

NINA ROOS

neem op



LITERARY FICTION

AUTHOR: NINA ROOS

TITLE: ANSWER (NEEM OP)

On 9/11 young Nina Roos barely survived the attacks on the Twin Towers. She was then working as a model in New York.

After this life changing experience, Roos decided to take matters into her own hands and went back to Holland to study at various art academies.

Now she regularly publishes and exhibits her work.

Her stories appeared in several Dutch magazines, and she was awarded with a literary magazine's grant for her writing.

Roos is praised for the way she describes the discomfort of her characters.

The stories in *Answer* explore the thin line between independence and loneliness, happiness and sorrow. The characters in Roos' debut struggle with relationships and often find themselves detached from reality.

A bright, new talent to watch!

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NINA ROOS

Answer

Cold

It's a cloudless Saturday morning. It will get up to 26°C in Drenthe today. Clouding over in the course of the day with the chance of a light shower. Wind force three, from the south-west.

The green rucksack in Jet's bicycle bag is full: two bottles of coke, a paper cornet of sweets, shortcake, an exercise book, an aerosol of whipped cream, chocolate marshmallows and a pencil case. Jet always cycles with headphones on because otherwise she can hear the wind, which makes cycling seem more of a struggle. She squirms on her saddle from time to time, since it creates a smouldering glow. Her dark hair is gathered into a silver plastic hair slide. Jet has a strikingly sharp jaw line. This is her sixth day on the till. The swimming pool opens at nine. She makes sure she's there at least ten minutes early.

The swimming pool has its own disproportionately spacious parking facilities. She locks her bike, even though she's noticed no one does that here. The pale-blue building has one door on the car-park side. She inserts a long key, goes in and turns the lock again behind her. She hangs her beige sweater on the coat hooks on the outside of the toilet door. There's a white chewing-gum stain on her sleeve, from about three weeks ago. A friend told her 'In the freezer. Bob's your uncle!' But she hasn't got round to it yet.

She takes a small key from the cutlery drawer in the kitchen, unlocks a tall cupboard and gets out the cashbox. Through the glass door she can see the pool lifeguard in his chair already, near the deep end. He's always here first and she doesn't understand why. She waves. He doesn't notice.

The glass door leads to the open-air pool. Change, pee and shower: left for the men, right for the women. Boys and girls, really, since she hardly ever sees adults here. On her busiest day only thirteen children came for a swim. Jet can bathe here for free, but the water's too cold. Anyway, she isn't game to swim with other people around.

At half past ten the lifeguard comes in. 'Just a quick cup,' he says. At three minutes before half past ten she pushes the button on the coffee machine. She puts the sugar bowl down to the right of the lifeguard's coffee and pours a glass of diet coke for herself.

'How's it going?' the lifeguard asks.

'Good,' Jet answers quietly.

He's tall and thin and whichever chair he sits in he seems to stick out too far top and bottom.

'Have a good weekend?'

'Yes, I did. You?'

'Yes, thanks.'

Jet click-clacks her ballpoint. She's cold. The lifeguard makes a barely audible slurping noise.

*Teedleedledee Teedleedledee, Teedleedledee Teedleedledee,
Teedleedledee Teedleedledee, Teedleedledee Teedleedledee!*

'Shouldn't you pick that up?' the lifeguard asks.

'Nah, no need.'

She looks at the clock. Nearly quarter to eleven. The lifeguard's suntanned fingers slide back and forth along the edge of the table.

'Okay, I'm off again then. See you!'

He shuffles over to the glass door on his plastic clogs. Jet can't stand people who don't lift their feet. She opens her exercise book. She wants to write a novella in between tasks, about loneliness in a relationship or about a family in a holiday cottage. But she can't concentrate. And she has to look up regularly to keep an eye on the changing cubicles. Besides, someone might appear at the till any moment. She prefers to move around, rearranging things in the office or removing weeds from the gaps in the paving outside with a potato knife. Sometimes she rubs out amounts in the cash book and enters them again, straighter, or practices on a large family coming to buy tickets. The ticket prices aren't easy to add up. So far everyone's shown an annual season ticket or asked her to stamp a twelve-

sessions card. There are eleven visitors on her push-counter.

