

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

### *Milla van der Have* **Gurdjieffs beard**

Lately, the look on Gurdjieffs face is irritating the hell out of him. The Gurdjieff in the picture wears a hat, a beard and a piercing, knowitall expression. Smug old bastard. The glow that used to surround his guru's face is long gone. It's been 15 years since he hung up the portrait in adoration. He has been waiting for enlightenment, or at least a lucky break, ever since.

Sometimes, he is well tempted to shave off his own beard altogether. Forget Gurdjieff, forget everything! Carina would be pleased. Unfortunately, so would Eva. The current state of affairs with his wife is such that he will go out of his way to avoid anything even remotely likable to her. It's the small things he holds on to. His beard, for one. His sandals, for another. Even on occasions where he's to wear proper shoeing, they'll go along with him, safely hidden in his bag. Eva knows, but she has stopped commenting on it. Then there are the trips. Whenever he goes hiking, he clutters the table with maps, carefully planning out each step of the way. Eva is always numbstruck by this amount of preparation. Sometimes, she mocks him. 'How can there be any surprise going on a hike with you?' she once said. 'You have planned out everything. Perhaps you have even scheduled a fight for us to have! Let's say, around 8.30?' He hates her when she is like that. So he surprised her and they had a fight right then, right there.

He flips his pencil. On his desk, the text he is trying to translate lies untouched. Through the small window, Berlin street noise makes its way into his office. Normally, he likes the idea of being connected with the world it gives him. Now it's only distracting him, so he gets up and takes out the hook to close the window with. Immediately a sense of suffocation comes over him. Speckles of dust dance in the small stripe of sunlight that still manages to come through to his darkened office. He settles back behind his text, waiting for a brilliant insight to come, something to make a mark with. Once more, he turns to the first words in the text, the ones he has read so many times today, without them releasing any of their meaning to him. His pencil twists and turns through his fingers.

For some weeks now, Eva has been less fidgety. Finally, some gentleness seems to have come over her. The only thing she's on his case about now, is his family. He doesn't understand why, but then again, he is not one to ask questions. Instead, he enjoys the lee. It has even made him grow bolder. He grins up at Gurdjieff. 'If only you'd know, old fellow!'

There's only a short knock on his door to announce his wife's entrance. 'I still can't believe you've allowed them to put you down here,' Eva states, as she sweeps through his office, glaring disapproval at Gurdjieff in the passing. She sets down across the desk. 'You could've protested.'

He nods, hoping she will let this slide and for once, his prayers are granted. 'Anyway,' says Eva, 'I just wanted to tell you that tonight, I have a meeting with the Rilke club, so you'll be alone for diner.'

He smiles up at her, kindly. 'Have fun, dear.' But Eva is not done yet.

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From a nearby shelf, she takes out one of his books and leaves through it absentmindedly. The dust this releases, makes him sneeze.

'August,' she starts, gently closing the book, 'please, will you call your family?'

'Eva, I am working.'

She is not one to let go easily. 'I have never met them, August.'

'I know.'

'We've been married for thirty-odd years.'

'I know.'

'Not even on our weddingday!'

'Please, Eva, I have a deadline.'

'Yes. So does your family.' She puts down the book on his desk and all but storms out. He waits for her footsteps to die down through the hallway, up the stairs, out of hearing entirely. Then he gets up and puts the book back where it belongs. He doesn't like things to be out of place. He walks over to the peg where his coat is on and takes out his cellphone. He'll send Carina their agreed upon message: 'Can I reschedule my yoga-class for tonight?' She will understand.

The hours go by ever so slowly and the Sanskrit keeps fighting him off, as if its determined he isn't worthy to unravel its secrets. The page that he is supposed to entrust his insights to, is ridiculously blank. To make his mood even worse, Carina hasn't answered yet. He is close to cursing. He pushes back his chair, less violently than he intended to and goes out to have a cup of tea. Maybe a walk will do him some good. If Carina hasn't answered by then, well, he'll just call one of the others. To get to the machine, he has to walk through a coworkers office, round some hallways and take the elevator down to the cafeteria. He passes Eva's office on his way. Hers is on the good side of the building, the one with both space and sun and, on a lucky day, the smell of lime-trees. 'Eva Friedmann, Linguistics' it says on her door. Every time he sees this, it makes him wince. The only ones to know they are married, are the the customs. Her passport states her proper name, his name. Everywhere else, she uses her maiden-name.

