

Four short stories from
Nens de llet (2016)
(A handful of kids)
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The Circus

Mother had abandoned us, God knows why, a year after my birth, and father, who at the time was a lion tamer, took me here and there on the work truck, following the fascinating but worthless pace of a rundown and shabby circus. I've kept the black-and-white pictures of that time, very faded owing to the ravages of time, surrounded by elephants, monkeys and tigers. I smile as happy children do, cuddling into an acrobat or the bearded lady, my second mother.

The day that one of the lions - the oldest and most resentful - puked father's hairy arm in the middle of the ring, the bearded lady took good care of me for quite a while. She shaved her beard and her moustache so that I could snuggle into her and when father left hospital with just one arm, he soon felt in the mood to start a family - a real one - away from the circus. Once and for all, he left the whip, the limelight and the clapping; and her, now without a beard, went back to use her name as a young girl - when she wasn't so hairy. Together we went to live to a small, rented flat in a commuting town. I was eight at the time. I attended the local school and quickly learnt to read and write. At first, I longed for the circus. I missed its people and animals, but I soon made new friends and everything ran like clockwork. Father worked in a car factory and my second mother cleaned houses and flats. Early in the morning, father left for work, not even having a bite to eat and my second mother locked herself in the bathroom for a very close shave, even those days when she didn't have to take me to school. We lived happily for a few years, but one Friday afternoon "Snip!", a factory machine swallowed father's only arm left and our life got very complicated. Father would just sit on the sofa and couldn't care less about anything, and my second mother, under depression, hardly shaved and in

a little while, I became the laughingstock of the school. It took us a long time to leave that hellish situation behind until the day our former circus - thank goodness! - came to town for a few days. We packed straightaway and returned eight years later, father without his arms and my second mother more bearded than ever. She looked like a woodcutter. The circus had hardly changed, and the people and the animals welcomed us with open arms, not asking any questions or requiring an explanation. That same evening we were already working: my second mother in the role of the bearded woman; I raised and lowered the curtain, avoiding the people's unwanted looks; and father - what a great artist! - kept the lions at bay with the whip in his mouth "Crack! Crack!" only front teeth and back teeth, and the audience clapped and clapped, highly excited by the show.

The Basket

Early in the morning, after breakfast, mother gives a basket full of fruits, greens and vegetables to her daughter and says: “now that you’re old enough, sweetheart, you can go to grandma’s house on your own and bring her this food that she needs to help her recover.” The girl eagerly takes the basket handle with both her hands - my goodness! It’s heavy! -, and a bit overwhelmed by responsibility, innocently kisses her mother on the cheek and heads towards grandma’s house in the middle of the forest. She gets there in a couple of hours. Exhausted, she leaves the basket on the ground and knocks on the door.

“Knock, knock.”

No answer. She waits for around three or four minutes. She passes the time picking up a few wildflowers. She tries again:

“Knock, knock.”

She waits for a few more minutes in front of the door, anxious, she’s so worried that she bites her nails. She can’t wait any longer:

“Grandmaaaaa! Open the doooooor! It’s meeeeeee!”

No sign of grandma. The girl leaves her nails alone and starts ripping up the handful of wildflowers until they’re all gone. Then, angry like a bull, with the patent-leather shoes from her first communion, she kicks the door down. She picks up the basket full of fruits, greens and vegetables, goes in the house and shouts:

“Grandmaaaa! Where are youuuuuu?”

She can hear the echo:

“Youuuuuu, youuuuuu, youuuuuu...”

She leaves the basket on the kitchen table and starts searching the house, hoping to find grandma: dining room, bedrooms, bathrooms, wardrobes... Not a trace. “Maybe

she's just left for a short while," she thinks. Meanwhile, she takes the fruits, greens and vegetables out of the basket to keep them cool, as mother does, so that they won't go off. She opens the fridge door and heigh-ho, that's grandma full-length, completely naked and with her knitting glasses on. Her nipples, ears, two fingers from the right hand and three from the left are missing. No toes are left. Even before closing the fridge door, she gets hold of the basket apace and hastens to return home like lightning.

