

The Bearded Lady

by Annelies Verbeke

Just as no one can combat the greying of the population by dying their hair, so Emmy Debeuckelaer could not keep her sorrow at bay by giving herself a good shave. At the age of about sixteen, when the beard started growing, she'd still been able to deny it a public outing. She shaved in the mornings before leaving for school, where she shut herself in the toilets with a pocket mirror and a Gillette in the afternoons. Contrary to her intentions, she was thereby ensuring that within a few months the excessive down would turn into tough, ever-present stubble. No matter how great Emmy's abhorrence of the role, she became the Bearded Lady.

Other than that she had an extremely attractive body, which led some of her classmates to put a sexual

proposal to her. The scene they had in mind would be played by six actors and a young woman wearing a mask. Emmy declined the offer and was considered ungrateful. Harassment followed, certainly, but more often she was avoided. They did look, boys and girls, women and men, they looked all the time, some biting their lower lip, others horrified, and all with the curiosity with which people witness natural disasters, just before running to safer ground. Deeply hidden in all those eyes was something else, too, something that was ignored because no one could say quite what it was.

Emmy was not the sort of woman who could easily put facial hair out of mind. Before the beard she'd looked forward with confidence to the moment when she would take over her mother's sunbed emporium and develop it into a fullyfledged beauty parlour. Her mother consulted doctors, who prescribed Emmy pills and injections that didn't help. In the end mother and daughter decided, hugging each other in their affliction, that a beard would not be good publicity for the business, and that Emmy's start, like the new investments, would have to wait for the medical life-raft that was no doubt already being inflated in some laboratory or other and would float their way in the

future.

Whole newspaper supplements are printed to convince you that your furniture tells you who you are, that you are what you eat. Lies, all of it, Emmy Debeuckelaer knew. She was her beard.

Although she continued to place her hopes in science, she found it increasingly hard to deny the existence of God. Not so much because she believed that a noble divinity lay behind every ray of sunshine, but rather because she found the idea of punishment more plausible than sheer bad luck. Her beard was a punishment. But for what? She couldn't recall any great personal crimes that would justify such inexorable retribution. She therefore persuaded herself of a previous life full of wild atrocities. A psychic confirmed that suspicion. The clairvoyant discovered that Emmy had been a warrior in the Hundred Years' War, first on the side of the House of Valois, later as a mercenary by the name of Richard the Slayer, deployable on all fronts, ever intent on the satisfaction of his perverse and extremely bloodthirsty destructive urges. Emmy had thought it was something like that.

The discovery of her previous existence at first mainly changed the nature of Emmy's dreams. She'd previously experienced in them a repeat of the

humiliations of the day, or had become in sleep her ideal self. Smooth-cheeked, regal hairstyle in the wind, at the head of a Japanese-style beauty salon — the most successful in Europe — she was surrounded by admirers saying she smelled nice, praising the softness of her moonlit skin. In her new dreams her broad fingers clasped an axe. Her muscular arms, all blood, earth, and sweat, lifted the thing above her head time and again and brought it down with full force, right the way through a fourteenth-century village.

At the start Emmy would never have admitted it to herself, but waking from this kind of dream was just as disappointing as from the one about smooth cheeks. That she had taken on a different guise and was living in a different time from Richard the Slayer did not absolve her of responsibility. She alone could make amends for the centuries-old guilt and get a beardless life in return.

Good things come to good people, thought Emmy. She retrained as a nurse and was able to start even before graduating. The care sector was understaffed, overburdened, and underpaid; a nurse with a beard was, as a consequence, no problem. At least, that was the theory. One little old man had an anxiety attack every time she walked into his room on night duty and

two other patients brazenly asked her whether she was undergoing gender reassignment. There were people with empathy and people with advice. The ones who annoyed Emmy most of all, however, were self-declared fellow-sufferers.

The patient in room 432, for example. Emmy couldn't remember her name, probably because after each encounter her brain purged itself as thoroughly as it could of all trace of the woman. Her tragedy was that she'd come no closer to modelling work than a vegetable-slicing portrait on the side of a kitchen shop's delivery van. She'd made reference to it in every conversation before realising it wasn't enough and never would be, that there wasn't even any such thing as enough.

While the woman griped, Emmy looked with a smile at the clouds, which disappeared more rapidly than normal behind the window frame, as if they felt trapped, vicariously embarrassed by the sight of her beard. The frustrated model considered her a good listener.