The sun has completely disappeared now behind marbled white and grey clouds. Jet puts on her sweater. At one o'clock the lifeguard comes in again. Lunch. He opens his sandwich box, with its washed-out Bart Simpson design. He's brought soft white rolls with pâté again. There's something in that pâté that has a powerful reek to it, a smell that lingers in the office for quite a while afterwards. Jet opens her second bottle of coke and eats a thin slice of home-baked bread with marmite. Bread balls up into solid lumps in your stomach. Bread takes a long time to digest.

'Good thing we can't hear the funfair from here, right?' says the lifeguard without waiting for an answer. 'I don't get it, do you? All those different songs, so they're all unintelligible? Surely that must bother them, too?'

'I think they stop noticing after a bit,' says Jet.

'Will you still be around for the four-day gala?'

'No, I'll be gone by then.'

Between two and five the clock drags. Jet takes a fixed route past all the changing cubicles and looks to see if the waste bins need emptying. With a dustpan and brush she clears away leaves, then wipes down the turnstile with a damp cloth. A fitful drizzle starts up and all the swimmers come to the covered area where the changing cubicles are. The boys like to climb over the partitions between cubicles, which are far from robust and flop about wildly. She doesn't say anything because she's frightened of the hard core. Three little tearaways with short blonde hair. Two of them must be brothers or even twins, with their bright blue eyes. The third is fat and has a big gap between his front teeth. Their shouts always startle her. And they move too quickly. She doesn't know what to say to make them listen. With luck they'll get sick of it soon.

It stops drizzling but the sun doesn't come out. Jet is cold. The boys run off onto the grass beyond the pool. She finds herself looking at the lifeguard in his high chair. He's sat there all through the drizzle. Even

in the downpour two weeks ago he stayed motionless in his seat. He's looking to his left, into the distance. Jet goes inside. Almost quarter past three. She takes a look at what's left in the cake tin. Not enough.

She puts a glass of chocolate milk ready. Liquorice works well as a start and finish. She gets the cornet of liquorice allsorts out of her bag and eats a couple. From the right-hand cupboard above the sink she takes a candied ginger cake and cuts two slices, then holds the brown edges between middle finger and thumb, spreads butter top and bottom and eats them quickly. From the biscuit tin she takes three mini-twix. And a treacle waffle. Squirts a tower of whipped cream on top. Licks, chews and swallows. Blind. Three penny waffles. The circular allsorts minus the bit in the middle. She avoids wine gums and anything minty. Too harsh soon. She takes two pink-iced shortcake biscuits out of her bag. Then her last four chocolate marshmallows. A sip of chocolate milk. She feels hot. Another treacle waffle. A mini-mars. Another mini-mars. She looks through the glass door at the lifeguard. Two sips of chocolate milk. Two pieces of liquorice. Jet gathers up the empty wrappers and pushes them to the bottom of her rucksack. Then she goes to the toilet, puts her spectacles in the sink, lifts the seat, hooks the door shut and bends over. With one finger she stirs at the back of her mouth. Gently. One doesn't work, so she sticks two fingers down her throat and moves them back and forth. The first wave is a big one. Liquorice. Go on. One finger's enough, go on now. Go on. She breathes in and looks at her finger covered in lumps, phlegm and white foam. Then pushes it into her throat again, forcing three short waves of sick out of her stomach. Not acidic enough yet. Snot. Go on. This isn't working. Her heart pounds inside and below her ears.

A pause. Cold sweat. Try again. It takes two fingers and for the last bits she stirs anxiously at the back of her mouth. She can see lumps of liquorice now. She quickly wipes her right hand with toilet paper. Some of it sticks, breaking up into tufts. She plucks, coughs and flushes. Dabs her wet eyes, blows her nose and opens the door, washes her hands and

drinks a glass of water. She drinks another glass of water and looks out at the pool. The lifeguard is still sitting there, his eyes fixed on the deep end. She walks back to the toilet, closes the door and vomits up the water along with the remaining lumps of liquorice and foamy bile. Jet carefully checks the rim of the toilet, picks up a tuft of paper from the linoleum, flushes, and sprays a long blast of toilet freshener. Pine forest. She drinks a glass of diet coke and starts on the washing up.

