THE YELLOW KITENGE | *Brecht De Poortere*

When we arrive at the lake, I put the brakes on Father's wheelchair. I get the pills out of my backpack, count them carefully, and lay them out in a straight line on the aluminium table in front of him. It will take him a while to work through his medication.

Reeds sway in the wind and coots glide soundlessly over the water. There's a wisp of spring in the air. The sun's warmth is tentative; white clouds float high up in the sky.

Father grabs a pale blue pill and places it on his tongue. He lifts the glass with a shaky hand and, when he swallows, his Adam's apple slides along his neck, causing a wave of wrinkly skin so thin I fear it will tear.

He closes his eyes and says, "The moment you die, do you think it matters whether you feel at peace, or scared?"

Through the rustle of the weeping willows, a nightingale sings.

"Did you hear that?" I ask, trying to distract.

Father continues. "Animals in an abattoir—they're stunned before they're killed. Why? When they're dead, what difference does it make?"

A coot clucks and there's a splash, followed by the flapping of wings. Sunlight reflects off the table and I put on my shades.

"It makes a difference to us," I say. "To know the animal hasn't suffered."

Father reaches for a couple of small pills. He struggles to pick them up with his thick, arthritic fingers and I help brush them into the creased palm of his hand. His skin is covered in blotches and scabs. There are few places left where the nurse can insert a drip.

His cancer is terminal. Nothing can be done except manage the pain and make the end as comfortable as possible. Father has everything a person might wish for in his final days: family and friends; the beauty of nature.

Yet there's melancholy in his eyes; a tremor in his movement that betrays turmoil of the soul.

He looks at me and asks, "Do you remember Bérénice?"

A fluff of cloud moves over the sun and a ghost of winter rides on the breeze.

"Our maid back in Rwanda?"

He gazes at the row of pills in front of him.

I had nearly forgotten about Bérénice—I was only four when we left Rwanda in 1994. Then, one day, as I strolled around the Matonge district in Brussels, I smelled palm oil in the air, cooked rice and soap, and everything came back to me: the scent of Bérénice, the scent of comfort and of safety.

As though Father has read my thoughts, he says, "When you were little, she used to carry you in one of those cloths on her back. A *kitenge*, they call it. Bright yellow it was. Such a happy colour."

I can almost feel the warmth and softness of Bérénice's body. Is it my imagination, or an authentic shred of memory?

The sun reappears and the smell of spring rises from the earth, rich and yearning. The grass is covered in buttercups—bright yellow splashes shivering on a green canvas. When you look closely, there is life everywhere.

"You won't remember this," Father says, "But she looked after me that time I came down with malaria. Shaking like a leaf, I was. Who knows what would have happened, had she not been there."

A fly lands on the table and darts towards the pills. I chase it away but, seconds later, it's back. I try a few more times, then give up.

"If only," he says, "I could have been there for her too…."

"Are you still in touch with Bérénice?" I ask.

His hair quivers in the breeze, like spider silk. Thin and sparse, it offers no protection for his scaly scalp against the sun. I reach for the sunscreen but he gestures with his hand for me to put it away.

"What's the point," he says, "with only months left to live…."

He is right, of course, but I can't help caring still.

He asks, "Is it possible to feel guilt for things you haven't done, for events that were beyond your control?"

I don't like where the conversation is going. Whatever is eating at him, I pray for acceptance, or even just resignation. *Guilt is the most painful companion of death.*

Father turns to me and says, "I tried to get her out, you know. But they wouldn't let me."

"Who wouldn't?"

"The Belgian soldiers," he says, fiddling with the pills. "They said no—even though, just down the road, Tutsis were being hacked to death."

"And Bérénice was Tutsi?"

Father runs his gnarled fingers over and around the pills. He picks them up, turns them over, pushes them into a heap, and then separates them again.

His voice fades into a whisper when he says, "They let the neighbours take their dog."

A pill falls off the table and I pick it up. It's a dull, brownish pink. Why, I wonder, choose that colour for someone who's dying? Why not something bright, like the yellow of buttercups, or the blue of Father's eyes?

I hand him the pill. He swallows and I can tell it hurts.

"What happened to Bérénice?" I ask.

"I hid her," he says. "In the attic. With tins of baked beans, dry pasta, cans of tuna."

"So, she survived?"

"That look on her face when I closed the scuttle hole…."

A butterfly, orange with black spots, flutters right by Father's head and on towards the reeds. On the table, drops of water sparkle in the sun, like nuggets of gold.

"When we arrived back in Belgium," Father says, "I watched the news all day long. I didn't miss a reel of footage. Then, one day—I'll never forget—the camera zoomed in on this pile of bodies. A mess of arms and legs and torsos. And there it was…."

"Was what?"

Father leans back in his armchair, hands clenched on the armrests. His mouth is half open as he wheezes.

"That yellow kitenge."

The sun reaches its highest point and the lake scintillates in the heat. On the horizon, the sky peels from the earth. Everywhere, daffodils, buttercups, dandelions shiver and shake. The world is a large palpitating heart that never skips a beat. A murmur of birdsong and bees, of grasses swishing and wavelets lapping at the shore—a near silence that swells, builds up, imperceptibly, and culminates into a crack of thunder when those spring storms come and cleanse the earth of all its sins.

"Terrified," Father says. "She must have been terrified when she died."