

## The street by Trisse Gejl

Translated by Jennifer Alexander

### Author Bio

Trisse Gejl is an award-nominated Danish author and journalist who has written eight novels, novellas, short stories and written for the theatre. She made her debut with the acclaimed *Where the Dandelions Grow* in 1995. Her novels have been nominated for several literary awards, including Danish Radio's Literary Award in 2007 and 2012. Her most recent novel, *Ulvekvinten* was short-listed for the 2016 Blixen Literary Award.

### Translator's note

Trisse Gejl's writing tends to probe the psychology and emotions of modern life and relationships with themes of loss, societal expectations, family roles and mental health. Her understated style means that what is *not* said carries as much weight as what is - that a great deal exists in the pauses and spaces in between. While translating, my main concern was to reproduce her tone correctly, achieve the same understated restraint, and leave the ambiguities standing.

## The Street

I observed them from the living room window, the day they moved in. It was afternoon when the removal van pulled up to the kerb and they started lifting in boxes and monstrous sofas. The frost had released its grip of the earth and the street was bathed in a pale light.

It wasn't the first time new people had moved into the street, but it was the first time in the fourteen years we had lived there that we were getting new immediate neighbours.

I waited a few days and dug out a few stems of my late autumn raspberries and went and knocked on the door one afternoon. It was the woman who opened up. Malene, she was called. She was a little younger than I had reckoned from the window. She had on jeans and a paint-splattered jumper and apologised, saying they were painting the whole of the upstairs. On the floor of the living room, a boy, about four years old, was lying watching television.

We had a coffee in the kitchen, chatting a bit about this and that, and it was still difficult to judge what type of people they were.

Now and then I would meet her with the boy in the street, as we both lugged our heavy shopping bags over from Irma supermarket. We sat them down on the pavement and chatted a bit. I offered them the loan of any tools they might need, as we had also refurbished a few years before and had pretty much everything. The husband was a violinist, it seemed. Malene was from Fyn and was a school teacher. Out of work at the moment, having moved because of her husband's new job.

I met Malene's husband in a rather unexpected way when, one evening in May, I was on my way to bed and wanted to close the bedroom window. Something or other caught my eye, and there he was on their ground floor with a pair of binoculars pointing right towards our bedroom on the first

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floor. Startled, I snapped the window shut and drew the blind down. I sat on the bed for a while just looking at its white slats.

I didn't say anything to Peter.

It happened again some evenings later. I was on my way to bed, it was warm and I was only wearing pants and a bra. I reached for the window handle, and there with my whole upper body leaning out of the window, I saw the binoculars again, pointed straight at me. I slowly let go of the handle and straightened up. I stayed standing there looking back at him in the dark. There was an indefinable beauty and vulnerability to the situation. I felt like a framed picture there in the lit up window. We stood like that for a bit and stared at each other, until he lowered the binoculars in a sudden movement and disappeared.

I still didn't say anything to Peter.

The night encounters repeated a few times. In a cream-coloured, lace bra, which lifted my cleavage a little. One time, I let my hand slide slowly from my neck down over my chest and midriff. Just like that, in a chance movement.

In the middle of June we held our annual street party. The lilacs were in bloom. Further down the street, Pia's dahlias spilled out over the pavement. The kids had grown one year bigger, maybe a new one had been born. The party was always a kind of ritual salute to life in Emdrup Engvej at that particular time.

We had applied to close the street and blocked it off with official candy-striped barriers at each end so the children could cycle and roller-skate all day without worrying about traffic. Tables and chairs and kettle barbecues were carted out and as the afternoon slowly progressed, a long table was built up in the middle of the street. We covered one end with parasols, as someone or other had seen on the weather forecast that there was a risk of showers into the evening.

First we played rounders, kids against adults. Then each went to their own place to prepare the dishes they would contribute. Peter baked Italian bread while I made a rice terrine and we had sampled the white wine. In between times, I wondered if our neighbours would turn up. They hadn't replied to the invitation.