It's only a short knock on the door, but it startles her nonetheless. She has been meticulously cleaning her apartment, to prepare it for Eva's coming and now she's here already. Before opening the door, she quickly checks everything. The small Japanese table is clean and empty, except for the bottle of wine, cooling. She has thought to surprise Eva with an Indian wine. She doesn't quite know why she feels the need to impress her lover so. It has been thus since their first meeting, at which she introduced herself with her writer's name. The look of approval that quickly passed over Eva's face definitely made it worthwhile. 'The playwright, isn't it?' She will have to set it straight some time, though. Give out her real name. Strange, how it makes her feel like it will make less of her. It won't change her work, just her surname. Still, Eva's admiration is bound to make her weak

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in her knees and she'd hate to lose it, especially for something as simple and meaningless as a name.

When Eva walks in, all those thoughts disappear in an instance. She is still dressed in her professor clothing, the stern jacket, the glasses she doesn't actually need, her hair bound in a tight knot behind her head. She can't deny she likes Eva looking like this, but only because she knows about the smile that's going to break through shortly, the gradual softening of the eyes, Eva's tender hands coming to life and, well, everything that comes with it. It's good to see someone thaw like that and she is glad she is the cause of it. Carefully avoiding the Thai cushions, Eva settles down on her couch. She keeps her bag close to her side, smiling ever so shyly. Eva needs some time to get accustomed to things, both to new adventures as to new environments. She has noticed this before. Something as simple as sitting on a cushion is still too much for Eva, who prefers 'proper sitting'. Deciding it's best to take things easy, she sits down next to the bag, pretending not to notice it. Just as if they are old friends, she offers Eva a glass of wine, carefully reading the look on her face as she enjoys a first sip. Involuntarily her eyes wander down to the bag, stopping short at a book sticking halfway out of it. A volume of poetry. Rilke.

'The Rilke club again?' she says, making a wry face.

'You have a better idea?' Quickly, Eva tugs the book inside and places the bag at her feet.

'You could try telling the truth.'

As soon as she's said it, she knows she has made a mistake. Eva's waver- ing smile fades, only to be replaced by a set, thinlined mouth.

'It's hard,' Eva states.

'I know,' she answers, even though she doesn't know. Not quite. If it was up to her, it wouldn't be hard at all. Just bite the bullet and get it over with. She has had worse in her life. Eva gets up rather abruptly, taking her wine with her. She paces the livingroom slowly, eyeing the pictures on the wall. Give her a minute and she'll start commenting on this apartment and how lucky Gertrude is to have found it, specially in present-day Berlin. She stares at her sneakers, while Eva makes her way over to the window, to appreciate the view.

'It shouldn't be hard.' Only an hour ago she promised herself not to make a scene. Not yet anyway.

'Gertrude,' Eva starts, turning away from the window and whatever it is that has captured her attention.

'Why can't you just tell your husband and have it done with? He'll have to know at some point,' she interrupts. A sudden sadness wafts over Eva's face.

'Let's not talk about this, Gertrude. Not now. It will ruin our evening.'

With that, Eva turns back to the window, eyes fixed, lost in thought. All of a sudden, she looks old. How has she never noticed it before? The countless lines that are etched near her eyes make her look worn, in a way. She wonders if she has pushed her too far, too soon. So she goes to join Eva by the window, not saying anything. Outside, Prenzlauerberg is teeming with life. Who'd thought that after all her travels, she'd settle

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down here of all places? As far as she knows, this apartment has been her families property for ages. It has survived not just the war but family dynamics as well. And yes, she was lucky to get it. It took most of her pride, anyway. Still, she likes it here. The bustle and business helps her to set down her thoughts, her memories. Already one of her plays, about a family falling apart, has been a huge succes. Changing her life was hard, but not that hard.

'Please, Eva,' she says, grabbing her hand. 'Before it ruins not just the evening...'

