

JESSA WILDEMEERSCH

DAYS
WITHOUT
DATES

Characters

Jessa *narrator, plays all characters*

Vera *author and nurse during World War I, 1914-1918*

Tony *Vietnam veteran, 1968-1972*

Rik *Vietnam veteran, 1967-1970*

Brendan *is based on testimonies of veterans from various wars; Vietnam 1968, Rwanda 1993, Colombia 1964, Yugoslavia 1991.*

Mokhallad *director and theater artist, fled from Iraq in 2005*

Jake *businessman and Afghanistan veteran, 2003*

Elizabeth *young woman, married to a World War II veteran in 1946*

Jacqueline *actress and daughter of World War II veteran, 1955*

Carlos *postman and Vietnam veteran, New Jersey 1964-1968*

Gordana *actress, fled from Bosnia to Germany and Belgium as a child, 1992*

1.

vera holds a book It began, I think, with being infuriated about the war. Then I tried to ignore it. Then I had to accept it as a fact. And at last I was forced to take part in it, to endure the fear and sorrow and fatigue that it brings. But even that isn't enough. It is now my duty to find out all about it, and try to prevent it, in so far as one person can, from happening to other people in the days to come. Perhaps the careful study of man's past will explain to me much, that seems inexplicable in this disconcerting present. Perhaps the means of salvation are already there, implicit in history, carefully concealed by the war-mongers, only awaiting rediscovery. When I was a girl I imagined that life was individual, one's own affair; that the events happening in the world outside were important enough in their own way, but for me personally quite irrelevant. Now, like everyone else, I have had to learn the terrible truth, that no life is ever really private, or isolated, or self-sufficient. People's lives were once entirely their own, when the world seemed enormous, and all its comings and goings were

slow and deliberate. But this is no longer true, and never will be again. Since man's inventions have eliminated so much distance and time, we are now each of us part of the surge and swell of the great economic and political movements.

And whatever we do as individuals, or as a nation, deeply affects everybody else. We were bound up like this before we realized it; and if the comfortable prosperity of the previous age hadn't lulled us into a false conviction of individual security, and made us believe that what was going on outside our homes, didn't matter to us, the Great War might never have happened.

Jessa signals to the lighting technician Can you turn the light, please?

That was a fragment from 'Testament of Youth', written in 1933 by the British writer Vera Brittain. It is a very interesting book, touching, definitely worth reading.

I read most of it, except the last 50 pages, then it got a bit too academic. Nevertheless, it is a great book about the experience of living and working as a nurse during World War One.

I got this book from Tony, he is a Vietnam veteran I interviewed last year in the Veterans' Retirement Home in New York. This past year I have spoken to a lot of people and asked them questions about what the impact of war has been on their lives. I recorded these conversations on a small recording device. And I have selected some fragments from them to share with you this evening.

When I entered Tony's room in the Veterans' Retirement Home, I saw how red curtains kept out the daylight. In the middle of the room sat a thin, white man. He offered me a chair and a cup of tea. I saw that he only had four fingers on one hand. He said: 'That's not from the war, Honey, that's from growing up in Brooklyn'.

I would have liked to share some audio fragments from our conversation, but he was so difficult to understand. He spoke in this low, unclear, rusty voice. I don't know if he spoke like that because of the cancer that he'd got from the Agent Orange in Vietnam or because he is a Brooklyn native. Anyway, let's try and listen to a short fragment of Tony.

Jessa signals the sound technician

Can you give me Tony?

Jessa interrupts the recording and imitates Tony.

tony If you are interested in doing a project about the war and also looking into female voices and especially those of nurses, you should definitely read Vera Brittain. She was serving as a nurse in World War I. She lost her fiancé and brother in the trenches of Flanders and France, she is a primary source for women's voices on war...

Rik interrupts.

rik What's her name Tony?

tony Vera Brittain. She was a nurse.

jessa Oh, and that guy, who says: 'What's her name Tony?', that is Rik.

I also interviewed him. He spoke a bit more clearly.

Audio recording Rik

jessa You served as a young soldier in what war?

rik My grandfather was a marine in World War I. My father was a marine in World War II.

My uncle was in Korea. I was in Vietnam.

My daughter, fifth-generation marine, is in Afghanistan. All in combat.

jessa And did you have specific expectations when you were going to war?

rik I had no expectations at all, I knew what to expect, cause
like I said,

I come from a Marine Court family. I grew up hearing
stories.

jessa And when you got there, was the experience different
from what you thought it would be.

rik No. No.

jessa And has going to the war changed you in any way?

rik ...

Jessa interrupts the Audio recording

2.

jessa Wait,

I think I am going too fast.

I have to go back.

It's early morning,

I'm lying in bed,

I have overslept.

The alarm-clock goes off.

