The Boy

WYTSKE VERSTEEG

Translated from the Dutch
by Sarah Welling

hoperoad : London

'At drama school they told us acting isn't therapy, but that's nonsense. Not because wallowing in emotions produces good theatre; it doesn't, they were right about that. But it can help cast out the demons and that was an experience I wanted my students, who never showed any emotions, to have.

'Sometimes I asked them what they were afraid of.

'I would ask the whole group and later I would ask them individually. Then they would start to laugh and say, "You don't think we'd tell you that?" They were always afraid of what would happen with the things they said and showed, scared that their openness would come back to them like a boomerang.

'Fear has an odour, true panic stinks. I smelled it on Kito. It must have been something in his sweat, a chemical adjustment. It's repellent, the smell of the underdog.

'Despite this, I arranged to meet with him more often, after the lesson had ended and the others had gone home. After that first time I'd offered to give him extra lessons, and he didn't dare refuse. He seemed happy with such a formal description of our meetings – he was one of those rare children who long for tasks and responsibilities. As long as he was in the classroom he was safe from his classmates.

'"Why do you make such an effort?" he asked me once. He was sitting on a table, his legs dangling, while I was packing up my things. His question sounded more reproachful than grateful.

'"You're worth making an effort for. Everyone is, when you come down to it."

'He stared at his shoes, which were leather and well-polished. "I meant the lessons, not what you do for me. You put such a lot of energy into them."

'I told him about my ideals, about the things drama can bring about. I said, "Sometimes pretending to be another person is the only way you can be yourself."

'"They laugh at you."

'I looked at the tabletop, and the messages carved into it with Stanley knives. Girls' names and phone numbers. *Call X for a blow job. Y woz here*.

'"I'm sure they laugh at all the teachers," I said calmly.

'"Not in the same way."

'He was looking me in the eye for the first time. His eyes were a very dark brown. I laughed uncomfortably. "What do they say?"

'He shifted about on the table. "You shouldn't trust Timothy."

'"I get along fine with Timothy."

'"He's playing with you."'

After a pause she went on: 'It's your body that decides whether or not to trust someone. Usually it happens in a split second, subconsciously. When Timothy was nearby your whole body would tense up. I saw it in the students but also, to my shame, in myself – the realization of what could happen. The threat lay in his expressionless gaze, the dangerously slippery surface of his emotions, the way his mood could suddenly turn, completely out of the blue.

'Sometimes, in passing, I felt his hand touch my bottom, always so fleetingly it was hard to make

anything of it. I never protested, what could I have said without making bigger and more important than it was? It was better to pretend it was just an accidental collision between his body and mine, even though it repeated itself every lesson.

'Looking back it seems strange I didn't listen to Kito, or ask him what he meant. But I listened to him out of politeness and it was easy enough to put his words down to his own precarious situation. He was – how shall I put it – unformed. Maybe he'd had to hide for so long that he didn't know who he was anymore. There was nothing interesting or characteristic about him, he'd hidden all of that away. He didn't speak, he mumbled. He never looked you in the eye, which always made you feel he was holding something back. I tried to explain some things to him about acting, the basics. How you need to feel the meaning while you say the lines, what the difference is between acting and reciting, how the expression in your voice is always carried by your breath. He wanted to learn how to speak better, do presentations, and maybe that's why he kept sticking around.

'He told me, much later, that he spent every break in the toilets, writing notes to himself in his notebook, because there was no one to speak to. It's hard to imagine how completely kids that age are left at each other's mercy. Those are the things we forget when we look back on our own youth – the way a school is much like a totalitarian state. We say it's good for them, it builds character; we say they need to get used to it and then we turn away, stop listening to what they say. The thing you forget is how interminable a school day is,

and how there's nowhere to withdraw to apart from the toilets, where your predecessors have used pens and keys to leave their mark. I saw him sometimes, when I was early and he had a free period. He would be staring at the display cases with the trophies and medals that sporting heroes had won for the school long ago. He held his hands behind his back and peered at the labels. It was painfully obvious that these didn't really interest him, and he was just looking at them so he didn't have to turn around, or face the corridor. Not that this offered any real protection against the other students, who walked through the hallway in boisterous groups and nearly pushed him aside as they passed, clipping the back of his head or slapping him on the bum like they did with the girls. He never turned around and didn't react, he just looked at those trophies and the yellowing photos of the boys' teams. Each of those boys was his exact opposite: strong, athletic, self-assured.'

