

Valentine Aafjes

Time: present

Valentine slides his rucksack into the coach's luggage compartment. It is a T916 Acron, manufactured by Belgian company Van Hool, with a 462hp engine. It is flame red and shines like new. It almost makes you look forward to the journey to the Ardennes.

Almost, because, unfortunately, the rest of class 2C is going, too. 'Move, Professor,' says someone behind him.

Apparently, he hasn't moved out of the way fast enough because he gets a thump in his back.

Driss, of course. He has used his sports bag as a boxing glove. That's what Driss looks like: a boxer. To his great sorrow, Valentine still has the slight frame of a primary-school pupil. Driss, on the other hand, is big and muscular.

One consolation is that he not only has the body but also the brain of a boxer. If you get a lot of whacks and bumps to the head, it can cause brain damage. Muhammad Ali, for example, ended up suffering from a degenerative disease. It wouldn't surprise Valentine if Driss had something similar because, otherwise, why would he act like a gorilla?

Driss digs his elbow into him. ‘What’s that stupid grin on your face for?’

‘Nothing,’ Valentine replies quickly, before he gets another dig. Fortunately, Driss has a three-second attention span. He has already forgotten Valentine and saunters across the schoolyard with his hands in the pockets of his Adidas track-suit bottoms.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ a girl with long blonde hair and a wheeled case says to Valentine. ‘Driss didn’t really mean anything by it.’

Jessica. She is wearing a tight shirt with ‘Keep out!’ written on the front.

Valentine mumbles something incomprehensible back. If he has to work out a problem in maths, he knows exactly how to go about it. Explaining to someone how a diesel engine works? Piece of cake. But holding a simple, spontaneous conversation seems beyond his brain and his tongue. *Can I help you with your luggage?* He rehearses saying it in his mind.

Too late. Ben van Poppel pops up in his camouflage trousers. He places Jessica’s case in the luggage compartment without asking her.

‘Thanks,’ she says.

Valentine flees on to the bus. The driver’s seat is empty. He resists the urge to climb behind the steering wheel and drive off – it’s an automatic, so it wouldn’t be terribly difficult. Irmak is the only one already sitting on the bus. Her bright blue headscarf almost hurts Valentine’s eyes. She nods at him then goes back to looking out of the window at the throng of parents and students with their cases and bags. Unlike the other girls in class 2C, she never gets hysterical. He slides on to the seat behind her and puts his plastic bag down next to him. It has in it the things he needs for the journey. Before he has the

chance to get anything out, a thin man in a long raincoat steps on to the bus. It's probably the driver, since Valentine has never seen him before. Everything about the man is beige. His clothes, his complexion, even his thin hair. He pauses for a moment then walks a little way down the aisle.

'Miss Fox not here yet?'

They say that there are no stupid questions, but this one is particularly idiotic, thinks Valentine. As if his teacher has secreted herself on the luggage rack or hidden behind one of the seats.

'Yes, she is,' Irmak replies. 'She's over there.' She points toward the schoolyard entrance.

'Thank you,' says the man, stepping back off the bus.

Valentine gets *Darkness over Sethanon* and his iPod out of his bag.

Earphones in. Music on.

As the sounds penetrate his head, he looks at the beige man, who is talking to Miss Fox. It's like a silent film. Valentine sees their lips move, but he hears Hardwell. Miss Fox makes a disappointed face and the man nods and disappears.

The end.

Valentine immerses himself in his book and shuts himself off from the rest of the world. While he goes on adventures in Krondor, the bus gradually fills.

'Help! Take cover!' Valentine, having been disturbed, looks up.

Driss again. What a surprise.

'A book!' he shouts. 'Help! Help!' He recoils like he's being attacked by a poisonous snake.

Inkie and Fleur shake with laughter. They have no idea how laughable they look themselves, in their almost identical clothing: a purple shirt and jeans with a horizontal tear at

knee height on each leg. With Inkie being so small and Fleur very tall, they look like a comedy duo.

With a calm expression on his face, Valentine turns off the music. Not that he really needs to, because Driss talks so loudly the whole bus can enjoy what he's saying.

'What kind of loser brings a book these days?' he bellows.

You're the loser, Valentine wants to say. *Can you even read with that battered brain of yours?*

But Driss has already grabbed the book and it is being passed around the bus.

Until Miss Fox sees what's happening and holds out her hand.

'Boys! Boys!'