On the news somebody says a plane has flown into a tower. That triggered my imagination. I thought they were talking about a small plane, a toy, that somebody had lost control over. I decide to finally get out of bed and start my day. I'm supposed to meet Michel, another Belgian, who is going to teach me French with the help of Georges Brassens' lyrics;

Elle est à toi cette chanson

Toi l'auvergnat qui sans façons

M'as donné quatre bouts de bois

Quand dans ma vie il faisait froid

And in return I am going to teach him Dutch.

At that moment, I live in New Jersey, just across the Hudson River. I am already late, so I run to the station. And I see, on the other side of the river, smoke coming out of one of the towers. I don't want to be some kind of rubbernecker, so I continue my journey to my meeting. In the tunnel, the train comes to a standstill.

It's not going forward or backwards.

There's a sense of restlessness.

It takes a long time.

I read a book.

When the train finally arrives in Manhattan, it's terribly busy. I try to find my way to the staircase and out of the station. At the corner of 14th street and 6th avenue, I eventually make it to street level. I immediately feel the emptiness. When I look up, I see, where you can usually see the towers, nothing, a gigantic nothing.

Unbelievable.

And chaos.

People run and shout:

'Go North!'

I witness a complete migration from downtown to uptown
Manhattan.

I go to the café where I was supposed to meet Michel, who
by then was already long gone.

I sit down at a table, outside, at the street corner. I think it
was called 'Cosi'. The man next to me is listening to the
news on a transistor radio, which he has just bought in the
Deli next to the café.

'There are still seven planes in the air.'

This is madness.

Where are they?

Where will they crash?

This is an attack.

I look at the stream of people running north in a state of
panic,

covered in white powder.

On foot,

on bicycles,

by car.

The homeless guy next to the café, Romy –

I know him, I see him every day – just continues begging.

No idea what the hell is going on. Happy with the mass of people passing by. ‘I have pain here, and here, and here, and here...’

This is absurd.

It doesn't seem like a good idea to go north like everybody else. If there are still seven planes in the air, then it is highly conceivable that another plane will fly into a skyscraper up North. The Empire State Building, for all I know. The telephone networks are overloaded, the tunnels have closed. I think I was on the last train into the city. So going back home is not an option. The broad, busy avenues of Manhattan slowly become deserted. The café closes. I am stuck on the island. I decide to go to a garden that I know. If I am going to die, I prefer to do it surrounded by grass, flowers and trees. I am alone in the garden, at least that's what I think at first. Then I see a beggar. He tells me it's his birthday. ‘I've had so much misery in my life, and now this happens, on my birthday.’ I sit down on a bench. A young African American girl comes to sit next to me. I spent the rest of the day with her. I've never seen her again. I've forgotten her name. The garden we're sitting in

belongs to a church. The church is next to a retirement home. I see an old lady sitting by the window looking outside, she just sits there, she is not aware what is going on. Two workmen in blue come out of the retirement home. They sit down on the bench next to the girl and me. They are carrying a plate of chocolate cookies and offer them to us. A priest runs into the garden, his bible clenched between his fingers. He sits down on the bench in front of the girl and me. He frantically starts reading excerpts from the bible.

Here we are,
the priest,
the old woman by the window,
the two workmen,
the African American girl,
the beggar and me.

The broad street is empty.

It was as if we were looking out from our prison. There was a gate surrounding the garden.

It was as if we were looking out from our oasis,
with chocolate cookies, flowers and trees,
and saw reality.

I tried to understand what had happened, the days and the weeks after. Helicopters flew over the city and fighter planes. Evacuation routes were indicated. Thousands of pictures of missing people were posted on central squares. My landlord shouted: 'It's going to get worse and worse and worse'. And while he was shouting he was spitting in my face.

Around that time, I was in love with Pavel, a Russian. I remember, the night before the towers fell, we sat on a bench by the river and looked at the island and the towers. Pavel said: 'A good couple is like these towers, You make a unity and still you are individual.'

I thought that was so romantic, he was right. Russians have such a 'way' of saying things.

I don't have to tell you that after the towers fell, our relationship didn't last long either.

I lost my job in the café because people were scared to go to public places. I had to take the ferry into the city instead of the train.

One morning I was sitting on a bus and a man was reading a newspaper, the headline read: 'World War III

has begun.’ The bombings in Afghanistan followed. The invasion of Iraq. To me, war had always been something remote, something my grandparents talked about, safely tucked away between the covers of history books. Not world history mattered, but what happened in my personal life. I was young, I wanted to be free, I wanted to be on stage in New York. But now I was forced to have an opinion, I could not ignore that this was happening. Suddenly my personal life and the public life touched one another, and since then they seem inseparable.

Audio recording Rik continues

jessa Has the war changed you in any way?

rik *coughs*

jessa And what is the impact of the war on your life today?

rik If you asked me twenty-five years ago, or thirty years ago, and asked: ‘What percentage of your life was the war?’ I would have told you: ‘Five or six percent.’ And today, and I’m much older, I would say: ‘Seventy to seventy-five percent.’ That’s how profound it becomes.

