



***My Dark Vanessa* - Kate Elizabeth Russell**

It was a regular weekday. I was a little early for my train and decided to enter the bookstore. That is always a bad idea for the to-be-read pile! *My Dark Vanessa* caught my eye; I didn't even read the blurb, but just bought it. It was later I found out what this book was about. Child abuse, sexual abuse, by a teacher! Could I handle such a subject? Would I dare to write a review of the book afterwards? I let it lie around for a couple of weeks, until I couldn't resist anymore. I needed to read this book and get it over with! I picked it up and finished it in two sessions.

In this book Kate Elizabeth Russell tells the story of Vanessa Wye, a girl who had an off-on relationship with her English teacher Mr Strane, for about 17 years, from the age of 15. During class Strane singled Vanessa out, carefully grooming her into consenting to everything he proposed. Years later Vanessa was still struggling. Did she lead him on? Was the relationship really what she wanted? Love and hate, need and disgust alternate in her mind. Then, a girl a couple of years younger than Vanessa speaks up and accuses Strane of abusing her. Other girls join her. Vanessa doesn't know what to think or what to do.

"I just really need it to be a love story. You know? I really, really need it to be that."

"I know," she [the therapist] says.

"Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?"

I look to her glassy eyes, her face of wide-open empathy.

"It's my life," I say. "This has been my whole life."

She stands over me as I say I'm sad, I'm so sad, small, simple words, the only ones that make sense as I clutch my chest like a child and point to where it hurts.

Above is an example of the struggle Vanessa goes through. You can feel the pain and sadness flow through all of the pages of this book. It keeps you reading, almost obsessively. Three quarters of the way through, I needed a break. On and on it goes. It is a little monotonous in the middle of the novel, very precisely describing what Vanessa's life had been like for the last 10 years. It just keeps on going.

Luckily this book is not only sadness. At the age of 32 Vanessa contacts a therapist, at first to learn to deal with the loss of her father. Then when Strane gets publicly accused, Vanessa finally starts talking to her therapist about him, though never calling it abuse. Towards the end of the novel Vanessa begins to heal, moving onto a healthier lifestyle and letting go of Strane, who still had a great impact on every part of her life. Will Vanessa be alright? I think so, given time. That's how this book leaves you: hopeful. She will be alright. You just know it!

My Dark Vanessa is Russell's debut novel, and quite an impressive one. It takes some courage to write about such a heavy topic as sexual abuse. In her foreword Russell explicitly says that this story was not based on her own experience. I can understand people coming to such a conclusion, as the abuse and the consequences of it are described so intensely and in such detail. Yes, this is a good book, though its main theme is quite horrific. I will certainly keep an eye on this author. Who knows what other interesting topics she might address?

Dit boek is in het Nederlands vertaald als *Mijn duistere Vanessa* (Prometheus)

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