't we going? It seemed as if we were waiting for the first sounds, until we knew for sure that it had really started. He said helicopters were flying. Not many, just a few. In it were members of the ALB, the Analogue Liberation Front. How did they find fuel for the helicopters, let alone the helicopters themselves? He did not know.

'They're looking for heart resonators. They can help us.' He said there were camps, for people like us. There was water, there was food. There were beds and we didn't have to be afraid to resonate. But there was hardly anywhere the helicopters could land. We had to get higher.

'The cries resounding from the houses in the street told us they were coming. The cries were human; they were inaudible. Maybe their feet have soft soles. Maybe they move with the wind. The sound would only appear once the biting had started. It was unbearable. I can't remember.

We're not the first on this rock. Lines, words, hearts are all carved into the rock face with spiky, sharp lines: *We'll be free, the last of the humans* and *James Harris was here*.

'How do the ALB people know where we are?' I sit up straight. His hand slides off me. He looks at me and nods. 'Resonance?' I ask. 'But if they...'

He nods.

We say nothing. We know everything.

Rumours were going round. There were people who said the creatures were blind, were going by smell. It would be better if you washed twice a day, especially your armpits and groin. Then there were people who said that they were drawn to the sounds. We were no longer allowed to talk, only say what was strictly necessary, in a whisper. But that also proved not to be right. Once people finally discovered what made them flare up like starving dogs, dozens of resonators from the village had their hearts removed. It might have been a sign, if we hadn't been so fixated on their digital ingenuity. What did they really want? That's what we should have asked ourselves. What was it they were lacking which we had, in abundance, because we were human?

Each time we heard a sound, a new sound, we looked up. We didn't say it, but I know that we were both hoping for a helicopter. Perhaps we sometimes forget what a helicopter sounds like. Maybe we hope that the calling of a vulture, the rustling of the wind in high trees, the rolling down of small stones and rocks can sound exactly the same as the rising, swishing sound of rotor blades.

When we get bored we hum songs the other person needs to guess. He hums better than me, but I don't recognise as many tunes, and so we can pretend for a long time that it's exciting.

They say that once you've seen one, you'll have the image forever etched in your memory when closing your eyes. He doesn't want to tell me whether it's true. Or whether, at night, when, like two earthworms, we fall asleep against each other, quivering, he disintegrates into a thousand pieces deep inside his head, like a machine full of bytes, which can never be more than the sum of its parts. Isn't that what we're holding onto? That we're not really machines, puzzles, just like them, but with one unaccountable piece? One piece that fits only inside us? A piece of me that can resonate with a piece of him.

Every day we sit opposite each other for a few minutes. We say nothing. We do not laugh. We lock our eyes, and our hearts open. And for as long as we sit like this, our pupils staring into each other's glistening water, as if that's also connected; water flowing into water, we can feel the resonance. It's a light vibration in my chest, and in his. I know, because I feel it; as if something's overflowing,

from him to me, from me to him and it sometimes makes me cry. After three minutes we drop our gaze and slowly extinguish our hearts. Then, with eyes closed, we listen in deep concentration to all the sound that we can detect. Whatever it may be. But all we can hear is the call of a vulture, the rustling of the wind in high trees, the rolling of small stones down the cliff, into the abyss.

We saw my mother lying on the ground in her kitchen. She was breathing mechanically, as if she had changed identity, and dammit, perhaps that was the case. Her eyes were open, focussed on a far plain of grey sorrow. My chest smarting, I sat down on the cold tiles next to her. Her cheeks, her hands, they were warm. And I held her tight. I held her tight.

At night I hold on to him. I sometimes dream that they are coming, that he rolls down the cliff in his sleep, that we're home again and have to stop my mother's life again; once more his hands around her neck, squeezing out the last bits of air, as he would do with a bottle of ketchup that's almost empty. I have to remember that dreams do not mean anything. Once I dreamt that we were in our garden. You could hear the stream flowing. There was a hammock in which the two of us just fitted, which we never wanted to leave. Not even when night fell, not even when helicopters flew by.

He tries to comfort me with his words. But they don't work because they are not anchored in his conviction.

With my words, I tell him that I love him. But that *is no* reassurance. Maybe even the opposite.

We, as opposed to the others, had left on time. Behind us, we heard things I've forgotten now, which can only be retrieved if necessary. I hope it's never necessary.

At times we feel normal. At times we lie against each other and I feel my hand slide down over his tummy, as if it's happening automatically. I feel how everything is still working, becomes hard, damp, warm, wild, forgets, makes up, reconciles and becomes sweat, breath and love, subsides and becomes soft, and then: begins to resonate. All fear dissolves into water during those minutes, trickles down from us, works its way into the rock that is keeping us upright.

'Dammit!'

My heart bursts open with such force that I'm convinced it's broken. I've never felt such pain. The resonance has broken off at the climax and the vibrations hit back like a cold whip. Bang in the middle of the red sky, something rises. He's gotten to his feet and makes his way towards the precipice. Now I can hear it, too. It's not a vulture, it's not the wind in high trees, it's not small stones. It's a sinister – choof, chop, choof, chop, choof, chop – and against the red sky stands his silhouette, his hands above his eyes. But he doesn't see it. He doesn't see it. My eyes begin to water. I want to scream but I've forgotten how my voice works. I close my eyes and lock away his silhouette in my heart,

next to mama's warm hands, next to the mornings at the
stream full of blinding sparkles and our kisses that tasted
of love and Guinness.

For whoever may find it.