'I'm a girl, actually,' says Fleur. But she still gives the book to Miss Fox, while smiling apologetically at Inkie.

'Sit down, Driss.' Miss Fox waits until he does what she says then studies the book cover. 'Looks exciting. Is it yours, Valentine?'

'Who else's?' Inkie calls out, and she laughs once again as she pushes a lock of black hair to one side with a mannered gesture. It immediately falls back in front of her eyes.

Miss Fox gives the book back to Valentine. He sticks it between the folding table and the seat in front of him. Hopefully, they will leave him alone if he plays a game on his phone.

Mr Van Piere enters the bus, panting. 'I'm sorry for being so late,' he says. 'My wife ... I just had to ...'

'Just had to ...' Tygo stands up and moves his hips back and forth suggestively.

'Blimey!' yells Fleur. 'Do you know how old he is?' Mr Van Piere is as blind as a bat, but there's nothing wrong with Miss Fox's eyesight.

'What's that supposed to mean?' she asks coolly.

'It's just a happy dance, Miss.' Tygo grins. 'Because we don't have to do any work this week.'

Miss Fox places her hands on her sizeable belly. Valentine suspects that it contains twins, because otherwise she is pregnant with a giant.

‘That’s what you think,’ she says to Tygo. ‘It’s not called “work week” for nothing. You can take the first turn at doing the chores.’ Irmak applauds. ‘One–nil to Miss Fox.’

Miss Fox celebrates in silence and turns toward Mr Van Piere. Tygo sticks his tongue out at her behind her back.

‘There’s no need to act so weird,’ Irmak comments.

‘It’s not so strange that old people do it,’ says Jessica. ‘My grandma and granddad are still crazy about each other, for example, and ...’

‘Don’t say it! Don’t say it!’ Fleur shakes her hands wildly then uses them to cover her eyes. ‘No! It’s already too late. Now I’m going to see that image all the time.’

Valentine wonders why some girls have to react in such an exaggerated way. Angelina Jolie isn’t that theatrical, even when she’s acting.

‘Is everyone here?’ Miss Fox asks.

‘No, Miss!’ Jessica calls out. ‘Mila’s not here yet.’

‘Mila’s not coming, unfortunately,’ says Miss Fox. ‘She fell ill suddenly last night.’

‘I’ll do a count of the students.’ Mr Van Piere puts his bag down. It is the same leather satchel that he brings to chemistry class every day. It always contains a lunchbox with two postmen’s elastic bands around it in the shape of a cross, with an apple held in place underneath it. He always eats it in the classroom, after the bell goes at the end of the third period.

‘One of your five a day?’ someone once asked, but Mr Van Piere didn’t see the funny side. He has the sense of humour of a tree stump.

‘Hello there, everyone!’ A huge guy with a beard enters the bus

and pauses on the top step. His linen trousers are held up by red braces and his stomach is almost bursting the buttons on his checked shirt. 'I'm your driver, Jan. Is everyone on board?' 'Twenty-four pupils,' says Mr Van Piere.

Miss Fox nods. 'That's the full complement.'

'Okey-dokey.' The driver steps back outside. Valentine watches through the window as he closes the luggage compartment doors. Jan then climbs back on board and takes his seat behind the steering wheel.

'Welcome, youngsters,' he says through the microphone. 'We're going to have a great time in the Ardennes!' The doors close with a hiss. The sound of cheering fills the bus.

Jessica waves out of the window. 'Bye, Mum!'

Valentine had already said goodbye to his mother that morning. She works for the police and has to start early. The driver beeps his horn and drives out on to the street. Valentine puts his earphones back in and turns up the music extra loud. Now he can read undisturbed. He goes to put his phone away and ... Hold on. A message has arrived. He taps on the icon.

play my dvd!

it's the one with the yellow cover

do it within five minutes

otherwise all hell will break loose

What a strange text. Valentine doesn't know whether to laugh or be worried. The sender's number doesn't look familiar to him and there's no profile photo.

wtf, he writes back.

The response arrives immediately: this is not a joke!

Valentine looks at Driss, who is also using his phone.

He is virtually certain that Driss sent him that message! He wants Valentine to take it seriously, of course, and search for the DVD. And if he finds it and plays it ...

He can just see the images and sounds in his mind: abuse and derision, the dog turd in his locker with a flag on top on his birthday ... Driss would have secretly filmed all of it, of course, and put it on the DVD. All hell would certainly break loose for Valentine if he followed the instructions. The whole of class 2C would laugh themselves silly all week long.