Her obese colleague Caroline was likewise drawn to Emmy time and again by an assumed kinship. At least once a week she enumerated all the forms of discrimination that had befallen her, all the ways fat

people were disadvantaged by society. The Bearded Lady again showed herself to be a benign listener, who never strayed into making comparisons, never said that fat people should simply eat less whereas for unwanted facial hair there was no remedy. She mentally christened Caroline 'Calorine'.

In her dreams Emmy was less accommodating. As Richard the Slayer she kicked in doors to houses where Calorine, the failed model, the little old man who was afraid of her and all the tip-givers, sympathisers and tormentors that had presented themselves in Emmy's life were hiding beneath rotten floorboards. They wore fourteenth-century clothes and held their breath. Richard the Slayer would walk through the room with a heavy tread, smash some furniture and curse threateningly to himself, as if incensed by the empty house. After stamping resoundingly to the front door, he would open and shut it without going out. As soon as the first sigh of relief rose from the floor, Richard stormed at it with his axe. A massacre later, Emmy would wake feeling relaxed.

All the same, when she then looked at herself in the bathroom mirror — the thing was indistinguishable from the rest of the bathroom fittings — she immediately lost heart. She was a woman with a light-

blue silk dressing gown and a full beard that seemed to be growing more and more rapidly.

Since her good deeds as a nurse clearly weren't sufficient to atone for the guilt of her previous life, Emmy decided to take a voluntary job at a shelter for the homeless on her nights off. Now and then there were fights, but usually it was quiet. A schizophrenic woman kept phoning her up with a knitting needle she'd pushed through one of her dreadlocks. Somewhat shocked by the size of the holes in the social safety net, Emmy pressed the three middle fingers of her right hand to her cheek so that thumb and little finger formed the ends of a receiver.

'Don't worry,' she whispered to her finger. 'I'm here to show you that it could be worse.' She initially felt ashamed of saying such a thing, but when the woman, after a slight delay, burst into assenting howls of laughter, Emmy suspected she'd spoken the truth. She would happily change places with the bag lady. Better hopeless than bearded.

She wondered whether she in turn could find comfort from individuals who had suffered even worse punishments. She went in search of pictures of people put on show in those long-abolished travelling circuses, or in cabinets of curiosities. Hiki, the scaly

man from Nebraska. Stella Blanchea, the woman with a tail. Betty Williams, who had the misshapen limbs of a twin sister growing out of her side. The Sanders family, with their leopard skin. Even hairiness could be worse, as proven by Krao, the 'Missing Link Girl' from Laos, whose entire body was shrouded in a coat of fur. 'One of us, one of us,' the photos chanted. Emmy belonged with them, just as a person belongs with his or her family, inextricably bound to them without having chosen to be. Emmy didn't believe that their success and the money they made from their handicaps had made them happy. In fact she became all the more convinced that the world she belonged to was peopled by a sad troupe, a vanload of weeping clowns, however broad might be the smile into which the armless among them inserted a cigarette with their toes.

Did love bring Emmy consolation? Hardly.

At the hospital, Bart, a urologist, courted her. He stayed the night ten times or so and came out with wise generalities about mankind such as: 'We humans are certainly the only creatures afraid of death, yet compared to us, animals are free of an even greater fear. The fear that governs us from our first breath to our last sigh is above all the fear of sorrow. An entire lifetime spent worrying about missing out on

happiness — and then you die.'

The fact that as he spoke these words a breadcrumb clung to his forehead so endeared Emmy to him that she briefly abandoned her reticence.

He never said anything about her beard and Emmy had to accept that. But after a few weeks she started to get the uneasy feeling that his ignoring the beard seemed to insinuate that she too had largely escaped Bart's attention.

One day, while shaving, she snapped at him that he needn't act as if it didn't exist.

'As if what doesn't exist?' Bart asked impatiently. He wanted to leave for a party.

'Stop play-acting. You're making us both ridiculous.'

He stared at her in exaggerated bewilderment.

'Your girlfriend is shaving her beard. Don't you find that strange?'

Bart shrugged. If he said now that he didn't see her beard she'd be furious with him.

'I don't see that beard,' he said.