I put on a light, figure-hugging dress and a summer hat, just for fun, and we took the food out.

It was only after the welcome drinks were poured and I, as chair, had welcomed everyone to our twelfth summer street party, when our new neighbours came rushing out with an old plastic table and a few chairs. They were sorry that they were late, but the husband, who was apparently called Kasper, had been playing a concert in Helsingør. The street's residents greeted them and I helped them set up their table next to ours, and ended up sitting beside Malene.

- Nice hat, she smiled. She was wearing long black trousers and a busy, flowery top.

- This is just my summer party hat, I said.

She tried to hand out the cutlery but their boy was clinging to her leg and wouldn't speak to anyone. Søren from number 70 made an attempt.

- We're not such a scary bunch really, here in the street, he smiled.

Later, after the food had been passed around several times and more wine had been drunk, he asked Malene what had brought them to Emdrup of all places. She looked at him for a moment then burst into a loud laugh:

- I've been running away from the suburbs ever since I grew up in one, and think about it, I've just bloody ended up in another one anyway, she laughed.

- What's wrong with the suburbs? Søren smiled.

- Nothing, said Malene. It's just a sort of ...non-place, where most people feel safe, because they grew up in one somewhere or other. And even though we swear we'll never go back to one, we

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end up here anyway. Bingo, she said, and raised her glass. Maybe she had had enough to drink already. - Bingo, she repeated, - so everything that we didn't know we needed is gathered here within a manageable radius, and we settle down. Then we live here, right by schools and sports centres and green spaces and sensible distances to cycle into town and believe that this is the place for us to be.

- But isn't it the place for us? asked Gitte, who sat diagonally opposite her, and who always got into long chats with people.

- Is it? said Malene. - Is this here what we live? Or is it just a practical arrangement? What do you do Gitte?

- I'm a nurse.

- Where?

- At Rigshospitalet

- And you Søren?

- I'm an architect. In Hørsholm.

- And the others? said Malene, pointing down the table with her glass.

And we had journalists working at city hall square, teachers who worked in Hvidovre, lawyers in Roskilde, public servants working in the city centre, and Peter, who was an IT manager in the ministry of industry, business and finance.

- I just mean, said Malene with a disarming smile, that our careers and interests and the things that mean something, over and above just family; we do them elsewhere.

- Well, Ida works in the local nursery, Søren said, gesturing towards me with his hand in an almost triumphant manner.

It went quiet. The whole thing felt awkward so I lifted my glass in a toast towards Søren.

- That's quite true, I then said. - I look after all your kids, while you live your lives elsewhere. I didn't mean for it to sound quite as it did.

- Well, that's great, sure, Malene tried. To be anchored in the place you live. Not many people are. That's why the suburbs have no memories.

- Now hang on, cried Søren, who was beginning to get drunk, - I have clear memories of all our many street parties.

- Like hell you do, came from somewhere down the table.

- Did you know that Emdrup first appears on a map from the 1100s? said Jørgen, who up until now had just been listening and not getting involved.

- Memories are just local history after all, he said, and looked at Malene.

- You can be interested in that, or not.

- But is it local history that makes us feel that we belong here? said Gitte, who was already at the point of becoming good friends with Malene. - It may well be that Emdrup was once just old farmyards and storks on the rooftops, but that's not what shapes the identity of the place today.

- The suburbs don't have any identity. They don't even have a centre. Look around you, Malene drawled, Emdrup is there where everything ends, she laughed. Both the city council and the 6A bus.

- Then why did you move out here? I asked.

Malene looked at me.

- Because it is near the school and sports centre and green spaces at a sensible cycling distance from the town, she answered, her half-filled glass drifting before her face.

More wine was poured and Jørgen asked me to swap places and lost himself in a long conversation with her.

