

Child's Play – Catherine R. Newell

With this story, translated from Dutch by the author, Catherine Newell won First Prize in the international writing competition Write Now! Wereldwijd

The little light on the smoke alarm flickered just like it always did. The bathroom fan hummed quietly just like it always did. But tonight Abigail felt completely different from any other night. As she lay back on the hard bunkbed, she could still feel the softness of another woman's pink lips against hers. Laughing through her tears, Abigail looked at the missed calls from her mum and turned her phone off. Good little Abi, faithful daughter of a priest, future obedient wife and mother, had just done what she was never going to do.

Escaping Her Life

The summer sun was going down as Abigail carried her heavy backpack through the doors of the HappyStay Hostel. She could no longer cope with her everyday life in London and her on-and-off relationship. The opportunity to explore her mother's homeland, contemplative books and prayer journal in hand, was more attractive than ever. Wasn't that what she needed? To spend time in God's creation, building her house on a rock again so she could survive storms — just like in Matthew's Gospel. Then everything would be fine.

'Hi, welcome to Veluwezoom National Park. Do you have a reservation?' said the lady at the check-in desk. Her fingers floated lightly on the keyboard as she waited for Abigail to answer.

'Yeah, sorry... I'm Abigail Palmer.'

'Welcome, Abigail! I can see that you have a booking for the whole of August. I'm Liza and I'm the receptionist and barmaid and... well, I do a lot of the random jobs around here. Nice to meet you,' said the young woman as she handed over a key. Abigail was sure that she felt a shiver as Liza's neatly manicured hands brushed against her own.

A few hours later, once her sleeping bag was rolled out on a metal bunk and her teddy bear was safe by her pillow, Abigail walked through the bar area on the way to the quiet terrace. She caught a glance of Liza's long black and silver braids, and suddenly the idea of sitting outside alone wasn't so appealing any more. She stopped by the door. She had come to the Netherlands to escape from her complicated life, not to complicate everything. She didn't need this kind of feeling. She pushed the door handle down and stepped out into the cool evening air.

A couple in their mid-thirties sat on the edge of the terrace with their arms around each other. The gentle breeze carried their laughter to Abigail. She unlocked her phone almost automatically, ready to call Tom, but his last raging words echoed in her head: 'Do you really

love me, or are you just playing make believe?’ Tom had been her childhood sweetheart since they played Mary and Joseph in the Christmas service as six year olds, and they had been talking about marriage since they were 16. He was safe, reliable, caring, the kind of boyfriend any parent would want for their darling daughter. But Abigail had no answer for him yet: was this real love, or just a continuation of a children’s game?

‘Are you all right here in the cold?’ A voice broke her out of her thoughts. The slight trace of an accent she couldn't quite place let her know that it was Liza.

‘I like... I like your accent,’ Abigail said absently, before she put her head in her hands.

‘Thank you,’ Liza came and sat next to Abigail before she added, ‘I grew up in South Africa and my accent just doesn’t want to disappear! And you? You also have a slight accent, right?’

‘Dutch mum, English dad, so...’ while Abigail spoke, she was captivated by Liza's dazzling smile. Her heart started to beat faster. She had come to the Netherlands to do something different than usual, but in a month she would go back home, back to the vicarage, back to real life.

The English Girl

Liza was sitting once again at the front desk. Her black boots lay on the desk, and she was flicking through a book.

‘Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,’ she announced when she saw Abigail's persistent gaze.

‘Sorry? What?’ Abigail blushed, aware that she was staring.

‘It's a book by Jeanette Winterson. I'll lend it to you.’

Abigail hung at the counter. She fiddled nervously with her shoulder-length blonde hair. Smiling at Abigail's reluctance to leave, Liza continued her explanation of the book: ‘It's about an English girl. She grew up in a Pentecostal family, but that didn’t change the fact that she was a lesbian.’ Her deep chestnut eyes moved meaningfully between Abigail's nervous face and the somewhat ragged Bible still in her hand. Abigail muttered something about not being interested as she walked to the dormitories, her muscles visibly tense. Liza sighed and shook her head. She was sure that Abigail was giving her hints, but maybe this was just another case of falling for a cute straight girl.

Struggling with Oranges

The dew was still on the grass when Abigail unrolled her blanket in the shade of an oak tree. She took a deep breath and lay back, surrounded by the light scent of heather. She closed her heavy eyes. She hadn’t slept well the last few nights. In her daily phone calls to her mother, Abigail explained away the fatigue in her voice as a normal consequence of sleeping in a dorm. The whispered conversations between roommates and footsteps in the middle of

the night weren't helping her sleep, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to deny to herself what - or rather who - was really keeping her awake.