Too bad for Driss. He wasn't going to fall for it.

Valentine slid the phone into his pocket and went back to his book.

Walter van Piere

Time: six months earlier

The heating was blasting out. It was very warm in the staff room. Walter would have liked to have taken off his jacket but he was afraid there might be visible patches of sweat under his armpits. 'As always, the history department will organise the Rome trip for the Third Years,' said Meike Fox.

Walter had always wanted to visit Rome. To see the Colosseum and the eye in the dome of the Pantheon and toss a coin into the Trevi Fountain. It had never happened. His wife didn't like to travel and by the time he'd finally built up the courage to go alone she had had the accident.

'For 2A and 2B, we thought London,' Fox continued. 'The supervision has already been arranged. That just leaves 2C.' A faint groan echoed around the room: 2C was not the easiest class.

An awful class, actually, thought Walter. The pupils called him Vampire if they thought he couldn't hear them and they had no respect whatsoever.

'I don't think we should immerse 2C in culture,' said Fox. 'We tried that last year and the museums were not very pleased

with our students. We have therefore gone for an active work week in the Ardennes this time round. The class will go abseiling, build rafts, go wild-water canoeing, mountain biking – that sort of thing. So ...’ Fox looked at her colleagues expectantly. ‘Who would like to go along as a supervisor?’

Everyone stared outside or down at their phones.

‘Come on, people, a little more enthusiasm,’ said Fox. The red tail of the little fox tattooed on her upper arm peeped out from under her short sleeve.

It was a mystery to Walter why so many women these days wanted to look like salty old sea dogs.

‘How about you, Meike?’ said a voice at the back. ‘At least you click with them.’

Fox became slightly flushed and stroked her belly. ‘Actually, I would have liked to have kept this one for myself, but ...’

‘You’re pregnant!’ someone suggested.

Fox nodded and there was a murmur of congratulations. Some women jumped up to kiss her. Walter surreptitiously looked at his watch.

‘In June, I’ll be almost seven months gone,’ said Fox, once everyone had sat down again. ‘You wouldn’t want me to hang off a mountain on a rope with a belly this big.’ She spread her arms to the size of a large beach ball.

Everyone grinned.

‘So, the question remains: who would like to supervise 2C?’ Walter’s stomach churned at the thought.

‘Not me,’ said a colleague. ‘I can already predict that it will be a disaster.’

Life itself is a disaster, thought Walter.

‘Don’t be so pessimistic.’ Fox put her hands on her hips. ‘A survival week could be particularly educational for this class. It will stretch the pupils’ boundaries ...’

The biology teacher let out a mocking laugh. 'If there's one thing they don't need to learn, it's how to stretch boundaries.' 'Their own personal boundaries,' Fox continued stoically. 'The positive experiences they gain will increase their self-confidence. And that's not to mention the opportunities for group bonding ...'

Walter suppressed a yawn.

'As far as I'm concerned, they can just stay at home,' the biology teacher said forcefully.

Fox could no longer hide her annoyance. 'All the pupils of this school have the right to a work week. And that includes 2C.'

But still no one was prepared to volunteer. 'Fine,' said Fox curtly. 'Then I will have to take on the role of supervisor. Despite my pregnancy. But someone else still has to come along.' The staff room turned awfully quiet again. Until Walter's phone started ringing.

'Sorry.' He felt the heat rushing to his face.

'It's my wife. I have to take this.' He hurried out into the corridor and closed the door behind him.

'Where are you?' asked his wife in her fragile voice.

He slipped into the toilets. 'I told you I had a meeting.'

'But the home help has already left. Can't you come home a little earlier?'

'As soon as we're finished here, okay? I'll come as soon as I can, sweetheart.' He slid the phone into the inside pocket of his jacket and dabbed his forehead and wrists with water from the tap to cool them. Reluctantly, he returned to the staff room.

Why had everyone stopped talking as soon as he walked in?

'Sorry,' he repeated. 'Have you already finished?'

'We've taken a vote,' said the colleague next to him. 'It was unanimous. You're going to the Ardennes with Meike and 2C.'

'But my wife –' Van Piere started to say.
But nobody listened to him. Everyone wanted to go home or
out for a smoke.
'It'll be fun,' said Fox, and she gave Walter a little smile.
He imagined taking a machine gun out of his satchel and
mowing the lot of them down.