

Power failure

(short story)

Aglaia Bouma

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Power failure

“Hi grandma.” I kiss her cheeks, flabby, wrinkled by 92 years of gravity.

She doesn't respond. Only when I sit down beside her, her small eyes look at me shortly, then into the distance. “And that's Fedra,” she says to the nurse, every word coming out of her mouth sounding like she just learned how to speak.

Very good, I smile. See, all those horror stories about completely demented and often confused were so exaggerated. I wrestle myself out of my coat, which weighs heavily on me in the smoldering temperature for the elderly. Grandma looks at me, searching, maybe a little malicious as well.

“What are you doing here?”

“Visiting you. I came to see how you're doing,” I answer cheerfully.

Her lips press together to form a glum, bitter line. “A story; you're thinking up a story, a fairy tale. It isn't real.”

Let's pretend I didn't hear that.

I pat her on the arm resting on her chair, saggy and languid, with flowing skin on both sides. “How are you doing, Grandma?”

“Me?” She seems surprised at someone asking her this. “I'm doing...” Apparently she doesn't know; she's silent for at least half a minute. During that time I glance at the dreary room, where here and there a gray perm, isolated from society, sits waiting until the body also stops working. A little old woman smiles at me with resignation.

“Terribly! I have to leave; need to go to my parents. Can I borrow some money from you? Maybe I can stay with them, because otherwise I'll have no place to sleep.”

Short circuit, I establish, while my grandmother gibbers on uncertainly about her daughter having a second child, the lack of money from indistinct relatives and her family letting her down. Her brain seems to work completely at random. A spark here and there, power failure halfway through a faltering sentence, electrons going slowly against the current of random words. I nod from time to time, inquire after some people, but give up on that because she seems to get even more confused when she can't place the names mentioned.

While she prattles on, I realize that the last thirty years of her life are gone, eroded by a different kind of current in her brain: a murmuring stream of retirement homes and strokes, gnawing at the banks of the swampy morass in her head.

*

It's high time to get that euthanasia declaration drawn up. A pill, potion or injection please, before I find myself in a place like this. I refuse to sink into the mire of a dream world against my will, especially if it's nasty, like the one my grandmother so clearly doesn't feel at home in. And it's also high time I go about my dormant plan to live life to the fullest, to have a passionately good time, before I reach that ultimate goal of existence, which she now has nearly reached.

How often have I, usually well advanced in the evening and a bottle of wine, firmly resolved to do things differently, starting tomorrow? How often have I celebrated this decision with a lavish glass of brandy, after which the next day hangover prevented me to work up the energy to visit even a museum? Living life to the fullest? Sure, full of booze and nicotine, a weak resistance to the ever-raging stream of thought, imaginary preferred over real, a whole world of my own in my head, where everything is just as dramatic as in day-to-day reality, but luckily not

as real: shocking misery with a positive charge, running on the voltage difference where the truth lies, in between depressing futility and the illusion of meaning.

As an adolescent I did live life as I should. I conducted wide and frequent experiments, regularly screwed up and would have nightlong, drunken discussions about the things people will never agree on. It was exciting but very tiring, and I'm a bit lazy, so instead of traveling to see the promises of two-dimensional images, I discovered the wonderful world of stories and sat reading in a corner. Instead of exploiting my ability to enjoy passionately, I settled for a glass of wine and a cigarette. Intellectually challenging friendships then? I don't think so. I'd rather spend my Sunday listening to the horror world that hacked its way into the demented head of my grandmother.

She tries to stand up, but doesn't have enough power, so she looks at me, again with those malicious, perhaps even reproachful eyes.

"Shall we go then?" she asks sharply.

"Go? Go where?"

She hesitates. Then a random series of neurons fires: "Home of course, to find accommodation for my daughters."

I suppress a sigh. "Grandma, you're already home. You live here. And your daughters are fine; you don't have to worry about them." I want to stroke her hand to reassure her, but I can't bring myself to touch this corpse to be.

Wild panic rushes into her eyes.

"Okay, you're right. I don't drive as well as I did anymore. And Fedra ..."

"Yes?"

"Her I haven't seen in years. I don't understand why." Bitterness clenches her teeth again and once more she tries in vain to get up, muttering: "I think we really should go now, before..."

I get up, put on my coat on and beckon a nurse.

"Well, I am going, grandma. You have a cup of tea." She drops back into her chair, staring uncertainly into nothingness.

"But at what time does the ...?" I hear her ask the nurse, while I take to my heels with lightning speed, going home, to a cold drink as a reward, and a good book to drown her permanent power failure in the current of oblivion.

About the author

In addition to being a writer, Aglaia Bouma (1970) is an entrepreneur, empathic misanthrope, emotional rationalist, light-hearted pessimist and a social *einzelgänger*.

Her Dutch novel 'De dwaling' was reviewed positively and her short stories often win in contests. The Dutch versions of 'Self-portrait' and 'Unleashed' were published in literary journals. 'Heaven on Earth' she read to the audience attending the presentation of an anthology the story was published in. Some other short stories were published in collections as well.

When writing, she tries to describe the characters roaming her fantasy in a way that the resulting story keeps hanging around in the head of the reader for a while. Because you, dear reader, is what it's all about!

If you enjoyed reading this story as much as I did writing it, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review at your favorite retailer.



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