3.

jessa And what are you still struggling with today?

brendan What?

jessa What are you still struggling with today?

brendan What am I struggling with...

Nightmares.

Compulsive reliving.

Recklessness.

Destructive behavior.

I have problems with intimacy.

I am emotionally explosive.

I distrust authority.

Chronic mental ailments.

Chronic insomnia.

Persistent paranoia.

I suffer from hallucinations.

Instant stress.

Shame.

Anger.

Isolation.

Flashbacks.

Fear.

My doctor prescribed me alprazolam. And for my insomnia, I have to take 40 mg of remoran a day, no more or I get the shits. But I 've stopped taking medication. Because if I do, I fall asleep, and then my dreams become violent. I never let myself sleep long enough to dream. I am always watchful. Hyper vigilant. In a room, I will always choose the corner, from which I can observe everything, especially the door. I only go out early in the morning or late at night. I go to the mall around closing time, when there is nobody left, except the washed-out cashier, who doesn't want anything except to go home.

I tried working, I tried marriage, but everything I touch gets broken. I was trained to destroy, that's why I never had kids. I can't trust myself. You become what you do. I would like to be back who I was before. But taking medication isn't going to give me back my soul. The pills aren't going to make me forget what I have seen. They aren't going to take away what I 've done. I have touched more dead people in one year, than I have touched living people in an

entire life. One day you've just seen too many dead, and now they come back to life. They stand up from their graves and ask me for help. The dead fill the seats. They weren't meant to become human again. They weren't human when I killed them. Look, war is impersonal. Death is random. We, the survivors, protect ourselves by making the killing impersonal.

The dead are 'enemies', body counts, objects, anything but human. The children, that was the hardest, I couldn't turn them into objects.

But when they come towards you, with a bomb strapped to their body, you have no choice, you have to bring them down.

And then they call you 'baby-killing junkie'. But how was I supposed to be human. I had to stop feeling. But one day you have to dig up all those corpses in your head. If you ever want to become human again, you have to dig them back up. And you have to say goodbye to them, one by one, with your battered heart wide open. And then you have to feel the pain. No wonder I've already had two heart attacks.

Sometimes I think the only reason I'm still alive is, so I can tell their stories. I want to tell my story; I want to tell their story. That's why I thought that therapy would be the solution. Talk, talk, talk. But it turns out that they don't want you to talk about the war.

Because that might 'upset' you and your war buddies too. My therapists advised me to avoid stress by not remembering, but that only locked those memories inside my head. I was given a single afternoon, one session to discuss my war experience. How can you cover a year of horror in one afternoon? It took Odysseus ten years to come back home, but they expect me to do it in an afternoon. The Greeks and the Romans wrote plays and music about it. With the ancient samurai, – not the ones in World War II, that was a fucked up thing with the samurai warrior code, they distorted it like crazy, there wasn't the honor in it, that there had been in ancient samurai – you weren't given a weapon until you mastered an art form. So you had some place to put that berserk energy when you came back. A lot of Native American tribes, Indians, – whatever you're supposed to say these days – they had rituals where you couldn't go back into the community, the village, until you

had gone through a restoration process or a purification ritual. Which the Greeks understood; that these men, sometimes women, had to be purified in some way in order to find the new normality.

‘The black feet’ tribe would keep the warriors outside the village, the elders would say: ‘You need to tell me your story, you’re not going back into the village until you tell your story’.

And one said: ‘Oh, I don’t have a story.’

The elders would say: ‘No, no, you have a story. You go back in there until you tell me your story.’

‘Oh, okay.’

And they would bring out little children the next day, and have them hold hands with the warriors and walk for an hour, to start to humanize them again.

The Native Indians, they understood something: mutual responsibility. Millions are invested and months of training, to make soldiers out of us, but not a dollar or day to help us become human again. Our stories need compassion and witnesses. I have served my country; I have the right to be heard.

But they gave me one afternoon. One fucking afternoon.

‘Try to forget! You’re home now,

go find yourself a nice job, go find yourself a good wife.

Then it will all disappear.’

But they deny the fact that many of our veterans are
homeless or psychological cases.

Some got cancer from the terrible stuff we spread around.

More soldiers died from suicide after the war, than that
were killed in battle. So, the least they can do is listen when
we have a story to tell. I feel like I prattled on a lot. I didn’t
give you a chance to ask me any questions. Is there
something you would like to ask me?

Audio recording Brendan

brendan I feel like I prattled on a lot,

I didn’t give you a chance to... Did you want to ask me any
questions?

jessa No, that’s not the point.

brendan *laughs*

4.

Audio recording Mokhallad

jessa Is it clear what I am asking you?

mokhallad Yes, yes, it is very clear.

But too many questions.

I will try to answer you.

I can't hear the alarm,

I can't hear the explosions,

I can't hear the chaos,

I can't see the fire. That is all gone.

But what stays is the feeling of fear.

Fear for too many cars together.

I don't want to be in a traffic jam,

because something can happen.

Ehm... How can I say...