- Well, there are Turks and Pakistanis in those housing blocks now, I heard him say, and he waved his hand over towards the yellow brick buildings on the other side of Emdrupvej. - It'll not be *that* war *they* remember. And from previous street parties I could just work out he was on to the

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story about the Gestapo. How they knocked on all the doors in Kantorparken until they found the resistance member they were searching for and shot him right there outside, as though that could stir up some feelings of local patriotism in anyone.

Further down the table, it had started to get that unsettled way that comes when people tire of sitting talking and Kasper, who had been sitting talking with Signe and Janus from number twelve the whole time, on request fetched his violin and played a little. I don't remember what it was, but it was so beautiful, and there was that light on the horizon that you get in summer, when the sun never goes fully down and the trees in the gardens stand like sharp silhouettes against a greenish summer evening.

I wanted to cry. His face looked almost angry when he played, but when his eyes met mine, there was a vulnerability, an intensity in his look that was almost like a question.

Later on, he sat down beside me. It wasn't actually that he was handsome, but there was something in those brown eyes. The way he lingered on me when I said something. Looked at me briefly, before answering. Those little things.

I poured more wine for us both and thought about how little we know, that someone can suddenly move in and change everything.

- Have you finished with painting? I asked, when I had run out of violin questions.

He looked at me.

I think I've seen a nightjar on your roof, he said.

I looked at him.

- It's very unusual, he continued, they usually keep to the heaths.

- A nightjar...? I smiled.

- Yes, it has a very distinct call, that's why I heard it, he said almost apologetically, holding my gaze.

Then he got up to take his sleeping son home. I drank a little more wine and waited. Now and then I looked up the street after him. I only gave up waiting for him to come back and sit with me when I saw him dancing with Gitte on her and Søren's patio.

The next day I told Peter. That Kasper sometimes stood and stared up at me with binoculars.

We were going round clearing up, with some of the other early risers, so we could take down the barriers, which had to be away by ten o'clock.

The place was littered with forgotten summer jackets, half-empty beer bottles, kids' bikes, paper plates and the beer stained pages of Ole Steen's handwritten speech.

Peter laughed and made light of it.

- Then you just need to pull the blind down, he said and wiped a big pile of plastic cups into a large black bin bag and started to fold up the tables and move them onto the pavement, so that the traffic could soon get by.

When the boy finally got a place some months later, it was at my nursery.

By that time there had been several irritating incidents with Malene and Kasper.

Partly to do with the boy, who had crawled through a hole in the hedge and picked all my dahlias. He was sitting in the middle of the bed and just pulling off the last few heads as I came home from work.

I had planted the bulbs in May and had been looking forward all summer to the moment they came into a great bloom. I took hold of the boy, told him off and took the flowers in with me in the hope that at least some of them could be put in a vase for a few days, but they were broken and the stems all shredded, so that they just looked so sad standing there, they upset me every time I passed.

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The day after, our car was scratched right up one side, and I spoke to Peter about it. We agreed we shouldn't fly off the handle, but to hand in a friendly note to Malene and Kasper asking to talk to them about the boy.

Another time, before the apples had ripened, I found him in our apple tree, where he was merrily picking unripe apples to chuck. On that occasion, I took him by the hand and went over and rang the bell. Malene was very apologetic, but didn't tell the boy off.

Then there was the drill, which I knew we had lent to them, and which they now claimed never to have borrowed. Peter also got annoyed then, and went over once again and asked them to have another look for it, as he needed to use it.

Then the hedge came down. Peter had kept our side closely cut since June, and had reminded Malene and Kasper to cut their side, when we met them down by Utterslev Mose on midsummer's eve. They never got it done, and the weight had pulled the hedge down, so that Peter and I had to spend a weekend lifting it and hammering in iron supports we could tie it up to.

The boy was five when he started at nursery and either he had ADHD or diabetes, because he drank water the whole time and switched between violent outbursts of rage and sudden withdrawal. I asked to speak with the manager and the boy was placed under observation. The parents were informed. After some weeks, I pushed for a more thorough assessment. I was concerned about his behaviour. They could certainly test him for diabetes now, though you had to be a little older to be assessed for ADHD.