Still, Eva can't seem to break away from the view. Finally, after she almost starts to believe Eva will never speak again, there it is. 'I know,' says Eva. 'You are right. Just give me some time. I need some time.'

When he comes back to his office, Carina is there. She bears down on him, full lenght. She is a rather tall woman, something which has always fascinated him about her. That and her obvious attraction to him. Her eyes are ablaze.

'You told me you were infertile, you pig!' she hisses at him, as soon as he enters the office. He closes the door, even if he knows all his colleagues have long gone home.

'What about it?' he asks lightly. Better to play it cool, just yet.

'Well, I am pregnant!'

His hearts misses just one beat. Immediately, he recovers. He has to tread carefully now, not let anything show.

'Is it mine?' he asks therefore.

Carina narrows her eyes, trying to figure out his motives. Then, she decides on the indignified response. 'Of course it's yours, you lying bastard!'

He can't stop his beaming smile from emerging, a sight that obviously startles Carina. 'What are you smiling about?' she demands.

'I am ... just happy.' Maybe he should just be honest about it. Own up to it, tell her that, yes, he wishes for something to live on after he's gone. Something that, maybe, will speak kindly of him.

'Happy,' Carina repeats, chewing over the word as if someone has fed her a dirty medicine. 'Happy?'

'Yes.' He has chosen this road now, so all he can do is to continue down this path. 'I will take care of the child, of course,' he says. 'And you,' he adds.

'Who says I am going to keep it?'

His smiles freezes on his face. 'What?'

'I am obviously getting rid of it.'

'What? Why?'

'Well, there's Thomas for one.'

'You have an open marriage.'

'Not so open that it will survive having to raise another man's child!'

'He wouldn't have to know! We can keep it a secret. I don't mind! We'll

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tell the child later, when...'

'There is my age to consider as well.'

'Your... you... you're 41,' he falters.

Carina smiles. Cleary, she is enjoying this moment.

'I'm 47 actually. You see, I have a lie of my own.'

He must act quickly, if he is to salvage anything.

'It's not too old. Thomas doesn't need to know. Carina, I want this child! You must...'

Before he can finish, Carina breaks it down to him. 'I will have this... it... removed. And I will have nothing to do with you anymore. Nothing whatsoever! Goodbye!' She sweeps out of his office.

The next days he spends most of his time perched on a bench outside the university, watching the students go in and out. He has even brought a newspaper, as to give some excuse for him sitting there, but no one bothers with him, so it stays folded in his lap, unopened. Reading it seems useless, somehow. There's nothing in there that interests in him. Life seems to go on without him just fine. Instead, he stares out over the lawn, where young girls and boys are stretched out in the sun, swapping songs and theories on the meaning of life, confident that everything will turn out as promised. They laugh, letting their voices rise up, until the whole inner court rings out with their liveliness. It's wearing him down. Bravado, it is such a breakable thing. Shattering it takes next to nothing.

Finally, the third day, when evening falls, he heads out to the Gurdjieff class. Carina isn't there. Even so, he decides to join the group anyway. He listens. He dances. He makes faces. It's all well enough to believe that stuff if you've got something going for you. With Carina gone, he feels like a schmuck, a fraud, twirling away till he gets dizzy. That's the sort of revelation he gets. That and the whisperings of the women he brushes past on his way out: 'He's the one who thinks his beard makes him look like Gurdjieff. Some way to achieve enlightenment.' He quickens his pace to the point where he's almost running. Outside, he tries calling Carina again and again. No matter how incessant he is, she won't take his calls. For a moment only, he considers contacting one of the others, but decides against it. His taste for affairs has lessened of late. He walks around, only to find himself somewhere in a street he has only faint memories of, toying with the phone in his hand. Maybe there's something resilient to bravado as well. Something that won't be brushed away that easily. Slowly, he punches in the number. He knows it by heart.