I don't like to stand still for too long.

I don't want to stay longer than five minutes in one place,

because...

jessa And even here... You are still scared?

mokhallad *laughs* I am not safe, something can happen.

5.

Jake sits down on a chair. A microphone on a stand in front of him, he is wearing a black hoodie. Only his silhouette and hands are visible. His voice sounds low and heavy through the microphone, as in an anonymous witness testimony.

jessa Can you remember a specific moment that wounded you?

jake I can give... hmmm...

Most of what's driving my PTSD,

I think,

is guilt,

is guilt.

I feel... guilty for having survived where...

...some of my buddies didn't.

And...

I feel guilt

also over...

a killing...

there you go.

And...

I'm not proud of it.

You know, again,

I'm not asking,

I'm not asking for any sympathy

I don't deserve any.

But I...

I...

it's just something...

I need to come to terms with,

and...

almost make amends for.

But then there is a...

a guilt,

over the killing I did,

of like Taliban.

And I...

some people might go like –

'Oh, well the Taliban, what's it matter?'

But the Taliban, in the briefing we had when we were going to Afghanistan, they were split into 3 groups. Like tier 1, 2 and 3. And tier 1 was described like Al Qaida types, what

other people would deem like fanatics. Tier 2 is like warlords, people acting for warlords, that kind of thing. And then tier 3, the lowest tier, is your, what's called 10-Dollar Taliban. And they're basically farmers in the fields who the Taliban... that the Taliban walk up to, give them 10 dollars. – which is a lot of money down there – and give them an AK as well, you know a Kalashnikov, and say, you know, shoot those Western soldiers, you know, those Western soldiers over there.

And, ehm, I think if I was an Afghan farmer, and all I knew was what my... relatives had told me about the West. As in, they just come to Afghanistan to take whatever they want, and then they fuck off without giving you anything – that's the oral history that's being passed down. If that was all I knew, and if these infidels over there are blowing things up. You know what, I could easily see myself as being like 10-Dollar Taliban. And also, these guys are just farmers.

But...

first of my ever-fired rounds in anger...

which is a counterintuitive phrase,

you never fire rounds in anger,
hardly ever.
It's a very cold, like clinical action.
You have to aim very precisely,
and you can't do that if you're angry,
clearly.
But the first rounds I fired
for real
ehm...
I, it was a...
I was on top of a hill.
And eh...
I was firing a fifty K – a heavy machine gun,
big thing on a tripod.
And four Taliban ran into the compound
ehm...
below.
And ehm...
myself and the lad next to me we were putting down
suppressing fire on...
on this compound.
Yeah, to keep them pinned in place.

So, an air strike was about to be brought upon them.
And I remember...
I remember...
deliberately firing bursts of fire through, you know, the
doorway, to stop anyone escaping through that doorway.
I remember thinking; 'I'm gonna shut off
like all these... these...
ways...
for them to escape...
their...
their terrifying predicament.'
And all we're doing is like keeping them held up there
for...
What happened next is; 2 F15s coming in,
strife and run, strife and run.
One bomb, followed by another one.

Later that night I went back to the camp.
And an interpreter
– we had guys listening in to the Taliban radio
communication –

and one of the interpreters, called me over and he said: ‘Oh, you might wanna take a look at our logbook.’

I’m like: ‘Okay.’

So, I read this transcription of this radio conversation.

And it was...

it was,

from

one of the guys in that compound.

And he was radioing his Taliban superior.

Ehm...

and he,

he was,

the interpreter had written down that he was basically

asking

for help.

Ehm...

He was...

and...

and also, the interpreter could tell that this guy was crying,

he was in tears and

ehm...

he was,

he sounded injured as well.

Anyway,

no one helped him.

And the next day we heard from the locals,
that four men died in that compound. Three from blast
injuries, that would be from the bomb, the bombs. And one
had died, one had died from bullet wounds. And ehm...

And that was probably the guy on the radio talking to his
Taliban superior. Cause the guys killed by the bombs
wouldn't be able to talk, they were, like, shredded.

I can...

through elimination it was,

I think,

It's perhaps probable...

that it's either myself or the soldier next to me, who shot
this guy...

and I know this guy's name;

Mustafa.

And eh...

and I knew he was

terrified.

I knew he bled to death,
alone,
at night.
And,
there's a fifty-percent chance that I
did that.
And ehm...
for all I knew he was just a local farmer.
And
again
I'm not asking for any sympathy
or any of all that.
Because I made the conscious like decision,
you know,
to go to Afghanistan.
and
and
and
I
I
got to live with that.
And got to try process that memory.

And ehm...

try,

to do something constructive,

with the rest of my life.

Film projection:

Black and white images of people dancing in a deep trance.

Loud disco music is heard. The image fades into an image of a man on the subway. The train comes to a standstill. We hear

doors open and close. The train moves again, the man has

remained seated. We see an elevator going up. A door opens,

we enter a living room, light music comes from an record

player. It is snowing outside.