To save on firewood you sleep in the same room as Hannah, listening to the sound of her breathing at night. It doesn't sound like she's bothered by nightmares and thoughts; she usually sleeps well, her breathing even and her movements calm. Sleep opens up her face, making its lines look sculpted but fragile. Someone could put a pillow over her face. Then she'd resist, her limbs convulsing but ultimately powerless. It would be a relief not to have to look at her anymore, not to have to listen to what she tells you.

You dream of white dresses and one red one, the colour of rotting meat. You dream you're holding on to everything until you can't anymore, and then all

those things fall from your hands, melting and dripping through your fingers, and then you wake up.

Later you ask her, almost casually, 'You mentioned an incident.'

But she pretends not to hear or maybe she really hasn't heard, and you're afraid to repeat the question. 'You get fireflies here in summer,' she says. 'I don't know if you've seen them. When I'd just got here I couldn't get over how bright they were. Whole evenings I'd sit outside staring at those things glowing in the dark.

'At drama school they'd told me I needed to ground myself, and maybe that was all that was required. Now I was here, somewhere else, time would fold itself back and the world would restore itself. I remember so vividly how I hoped that would happen, and almost took it for granted. I kept imagining how I would be living here in a couple of years' time, completely self-sufficient. How I'd wander through the forest with a dog beside me, and ride a horse perhaps. In those dreams I never limped and of course I didn't know then what hard work it is to live like that, how hard it is when you haven't grown up with it. There are people who seem to have an in-built talent for these things; it's a knack or perhaps it's a question of confidence – I had neither, though. The only thing I could do was stare at those fireflies at night and maybe that was enough. Do you believe in reincarnation?'

'No.'

'It seems like it'd be a comforting thought. In your situation.'

You don't answer. There are so many nicer thoughts that are supposed to provide consolation, but that

doesn't mean you can go ahead and believe in them, just because you want to. After Kito's announcement had appeared in the paper, strangers and acquaintances came to offer comfort. He wasn't dead, not really, but in heaven and safe and happy there. He wasn't dead but would come back to earth, may have been born again already. It was incredible to see how self-centred people were, how eager to use you to keep their own rose-tinted beliefs afloat.

'I believe in it,' Hannah says proudly. 'Maybe not after death, I don't know about that, nobody does after all, but I hope …' She doesn't finish her sentence. 'But in life, yes; I believe you can become a completely different person. That you can decide to come into the world a second time, and it's your own choice, ultimately.'

You wonder if you were ever like that, the way she is now – so hopeful, so excruciatingly naïve.

Later that week friends of Hannah's drop by, Liam and Melanie and their daughter. When they were here in the summer, the little girl, a chubby toddler with blonde ringlets, had run around in circles like mad. She looked very cute then, with her plump little arms and a straw hat that kept falling off; now she's older and so pale it looks unhealthy. She kicks against the leg of the table and refuses to stop even after her parents warn her and scold her.

You bring coffee and the cake Hannah insisted you bake – 'Hospitality is the only rule here.' You make faces at the child, but she doesn't react, just stares at you with a serious expression. Liam and Melanie also seem more

worn out than in the summer. They're thinking of going back. 'Not for long, just to get through the winter.'

They're talking about the situation in the rest of the country, the protests in the capital about rising energy prices, the poverty many Bulgarians live in. They're things you've heard about on the radio, but they have nothing to do with life here.

The girl coughs.