It has been a few days since Eva was here last. Somehow, after she left, her apartment feels less alive. Everything that's in it seems only a symbol of a life she once lead, a life she has left behind. Photographs she has taken of ethnic minorities in the remotest of villages, pictures of places steeped in the secret beauty of nature, the handwoven rugs, the finely crafted charms and bracelets she brought back: trophies and trinkets, one and all. None of that matters anymore. It's obvious. Her apartment isn't any good without Eva in it. She'd trade it away gladly, and all that goes with it, if only Eva'd come through. But it is out of her hands now. She has said her piece. All she can do now is hold still, wait for the calm to turn into a storm and for the storm to pass. She walks up to the window. Even though

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evening is well on its way, there are plenty of people still outside. It looks like a perfect night to work some more on her play. She takes out her paper and, after a short moment of hesitation, sits down on the couch. With a bit of imagination some of Eva's smell still lingers there. As she sets to work though, the thought of Eva settles down quietly in the back of her mind. A smouldering ember that could blaze up in a moment's notice. For now, it gives her just enough peace of mind to resume her play. Within a few minutes her characters are taking on a life of their own again.

The phone rings out suddenly, shattering her train of thought. Just in time, she stops herself from calling Eva's name in the horn. 'Gertude?' a familiar sounding voice wants to know. 'Getrude Erdl?'

'Yes,' she breathes. From the other side, the past answers. 'It's August.' And, as if there's any need to explain, even after almost forty years, he adds: 'Your brother.'

It's full dark when he returns home. Eva must be asleep already, for there's no light on in the house. Odd, she isn't an early sleeper. He doesn't much care. He is in no mood to tell her anything, least of all about the conversation. She doesn't need to know he followed up on her advice. He switches on the light in the livingroom, then in the kitchen. He likes it when there's light all around. Darkness makes him feel ill at ease. He grabs a beer, opening it up on his way back to the livingroom. Even if it were to be dark, he knows his way around here by heart. At least here, nothing much changes. The only thing to grow is his butterfly collection, other than that, things in his home have reached a state of stagnancy. They bought their furniture years ago. Of late, Eva has been dying to get new things. New beds, new chairs, new table, new couch, new everything. He won't let her. In spite of his normal behaviour, he has been quite adamant about this. His old chair suits him just fine. He gulps down his beer, trying to drown the horrible mood he is in. He soon finds that nothing can set this awful day right, not even a rather nice chat with his sister. No matter, though. He'll find a way to deal with it in the morning. 'Things always clear up in the morning,' he tells himself.

After several more beers he slouches up the stairs, revelling in the unexpected silence of the house. In spite of everything, he feels some peace coming over him. With luck, things might still turn out to be alright. The first thing he sees upon turning on the light, is Eva's weddingring on the night stand. There's nothing strange about that, it's where it's usually is. Only when he sees the bed is unslept in, the closetdoor is not completely closed, his gaze flicks back to the ring. There's a piece of paper lying next to it.

'What the...,' he starts as he reaches the nightstand in two firm paces. He yanks out the paper.

'This was never mine,' it reads in Eva's stern, neat handwriting. 'I am sorry.'

'Verdammt!' he curses. His fist slams down into the nightstand. The ring springs up, falls down. It bounces on the wooden floors, almost as if it's mocking him. Then it reaches a final resting place in one of the cracks underneath the bed.

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He awakes to the sound of Berlin traffic, bursting in through the window. Slowly, his environment dawns on him. He's in his office. It hardly looks the way it's supposed to look. There's dirty plates and dirty glasses. Clothes are cluttered all over the floor. His desk is covered with a stack of papers.

Most of them are pages of his books. Last night, a sudden need for destruction came over him. He ripped apart most of his work, till the dust gave him a coughing fit. Then there's the divorce papers Eva has filed a few days ago. Right down next to these is the restraining order Carina got against him. And underneath all those pieces and fragments, lies the Sanskrit text. Waiting. Lurking. Some other scholar will have to get lost in it. He, for his part, has given up.

Scratching his beard, he gets up from his provisional mattress, kicking over some empty bottles as he does. Gurdjieff glances down on him knowingly. 'What are you looking at?' he growls at the picture, which for some reasons survived being ripped to pieces. He stumbles over to the bathrooms. They're just outside his office. Besides, it's still early, so there'll be no one to notice him. Thank heaven for small blessings. He stares into the mirror, hardly even recognizing his face as his own. Has he changed so much or is this the first time he is actually looking at it? A tiny ray of sunlight reflects of the razor-blade, as he raises it to its face. He starts taking off his beard, with strong, deliberate strokes.