6.

Elizabeth is wearing white heels, she loosens her hair that was tied in a ribbon. A telephone rings. Elizabeth picks up the phone, her mother is at the other end of the line.

elizabeth Hello.

mother Oh, Elizabeth.

elizabeth Hi Mom.

mother I was so worried. Why didn't you call me?

elizabeth I was planning on doing that tonight.

mother How is everything?

elizabeth Great!

mother When did you get there?

elizabeth I can't remember, yesterday morning, I guess.

mother Who drove?

elizabeth He drove.

mother You gave me your word.

elizabeth Mother, relax, he drove very nicely.

mother You promised me he wasn't going to drive anymore.

elizabeth Mother I just told you, he drove very nicely, he stayed close to the white line and he wasn't even looking at the trees, I could tell.

mother And how did he behave in the car?

elizabeth He behaved terribly. He was singing the whole time;

I'm gonna die,

you're gonna die,

Whoopi, we're all gonna die.

mother That's not funny, Elizabeth.

elizabeth Oh please Mother, can't you take a joke? Actually, Mom, I can't talk right now, I am about to leave...

mother Wait... Is he there?

elizabeth No, why?

mother Where is he?

elizabeth He is lying on the beach.

mother Alone.

elizabeth Yes, Mom, alone.

mother I hope he is not swimming.

elizabeth No, he is not swimming, he doesn't want to take his bathrobe off.

mother Why is he wearing his bathrobe?

elizabeth I don't know, Mom, probably because he's so pale.

mother My goodness, then he definitely needs the sun.
Can't you make him take it off?

elizabeth You know what he's like; he says that he doesn't want a bunch of fools looking at his tattoo.

mother He doesn't have a tattoo, does he?
Did he get one in the Army?

elizabeth No, of course he doesn't have a tattoo. You are acting as if he is completely insane.

mother I didn't say that.

elizabeth Well, it sounded like it.

mother Elizabeth, listen, the reason I called...

elizabeth Hold on.

Elizabeth looks around, as if somebody is entering the room.

elizabeth Yes, Mother.

mother Your father spoke with a psychiatrist and he told him everything about Philip.

elizabeth What did he tell him?

mother About the fish tank, the car, the business with that chair... about what he said to Grandma.

elizabeth Philip said so himself, he is going to cover the costs for the car, I can't believe we're still talking about this.

mother Elizabeth, the psychiatrist said that there is a big chance that Philip may completely lose control.

Silence

mother I told you so many times, you should have waited to marry that boy until he got back from the war.

Elizabeth interrupts her

elizabeth Yes, you told me, Grandma told me, Aunt Annie told me, Uncle Richard told me, The Butcher's neighbour's son told me.

So what! We are married and we are happy!

mother Calm down Elizabeth!

elizabeth I am calm. I am perfectly calm.

mother The doctor says it is a crime that the Army released him from hospital.

elizabeth I am not afraid of him.

mother Lizzy, wouldn't it be better for you to come home?

elizabeth No.

mother Your father said that he would be willing to pay if you'd like to go away someplace by yourself and think things over. You could go on a lovely cruise.

elizabeth I am not coming home, Mother, I just got here. This is the first vacation I've had in years. I couldn't travel now anyway, I am so sunburnt I can hardly move.

mother I would like you to be honest with us, Lizzy.

Silence

Hello?

Silence

elizabeth Yes Mom, I told you a million times.

I am going to hang up the phone now,

Philip could walk in any moment.

mother Promise you will call us if something happens.

elizabeth Bye bye.

7.

Film projection:

Snow falling behind a glass door, meanwhile we hear Brian's voice-over.

brian I think I was kind of planning my own suicide. Once I was thinking like seriously going into the ocean, down in New Jersey. And just go out and just keep swimming, and keep going and keep going, until I can't go any further and I can't get back. And then just: 'I'm out of here.' And I am not leaving a mess for people. You know I am not blowing my brains out or something. And I went down to the beach, and I was seriously thinking of writing a note, leaving it in the car, just basically saying: 'I can't keep doing this.' And there was a kid out there, like an eleven-year-old kid, twelve-year-old kid, he reminded me of myself, and his sailboat flipped over and he had a lifevest on, but he couldn't get the boat back up. And I know, I had done that myself when I was his age. And I found myself going out

there and getting him back in. And then, it went... it passed.

Film projection:

A woman reclining on a bed, her bare back towards us. She is looking out of the window.

Very slowly her images fades away, until she disappears completely and only the empty room is left. Cello music is heard and a child sings

'A Yellow Bird'

There was a bird
With a yellow bill
Sitting on a window sill
La la la la la lala lala lala lala la

I coaxed him in
With a piece of bread
Then I smashed his little head
La la la la la lala lala lala lala la

I cooked him up
In a little pot

Then I ate him on the spot

La la la la la lala lala lala lala la

This is the end

Of the little bird

Now he is shaped just like a turd

La la la la la lala lala lala lala la

8.