Jet blows a hole in the suds. She submerges her hands in the scalding water for a long time. For stamina and to make her fingers wrinkle. After drying up she fills the kettle to the 750ml mark and turns it on. At four o'clock the lifeguard comes in. She waters the plant in the office and tops up the biscuit tin with liquorice and the rest of the pink shortcake from her rucksack. She puts a cup of earl grey on the table for the lifeguard, clicks four sweeteners into a glass and makes rooibos tea for herself.

'Jet? Do you know who's on the till tomorrow?' the lifeguard asks as he takes off his damp white T-shirt.

'I am.'

'Oh, right.'

He has irregular clumps of chest hair. Jet shivers. The lifeguard puts on a light-blue polo shirt and comes to sit next to her at the formica table. There's a strip of grey plastic around the edge of the tabletop. Jet uses a paper clip to tease crumbs out of the gap where it's coming away. The lifeguard leafs through a copy of *Autoweek* from last year. As he reads he taps the toe of his gym shoe against the table leg.

'They really need to do something about that lawn.'

The lifeguard pushes his forehead into furrows as he talks to her.

'It's beyond a joke, all those mounds. Soon there won't be anywhere left to lie down. Right?'

'Yes, you're right.'

She pulls her socks up, then pushes them down to the tops of her trainers.

‘It’s strangely quiet for this heat, don’t you think?’ he says without looking up from his magazine. ‘Beats me why that is.’

‘Yes, a lot of people must be on holiday,’ Jet says.

‘Ah, you’re right. I’m not stopping them!’ he says enthusiastically.

He closes his *Autoweek*.

‘Right then, I’m going to go and sit a bit longer.’

He puts his cup on the draining board and heads for the glass door.

‘Fine,’ says Jet softly, and she writes the number from the counter, eleven, in the folder with visitor data.

She puts the sweet wrappers into a white pedal-bin bag, goes outside, throws the bag into the waste bin next to the gents and unreels a yellow-and-black garden hose. First she hoses the gents’ partitions. The toilets require a targeted approach. One false move and the water splashes straight back the way it came. Jet has mastered the technique but can’t avoid spattering the toilet rolls. Fortunately they’re already damp from children’s wet hands. She flushes away a forgotten pee and stares out across the grass. Three boys are still swimming. The lifeguard has already told them two or three times to get dressed. Jet hopes she’ll be finished before they come. Otherwise they’ll play with her arc of water. She hoses the hinged seats in the cubicles, then transfers the hose to the tap outside the ladies. She dawdles over this part.

Jet looks at the water pouring over the plastic partitions and subsides into calm disinterest. The square drain can’t cope with the continual flow. The water runs away too slowly; a puddle develops and grass swirls above the holes in the drain cover. She shivers, rolls up the hose and checks that the boys really have gone. She packs her rucksack and waves to the lifeguard. He waves back. He always stays on after closing time. She doesn’t know why. Cycling through drizzle, she’s soon sticky wet and droplets collect on her face. They slowly run down and hang annoyingly on her nose and under her chin. She has to wipe them away before they fall. By the time she reaches Bunne, Jet once again feels completely warmed through.

Balls

His eyes have a film over them that moves across his field of vision even if he doesn't blink. He dabs at them now and then with a wet flannel. His mother starts shuffling her feet in and out of her sandals the moment she sits down. Today they're eating outside, at the bottom of the garden, since she's decided it's a sweltering afternoon. She believes days like this are rare in the Netherlands. It doesn't feel sweltering to him. He has goose bumps on his forearms. So does his father. His sister looks pointedly bored and sighs a lot. She's just casually mentioned she wants to study law. Pure spite, he thinks. With any luck she'll carry on messing around and they'll forget about him and his soup. He looks at what's happening in his soup bowl. There are hard green bits at the bottom and floating on the surface are pallid brown vegetarian balls. He'd give anything for his own to be as small as that. Conscious that dawdling gets on his father's nerves, he tries to spoon steadily at his bowl. Quietly get on with it and swallow without tasting first. Any spills may be answered by a quick tap to the back of his head. Rattling of cutlery too. His mother hums. Tomorrow his grandparents are coming to mark his last birthday. It's more than a month since he turned twelve, but because he didn't want anything, there was no celebration. Grandma and granddad want to hand him the envelope of cash in person. They're just back from holiday, a boat trip to Lofoten. Really beautiful here, it said on the card.