After she'd been furious with him, and he'd asked himself in a very loud voice what he'd been supposed to say, repeated that he loved her and to her dismay even resorted to pleading, they decided to give the party a miss, rapidly downed a bottle of Cointreau

between them and ended up between the sheets. There she asked him whether she could scratch him really hard, since he struck her as someone she wanted to have under her fingernails and she also asked, sounding far more fragile now, far deeper into the night: 'If at the end of your life you've been hurt more than you've hurt others, does that make you a loser?' As an answer he hugged her until the next afternoon.

It seemed a harmonious time between Emmy and Bart, but you never know what other people are thinking. Even if they say something exactly the way you once put it, it's hard to believe they mean the same thing.

Rather unexpectedly he said he had trouble dealing with the mistrustful way she approached other people, her misanthropy. She described that allegation as deadly, saying her reticence towards others was less now than it had ever been. More arguments followed about her beard, how he dealt with it, how she dealt with it, quarrels that were no longer settled in each other's arms. What Emmy and Bart shared was ultimately no more than the umpteenth love that came down to having to convince the other person that they were the one more beset by madness, the one less in tune with reality. In the end Bart fled to a beardless

hepatologist called Patsy.

Emmy remained alone and firmly resolved to look at love from a distance in future. For women that was generally more difficult, she realised, biologically speaking but even more on a semantic level: a man is restless, a woman hysterical. At work she frequently stopped to examine the intriguing portrait of a bald man mounted on the wall in the corridor next to the secretarial offices. Ignaz Semmelweis was his name, according to the caption. Emmy never looked up who he was – she assumed he had something to do with founding the hospital – but because of the portrait she often thought about baldness in men. How baldness is worse in women. How for a man it's no catastrophe if he lacks a beard.

Yet she'd looked into the eyes of enough flawed men to know that despair and impotence were sexless, just like short-sightedness and malice, and Emmy did not wish to become involved with gender-bound misanthropy. The more couples she observed, the more relieved she felt at being spared their exhausting fulfilments in life. You could see it in their faces. Everyone had insulted everyone else again. At home silences or tears would fall, and there were rifts, with an eye to something better, until there was no avoiding

the realisation that it only ever seems that way.

Emmy Debeuckelaer raced through her life, past adults with dirty nappies, vagrants with psychoses, couples with problems, strangers with stares and recurring extras who liked her but didn't know her. Sometimes she would turn abruptly to people and ask what they were looking at. One time a woman answered: 'I was looking at your dress, it's lovely,' and it cost Emmy quite some effort not to believe her. And every night again: the axe, the screams, the perforated intestines, the taste of human flesh, the relief.

God took all the time in the world to put her patience to the test. She was approaching forty, Emmy was. Her beard was already showing its first grey hairs. The guilt had still not been atoned.

There were days when she doubted whether one lifetime would be enough to set right all Richard's wrongdoing, especially since she enjoyed it so much in her sleep. There were days when the beard seemed more like bad luck after all, days when she no longer believed in recompense, even though she had nothing else to go on, days too when she believed that all goodness begins and ends with yourself, which needn't necessarily be a problem. There were ominous days when she thought: from now on everything is full of

flies. Emmy started to see people who wronged her as ever-shrinking sculptures on the palm of her hand. When she closed and opened it again, they were gone. She learned how to look at people, saw that they could continually and permanently damage themselves by their efforts to change course. She'd finally worked out how to describe what was hidden inside them when they looked at her forested chin; they saw their own scars, concealed in the darkest passageways of their soul, the ghosts of their childhood, the traumas woven into their DNA for generations.

There was a morning when Emmy woke from a dream in which Richard had been lying on his back in the grass staring at the clouds and the migrating birds flying past them. She had no idea what his fourteenth-century brain thought about that, perhaps Richard didn't think anything at all, but it was clear he'd been behaving the same way all night, briefly no longer a slayer. It made her feel as if she'd lost something essential and immediately forgotten what. It felt good.

There are people who laugh till they cry. With Emmy Debeuckelaer it was the other way round. In the deepest pit of her sorrow she suddenly felt immensely happy. What a morning! It was a morning on which she was the only glittering grain in the awe-inspiring

mountain of variation that nature had managed to bring forth, not a type that would set the tone for future generations but a sublime one-off. A gift is also an abnormality, went the cry of jubilation in Emmy's chest, and she even turned it around: an abnormality is also a gift. She felt a true and sovereign aristocrat, that morning, and for a handful of mornings after, scattered untidily across a life that advanced just as quickly as anyone else's. As for the beard, that remained.

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Translated into English by Liz Waters.