Jacqueline is wearing a white shirt and socks. She carries a tray containing a teapot, a cup, a knife, a spoon, a sandwich wrapped in tinfoil and a letter. She tries to open the tinfoil smoothly without making any noise. Then she opens the letter with a knife, she cleans the knife with her napkin and puts it down. In a voice-over we hear what is in the letter.

jacqueline

Dear Jacqueline,

Thank you for your kind response to my previous letter.

I have indeed found many testimonies of soldiers and nurses serving in World War I and World War II, but as I mentioned before, haven't found many testimonies of people who experienced secondary trauma.

Jacqueline cleans teapot with napkin

I am very grateful that you are willing to share some of your experiences growing up in a home with a father who was suffering from war trauma.

Jacqueline puts the letter down, pours tea in cup, cleans the teapot, drinks tea, cleans teacup, puts down napkin, takes up letter and continues reading

I have made you a list of questions, you can choose to respond either in writing, or if you prefer speaking out your thoughts then you can also record your answers.

Jacqueline puts the letter down, pours tea in cup, cleans the teapot, drinks tea, cleans teacup, puts down napkin, takes up letter and continues reading

I am very grateful for your help Jacqueline,
With deep appreciation and respect.

Sincerely, Jessa

Jacqueline takes up butter and knife

What war was your father part of?

Have you seen pictures of him as a young man before he went to war?

Did your father continue his military career when he came back from the war?

Jacqueline spreads butter on sandwich

Was he physically wounded during the war?

How?

Did he suffer mental injuries during the war?

Was there one specific event that triggered his trauma?

Do you know what it was?

Was his suffering from his trauma present constantly, or did it occur suddenly and then disappear again?

Jacqueline turns letter, spreads butter on sandwich

Did he have sudden changes in character?

Was he silent, introverted?

Was he moody?

Was he angry?

Did he manifest himself physically or verbally?

Jacqueline cleans knife continuously

Did he share some of his wartime experiences?

What is the most beautiful memory you have of your father?

Her movements become neurotic

Can you give an example of how his trauma affected family life?

Were you aware that you were growing up with secondary trauma?

Can you describe how that made you feel?

Can you give an example of how, as a child, you experienced living with a father suffering from war trauma?

Jacqueline drinks from her cup, tries to eat her bread, but her memories become too strong. She struggles to pick up her

sandwich as silently as possible. The thin foil makes a loud, uncomfortable noise. Jacqueline gets into a physical cramp.

9.

Audio recording: Carlos is delivering the mail in the streets of Downtown New Jersey. Jessa follows him with her recording device.

carlos Hello darling how are you? Buenas, cómo estás?

How are you my friend.

woman Smelling nice, Carlos!

carlos Hello Mamie. How are you?

woman Mmmm.

carlos Okay my friend, have good day... Okay, Leo must have left this here for me?

woman Yes, take it away.

carlos Alright ladies, I'll see you tomorrow okay?

woman Have a nice day Carlos.

carlos You too ladies, thank you.

Sound of sirens as an ambulance passes by.

carlos *to shop owner* Papa, how you feeling today? What do you want Papa?

to Jessa So how is your baby going to school, everything okay?

jessa She's good. Did you see her the last time she was here?

carlos Yes. *gives a letter to a girl he runs into* Here you go princess.

girl Thank you.

carlos You're welcome darling.

to Jessa My god, it's hard to believe, I felt that you just had her the other day.

Wow, I remember when you were wobbling all over Jersey City, are you kidding me. *laughs*

I told someone, someday I saw you wobbling with pregnancy of baby and I don't know who I told one day, I said: 'You know you got women that look sexy when they're pregnant.' You, my dear, looked sexy when you were pregnant.

jessa Yeah?

carlos Yes, yes. You know my daughter... *sees somebody cross the street, Carlos calls out* Hurray! *to Jessa* That's another veteran.

Film projection:

Children's shoes, a bath duck, a messy breakfast table.

Music takes over. A rhythmic beat composed from the sound of opening and closing mailboxes drives the next testimony.

carlos My whole life is military.

I eat, sleep, breathe military.

You go to my house: military,
you can tell a soldier lives there.

I mean even: go in my closet,
look at my uniform,

I am a soldier.

How many guys you know iron their underwear?

You know it's that discipline.

We're taught shiny shoes,
no holes in our clothes,

we eat like soldiers,

we sleep like soldiers,

the people around us become soldiers.

My wife, she does things in a soldier's way,

because she's married to a soldier.

You know, it becomes a way of life.

You don't know anything else.

You find that the most undisciplined thing in the world is a civilian.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that I dislike civilians.

If we had a little more discipline probably a lot of things in this world would run a lot better.

Unfortunately, not everybody is a soldier like me.

I lead a very disciplined life.

You can see it in my car,
you can go to my desk right now
and see it in my desk,
discipline all there.

You know,
it structures my life,
it helps me deal with what I did,
my flashbacks,
it makes me understand what happened
and why I did it.

