

For the first time in ages, Marijke dreamt of somewhere other than the city. Gray waves crashed on the side of an island. A few small fishermen's boats floated further down the coast, the rough grunts of their workers breaking apart the quiet dawn. Grassy hills rolled behind her, protected from the rough sea by the tall dijk she sat on.

She'd always imagined raising her family here, far from the burning engines of cars rushing down narrow city streets.

A young boy with brown hair waved up at her from where he crouched on the bottommost rocks of the dijk, where their steep, sloping structure met the waves. He held a stick with a net at its end, a squirming crab held captive inside.

"Mama! Look at the crab I caught," he called. "He's blue!"

Marijke laughed in her dream. "Come up here and show me, Milo! I'm too old to clamber down like you."

The boy laughed, wedging the stick under his arm to climb with both hands. He made his way up the lowest rocks like a monkey, and Marijke admired his agility.

She saw the patch of wet moss before he did.

"Watch your step, Milo," she tried to say, but the words wouldn't leave her mouth.

Milo's right foot slipped on the rock as he scurried towards her, and the young boy lost his footing with a yelp. Surprised blue eyes met hers, and he struggled for purchase for a second before his little body fell backwards, engulfed by the dark waters of the sea.

His handmade fishing net clattered onto the lowest rocks. Marijke watched the little crab he'd caught skittering over the rocks before disappearing. The waves battered the coast as if her son had never existed.

She woke up with a start.

She looked over at the digital clock on the nightstand. Barely 3am. On the other side of the bed, a form shifted beneath the blankets.

“Alexander?”

Her husband didn’t reply. For a moment, Marijke weighed the idea of waking him but decided against it. She shivered in the cool night air, pulling the covers tighter around herself and shifting closer to the warmth of Alexander’s body behind her. Eventually, a restless sleep overtook her again.

The next morning, as she cut strawberries into two bowls of muesli, she broached the subject.

“I dreamed I was back in Terschelling last night,” she said. “I saw Milo.”

Alexander looked at her in surprise. They didn’t talk much about their son much these days, as if they were trying to pretend he’d never existed.

“What happened?”

“We were on the Waddendijk, you know, where all the kids would go fish for crabs.”

“Just you and Milo?”

“Yeah. It was low tide, so he’d climbed down to the lowest part. He found one of those blue crabs,” Marijke said, her voice catching slightly as she relieved her vivid dream. “But he slipped as he was climbing back up.”

Alexander walked around the kitchen counter to her, wrapping her in his arms.

“It was just a dream. You haven’t been getting enough sleep. You should take the pills the doctor prescribed.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But it feels wrong.”

He waited for her to continue.

“Part of me feels guilty for wanting to get rid of my dreams,” she said. “It’s the only time I still see him.”

“You sound crazy, Marijke,” Alexander said. “I’ll go pick them up from the pharmacist for you today. That’s not healthy.”

Marijke pried herself from his arms.

“Don’t call me crazy when all you’ve been doing is pretending we’re fine!”

“Because we can’t keep living like this!” he said. “We need to move on, start fresh. It’s the only thing we can do.”

“What would you have us do?” she said.

“Anything! We could take a vacation and travel together to one of those places we’ve always talked about!” Alexander took a deep breath. “Hell, we could even move away, move out of the city to somewhere in the countryside, like where you grew up. We could try again—”

Marijke whirled around, cutting him off with a pained sound.

“Stop!”

He was quiet and she tried to keep the tears from spilling.

“I can’t talk about this right now,” she said quietly.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” he said.

She picked up another strawberry and sliced it in half against her thumb, then in half again. Tears clouded her eyes.

“Fuck!” Careless, the knife she’d been using to cut the berries had bitten into her finger.

Alexander sighed, taking her hand in his and bringing it under the faucet to wash away the blood. “I’ll cut them, go sit down.”

She walked to their small dining table and sat in one of the rickety wooden chairs that had been a wedding gift from her mother. Alexander followed, holding the two bowls of muesli, and sat down in one of the two other chairs.

“Honey?” he asked.

Marijke nodded, taking the bottle. They ate in silence after that, neither in the mood for conversation.