Her canvas bag was lying on the ground next to her. Abigail could still make out the faded picture on the front of her bag: children in stereotypical national dress stood hand-in-hand on a globe which floated above the words 'Jesus loves all the children here on earth'. A souvenir of a church camp, and of an easier time in her life, when all her beliefs could be summed up in cute little slogans.

Abigail pulled her sketchpad out of the bag and began to draw the colourful landscape. Sometimes Abigail wrote words above her drawings: Bible verses, hymns, prayers, poems full of worship for God. Her painting of Calvary even hung on the wall of her father's church. But today she only had one image in her head. A face with eyes the colour of burnt umber, with a perfectly chiselled jawline, with those rosy lips, with... Abigail wanted to scream, but only a resigned sigh escaped from her mouth.

'Genesis,' began the book. That felt familiar to Abigail. 'Like most people, I lived for a long time with my mother and father,' continued the words on the first page of the novel that Abigail had stolen from the check-in desk. By the time her rumbling stomach forced her to stop for a late picnic lunch, she had reached the end of Deuteronomy, but you wouldn't find this Pentateuch in the old oak bookcases that housed her father's theological collection. 'Oranges are not the only fruit,' whispered Abigail softly as she finally put the book back in her bag, 'but they are the only fruit allowed in a family like mine.'

Abigail started the walk back to the hostel. The tears slowly rolling down her face were warmed by the setting sun. Against the rhythmic background of her walking shoes on the dusty path, she played with different sentences in her head. 'I like women... I'm a lesbian, or homosexual, or...' she tried the expressions she found in the media, and those from biology textbooks, but the favourite phrase of youth pastors and Bible study guides wouldn't leave her alone: 'I'm struggling with same-sex attraction.' When she swiped her keycard at the door of the hostel, she noticed that her knuckles were hurting. She had been clenching her fists all the way.

Love Isn't Always Easy

'Hi there!' came Liza's voice from the bar area. She extended the last rolling 'r': a giveaway that her childhood was spent in Nelson Mandela Bay and not around the bays of Texel. Abigail inspected her blushing reflection in the window and brushed a few blades of grass out of her hair before following the sound of people chattering.

Liza's toned legs dangled from the bar stool. Across from her sat a young man with stubble and a frown. He looked close to tears as he spoke, and didn't even notice Liza's gesture for Abigail to join them.

'How could he say no? Asking him for his daughter's hand was just a formality,' he held a ring box in one hand and a big glass of lager in the other, 'just because I'm not a lying lawyer or a greedy, soulless banker!'

'Love isn't always easy, huh, Joost?' Liza said sympathetically. She refilled his glass as the man continued with his history of suffering. Abigail realized that Joost was the man she had seen on her first night here whispering sweet words in his girlfriend's ear. How could someone so clearly in love consider leaving his girlfriend over family problems? The man ended his monologue with a desperate sob.

Liza finally broke the silence: 'My parents got married without their parents' permission. My father is an Afrikaner and my mother is Xhosa. And they started dating less than a year after the end of apartheid. It wasn't just their families who objected. The things that people shouted - and still shout - at mixed race couples in the so-called 'Rainbow Nation'! My grandparents wouldn't even look at their wedding pictures. My father's family said they couldn't bear to see their daughter-in-law in an African headdress, and my maternal grandmother cried for weeks at the thought of her daughter marrying an oppressor. Racism nearly ended their relationship several times.'

'But they stayed together?' asked Abigail. She was fascinated by this story of rebellion.

'Yes. Love is a strong force. And it can change people. Even my grandparents are becoming more positive. My grandmother still complains about my accent when I speak Xhosa, but I can live with that!'

When the conversation drew to an end, Abigail saw she had a text from Tom. She barely read it before she wrote an answer: 'Sorry, Tom, but this break really is the end.' She waited for a tidal wave of emotions, or at least tears to come to her eyes, but only relief flooded over her.

This Moment

The tinkle of glasses and the excited chatter of tipsy guests filled the bar area. The old stereo in the corner played a song from the 80s on repeat, but nobody was paying attention. Abigail downed a martini before she walked over to a group of twenty-somethings and joined their circle on the floor.

'We're playing truth or dare. Do you want to join?'

Abigail nodded. She watched, while other players confessed their celebrity crushes, or drunkenly attempted headstands. And then it was her turn.

'So, Abigail, truth or dare?' asked Joost. She didn't have to think for long. She didn't want to reveal her secrets right now: 'Dare.'

'Okay... I dare you kiss Liza.'

Abigail froze.

'Come on! It's just a children's game! Do you dare?' somebody called out.

Abigail turned and looked at Liza. With her hand on Abigail's cheek and her gaze on Abigail's pale face, Liza asked, 'Do you want to?'

Abigail nodded again. A smile spread over her face as her body melted at the taste of Liza's soft lips. There was nothing in the world but her, Liza, and this moment.