It also helps me out with what I am about to do, or what I plan to do,
discipline is involved in there a lot.

And without that discipline I would be lost,

so, I believe in it.
Even my children,
even before they left for military service,
they were taught discipline.
Why,
because I taught them.
I run my house on discipline.
And I see it works,
it works.
For forty-one years I've been getting up at 5 o'clock in the
morning,
to go to work or to report on duty,
I don't even need an alarm-clock,
it's built in,
discipline.
I get up,
I have a routine,
every day.
My uniform is layed out,
I take a shower,
I put this uniform on,
I put one shoe on,

I put the other,
I know I am supposed to shine my shoes,
I know I need to have that look,
that professional look,
I know these things.
So,
in order for you to keep a routine,
you must have discipline first.
Okay,
you don't have discipline,
you can't keep that routine.
Discipline,
routine.
You can't have routine unless you have discipline,
that's the key,
discipline.
I'm the type of person,
you might want to call it perfectionist.

You know at home,
my wife can say:
'Oh, this gotta be done.'

It's already been done.

'This got to be done,'

it's already been taken care of,

discipline.

Tonight,

everything I got to get done,

it's already done,

things at home prepped up to get me started when I get

home.

How many people you know do that?

Discipline.

You might think I am crazy but you know something;

it works.

Troubleshooting,

I troubleshoot like it's normal.

Some people stress,

draw on it,

I'm not the type of person.

The only way I can kill my stress is,

I react on it,

if I have a problem,

I react on it,

right away,
like it's yesterday,
okay.
I don't wait until the last minute,
I react right away,
I react,
and when you got that,
you are set.
I even,
I get up in the morning and I make my bed.
Are you kidding,
my wife don't have to make the bed,
because I get up, it's part of my routine,
I get up,
she gets up,
goes to the showers,
because I got that discipline
I know I have a routine,
she comes back and says:
'You make the bed.'
I say: 'Yeah.'
See tonight when I come home,

my house is not a mess.

My floors are waxed.

Discipline,

a lot of work,

but discipline.

It works,

it works.

I got the nastiest temper,

I got a hot-blooded Spanish temper,

but the discipline keeps it under control.

When I came home from the military,

I had my routine.

I would get up in the morning,

during the day, I would buy:

two twenty pieces of coke,

a bag of weed,

a case of beer,

and two pints of rum.

For twenty-nine years,

I would get up every morning,

because I didn't know how to get to sleep,

or I didn't know how to wake up.
My body,
I was taught to stay awake all the time.
So,
in order to wake up when I fell asleep,
I do a twenty piece of coke.
Before I got in the showers,
I drank one pint of rum,
and a six pack of beer before I went to work.
And I walked around like that,
working,
doing my job and nobody knew it,
okay.
Because I worked,
and I did my job with discipline,
I did my job the way I was supposed to.
Then I would get home,
I would drink the other pint of rum,
I would drink some more beer,
and then I would use the weed to put me to sleep,
because I did not know how to go to sleep.
And like I said, I did that for twenty-nine years.

And one day I just got up and said,
– Oh, and I smoked three packs of cigarettes a day –
I got up and I said:
‘I’m not doing this no more.
I don’t do none of that junk no more.’
Simply put.
And I did it.
And it’s the best thing that ever happened to me.
So,
it does work.
Discipline.
Jesus!

Film projection:

An elevator is going down.

Fades into an image of a city at night.

Jessa recalls her meeting with Carlos while she takes off her vest and unbuttons her shirt. She is wearing a grey tank top

jessa That was Carlos, my postman in New Jersey. One day
I asked him if he wanted to talk about his war experience.
He said; ‘I can’t say anything about that, I have top secret, I

was with the Special Ops.’

I asked if he could tell me how he lives now.

He said: ‘That’s okay.’

I asked him: ‘Can I call you?’

He said: ‘No, Honey, my wife is very jealous, she doesn’t want me to talk to other women.’

So, I asked him: ‘How can we meet?’

He said: ‘The only time I can talk to you is while I do my round, when I deliver the mail.’

So, one very cold January morning I walked around with Carlos, while he was delivering the mail, I asked him questions about his life and if his war experience is still influencing his life today. I also spoke with people back home in Belgium. Gordana was one of them, we met in a bar in Brussels.

10.

Film projection:

Trucks driving the highway. The images fade into images of a forest.

Gordana sits on a little stool and is rolling a cigarette. Café noises

gordana I was born in Sarajevo. I don't know which dates they were exactly but I think it was January 1991 that my parents decided to move to Germany and ask for asylum because they knew the war was coming. In Germany we lived in Essen, but it was also always moving from Essen to I don't know where.

But we were always living with gypsies, Kurds, with I don't know, yeah, all kinds of people. Sometimes we were in camps, sometimes in schools, where you had like four beds in a small room, and when I went to the bathroom and stuff, it was all shared. And sometimes you'd see *laughs* other naked people walking around and they didn't care

that there were children running around. That was the first one.