The test for diabetes were negative - and once the boy had been through initial assessments for ADHD, just before his sixth birthday, I was called into the office.

The manager looked at me and asked if I thought the boy should be checked for any other conditions. Autism (which I had thought of) or perhaps muscular atrophy? (which I had not thought of). I was completely shaken. The parents, my own neighbours, had put in a formal complaint about me to the local authority, and asked that the boy be moved to another nursery.

I felt that I was obliged to let the rest of the neighbourhood committee know about the escalation of our situation with the neighbours. They listened, astonished, and asked if we couldn't talk about it together. But we couldn't, and obviously now we should communicate through the city council's complaints system.

I spoke with Peter at length. He supported me and of course did not doubt my professional competence. But he thought that the situation was sorted, now that the boy was to be moved.

- It's an ideal situation, he said, -The boy is no longer your responsibility.

- An ideal situation? I yelled. - Do you know what it feels like to be around people every day who have complained about you to the local authority? They've questioned my professionalism, Peter.

- Yes, but it's not like you've been fired or anything, he said, uncorking a bottle of red wine. You need to stop letting it eat you up, Ida, every place has its idiots, he said as he poured out two glasses. As he handed me one, giving a little nod as he raised his glass, I realised it was true. He lived in a different place.

By the time the street party was coming around again, Peter and I had put up a tall fence between the two houses, and Kasper and Malene had built an illegal car port, which, apart from anything else, sat too close to the boundary. I went through the plans, discussed it with Peter, and thought carefully whether it was worth reporting. Peter felt that it was an unnecessary intensification of the conflict, but I was still smarting from the complaint about me lodged with the local authority. The only thing I wished for was that they would move.

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For the first time, I was not looking forward to the street party. I couldn't face having to socialise with them, but we had to attend. It was our turn to do the welcome drinks. It was all prepared and laid out in a big bowl in the kitchen with fresh strawberries and champagne. It only needed to be carried out. We had sent the children ahead with glasses. Pure zen, I had promised Peter, whose strategy had become more and more vague.

I was in the middle of doing my make-up when Peter leant against the door frame behind me and gave a great sigh. I met his eyes in the mirror. He looked tired.

- Pure zen, I smiled, waving the mascara brush.

He didn't smile back. Behind that tired look, I caught something else, and I lowered the brush. We looked at each other then. I knew, before he said anything, what he was going to say. I got as far as thinking that the world can collapse in a single moment, when you least expect it.

That is was a terrible time to say it, he could only agree, but would there ever be a good time?

I got ready. Took the bowl from the kitchen table and went down the street.

The house was put up for sale nearly a year later. A good few had come to view it but they bid way under the asking price. I've thought about how it stood there, dark and empty, during the following year's street party. And what they talked about. And how when somebody moves out, a little of the street's tenuous memories disappear. Now it would soon be forgotten how Ole Steen and Maria in number seven had done a stingy, cheap deal with a mourning widow and that the people in number nine had once lost a son in a traffic accident on Emdrupvej.

Not so long ago, I bumped into Gitte in the street. Of course, we said that we should get together, but it'll never come to anything. Once you've moved away, you're quickly forgotten, and new people take your place. Like the family, who bought our house, who are nice enough, Gitte says. But it's not really the same, she quickly added.

Maybe there will be stories about when we lived there, Peter and I and the kids. Maybe Kasper and Malene's version of the truth will win out. There's not much you can do about that. We talked a long time. About the other homes in the street. About my children, who are so angry with their father. About Gitte's new job. At the end she gave me a hug, and we didn't say see you again. We were already each going our own way when Gitte turned around:

- Kasper and Malene's son has had a diagnosis of autism, she said.

- That's a shame, I said.

- She nodded.

I turned and crossed the street.