To live in an ice-cold world is his main birthday wish, but he's never dared say it because of the why question that would come next. Summer hasn't arrived yet. Summers cause signs of paralysis in his body. As soon as the temperature gets above twenty he stops being able to move naturally. The itch in his eyes, the tickle in his bones and his tight throat turn the summer into a war of attrition.

NINA ROOS – *Answer*

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Last year they spent four weeks walking and camping in Denmark, while his sister went off to a hot island with her tall boyfriend. She hasn't gone camping with them for years. He has to go. The three of them left by car in the dead of night, to avoid getting stuck in traffic. He sat in the back minding the saucepan set, his football and the cushions. In poor countries people get poison in their blood from eating out of aluminium pans. He's read that it can give you brain damage. The maps showed only day walks. He was disappointed there weren't any mountains, since he knows there's less pollen floating in the air when you're very high up. His sneezing was bearable only by the sea. Ice lollies helped too. He has his own green tent, super-lightweight. It fits one person, flat. His parents sleep in the substantial De Waard, big enough to stand up in; his father refuses to go otherwise. Every evening at around ten his father declared it was up with the lark. His parents go to bed in good time because they're early risers. Or the other way round, he hasn't decided yet, he prefers to ask as little as possible. Father would then fold the table and chairs and put them under the awning. The plastic cups from their herb tea and coffee went into the yellow washing-up bowl and the gas lamps were turned off as soon as everyone was back from the toilet block. If his mother forgot to kiss him goodnight he'd leave his tent zip open. She usually came for a kiss and then closed up the tent as tightly as possible. He developed a technique for silently opening the zip. With a towel and hair wax. For the velcro at the bottom he deployed a fake sneeze.

He would patiently wait till he could hear his father's irregular snoring and then smear wax on the zip with his finger, sneeze, and slowly start unzipping from bottom to top. Wipe his fingers on the towel and crawl out of the tent. Outside he tried to stand not far from his tent but definitely out of sight.

'Not having any bread?' his father says loudly.

He cautiously looks up from his thighs. Considers a logical answer, but his father is ahead of him.

‘You won’t grow balls on soup alone, young man.’

He nods and takes the top part of a halved sourdough roll, spreads pâté on it and asks if he can put on a sweater.

‘Can’t you do that after we’ve eaten?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘We’re waiting for you, see. I don’t know which ninja world you’re in, but we finished eating some time ago.’

He eats and no one speaks. After clearing away, his sister and her boyfriend leave and he dries the dishes, once his mother has washed everything up. His parents like them all to have a nice sit together in the living room in the evenings, so he settles down on the sofa with a book. A book-reading father and mother fill the room with presences and he can’t concentrate. The suck-cluck sound his father produces, the clock, the wild piano notes from the speakers, his mother’s constant smile, her glasses cord. He squeezes his thumb, middle finger and forefinger together until it hurts and keeps squeezing.

Tea at half past seven. At nine his mother tucks him up in bed. He waits for the final stair-creak and feels his body go slack. In bed he listens to the trees. The rustling of leaves is reasonably wild. Wild enough, he thinks. He sets his alarm for half past midnight, turns out his bedside light and falls asleep, his blanket almost completely covering his head. When the alarm goes off he climbs out of his bunk bed, puts on his blue dressing gown, takes a key from the wooden cabinet in the kitchen and tiptoes to the back door, head down, then on to the fence at the bottom of the garden to stand among the fruit bushes. He opens his dressing gown and pulls down his pyjama trousers, which fall lukewarm over his feet. He looks at his big balls and waits, turns slightly to the right to catch more wind and looks. Slowly they start to shrink. Goose bumps spread over his thighs. He smiles when they’re fully shrunk, pulls his pyjama trousers up again and goes indoors relieved, back to bed.