Café noises fade into African song

Then we moved to Harttem, also in Germany. The first time where we lived was in a classroom. It was just a classroom and ehm. Two days later the city council said that another couple with one kid would move into there too – that were gypsies – and we, to make our privacy we had to build a wall with school equipment and cupboards.

African music continues

So that's how we lived. And my father was really not happy with it, he thought it was a scandal. And he made a scandal of it, went to the City Hall and shouted and ranted. It's not because it's war, I mean like it's war in our country, that you can just put us anywhere without being able to really live.

Audio recording: Mixed voices of testimonies become more intense.

Gordana tries to speak above this mix of voices

gordana I mean like a small apartment or something.

But we had to share a classroom.
But we weren't allowed to do anything.
And my brother and I we were just kids,
we just wanted to play,
but we weren't allowed.
And all that kind of stuff.
But you know,
we all have stories,
you have a story too.

Gordana takes her cigarette and disappears behind the projection screen. We only see her silhouette holding a cigarette.

Audio recording: continuation of the audio mix and African song.

mokhallad When I was a child, I don't understand my
mother, why she smoked.
But now I understand why she smokes. In every inhalation
from her cigarette, I see her pain.
koen '92 I was Congo, '93 Zaire, '94 Rwanda, the
Genocide.

tony While the Vietnam war is the central experience of my life, it is not the only thing that exists in my life. I have intellectual interests, I have artistic interests, I have interests in gambling, I have interests in a lot of other things.

ketis Combien de papas, ont perdus leur maman, combien de mamans on perdu leur bébés?

jacqueline I want to cry, run, hide, retreat from your questions.

tony I have more in common with the people that I fought against, than that I have with my own country.

gordana We were just kids, we wanted to play.

rik There is always going to be somewhere, somehow, some kind of conflict.

11.

Film projection:

The projection of the forest disappears.

Audio recording: the audio mix comes to a climax. Jessa asks one last question.

jessa Can you describe what peace is?

Like a colour or a feeling or a sensation?

Can you describe what peace means to you?

mokhallad Peace?

Silence

Peace is a room,

A very closed room, that is peace. It's a room where, every night we go there to sleep, with

a very, with the walls made from concrete.

In English, I don't know how to say, yeah protection.

Melzje

but...

jessa Bunker?

mokhallad Yes, something like a cellar actually, kind of cellar, has no window, because if something happens, the window will not break. Only walls and iron. And the walls must be very strong. When something falls, the corners will not fall, with every house... Why do people make... the corner with irons? Because that makes the house... the base of the house is very strong. And we always say when something happens: 'Go stand in the corner.' Because when something falls, the corners will stay up. I remember, when I went to, when we go in that room, to sleep. And that room, I felt, until now, the most beautiful place I have been in my whole life because, we play in the room, faces close together, intimate the touching. Everything in the room, it was a very nice atmosphere.

And I recognise that, the peace in that room actually. In Arabic called melzje.

Film projection:

A child is sleeping in a courtyard somewhere in Iran. A pigeon crosses the courtyard. A little door opens. A very old woman, wearing blue slippers, walks out of the door, she takes up her cane and crosses the courtyard. Fighter planes fly over

Blackout.

Dagen zonder data is een voorstelling van
Jessa Wildemeersch in samenwerking met
het nieuwstedelijk. De voorstelling ging bij
De Grote Post in Oostende in première op
20 november 2014.

Concept, tekst en spel Jessa Wildemeersch

Dramaturgie Els Theunis

Coaching Sara Vertongen

Film Julie De Clercq

Muziek Roeland Luyten

Licht Koen De Saeger

Bewegingscoach Ugo Dehaes

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Days without dates had its international première on March 6th 2015 at The Atlas Intersections Festival in Washington, DC.

Concept, text and performance

Jessa Wildemeersch

Dramaturgy Els Theunis

Coaching Sara Vertongen

Film Julie De Clercq

Music Roeland Luyten

Lighting Design Koen De Saeger

Movement coach Ugo Dehaes

Translation Jessa Wildemeersch,

Sara Vertongen and Els Theunis

Jessa Wildemeersch (1978) is an actress, writer and theatre maker. She started her acting career at the age of fourteen, starring in the MTV award-winning music video. At the age of eighteen she received the audience award at the Ostend Theatre Festival for her performance in the monologue *München*.

Jessa studied acting at Studio Herman Teirlinck in Antwerp. In 2005 she was awarded a Lifetime Membership at the renowned Actors Studio in New York. In 2006 she started her non-profit organization JESSA. This structure allows her to develop, write, produce and perform plays with a social awareness dimension. Historical and present-day events are remixed into theatre performances, in collaboration with (inter)national artists and venues.

www.jessa.be

Plays

L'étude (when chaos strikes) – 2017

Days without dates – 2015

Long Days. Short stories – 2010

De Misfit in Me – 2006

Me, Mike en Mustafa – 2003