Hannah puts a bottle of *rakia* on the table and they start drinking. Liam talks about his plans to become rich by driving back and forth between Bulgaria and the West, making good money on things that are considered old rubbish over here. He has a second glass of *rakia* and then a third, even though earlier he said he was driving. The roads are icy now, the bends treacherous, and yet they stay until long after dark. Liam does most of the talking, while Melanie stares into space and smiles like it's hard work. When you get up to get another bottle, you can feel their eyes on your back. You're no longer this summer's volunteer, just passing through, but they're having trouble figuring out what you are instead, how they should relate to you. They ask you if you're thinking of buying a house too.

'No.'

The silence goes on a little too long. They're waiting for an explanation you don't give them, and the conversation doesn't really get going again after that.

After a while you get up and go to the door, putting your shoes on to go to the toilet. It's good to be alone and you stay outside for a long time, wrapping your arms around yourself against the cold. From the veranda you hear the others talking over each other, Liam's loud

voice and Melanie's shrill, cynical laugh. They fall silent when you come in and not long after Liam says they should be going. This is followed by the usual fussing around with scarves and winter coats, promises to drop by again soon and awkward hugs.

After the tail lights have disappeared, Hannah sinks back onto the sofa, her face suddenly empty and exhausted.

'They were worried about me.'

'Why?'

She sniffs. 'They think you have an unhealthy influence on me. They don't understand why you're still here, what you're doing here if you don't actually plan to stay here.'

'And what do you think?'

'I don't know what I'd do without you.'

Then she bursts out laughing. At first, you laugh along with her, but gradually her laughter becomes shriller and less controlled. You just stand there, holding a cup in your hand, while she doubles over, wiping the tears from her face.

The walls you whitewashed in the summer have already been covered again by a dark, greasy film of soot. You imagine, you don't even know why, that this is how things will always go: in the spring, Hannah will get up, you will whitewash the walls and then, in winter, they will once again become dirty and black.

When you're alone, you bite your nails to the quick.

What's the weight of something that's disappeared? How heavy can someone be when he's no longer there? You gave him what you could, what you had, but it

wasn't enough. You squeezed oranges for him every day, because it was good for him. One day, the core of one of the oranges was pitch-black, like a fire had raged within. You only noticed afterwards, though, when he was already holding the glass. Countless tiny, jet-black particles swirled around in the liquid, but he drank it down without looking. He always trusted you.

One morning you call Mark. Only when you're about to hang up does he answer. His voice sounds curt and businesslike, not the way you remembered it, not the way you'd hoped.

'Mark?'

For a moment, all you hear is his breathing, distorted, far away. You could have a conversation like this, without saying anything; maybe that's what you should do, renounce words and listen to the sounds of the body, breath and heartbeat.

'What are you doing there?' he asks. 'Why are you still there?'

His voice sounds hoarse, he's a little out of breath. You imagine he's just got off his bicycle, downed the contents of his water bottle in the kitchen and then picked up the phone.

'I'm worried,' he says. 'I didn't know whether to call the police, or what I should say if I did. I miss you.'

You're silent. You wonder if he cooks for himself, whether he lays the table.

'Can I reach you on this number?' he insists. 'Are you still there? When are you coming back?'

There's nothing to say and so you hang up, just like that, not giving him the chance to protest. Then you just

stand there, listening to the monotonous sound of the phone telling you there's no one left. Still, this wasn't the actual separation but, at most, the confirmation of something that had already happened, or that's what you tell yourself as you walk back to the house.

'With him, Kito I mean,' Hannah says, 'it was like approaching a shy animal, a bird or a mouse or some other tiny, nervous creature. I could get nearer, but only if I did it so slowly and so carefully it seemed like I wasn't moving towards him at all. Once you start doing that, it becomes a kind of art in itself, a pastime, even if the animal in question doesn't really interest you that much.

'At the start of each lesson I had the students do an exercise to loosen them up, and one time I picked the exaggeration circle. It's a simple idea: one person walks around the classroom in circles and the rest watches. That's scary enough at that age, but then it gets worse. Someone starts walking behind you and exaggerating your movements, just a little to start with. You're not allowed to look behind you, not even when the class starts laughing. Then someone else starts walking behind that person, exaggerating a little more and so on, until you have the whole group following you. That's when you're allowed to step out of the line and look at what has become a caricature of yourself, a brazen amplification of everything your mother used to warn you about. Maybe you walk around with your back slightly bent or your head sticking out in front or you have a dopey grin on your face. All those things, all your habits, are mercilessly put on display.