The Parrot

Before I was born, my name was meant to be Enric, like my father and my grandfather - and my great-grandfather and my great-great-grandfather - but when I came out my mother's womb, I lacked an eye - I might have lost it going through the cervix. Unhappy with the birth, father and mother got back to business as soon as they could, and even before a year had gone by, she already gave birth to a baby with both eyes, a proper Enric. When I was old enough to ask questions, whatever the consequences I wanted to know why the fuck my name was Polyphemus and not Blackbeard. I couldn't care less if my name wasn't Enric. Screw the family tradition on my father's side... but my good eye was on the right side and not in the middle of the forehead (on the left side I just had a hole). Every time I looked myself in the mirror or went through the family pictures, I always saw a tender Pirate, a half-made character but having a lot of potential and an entire life in front of me, not just an ordinary cyclops, obtuse and always angry. On Christmas day, the Christmas log finally pooped a black eyepatch for me and half of the job was already done. Every day my younger brother resembled my father more and more; however, I started behaving like a real pirate. At school I didn't do a stroke of work, I drank and smoked on the quiet, didn't brush my teeth and couldn't be bothered with going to the doctor's. On my sixteenth birthday - then I already had a beard -, I left home and never went back again. I began selling hash and marihuana in a seedy flat and quickly made some cash. I bought a tropical parrot on the black market. He always slept with me and went everywhere with me perched on my left shoulder. His name was Enric and thanks to him, I was never sent to the clink. He could smell treasons from a distance. We stole together, scammed everyone, blackmailed if need be... After hash, we started selling synthetic drugs, after synthetic drugs, we went on to

sell coke and horse. Later, it was arms trafficking, prostitution and illegal gambling. At thirty-five, I had lost half of my teeth - and the other half were yellow - and drank rum like there was no tomorrow. I got one leg amputated and replaced it for a cutting-edge wooden-like one. Limping on the street “clock, clock”, one day I bumped into an antiquarian, on whose counter an enigmatic and violent eighteenth-century sable was glowing. I fell in love straightaway. I went in to buy it and a few days later I stabbed my brother in the heart one afternoon when he came to ask me for some cash.

The Hand

At home, we were poor: two young children and our father nowhere to be seen. From time to time, mother would go out to steal so that we could have something to eat in the evenings and we did not have to go to bed on an empty tummy. She didn't steal much, only what was strictly necessary for her children not to starve to death. On one occasion, at Christmas time, she stretched her hand too far and the village butcher, in an almost reflex reaction, "plonk", picked up his knife and mother was left without her right hand.

Thank God, it wasn't her good hand, and neither my sister nor me were with her at the time. Everybody in the village was talking about it. They said mother had fainted straight-away, blood was gushing left and right to the extent that it had splashed all over the shop! The butcher, poor him, didn't know what to do. For a few moments, he was completely paralysed, incredulous, steel in hand and his eyes wide open, staring off into space. He took, first, her hand with her fingers still grabbing the beef steaks, and then, the rest of mother's body, and he rushed her to hospital. He himself gave the doctors chapter and verse on what had exactly happened. But they couldn't even save her little finger. They provided her with a brand new, sturdy plastic hand, one of those that don't move, and painted the nails of both hands in the same colour.

We were never on the verge of starving again. The butcher often came to see mother and presented us with all kinds of meats: cold cuts, sausages, ribs, bacon rashers... He was a cheerful man, a jolly fellow, paunchy and full-cheeked. He liked to dress up as a woman at the carnival, and a few hairs came out of his ears and nostrils. You'd never guess that he had cut off someone's hand. He'd stay for dinner and tell outlandish stories that would make my sister and me laugh a lot. When we went to

bed, the butcher kissed mother's plastic hand over and over again, kneeling in full repentance, and begged her to forgive him. Mother was very fond of him, told him that there was no need to forgive him for anything, that there were much worse things in life, and wiped his tears with her plastic hand's thumb.

After a while, we all went to live at the butcher's house. What a surprise to see that he still kept mother's old hand. He had it on a pedestal, stuffed and surrounded by flowers. He adopted us as his legitimate children, taught me the trade, and paid my sister's university fees. When he retired, I took over the butcher's shop myself. He was in poor health, and before he died, he made me promise to take care of mother and never to cut anybody's hand or finger. I said, "And if the same happens to me. You couldn't help chopping her hand off." "Then," he replied, "you will take full responsibility for your acts and will undertake to make the mutilated person happy for the rest of their life." I hope to live up to it.