After breakfast, Alexander retreated to his study and Marijke set to cleaning the house. Architectural plans for the nearby Beeldenpark sat waiting on her desk, but she preferred cleaning. Something about its mindlessness made her feel more in control of herself, like she wasn’t about to fall to pieces any moment.

Barely any dust had settled on the floors since she’d last vacuumed them yesterday, but she tidied the counter and set out some butter to warm for lunch. Outside the window, the sun shone softly on the golden-brown leaves of the Tallow tree in their yard. They’d planted it when Milo was born. The plant had quickly outgrown him.

Once the downstairs was clean, she moved to the bedroom, where the bed sat unmade from last night. She straightened out the crumpled sheets and adjusted the pillows. She heard a door open and close from down the hall. In the bathroom, she scrubbed the sink and tub with a cloth. She wiped down the mirrors too. Her reflection stared back at her, blue eyes tired and haunted, the same colour as her son’s.

The house was clean now, except for one room. She’d been avoiding going into Milo’s bedroom, despite the dust collecting in there. Taking a deep breath, she walked down the hallway. Surprisingly, the door to his room was ajar. Pushing the door open, Marijke walked in.

Inside, Alexander stood next to Milo's bed. He held a child-sized shirt in his hands. With careful movements, he folded it and placed it in a box. Then, finally noticing her, he looked back.

"Oh. Hey."

Marijke's voice came out quivering. "You want to throw out all we have left of our son?"

Alexander frowned. "Marijke, we can't keep doing this to ourselves. It's been months."

"Months?" she said angrily. "Is that all it takes for you to forget him? To decide it's been long enough, that we should 'try again' and replace him?"

"Don't twist my words like that. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that we need to find a way to move on."

"Move on?" Marijke's voice rose. "Milo would still be here if you hadn't been so careless that day!"

"So now you're blaming me!"

"You should've watched him better," Marijke said accusingly.

"I sent him to his room!"

"You promised you'd take care of him, that he'd be safe with you! You should've known he'd sneak out!"

"How could I possibly have known?" Alexander yelled.

"How could you not? Do you know how many times I've wished it was me taking care of him that night instead of you? I could've stopped him..."

Her voice trailed off as Alexander's eyes met hers and she saw their glassy sheen. Her anger receded like the tide. Guilt washed over her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it."

Alexander was quiet. "You think I don't blame myself too, Marijke?"

She laughed bitterly. "Every single day, I wish it was me instead of him."

Alexander wrapped his arms around her.

"It's not fair," she said, crying. "He had so much life left. It should've been me."

"I dream about it almost every night too," Alexander admitted. "I replay that day over and over in my head. If only I hadn't been so opposed to him skateboarding, I could have at least persuaded him to wear a helmet."

"You were right. We can't keep doing this," she said.

He wiped a tear from her cheek with a shaking hand. "It's hard not to."

"It just hurts the same everyday. As bad as when I first got that call from the hospital."

Alexander took her hand in his. "I love you, Marijke. I don't want to lose you as well."

"I love you too. You're right. We need to find a way to heal. For us."

She felt him exhale and his body relaxed slightly as he pulled her back into an embrace. And they stood there, in the silence of their grief, finding solace in each other.

Eventually, Marijke pulled away and looked at him. "Let's finish packing up Milo's things together. We can donate them."

He nodded. "He would've liked that."

And so, they packed up their son's belongings. As they worked, a sense of calm settled over Marijke. It was as if in letting go of these physical reminders, they were also letting go of some of the pain that had ensnared them.

When the room was finally empty, they stood in the doorway, looking at the barren space that had once been filled with laughter and joy.

"It's so empty," Marijke said.

“He’s fishing for blue crabs somewhere up there, I promise,” Alexander said softly.

She turned to him, and saw the glisten of tears in his eyes.

“Let’s go to the pharmacist,” she said.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “I’ll go with you.”

A small smile curved her lips. “I’d like that.”

They walked away, their fingers interlaced, leaving behind the silence of a room that once rang with laughter. A soft wind drifted through the open window at the end of the hall, pushing the door shut.

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