'I'd done the exercise before during my placements, but always with groups of adults, people who were doing my course for pleasure. Each time, it was only when we'd started – too late – that I noticed how radically different this kind of exercise worked in a group of secondary-school students. They were ruthless in the way they copied each other's defects, and mine too, and I could only look on as Timothy exaggerated my limp and made fun of me. He dragged his left leg along the floor, his entire body skewed by the deformity he simulated, with a semi-imploring look on his twisted face. The terrifying thing was that I recognized myself in him, he was acting out all the things I didn't want to be – not just the disability but everything associated with it, the way people either turn away or look at you for too long, their self-conscious effort to act normal. He had enough control over his face, usually so impassive, to truly turn into a version of me. Just once, he looked in my direction and held my gaze. It was no coincidence, he knew what he was doing and was enjoying it. But I couldn't stop the exercise now; his victory would be obvious. I just stood there while the kids nudged each other and started laughing louder and louder. They looked at me, all of them, and all I wanted was to walk out of the classroom and never come back. But I knew they'd stare at my leg and that was the only thing that kept me standing there. That's the moment I decided things needed to change.'

She said, 'There's one thing you always need to remember: the fact that they listen to you and do what

you say is just an agreement. And that agreement can be broken at any time, stealthily or with brute violence.

'Not every student is capable of it; many of them won't want to. But nearly every class has one kid whose status depends on their disdain for the rules, which they have to demonstrate again and again to retain their air of invulnerability, and the glamour that comes with it. Maybe those kids know it too, that at this point they have not yet failed, something that often happens soon after they leave school. Maybe they know that these years are their years, and of course they're often desperate and powerless at home.

'That makes them terrifying at school. Sometimes, if you don't get in their way too much, it's possible to get through the school year in one piece, and even come to something you could call an understanding with them. When you know you're the weakest you avoid that confrontation, you put up with it. You put up with it so long because you hope to keep your dignity intact, more or less. You adapt. The threat never really disappears, but you can live with it, if you don't make them look ridiculous and don't ask them for their input too often.

'Until they feel the need for a new demonstration. At that moment, the conflict that was always there suddenly comes out into the open for everyone to see, and you will have to act and show them who's strongest. I saw Timothy's father once, a man in combat boots and a bomber jacket, his hair gelled back straight over his skull. The Rottweiler he had with him followed his commands very obediently and whenever I saw Timothy after that I always thought of that dog and the submissive look in its eyes.

'I'd put up and shut up the whole term, and I'd been prepared to carry on like that till the last lesson. Now, on the spot, I decided to challenge them. "Imagine," I said, "portraying the opposite of the way you normally are. We have Richard's words, we have Shakespeare's text. When you learn those by heart" – a collective groan – "when you learn them by heart and you say them, then that's all we have: the way you are all the time, with the emotions everyone knows and using them to act out an old, dead text. But I want you to expand your repertoire. I want you to say those lines like you're someone else, or rather a different version of yourself. One you don't know yet. So, for example, for Timothy to say those lines in a very loving way. What would that take? Are you familiar with that emotion, Timothy? Love?"

'Laughter. Timothy looked around, his face pale with anger, his mouth a narrow line. We waited, the students and me too, but he didn't say anything and after a while things went quiet. Now there was nobody who dared laugh openly, but every now and then somebody would start giggling and then stop quickly.

'"Love, Timothy. I think that would be a really good assignment for you, to do this monologue and take love as your starting point. And the same goes for all of you: choose an emotion you don't use very often. You'll prepare it at home and present it in the last lesson."

'They picked up their bags and left the classroom accompanied by the customary noise, Kito being the only one to stay behind as usual. I put the tables back and wiped the board. It was only after they'd gone that I realized what I'd done, and the thought scared me.